



Made Wijaya: Flamboyant Bali garden guru remembered as witty, kind and generous

By Anne Barker

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PHOTO: Tropical gardening guru Made Wijaya's flamboyance was a perfect match for the bright colourful gardens he designed around the world. (Tim Street-Porter)

When a young Sydney architecture student sailed to Bali in 1973 he was so taken with the place he jumped overboard and swam the last distance to shore.

MAP: Sydney 2000



Michael White never looked back. Not only did he adopt Bali as his permanent home, but the Balinese adopted him, quite literally. An upper-caste Brahmin family took him in as their own son. White converted to Hinduism and changed his name to Made Wijaya.

As a former NSW junior tennis champion, he first made a living giving tennis and English lessons to wealthy Balinese, as well as writing. But his innate sense of design and beauty inevitably led him back to architecture and tropical landscaping.



PHOTO: Made Wijaya's passion for architecture and design followed him to Bali. Here he stands in his younger days on top of one of the Mayan pyramids during a trip to Yucatan in Mexico. (Annie Kelly)

Wijaya's own flamboyance was a perfect match for the bright, colourful gardens he leaves behind as his life's legacy. Chances are, anyone who has been to Bali and admired its beautiful gardens has seen some of Made Wijaya's work. It was Wijaya who first designed the gardens at the Bali Hyatt in Sanur in the early 1980s, before moving on to the famous Oberoi and other landmarks around Bali.

As much as Balinese culture influenced his work, Wijaya in turn had a profound impact on Balinese landscaping trends and design. Indeed, Wijaya was soon renowned outside Bali as a world authority on tropical design. He remains best known as a gardener to the rich and famous — among them David Bowie and Francis Ford Coppola.

In the late 80s Wijaya was commissioned to transform the arid garden of Bowie's exotic home at Mustique in the West Indies into a tropical paradise, with giant ponds surrounded by Balinese-style gardens. He later recalled that it was hard to get any work done because the local workforce was so lazy.

"I brought over four of my Bali commandos and stayed at Mustique's famous Basil's Bar," Wijaya said. "The happy hour got earlier and earlier, and there was nothing but clouds of marijuana on the building site from day one".

Bowie later sold the retreat to a British publisher who disliked the style and ripped out most of the home's interior and the garden.

It wasn't the only time Wijaya's work was destroyed. He often joked he was in the privileged position of having one of his gardens blown up — when the Australian embassy in Jakarta was bombed in 2004.

In all Wijaya designed at least 600 public and private gardens around the world, from Florida and Mexico to Spain, Morocco, Belize, Southeast Asia and Australia.

But he was more than just a gardener. Those closest to him say he was a complex character and a study in contrasts.

Indonesian photographer Rio Helmi knew Wijaya from his earliest days in Bali.

"Here was an ex-tennis coach to the well-heeled foreigners in Bali who were probably as dazzled (or perhaps dazed) by his fanciful flair as his serve; an international socialite who was at the same time a born again Balinese; an absolutely outrageous social media queen with a cross dressing (well maybe cross-undressing) alter-ego."

"He was a staunch battler for the preservation of vibrant Balinese culture with an autodidactic, encyclopaedic knowledge of the island that rivalled that of many Balinese. He produced video after video that showed most viewers a Bali they had never known, and perhaps never would".

Others say their overriding memory of Made Wijaya is his caustic wit.

"He was one of the wittiest people I ever met. He could hold his own with Barry Humphries," says US based photographer Tim Street-Porter, who took many of the photographs in Wijaya's six books.



PHOTO: Made Wijaya adopted Bali as his permanent home, and resided in Sanur in his later years. (Tim Street-Porter)

"He was acerbic and outrageous, a brilliant designer and commander-in-chief of his gardening guerillas, a raconteur, stubborn and sometimes difficult," said Brian Holley, at the Naples Botanical Garden in Florida.

"He had a wit that Noel Coward would have been jealous of, and one of humanity's kindest souls."

He could be biting rude, but also deeply kind.

The Jakarta Post described Wijaya as a "cultural provocateur" who for decades chronicled "Bali's ups and downs, from its majestic temple festivals to the rites of passage of its influential royal and Brahmin families".

He wrote a regular column for different blogs documenting Balinese culture and changing environment, particularly the "unsightly, architectural nightmares of hotels along the island's coast and satirical lampoons on the rising moral conservatism and snobbery among the island's elites".

But his own staff showed nothing but loyalty and love. Wijaya employed up to 50 people at his private home and garden, Villa Bebek in Sanur. He regularly paid for their hospital bills and funeral costs when they fell ill or relatives died.

In fact Wijaya had a passion for documenting Bali's unique cremation and funeral ceremonies and posting regular videos on his personal blog. Now, his adoptive Balinese family will be responsible for attending to his, after his death in Sydney this week.

"It is likely that his body will be cremated in Australia and then the ashes will be transported here and we will have a Hindu ritual," Kapaon village chief Ida Bagus Suteja said.

Topics: death, gardening, community-and-society, sydney-2000, bali, indonesia

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