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Heart-capturing moment with HIV positives

PETALING JAYA: How often would anyone be willingly get up close to several HIV-positive people and spend over an hour listening to their honest testimonies?

That's exactly what made the play *I'm Positive* by The Actors Studio and Malaysian AIDS Council simply amazing as it is extremely rare in the Malaysian culture that one gets an opportunity to listen to a group of HIV positives, and those affiliated with them, tell their stories on stage in a no-holds-barred setting, talking about sex, drugs and what it is like to feel the inevitability of death.

Out of the nine characters in the play, which was the fifth instalment of the Life Sdn Bhd series, six were HIV positives.

The play opened with Norlela Mokhtar or Ella, a 46-year-old single mother of four who learnt of her infection when she was 29.

"I got it from my second husband who was the love of my life. He was a drug-user. He promised me he would leave the habit behind but the drugs proved too much for him," she said.

Ella related how with her low pay, she had to choose between financing her expensive medication and feeding her children. She chose the latter and never looked back as she was later lucky to be able to do both.

"My eldest child just got married two weeks ago and my youngest is

studying in a local university," said Ella, who is now a treatment, care and support executive with the Malaysian AIDS Council.

For Rina, a 31-year-old transsexual, she first realised being different from her siblings at 13 years of age. "Because I was different, my father kicked me out of the house. He couldn't take it that people from my village in Kedah were laughing at my family.

"I ended up as a sex worker in Kuala Lumpur, just so I could feed myself every day."

After she was rescued by a non-governmental organisation and taken off the streets, Rina pursued her studies and worked in an architecture

firm to prove to her father that she, or transsexuals in general, were not a lost cause.

"I went back with my certificate in hand, but my father had passed on. He died not knowing that I had made something of myself," she noted with regret. Rina is now a programme manager for a local NGO that focuses on HIV and AIDS work.

But it was the story of Raina and her husband, Alias Nor, that tugged the heartstrings the most.

Alias Nor was a heavy drug-user since the 1970s, and had been in and out of prison and lock-ups. "I learnt of my infection in 1991. I was at a shelter when introduced to the medication that has helped me lead a healthier life till today."

Like Ella, Raina was also infected by her former husband, a drug-user. "My first husband died when I was seven months pregnant with my second child. Three months after I gave birth, my baby died as well." Raina said it was then that she learnt of her infection, and that of her deceased child.

"After that, I ended up in the same shelter home with Alias in Johor. He was already on medication at that time but I had my reservations about taking them. But he managed to convince me; the love and trust grew between us and we decided to get married."

Despite both being HIV positives, the couple have a newborn child who is not infected.

The stories of the other five — Jeffrey, Yatie, Bakhtiar, Dr Zaki and Esh, were just as compelling.

The highly liberating play, held at The Actors Studio@Lot 10 from March 24 till yesterday, was directed by Datuk Faridah Merican with her husband Joe Hasham as artistic director.

It was fantastic to see how the directors made each individual's story, despite it being so different, come together in the end to define the same thing — that the HIV virus does not discriminate, and that life does not necessarily stop for a person the moment he or she is infected.

The play also included performances by Dayang Nurfaizah, and musicians Ian Chow, Ariff Akhir and Peter Ong.



TIMEOUT: Musicians Ian Chow (left) and Ariff Akhir performing at the 'I'm Positive' play by The Actors Studio and the Malaysian AIDS Council