



ACCOMPLISHED ARTISTS

## 2 WOMEN'S PASSION FOR JAPANESE ARTS

'Rakugo' performer Diane Kichijitsu and Japanese calligrapher Ozawa Ransetsu were in the country to share their craft with Malaysians, writes **SUZANNA PILLAY**

**T**ICKLING the funny bone of the young and old is something *rakugo* performer Diane Kichijitsu finds rewarding. *Rakugo* is Japan's 400-year-old answer to stand-up comedy, where a lone storyteller on stage entertains the audience with a long and complicated story.

Playing all the characters in it while kneeling on a cushion throughout the performance, the storyteller has only a folding fan and a small towel to use as props.

Kichijitsu, who toured several cities in Peninsular Malaysia to perform her one-woman shows, described *rakugo* as being "clever in its simplicity".

The event was jointly organised by the Japan Foundation and the Embassy of Japan in Malaysia, to

mark the 60th anniversary of Malaysia-Japan diplomatic relations.

"All performances are based entirely on imagination with no technology involved, just two props which can be anything the performer wants, from a shed to a cow's tail. There is also no limit to the number of characters you can play in the story, which you have to depict by changing your voice pitch and tone, eye and limited head movements. It can be challenging to keep the audience with you if you are spinning a story with several characters, but once you tell people to relax and enjoy the journey, they can," said Kichijitsu, who hails from Liverpool, the United Kingdom, and spins her art in both English and Japanese.

"If you are playing a geisha, samurai or baby, then it's easy for people to keep track of the characters because they are distinct to begin with. However, imagine playing four or five men of the same age. So, besides referring to them by names, I try to create quirky and distinctive characters, so people can keep up with the story."

A permanent resident in Japan, Kichijitsu first arrived in the country in 1990 during her backpacking travels and fell in love with it. While working as a stage assistant for the late Katsura Shijaku, the pioneer of *rakugo* in English, she was introduced to the world of *rakugo* and inspired to take up the art.

She performs both traditional and modern *rakugo*, and stories



Ozawa Ransetsu says she started teaching calligraphy during her university days, which was at that time an unprecedented achievement. PIC BY HALIMATON SAADIAH SULAIMAN

that she has written herself.

"In traditional *rakugo*, there were very few female characters because they were written and performed by men. In my stories, I have introduced more female characters. My stories are based on my travels to more than 50 countries, my encounters in Japan and my observation of cultural differences."

Japanese calligrapher Ozawa Ransetsu was also in Malaysia to mark the occasion, sharing her skills with Malaysian students at a number of special calligraphy lectures and workshops at Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris and Universiti Putra Malaysia. Eager students had the opportunity to try their hand at Japanese calligraphy during the workshops.

Ransetsu, who was born in 1945 and grew up in Ota City, Gunma Prefecture, Japan, said her fascination with calligraphy started since she was a child.

"I was intrigued by the interesting lines the ink made on paper. My interest in calligraphy grew from there as I got older. When I was 11, I helped my father teach children at private calligraphy classes he conducted for them."

In her late teens, Ransetsu gave

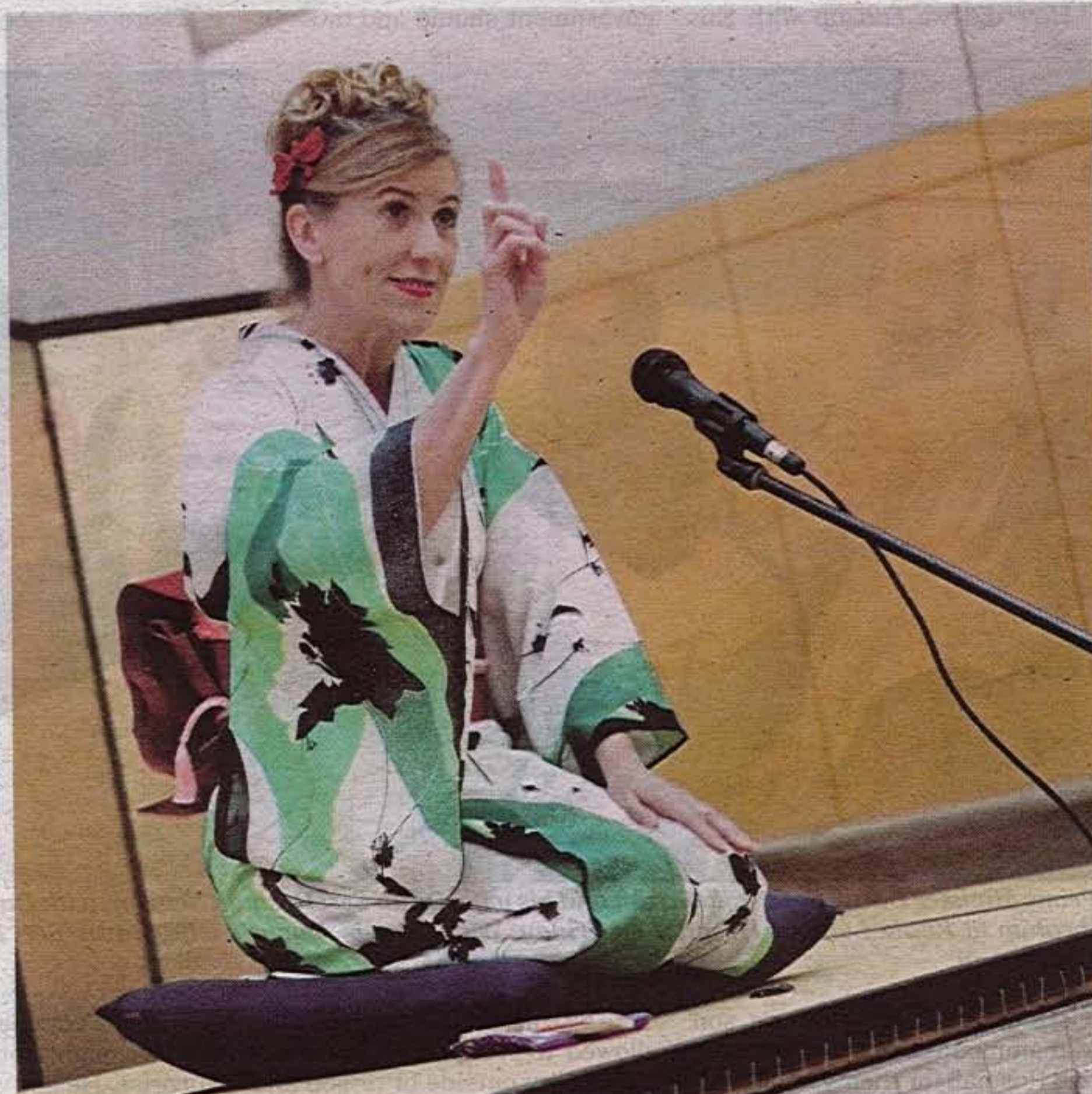
a speech in English about her relationship with calligraphy in the first Nippon High School English Speech Contest in the Kanto region and won first prize.

As a university student, the industrious Ransetsu became qualified to teach calligraphy to high-school students, which was at that time an unprecedented achievement.

Since her first exhibition in 1985, she has held more than 20 specially themed and designed exhibitions, principally at the Ginza Kyukyodo Gallery, Tokyo. She has been a tutor-in-residence teaching Japanese brush calligraphy at Higham Hall in the English Lake District and also held an exhibition called "Unadorned" at the Wordsworth Museum in Grasmere England in 2011.

Based in Sumida, Tokyo, Ozawa said the art of calligraphy was a lifelong art and she had never stopped learning and improving.

"I am inspired by the numerous calligraphy forms over the centuries, regarded as treasures, which are preserved in museums today. Not many can replicate these beautiful works of art and I would like to acquire as many of these special skills and techniques as I can."



Diane Kichijitsu says she discovered 'rakugo' while working as a stage assistant for the late Katsura Shijaku, the pioneer of 'rakugo' in English. PIC BY NURUL SYAZANA ROSE RAZMAN