

## An Interview with Mr G.T. Lye

*Mr G.T. Lye - Recipient of the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Award 2020*



Left: G.T. Lye (seated), G.T. Lye (standing)

Image Credit: National Heritage Board

<b>Culture Academy</b>	Congratulations on receiving the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award! Please introduce Dondang Sayang to our readers.
G.T. Lye	Dondang Sayang of old is the spontaneous singing of pantun (poetry) in Malay or Peranakan accompanied by music. Anything could be a subject and singers would challenge each other on subjects such as Love, Beatitudes, Animals, Birds. It can go on for hours on end. You have to be quick and witty with a strong command of the language, and a wide vocabulary to create poems called pantun. It is not easy, especially since you have to juggle the rhythm and beat as well. Today, Dondang Sayang is different. It is more structured. Rather than spontaneous pantuns, singers would memorise and sing old pantuns.
<b>Culture Academy</b>	How did you master the art of Dondang Sayang?
G.T. Lye	My late father is an expert in pantun. From dusk till dawn, he would be singing Dondang Sayang. So, I grew up listening and passively absorbing the intricacies of pantun without any deliberate effort to learn them. No one knew that I was able

	<p>to create my own pantun until my late 30s, when I joined the Gunong Sayang Association. There, we had weekly sessions of Dondang Sayang. People began to recognize my flair for the art. When the news reached my father's ears, he just had to see it for himself. So, he went to the association, even though he was in a wheelchair, and challenged me to Dondang Sayang.</p> <p>He was shocked to learn that I was able to match and return his lines, even though I was new to Dondang Sayang, while he was an expert. It became very emotional for us and we ended the session in an embrace. Then, he gave me one simple advice, he said, "if you are really interested in Dondang Sayang, there is only one rule, you must sing audibly. Otherwise, you are wasting everyone's time".</p>
Culture Academy	Besides Dondang Sayang, you are also recognized for your contribution in reviving wayang Peranakan in Singapore. How did that happen?
G.T. Lye	<p>In 1984, the Ministry of Culture put up a call for actors to perform Wayang  Peranakan. The play was Pilih Menantu (Choosing in-law). I applied for the role of the father and I was accepted, even though I had no prior experience acting in Wayang Peranakan. We were very successful, which made the Gunong Sayang Association realize- that there are real money-making prospects for it.</p> <p>One of the key characters of Wayang Peranakan is the matriarch. They are fascinating and unforgettable characters. However, the association was unable to find a good matriarch actor, and so I volunteered to play the role. Initially, everyone disagreed because I've never done it before. Fortunately, Mr Kwek Choon Chuan, vetoed their decision and allowed me to become the matriarch. At that time, I told everyone that I am only doing it until they can find a replacement, then I'll bow out. But I ended up doing it till today!</p>
Culture Academy	Having no experience at all, what gave you the confidence to act as a female impersonator?
G.T. Lye	<p>Even though there were female actors in 1984, before that, women were not allowed on stage. At that time, it was considered unbecoming to see ladies acting. Hence, all female roles were taken by impersonators.</p> <p>I remember watching the female impersonators from the Wayang Peranakan performances of the 1950s. I also had first-hand experiences living with the actual old peranakan matriarchs – the good, the bad, the ugly. So, it was very natural for me to emulate them from memory. They were a part of me.</p>
Culture Academy	As the doyen of female impersonators, what is your advice for female impersonators today?
G.T. Lye	For my first performance, I told myself that I must do my job so well that no one will believe that I am an impersonator. That was when I used the initials of my Chinese name as my stage name – G.T. Lye. It also helped that I was blessed with a naturally feminine voice and so when I acted as an impersonator for the first time, no one thought that the matriarch on stage is a man.

	<p>So, my advice to female impersonators today is to always impersonate naturally. Forget that you're a man. Imagine yourself as a matriarch to the point that the audience won't believe otherwise. Similar to Noh theatre, the moment the male actor goes on stage as a woman, he is transformed into genuine femininity. If you're an impersonator, you must make people forget that you're an impersonator.</p>
Culture Academy	What is your most unforgettable role?
G.T. Lye	<p>My favourite role was when I acted as the matriarch with an adopted unfilial son, who tried to disown me. When I did that role, I created some of the scenes, which were not in the script. It really touched the audience. The audience were crying and sobbing for all five nights of our performance. It was very beautiful.</p>
Culture Academy	Do you miss the freedom of ad-libbing at Wayang Peranakan productions?
G.T. Lye	<p>I always improvise from the script because I feel that I could make it better. When I improvise, the crowd enjoys it because it comes out naturally. I prefer not to utter the script word by word, instead, I gather its meaning and I create my performance from it. When you get the meaning and translate something into your style, it's no longer reading a script, but a natural performance.</p> <p>But, just like Dondang Sayang, improvisation requires the attention of the other actors, who can catch on and be witty in the conversation. This is very difficult and could sometimes shock my fellow actors. When I see that happening, I'll have to bring them back with a prompt. But improvisation sometimes lengthens the story significantly and so directors are not always in favour of it.</p>
Culture Academy	For many of your fans, your performances go far beyond the fourth wall. Could you share an experience of this?
G.T. Lye	<p>Yes. Once, when I was returning from Malacca, I met an old Malay lady. When she recognized me as the actor for a TV drama, Menyesal, she began to cry, hug and kiss me. I was absolutely shocked. "What happened?" I asked. And she explained that her only son had married a wife that was rude to her. Things got so bad that they were not on talking terms. One day, they were both watching the drama Menyesal together on TV. Menyesal, which means regret, centres around a daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship. Because of the similarity in what was portrayed and their own experiences, after the show was over, the old lady's daughter-in-law turned around and knelt for her forgiveness. Since then, the old lady and her daughter-in-law became very close. I was very touched to know that the message of our show had gone through.</p>
Culture Academy	What does this award mean to you?
G.T. Lye	<p>This really came as a surprise. This recognition is very encouraging and makes me want to carry on acting even though I am 81 years old. The award is important because it allows more people to know about the intangible artforms, it also becomes internationally known and so it encourages more participation by the younger generation.</p>

	<p>I never thought that there would be such an award or that I would receive one. At my age, it is almost belated. Like many former heart throbs, when they passed on, no one remembers them. So being well-known is momentary. The most important thing is to make people happy in the good and proper way.</p>
<b>Culture Academy</b>	<p>Is there anything you'll like to say to the young readers of our newsletter?</p>
G.T. Lye	<p>I want to share my knowledge on Peranakan culture with the younger generation. Over the years, I've helped many students on their academic pieces or simply to learn about peranakan culture, be it festivals, cooking, dressing or weddings. I've also played a part in guiding young actors and directors in all things peranakan. Through the years, I've assisted many famous impersonators to help their career take-off. Recently, I wrote a pantun on betel nut, which was translated into a modern dance. This is quite wonderful.</p> <p>So, for those who are interested, I ask them to come to me directly.</p>