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19

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BY **BISSME S.**

THE FIRST Actors Studio's production of *Life Sdn Bhd* started way back in 2004, and it has since evolved into a series where actors and 'invited guests' share true stories on pressing issues, both social and political, that affect lives in Malaysia.

In less than eight years, *Life Sdn Bhd* has covered issues ranging from HIV to breast cancer and refugees.

This time around, in the eighth instalment of the series, director Datuk Faridah Merican is focusing on the issue of human trafficking.

"I'm told this issue in Malaysia is bad enough for NGOs (non-governmental organisations) to be concerned about," says Faridah, who set up The Actors Studio with husband Joe Hasham.

She pointed out that some victims had been cheated into coming here with false promises of jobs with good salaries.

"Instead, they are abused and taken advantage of," adds Faridah who was awarded the Boh Cameronian Lifetime Achievement Award in 2004.

Yet, there are people who insist that the problem of human trafficking is not as serious here as in other countries.

"It is ignorance to believe human trafficking is not bad here," says this outspoken director.

"The stories about how some people here treat their maids, which comes under abuse, are the kind of stories we do not want the rest of the world to read about because it will say we are a nation that doesn't care."

There are also stories, she says, of victims being put in boats as fishermen for years and not allowed to step on shore.

"If they complained too much and if they become useless and cannot fish any more, they would be shot and their bodies thrown into the sea. They were also given very little food and a low salary.

"I have never imagined that there is slavery among fishermen. What is happening now is modern-day slavery."

She points out that the victims are someone's husband, wife, father, mother, sibling, child, friend and lover.

She feels strongly that the public should be made aware of the inhumanity that's happening around us and that they should

respond by lending a helping hand.

Life Sdn Bhd 8: Human Trafficking will feature a group of brave individuals telling stories from the victims' perspectives.

Most of them are representatives of NGOs such as Tenaganita, Women's Aid Organisation, Voice of the Children, Yayasan Chow Kit and International Organisation of Migration.

"The humanity in us have gone," remarks Urmilah Dass, a clinical psychological attached with the International Organisation of Migration,

who will be speaking in the production.

"Some of us do not give their maids a day off. They make their maids get up early in the morning to wash all their cars, send their kids to school and to look after the elderly at home.

"Some of these maids can only go to sleep after everyone has gone to sleep. These maids sometimes work up to 15 hours a day."

Dr Hartini Zainudin, who is with Yayasan Chow Kit and Voices of Children, says:

"When I first started working in this field five years ago, I was utterly shocked to learn about child trafficking."

She adds that these children are being used for prostitution and as beggars, organ donors and even sold to childless couples.

"I got involved [in this production] because I wanted to give a voice to these

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children who have no voice," Hartini says.

"Every child matters. Every child deserves to have a happy home. Every child doesn't deserve to be sold."

Professional theatre actors Kimmy Kiew and Malik Taufiq will also be lending their voices to the victims. Choreographer Lakshman Balakrishnan from Aswara (the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy) will present a one-dance act while songwriters Ian Chow, Ariff Akhir and Lim Min Tze will present a song each.

Life Sdn Bhd 8: Human Trafficking opens tomorrow at The Actors Studio@Lot 10 until Saturday and will next be playing at the Performing Arts Centre of Penang (Penangpac) at Straits Quay in Tanjung Tokong, Penang, from May 3 to May 5.

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– Datuk Faridah Merican

