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Theatre in Malaysia: The Contemporary Situation

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Since Independence, theatre practice in Malaysia is characterized by two salient features: its ability to respond and adapt to an ever-changing context, and its diversity in terms of form, style, and structure. Nonetheless, like all creative arts practices in the world, theatre in Malaysia is not without its problems; the ebb and flow of the performing arts scene in the country is very much informed by trends and events both within as well as beyond the confines of Malaysia alone. Despite this reality, there is no denying that theatre practice in this country continues to endure and theatre practitioners continue to create work that often entertain, and sometimes challenge and provoke theatre audiences in Malaysia and even abroad.

This essay, which attempts to give an overview of theatre practice in Malaysia, is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, this essay will focus on theatre practice in the contemporary scene, while giving the reader a sense of what came before, i.e. some general historical information is provided but by no means is this meant to be comprehensive. Additionally, this essay delineates the differences within Malaysian theatre along linguistic lines; hence, there is no coverage of Malaysian theatre as a whole. While some may quibble about this delineation, the fact of the matter is that broadly speaking, the contemporary theatre scene in Malaysia continues to be structured along linguistic lines and there exists much development within each language-specific theatre that deserve mention and explication. However, even though the histories and trends within each language-specific theatre will be discussed, this essay will also identify a few general trends that have been observed in theatre in Malaysia as a whole. Lastly, a list of theatre venues is compiled as well.

Malay Language Theatre

Malay language theatre today can be better appreciated if one understood its historical underpinnings in the last five decades. Despite its short history, Malay language theatre practice in Malaysia is rich and complex. Broadly speaking, its history can be divided into the early years—shortly before independence and lasting all the way up to the late 1960s; the post-1969 decade where theatrical experimentation in all guises significantly influenced the Malaysian creative arts scene; the period of Islamic revivalism in the 1980s; and the current scene today.

Early History: 1960s and prior

Malay theatre scholars are still debating the issue of when the first Malay language drama was written but there is no denying that Malay language theatre existed prior to independence in 1957. Much of the work performed during this pre-independence period coincided with nationalist aims. Krishen Jit, in an illuminating essay for Tenggara entitled “Contemporary Malaysian Theatre”, identifies the existence of purbawara and

bangsawan drama that worked in tandem with nationalist impulses before independence. Such dramas extolled the achievements of historical figures among the Malay royal elite to almost mythical proportions so as to compensate for their relative powerlessness at the hands of the British colonial regime. After independence, such dramas redirected their focus to express modern aspirations and employed a critical lens with which to scrutinize the Malay feudal past and values. In short, Malay language theatre before the 1960s was very much responsive to the sign of the times and was not only expressive of the Malaysian socio-political condition but also proactive about trying to influence it, albeit in an indirect manner.

The Malayan Arts Theatre Group (MATG) was set up in the late 1950s and was initially an expatriate theatre group before it was taken over by Malaysians in the late 1960s. The group staged local English plays before 1974, after which they shifted to Malay language theatre. MATG disbanded in 1978.

Early Malay language theatre in the 1960s was revolved around seminal figures such as Noordin Hassan and Mustapha Kamal Yassim, among others, and all of whom were playwrights as well as directors. Productions were mounted due to the efforts of various individuals and the concept of a theatre company did not really exist in its contemporary sense. Individuals who wished to stage a play would organize themselves and their ensemble but there was no conscious attempt to band together as a collective.

It would, however, be erroneous to say that Malay language theatre was individual-centric because most of the individuals involved in theatre at the time tended to affiliate themselves with a particular institution, whether it be a literary establishment such as Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP)—such as Usman Awang and later, Zakaria Ariffin—or the Teacher's Training College—such as Noordin Hassan. Institutional affiliation was commonplace among theatre directors and playwrights because both parties stood to benefit from this arrangement. However, it might be more accurate to say that institutions like DBP, for example, was dependent on luminaries such as Usman Awang and Zakaria Ariffin for its status and strong presence in the theatre and arts scene. With the departure of both directors, DBP's presence in the world of Malay language theatre took a nosedive.

Apart from institutional affiliation, Malay language theatre also benefited from government assistance and patronage. The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was part of the Malay language theatre scene at the time, and sometimes staged plays and invited individuals to direct them. They occasionally donated small sums of money to individual theatre practitioners in order to assist them with the production of their work.

After 1969

Malay language theatre, post-1969, saw the emergence of a crop of young, unconventional, and innovative playwrights and directors, most of whom were interested to push the boundaries of theatre on all fronts, i.e. styles, formats, and strategies of staging. Theatre began to move out of its conventional indoor spaces into non-theatrical spaces such as out in the open air, in shopping marts, etc.

Practitioners such as Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan, and Johan Jaafar, to name a few, began to experiment with theatrical form and content in a manner that challenged

audiences to rethink their conception of Malay language theatre, its scope and purpose. Due in part to the volatile events of 1969 as well as to the burgeoning need for an engagement with issues such as urbanity and modernity, and the interface between the contemporary and the traditional, the 70s decade saw the flowering of experimental Malay language theatre. Some of this experimentation grew out of the university theatrical space, where students were given more freedom to explore the limits of theatre.

As a result of the post-1969 consciousness among theatre practitioners, the domain of Malay language theatre was marked by an influx of creative energies and ideas. This consciousness was very much a part of university life and in their efforts to construct a national identity, students dabbling in theatre were often caught up in the task of reclaiming what used to be the domain of the Malays. Thus, learning and adapting traditional forms of theatre into their work became a common practice. Non-Malays such as Krishen Jit were very much a part of this Malay language theatre scene as well, working alongside Usman Awang, Syed Alwi and Noordin Hassan.

Around 1972-3, for example, with the inception of the Performing Arts Department in Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang, the amount of plays to emerge from USM rose. Hatta Azad Khan, for example, was a graduate of USM, and directed his own plays while a student there. Experimentation was very much the norm in USM at the time, influencing arenas beyond theatre as well, such as dance and music. In fact, the first big theatrical production in USM was a devised play entitled *Naga-naga siapa kau, Naga-naga dimana kau*. It was a play staged primarily in Malay with some English as well.

Universiti Malaya (UM), which did not have Performing Arts Department, was also an active arena for the rise of theatre due to the efforts of a few individuals within the university. Infamous UM graduate, Dinsman, with his absurdist billed plays, and Johan Jaafar both came out of the UM campus theatre scene and created works that challenged audiences to contemplate heated issues of the day, such as the tensions between individual and society, religiosity and urban alienation, tradition and modernity, and the interrelationship between men. UM plays were not solely Malay language, however. Their literary and dramatic society, called LIDRA, mostly mounted English plays.

Apart from the growth of theatre in universities, the 1970s also saw the formation of TEMA (short for Teater Malaysia). TEMA was an umbrella organization that incorporated, in a loose manner, the Malay language theatre companies around the country. These companies were usually small and state-specific, creating drama for communal consumption on a small-scale basis. TEMA was also formed in part to handle the administrative aspect of the National Theatre and Dance festival held by the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports each year.

At the time, the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports was an influential and important ministry within the government. As a proponent of the arts at the local and communal level, the Ministry gave funds to state offices to form drama and dance groups. 1970s activity from these state groups (and even a few private ones) was particularly vibrant due to the existence of the annual National Theatre and Dance festival. Thus, despite the fact that these groups were not organized as formal companies, they were nonetheless active in terms of being able to gear themselves up for theatre festivals at the state and national level. Any company that received state funding thus became a

part of TEMA, which was primarily responsible for coordinating the annual festival. Although the state-level festival disappeared during the 1980s, it has, in the last 7-8 years, been brought back again and TEMA still functions as festival organizer.

Part of this frenetic theatrical activity at the state and national level was spurred by a post-1969 consciousness about national identity. The arts became an avenue for such explorations and community building. Although no-one emerged as a seminal figure from these local productions, they were nonetheless fertile ground for the rise and spread of a theatrical and arts consciousness among Malaysians beyond Kuala Lumpur's city limits.

Islam and the 1980s

The 1980s marked a big shift in Malay language theatre due to a worldwide Islamic revival. Influential figures in the Malay literati began to question the relationship between Islam and the arts, and in particular, to delve into the issue of whether the performing arts was to be viewed as an illicit and contrary to the tenets of Islamic law and culture. Once this shift occurred, a lot of Malay language theatre died out because theatre festivals were no longer held at the state and national levels. Individual and state theatrical activity petered out even though DBP and various government agencies carried on. A notable exception is Noordin Hassan, who continued to create plays--such as *1400* and *Jangan Bunuh Rama-Rama*--but with a more explicit Islamic and religious thrust. Government-sponsored theatre took on the mantle of encouraging drama with Islamic themes, hence the 1981 Prime Minister's Department-sponsored playwriting competition on Islamic drama.

The Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports split. It became the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism to reflect the growing perception that artistic and cultural activities had to serve the larger purpose of contributing to Malaysia's economy, via tourism. Youth and Sports became a ministry on its own. This shift also marked a growing awareness on the value of the arts as a commodity to be exploited in the interests of the country's economic progress. The importance of the arts as a building block for cultural and communal identity was sidestepped in favour of its role as simply an economic commodity.

At this time the first private Malay theatre company, Centerstage, was formed in 1985 by Normah Noordin and Najib Nor. Focusing mostly on experimental work, Centerstage explored a wide and eclectic range of artistic pieces and genres, ranging from poetry readings and musical theatre to regular dramas.

1990s and beyond

The biggest development for the Malay language theatre world in the 1990s is surely the setting up of Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK) or the National Arts Academy in 1994. The creation of ASK brought a new focus and status to the performing arts in general because at ASK, individuals were formally trained in the various facets of the performing arts. Once the first batch of ASK graduates entered the local performing arts scene, we began to see an influx of formally trained arts practitioners who were not only talented but who also wanted very much to participate in the theatre scene.

From 2000 onwards, there exists 3 new companies headed by ASK graduates: Alternative Stage (led by Nam Ron), Studio Chombrang (an arts company headed by dancer Junainah Lojong and visual artist Bayu Utomo Radjikin) and Sekutu Teater-Indi Melayu (co-founded by Adlin Aman Ramlie). All 3 companies engage with fairly experimental work and not all of them are exclusively focused on theatre. Its members are comfortable straddling the boundaries of theatre, film, dance, and visual art, in part because they are well aware that working within theatre alone will not financially viable.

In the year 2000, Malaysia also saw the grand opening of Istana Budaya, a fully government-funded national theatre. The first blueprint for Istana Budaya took shape in 1953 but the current structure only came to fruition in 2000. With the setting up of Istana Budaya, Malaysia could claim to take theatre seriously; performers at the Istana Budaya typically get paid professional rates, regardless of box office receipts. Nonetheless, Istana Budaya continues to be dominated by Malay language theatre and Malay theatre practitioners. Since one either has to be invited to perform at the Istana Budaya or be willing to pay through the nose for the rental of its space, the luminaries who have worked there are mostly Malays with government funding, although news has leaked about a local English language company mounting a production there in the very near future. It is, however, important to note that international productions from foreign countries have performed at the Istana Budaya.

In the current Malay language theatre scene, Pejabat Kebudayaan or offices of culture around the country continue to stage plays at the local level with individuals from those locations. DBP productions continue unabated and universities keep on mounting plays on campus. Older and established directors such as Ahmad Yatim, Rahim Razali and Syed Alwi dominate the Istana Budaya circuit, effectively shutting out the inclusion of younger and less well-known directors. Despite this, ASK graduates are gradually being given bigger roles to play in Istana Budaya productions and those who choose to work outside the governmental structure of funding take the initiative and call the shots in their own companies.

A salient issue that persists in the Malay language theatre world to this day is certainly funding. Malay language theatre activity is still mostly dependent on government financial support or quasi-governmental institutional support from the Ministry and DBP. At Istana Budaya, for example, government support greatly minimizes the amount of creative input among theatre practitioners because decisions about which play to stage or even about who writes a particular play is often already pre-determined. Individuals invited to participate often have to work within these constraints and have little or no autonomy in the initial process of the creation of a theatrical piece. This does not mean, however, that all government or Ministry support results in government control or intervention. Istana Budaya is a case in the extreme but in many other cases, government funding comes without many strings attached.

There still does not exist a sense of an industry that is independent on such structures of support, despite the emergence of new, up and coming outfits such as Alternative Stage and Sekutu Teater-Indi Melayu. Older companies such as Centerstage understand the necessity of working both with the government as well as independent of it. The test of the Malay language theatre industry's sense of independence rests with the younger generation and independent Malay language theatre groups. It remains to be seen whether they will be able to wean themselves off of government support but still survive.

Despite the preponderance of governmental influence and intervention, it is still significant to note is that at least 80% of Malay language theatre produced in the country is entirely original Malaysian playwriting. The rest are foreign works in translation.

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Malay language theatre has, in the last five decades, certainly gone through a great many changes and developments. While the institutional affiliations of theatre practitioners are no longer as paramount as before, the ties that bind Malay language theatre to government and Ministry funding continues unabated. While leading individuals in the scene claimed a prominent role and status in the decades before 1990, what we see now is the emergence of younger theatre practitioners who have chosen to express their creativity in smaller groups, as opposed to single individuals. This development is not extensive enough to be called a trend but is certainly well worth keeping an eye on. Additionally, one of the more significant developments in Malay language theatre in the last few years is also the formation of tertiary and college level performing arts departments, for example ASK and also Institute Teknologi Mara (ITM). This trend of having more and more educational institutions involved in theatre can also be observed at a general level in Malaysian theatre as a whole. In some ways, the creation of such departments is continuous with the mood of the 1970s, when university campus theatre groups became the breeding ground for the next generation of theatre practitioners. Perhaps more of the same lies in the future of Malay language theatre.

## **English Language Theatre**

English language theatre today is eclectic and vibrant primarily due to the existence of a few core theatre companies and the variety of work that has emerged from their collective creative efforts. Their level of commitment and focus contributes to and is also fuelled by an environment that is fairly conducive to the arts, an environment characterized by audience growth, increased corporate funding, and the perception of theatre as an event not to be missed by the middle-class public. The growth of English language theatre, however, must be understood in relation to its early beginnings as expatriate theatre and its development thereafter. Much like Malay language theatre, its history can be divided into the early years, i.e. 1960s and before; the post-1969 decade; the influx of new and enduring theatre companies in the 1980s; and the current scene today.

### *Early History: 60s and prior*

Due to the insidious educational structure set up during the colonial period, English language plays were first studied and staged in mission schools and convents. The annual activity of a great many mission schools revolved around the staging of a play in English, usually a Shakespearean play. An enduring figure in the realm of colonial education, Shakespeare was widely studied and made mandatory for those sitting for their Senior Cambridge O'level examinations. Foreign companies were sometimes invited to stage a play that the students were studying in their classes. Thus, at this early stage in the development of English language theatre in Malaysia, the coupling of

English language theatre and British colonial ideology was readily apparent.

Apart from the mission school milieu, most English language plays were expatriate endeavours, with local actors having little or no role in these productions. The plays were written by English-speaking foreign playwrights and principal roles were acted by members of the expatriate community. Local actors were minor players in this scene. In fact, Krishen Jit became the first Malaysian to play the lead in an English language play in this expatriate scene at the time.

Homegrown local English language theatre in Malaysia dates back to the 1960s, when the first plays written by Edward Dorall, K. Das, and Lee Joo For emerged in the theatre scene. The MATG also did some English language theatre, as did students at USM. Most of the plays performed at USM were, however, foreign because some of the early professors who taught acting at the time were also foreigners. A Belgian by the name of Tone Brulin was actually instrumental in spearheading the performing arts department in USM.

#### *After 1969*

After the racial riots of 1969, amateur theatrics gave way to a concerted search for a Malaysian identity and a heightened interest in the Malay traditional arts by non-Malays, who saw such arts as a means by which to establish the meaning of identity within a Malaysian context. The question of why English language theatre and why English language became paramount in theatre practitioners' conception of their work, although this was by no means a widespread phenomenon among English language theatre practitioners. People like Syed Alwi, Faridah Merican, and Krishen Jit, who were engaged with English language theatre at the time, began their foray into the realm of Malay theatre as well as experimental theatre, working alongside Usman Awang and Noordin Hassan, among others.

In the 1970s, a seminal play by Indonesian writer W.S. Rendra's *Struggle of the Naga Tribe*, (translated into English) was staged by LIDRA as well as other groups. Depicting the tensions between progress and technology versus the destruction of rural life among kampung folk, the play was political and touched on issues that were on the forefront of discussions at the time. Additionally, the staging of the play was quite unusual in terms of its formal qualities and this experimental character is continuous with the kinds of experimentation happening in Malay language theatre at the time. Clearly, the kind of English language theatre being staged on the campus theatres of UM and USM continued to be as interesting as those in the Malay language.

The late 1970s also saw the formation of two English language theatre companies: the Liberal Arts Society, which was solely committed to foreign plays by Chekov, Shakespeare and Ibsen, among others; and the Selangor Philharmonic Society, which were mainly committed to western musicals as well as Asian-themed ones, such as *The Mikado*. The former has since folded but the latter continues to mount musical works.

#### *1980s and the influx of new theatre companies*

By the 1980s, because the question of Malaysian identity became too wrapped up in an

overemphasis on Malay identity and Malay language, theatre practitioners such as Krishen Jit, for example, returned to English language theatre with new questions and challenges.

Five Arts Centre (founder members Krishen Jit, Chin San Sooi and Marion D'Cruz) was, in part, formed (in 1984) as a result of these questions and concerns. Fusing an approach that utilizes traditional forms from Malay theatre in contemporary plays, as well as straddling the different forms of artistic practice—theatre, dance, music and visual art—Five Arts developed a way of conceiving Malaysian-ness that was unmoored from its post-1969 reactionary lineage.

At the time, Five Arts Centre was the only purportedly English language theatre company who produced both English language as well as bilingual (English and Malay) theatre. Local playwriting was also emphasized and encouraged. Five Arts Centre inaugurated their company with a ground-breaking production by local playwright K.S. Maniam, called *The Cord*. This was the first time that a local company mounted a local play in a professional manner at a proper theatrical venue. Previously, local plays by Lee Joo For were staged by expatriate groups or in the universities. Thus, the profile of a local play being seen as legitimate public professional theatre was not highlighted until *The Cord*. Additionally, Maniam's play dealt with Indian life, with a strong socio-political commentary running through it—a subject matter that was decidedly atypical for English language theatre at the time.

Five Arts Centre continues to create innovative and cutting edge theatrical works that are multilingual and addresses the issues and concerns of Malaysian society as a whole. To date, Five Arts Centre is almost 20 years old and has been an enduring presence in the Malaysian theatre scene. The company has also embarked on training programmes for theatre practitioners, for example, Teater Muda (Young Theatre) and the Directors' Workshop. And in the last 8 years, Five Arts has also begun producing Theatre-in-Education, with adult actors performing for young audiences. In fact, the youth theatre wing of the company has been injected with new energy from the addition of the youth theatre group, Akshen, into its fold. Akshen is a collective of young people dedicated to generating original Malaysian work that is relevant, thought-provoking and empowering, mostly dealing with issues concerning Malaysian youth.

Around the same time as Five Arts Centre, Thor Kah Hoong's company, KamiKasih, was formed with similar intentions: to promote and nurture local playwriting. They also staged foreign plays from Africa and the Third World but these plays were carefully chosen to reflect and resonate with existing issues and concerns in the Malaysian context.

In the late 80s, two more English language theatre companies were formed, Instant Café Theatre (ICT) (founder Jo Kukathas, Andrew Leci, Jit Murad and Zahim Albakri) in 1989 and The Actors Studio, (founders Joe Hasham and Faridah Merican) the very same year. ICT, comprising an ensemble team, mostly focused on staging original political satire written by Malaysians, whereas The Actors Studio was primarily interested in creating a niche for drama at the professional level. Additionally, The Actors Studio's first play, *Norm and Ahmed*, also had a strong ethnic social commentary. In the following decade, in 1995, The Actors Studio became the first theatre company to have their own private venue, located at the basement level of Dataran Merdeka called The Actors Studio Theatre. Once the space was secured by The Actors Studio, English language theatre began to flourish. Companies no longer needed to depend on the generosity of

non-theatrical establishments for the rental of space. Furthermore, due to its relatively inexpensive rental and the fact that the physical space of the theatre was conducive for experimental work, The Actors Studio Theatre certainly became the venue for a great many performances not only by English language theatre companies but also Chinese language ones. A few years later, The Actors Studio opened a second space in Dataran Merdeka, The Actors Studio Box, giving even more opportunity to theatre makers. Later on, The Actors Studio situated their academy and rehearsal space as well as a bookshop/coffee shop in Dataran Merdeka. The area became a hub for theatre activity of all kinds. Even underground rock bands held their gigs at The Actors Studio Box.

All these companies began to function independently of any institutional or governmental affiliation and produced work that was of a high professional standard. However, within the generally accepted standards of what is meant by professional, they did not quite fit the bill because not all of their members were employed full-time by their respective companies. Company members typically worked a day job for pay and concentrated their theatrical energies in the evening, after salaried work was done. The notion of professionalism, however, mainly had to do with the production values of the plays. English language theatre companies were mounting an average of (maximum) 3-4 projects a year and were committed to staging high quality work for public consumption. Instant Café Theatre is the only exception in this case because they performed at corporate events for an exclusively private corporate audience and ICT and their actors were paid handsomely for these shows. However, like their public performances, these corporate shows were not necessarily all political satire; ICT has also staged foreign plays and adapted Shakespeare for a Malaysian audience.

Funding for English language theatre at this time mostly derived from private corporate sponsorship, with a few grants trickling through from time to time. Ticket sales and minimal ministry support in the form of free or very cheap venues were also important. At this early stage, those involved in an English language theatre production (with the exception of ICT during their corporate shows) were either unpaid or given a small token sum by the company. The meagre salary earned by actors, directors, and production crew is indicative of the problematic use of the term "professional" when referring to such companies.

The 1990s saw the flourishing of young talent and the creation of a crop of new and exciting theatre companies. These include Dramalab, (founders Zahim Albakri, Jit Murad and Pia Zain) an offshoot of Instant Café Theatre that was created in 1994 to encourage new local writing, and Straits Theatre Company, founded in 1996 by Huzir Sulaiman, who mostly directs his own plays for the company.

Dramalab's most successful venture to date has been their Writers' Workshop, which not only nurtured local artistic expression but also provided new writing talents with a space to perform their work for the first time. Apart from their workshops (Stage Management, Acting, and Dance workshops), the company also staged plays written by local writers such as Jit Murad (*Gold Rain and Hailstones*), Yasmin Yaacob, and Ann Lee (*Happy Families*). Zahim Albakri frequently directs.

Straits Theatre Company's claim to fame is for making the most money in English language theatre from the staging of a play entitled: HipHopera. With a cast comprising Afdlin Shauki and Paula Malai Ali, two stars in the Malaysian television media and music firmament, the musical theatre performance played to packed houses. Huzir Sulaiman,

who used to perform for ICT, excels in writing political satire and comedic theatre with a political edge but unlike the short satirical revues of ICT, Sulaiman writes and directs full-length plays.

The 1990s also saw the creation of KualiiWorks, an all women theatre company committed to feminist interests and gender concerns, was led and run by Ann Lee, who is presently living in Tokyo. Producing mostly local plays written by Lee, with a few foreign plays thrown in, KualiiWorks is now dormant due to Lee's move to Japan. One of their more well-known pieces is *From Table Mountain to Teluk Intan*, written by Shahimah Idris.

From 2000 onwards, English language theatre companies that emerged would furiously produce shows for a few years and then disappear from the scene. Examples include Rep21 and Gardner and Wife. Rep21, headed by Christopher Ling and Llewellyn Marsh, produced a considerable amount of work in their short 2 year life span. Their focus was to do professional theatre, using mostly foreign texts. They also had a youth theatre wing called 16:21, which focused on creating scripted as well as devised work created and performed by young people. But the company did not last beyond its initial 2 years.

Gardner and Wife, a commercially motivated and corporate-funded company, focused on staging big musical numbers that were farcical and British, such as *Nonsense* and *Charley's Aunt*. Began by Richard Gardner and his wife Chae Lian, the company soon disappeared from the scene for about a year.

Very recently, about a year ago, Tall Order Productions was formed by Hans Isaac. It is not a theatre company as such but produces mainly yearly festivals of stand-up comedy. Isaac usually gathers people who are well-known in the theatre scene, like Jit Murad or Afdlin Shauki, and gives them a chance to collaborate together in a show. These festivals have been very successful, playing to packed audiences and reaping a sizeable profit.

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In the contemporary situation, English language theatre in Malaysia is marked by more original Malaysian playwriting that is fuelled by a higher quotient of growing audience interest; and new blood in the form of young practitioners who are attempting to survive exclusively through their theatrical practice. These practitioners are freelancers with multiple sources of income from a wide range of artistic genres such as theatre, film, TV, etc. This is undeniably a difficult and unstable endeavour but due to their passion and focus, such practitioners continue to persist. There also exists more corporate funding for English language theatre from multinationals, businesses, and foreign agencies. Finally, international collaborations appear to be an important part of the development of the English language theatre scene.

Chinese Language Theatre

Chinese language theatre in Malaysia has basically been influenced by Taiwan, China, Hong Kong, and Singapore (especially through the work of the late Kuo Pao Kun and his company, Practice Performing Arts). Due to our lack of knowledge about the history of

Chinese language theatre in this country, however, this section of the essay will primarily address the contemporary scene.

One of the most significant influences within Malaysia was the Malaysian Institute of Art or MIA. The most significant company to emerge from MIA (to date) is Dan Dan Theatre, established in 1992, which staged some excellent work for about 8 years but is now dormant. Led by Loh Kok Man and Soon Choon Mee, Dan Dan Theatre is very much influenced by Pao Kun and his works. Their work is experimental and with somewhat of a political edge. Dan Dan has also travelled to Japan and Thailand with their shows.

Choon Mee in particular is considered by many to be a pioneer of experimental Chinese language theatre. Trained in Taiwan and engaged with postmodern intellectual Chinese drama, Choon Mee was most interested in experimental work coming out of Taiwan. Having taught at MIA, she greatly influenced the Chinese-speaking students who studied at the school. However, Choon Mee does not locate her work solely within the realm of Chinese language theatre. Having written her Masters thesis on Krishen Jit, she also served as assistant director for the English language play, *Skin Trilogy*. Nowadays, she no longer directs. She mostly lectures at institutions of higher learning and last directed in 2001.

In the last few years before The Actors Studio space at Dataran Merdeka was flooded, Chinese language theatre was a strong presence at the venue. The Actors Studio venue functioned as an experimental space for Chinese theatre. Recent groups formed in the last 3 years such as Space Spirit Studio were often seen mounting shows at The Actors Studio location. Space Spirit Studio is made up of architects interested in both the visual arts and theatre. At the helm is Caesar Chong and Phillip Leong.

After the flood, when The Actors Studio consolidated their offices in Bangsar Shopping Complex, English language theatre became the main focus of the new space and the more experimental work put out by Chinese language theatre suffered a setback. The Dataran Merdeka venue was ideal for more experimental work due to the nature of its physical space. The Actors Studio at BSC, being a traditional proscenium stage, does not always allow for more spatially challenging performances and staging.

Nevertheless, some new companies formed in the 2000s are still going strong. Companies such as Need Entertainment, Ping Stage, and Zero Space (founder: Loh Kok Man) continue to create and mount works. Apart from the more formal companies, we also see the emergence of James Lee and Lee Swee Keong's *Chicken Parts* series. Started by both men, the series is not a formal group as such but can be construed as a platform for young artists to show their work. Essentially an eclectic platform for Chinese language arts practitioners, the *Chicken Parts* series mostly revolves around performance art, but also screens films and mounts dance performances.

In general, most Chinese language theatre groups are far from being corporate. Their work is still experimental in nature, with some of the young companies coming up with original local playwriting. Broadly speaking, however, Chinese language theatre often deals with the theme of alienation among the young Chinese in Malaysian society.

Indian Theatre

The category of Indian theatre is referred to as such because an exclusively Tamil language theatre does not exist. The two main groups that can be considered Tamil theatre: Sehala Studio and Phenomena Seni Pentas, deal with issues specific to the Indian community but they do not see eye to eye with regards to the language used in their pieces.

Spike Selva's Sehala Studio is a mixed language theatre group that addresses serious social issues such as wife abuse in a populist fashion. Rivals with Phenomena Seni Pentas because of their adherence to a mixed language theatre, Sehala Studio has since become less active after K.R. Soma auditorium was no longer available as a performance space for their work.

S.T. Bala's group, Phenomena Seni Pentas, is strictly Tamil language theatre. Like Sehala Studio, they too frequently utilized the K.R. Soma auditorium as a performance as well as The Actors Studio venue at Dataran Merdeka. With the demise of both spaces as viable theatrical venues, Bala's group has had to source for other locations. The group continues to frequently stage their most popular play: *Inaggal and Nisa*, which is about women and domestic issues.

Within the Indian community there also exists Malayalam theatre, produced by the Kerala Samajam. Among the south Indians in Malaysia, the Malayalees are a small minority who speak Malayalam. The Kerala Samajam, an organisation that does various activity for the community, mounts plays once or twice a year, usually in conjunction with some festival. The late Bosco D'Cruz, a fine actor who used to act in English and Malayalam, worked with them.

While different Indian theatre groups have been around for a long time, it is unfortunate to note that they have only come into our consciousness recently. Indian theatre is nonetheless vibrant and popular within its own community.

General Trends

1. Audience Attendance

In general, there is a fair bit of polarization among audiences, in terms of who attends which kind of theatre. Malay language theatre is still predominantly attended by Malays. A play that is in the Malay language or staged by Malays will typically have an audience of 90% Malays. There exists some cross-over in the arena of contemporary drama when it comes to audience attendance but this happens more in English language theatre. Because it is mostly viewed as a middle class event, English language theatre manages to attract a racially-mixed middle class audience that is educated and English-speaking. Chinese and Tamil theatre is very much community- and language-based and attracts audiences who are conversant in the respective languages.

Divisions of all kinds have been constructed and sustained by audience perception over the years, making it difficult to break free from a particular company profile or image. For example, the perception among audiences is that Five Arts Centre is an English language company even though more than 50% of Five Art's work is bilingual.

The chosen venue for a particular performance also greatly determines audience perception. For example, a play at the Malaysian Tourist Centre usually attracts a Malay audience and The Actors Studio space at the BSC generally garners an English-speaking audience. Venues are also imbued with their own image and profile, with some venues being seen as “sexier” or more “sophisticated” than others. A Shakespeare play staged at Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka will have difficulty attracting a large audience simply because the space does not have the same ambient currency as the Istana Budaya, for instance.

2. Singapore

Generally speaking, the number of Malaysians working in Singapore and collaborating with Singaporeans have grown over the years. Since funding for the arts has grown in leaps and bounds in the island nation, Malaysians working in Singapore get paid much better than they do at home. Huzir Sulaiman, who founded Checkpoint Theatre with Claire Wong (a Malaysian living in Singapore) and Casey Lim (Singaporean) in 2002, has also done some acting in Singapore with Singaporean companies. Krishen Jit has directed a significant number of plays in Singapore in the last two years as well.

Collaboration being a two-way affair, Singaporean company, Teater Ekamatra has worked together with The Actors Studio in a piece entitled Causeway. The former is now embarking on Project Suitcase, which explores the issue of endangered Malay dialects. Malaysian playwrights such as Namron and Faisal Tehrani, as well as up and coming Malaysian performers from Malaysia are also involved with this current project.

3. International Collaborations

International collaborations happen mostly as a result of funding from various international or foreign agencies, such as the British Council, The Japan Foundation, The Australian High Commission, etc. 2 companies from different countries can collaborate on a joint project or a director may be invited to direct a piece that is international in scope. Essentially, the nature of international collaborations are diverse and multi-faceted.

For example, *Pulau Antara* (a Japanese-Malaysian collaboration) consisted of a director, a scriptwriter, composer and a set designer from Malaysia; a lighting and costume designer from Japan; and Malaysian and Japanese performers. The piece was performed in both Japan and Kuala Lumpur. A recent Malaysian-Japanese collaboration, *Spring in KL*, was made up of Malaysian and Japanese performers but was helmed by Hiroshi Koike, a Japanese director. The producers were Japan Foundation and Five Arts Centre.

Occasionally, instead of individuals, companies from two different countries collaborate. Examples include *Coffin* (Five Arts Centre and Wild Rice, Singapore); *An Occasional Orchid* (Drama Lab and Wild Rice); *The Other* (FAC, Straits Theatre, and The Substation, Singapore); *Manchester United and the Malay Warrior* (FAC and Rasa Productions, UK based).

4. Funding

Sourcing for funds has always been an extremely arduous process for arts practitioners in Malaysia. While audiences have grown and are willing to pay more for certain kinds of theatre—for example, musicals, comedy, and political satire—consistent sources of funding are often difficult to come by. Overall, there exists a theatre-going audience of about 10,000 people but the largest crowds are mostly limited to extravaganza performances with superstars like Siti Nurhaliza, or a good comedy with famous faces. Most companies, however, still sustain themselves through the sale of tickets.

Some corporate sponsorship has surfaced over the years but this is very much limited to the domain of popular theatrical forms. Foreign agencies like the British Council, The Japan Foundation or JFKL, The Australian High Commission, Goethe Institute, and the Canadian International Development Agency, among others, do contribute to theatre companies from time to time. The Ministry and other government agencies such as Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK) and Balai Seni Lukis Negara (BSLN) mostly provide assistance in the form of renting out venues for free or relatively cheap and small grants.

VENUES

Proscenium Stage

1. The Actors Studio, Bangsar. 265 seater.
2. Auditorium DBKL (City Hall Auditorium). 600 seater.
3. Balai Seni Lukis Negara (National Art Gallery) Theatre. 150 seater.
4. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Balai Budaya, 500 seater.
5. Istana Budaya. 1,500 seater.
6. MAS Auditorium. 500 seater.
7. Malaysian Tourist Centre (MTC):
Main auditorium, 400 seater.
Mini auditorium, 150 seater.
8. National Museum Theatre. 300 seater.
9. Panggung Bandaraya (old Town Hall). Newly opened, 350 seater.
10. PJ Civic Centre. 1000 seater.
11. Securities Commission Theatre, Damansara Heights. 400 seater.

Studio Theatre & Black Box

1. Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP), Stor Teater. 100 seater.
2. Fonteyn Theatre, Federal Academy of Ballet, Small studio theatre. 150 seater.
3. Sunway College Black Box Theatre. 150 seater.
4. Taylors College Purple Box Theatre. 100 seater.

Amphitheatre

1. Malaysian Tourist Centre (MTC). 400 seater.

2. Sutra Amphitheatre. 200 seater.

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Sources:

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