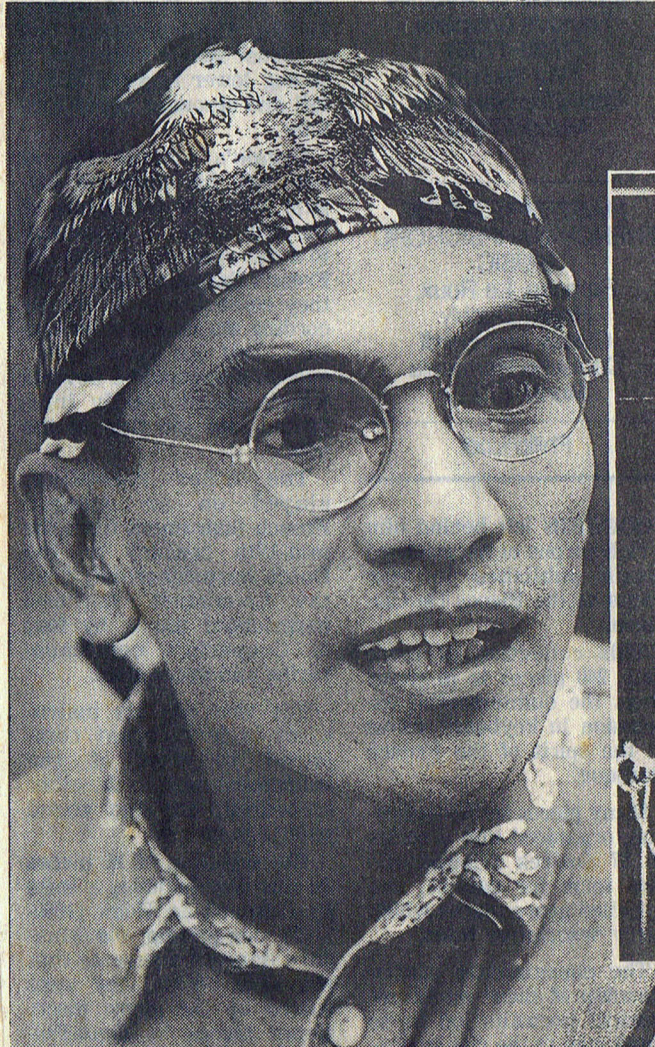


Let's get physical

ALEXIUS PEREIRA talks to a Filipino dancer and choreographer who treats his body as a temple to his art.

STEVEN LEE



Enrico Labayen: "To do what I conceive in my

"STARVE the digestive system and feed the artistic system." This is 39-year-old Enrico Labayen's recipe for aesthetic success.

A vegetarian who only has one meal a day (although he "cannot live without coffee"), he disciplines his body by dancing or aerobics at least six hours a day.

The result is a sculpted body with well-defined muscles. "To do what I conceive in my mind, I must have full control of my body," explained the founder and driving force behind the Lab Projekt, a premier modern dance group in the Philippines.

Indeed, he demonstrated complete control of his body during his solo performances at the Arts Festival Fringe, as he contorted his body in many ways while hanging from a rope 4.5 m above the ground.

The articulate Labayen loves dealing with ideas and concepts. Take his group's multi-faceted name. "Lab" means "love" in Tagalog. It also happens to be the first three letters of Labayen's surname.

He added: "Lab also comes from the word laboratory, where people with artistic ideas can come together and experiment," he explained. "Collaboration is the key to our success. Painters, engineers, designers, poets, dancers and photographers all give input in the projects — with me, of course, at the centre."

Lab Projekt's performances are closer to art installations than traditional dance because of the merging of many forms of art. But labels trouble the philosophic Labayen.

"Labels, like categories, are restrictive! Freedom is totally essential to the Projekt," he said. "For example, we don't have a fixed set of performers. Instead, we have a 'revolving door' policy. You want to be involved in a project, just raise your

the fruits of collaborations. For example, *Sabelle* was a socially conscious painting by Ben Cabreras, which depicts the bag ladies and scavengers of Manila.

Labayen then worked closely with Cabreras, who followed the group here, to bring the painting to life, featuring two female dancers and New Age music. With such radical ideas, he has changed drastically the "arts-scape" in the Philippines.

He said: "Asian bodies should not pretend to be Western bodies — the archetypal 'tall and long' person. We should have a dance idiom which suits the Asian anthropomorphic form."

He knows about the differences between East and West, having trained and worked in the United States with renowned dance groups like the Alvin Ailey group and Sacramento Ballet for over 10 years.

Initially, there was resistance to his radical ideas among the Filipinos, who still looked towards the West.

"There will always be resistance to change. But with proper exposure, people will eventually accept it."

One way to reach out to the people is to keep ticket prices low. Back home, the Lab Projekt's performances cost 10 pesos (Singapore 65 cents) per ticket, less than the cost of a meal there. "In making our shows affordable, we are de-edifying 'Art', so that it is no longer a class-related issue. I'm not in it to make money!" Labayen declared.

"My art comes first — everything else is second. Maybe that's why I'm not married. My muses demand total fidelity!" he said with a laugh.

He was deeply affected by a traffic accident he had in New York four years ago.

"When I got hit, I realised how short life is. Now, more than ever, I have got to do as