



**H**omegrown music theatre company Dama Orchestra commands a certain respect, not just on the local arts scene, but also abroad in places where it has performed like China, Singapore, Australia and Indonesia. Many of its original music theatre works are critically acclaimed and have gone on to win awards.

To be able to come up with works that are both commercial and critical successes time and again is no mean feat. The creative duo behind these works — the group's founder and music director Khor Seng Chew and artistic director Pun Kai Loon — say with each new production, they're pushing the envelope in challenging themselves artistically and musically. The result is emotive works that are mesmerising in presentation and solid in musicality.

Khor and Pun were looking to stage a musical to celebrate Dama Orchestra's 15th anniversary this year that would reflect its story. They decided on *I Have a Date with Spring*, a play written by Hong Kong dramatist and film director Raymond To, which was adapted for a multiple award-winning film of the same name in 1994 and a TV series in 1995.

Set in the 1960s to the 1980s, the play follows the dreams, hopes, aspirations, love and trials of four singers who become the best of friends while working together at a well-known nightclub. The four eventually move on to individual pursuits, with Butterfly Yiu becoming the most celebrated singer. Some years later, they return to perform a benefit concert at the soon-to-be-closed nightclub. Being back at the venue that holds so many memories, Yiu has to come to terms with the ghosts of her past.

"When I watched the film [*I Have a Date with Spring*], the thing that attracted me was the humanism and realism of the story," says Pun. "A lot of Hong Kong, Chinese movies are action-packed, comedy-based, which is not the kind of story I have an affinity to. When I saw this, I thought 'here is a story rich in character, rich in layers of issues, which are very real to us'. The essence of it is actually a celebration of friendship... the enduring kind."

He continues, "I was reflecting on Dama's situation, and how it has come through 15 years, and how most musicians who started with us are still around... We have gone through trials and tribulations, we have fought among ourselves but at the end of the day, the beautiful thing is that we still stick together and are still working on something we love best — playing music and performing on stage. In a sense, it's a metaphor. Their friendship [reflects] ours. We share common threads in our development."

Pun says Dama Orchestra managed to stay intact as a group all these years in spite of disagreements and quarrels because of a shared passion for music and theatre. The group also survived a devastating flood in 2003 that wiped out their office in Dataran Merdeka. They lost the bulk of their music and reference materials from the 1970s right up to 2003 (that Khor had painstakingly sourced and collected) and musical instruments, among other things.

According to Pun, they would not be here today if not for kind-hearted and



## An enduring friendship

Dama Orchestra celebrates 15 years of sticking together with musical *I Have a Date with Spring*

generous corporations and individuals.

Both he and Khor talk about the milestones that the orchestra has achieved and how it has evolved from a strictly Chinese instrumental group performing mostly Chinese works when it started in 1994, to one of the most renowned music theatre companies in Malaysia today. Pun says when the 1997/98 Asian financial crisis struck, the orchestra had to be downsized, which was when they decided to venture into music theatre. The first musical, *Spring Kisses Loves Tears*, is still one of its most successful musicals.

"That work was a documentation of all the songstresses and actresses who contributed to Chinese music development," he says.

"We had an extended run and people were even buying standing tickets. It was such a relief for us. We were a music theatre group, no longer just an instrumental group. We felt we had made the right decision and we continued from there. That was a life-changing direction for Dama."

Dama Orchestra staged *Spring Kisses Loves Tears* in China with much success. That was a significant achievement as the group was performing in the heartland of Chinese orchestral music. Pun recalls: "After the first run, the technical head gave me a bear hug. He told me, 'China can do a lot of productions like yours, mid-sized but still tastefully done'. For them to say that was what China needed... it was a good achievement for us."

When Dama Orchestra staged *Butterfly Loves in Perth* some years ago, the experience was somewhat similar in that they were viewed with scepticism at first but were vindicated by their stellar production. "After the curtain call, the applause was so rousing, much louder than what we had in Malaysia. It lasted easily for 15 minutes. After the show, people were milling outside waiting to congratulate us on a show well done. It is this kind of encouragement that sustains our energy. We had wanted to give up many times," says Pun.

Having done several original music theatre works, Khor and Pun felt they could take on something more challenging — to adapt *I Have a Date with Spring*, a dramatic work, for a musical.

The music in the production reflects the three decades that the play spans — the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Khor says that in a way, the musical charts the development of Chinese pop songs over that period of time. He explains that the 1960s were the heyday of Chinese golden oldies in Hong Kong. This was also when Chinese pop songs started to develop with the rise of Western music influences, such as The Beatles, Elvis Presley, Doris Day and The Everly Brothers, among others. The 1970s saw the rise in popularity of Taiwanese pop songs while Cantonese pop songs ruled the music scene in the 1980s.

Khor says they scanned thousands of songs before finally picking 30 to incorporate into the story. "It was not just the song itself; the mood had to be right, the lyrics and the rhythm as well. We needed to find a song that fitted that particular moment — it was not an easy task. There were a lot of songs that were suitable for that moment in terms of lyrics, but the flow of the music, rhythm and tempo [were not], so that made it even more challenging. There were a lot of songs we liked but could not use," he adds.

With more than 30 cast members, the musical is Dama Orchestra's biggest to date and is the first time both Chinese and English-speaking performing arts practitioners have come together in a Chinese musical. Dama Orchestra's award-winning resident singer Tan Soo Suan holds the title role.

If past productions are anything to go by, audiences can expect the same tight storytelling, beautiful sets and costumes and, of course, moving music in the musical *I Have a Date with Spring*.

*I Have a Date with Spring* will be staged in Cantonese with English surtitles from Oct 10 to 25 at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, Sentral Park, Jalan Stesen, off Jalan Ipoh, KL. Tickets are RM60 to RM235 for the Wednesday to Thursday shows and RM75 to RM275 for the Friday to Sunday shows. Call the box office at (03) 4047 9000 or Access at (03) 7711 5000.



Pun and Khor are the creative force behind Dama Orchestra's critically acclaimed music theatre works