

Dama Orchestra have been going places, and they're going again. Their next stop will see them performing – in Mandarin, no less – to audiences in Perth, Australia.

By CHRISTY YOONG

IT HAS been about taking slow but steady steps. In the 13 years since it made its debut, Dama Orchestra has established a reputation for praiseworthy productions, meticulous preparations and inspiring presentations.

Building on milestone upon milestone – "You don't run before learning how to walk," is how Dama artistic director Pun Kai Loon describes it – they have won accolades and a passionate following.

Next up is another stepping stone: a stint in Perth's His Majesty's Theatre, home to the West Australian Opera and the West Australian Ballet.

Slated to perform on the very boards that accommodated Dame Nellie Melba, Vivien Leigh, Sir Robert Helpman, Sir John Gielgud, Rex Harrison and Katherine Hepburn, among others, Dama will be presenting its highly-successful musical tale of star-crossed lovers and unfulfilled love, *Butterfly Lovers*, from June 7 to 9.

It all began during Dama's inaugural run of *Butterfly Lovers* at the KL Performing Arts Centre in September/October last year.

"A member of the audience came up to us after one of our shows and he had enjoyed it so much that he wondered if we'd like to put it up in Australia," Pun explains.

"At first, we didn't think much about the offer but, later, this Australian company, the Hawaiian Management Group, contacted us

# Building bridges Down Under



From left: Dama Orchestra's artistic director Pun Kai Loon, CEO of HELP International, and Dama's musical director, Khor Seng Chew in the Perth theatre in which Dama will be staging *Butterfly Lovers*. - Photos courtesy of Dama Orchestra

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PUN KAI LOON

and repeated the offer.

"Only then did we realise that they were serious about taking us to Perth."

The first thing Dama did was study the feasibility of taking the show to Australia.

After all, it would be more than just taking a bunch of musicians and their instruments on a roadshow. There are also sets, props and costumes from what is Dama's most elaborate production so far, and a cast and crew that numbered 50 people.

Logistics were weighed and trips to Perth were arranged. In the end, it was too good an offer to refuse, which was when the really hard work began.

"We're taking along two 40-foot containers," says *Butterfly Lovers*'s stage production manager Melissa Teoh.

Support was also an initial concern.

Although the Hawaiian Management Group was sponsoring the production, local assistance was also necessary.

To that end, Dama were grateful to HELP International Corporation, as well as HSBC in the Arts, CHT-Natural Solutions

Australian audiences will have the chance to hear leading lady Tan Soo Suan's powerful voice.

and Creditassess.com.

"We're lucky that we found such generous support," says Dama music director Khor Seng Chew. "It would have been very difficult to take the show to Perth without it."

Getting there is one thing; transferring to Perth the experience that made *Butterfly Lovers* a success back home is something else.

Language will not be a problem as there are English subtitles for non-Mandarin speakers, but would the culturally-dissimilar Perth audience "get it"?

"Up to 80% of our audience for all our shows are English speakers and this was no different with *Butterfly Lovers*," Pun says.

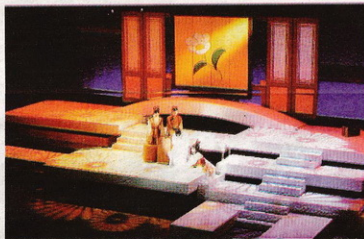
"The values represented in *Butterfly Lovers* are universal enough for any audience," says Janet Lee, who plays Yinxin, maid to Tan Soo Suan's Zhu Yingta. In addition, there's the visual feast of sets and costumes."

Not known for half-measures, Dama never leaves anything to chance.

For *Butterfly Lovers*, Pun, who is also the producer/director, watched the 1963 Shaw Brothers production, *The Love Eterne*, more than 100 times, as well as catching other stage, TV and movie versions in Hong Kong, China and Taiwan. He even sat through a cartoon version as well.

Although the homework was vital, Pun also pointed out that Dama was lucky enough to have an enthusiastic and committed team for *Butterfly Lovers*.

Teoh, for example, is working in her first production since her return from Los Angeles, where she is an ensemble member of the Furious Theatre Company, resident artists at



The magnificent set from the musical's KL production will travel to Perth.

the Pasadena Playhouse.

Tan Wei Han, 26, who has taken over the role of Liang Shanbo, is a graduate of the Xian Music Conservatory and a member of the World Youth Choir, with whom he toured Europe in 2006.

Even now, as the cast and crew prepare for this month's staging at the Genting International Showroom, a prelude, Khor says, rehearsals for the Perth shows have been as intense as they were for the first run.

Perth is also a testing ground for Dama. Long-term plans include establishing itself internationally by performing more overseas (the ensemble has previously staged shows in Shanghai and Singapore) as well as working with foreign artists.

"Previously, we used to plan one year in advance," says Pun. "Now, we need to think about what we're going to do in two or three years' time."

Although Khor and Pun agree that the level of financial support has improved from when Dama first started, both feel more needs to be done.

"Good work needs support," Pun says simply. "The one cannot do without the other."

■ Dama Orchestra will be performing *Butterfly Lovers* in the Genting International Showroom from April 13-15 and 20-22. For details, call 03-2718 1118 or visit [genting.com.my/en/live\\_ent/2007/butterfly/default.htm](http://genting.com.my/en/live_ent/2007/butterfly/default.htm).

