

CONTEMPORARY THEATRE IN POST-COLONIAL MALAYSIA: THEATRE OF ROOTS AND PEOPLE’S THEATRE SEEKING COMMON GROUND

(Teater Kontemporari Malaysia Pascakolonial: Mencari Titik Persamaan antara Teater Asal Usul dengan Teater Masyarakat)

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Abstract

In the late twentieth century in post-colonial Malaysia, like other parts of South Asia and Southeast Asia theatre makers reviewed traditional improvised theatres for reusable material in modern drama. The search for a theatre of roots was undertaken by urban educated authors who in late colonial period had generated scripted dramatic literature influenced by western models. Modern theatre makers trained in traditional genres have experimented with adapting Malaysian dance drama forms, creating for example *mak yong* for the modern proscenium stage using western narratives, as with the work of Norzizi Zukaflī and Zamzuriah Zahari or *bangsawan* in the work of Marlenny Deenerwan. A second mode of exploration is “people’s theatre” which proliferated across Southeast Asia from the 1970s and borrowed stylistic aspects of indigenous genres, but took up social and political issues of the nation, risking censorship as seen in the work of the Five Arts Center and playwright Dinsman.

Keywords: Malaysian drama, post-colonial literature, political theatre, *mak yong*, censorship, multiculturalism

Abstrak

Pada penghujung abad ke-20, Malaysia pascakolonial, seperti bahagian lain di Asia Selatan dan Asia Tenggara penghasil teater mengkaji semula teater improvisasi tradisional bagi bahan yang boleh digunakan semula dalam drama moden. Pencarian teater asal usul dilakukan oleh pengarang berpendidikan bandar yang pada zaman lewat kolonial telah menghasilkan sastera dramatik berskrip yang dipengaruhi oleh model barat. Penghasil teater moden yang dilatih dalam genre tradisional telah bereksperimen dengan mengadaptasi bentuk drama tari Malaysia, mencipta contohnya mak yong untuk pentas proscenium moden menggunakan naratif barat, seperti karya Norzizi Zulkifli dan Zamzuriah Zahari atau bangsawan dalam karya Marlenny Deenerwan. Mod penerokaan kedua ialah “teater masyarakat” yang berkembang pesat di seluruh Asia Tenggara dari tahun 1970-an dan meminjam aspek gaya genre peribumi, tetapi mengambil isu sosial dan politik negara, mempertaruhkan penapisan seperti yang dilihat dalam karya Five Arts Center dan penulis drama Dinsman.

Kata kunci: Drama Malaysia, sastera pascakolonial, teater politik, mak yong, penapisan, kepelbagaian budaya

INTRODUCTION

Malaysia and other Southeast Asia countries are rich in resources to rework for new theatre performances. In the 1970s and 1980s there were attempts to bridge traditional theatre genres, rethinking them for urban, modern audiences. This work has evolved. One variant is referred to as the post-colonial “theatre of roots,” which began with independence and used local genres of music, movement and other features, but presented work in an urban and elite theatre, often adapting non-traditional stories. This mode requires considerable training in a particular traditional performance genre and results in director-led new work for the proscenium stage. This paper will discuss the use of the work of Norzizi Zukaffi and Zamzuriah Zahari in *mak yong* as examples of theatre of roots. Other forms like *zapin* and *bangsawan* have also been tapped. The second mode is termed as a “people’s theatre” which involves educated elite creating performances with narratives focused on socio-political issues. This style of theatre became active in Southeast Asia from the 1970s in the work of groups like PETA (Philippine Educational Theatre Association), of Rendra (*Bengkel Teater*) and Arifin C Noer (*Teater Kecil*) in Indonesia, or Kuo Pao Kun (Substation) in Singapore. The form was often spearheaded in Malaysia by director and drama critic Krishan Jit at the Five Arts Centre beginning with *1984 Here and Now* from Kee (2003). In

addition, this paper will discuss recent developments of this style of politically active people's theatre including a large group of outdoor production by Dinsman, *Theatre Atop a Tree (Teater Atas Pokok, 2016)*, and a solo piece presented by Marion D'Cruz, *Gostan Forward: A Solo Performance Lecture (2009)*, which was presented in a 2014 iteration at Five Arts Centre. The method of this research follows a humanities model of theatre attendance, review of criticism, textual and performance analysis.

THEATRE OF ROOTS

Theatre of Roots was a term proposed by Awasthi (1918-2004), General Secretary of Sangeet Natak Akademi in India. In theorizing the form, he noted that reconnecting with indigenous heritage was a shared aspiration of post WWII theatre makers across Asia who were emerging from colonial regimes that had foregrounded European theatrical models (Awasthi & Schechner, 1989). From the 1970s, Awasthi saw the use of heritage forms and/or indigenous tales as method of decolonizing and moving from the realistic Stanislavski-based drama that has dominated Indian modern drama of the urban elite of the pre-independence period. According to Awasthi, "The return to and discovery of tradition is inspired by a search for roots and a quest for identity. This is part of the whole process of decolonization of lifestyle, social institutions, creative forms, and cultural modes. The modern Indian theatre, a product of colonial culture, felt an intense need to search for roots to counteract its violent dislocation from tradition" (p. 48).

In India this return toward indigenous roots helped subvert Aristotelian theories of plot and proscenium stagings, and turned artist-writer-directors toward local resources. The *Natyasastra* overrode Aristotle as a theory. Martial arts or Indian dance genres, music, and costumes were borrowed for presentation choices. Artist like Ratam Tiyaam trained his actors in Manipuri martial arts (*thang-ta*) and created new interpretations of episodes from the *Mahabharata* or *Macbeth* to make commentary on present political and social issues. Local tales or adaptations of western narratives yielded *Kathakali Othello* or *King Lear*.¹

In Malaysia similar efforts pressed toward revivals. Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang in the 1970s was the first program to integrate classes in forms like *mak yong*, the dance drama of Kelantan, and *wayang kulit siam/kelantan* shadow puppetry. In time the prime locus for learning traditional arts moved from USM to the national arts academy (Akademi Seni Kebangsaan [ASK]), founded in 1994 and now called ASWARA (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan) as a training site, but the short time students learn heritage arts normally mean limited absorption of the models.² While individual efforts by some artists have

maintained the genres in their home states, in the face of waning public interest and (as in Kelantan), strong attacks of religious leaders on various aspects [connection to ritual, performance by women, transgender depictions (women playing men), and traditional narratives which may have Hindu or animist roots] the indigenous forms have suffered. From 1998, Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) banned the *mak yong*, *wayang siam*, and other traditional genres as “un-Islamic, hence maintaining traditions in the genres home locales has been difficult.

Instead, a quite different style of performing the traditional genres evolved in the cities, in which, like the theatre of roots in India, tried to side step divisive issues. In Malaysia this has been sometimes by ignoring the philosophical-religious aspects of the work (however firmly these genres are part of Malay Islam history), since given those elements do not fit either modern urban culture and/or contemporary Sunni orthodoxy from the Hejaz, which in modern globalized Islam is promoted as standard religiosity.

The urban theatre of roots emphasizes form and is exemplified by artists like director Norzizi Zukafli who started learning *mak yong* at ASK/ASWARA working under the traditionally trained Fatimah Abdullah. Zukafli first directed a production of a traditional play (*Anak Raja Gondang*) in 2002 while she was still a student at ASK. *Raja Tangkai Hati* (*King of the Heart*, 2003), her next effort, was presented at Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture/National Theatre) which was then under the direction of film maker and playwright Hatta Azad Khan. *Raja Tangkai Hati* transformed the traditional rural performance to the modern proscenium stage with extravaganza lighting, special effects, full set, and detailed blocking. Though *mak yong* had already been updated and produced nationally in the early independence period, Zukafli’s version was a more radical urbanization than previously (Foley & Kahn, 2012).

Impressed with the success of *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, a modern musical spearheaded by actress Tiara Jacquelina which reworked an older narrative, used Southeast Asian dance stylization and others. Zukafli, while studying in the United Kingdom, asked herself how she might merge material from Kelantanese *mak yong* in her modern directorial work. She questioned: “Did those traditional forms have to remain exactly as they were when I was a child? Or, could I employ those cultural materials in new ways for contemporary aesthetic purposes in an intercultural theatre production?” (Zukafli, 2017:15)

Zukafli has over time become best known for her efforts which used Shakespeare’s plots: *Midsummer’s Night Dream* (*Mak Yong Titis Sakti*, 2009, 2018), and *Tempest* (*Throne of Thorns*, 2015, produced for her PhD work in Australia).³

In both works she carefully fit Shakespearean texts to what she found as central features of *mak yong*; royal figures, clown characters, magic, and spirits. Zukafli, for example, writes:

Both unseen and seen creatures appear in *The Tempest* and *Mak Yong*. Prospero has the power to communicate with the unseen world, and Ariel is portrayed as an unseen spirit invisible to all but Prospero. Apart from the use of magic and the supernatural, both *The Tempest* and the *Mak Yong* stories have a richness of spoken language, and use comedy to explore notions of the oppressed and the oppressor. ... As a contemporary Malaysian artist and a global citizen, this same story offered opportunities for me to reflect upon my own country and its interactions with other nations. (Zukafli, 2017:88)

The PhD production in Australia used Australian actors and combined traditional elements such as the opening dance “Menghadap Rebab” with stylized acting and costumes inspired by, but not fully following traditional *mak yong*. Malaysian piece like *Titis Sakti* has proved to be very successful through the combination of full *mak yong* costuming, intricate lighting, and actors who can fully embody the dance—some performers come from traditional *mak yong* families. Yet instead of the traditional improvisation of dialogue according to the scene needs, fully scripted texts (Zukafli and her co-author’s Shakespeare adaptation) are used.

Another of Zukafli’s contemporary script efforts was *Usikan Rebab: The Legend of a Prima Donna* (2012). A monodrama for Zamzuriah Zahari who comes from a family of *mak yong* performers. The text itself was a reworking of Rahimidin Zahari and Rosnan Rahman’s earlier *mak yong* monodrama *Rebab Berbisik (Whispering Rebab, 2007)* and explored the fate of *mak yong*, passed in family lineages, when it lacks a member of the new generation to continue. Even more the autobiographical was Zamzuriah Zahari’s own script in 2015, *Jalan Primadona*, which recounts aspects of Zamzuriah’s personal experience as dancer confronting a changing society shifting toward more fundamentalist religious thinking wherein the female dancer is increasingly looked down upon if she continues to appear on stage. Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Company (KLPac) advertised the performance in the following terms:

This musical revolves around a Primadona who feels marginalised and no longer appreciated in the industry. Just when her name is about to rise again, she begins to embrace religion and intends to leave her glamorous past behind. The Primadona’s sorrow remind her during the glory days of her performances in *Mak Yong, Tari*

Inai, and *Pejuang Seni Tradisional*. The vagaries of her life from five years ago are relived and the disapproving words of society and even her family towards her passion for the arts births a new impression for the title of “Primadona”. Behind that title, no one really knows the sorrows of a woman in different “life of arts”. This monodrama musical features more than 8 complex characters that challenge the credibility of an actor, singer, dancer and their traditional poetry reciting skill. (Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, 2015).

Directed by Faridah Merican, doyenne of KLPac, Zamzuriah Zahari noted:

“Sixty percent of what you will see on stage is based on my own experience as an artiste. ... It is not easy to be a female artiste because people are always judging you. ... Some have told me that I am not a pious Muslim because I do not cover my head when I am performing. But my question to my critics, and to myself is: ‘Does your attire make you a good Muslim?’” (Zahari quoted in. Bissme, 2015)

For these new scripts, artists maintain the formal features of *mak yong* but use new narratives thus side-stepping the “non-Islamic” issues that are part of the traditional stories and opening rituals that have caused the bans by ulama. Shakespeare as an icon of high culture is enjoyed by the educated urban audiences who attend Zukaflī’s productions and viewers can quickly appreciate the equivalence of the fairy king, Oberon, to a Pak Yong prince (the major male role Oberon takes in Zukaflī’s *Midsummer’s Night Dream* as played by the female artist Zahari). The two traditional *mak yong peran* (clowns) co-jointly carry out the trickster fairy Puck’s role.⁴

Meanwhile, monodramas about the situation of contemporary *mak yong* artists confront allow a realistic, psychologized acting and can comment on the predicament of the present. These works ask how a heritage art like *mak yong* can be preserved in the changing political-social environment. Performances combine psychologically-based acting with dance and music from the traditional *mak yong* and represent good examples of theatre of roots. These monodramas are modern hybrids taking elements from tradition, but reworking them in contemporary ways that speak to the present urban audiences while avoiding the controversy about the spiritual aspects of *mak yong*’s traditional repertoire.

Other genres of Malay traditional arts have also been tapped. For *bangsawan* the popular improvised theatre of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century with its *silat* martial arts battles and extravagant “extra turns” (variety acts of song/dance between scenes), the works by Marlenny Deenerwan are significant. She has

created *Bangsawan Hikayat Seribu Satu Malam* (*Bangsawan One Thousand and One Nights*), attempting a feminist perspective of storyteller Scheherazade's situation saving her life via her king-husband's thirst for yet another tale (Deenerwan, 2017b). Additionally Deenerwan's *Hikayat Si Miskin Menjadi Raja*, based on Mark Twain's *The Prince and the Pauper* was her adaptation of the short story *Anak Raja dan Anak Papa* (*The Royal Child and The Poor Child*, 1958) by noted Malay writer, Tan Sri Zainal Abidin bin Ahmad (Za'aba) (Deenerwan 2017a). This script, presented at KLPac in late 2021, is part of ongoing efforts by Deenerwan and other younger artists to revitalize *bangsawan* (see Deenerwan & Kahn, 2018).

Deenerwan's script begins with the song:

*Dalam sebuah keluarga diraja
Lahirlah putera pewaris takhta
Jadi permata ayah dan bonda
Amir Hamzah diberi nama*

*Pada hari dan masa yang sama
Dalam keluarga yang miskin hina
Lahir pula seorang bayi
Nasibnya malang tidak terperi*

*Dua pemuda, dua cerita
Seiras wajah, nasibnya berbeza
Ingin mencari makna dunia
Tak pernah tahu apa takdirnya*

*Rencana Tuhan tiada yang tahu
Di simpang hidup mereka bertemu
Lalu bermula sebuah cerita
Hikayat si miskin menjadi raja
(Syair *Si Miskin Menjadi Raja*, Deneerwan, 2017a)*

[On the selfsame day and hour
In a family poor and without power
Another child is born
His fate best and forlorn.

Two youths, two different fates
With varied chances meet face to face,
Each seeking to know life's meaning,
Not knowing destiny and its seeming.

No one knows God's plan.
Meeting on life's crossroads they both stand.
Thus the tale begins,
Of how the pauper became king.

Using the techniques of *bangsawan* that Deenerwan first acquired at ASK/ASWARA under the tutelage of National Artist Rahman Bakar (Rahman B.), one of the last *bangsawan* maestros, she added to her modern theatre and acting training. As director-author, she shared the tale of a prince, Amir Hamzah, experiencing the life of a poor boy when he exchanges clothes with a youth (Kadir) from Kampung Sampah (Garbage Neighborhood). The script asserts that the empowered need to learn empathy and expose themselves to the situation of the poor, rather than stay in the bubble of their elite circle. Once the two youths trade garments, no one can tell the pauper from the prince. Though wealth, granted to the poor youth by the prince, *Deus ex machina* as the play concludes, does not really resolve the contemporary social issues that the play raises – abusive fathers and limited ability of the lower class to lift themselves out of poverty – the narrative invites political leaders to understand the needs of the poor. Deenerwan implies that Amir Hamzah will be a better king for having gone beyond the palace walls.

1. *Kandang* (literally, Cage, 2017) is yet another example of theatre of roots. This is a work adapted by a father and son team, the late Tan Sri Muhammad Ali Hashim (an important Johor political leader) and his offspring Omar Ali. *Kandang* is a cautionary tale about freedom and equality. Based on George Orwell's *Animal Farm* - which attacked the Stalinist oppression that pervaded world communism by 1945, the script applies failure in leadership to a Malay situation. The core idea: "All Animals Are Equal / But Some Are More Equal Than Others" shows the corrupting influence of power when the elite exploit governance for their own and their cronies enrichment. Using movement from Johor style *zapin* dance and gamelan accompaniment, this important production was staged at KLPac in 2017, revived in 2019, and streamed during Covid in 2020. It shows the corruption of the "Rukun Haiawanisme" (Animals'

Constitution/Pillars). The animals have free themselves from the farmer's colonial order, but rather than realizing true freedom, the politics of oppression are replayed by the new leaders who forget all too soon that they were once oppressed. The elite subdue all the other animals. The pillars as outlined in Muhammad Ali Hashim and Omar Ali's script are not achieved:

Rukun pertama: Makhluk berkaki dua: musuh haiawan belaka.

Rukun kedua: Makhluk berkaki empat: saudara dan sahabat.

Rukun ketiga: Semua haiawan: dilarang berpakaian.

Rukun keempat: Semua haiawan: dilarang tidur atas katil.

Rukun kelima: Semua haiawan: dilarang minum arak.

Rukun keenam: Semua haiawan: dilarang bunuh haiawan lain.

Rukun Ketujuh: Semua haiawan: sama cita, sama rasa, sama rata.

Inilah Tujuh Prinsip Rukun Haiawanisme! Undang-undang Perlembagaan Ladang Haiawan. (hokl_admin, 2019)

[The first pillar: Two -legged creatures: animals' enemies.

The second pillar: Four -legged creatures: brothers and friends.

The third pillar: For all animals: No clothes are allowed.

The fourth pillar: For all animals: No sleeping in beds.

The fifth pillar: For all animals: Drinking alcohol is forbidden.

Sixth Pillar: For all animals: No killing of other animals.

Seventh Pillar: For all animals: The same goals, same feelings, same status.

These are the Seven Pillars of Animalism! Animal Farm Constitution.]

Director and co-author Omar Ali, speaking after his father's death, noted: "In the end, it all doesn't matter who is in power but what matters is once you're up there what do you do with it? That question was important for my dad (Chalil, 2019).

Kandang faced criticism. Omar Ali noted: "These critics keep saying ... that is how the Westerners will behave, and not us. ... [But] The West has a wealth of stories that we can learn from. The message in their stories is relevant to us. Ultimately, their stories tell us that we all are humans and make mistakes." (*Kandang – A play on power* [video], 2017).

Some were upset that Malay actors were playing pigs (an animal anathema to Muslims). Omar Ali in a 2019 interview with Melanie Chalil noted:

It's also part of the statement – we are offended by a Malay actor playing pigs or all these pigs speaking Malay for example but we're not offended by what's going on in the country?

We should be aware of what offends us. This whole idea of what is offensive and wrong, we want to question that. (Chalil, 2019)

The combination of strong acting, the circular floor patterns of *zapin*, martial stances, lively percussion gave the story a firm tie to Malaysia. Independence was declared in 1957, the status quo was temporarily overturned in 2018 when the ruling party led by Malays (but enmeshed in corruption) was thrown out temporarily. The play implied that the work of freedom is not finished and government policies which give preference to Malays over other ethnic groups is unjust.

One should note that in each of these plays, the forms of movement, music, presentation are taken from Malay tradition. The additives of western staging (set script, lighting/set design, set blocking), instead of local forms (improvised dialogue, no set, improvised blocking), refine the plays for urban audiences. Instead of going to local narratives for story however, the artists often opt for radical reworkings of the western canon (Shakespeare, Twain, Orwell) or, in the case of the monodramas, do semi-autobiographical riffs. Traditional storylines are rarely tapped. This is surely a sign that contemporary political and religious ideologies have made championing the Malay heritage narratives difficult. While Disney or Broadway routinely use western fairytales or epics for new entertainments without problem, the potential power that inhered in heritage stories such as *Dewa Muda*, *Dewa Pechil*, or the *Ramayana* are avoided: otherworldly manifestations, the prominence of females, and other issues may still complicate for contemporary Malays, full reclaiming of heritage arts. Artists take the outward form without problem, but the inward soul is avoided—perhaps out of fear it might test compliance contemporary takes on Muslim religiosity. Deeper reworkings of traditional tales may be too hot to handle when Hijaz Islam is dominant over the long history of Malay and Southeast Asian Islam.

PEOPLE'S THEATRE

A second decolonizing genre is the “people’s theatre.” Due to its political antecedents this genre became somewhat problematized in Southeast Asia and seen as a theatre

of dissidence. If forms related to traditional theatres like *mak yong* or *wayang kulit* struggle with censorship of the act of performing, these productions contend with censorship that sees the narrative's political criticism (of race, religion, and politicians) as a potential challenge to calm and stability. Interestingly, the authors in Malaysia often shield themselves by retreat into English language production – presumably the curtailed audience and the therefore small venue makes it easier to produce. The audience is few and already like-minded.

Berthold Brecht was a major theorist of people's theatre and he demanded more than the passive audience of early twentieth century melodrama. Brecht felt viewers became lost in emotional empathy with the beset protagonists and would fail to do anything tangible. He therefore sought theatre that made viewers analytical and proactive in change. Brecht's ideas as amplified by practitioners like Augusto Boal in Brazil (Forum Theatre) were exported from Latin America to the Philippines and, through workshops by organizations like Pilipino Educational Theatre Association (PETA) in the 1970s and 1980s, were shared across post-colonial Southeast Asia. These efforts to create clear-eyed audiences that came to theatre for debate, social criticism, and demanded agency by the citizens outside the performing space. People's theatre often became problematized in Southeast Asia due to the dynamics of the Southeast Asian War, part of the international Cold War. This political criticism made governments nervous and writers and performers were often branded socialist and censorship became likely. Yet the idea was and remains strong in small, not for profit of the theatre circles. This work will use the examples of scripts in English by Kee Thuan Chye and Marion D'Cruz and a Malay language drama by Dinsman.

In a Malaysian publication on the thirtieth year anniversary of Five Arts Centre, artists remembered *1984 Here and Now* (hereafter, *1984* and published 1985) by Kee Thuan Chye (1954-now) and directed by Krishan Jit (1939-2005).⁵ Five Arts Centre brought together Malaysian artists across ethnic and disciplinary lines and was part of the late twentieth century Southeast Asian people's theatre movement promoting political and social justice (Ken Takauchi in Rowland, 2015:14-20). Kee and Jit's *1984* adapted Orwell's tale, using ethnicity to set hierarchy. "The Party" was Malays supporting "Big Brother" (standing for then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad) and the oppressed "Proles" were non-Malay "others," Sino- and Indian-Malaysians. The play reflected Kee's experience as an aspiring academic and practicing journalist. He came of age after the 1971 National Cultural Policy/National Economic Policy had enshrined affirmative action for *bumiputera* (sons of the land, Malay ethnic) over citizens of Chinese, Indian, or other descent. At the time of independence (1957) the last two groups were nearly half of the population.⁶ The play reflected the heavy

ensorship from the Sedition Act (1948, put in place by the British), Internal Security Act (1960) allowing detention without trial, and a recently passed Printing Presses and Publication Act (1984). Scenes showed the pressure on writers to do stories that praised those in power, presumably referring to pressure from United Malay National Organization (UMNO) and Barisan Nasional (BN) which ruled from Independence until 2018 (and returned to power in 2021).

Kee's *1984* begins with a scene of Party members screaming at the rock music and dancing with phrases like "Obscene" and "Against our religion" (Kee as cited in Rowland, 2015:38). "Big Brother" then replaces the offending modernity, announcing the war on Kloots (representing supposed Communists/dissidents and, by association, Chinese-Malaysians]:

"Our war is a war of peace ... you must put your faith in the party. You must put your faith in God, observe the principles of our religion. You must uphold our culture. Do not let it be shaken by foreign influences ... Party members must unite, one and all with no exceptions. As for the Proles who have made their homes in this nation. ... they must understand that above all else the party members must be kept happy. Party members must not feel threatened or deprived in this land that is rightfully theirs." (pp. 38-39)

The play ends as the Malay journalist hero, Wiran, hears the police coming and exhorts the audience:

"Are you all going to sit here and do nothing? The hope of the nation lies with you! Are you going to sit here and let it go to the dogs? Stand up! ... Stand up for your freedom, for racial equality and integration, for humanity and justice, for truth, for a nation capable of greatness! ... You have the power to bring about changes. ... Yes! Yes! Yes!" (p. 70)

Critic Kathy Rowland in introducing his drama notes:

"The play ends as the audience decides it should, empowering the spectators to decide the fate of the characters and by extension themselves. ... Kee's vision of Malaysia is not merely prescient, but downright uncanny in its detailed depictions of the illogical extremes of single party rule and the toxic trinity of religion, politics and race. " (Rowland, 2015:4)

Jennifer Lo credits Five Arts Centre with sparking a “politicized Theatrical Renaissance in the mid-1980” (Lo, 2004:5). Kee has continued his writing, primarily in English which both frees him to be more critical (given that it will only be watched by the educated elite) and limits his audience in Malaysia, but of course also gives testimony to issues internationally. Kee’s scathing *The Big Purge* (1988), which dealt with the 1987 detention of a hundred activists in *Operasi Lalang* (Weeding Operation) by Mahathir government under the Internal Security Act, was his next effort. A sample detainee was Chow Chee Kong who due to having attended a “people’s theatre” workshop with the Philippine Educational Theatre Association (PETA) on Boal’s Forum Theatre was accused of being a Marxist. A number of members of the activist theatre community were caught up in the sweep which showed the limits of free speech. *The Big Purge* was presented at Essex University in the United Kingdom where the author was studying, not in Malaysia. It is set in Equaland, with a *wayang kulit* world of shadowy politicians and the “real” world of five people of different ethnicities caught in interracial politics. The constipated Chief Minister plans his purge of dissenters. Kee notes:

I incorporated these elements (traditional features) in 1984 *Here and Now* and *The Big Purge* to depict the shadowy world of manipulative powers. In a sense, ruling politicians are like the *dalang* who is all-powerful because he dictates the story, the script, the performance. He manipulates. He theatricalises reality. What you see is what he conjures. The *Wayang Kulit* is for me, therefore, a powerful metaphor of power play. (Kee quoted in Quayum, 2005:134).

Kee and others (for example Mark Teh) go to history and political events for their inspiration in creating people’s theatre scripts, since drama gives citizen-artists a voice. Theatre provides agency in querying the state of the nation.

A subset of people’s theatre that has emerged in the last decade is what will termed as “portmanteau theatre”: it seeks to meld a variety of styles from contemporary to traditional to create art that is not ethnically specific, but embraces all cultural resources of Malaysia. While this hybrid genre can seem disjunct as one switches from one genre to another, it moves in a productive direction – it promotes a democracy of the arts and may prepare the way of the future. As for example, in American culture, the blues came out of a specific American synthesis of African American and then Euro-American melding of African traditions, hymns, syncopation, county and southern traditions, hybridity births new arts specific to the place.

Malaysia has yet to let its diverse resources unify. But, at least in theatre, artists are trying to model the unity that they want to be achieved in life. *Teater Atas Pokok* (*Theatre Atop the Tree*, 2016) written and directed by Dinsman (Che Shamsudin Osman), in April 2016 and Marion D’Cruz’s *Gostan Forward* (2009) devised with and directed by Mark Teh, first in 2009 (revised in 2012) and presented thereafter, respond to local cultural realities. These artists create hybrid art that is inclusive of the many different cultural possibilities that are Malaysian. Dinsman does it by creating an overarching story of ecology (saving a heritage tree that represents the land) in a performance that included many arts and cultural diversity within its structure; D’Cruz did it by showcasing her journey through multiple Southeast Asia dance genres from a young dancer to an elder of the activist dance/theatre community. For Dinsman the political creates a performative coalition from which his group can help green the city. For D’Cruz solo dance monologue, the personal is political: by putting the diverse movement stains of Malay world into her body, D’Cruz becomes the multi-ethnic, multi-possibilities of the Malaysia for which she works.

While both Dinsman and D’Cruz may questioned the reality of the “1Malaysia” rhetoric of Najib Razak’s government, by inclusivity and recognition of multiple roots of the nation, they actualize the unified nation. Both their performances argue that all ethnicities and all groups’ heritage arts should be allowed to meet and intermingle on the level playing field. The two artists imply this equality that is needed if ever a truly Malaysian contemporary drama is to thrive. Indeed this region has always been hybrid given the sea-lanes where Austronesian, Melanesian, Caucasian, Indo-Aryan, Dravidian, Semitic, Tai and Sinitic people have met and mingled since recorded time.

Dinsman’s *Theatre Atas Pokok* was staged by actors in an impressive tree in a major park in Shah Alam, capital of Selangor state in 2016. The plot pitted community and environmentalism against urban development, capitalism and corruption. Dinsman and his diverse cast united to resist planned development in Kampung Bandar where Seniman Paksi Rakyat, Artists’ Axis of the People (PAKSI), his group of writers and artist, holds monthly poetry readings at an Islamic educational institution advocating for civil society (Madrasah Tarbiyah). The play was inspired by two poems of Malaysian National Laureate Usman Awang (1929-2001). “*Balada Terbunuhnya Beringan Tua di Pinggir Sebuah Bandaraya*” (*Ballad of the Murdering of an Old Banyan on the City Outskirts*) is a portion which goes:

*Sampai sekarang, tiap senjakala lembayung petang
Dengarlah suara Beringin mengucapkan pesan:*

*Selamat tinggal, selamat tinggal wahai awan
Selamat tinggal matahari selamat tinggal bulan
Selamat tinggal, kupu-kupu sayang
Selamat tinggal, wahai burung-burung bersarang
Selamat tinggal anak-anak bermain riang*

*Namaku Beringin pohon tua yang terbang
Dimusuhi oleh rancangan bernama Pembangunan*

[To this day, when twilight graces the sky
You can hear the old banyan tree's farewell:

Goodbye, goodbye cloud
Goodbye sun, goodbye moon
Goodbye dear butterflies
Goodbye nesting birds
Goodbye frolicking children

It was old Banyan tree cast inside
By an enemy called Development.]
(translation from Ensemble fur Neue Music Zurich: Archive, 2004)

In the show, perches for actors and featured musicians were hung in a massive tree with the younger and more athletic climbing high above to play; the musicians in the middle of the tree; and larger groups on the ground, including specialty acts performing traditional *kuda kepang* (horse trance dance), Thai *likay* dance, frame drummers, a chorus from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), hand puppeteers to represent various animals, and writer Yassin Salleh declaiming poetry. The audience sat on a grassy hill gazing down into the natural amphitheater from which this stately tree rose. Performance artist Paik Yin climbed to amazing heights, then descended on a swing for musical numbers, and finally went to the ground to meet Thai *likay* actor/dancer Bhumin Dhanaketpisarn. It was a performance full of highs and lows.

The text praised: “Kampung Bandar Dalam, a village that is our common heritage, a fortress of protecting humanity against the greedy destroying monster of capitalism” (Dinsman, 2016:31). A cardboard bulldozer womaned by a government minister and her male peons (dressed as August clowns) attacked. These antagonists were forestalled by the assembled community who saved the tree. Usman Awang’s poems were the strongest writing and gave voices to the tree and the birds. *Surat dari Masyarakat Burung kepada Datuk Bandar (Letter from the Birds to the Mayor)* a poem included in Awang’s *Salam Benua-Greeting to the Continent*, 1982 was a highlight: it advocates for preserving nature in the face urban growth.

Lord Mayor

though we had no hand in electing you since franchise is not for the feathered,
still we honoured you for your promise

OF A GREEN CITY.

Alas, they have desecrated THE GREEN of nature

to worship THE GREEN of dollars

since Kuala Lumpur’s mud turned to concrete

we birds have been the silent sufferers

the late Belatuk was crushed under a felled tree Merbuk was conned by the name

Padang Merbuk While he and his kind were cooped in cages.

... this letter request that in your wisdom

you will protect each branch, each root,

each leaf, each petal, each bower,

for these have been our homes through the centuries, and it would also be for the
good of man,

his health and happiness, his peace of mind,

to let nature and its myriad beauties bloom

in the brilliant sun

(translation by Usman Awang)

(translation from Bujang, 2018:17-18).

Sitting in the open air with an audience of all ages invited viewers to remember this was a traditional Malay way of viewing the performances. Watching in the cool evening breeze under the towering tree, a normal site for village performance historically, made one feel this was indeed performance that tapped local roots. The tree had become like *wayang kelantan’s pohon beringin* (tree of life puppet which opens the play), a symbol of cosmic wholeness. Dinsman addressed the seemingly

relentless development in Kuala Lumpur under Prime Minister Najib's government. In the play the bulldozer retreated, the banyan at the edge of the city was saved; its branches could descend from above and take root in new ground. A Thai *Likay* dancer, a Chinese contemporary performance artist, a Malay singer, a Javanese *kuda kebang* group – all could share the shade under the same tree's canopy and this, it was implied would be the strength of the nation.

Dinsman attempt to incorporate all groups within his frame narrative, making for a mass performance in *Theatre Atop a Tree*. D'Cruz's *Gostan Forward* is an English language dance monologue that does something related but in a solo work. By combining the many movement and drama styles of the groups and area one performer stages multicultural Malaysian identity. D'Cruz's exploration of Southeast Asian diversity included a story of her choreographing *silat* (martial arts dance) moves for Joe Papp's New York Shakespeare in the Park *Tempest* production. She later demonstrated her versions of traditional palace dances of *joget gamelan* and *Terinai Mengadap* which she had researched. She remembered her improvised movement set to a poem by Indonesian poet W. S. Rendra. She spoke of the *wayang kulit* which she performed after studying with noted Dalang Hmazah bin Awang at Universiti Sains Malaysia. She recounted participating in the first major dance drama that showcased Malay dance where Zamin Haron had her featured. Critics complained at the time that she, being of Indian heritage should be allowed to "star" as a Malay dancer. But she affirmed the strong interest in the Malaysian dance community to avoid such narrowmindedness:

Thankfully, while most of this nation has regressed, gostan, in some areas of dance, we have progressed, forward. Gostan Forward. Gostan Forward. Now budak India boleh menari Melayu, budak Melayu boleh menari Cina, budak Cina boleh menari Indian and in Johor, semou budak boleh menari Zapin. ("Indian kid can dance Malay, a Malay can dance Chinese, a Chinese can dance Indian, and in Johor, anyone can dance Zapin) (D'Cruz *Gostan Forward* in Rowland, 2015:341)

D'Cruz in the play whose title means (reverse) longs for the freedom to cross lines which was common in the early days of the nation. She talks of her efforts to incorporate multiple people of all backgrounds in her work:

When I began this journey I was in search for contemporary Malaysia dance and a new vocabulary. I wanted people who were interested to journey and search with me. A trained dancer spends so much time and energy to get their body to do these impossible things

– the perfect turnout, the perfect line. ... I wanted something else. Non-trained dancers ... I want to make work that is so ordinary and extraordinary all at the same time, so that people. When they look, they feel, ‘Wahh ...’ and then say, ‘but I can do that! (p. 331)

D’Cruz recalled her choreography of *Bunga Manggar Bunga Raya* in 2007 when she asked everyone to dance their relationship to Malaysia. “The idea was to create multiplicity, many stories, many bodies, many ideas, many minds, many Malaysias.” Chinese Malaysian actress-playwright Puay Tin sang the anthem “Negaraku” in Hokkien and children’s Indian-Malaysian theatre director Janet Pillai circled the stage on a bike. That twenty-two performer piece staged the nation. “I liked to believe that as the democratic space in the nation was becoming smaller, the democratic space in our studio (Five Arts Centre) expanded” (p. 329)

By creating space for multiple voices of her many collaborators in group works to do their own version of being Malaysian and in this piece recollecting and reprising in her own dance and through her text, one singer/actor voices the nation. By remembering her own life from independence to the present and her search for inclusivity, she echoes what Dinsman did with his large ensemble for *Theatre Atop a Tree*: a united egalitarian Malaysia. Such performances represent the many Malaysian who meet in creative artistic collaboration to implement real nation-building. These works argue that hybridity is a strength and created across ethnic lines, roots theatre in the reality of contemporary Malaysia. People’s theatre is not a world of either/or but one of many/and.

CONCLUSION

All these artists are working to connect the arts of the past with the present to build the future. Norzizi Zukafli, Marlenny Deenerwan, and Omar Ali take movement and sound of traditional arts matching the work with new stories adapted from western sources and/or contemporary Malaysia life. Kee Chuan Khye, Dinsman and Marion D’Cruz start with the idea of theatre as agency. They model democracy on the stage and by doing this they believe they can jumpstart it in the life of the nation. All these playwrights aver that the roots of Malaysian tradition are multiple. The works show ways that diverse Malaysian resources can combine democratically. All these artist create theatre that seeks equality rooted in the Malaysian nation as their common ground.

NOTES

- 1 See Diane Daugherty (2005) and Phukan (2018) for information on a sample Indian *kathakali* productions that meld Indian theatre techniques and western dramatic texts.
- 2 Training in Malay theatre genres began under the leadership of Ghulam-Sawar Yousof who has written extensively on *mak yong* (1976, 2018, and 2019). For recent developments in *mak yong* see Hardwick (2020). On Malaysian *wayang* see Wright (1980) and Matusky (1993).
- 3 For full discussion of her PhD. production see Zulkafli, 2017.
- 4 See Zulkafli's YouTube version of *A Midsummer's Night Dream, Titis Sakti* (2014).
- 5 Kee studied drama at the University of Sciences in Penang, but was not given a lecturer position, since Malay affirmative action used positions for Malays. He became a journalist for the *New Straits Times* and later *The Star* in Kuala Lumpur where he consistently struggled for freedom of censorship in press and in the arts. Krishan Jit was the noted director, theatre critic, professor and co-founder of Five Arts Centre. Jit's work was seminal for the directions of theatre in Malaysia and Singapore from Independence until his death. For background on Five Arts Centre see Lo, 2004; Nge, 2014; Philip, 2007 and 2012 and Rowland, 2003 and 2015.
- 6 Due to the higher fertility of Malays and large emigration due to discrimination, Malays are now over 68%.

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