

Drama by Dama

TASHNY SUKUMARAN has a chat with theatre director Pun Kai Loon about his date with Spring



The teacher must have thought I was cute, recalls Pun Kai Loon about his start in theatre



Music director Khor Song Chew

From left: Ross Tan, Annie Tan, Tam Yee Siew, Leslie Cheng, Beauty Tech and Cattie Wong

PUN Kai Loon and the rest of Dama Orchestra, a Chinese classical ensemble, have been hard at work these past months getting their show shape. But you wouldn't know it to look at him.

The 51-year-old financial analyst, an articulate and frank man, is the artistic director and stage designer of Dama's productions. He's currently shipping *I Have A Date With Spring* into dazzling form for its Oct 18 debut at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. Dama is a multiple award-winning ensemble that entered the scene back in 1993, led by Penangite Khor Song Chew.

Perforating a blend of musical works from the east and west, Dama Orchestra has always brought something new to the arena of local music.

When asked about his being a financial analyst, Pun's mischievous eyes crinkle into a smile. "Yes, I have a background in finance. I used to work with Citibank. I've been a fund manager, an asset manager... but I've been doing theatre work for much longer."

"I started in primary school, actually. Not because I was good or anything - but I think because the teacher must've thought I was cute. I remember copying out onstage and singing *My Romance Lies Over The Ocean*. So I guess it went on from there. It gave me an idea of the stage. I used to read a lot of books about plays too."

Pun has, of course, done a lot more than school plays. After studying Finance in Britain, he signed up for a course in acting under

the tutelage of Mustafa Noor at The Drama Centre, and acted in many local performances.

"Mustafa Noor is a pioneer. It was a very good experience."

Driven by creativity and a hunger to understand the human condition, Pun first worked with Khor Song Chew in 1994, at Dama's debut solo-out concert *An Evening Of Chinese Chamber Music*.

"I wasn't a fan of Chinese music then. But the music just spoke to me. That show got me hooked. And it was so fantastic. It was sold out. People were paying for standing room..." He pauses for dramatic effect, before continuing. "And, it was the same night as the World Cup final, Brazil versus Italy."

Heck, those guys must be good. From then on, he collaborated regularly with Dama Orchestra and Khor, co-producing performances such as *Reminiscences By The Moon Lake*, *Earthbound* and *Le Cabaret Shanghai*.

He has also worked as co-scriptwriter and, in the case of *I Have A Date With Spring*, designing sets.

He shows the some of the sets, and his passion is tangible. The sets are subtly complex, with texture and feeling to them. "I wanted them to be beautiful, done but economically managed," he explains.

I Have A Date With Spring is a beautiful story following the lives of four women through three decades. It's a celebration of enduring friendship - in fact, it reminds me of the relationships within *Dama!*

It's a musical adaptation of the critically-acclaimed stage and film productions,

which have won numerous awards. *I Have A Date With Spring* is set against the rightful scenes of the 60s to 80s.

In Dama's Cantonese production, the songs and music were carefully chosen by Khor to create the proper ambience and to go with the cinematic script.

It stars Tan Soo Suan as the lead Butterfly Liu in a 30-strong cast which includes Soren Yap and Janet Lee. Khor and Pun feel that Dama has made Chinese productions accessible to other groups.

Says Pun: "When we first started, I had actors who hadn't sung before and singers who had never acted! We had to get them unlearned in it, to make all those things meld into a unified whole."

Does Pun prefer being onstage or off it? "That's a tricky question. I have a secret wish to be onstage but I get very nervous. Offstage, you get to harness all this creativity."

To those keen on joining Malaysia's theatre scene, Pun says: "Do it for the love of art. Ask yourself if you have the passion for it, because if you're looking for fame, that it won't sustain you."

I Have A Date With Spring runs Oct 15-11, Oct 14-18, Oct 21-25, 8.30pm with 3pm matinees on Oct 11, 18 and Oct 25. Tickets for Wed-Thurs start at RM60, and Fri-Sun from RM75. Call the KLPAC Box Office at 03-40479000 or the Access Hotline at 03-77115000.



Tan Soo Suan as Butterfly Liu (centre) and backup singers

Below: Lulu (left) and Feng Ping in *I Have A Date With Spring*

