



Drumming up a storm

Malaysian ensemble Hands Percussion organises the *Balik Kampung* tour every year to bring their love for drumming to school children in small towns and villages. Last year, the tour ended with a bang in the sleepy hollow of Kodiang in Kedah, where 140 primary school pupils rocked the town with the sound of drums, paint cans and biscuit tins.

TEXT SREEREMA BANOO PHOTOS LAW SOO PHYE



Nor Zahirah Shuhaimi purses her lips each time she hits the drum with the wooden stick, her torso rocking back and forth to the tempo. She is full of determination and focused on the task at hand, her eyes glued to the coach and his instructions. The only time the 10-year-old offers a dimpled grin is when she or other members of her small drum troupe falter. But it's more of a sheepish grin really, because like her bandmates, Nor Zahirah is eager to put up a good show for her friends and parents. Two hours into the practice session, you can see that the Standard Four pupil and her bandmates are a little tired, but they don't complain. "It's really fun," the youngster says. "It's my first time but it's quite easy. Someday I want to try playing a real drum," she adds shyly.

This group does not use conventional percussion instruments; their drums are made up of recyclables ranging from plastic paint cans – Nor Zahirah's instrument of choice – to biscuit tins. But they are making music, and while it may not be rock and roll, they could give a few marching bands a run for their

money. Nor Zahirah, along with 140 pupils of SKJ (C) Choong Hwa in Kodiang, and seven other Chinese primary schools in the Kubang Pasu district of Kedah, are participants of a unique drumming and performing arts camp organised by Hands Percussion. The camp in Kodiang is the renowned percussion ensemble's ninth in their series of *Balik Kampung* (or 'Back to Hometown') tours that began back in 2009. Through the tours, Hands Percussion (synonymous for its 24 Festive Drums, so called because the 24 barrel-shaped drums in the ensemble signify the various festivals of the Chinese calendar) hopes to expose young children to drumming culture.

The idea behind the tour began in 2009 when the ensemble was touring in France. "Everywhere we went we were so welcomed and received tremendous response. We thought that it would be a good idea to share our love for the performing arts with rural communities in Malaysia who may not have the opportunity to enjoy this kind of artform," says Hands Percussion co-founder and administrative director, Eric Ch'ng.

The first *Balik Kampung* trip was in Dec that year, to Eric's hometown of Sekinchan in Selangor. During the one-day workshop, both primary and secondary school students were taught drumming and how to make their own instruments by recycling dustbin covers and bottles. Flags were drawn and coloured, and the culmination of the workshop was a parade that saw parents and children take to the streets of Sekinchan.

Buoyed by the response, Hands Percussion then followed up with a trip to Sabah in May the following year, covering six towns spanning the west and east coast. Last year, their *Balik Kampung* tour again lived up to its name with a stop in Selama, Perak – the hometown of one of its members, Boyz Chew Soon Heng. This was followed by tours to Pertang in Negeri Sembilan, Kuala Kemaman in Terengganu, Pasir Parit in Kelantan, Pulau Pangkor in Perak and finally, Kodiang.



(Facing page) The parade takes to a country lane that meanders through lush paddy fields and coconut groves; (above) children, show off their new drumming skills with exuberance. There are a few Malay pupils in this Chinese school that also boasts a handful of pupils of Siamese descent, unsurprising given the town's proximity to the Thai border; (right) part of the parade also includes the lion dance troupe – the children fashioned these lion heads from old cardboard boxes the day before

Kedah

Community



Grooving with the people

Apart from bringing the world of drums and percussion to school children and rural communities, Eric says Hands Percussion members benefit from the exposure to the cultures of the various communities they visit. "I want our members to know this country and its beauty... and on these tours it's not just the beautiful scenery that we've encountered, it's also the people who have been so sincere, polite and pure." He recalls fondly the interaction with the Kadazandusun and Murut communities of Sabah and the meeting with one of the last remaining *tok dalang wayang kulit* (shadow play practitioner) of Peranakan descent in Kelantan. Impromptu dance sessions are another highlight. "It so happened that while we were in the village in Kelantan, there was a wedding and the wedding party had hired musicians

who played joget (a traditional Malay dance) tunes. A few aunties pulled us on the dance floor and invited us to *joget* with them. It was wonderful...those are memories that we will treasure," says Eric. For Eric and his team, what's been particularly encouraging about these *Balik Kampung* tours is the reception they've received from the respective communities. He concedes that in the beginning there may have been some hesitancy, "But when they see that we are sincere in sharing the drumming culture with the children, they're very supportive...we even have headmistresses who are so happy with the workshops that they've cried," he adds. And even more encouraging is the fact that these tours, fleeting though they may be, have planted interest in the performing arts among the school children. "A week after our *Balik Kampung* tour in Terengganu, the headmaster called and told us that they had set up a drum troupe at the request of the parents. The troupe is made up of the school children and their mothers, and the community got together to raise money to buy the drums...Honestly I didn't expect the tours to generate

“WE EVEN HAVE HEADMISTRESSES WHO ARE SO HAPPY WITH THE WORKSHOPS THAT THEY’VE CRIED”

this kind of response," says Eric. The response in Kodiang, a small town close to the Kedah-Perlis border (the Perlis royal capital, Arau, is a mere 6km away) has been equally heartening. "It's a small school and they have limited resources but everything that we asked for in the run up to the project, they've managed to obtain, whether it's bicycles,



bamboo or paint...and these are all loaned or sponsored by the community," he adds.

The involvement of the teachers and parents in this town is very apparent. Headmaster of SKJ (C) Choong Hwa, Ong Bak Khim isn't just hosting the team from Hands Percussion (all 31 of them!) in the school, he's also present at the setting up and preparation of the workshops, as well as during the practice sessions. And together with Parent-Teacher Association chairman Leo Swee Hin, he's managed to rally support from parents and the community. "One parent brought some *kuih* (local cakes) for tea, another helped to put up the tent," he says.

Still, the ones who truly feel the impact of these workshops are the school children. Their enthusiasm to learn something new is palpable – it's on the face of every child, from the pint-sized Standard One pupil twirling the umbrella in the musical to the 12-year-old Bruno Mars fan who beats the drum with that extra dash of panache. The latter, Loh Yong Jie, is a Standard Six pupil from neighbouring Padang Sera. The pupil from SJK (C) Pei Min can't seem to get enough of the drums – he's in the group that's playing the 24 Festive Drums – and is seen twirling his drumsticks and beating imaginary drums (*Drum Hero*, anyone?) during breaks.

And the beat goes on

The workshop in Kodiang begins with an ice-breaking session for the children to get to know each other and the coaches. All 140 of the participants are divided into groups based on the different workshop activities – apart from the lion dance, 24 Festive Drums and body percussion (which is the use of recyclables as percussion instruments), there's also a mini



musical which is the brainchild of theatre activist and Kodiang native, Soon Choon Mee.

After the ice-breaking session, there's some stretching followed by the groups painting their respective flags. The short tea break is then followed by practice sessions in the classrooms, school hall and even the parking shed.

The younger children learn the moves to their musical – umbrella-twirling girls to cloud-bearing boys and dancing



(Top) Recyclables like biscuit tins make for unique percussion instruments, and after about 30 minutes are dented on all sides; practising on chairs before moving on to the real drums; (facing page from top) when you have more than a 100 children in one room, it's difficult to keep them focused but dancing and cheering help; each group colours and decorates its own 'house' flag that is later paraded through the town



Turning 15 this year

Hands Percussion have created a veritable bang on the Malaysian music scene since 1997 with their ground breaking and innovative performances. Apart from the well-received showcases in the country, they have also toured through the region and performed at several music festivals in China, the Netherlands, Australia, Greece and France, among other countries. Today the group has 40 performers, of which 17 are full-time. In addition to performing, Hands also conduct drumming workshops for 26 schools in the Klang Valley. In 2007, the ensemble started the Hands Gamelan team, which held their maiden gamelan (a traditional musical instrument) concert last June.

As part of their 15th anniversary celebrations, Hands are planning to hold a drumming festival in March. Besides African, Korean and Japanese drum ensembles, they hope to invite all the schools that participated in the *Balik Kampung* tours to take part in a parade that will be the finale of the celebrations. www.hands.com.my

limestone hills, and let's not forget the young ones who wait their turn as the floodwaters! All these are scenes which depict Kodiang's picturesque landscape. Another group of children, spilt into pairs, learn the moves of a lion dance under the patient and encouraging instruction of Leow Sze Yee who, together with Boyz Chew, head Hands' education and outreach department.

Meanwhile the older children pick up the rudiments of drumming – which basically boils down to keeping a beat. "One, two, three, four. One, two, three, four." Before long this becomes a familiar tune. And after a few hours, the entire school is reverberating to the beat of the different percussion instruments. By 3pm, the excitement has already reached fever pitch, especially since the storm clouds that had been building earlier in the afternoon have now dissipated.

The rehearsal proceeds without much of a hitch and after a quick tea break to fuel up, the children change into their T-shirts and take their places for the parade. The police show up to help with safety and traffic, while volunteers from the fire brigade are on hand to assist. There are people on motorbikes forming an unofficial outrider team.

Parents have their cameras and camera phones to record the occasion.

The parade is a colourful affair – the children in their red T-shirts and green headscarves, the different group flags billowing in the evening breeze and the teachers all dressed in yellow. They weave their way around the town; from the main street, they turn into a tiny lane leading to the verdant paddy fields. In the distance are the limestone hills this area is famous for, and for a moment the usual calm of this pastoral setting is interrupted by drumbeats and the laughter of children and adults. At one point, someone starts singing *Rasa Sayang* (a popular Malaysian folk song) and before long it's a chorus. Villagers, shopkeepers and motorists stand at the kerbside watching the parade, each with a mobile phone recording the moment for posterity.

The sudden drizzle and rain cuts the parade short, but the entertainment for the evening isn't quite over. In the school hall, packed to the rafters with parents, grandparents, siblings, aunts, uncles and the curious, the school children perform what they've practised almost the entire day. They give it their all, performing with gusto and passion that moves Eric nearly to tears. He shakes his head in disbelief. "This is what it's all about. This is why we do this," he says over the din of the applause and whistles.

For the children, teachers and parents, this is hopefully just the start of a new performing arts culture in this small corner of Kedah. ☺



(Clockwise from top) The parade makes a few pit stops for the lion dance troupe to show off their moves; the project also attracted volunteers from Universiti Utara Malaysia who are drumming enthusiasts, seen here riding the homemade 'bumblebee'; getting their game face on just moments before the parade.



Our community airline Firefly flies nonstop from Subang (SZB) to Alor Setar, Kedah (AOR)