



# Crafted for Perfection

**T**UCKED in one corner of Padang Merbok, Kuala Lumpur, and within walking distance from the nation's central bank, some serious work is under way at a centre to institute some important changes to Malaysia's arts and heritage scene.

The Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan (ASWARA) is now beginning to extend its reach. After more than a decade on a mission to raise a new generation of talents for the performing arts scene, the academy -- previously known as Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK) -- recently saw its status upgraded to that of a university.

Henceforth, the academy will not only continue with its reasonably varied diploma programmes, but also put its stamp of excellence on internally crafted degree programmes. This would include areas like dance, music, film, television, video, writing, theatre and heritage.

With its upgrade to Aswara (National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy), the outfit will have a larger role to play.

'We will be going beyond performance arts alone. Now, we will also look at heritage and fine arts,'

## Upgrading means a bigger role for Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan.

By Habhajan Singh

says academy director Omar Awang.

Up till now, the core business of the academy, formed in 1994, has been to produce human resources in the field of arts.

The upgrade is the brainchild of Minister of Culture, Arts and Heritage, Datuk Seri Dr Rais Yatim. Two years into helming the newly created ministry, Rais sensed the acute need for a full-fledged institution of teaching for the related subject.

'We have had ASK for 12 years. It has never been able to emerge as a sprouting umbrella to take care of the arts. We feel it must have the university status. Realising that, we pushed



DR RAIS: The academy to act as a sprouting umbrella for culture, arts and heritage



MAJESTIC: Aerial view of the academy

for an Act of Parliament,' Rais told *Malaysian Business* in a recent interview.

The academy is a specialised and unique institution of higher learning with a core business specifically on performing arts and a fully funded Government agency within the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. Its objective is simple, yet daunting: To provide formal training in the arts that are mature, knowledgeable and professional.

Simple because the nation is no stranger to the field of arts. In fact, the nation has plenty of examples to showcase to the world. But it is daunting at the same time because arts is not really the top agenda on the minds of many. Many Malaysians actually go through life without stepping foot into a theatre or taking time off to watch a *wayang kulit* play or watching traditional dances.

Hence, the challenge before institutions like ASWARA is to keep the fire burning and produce talented performers to enthrall the audience.

'We aspire to be the premier institution in the three areas (culture, arts and heritage) and a centre for academic excellence,' says Omar.

In line with the Government's vision of Malaysia as a developed nation by the year 2020, education in the arts, culture and heritage plays an important part of the development agenda. This is because



OMAR: Going beyond performance arts

culture and arts have always been integral parts of developed and highly civilised nations to strike a more wholesome balance with the materialistic and physical side.

With that in mind, the decision to upgrade the academy from a college to a university reflects the Government's desire to see the academy playing a bigger role in producing artists of the future.

The upgrade comes with the force of an Act of Parliament. The nation's legislature had recently passed the Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan Act 2006.

The academy's ambit is wide. It includes fine arts, cinematography or filming, choreography, drama, stage or

cinematic acting, stage management, photography, designing, creative arts, dance, creative writing, screenplay, script writing, archiving or subjects pertaining to archives, library science, museum subjects, television or electronic media productions and music.

This is part of fulfilling the academy's mission of producing artists and arts managers, research and performances that are based on traditional arts through a formal and systematic education programme. It also intends to cultivate creativity that is supported by effective planning, management and coordination.

'We have the expertise and the capacity. For example, we are the only film school with the full paraphernalia. When we talk about film, our end product is the actual film, the whole works, with the pre- and post-production capability,' says Omar.

For the future, the academy is planning a slow and steady expansion. With about 600 students at the moment, it targets to increase it to 1,700-2,000 in 2010.

One unique aspect of learning at ASK is the balance between practical lessons and theory. Diploma students spend 60% of their time getting immersed in the practical side of their studies and the rest in theory. The heavy emphasis on practicals is truly reflected in the quality and calibre of the academy's performances.

Aided with Government-funding -- its annual budget is in the range of RM12 million to RM15 million -- the academy has been able to propel further its objective with activities beyond its corridors.

'The funding not only covers academic programmes but also other add-ons like workshops which we conduct on a regular basis,' says Joseph Gonzales, who heads the academy's Department of Dance.

This enables the academy to add value to students and the teaching staff, further widening their horizons and deepening their knowledge and expertise. **mb**

For more information, check out the academy's website at [www.ask.edu.my](http://www.ask.edu.my)