



HARRY DARSONO TELLS OF OUTFITTING SUCH LUMINARIES AS QUEEN RANIA OF JORDAN AND THE LATE PRINCESS DIANA, BUT HIS PRIVATE HOME MUSEUM IS THE STORY OF A BOY WHO OVERCAME THE ODDS TO SUCCEED.

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The mesmerizing detail of Harry Darsono's sartorial oeuvres – Shakespearian operatic costumes, beadwork-encrusted ball gowns wrought from sheets of gold – conceals their maker's early struggles.

The year before Harry turned nine, he was expelled by four schools for offenses he shudders to recount, the mildest of which was pulling his teachers' hair during Mass.

More serious was his inability to speak, a condition he attributes to Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder.

"When your brain is full, you can't speak," Harry says of his struggle with the disorder. "Even to say the name of a relative [...]. At one point I decided to end my life because I was already sixteen and I still could not speak when in fact there was so much I wanted to say."

Instead, he drew what he could not utter (he says he did not speak properly until the age of 22). "If I wanted a cookie, I would draw a cookie. I would draw a bed – I would draw everything."

The young Harry sketched every unvoiced yearning, including the three-story baroque museum that stands today on one hectare of land – life imitating art right

down to the 79 final trophies and the punishment chamber in the rooftop garden (pardon the fairytale-enamored imagination of a nine-year-old boy). The original sketch is in a gilt frame by the main door, notable for its technical prowess.

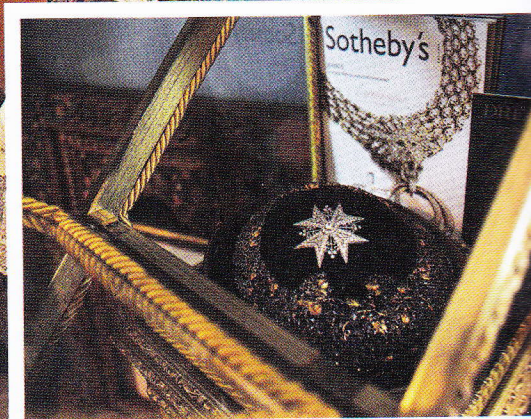
A distinctive touch

I learn all this before we have even moved through the ornate entrance hall of his home. Black mannequins clad in aristocratic finery stand guard in the main foyer, with its arched windows monogrammed HDC (for "Harry Darsono Couture"); marble pedestals bear timepieces and glassware, and shadow boxes sit in wall recesses, one spotlighting a wide-sleeved organza jacket Harry created for a production of Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*.

By the window looms the armor-like costume worn by Othello in a production of Verdi's opera.

"All of this is made from metal," Harry says of the costume. "This" – he points to the breastplate – "is made from stainless steel that has been welded from three parts of a large metal box [made into] large circles and small circles. It was worn for more than 16 years, every night."

He invites me to touch it. In Harry's museum, the



only exhibits encased in glass are the limited-edition tea sets from the British royal family. Otherwise, Harry's museum is configured exactly like a residence – perhaps that of a Victorian aristocrat – and everything else is meant to be probed, marveled at and discussed with their collector.

A recording of Bach forms our soundtrack as we linger before a floor-length silk robe that was used in a production of *King Lear*. It was hand-woven and hand-sewn, Harry says.

"The opera's director asked me, 'Why does it have to be hand-sewn when you can use a sewing machine?' The costumes that are worn onstage are far from the audience so they wouldn't be able to tell if it was machine-sewn. Nobody knew that my [handiwork] was my therapy," Harry explains.

With each of his creations, he fingers the imperfect seams. "See?" he says excitedly. "It's all made by hand."

Manual handiwork soothes Harry's ADHD-wrought nerves. While his teenage peers learned to thread needles, Harry recounts, he made knot after knot without stopping, switching needles and threads 70, 80 times until the knots, each one like a pixel, formed a picture. It has become Harry's design trademark: knots so tight, clustered and numerous they obscure the fabric altogether.

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Like a dream

We trail our fingers over what Harry tells me is the world's most expensive perfume fountain, its spouts shaped like lion heads.

"This belonged to King Louis XVI, the one king who never bathed," he says. "His body odor was terrible because he liked to eat raw fish and aged cheese. When he hosted a party he would display 48 of these fountains along the corridors of the Fontainebleau in Paris so his guests would not smell his body odor."

Before we climb the floating spiral staircase, Harry ushers me into his textile room. Before I know it I'm

draped in a rainbow-hued silk cape and a feathered hat – made from dried cow manure – that he says were Princess Diana's.

"[People] can enjoy the museum, just like they enjoy being in the mall. They see the fashion and the artifacts, the history, the private letters of Albert Einstein. They touch everything that is not supposed to be touched in other museums – but here they can touch it, they can use it," Harry explains.

"Also the costumes that they can wear from the *Phantom of the Opera*, *Julius Caesar*, *Othello* and all the royal families' dresses. They can just wear it and



sit and enjoy."

The collection is wide-ranging and eclectic, a chronicle of Harry's life and mind. He describes the items he shows me: Princess Diana's disconcertingly heavy sapphire tiara; a small Hebrew scroll that is purportedly a copy of the *Book of Moses*; Ernest Hemingway's writing desk; framed typewritten letters by Albert Einstein; even Harry's own toys, such as a red tin car carrying smiling wooden passengers.

Each item comes with a tale, as does Harry himself: he tells of a man who can create a tapestry

from over 22,000 tiny knots, study four majors at once and publish more than 70 books in French, English, Dutch and Indonesian because he requires only one or two hours of sleep each night.

A visit to the museum closes with tea and fresh fruit in the parlor. Harry sits behind the grand piano – once owned by Chopin, he notes. He launches into ABBA's "I Have a Dream" and exhorts me to sing.

He then asks me to recite his poem "The List".

"The most effective sleeping pill: Peace of mind/
The most crippling failure disease: Excuses/The two most powerful words: 'I can.'"

Harry nods vigorously at the end of each line.

He is indeed vigorous in many ways, a youthful 63, and he claims that, as a university lecturer, his greatest teachers now are his young students.

"A museum has to be entertaining and have lots of sensations. If it is just dead and dry and dour, it's not interesting for the young," Harry says. "Museum is for 'M', like 'mood-creating', 'music.'"

Yet even though he has created a museum holding some of the world's most coveted artifacts, he warns against being enthralled by objects. There are greater things to pursue.

"I'm a dreamer," he says. "But I make my dreams come true."

