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PURSUITS FEATURE

OVER THE RAINBOW

In the life of an artist, something inexplicable happens when they embark on their pursuit of the fantastic; that perfect song, that amazing book, that magical show, an incredible painting. And somewhere along the way, they transcend the vicissitudes of life, in their desire to touch the heavens. In this month's issue of *The Peak*, we take a look at the Malaysian artists who have chased the dream, ultimately emerging in a land quite different from here.

Text Flavia Galeotti, Kenneth Tan, Michelle Liong & Weng Sheng Thong Photography Damien Khoo, Danny Lee, Law Soo Phye & Soon Lau

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DATIN MARION D'CRUZ
- *Dancer/Choreographer*

As one of Malaysia's pioneering contemporary dancer-choreographers and original founders of Five Arts Centre, established in 1984, D'Cruz's renown is indisputable. "When we started Five Arts Centre, we wanted to push the boundaries, in terms of alternative, experimental works, through the five arts of dance, theatre, creative writing, visual arts and anything else we wanted to do," explains D'Cruz. "The goal was to look at Malaysian creativity, works by locals and telling our country's story." Today, Five Arts Centre is headed by a body of 14 artists and producers.

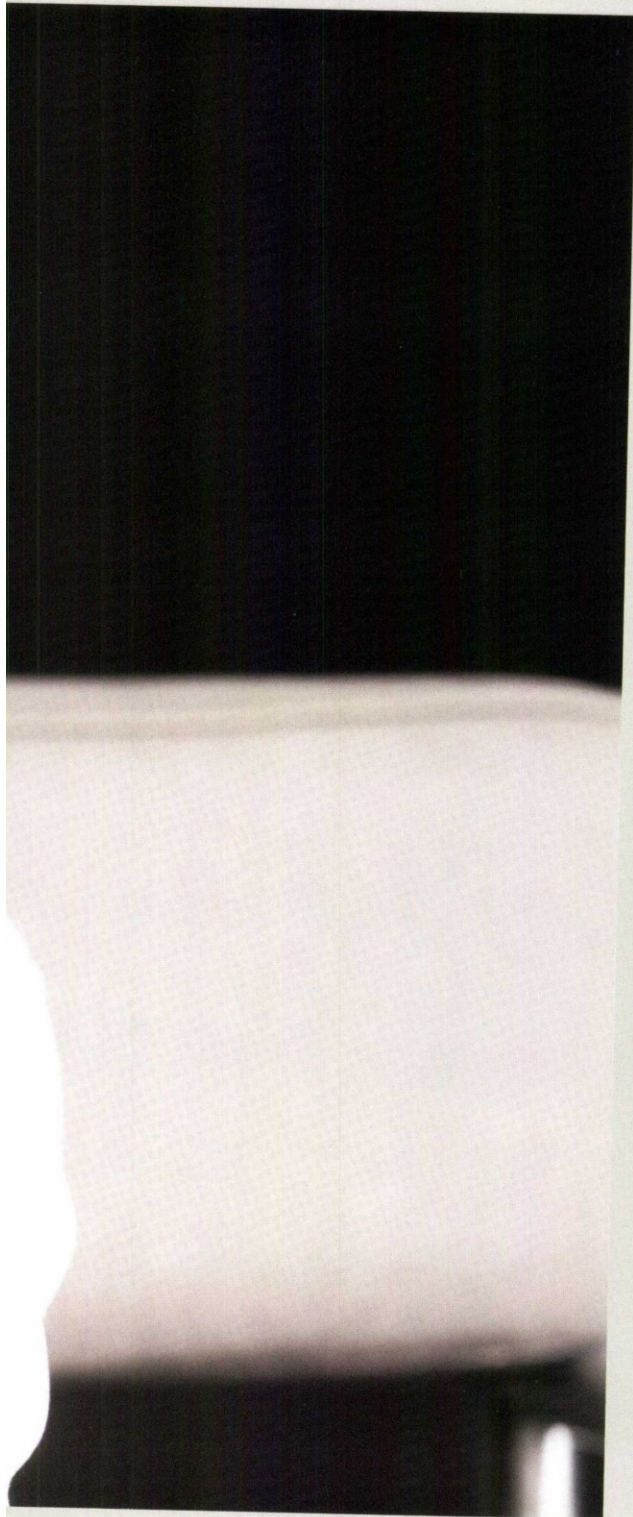
Although D'Cruz began dancing from an early age, she "wasn't the sort of person who wanted to be a dancer from six years old." Rather, "it all really started from being skinny and hunched over," D'Cruz recounts, adding: "and my mother became worried about this. At a doctor friend's urging, she enrolled me in dance classes to straighten my back. I went on to do ballet and continued to do lots of dancing after. Everything fell into place from there," she says. "I really believe a lot of my choreography is a gift from God. You still need to put in a lot of work, but you also need to have that talent within you. I'm also very lucky in the sense that I'm constantly inspired by everything around me or from what I read." And, with the winds of change sweeping across the Malaysian political scene, it is perhaps inevitable that D'Cruz has found herself drawn into the world of politics. "My recent works

draw from the state of the nation and have become more political in the last few years, especially after the General Elections of '08," D'Cruz explains. "A few years ago, I did a piece on the ISA, where I read out the names of the people who had been arrested under the Act. It was very profound and felt like a prayer or ritual."

Despite the success of her works, D'Cruz remains down to earth. "I live a very ordinary life," she says. From that life, however, comes a body of extraordinary work. One of D'Cruz's most extraordinary creations has to be 1988's *Urn Piece*, inspired by Leow Puay Tin's monologue, *Dream Country*. Throughout this story of a young girl taking her mother back to the old country to die, there is an overwhelming imagery of rivers, rain and tears to denote running water. It was this that inspired D'Cruz to stage *Urn Piece*, where three performers emerge from large water-filled urns. Last year, the Singapore Arts Festival recommissioned the show on a much greater scale, calling it *Dream Country: A Lost Monologue*, utilising 35 performers and 35 urns. "People still remember that piece very well," D'Cruz smiles. "While it's difficult to say that this is my favourite piece of work, it has been one of the most profound journeys in dance I've undertaken in my career."

*Marion D'Cruz, along with theatre directors Krishen Jit, her late husband, and Chin San Sooi, founded the Five Arts Centre in 1984. Some of D'Cruz's most renowned works include the solo performance *Costan Forward* (2009), *Bunga Mangga Bunga Raya* (2007), *Urn Piece* (1988) and *Swan Song* (1988).*

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TASH AW - *Writer*

Aw, as most writers are wont to do, feels uncomfortable when he doesn't get about 600 words in for the day. "When I don't, even if it's for a good reason, I feel slightly anxious," he says. His freshman effort, entitled *The Harmony Silk Factory*, was lauded by critics and long-listed for the 2005 Man Booker Prize as well as winning the First Novel Award at the same year's Whitbread Book Awards. When Aw returned to his seat after accepting that award, the celebrated British novelist, poet and playwright Dorris Lessing turned to him and said: "My advice to you is, don't believe the hype."

That advice, he says, is what has really helped him through his career as a writer. What he believes in is old-fashioned diligence. "My creativity lies in constancy – basically, the more I work and the more disciplined I am, that's what makes me feel more creative," he says. To feed it, Aw relies on a plethora of references: televisions, films, food and plenty of pop references, by

virtue of the author's own penchant for 'bad pop music'. For his latest novel, *Five Star Billionaire*, Aw had moved to Shanghai and lived there – on and off – for about a year before the story came to him. "I was struck by how so many foreigners were drawn there, by the fantastic opportunities that China represented for making money, in particular, and also making a new life."

While deadlines figure as motivation as much as constancy, Aw also treasures the times when he is handed artistic license by the muses. "When I was about 15, some friends in school and I wrote short stories and bound them together with manila cardboard," he reminisces. "We folded them into half, stapled them together and published them as books. After that, everything became quite serious and earnest, but that early memory is something that always comes back to me."

Tash Aw's recently published Five Star Billionaire is his third novel.

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PURSUITS FEATURE

BERNARD GOH – *Painter, Percussionist and Founder of Hands Percussion*

Goh has a simple goal: to share the Malaysian story with the world. “We live in a country with such a rich culture that, at times, it feels almost overwhelming,” he says. “If you are a creative person in this environment, you can’t help but feel the need to create something to express the identity of the people here.” This sentiment led to Goh’s partnership with Eric Ch’ng to form the award-winning Hands Percussion in 1997.

It is in Goh’s character to pay meticulous attention to detail, with a zero tolerance for shortcuts. “Many of the members in Hands are very young, so, while they have plenty of great ideas, they also tend to take a lot of shortcuts, copying ideas off the Internet,” he says. “I say no shortcuts! It doesn’t work performing arts. You need to start from the basics.” Ignoring the many complaints from his team that they were ‘bored’ of repeating simple practices, he and his team went to China to learn the fundamentals of playing the Chinese *shigu* drum. “Practice is a must to master the art,” he insists. “Otherwise, you are fooling yourself and

the audience – you might have that wow factor but you’re just a one-trick pony as it doesn’t have true and lasting meaning.”

However, with fame, there inevitably comes criticism. Goh recalls the advice of his late teacher: “People will criticise you all the time. So, just accept it and move on.” It has been this mindset that has enabled Goh to create art in a wholly original fashion, incorporating a variety of traditional instrument, such as the Chinese *shigu* drum, Malay gamelan and Indian table, in his musical ensemble. While praised for his unique style, Goh has also drawn criticism from hidebound conservatives, who balk at seeing traditional instruments used in such outlandish manner. Goh, however, is unperturbed. “I want us to be the next voice for Malaysian percussion,” he says, referring to his 2012 show, *The Next*. “I want to take traditional Malay, Chinese and Indian instruments, and let them resonate in a Malaysian fashion. Why? Because I am Malaysian and it is my culture.”

In 2009, Hands Percussion made a guest appearance at the International Folkloriada Competition in Dijon, France, and was such a success that it was awarded a special trophy, the first of its kind in the festival’s 60-year history.

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ISMAIL HASHIM – Teacher, Artist

For Ismail, his fondest memories as an art teacher occurred when he was attached to the Federation School for the Deaf in Penang. Teaching art to the deaf children was, for him, a joy. This was primarily because the conventional walls were not erected between the artist and his work. “Children begin with their imaginations – a cat larger than a house or pregnant teachers with durians and mangosteens in their bellies,” says Ismail. “It’s when we start correcting them that barriers come up and their creativity is stunted.”

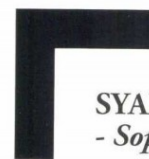
This Penang native would know a thing or two about that, having lived a vivid early life. He says he grew up in a world encouraged by wondrous imagination, aided and abetted by friends who were equally as creative with their stories of bogeymen and magic. After the war, he was captivated by the magic of Tan Sri P Ramlee, whose own creative genius inspired the young Ismail to dedicate himself to art, going all the way to a Master of Fine Arts degree from Washington State University. Today, a much-older Ismail is renowned for his series of hand-tinted paintings, a particular niche that he has come to inhabit. “It was all that photorealism in art – where paintings looked

like photos – that inspired me to do this,” he says. “In these pictures, you can feel the presence of the painter; it’s as though someone exists between the viewer and the piece.”

For a long time, despite having secured acclaim for his works of art, Ismail had resisted putting a show together until four years ago, when he held his first solo show on Armenian Street in Penang. This was followed by a state-sponsored retrospective the following year, an indication of the large body of work that he had accrued over the years. “In art, you can’t take away the aesthetics – the first person you have to please is yourself,” he states. That flow of original ideas gushes out as a torrent for Ismail. “I get my best ideas when I’m taking a bath and then the ideas flood in so quickly that it’s difficult for the body to keep up,” he laments. He admits to feeling lucky, that he can be carried away by his work. For him, art is a shy lover and one must be original in approaching it. Cliches would not work. “Art is something sacred,” he muses, before adding with a smile, “you can’t cheat.”

At the Henry Butcher Art Auction 2012, Ismail Hashim’s hand-tinted Kedai Gunting sold for RM24,200, three times its lower estimate. He passed away on 22 June this year at the age of 73.

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SYAFINAZ SELAMAT - Soprano / Singer

"I come from a family where everyone loves to sing. My mom, who is now 83 years old, has her own karaoke set and she takes on the role of sound engineer or deejay during family occasions," Syafinaz says of her musical provenance. In fact, she was only nine when her talent was discovered by Radio Television Malaysia (RTM). Her sister, then an employee of RTM, was looking for child singers for one of the radio programmes and, thereafter, began life on the road for Syafinaz. "My father would drive me to places whenever I had recordings. The opportunity to travel really thrilled me!" says the effervescent songbird.

With that early exposure, the ensuring attentions of national television and radio would serve to put Syafinaz on track to a musical career. It was during her pursuit of a classical music degree at University Teknologi Mara (UiTM), however, that Syafinaz stumbled into what would prove to be a life-long affair, losing her heart to opera. In time, the arias of Puccini, Bellini and Verdi would be second nature to Syafinaz and she hit an apogee when performing as the solo soprano

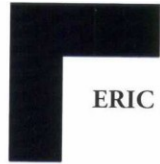
in Carl Orff's *Carmina Burana*, backed by a hundred-strong choir from the National Symphony Orchestra.

"Though piano was my first musical instrument, my forte would always be the opera," she says. In her education, she has had to traverse the miles, spending up to a month in Germany under the tutelage of her voice coach Maria Heidrun Hahn. From another teacher, Siti Chairani Proehoeman from Indonesia, Syafinaz is reminded that the better she becomes, "the more humble she needs to be." This advice has kept her feet firmly planted to the ground as she carves out a unique niche in the industry with her brand of singing – a combination of pop influences and classical forms.

To succeed in such an esoteric genre, the artiste has had to dig deep. "The technique is the key," she reveals. This fundamental element is what she builds her body of work on. "Once you've got it, anything else is easy."

Syafinaz currently lectures at her alma mater, the International College of Music (ICOM), and National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage (ASWARA), and holds the positions of vocal master with the National Choir of Malaysia and choir director at Permata Seni Negara.

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ERIC PERIS – *Photographer*

The first time Peris ever handled a camera was as a child in Johor Baru. “A Chinese auntie gave me a Kodak box camera when I was about 10 or 11,” Peris recalls. Beyond being a school curricular activity, photography wasn’t something that had played much of a role in his life until he went to Singapore and became a journalist and photographer. It was a fateful trip in 1972 to Kedah that ignited Peris’ passion for his craft and his subject: Malaysia. “That trip changed my mind in understanding the Malaysian landscape – from the rice bowl of Malaysia, Kedah, to the tin centre of Malaysia, Perak; it opened my eyes. I wasn’t interested in photojournalism as such, but I was more fascinated in recording the country.”

As the son of two painters, it might seem a little unusual that Peris became a photographer. “I learnt painting from my father but he didn’t want me to be an artist. He said, ‘You can’t survive as an artist in this country, but if you want to learn, go ahead!’” Peris says. “But I was more interested in photography. Being in the press is where your pictures are of the ‘there and now’; you become the eyes for the public. You have to get the kind of pictures that the reader might not be able to see and then you have to do your best

to work with what you have.”

Peris largely credits his late parents for their guidance as well as his Buddhist faith in his life and influences in his art. The concept of impermanence – that everything eventually dies, making life more precious – is something that he is always mindful of. “I learned that from the Dharma and I try to apply that in my photography.” His trademark black-and-whites are not only aesthetic but also an exploration of the light and dark sides of life.

Peris is self-taught and with good reason. “I didn’t read books on photography as I didn’t want to be influenced by the works of other photographers,” he says. “I’m an Asian; we have our own philosophy and culture, and we look at things completely different from what a Western photographer would see.” He quotes his father: “Learn the rules, and then break them. Then you will have your own rules, and you break that again.”

23 of the 41 original images from Eric Peris’ Tin Mine Landscapes collection have been preserved in digital format and will be presented for the first time as a series since the 1970s at Shalini Ganendra Fine Art gallery from August to October this year.

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CHANG FEE MING – *Watercolourist*

Even as a child in the small coastal kampong of Dungun, Terengganu, Chang's artistic nature had always made itself known. "I still remember my first drawing was made using a wooden stick on the beach... a huge fish!" Despite dropping out of school in Form Three and, with that, forgoing the chance to receive formal training in art school, Chang hasn't stopped drawing since that first experiment in the sand. To call him a self-taught artist is somewhat of an understatement.

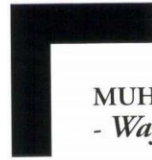
To this day, it's the scenes of his hometown on the east coast of Malaysia that largely inspire his kaleidoscopic paintings. His works of art produce a distinctly Malaysian watercolour creation – "Batik cloth hanging on a line in the village, a market scene, especially the combination of the *makcik* wearing colourful sarong with all kinds of vegetation, tropical fruits and flowers; everything is just so, so colourful." It's this defining style that has established him as one of the best watercolourists in Malaysia, especially his enduringly popular window batik series of the late 1980s. His proudest moment came in the form of a note from a major American collector, which said: "Your

painting now hangs on my wall with the entire Wyeth family works". Chang explains: "The late Andrew Wyeth is the watercolourist I respect most." To have his painting amidst the seminal works of Wyeth is an honour Chang has self-deprecatingly placed higher than anything he has achieved so far.

Chang first worked with oils before switching to watercolours – "I found the medium more suitable for me" – and thus set the trajectory for his artistic career. It is also a medium that lends itself well to travelling, something Chang now does a lot of: his latest project sees him venturing to Kelantan and South Thailand to discover the area around the Isthmus of Kra, "for my future work based on what I call my Langkasuka and Funan mission" he explains. Last year, Chang travelled from Phnom Penh to Oc Eco in Vietnam through the Mekong Delta, following the trade route of merchants from India to China. "As an artist, I am full of imagination and wish to capture the faces of people that recall this epoch along my journey in that region."

Chang Fee Ming's The Trail of Zheng He-Semarang went for RM165,000 at an auction of modern and contemporary Malaysian art this year, significantly higher than the estimated RM100,000

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MUHAMMAD DAIN OTHMAN
- Wayang Kulit Maker, Master Puppeteer

In the hinterland where the art of *wayang kulit* (or shadow play) is alive and well, there lived a teenager who never missed a single show. Here, in the tiny village of Kampung Tebakat in Kelantan, the boy assiduously attended each performance, after which he would practise the voices made by the master puppeteer, also known as *tok dalang*. In time, he, too, would develop the signature falsetto that was necessary to the art of *wayang kulit*. However, in the deepest recesses of his mind, this young man was perturbed when thinking about the future of this art – wondering if it could withstand the test of time.

That teenager, by the name of Muhammad Dain Othman, would grow up to be fondly known as Pak Daim, a sobriquet that he earned from familiarity and popularity. Today, the 61-year-old Pak Daim is the only *tok dalang* who holds the title of *perlimau* (a *wayang kulit* graduate) in Malaysia. He represents the 11th generation in a line of master puppeteers, each of whom received tutelage from the foremost *wayang kulit* exponent of the day. Pak Daim's own mentor was none other than the late Hamzah Awang Amat – who was awarded the National Artist accolade for his contributions to *wayang kulit*.

Pak Daim, a teacher by profession, would spend his free time performing in a troupe at the Kota Baru


Arts and Cultural Centre. And, with time, the idea of conserving this art for posterity grew stronger than ever.

“Ever since I graduated from university in the 1980s, my love for this art has increased day by day – hence, the setting up of a *wayang kulit* gallery to preserve this particular craft,” Pak Daim says. With the money he had saved, plus a grant of RM48,000 from the Government, the *Wayang Kulit Melayu Tradisional Kelantan* gallery was birthed in Tumpat, Kelantan, five years ago.

Inside, one finds *wayang kulit* masterpieces as old as 200 years, treasures passed on from one generation of *tok dalangs* to the next. Along with these historical pieces are some contemporary works and a space where visitors can make their own puppets and learn the rudiments of *wayang kulit*. For Pak Daim, this place is as close to home as it can be and he never tires of being here, whether alone or in the company of visitors. “The gallery is my life’s asset and, even when I die, without a *tok dalang* to replace me, the art will continue to live in this gallery and the heart of its visitors.” ■

In his bid to keep wayang kulit alive, Pak Daim is now collaborating with designer Tintoy Chuo to create puppets in the form of characters from the Star Wars films. The effort will climax in Peperangan Bintang Wayang Kulit, a retelling of the Star Wars saga but done in the traditional wayang kulit way. The performance debuts in Kuala Lumpur sometime next year.

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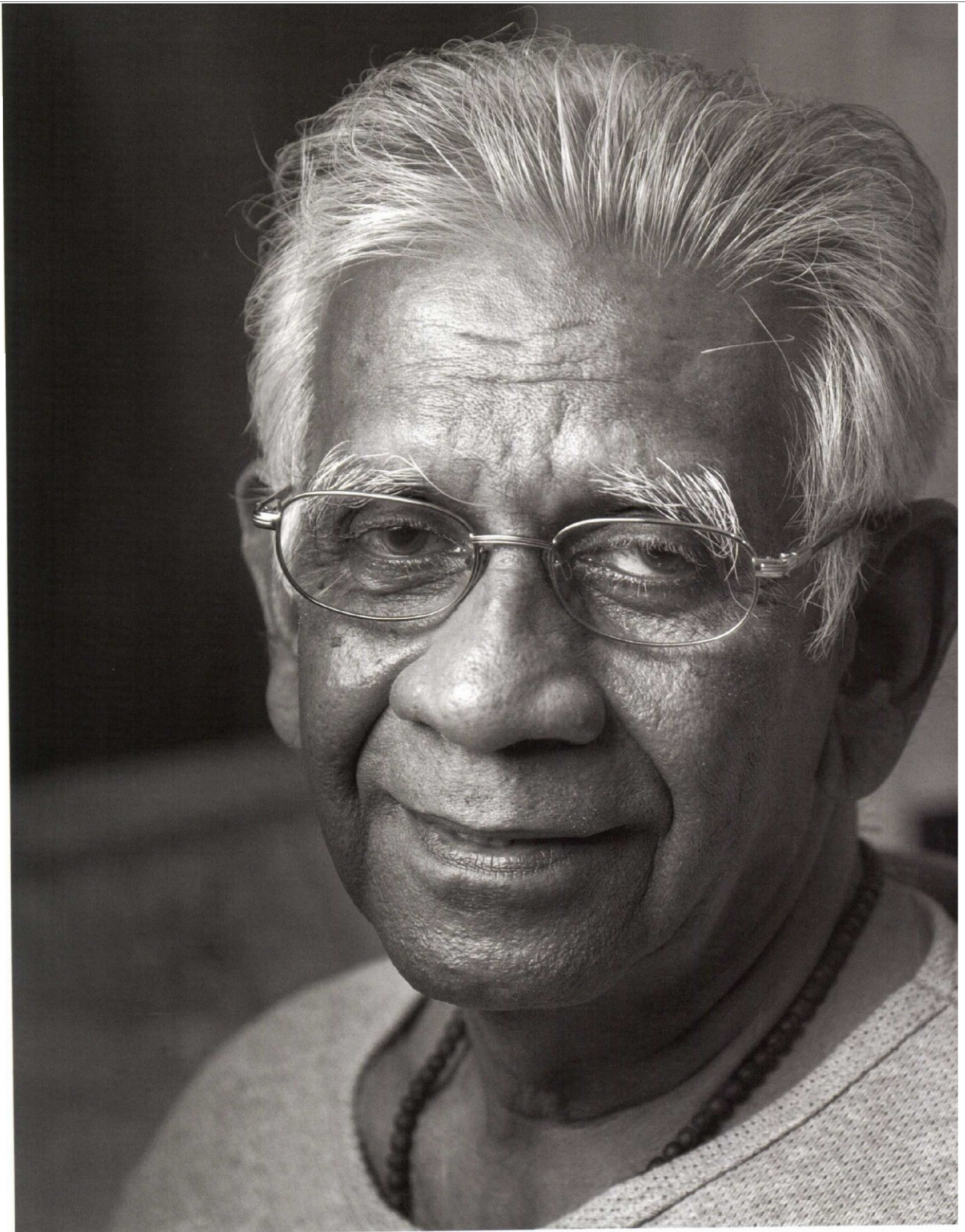
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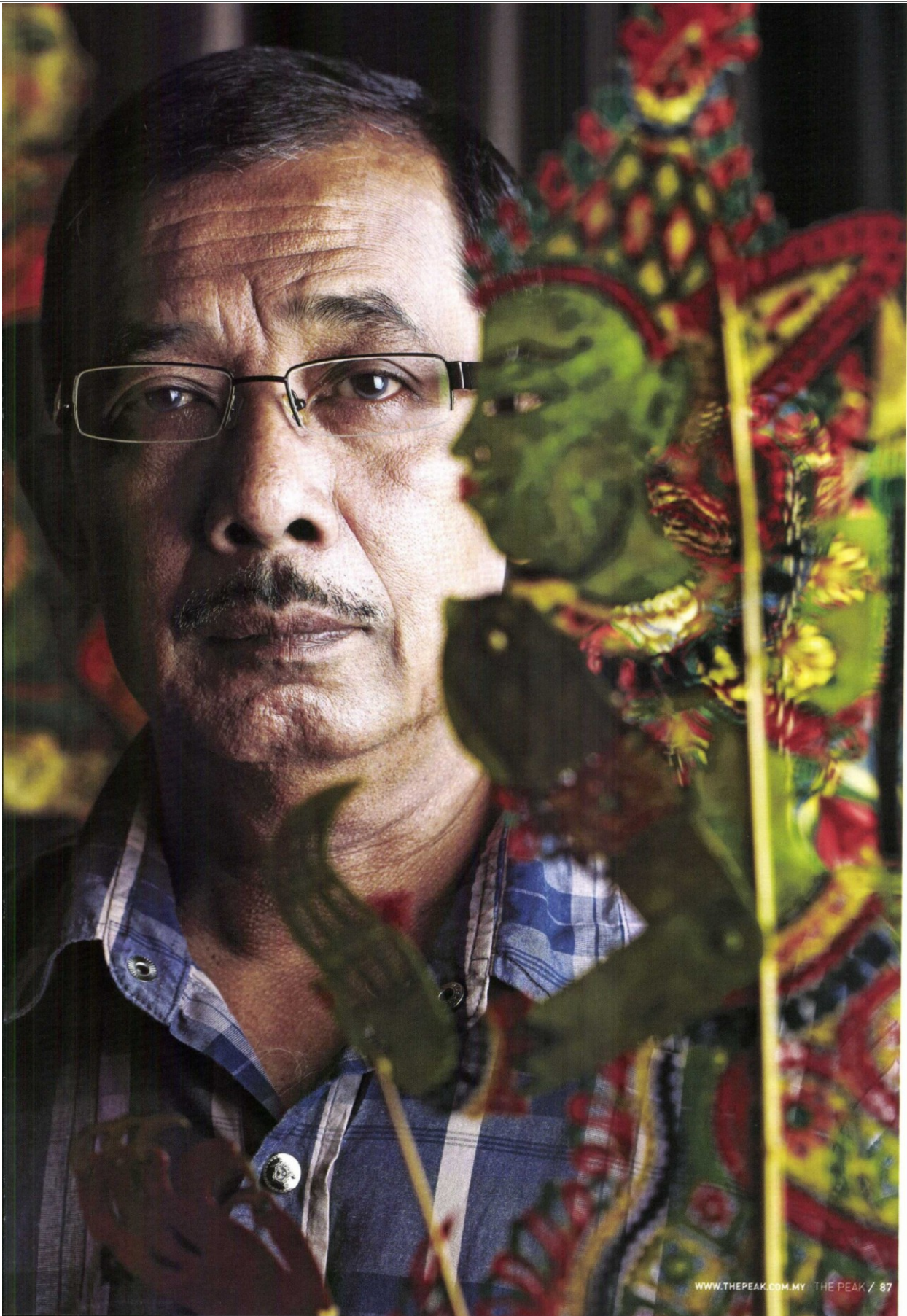
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