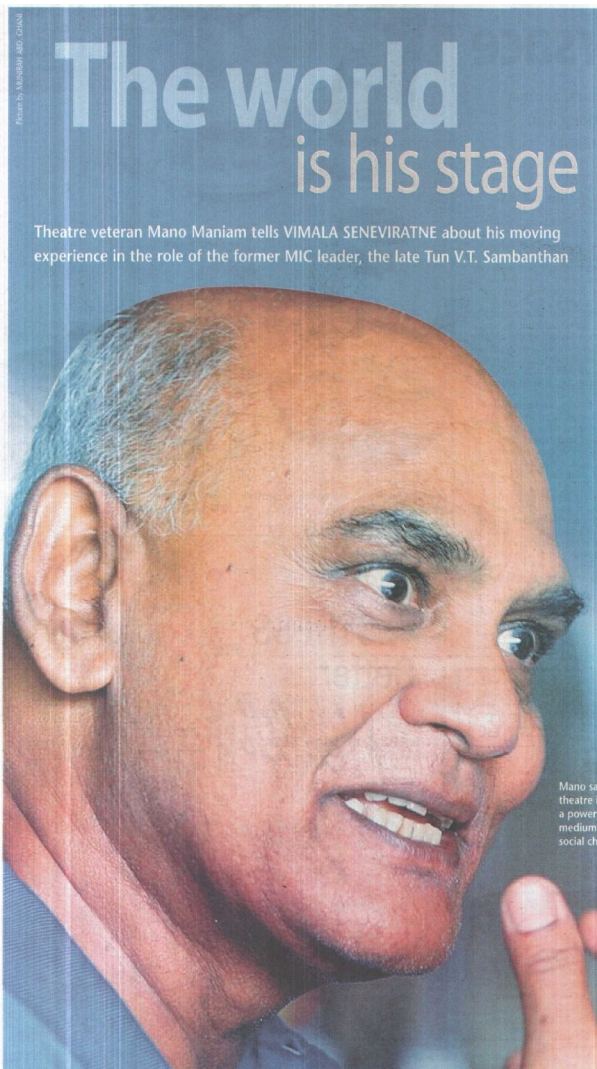


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ONE of local theatre's most recognised faces, Mano Maniam is looking absolutely comfortable in a casual, blue T-shirt and pants.

He is all perked up from having played the role of the older Tun V. T. Sambanthan the previous night. Shifting his sitting position, he gives a warm, cheery smile and explains: "I hurt my leg so I have to sit at a particular angle."

Known mainly for his acting roles, Mano is also heavily involved in environmental education, always crusading behind the scenes. Having studied geography for his bachelor's degree, he taught the subject to Form Six students and in the 1980s, he worked with the Malaysian Institute of Management and helped develop environmental programmes and courses. He was also involved in developing with UPM the first four-year degree programme on Environmental Studies. "We'll keep that subject for another day. Let's just talk about the theatre world for now," he says.

With a cup of steaming, freshly brewed Laotian coffee in hand and with the morning sun streaming in to his neatly laid out living room in Brickfields, the multi-talented, multi-faceted Mano plunges straight into the topic at hand, that of playing the role of one of Malaysia's founding fathers and of speaking in Tamil.

"I have played so many roles in my almost 40 years in the theatre world, but this is the most challenging – playing a real life icon, keeping it as straight and narrow as possible for historical purpose and capturing his mannerisms, the way he walks and talks," says Ipoh-born Mano whose father knew Tun Sambanthan.

"All the memories of him came flooding back. He was my father's friend and we had the opportunity to meet Tun whenever my father visited him in Sungai Siput. I remember him as a friendly, soft-spoken person. He had charisma, lots of it... a plus factor in pulling the Indian community together."

Speaking in Tamil was a breeze, he says. After all, it was the spoken language in Mano's home.

"My father sent all his children for classes to make sure we could speak, read and write Tamil fluently," he adds.

As Mano was not cast for the role of Tun Sambanthan initially, he had made plans to go and unwind in a remote

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island off Phuket in southern Thailand.

About two weeks before the opening night of the historical play at Auditorium Tunku Abdul Rahman Malaysian Tourism Centre, he received a call from the play director, S.T. Bala, offering him the role of the older Tun.

Almost half-way through the production, Bala decided that he needed three actors to play the role of Tun – two for the younger version and one for the older. The younger Tun were played by A. Kisukumar and S. Balekumar.

"I was in Singapore at that time and I had made all my travel arrangements. As soon as I returned, we met to discuss the parts I had to play and I accepted the challenge," says Mano.

There were six scenes for the role and Mano took on four, one of which was a voice-over.

With only 12 days before the show opened, Mano brought the script along with him on holiday so that he could "memorise my lines in Tamil while laying on the beach on some remote Thai island".

"Some of Tun's speeches were so long, especially his resignation speech. I had to capture the raw emotions of the man and deliver the lines convincingly."

However, just two days before the opening night, that scene was replaced with the actual footage of Tun's resignation at the MIC meeting.

"We saw the actual footage and decided to go with it. Frankly, the film clip did better justice to Tun than any of us could have because it captured the very essence of who the man was – the raw emotions, the charged atmosphere. Some of these things would be difficult to portray on stage," says Mano.

His interest in acting began in primary school.

"We grew up in an era where radio and live performances were the common form of entertainment. No television then. A group of us kids looked forward to the Saturday *pasar malam* where story-telling and live dramas were performed. It was the social gathering place for many people then. And we kids would try and act out the drama for friends who missed the show.

"Our imaginations often ran wild. We added to the story and often used rulers and sticks for swords, bedsheets for cloaks and pots and pan for dramatic sound effects."

He was actively involved in theatre in his secondary school years in the Anglo Chinese School where he played his first Shakespearean role, as a sea captain in *Twelfth Night*. Last year he played the role of the protagonist, Prospero, in Sabera Shaik's *Urmi*, an adaptation of the Bard's *Tempest*.

He has acted in popular local TV series like *Kopitiam* and *Bilik 13*, worked in Hollywood productions like *Anna & The King* and *The Sleeping Dictionary* which was shot in Sarawak. He has also collaborated with dancer

Ramli Ibrahim to produce dance dramas such as *Adorations*, *Night Of Purnama*, *Sindhu*, *Mother India* and *Karma*.

In fact, he has played so many different characters so frequently that he can easily fish one out of his repertory on call.

"For as long as I can remember, it has been one role after another. And I am enjoying every minute of it," says Mano who has also received numerous awards (local and international) in recognition of his contribution to the theatre world, among them, the Fulbright Distinguished Artist Award from the US government in 2000.

He believes that the performing arts should develop, that it should go beyond just entertaining people. Theatre, he feels, is more than just entertainment – it is a thinking ground for people.

"In playing the role of the older Tun, I realised that some of the issues confronting the Indians then – issues such as where is their home and what are they doing about it – are the same today."

Theatre, he maintains, is a powerful medium that can bring to the forefront thorny issues and is a powerful medium for social change. The fact that more younger people are interested in the performing arts, he says, also means that the talent pool is ever increasing.

He credits Kisukumar and Balekumar for helping pull off the show which played to a full house for three successive nights. "These two talented youngsters had a tougher role to play."

Meanwhile, Mano is preparing for his next role, that of the big bad wolf in Roald Dahl's *Little Red Riding Hood*. Composer Paul Patterson has written colourful music to go with the retelling of this children's story. *Little Red Riding Hood* will be on at 2.30pm and 4.30pm today at the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas in Jalan Ampang, Kuala Lumpur.

The play, *Sambanthan*, will be re-staged at Malaysian Tourism Centre from Aug 20 to 24.