

An Interview with Mr Adel Ahmad – Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd

Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd - Recipient of the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award 2020



Culture Academy	Congratulations to Sri Warisan for receiving the Stewards of Intangible Cultural Heritage Award! Please introduce yourself and your role in Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts Ltd for our readers
Adel Ahmad	My name is Adel Ahmad and I am the managing director of Sri Warisan. I manage the running of the company, the arts education programmes, general performances, community outreach, as well as, both overseas festivals and local production.
Culture Academy	Tell us about Sri Warisan Som Said Performing Arts. What do you guys do and what sets you apart?
Adel Ahmad	Sri Warisan started out around 23 years ago with the mission and vision to make the arts accessible to all. We established ourselves as a professional performing arts company that promotes and preserves Singapore's cultural heritage, especially the Malay performance arts.
Culture Academy	How have you continued and expanded on the vision of Sri Warisan's founder, Madam Som Said?

Adel Ahmad	<p>When Sri Warisan first started, Madam Som was focused on improving the arts education programme. Back in the 1980s, schools had few avenues for performance arts beyond the recorder, band or choir. It was most certainly lacking in the traditional arts. Madam Som Said wanted to have school students better understand their own cultures. As part of Sriwana, she wanted to promote Malay Dance - Angklung, Kompang and Dikir Barat, together with the National Arts Council's arts education programme in 1983. Later, Madam Som Said set up Sri Warisan in 1997 with 6 part-time instructors who triple-hat as dancers and administrators. Demand for arts education have since expanded. Today, we are able to do this full time with 15 full timers, 15 part timers and 200 student members. We also expanded our arts education programmes from 5 schools to 130 schools per year.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>Sri Warisan have found many innovative ways to blend tradition with contemporary techniques. What is your creative process?</p>
Adel Ahmad	<p>Our multiethnic component owes a debt to Madam Som's personal experience as a dancer at the national dance company. She had regular exposure to many types of dances, which she learnt from her friends at the company. Now, our dance instructors are also trained in the same spirit. We collaborate with other dance companies such as Dance Ensemble Singapore, Bhaskar's Arts Academy and Apsaras Arts and Jiggri Yaar Bhangra. As part of our routine, we incorporate elements such as the Malay, Chinese, Indian and Bhangra dance.</p> <p>When it comes to multimedia, we approach new innovations step by step. For example, one of our contemporary dance productions uses an LED wall. With the LED wall, dancers could interact with the background giving rise to a new segment. Similarly, we adapted the LED wall to wayang kulit. The actors interact with the puppets that is live streamed on the LED wall. We also used the LED wall at the Kallang Theatre. This allowed us to perform to about 1000 seats, for 4 shows a day. In 2012, we have a production called Bendahara in 2012 that made use of the full space of the Kallang theatre.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>Have you considered using hologram technology?</p>
Adel Ahmad	<p>We have, but the technology is very expensive. Being on stage for a week is about \$70,000. We have been considering it for about 6 years.</p>
Culture Academy	<p>I see, let's talk about the elephant in the room, what is the impact of Covid-19 on Sri Warisan?</p>
Adel Ahmad	<p>Despite the many obvious challenges, there has been a silver lining; Covid-19 have helped to speed up our digitalization efforts. Many years ago, we started our youtube channel and began putting up our past productions. With Covid-19 and the help from NAC's digital production grants etc, we were able to put up ten arts education programmes as digital content.</p> <p>We converted the usual school programmes such as Dikir Barat, Kompang, Angklung and Wayang Kulit, into digital content. This was originally in our next 3 to 5</p>

	<p>year plan. However, we have sped it up and so, this is something good that have come out of the Covid-19 situation.</p> <p>Digitalization have changed the way we do things. In the past, we take photos and put them on physical boards. Now it's putting it on instagram and reaching out to the audience has become much faster.</p>
Culture Academy	How do you encourage the uninitiated to better appreciate traditional performances?
Adel Ahmad	<p>Let me give you an example from my personal experience. In the 1980s and 1990s, interest in the wayang kulit have largely died off. However, because of my personal interest, I wanted to refine the traditional artform. So together with friends, we started to bring masters of wayang kulit for performances and workshops in Singapore around the year 2000. We also went to Indonesia, Bali, Yogyakarta, Jakarta, to learn more about pedagogy - how to teach and perform wayang kulit in the traditional way. Our next step was to make Wayang Kulit relevant for the Singapore community. Instead of the traditional folklores from Mahabharata and Ramayana, we used more familiar stories of Hang Tuah, Badang, how Singapore was started. We also realized that youth don't really know the superheroes of the old legends, and so we added superman and the avengers. By using contemporary and familiar culture, we pull the audience back into traditional artforms.</p>
Culture Academy	Since then, how have overseas collaborations helped to refine, improve, and develop Sri Warisan's performances?
Adel Ahmad	<p>We perform in 5 to 10 countries every year. Ever since I got back from studying in Canada in 2000, one of our ambitions was for Singapore's traditional art scene to travel the world. We aimed to travel to 100 cities in 20 years. We were able to complete that goal even earlier with about 101 cities in 40 countries in less than 20 years - we have been to all the continents except Antarctica!</p> <p>When we go overseas, we go together in collaborations with other artists such as dance ensemble as well as musicians from Sri Mahligai, Orchestra Sri Temasek, OrkeStar Trio. There is strong kampong spirit among us. We go overseas performing as one. This keeps us competitive with the best of the best in the international arena.</p>
Culture Academy	What does the term 'intangible culture' mean to you? And what are some aspects of Singapore's intangible culture that you value most?
Adel Ahmad	In the words of Madam Som, for all in Sri Warisan, intangible culture is about interchanging the seeds of wisdom in performance art; it is all about respect, care, share and love. For her, it's more of improving the cultural, artistic and aesthetic values of the production. For me, I think intangible culture is for everybody. There is increasing recognition that the intangible is valued. It is priceless.