

Batik 'R' Us

The Story of Batik in Dance-drama was staged recently at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Victoria.

WE are often fascinated by things unfamiliar to us, and take for granted those with which we come in contact every day. In fact, many of us know very little about the things we use, or at least come across, day in, day out in our lives. Many years ago a woman (in Australia), out of curiosity, asked her 5-year-old son, "You drink milk every day. Do you know where it comes from?" The son barely shifted his gaze from the television screen and replied, "Yes, from the cold supermarket shelves." Now that was from a dairy country.

In Indonesia—where batik comes from—even if we don't wear *kain-kebaya* or sarong everyday, most likely we nonetheless use one or two batik products continuously. However in our busy lives, do we stop and think how these items are made? Even stretching it further, do we talk about how batik the fabric is traditionally made?

Curiously while we pay the scantest respect to it, we sure are sore when some other cultures claim it. So should we not have a closer look and extend deeper appreciation of this heritage item, which has literally been ushering us through life quietly and steadfastly? In the last few decades batik has attracted a large number of aficionados around the world, many of whom may not know where it actually originated, and unaware of its embedded rich cultural significance. It was thus only apt that a distinguished group, brought to Australia by the Indonesian Department of Culture & Tourism's head of Directorate General, Sapt Nirwandar and his team, with the cooperation of Consul General Budiarm Bahar and his staff in Melbourne, staged a performance of *Sendratari Batik*, or *The Story of Batik in Dance-drama*, at the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Victoria, on 31 July 2009.

Rima Melati in her introduction extolled the timeless beauty of batik, working the audience into an appropriately anticipatory mood. And with the exquisite piano accompaniment of Jaya Suprana, the whole stage show, attended by invited guests selected from various sectors of the community, became

a truly memorable evening of dance, cultural history, fashion and light drama. All that while indulging in a three-course Indonesian dinner.

The dance-drama opened with a male dancer clad in traditional Javanese attire unfurling a length of white fabric, heralding the beginning of the batik-making. It was then followed by the next stages, such as the drawing of designs using a special implement called *canting*, and the repeated immersion of the fabric to obtain different colors. The perfect and graceful execution of the dance movement impressed upon the audience not only the actual work,

but that the whole process had a mystical undertone.

When the work part was completed, there was a distinctive shift in the performance to a more merry atmosphere. It was time to show off the end products. And indeed it was great fun.

The richness and the seemingly unlimited number of styles and designs astounded those in the audience.

This part of the show was roughly divided into three sequences based on motifs and styles, stated as: *Kraton Batik – Saudagaran*, (motifs and styles worn by those in the palace and upper middle-class), *Chinese-Netherland Batik*,



PHOTOS: VICTOR AUGUSTED

Designing batik motifs using a *canting* on a prepared length of fabric (left).

A colorful number in classy male outfit.

A modern number in *kain-kebaya* ensemble (far right).



and *Modern Batik*. For those in the audience who did not concentrate on the commentary delivered *sotto voce*, the three sequences seemed to emerge and flow from one to another without abrupt or conscious changes. It was like a journey—geographically and temporally—where you come to realization only when you are well into another place or era, this slightly inebriating effect no doubt brought by the often nostalgic piano music by Jaya Suprana.

The styles favored by the upper middle-class extended to those worn by men as well as women. The men's attire tended to be loose and easy to wear while the women's bodice-hugging, worn with *kebaya* (blouses) and *selendang* (sashes) elaborately and decorously adorned and embroidered, demure and alluring with the elegance of earth or natural colors.

The *Chinese-Netherland* numbers had particular motifs depicting birds or flowers, usually inhabiting the borders then bursting into the middle part in incredibly contrasting colors without being tacky or garish. These were widely worn by *peranakan* women, interestingly, of Chinese and Eurasian backgrounds, also by common-law or officially wedded wives of Dutch men. And again, the men's fashion was more of lei-

sure wear, though not necessarily less colorful. Looking at the models sauntering, supposedly conversing, sometimes looking skyward at an imaginary moon, there were moments when you would have been forgiven for thinking you were watching scenes in G. Francis' *Nyai Dasima*. But then, when the music filled the room with tunes you had often heard while shopping in Pasar Baru, Jakarta circa 1950s—or remembered from films of that era—you knew then that the scenes before you were of characters in their early evening promenade, trying to outdo one another in showing off their newly tailored clothes.

The last sequence, *Modern Batik* was the longest and the richest in terms of style and presentation. It drew on a larger number of segments of the society. The fabric and the designs fit in so well in Western-style repertoire with a touch of unattainable class. These outfits have always been favored by women in the West for their afternoon outings or exclusive soirées, as well as by Indonesian women who can afford them. *Modern Batik* also included the traditional ensemble of *kain-kebaya* though with wildly creative cuts and folds in somewhat unconventional and stunning colors. These ensembles would suit offi-

cial receptions or gatherings where you want to conform yet appear individual and unique at the same time. Then there were *kain-kebaya* sets which were necessarily garish because these were worn by women who earned their living by charging men a certain amount of money to dance with them. Their sashes were more utilitarian because they were part of the dancing accoutrement.

Today, all these numbers have become an amazing plethora of fashion for the modern women and men.

The whole array of batik fashion is proof of the incredible creative talent and extensive historical knowledge of the designer, Afif Syakur, a fourth generation of Pekalongan batik craftsman, Pekalongan being one of Indonesia's batik centers.

The event was wonderfully entertaining and informative for the whole audience and a bonus feel-good for Indonesians among them, who were glowing with pride as they filed out of the Great Hall of the National Gallery of Victoria. However, this kind of performance should be a sustained and regular show in Australia and other countries where batik has insinuated itself into people's fashion consciousness.

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