

'WAYANG KULIT'

ONE CHILD'S PASSION FOR PUPPETS

Kamarul Baihaqi Kamarul Baisah's talent has made him the country's youngest 'tok dalang', writes **DENNIS CHUA**

SIX-year-old Kamarul Baihaqi Kamarul Baisah, or Aqi, is blessed with a special gift.

Though he may have just recently started schooling, he is the country's youngest *tok dalang* (wayang kulit puppetmaster and storyteller).

Once he gets a hold of his shadow puppets and goes on stage, the Pasir Mas-born child, who is the eldest of three boys, surprises and inspires many with his natural talent at manipulating traditional wayang kulit characters as Sri Rama and his favourite, Maharaja Suria.

A focused and disciplined performer (despite being playful off-stage), Kamarul Baihaqi presents every wayang kulit character's

lines well and speaks fluent Kelantanese Malay, the traditional language of the popular art form.

"Since I was 3, I enjoyed wayang kulit. I have always followed my father to his shows," he said at the Tuanku Bainun Children's Centre in Taman Tun Dr Ismail, Kuala Lumpur, recently.

His father, Kamarul Baisah Hussin, 34, has been a *tok dalang* for two decades and always encouraged his son to attend his wayang kulit performances.

"My son would observe my every move as a *tok dalang*, and memorised them before retelling the stories by himself," said Kamarul Baisah.

Along the way, he coached his young son to perfect his move-

ments while his mother, Zamzuriyah Zahari, taught him to play traditional drums to accompany his performances.

Kamarul Baisah always stressed to Aqi that wayang kulit stories were timeless legends of Malay culture, as well as Indian legends modified to suit Malay mythology.

Zamzuriyah, 35, from the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy (Aswara), who is also a *makyong* lecturer, said Kamarul Baihaqi was probably first exposed to wayang kulit while he was still in her womb.

"I attended performances during my pregnancy, and when he was a baby, he used to cry a lot and could only sleep to the music of wayang kulit," she said.

Kamarul Baihaqi's talent was

recognised by Aswara's wayang kulit master Mohd Nasir Yusoff, a friend of his parents. The boy was able to count the tempo and follow the beat of a gong at 3.

"He often follows me or his father to Aswara and it is like a second home for him," said Zamzuriyah.

Kamarul Baihaqi, a student of SJK(C) Serdang Baru 2, takes regular lessons like his fellow classmates. However, he always makes time to rehearse wayang kulit in the evenings.

"We draw up daily and weekly timetables for him, so that he has an hour or two to focus on his passion.

"While he still has a long way to go to understand the classics deeply, he is capable of telling simple stories, which revolve

around princes defeating villains," said Zamzuriyah, who is doing her Master's degree in social science at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia.

Kamarul Baihaqi plans to become a successful *tok dalang* and wayang kulit lecturer like his father, who inherited his ancestors' knowledge of shadow puppetry.

"I want to master the traditional form of wayang kulit. It enables me to tell colourful stories to my friends," he said.

Kamarul Baihaqi performed a wayang kulit piece titled, *Shadow*, organised by kakiseni at the Tuanku Bainun Children's Centre recently.

It is based on the book of the same name by Maya Zaharudin and illustrated by Shufitr Shukardi.



Kamarul Baihaqi Kamarul Baisah performing at the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy in Kuala Lumpur last year. FILE PIC