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PLAYING WITH SHADOWS

A shadow play master fuses traditional Balinese wayang with contemporary styles to tell stories of indigenous people, writes **Sulyn Chong**



Shadow master, Larry Reed
(PICTURE BY MOHD KHAIRUL HELMI)

A LARGE white screen lies on the floor of the hall, while an overhead structural crane moves up and down stealthily. People busy themselves measuring tarps and trimming rope. They're all working like a well-oiled machine, while one man stands guard near the entrance like a hawk. His only movements are when he's barking intermittent instructions. "No, no... It's easier this way," Larry Reed interjects as he pulls out his trusty mini Swiss army knife and proceeds to puncture a hole on the white screen. With one swift move, he runs a string through and ties it up. With a proud smile, he turns to me and says: "This is my major tool for building a shadow theatre because it has a little scissor and a little knife. That's all I need."

Reed is a shadow play theatre master who's been called upon to impart his know-how in setting up his art at a newly reinvigorated bungalow at Bukit Tunku, soon to be home to Masakini Studio. This refurbished home will be the stage for a new form of Wayang (shadow theatre) which Reed is renowned for.

CONTEMPORARY CAST

Wayang traditionally involves one light source, a dalang (master), a 50-piece gamelan (traditional Indonesian instrumental set) and a multitude of hand puppets. Reed's brand of wayang, however, incorporates modern dance weaved with theatre acting, voice-overs, contemporary compositions and intricate light source management instead.



As the screen goes up, a collaboration between Sabera Shaik and Larry Reed
(PICTURE BY MOHD KHAIRUL HELMI)

"I keep to the traditional techniques of Balinese shadow theatres as much as possible, but I don't hesitate in injecting other styles based on my understanding of filmmaking that can be used to express any culture," he explains.

One of Reed's specialties is his use of multiple light sources. "Differently positioned light sources allow me to portray the shadows in different positions and I can switch from one light source to another to create a live montage or live editing," he says, noting the different layers in front of the light sources give the theater play a more three-dimensional image.

"Each layer is important to the storyline. There's a panel of scenery that changes from scene to scene placed right in front of the light. In front of that are the puppets and in front of that, the actors. With these combinations, it makes my shadow theatre more visually

than verbally-driven, like in traditional shadow theatres," he enlightens.

Another aspect where Reed's form of wayang differs from the traditional, is in the number of people that make up his production team. He has a team of five to six people. "It's a small team but we make it work," he claims, adding: "Usually, in each production, people who are specific to that culture will be part of it."

This, Reed feels, gives his plays a more authentic significance. "But if I'm doing a production in another country, probably it'll just be me and one other person — like now, and then I'll train everyone else.

FIRST EXPOSURE

Born and raised in the US, with parents who have no connections to the world of theatre and arts, Reed's journey has been an unconventional one. His first exposure to this art form began with the Balinese shadow puppet back in the

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NEW SUNDAY TIMES | P



Checking shadow positions
(PICTURE COURTESY OF SHADOWLIGHT PRODUCTIONS).

1960s. It started as an exploration that then turned into a passion and respect for the art and form.

"It started out as a list of things I wanted to find out or I thought was missing in life and many urged me to head to Bali to experience something different. So my first exposure was in Bali, but it wasn't until I returned to the States and started studying the Javanese wayang with a dalang in California that I fell in love with shadow theatre," he confides.

However, further research and a chance to study with a dalang in Bali brought him deeper understanding of the Balinese version. "I've always liked improvised theatre like *commedia dell'arte* and I found that in the Balinese wayang," Reed says.

His involvement in several

productions after that led to him to open ShadowLight Productions in 1972 in his native San Francisco. "I realised that I wanted to be able to control the productions I'm doing. I wanted to not just work for somebody else, but to be able to do something where I'm in charge and be able to happily collaborate with others to come up with other things that would change perceptions," he divulges, adding that he felt strongly about telling stories about minority indigenous communities.

"I've worked with the Karuk tribe in California and the Ainu people in Hokkaido, Japan. I feel these people haven't been treated fairly which makes me want to tell their stories," Reed says.

Aside from just being a voice for indigenous people, he'll always try to bring in a few members of the community to be part of the production crew or encourage them to be part of the play. "It's always great to have the community be part of the production and have a hand in telling their community's stories," he says.

This is the very reason why Reed is here in Malaysia. Together with Sabera Shaik, the founder of Masakini Theatre Company (who owns Masakini Studio), they are setting up the shadow theatre and looking into a project with the orang asli in Malaysia.

"At some point, we'll find the funding for this project, and we'll probably rehearse part of it here and part of it at whichever Orang Asli group we end up working with," he discloses.

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REACTION AND CHALLENGES

It's never easy mastering something that's not of your culture or background. At 72 and with more than three decades of experience in the industry, it wouldn't have been a surprise if he was frowned upon by purists of the art form. But that was never the case with Reed's productions. He share: "We've always had a good show and good reception. Possibly because it's the Bay area and we're just so diverse as it is."

He also tells of the excitement among the Chinese community when he produced the famous *Journey To The West* shadow play. "Many of the Chinese kids in America haven't seen it before, at least not in real life, perhaps in cartoon. So for them, it was really good."

Nevertheless, the more pressing matter at hand is the dwindling theatre industry. "It's more difficult to do theatre in general because more and more places are closed," he opines. However, he hopes that with his continuation in spreading the art form, people will slowly come to appreciate and take interest in it as they did, back in the 1990s.

"Sometimes, when you've focused your interest on something, it will make others from that culture appreciate it in a way they hadn't before. At least that's what I hope will be the result of my doing this," he says.

At the end of the day, as Reed points out: "It's always very exciting when the screen goes up." No matter who or what the story is about.