

Flight of the songbirds

Dama Orchestra's musical adaptation of *I Have A Date With Spring* is memorable for all the right reasons.

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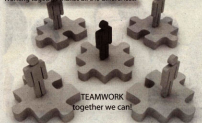
SINCE its debut in 1994, the Dama Orchestra has given us a pleasing range of treats. I still have fond memories of the early instrumental extravaganzas that was *Rhythm Of The Drum* (1996), while a move towards nostalgic, popular songs of the 1960s and pre-war eras was begun soon after through *Reminiscence By The Moon Lake* and *Spring Kisses Lover's Tears*. Over the years, the branchchild of music director Khor Seng Chew has overcome setbacks to become an institution in the arts scene.

Now celebrating its 15th anniversary, Dama has embarked upon arguably its most ambitious production yet, a musical adaptation of the popular *I Have A Date With Spring* that will run for three weeks at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAc). Based on the award-winning play by Raymond To, which itself was adapted into a movie and television series, it tells the tale of four cabaret singers: Butterfly (Tan Soo Suan), Lulu (Janet Lee), Feng Ping (Chris Tong) and Nancy (Feng Chyi Chang) whose deep friendship helps them



Glistening triumph: *I Have A Date With Spring* is Dama Orchestra's most ambitious production yet.

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enrich a series of heartwarming and triumphant. While To's original was set in Hong Kong at the time of the 1967 leftist riots, Dama has adapted the story to Malaysia and our own 1960s race riots. In fact much of the story is told through a series of flashbacks as its opening scene is set in the 1960s, when there is a reunion between the now highly successful Butterfly and Lulu at the very venue (the Lai Fa Palace) where they enjoyed their youth.

The opening night last Saturday, which doubled as a fundraiser for the Malacca Badminton Society, was a packed affair and proved to be a glittering triumph. While every opening night has its minor hitches, the musical was memorable for all the right reasons.

Backed by Dama's sterling musicians, Tan Soo Suan was her usual impressive self, effortlessly moving between eras, delivering songs with aplomb and showcasing her acting ability. She was ably backed by a cast that included Steve Yap as her lover Ismeten Kai, and Neil Ng, an equally vocal singer Yuen Pak. Key to the musical's success was the feeling of camaraderie between the four friends, and that was clearly felt.

The dynamics of the musical were a well-balanced blend of nostalgia, romance, drama and humour.

Successful jokes revolved around thumbtacks, nappies and a vegetarian meal! Musically the songs were taken largely from the 1960s with most of them being in Mandarin. Thanks to the stellar arrangements of Leo Fung Ting and Leo Fung Chai who composed some incidental music and reworked many of the songs to suit Dama's unique sounds, the band effortlessly conjured up the sound of the swinging 60s. There were some awesomely funky organ grooves and strutting sax while there was more than one occasion when the stellar cello playing of Dama stalwart Gan Boon We threatened to elicit a tearful response from the audience.

Highlights included the cheeky "double dirt" *Smoking Around*, Butterfly's catchy breakthrough number *All Because Of Love* and *I Want Your Love*, which sees her racing through some difficult quick phrasing, and the cleverly arranged *Red Hair Happy Heart* by Lulu, which featured the work of rhythm



Feng Ping (Chris Tong, left) and Nancy (Feng Chyi Chang) chatting in the 'dressing room' during *I Have A Date With Spring*.

section Tee Hsien Onn (double bass) and See Koh Fong (drums).

Despite its considerable length there was nary a dull moment in the show, and you should bear in mind that I was unable to understand the nuances of the Cantonese language and had to make do with reading the subtitles! As with most musicals, one could query the character development... for example what happens to prompt a character change in prima donna performer Pak Long (Lau Sze Keong) is never really explained. There is also no doubt that the ending is clichéd and perhaps there is an element of the main romance that defies logic... but who wants too much logic from a musical?

Overall, *I Have A Date With Spring* proved to be yet another feather in the cap of an enterprising and skilled group which one hopes will be with us for many years to come.

■ *I Have A Date With Spring* is running at the Petai 1, KLPAc, Sentul Park, Jalan Stockton, Off Jalan Ipoh, Kuala Lumpur until Nov 1. It has evening shows (8.30pm) on Oct 14-16, 21-25, 29-31 and Nov 1 and matinees (3pm) on Oct 18 & 25, Nov 1. For details, visit damaorchestra.com or call KLPAc (☎ 03-4567 9000) Access Hotline (☎ 03-7711 5000).