

Modern *Teater* and Traditional Genres in Malaysia and Indonesia

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Abstract

This article will discuss selected patterns of actor training in modern *teater* in Indonesia and Malaysia. Examples from traditional training for puppetry and dance will be contrasted with work of university-educated modern theatre artists in Jakarta, Bandung, and Kuala Lumpur, noting political/social currents. Artists like Teguh Karya and Suryatna Anurudin in Indonesia and Krishen Jit and Faridah Merican in Malaysia looked for Southeast Asian fusions in new scripted works beginning in the 1960s-1970s. Director/artists of the present like Nano Riantiarno and Arthur Nalan in Indonesia and Marion D'Cruz and Norzizi Zukifli in Malaysia have used aspects of tradition in their contemporary performances. Such experiments have created diverse work, and issues of national identity and heritage formation remain central in their fusions of tradition and modern theatre.

Keywords

Malaysian modern theatre, Indonesian modern theatre, Nano Riantiarno, Arthur Nalan, Marion D'Cruz, Norzizi Zukifli

Traditional lineal actor/dance/puppet training in Southeast Asia contrasts with modern urban acting affected by hybrid western models adopted by the 1960s. This has led to the rise of neo-traditional, intercultural experiments in the last decades, which mix traditional clowning or dance theatre with psychologically-

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based acting in scripted plays.³

Traditional Lineage-based Training and Traditional Theatre

In the traditional theatre of Indonesia and Malaysia, dance, drama and music were intertwined and non-formal transmission was the norm of village or palace performance for *wayang* (puppetry), *topeng* (mask dance) and dance dramas such as Indonesia's *wayang orang* ("human puppetry," i.e. acting based on puppetry) or Malaysia's *mak yong*. Such genres were largely passed down in family lineages as the children of artist families gradually replaced elders. For training, the young performed segments or small roles in shows to launch their careers. Such sequences include the playful Samba dance, a semi-refined character/mask in Cirebon *topeng* of West Java in which a *dalang topeng* (master mask dancer) would present masked characters to *gamelan* accompaniment with a clown-partner (*peran*). In traditional Javanese *wayang kulit* (shadow play) the scene of the *perang kembang* (flower battle) let the *dalang*-to-be show manipulation technique, as a refined knight such as Arjuna defeats demons. In Sundanese *wayang golek* rod puppetry the *dalang* (puppetmaster) would announce his student's "*kaul*" (carrying out a vow) to display a scene of fights (*sabat*) and improvised dialogue (*antawacana*).⁴ Students were trained by first watching, then performing a segment of the show.

Traditional Malay genres also inserted training scenes. Malay *wayang kelantan* (shadow play) has an opening called the *dalang muda* (young puppet master) sequence, comprised of a fight between a refined and strong character (the *dewa panah* or "weapon gods") who are thereafter admonished by a hermit before an audience scene wherein Prince Rama and his brother Laksmana greet courtiers. In the Kelantan/Malay dance theatre *mak yong* the *mengahadap rebab* (honouring the bowed lute player/guru) demands significant dance and singing; by following behind the advanced player, the student could absorb gestural and vocal style and, later, advance to major roles. Such scenes ensure young performers have the correct moves, voices and music abilities to play a whole narrative.

In both Indonesian and Malaysian traditions, watching performances or playing minor roles allowed young performers to gain understanding of the complex stories, performance structures and characters/scene types. Sequences also had mystical implications, but such symbols were rarely discussed openly, as these "secrets" would empower the performer – an elder might share more with

³ Due to space limitation this paper will not discuss martial arts based theatres, *ronggeng* (courtesan) genres, or urban popular theatres developed from the late 1900s including *bangsawan*, *stambul* and *sandiwara*. For information on these see, for example, Matthew Cohen (2006), Tan Sooi Beng, Nancy Nanney and Krishen Jit and Kathy Foley.

⁴ See Laurie Ross on *topeng*. On Javanese *wayang kulit* see James Brandon and Mathew Cohen (2002). For *wayang golek*, see Andrew Wientraub. On *mak yong*, see Ghulam Sawar Yousof. On *wayang Kelantan*, see Patricia Matusky.

his/her son/daughter, but other students might mediate or entice the teacher into divulging hints in moments of relaxation and generous feeling. “The clever student would eventually intuit meanings,” as Dalang Iden Sunarya reiterated to co-author Foley in a 2015 conversation on training that she had shared with him under his father in 1977-78.

Performers from family lineages, prior to the 1970s, noted that they rarely received formal training. They followed, dancing in the back row of an opening group dance or passing puppets to their guru. They practiced on their own at home. Only as the parent/teacher decided the student was ready to debut were specific comments forthcoming. Dancers like Abay Subarja in 1978 talked of learning a single refined dance for a year before his grandfather – a noted exponent of *tari keursus* (“course dancing”) of the Sundanese aristocratic tradition of West Java – allowed him to begin a second character. Students learned the movement, voice and other patterns appropriate to a specific character type (refined, clown, warrior, demon, etc.) and reproduced them. Traditional training was an ongoing part of being in an artist family. Performers of *wayang golek* say the art has to “*masuk daging dan darah*” (“enter your flesh and blood”). Rather than being invited to link your personal psychology in the Stanislavskian acting mode, the student just follows movement and memorises mantras in an archaic language only half understood. He/she makes sense of the art for him/herself when enlisted to play a scene and eventually can breathe life into performance, improvising humour and using the classical repertoire to critique present day situations. The performer will gradually understand story structure, repertoire, language appropriate to character, and the ways music, dance and narrative intertwine. The performer can then improvise the performance collaboratively with musicians in front of an audience, in this complex structure, with no need for rehearsals.

Theatres existed in traditional economic structures. Palace troupes were sometimes financed by an aristocrat who might also be the main director/writer/performer. Meanwhile, professional performers outside court circles could be hired by local villagers, for rites of passage (i.e. weddings or circumcisions) or community rituals (harvests, ancestral commemorations, healing ceremonies). However, in the cities, by the twentieth century, such performances could also be presented in open-air fairs, markets or entertainment venues where tickets were sold.

Bloodlines were important, whether these were from palace traditions, where artists might be minor wives, relatives or retainers of the prince, or from village traditions where performers were born or adopted/apprenticed into artist families. Gifted young people moved from the group dances or assistant puppeteer positions toward troupe leadership.

Normally, performers felt that mystical formulae or ceremonial initiations (*sembah guru* in Malaysia or ceremonies of *dalang* initiation normally celebrated

during the Prophet's birthday [Mulud] in Java) were part of their learning process. Various kinds of magical practices (*susuk* [inserting metal objects beneath the skin], learning mantra to make holy water [*air suci*] for exorcisms, saying love charms to bind the viewers to the performer/event) were also used to become empowered performers. In Java, fasting or vigils at graves – *zikir* (overnight meditation) – might be part of the prescribed learning.

The ritual practices were differently valued. Some performers saw them as simple magic, others as tools toward profound mystical meanings, while still others abjured them.⁵ This element of traditional performance training has been alienated from practice in many areas of Malaysia and Indonesia since the 1970s: secular rationalism and Islamic fundamentalism have both eaten away at such traditions. The first sees the exercises as superstition; the latter brands them *syirik* (worshiping another god than Allah). Traditional genres taught and entertained human viewers, but also were thought to please ancestral/place spirits. It is perhaps this spirit dimension that explains why lineal descendants were/are preferred. Even today when outsiders are accepted as students, those who share bloodlines with past masters are felt to be more likely to inherit talent, knowledge and spiritual prowess – becoming the complete performer.

Modern Theatre Training

Modern Theatre training is of course structured very differently and comes out of the formal education set up in the postcolonial efforts to perpetuate cultural heritage and develop new arts appropriate to nation states gaining independence from Dutch (Indonesia, post-1945) and British (Malaysia, 1957) rule. The artist demographic in modern theatre is non-lineal and most members are urban middle-class. While these artists may have viewed traditional arts in childhood, few are trained in music, puppets or dance, though they may take these up in a secondary/tertiary education class or work with other university-trained artists, some of whom may come from an artist family. Their outlook and language are national rather than local. Traditional arts are in local languages (Sundanese, Cirebon Javanese, Kelantanese, etc.) rather than the national languages, Indonesian or Malay. The national idiom, by contrast, is normally used in modern theatre, (or, in Malaysia, sometimes English, Chinese or an Indian language). Though the play may take a local story, the ideological audience for theatre in

⁵ Interpretations may also change as performers mature or react to changing political-social climates. Kelantan *dalang* often rue the connection to local animism and mystical beliefs that have helped turn people against the performance form and feel this is the source of the decline in the art since the Islamic party was voted into power in Kelantan in the beginning of the 1990s (personal communication Rahim bin Hamzah, 19 July 2014). Sundanese puppetmaster Dalang Asep Sunandar Sunarya showed considerable interest in magical aspects in 1977-1978, but when co-author Foley spoke with him in December 2013 he stated that *wayang* was just entertainment – a view that fit better given the tone of the then strong Islamic revival.

national languages is multi-ethnic and trans-regional. Most modern theatre artists as part of their learning have or soon acquire international experience, be it through ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations) festivals/travel grants, or through pan-Asian encounters (often funded by Japan Foundation, Korea Foundation, Indian Council for Cultural Relations, or international arts conferences/events, with artists collaborating/travelling in both directions). Euro-American study opportunities are significant (Fulbright, Asian Cultural Council, British Council, Goethe Institute, Alliance Française).

The curriculums in the arts academies funded by the Indonesian and Malaysian governments were initially derived from western tertiary education models and split dance, music and drama/theatre into separate areas, with theatre often aligned to literature rather than performance. The first generation of educators in these university-level arts programmes created a curriculum with classes in specific time blocks in majors that exposed students to some aspects of the traditional arts along with national and international theatre history and texts. Learning takes place in lectures, seminar and studio classes, rehearsals and short field studies/research projects. Artists present academic papers and dialogue at conferences, as well as mount stage productions where tickets are sold. Modern, urban theatre training is part of the post-colonial project (though it may have had some roots in the pan-Malay *bangsawan* or Indonesian *sandiwara* – urban, hybrid dramas of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries where performers learned by developing a stock character that they played in scenarios where dialogue was improvised). The work of modern theatre's educated elite, in contrast with earlier family and troupe training, was/is often based in secondary schools and universities, which place greater significance on text. Whereas the earlier theatres often assumed that performers would have skills to improvise according to the rules of a genre, modern drama places primacy on the clear communication of ideas of the author/auteur. The performers with whom the director or director-author works sometime help the author shape the text, but dialogue is more set than improvised by the time of performance. This genre, called *teater* (theatre), began in institutions of higher learning. Nationalism and political sentiments remain important themes of this form to the present. This is theatre that educates while it entertains and has no use for mystical/spiritual practice. Performers generally do not make a living by theatre alone: many work in education, cultural departments, communication, media, advertising or film/TV.⁶

As in China (*huaju*, spoken drama) or Japan (*shimpa* and *shingeki*, new drama genres), modern drama was, from the early part of the twentieth century, pushed by a political and social elite that worked to define national identity and political self-determination. It used fully scripted texts without improvised sections to

⁶ For more discussion of Modern drama in Malaysia, see Nanney, Philip and Rowland. For Indonesian discussions, see Bodden, Hatley and Winet.

articulate ideas. Plays like Rustom Affandi's *Bebasari* (*Freedom*, 1926), written for secondary school students in Padang, Indonesia, echoed the narrative of the princess who must be liberated, borrowing the idea from the *Ramayana* but envisioning the nation as the woman who must be freed by the hero Bujangga (Youth). Sukarno, the future president of Indonesia, during his exile in Flores likewise wrote and directed play texts with anti-colonial messages for youth theatre group Kelimutu, including *Dr. Setan*, a Frankenstein-inspired story with an anti-colonial message.

During the Japanese occupation in the 1940s, Indonesian artists saw how the Japanese harnessed drama for propaganda. Set scripts were required by the Japanese censors and Indonesians, though disagreeing with content, saw that these scripts transmitted controlled messages in ways improvised genres did not. Characterisation differed too: the movement was away from classical character typology found in puppet or dance theatre or even popular drama and toward psychologically-based characters which better represented urbanite self-identity. This did not require the long training period to accumulate dance, narrative, improvisation, music and vocal skills to present set characters from known narratives. Instead this was representation of individualised characters in realistic, fully scripted texts, which were rehearsed for limited periods, during which actors explored text/subtext for a paying audience or community of politically or socially aligned viewers. Even if there was a charge to watch, revenue from tickets rarely "paid" costs. Schools, social associations and government provided funding.

Modern drama author Saini K.M. (1939-) writes:

Indonesian theatre is one of the reflections of the birth and growth of a nation, Indonesia... it expresses both the pains and the exultations of the growth of a nation which is still in the process of development. It uses... the Indonesian language as its lingua franca. It distinguishes itself from both the western and the ethnic theatres not only in the matter of theme, but also in its idiom or 'style.' It mixes both the western and indigenous idioms to express the sensibility of a nation that is culturally influenced by both. It is supported by the members of all ethnic groups. (Saini)

During the Sukarno period, the founders of ATNI (Akademi Teater Nasional Indonesia, 1955, now Institut Kesenian Jakarta [IKJ], Jakarta Institute of the Arts) included D. Jayakusuma (1918-87), who had been involved with the important troupe Maya, studied Stanislavski's acting technique and applied it in theatre and film. Also teaching at ATNI was Saini, who had studied theatre in Holland and then film at the University of Southern California (1955-57). His translation of Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares* from the American version of his work became an important part of studies in the ATNI curriculum. Other theatre makers were

exposed to the “method” style of acting while in the US studying theatre/film. In Indonesia two important acting studios were loosely aligned with academic programmes. Steve Liem Tjoan Hok (1937-2001), better known as Teguh Karya, taught at ATNI and, from the late 1960s, led his Teater Populer [Popular Theatre, 1968] in Jakarta. Studiklub Teater Bandung [Bandung Study Club Theatre, STB] began under Suryatna Anirun [1936-2002] and Jim Lim with a production of Yeats’ *On Baille’s Strand* in 1958, when the pair were literature students at the Bandung Institute of Technology. Both were versed in European performance models. Suryatna explored both Stanislavskian techniques and Brechtian models. Jim Lim focused on European dramatic literature but later emigrated to France in 1967, when being Chinese in the wake of the 1965 mass killings in Indonesia made his advancement in the arts difficult.

Teguh Karya studied at the East-West Center in Hawaii from 1962-63 and was impressed by American method acting, which he used in successful performances staged at Hotel Indonesia. Works by Tennessee Williams (*Glass Menagerie*), Strindberg (*The Father*) and other realist authors were preferred. He trained a generation of actors who became pillars of the Indonesian realist cinema (Tuti Indra Malaon, Slamet Rahardjo, Christine Hakim, and Ratna and Nano Riantiarno). Teguh’s films like *Ibu Inda* (The Mother, 1986) are important models of realism reflecting the contemporary Indonesian scene. Realism’s emphasis on individual complexity/psychology appealed to the urban elite, busy defining the direction of the nation. Teguh’s use of western scripts and focus on psychology over politics made his work less fraught with controversy than the offerings of auteur directors like W.S. Rendra (1935-2009), a charismatic actor-author who trained in his Bengkel (Workshop) theatre group some of the next generation of actor-authors including Arifin C Noor (1941-95) and Putu Wijaya (1941-).

In Bandung, Saini K.M. wrote scripts for STB based on local legends, which were directed by Suryatna in the attempt to psychologise Indonesian performances, for example *Pangeran Geusan Ulun* (1962) about the eponymous Prince of West Java and *Panji Koming* (1988) based on stories of an East Javanese prince. Saini and Suryatna founded the actor-training programme at ASTI-Bandung (Akademi Seni Tari Indonesia-Bandung [Academy of the Dance]) with *An Actor Prepares* as core text. Western plays and works of Rendra, Arifin, Saini and others were studied. Bandung remains, perhaps, the most prestigious theatre programme in Indonesia. STB used academy-trained actors and adapted western plays into Indonesian contexts. *Volpone* (1973) by Ben Johnson, became *Karto Loewak* and was presented in the slang of Jakarta and set circa 1915. *Romeo and Juliet*, *Hamlet* and *King Lear* were all contextualised for Bandung audiences with characters changed to fit the local realities. German work from *Faust* to Brecht was also part of the STB agenda. In Bandung, ASTI [now ISBI, Institut Seni Budaya Indonesia] has also collaborated with artists from Malaysia, Japan, India and Germany in creating productions. Arthur Nalan noted this with co-author

Foley in an interview on 3 September 2015, and programme graduates like Iman Soleh and Arthur Nalan himself have become teachers for both ASTI/ISBI-Bandung and STB workshop activities. Thus there has been ongoing movement between the school's education and the important company for decades.

Suryatna would occasionally do works that took elements of local theatre beginning with *Bung Besar* (Big Boss 1960, by Misbach Yusa Biran), which was criticised for using the “low” style of *longser* (a comic folk theatre of Sunda, West Java). Suryatna integrated elements of *wayang kulit* and *gamelan* music for Saini's *Pangeran Geusan Ulun*. However, actors had no ongoing training in any local dance-acting genre. Styles used by STB would change from production to production: *lengser* for one show and *wayang* for the next, so “quick and dirty” approximations of styles and not expertise were the norm.

Malaysian modern theatre has similarities – text was used as a tool of political discourse and nation building and used mixed western-local acting styles. Actor training began from the English language theatre MATG (Malay Theatre Arts Group) wherein, in the colonial period, English actors played major roles and locals took supporting positions. Emerging from this group were Krishen Jit (1935-2005) – the first local actor cast in a leading role (in MATG's *Julius Caesar*) – and Faridah Merican (1939-) – actress-director, who with her Australian-Lebanese husband Joseph Hasham, directs from a Stanislavski base. Merican and Hasham founded the Actor's Studio (1989) and later Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPac, 2004) – the only fully professional ongoing company in Kuala Lumpur, which has now a related venue at the Penang Performing Arts Centre (2011). Jit and Merican have impacted the training and practice from the 1960s through the early twentieth century. Both are Malaysians of Indian heritage who were (prior to the 1970 changes in language/culture policy) more conversant in English (the language of education and government during British Colonialism) than Malay. The first full academic drama programme in Malaysia only started at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in Penang in 1970-71 under the School of Humanities. Besides local lecturers like Ghulam Sarwar Yousof, Ghouse Nasaruddin and Mustapha Kamil Yassin (*Kala Dewata*), international faculty included Roger and Lois Long from University of Hawai'i. Roger was trained in both Stanislavski and Javanese *wayang kulit* and Tone Brulin (from Belgium) whose expertise was in experimental production. Krishen Jit also came to USM to lecture from Kuala Lumpur (University of Malaya), besides Vijaya Samawicarma from ITM. Traditional performers like Dalang Hamzah Awang Amat taught *wayang kelantan* and Kadijah Awang gave *mak yong* lessons under support of Ghulam Sawar Yousof and who researched these important Kelantanese arts and earned his PhD from University of Hawai'i on *mak yong*. Pak Alias and Mak Minah would also come to conduct *Bangsawan* lessons. Soon graduates of the USM programme, such as co-author Zainal Abdul Latiff who earned his MA at University of Hawaii would teach and direct productions in the

folk form of *randai* using *silat* (martial arts dance style).

The mixture of textual, realist, experimental and local sources developed a strong programme that produced many of the future teachers of Malaysian tertiary theatre programmes. USM hired its graduates Mumtaz, Hemi, Roslan Chin, Samat Salleh and Janet Pillai. Other USM graduates teach at University of Malaya or ASWARA (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Negara, National Academy of Cultural Arts and Heritage) whose USM trained staff in 2015 included playwright Hatta Azad Khan, director Rosminah Tahir and dancer/performance artist Marion D’Cruz. Students who graduated from USM also became actors in TV and film, or worked at TV Malaysia, Ministry of Culture, or Istana Budaya (National Theatre).

Krishen Jit was perhaps the most significant Malaysian director from the 1970s to the early 2000s. He came from a Punjabi merchant family and through his teaching and directing (as well as his theatre criticism and academic writing on Malay theatre) helped mould modern theatre. He was exposed to Shakespeare as a student actor in the Victoria Institution during high school and became involved in radio drama while a student at the University of Malaya (UM) where he founded the drama society. A lecturer in history at UM after earning a PhD from UC-Berkeley (1962), he was best known for his work as a director, theatre practitioner and critic.⁷

After the Chinese-Malay ethnic riots of 13 May 1969, Jit noted that he

began to think about what I really wanted to do, I needed to understand our roots as a nation, ... 1969 made me think differently about this country. It made me aware of the great divide. Malay theatre existed before the 1960s, so how come I didn’t know much about it. (quoted in Manavalan)

In the 1970s and 1980s Jit worked closely with scripts of Noordin Hassan (1929-) who plumbed political and social issues in Malay language scripts like *Bukan Lalang Dituiip Angin* (It Is Not Tall Grass that is Blown by the Wind, 1970). Noordin who studied English literature at University of London in 1962, and Theatre at the University of Newcastle in 1976, established the idea of Islamic theatre or theatre of faith (*teater fitnah*) and referenced *bangsawan*, *dabus* (where performers pierce themselves with awls), and other Islamic folk forms. He was named National Laureate (Sastrawan Negara) in 1993. As with Indonesian post-colonial directors, Jit experimented with “roots” performance styles. In directing Syed Alwi’s *Tok Perak* (1974) he used aspects of shadow play and performance by local curers.⁸ In Noordin Hassan’s *Son of Penang* (*Anak Tanjung*, 1987) the genre

⁷ See Rowland for some of Jit’s writing and more detail on his work.

⁸ See Charlene Rajendran who argues a difference between modern drama and *teater kontemporar* (contemporary theatre). We see the movement toward local sources more related to the pan-Asia “theatre of roots” of the 1970-1980s, rather than as an isolated Malaysian phenomena.

was *boria*, a popular Islamic theatre. But, as with the STB example in Indonesia, local genres were only for individual productions with no continuity in group training or use of technique from one play to the next. Many of Jit's productions were mounted at the University of Malaya Cultural Centre where acting teachers included Joy Zinoman (later founder of Washington, DC's Studio Theatre in 1979). Zinoman trained in Method acting by Alvina Krause at Northwestern. So training in Stanislavki, with attention to text and western style director-actor relations, was important for both Jit and Merican.

The messages might change, but techniques used in production were related to the combination of western acting and genres needed for the specific work. Jit in writing about Hassan's work writes: "Traditional performance behavior, exemplified... by the *dalang* [puppeteer]... seems to have carried over into the modern arena" (Jit 133). One person (for example, the playwright-director Noordin Hassan with students at his teacher training college) was crucial to developing new work, but the untrained students could not bring the work to full glory. Carrying Noordin Hassan's work to a larger public was part of Jit's mission in directing in the 1970s and early 1980s. Jit immersed himself in Hassan's work and championed Malay language theatre as a social justice choice in this period. This meant fully working himself in Malay, Malay themes and foregrounding Islamic religiosity (a favoured theme of Hassan). Jit's later movement away from this 1980s stance was not about a rejection of Noordin Hassan or his spiritual and literary insights, but linked to the injustice that sometimes grew from the *pribumi* (indigenous) affirmative action policies that played out over time in education, government and daily life in Malaysia.

Jit's legacy is represented in the Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur, founded when he retreated from Malay language theatre in 1984 to redress the silencing of Indian and Chinese voices. English as the language of no major ethnic groups in the politically contested nation was, Jit decided, a more "level playing field" than Malay (which he had spent a decade supporting). Jit's history and political interests in breaking ethnic lines show in plays he directed for Five Arts and his casting. For example, in Malaysian-Indian K.S. Mamian's *The Cord*, he controversially cast Chinese-Malaysian actor Kee Thuan Chye as an Indian. With Kee's script *1984 Here & Now* (1985, based on *Animal Farm* with some [i.e. indigenous or *bumi putra* Malays] "more equal" than others), Jit critiqued the pro-Malay politics of the National Cultural Policy. Jit's work redressed the lack of diversity in groups supported by government funding, which generally favoured Malay authors. Five Arts Centre, since Jit's death, has been headed by Marion D'Cruz, Jit's wife and modern dancer, discussed below. Jit's basic orientation was toward text. This is affirmed in the experimental work he espoused from the 1970s and it echoed his experience in New York's postmodern theatre scene in the 1980s when he did research there. He made close contacts with modern theatre groups throughout Southeast Asia – especially Indonesia (including with

figures like W.S. Rendra, Arifin C Noor and Nano Riantiarno) and Singapore (often directing for 'The Necessary Stage). Though individual play texts might use aspects of local performance genres, no ongoing training in traditional theatre disciplines was requisite for his actors. Stanislavski with post-colonial and post-modern amendments served as common idiom from which his actors could depart in their experimentation. *Dikir barat*, *wayang* or other local genres for a specific play might be tapped. These forms provided local colour and grounding. But his work is modern, transnationally informed and textual. It borrows from, but is not continuous with, traditional Malay performance.

Faridah Merican (1939-) is, as noted earlier, also a Malaysian of Indian heritage. She grew up in Penang seeing the model of *bangsawan* – the early twentieth century multicultural entertainment. Her vision of theatre is less overtly political/national than Jit's. She works to create a free space for all to express. She played Kate in the *Taming of the Shrew* in a teacher training college at Kota Bharu in the early 1960s. Later, she joined MATG and collaborated with Jit and Syed Alwi, while developing a career in media and advertising. This enabled her theatre work. She studied in the 1980s at the University of Middlesex. The Actor's Studio, founded with her husband Lebanese-Australian actor-director Joe Hasham in 1989, helped professionalise Malaysian theatre, and, with corporate support, she developed KLPac (Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre). In an August 2013 interview, Merican noted that her company was inspired by Joy Zinoman's Studio Theatre in Washington, D.C. Merican's theatre is a neutral space and attempts to be free of censorship so artists can explore whatever their ethnic origins. Indians, Chinese, Malays, and international artists all find a place in the KLPac's season.

English language theatre is an open forum for the educated. Merican's productions of *Vagina Monologues* caused outrage and gay themed plays/skits sometimes evoke outcry, but the show will go on – even if it has to move out of the KLPac theatre and to a living room. Mark Beau de Silva, a resident writer-director, in a June 2014 interview described the KLPac programme as “whatever we can get away with” (“Personal Interview”). In the annual ten-minute play festival Merican and Hasham created – “Short and Sweet” – the performances allowed youth to find voice regardless of the topic. Merican and Hasham further cultivate their emerging writers/directors: commissioning plays or giving them a directing slot in the KLPac studio. Merican, like Jit, has always supported projects that try to merge western and local traditions. For example, works like *Titis Sakti* (Magic Drops) or *Jalan Primadona* (A Prima Donna's Journey) discussed below.

Modern drama supported by figures like Teguh Karya, Saini, Jit or Merican could involve local music and dance, but the training that creates common ground is primarily psychological realism as actor tool and textual analysis in staging. The artists and audiences are university-trained. They value the script and the author's message. If a particular classical tradition is required, performers will

study – perhaps via a workshop or short class as appropriate – *wayang* style for one work, *randai* or *xiqu* (Chinese opera) for the next. Artists stick to the text and designers create the lighting cues pegged to lines. Theatre is a tool of dissecting the problems of the nation. Psychologised self-exploration of ethnic, political and class divides or personal problems are probed toward solutions.

Putting Pieces Together: Multi-Guru Theatre Makers

Artists whose training represent more embodied relationships with classical-local traditions are part of the present. In Indonesia Nano Riantiarno (a student of Teguh Karya) and Arthur Nalan (a student of Suryatna and Saini) take clowning and puppetry, respectively, into modern performances. In Malaysia, Marion D'Cruz (student and wife of Krishen Jit) and Norzizi Zukifli (produced by Faridah Merican) are combining pan-Southeast Asian or local dance drama forms with western influences/training. These directors-theatre makers are often both actors and teachers. They show their ongoing commitment to traditional styles, which they carry from production to production over the years. This survey can only suggest their work that strives toward deeper synthesis of the inter- and intra-cultural strains.

Indonesia

Nano Riantiarno (1949-) created Teater Koma (Comma Theatre), the most successful professional company in Indonesia. He continues a tradition of author-adaptor-director that emerged in the 1960-70s. His background is of a Chinese Indonesian and he has shown interest in exploring Chinese culture during Suharto's New Order, even when this was forbidden. His *Sampek-Engtay* (Butterfly Lovers, 1988) based on the traditional Chinese story and using inspiration from *xiqu* (Chinese opera) was banned. His productions that openly critiqued the Suharto government (*Suksesesi* [Sucession], 1990 and *Opera Primadona*, 1993) were likewise controversial. His work can combine features of Brechtian musical with strong political content and touches of *xiqu* or *wayang wong*.

From a Cirebon area family of Chinese heritage, Riantiarno in his childhood saw but did not participate in traditional arts. He studied at ATNI with Teguh Karya and became grounded in Teguh's versions of Stanislavski method at Teater Popular. After a study tour of local Indonesian theatres (1975), he launched his group in 1977 and then entered University of Iowa writer's program (1978). His wife, Ratna, has been producer and a major actress. Company members are not trained in traditional theatre, but Riantarno since the 1990s has used the comic characters of *wayang* as a base for his ongoing critiques of the tragicomedy of Indonesian politics, from Suharto era on.

The clowns in traditional *wayang wong* were the bridge between the epic story and problems of the present. Their use of accessible local language, slang and wit made the lessons of the epics clear. This mixture of comedy, rough movement

(not requiring advanced training), and the ability to “tell it like it is” make his clown plays starting with *Semar Gugat* (Semar Accuses, 1995) prime viewing for Jakarta audiences which include Indonesia’s power players themselves. His clown plays capture the *gara-gara* (“world in chaos”) energy of traditional *wayang* and invite a range of music from traditional to hip-hop to reflect in song-dialogue-movement the current political and social reality of the nation. For example, in *Petruk Jadi Raja* (Petruk Becomes King, 2014), Riantarno used Cirebon genres like *tarling* music to tell the story about how the clown has to take over the government. Parallels of President Jokowi with his lower class background who was just elected and was struggling with corruption of the powerful elite were explored via the story of the clown Petruk who tries his hand at governing.

A second example is, as previously noted, Arthur Nalan (1959-), a Sundanese actor-director author trained at STB and ASTI/ISBI in Bandung. Nalan’s education was primarily in terms of textual theatre but, as the academy has required higher degrees for continued advancement, he has plunged into research on traditional theatre and in 2013 completed his doctorate at the University of Pajajaran on the practice of *wayang golek* of the Sunarya family outside of Bandung. As a result of his research into popular theatre and *wayang*, these subjects of traditional theatre practice have now become mandatory parts of the drama curriculum at ASTI/ISBI (the programme founded by Suyatna and Saini). While Nalan in an interview in September 2015 acknowledged that the acting focus still has a strong Stanislavski component and text is core, the movement is toward local techniques, such as using puppetry as the medium, which is allowing students to envision new work. In a required workshop, traditional theatre is given modern applications and scripted work based on local styles is developed. The puppetry is not traditional *wayang golek*, but as with Nalan’s *wayang botol* (bottle puppetry), found objects from garbage (water bottles, paper bags) are used to tell contemporary stories.

Malaysia

In Malaysia, Marion D’Cruz (1950-) is a USM trained performance artist who teaches at ASWARA and since the death of Jit, has been artistic director of Five Arts Centre. She met Jit while she studied at USM (“Marion D’ Cruz/ Five Arts Centre.”) As an Indian Malayalee Christian she studied ballet as a child and did a high school year in the US before entering USM where she was exposed to *wayang kelantan* and *mak yong*. Her work is diverse and much of it fits the genre of performance art or postmodern dance, but with Southeast Asian characteristics. She choreographed many of Jit’s productions, has done research on traditional Malay court dance, and spent time in Java and Bali studying *topeng* masking and other movement forms of the archipelago.

In her solo *Gostan* (2009), she presented pieces of work developed over her career. “Tirinai” combines a mixture of the Balinese *topeng tua* (old man) mask

dance with Malay *tirinai*, a court dance with movement perhaps related to *mak yong*. In another part of the presentation, she dances a Javanese Panji mask with gestures that fuse Javanese and Balinese dance with echoes of the Marcel Marceau's mime where the mask maker gets imprisoned in the mask – a comment stasis of Malaysia's ethnic-divided politics. In the text of *Gostan* she shares memories of a performance she did for coterie audience at Julliard in New York that included important avant-garde composer John Cage and Ralph Samuelson, the ethnomusicologist and head of the Asian Cultural Council who had given her a grant. Autobiography, reflection on Malaysian political “stuck-ness,” classical gesture and postmodern movement intermix. In speaking of her performance, she says: “By doing this [political performance], we’re not going to start a revolution but it does present questions for people to think about. It’s not about giving answers but about posing issues for people to consider on the state of their lives and the nation” (“All the Right Moves”). Dialogue-dance-theatre reflects the legacy of Jit but her trained body enriches the textual; she melds the local and the cross-cultural.

Norzizi Zukifli (1976-) is another example of a younger Malaysian actress-director with training that fuses the textual and traditional. She was a student at ASWARA where she played in *Wild Duck*, began acting in TV and film, and learned *mak yong*. At twenty-seven she directed *Raja Tangkai Hati* (King of the Heart, 2003) at Istana Budaya (National Theatre), where USM trained Hatta Azad Khan was then artistic director and promoted the blend of modern theatre and tradition (Foley and Khan). More recently *Titis Sakti* (Magic Drops, 2009) was Zukifli's rendition of *Midsummer's Night Dream*, which she adapted with co-author Nan Megat using *mak yong* style. Many of the cast members were graduates of the ASWARA programme who had studied with Katijah Awang – a nationally acclaimed artist who had migrated by then from USM to teach at ASK/ASWARA (the school was first called ASK, Akadmi Seni Kebangsaan, 1994, and then renamed ASWARA, 2006). Zukifli studied at ASWARA and did her MA at University of Middlesex, UK. She was also impacted by Krishen Jit whom in the programme to *Titis Sakti* she described as “her idol.” Zukifli combined method acting and *mak yong* while directing at Merican's Actor's Studio in the *teater rakyat* (folk theatre) programme. Zukifli wanted to expand the repertoire of *mak yong* beyond the twelve traditional texts. Shakespeare was her choice. Of course the original had to change to “fit” *mak yong*. The opening dance featuring the *rebab* (spiked fiddle) was maintained. But instead of Puck, the two *peran* (clowns) of *mak yong* carried out the directives of the Oberon character (here, the *pak yong* or prince role, played as is customary by a female, here Zamzuriah Zahari) to administer the love potion to the couples. The flower became a full character, comically dragged around by the clowns. The drama shifted from focus on the lovers – central to most Euro-American productions – to centre clearly on the Oberon and Titania characters who filled the *pak yong* (prince) and *mak yong*

(princess) roles and allowed the magical aura which in *mak yong* is known to prevail. Shakespeare's text was successfully reformed to fit the patterns of a traditional Malaysian genre. Text, music and dance were balanced.

In another project, Norzizi Zukifli, again with actress/author Zamzuriah Zahari who, like Zukifli, trained in *mak yong* at ASWARA and now teaches at the school, created *Usik Rebab* (Sounding the Rebab, 2012), a monodrama in which an aging *mak yong* dancer sees her legacy being lost as three daughters reject dance to take on modern careers or respond to changing religion (a script based on Rahimidin Zahari and Rosnan Rahman's early *mak yong* monodrama *Rebab Berbisik* [Whispering Rebab, 2007]). For Zukifli's practiced-based PhD project in Australia, she combined *mak yong* and Shakespeare's *Tempest*, another text that invited the "magic" that *mak yong* can use. Psychological acting and *mak yong* technique are needed to present such scripts successfully. The prime movers (often, Zamzuriah Zahari performs) must be trained in actual *mak yong* style. This is possible given institutions like ASWARA where performers are now teachers of the traditional dance and have learned both traditional theatre and Stanislavski acting. Such experiments of a new theatre grounded in old technique are projected to increase in Malaysia, given ASWARA's recent establishment of PuTRA (Pusat untuk Tradisi) under Kelantanese Pak Nik Mustapha Nik Salleh, a centre meant to revitalise *wayang kelantan* under Dalang Che Mohd. Nasir Yusoff and *mak yong* under Katijah Awang's relatives and Zamzuriah Zahari, as a teacher of the younger generation. Hopefully they can also reinvigorate *randai* and other traditional arts.

As one last example, I cite *Jalan Primadona* (Prima Donna's Journey, 2015) written and performed by Zamzuriah Zahari which tells the story of a *mak yong* dancer who faces scorn from those who see her dance as "un-Islamic." *Jalan Primadona's* story tells how the dancer first finds fame, but then feels society has turned against her and confronts the relation of Islam and *mak yong* dance practice. The work is semi-autobiographical. "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" (Zamzuriah Zahari quoted in Bissme, "A Thespian's Journey"). This piece was Zamzuriah Zahari's collaboration with Faridah Merican. The issues that the performance touched on are pressing ones: how do traditional arts and modern theatre come together? How does a new generation of artists who are trained in tradition keep intangible cultural heritage arts alive for modern urban audiences and use them to reflect their experiences? What is the situation (politically-socially-religiously) of the female artist who wants to share her story on a public stage? In these modern performances we are seeing the personal, semi-autobiographical stories of the dancers (representations of "self" which are primary for sources for much contemporary western drama) infused into the performance structure. The character is no longer the mythical prince/princess but a contemporary artist of

the age and background of the performer. There is little need for impersonation on stage when the character and performer are identical.

Such strategies are mixtures of new and old. One involved changing to a clearly secular classic text, as with Shakespeare, but keeping the performance structure and dance technique. The other shifts the story to a realistic, self-reflexive one, focused on performer's life and psychology (*Rebab Berbisik* and *Jalan Primadona*). These are significant trends.

Conclusion

In the work of these younger Indonesian directors/teachers, older clowning or puppetry techniques may be repurposed to innovate politically-focused theatre and modern *wayang* (Nano Riantiarno and Artur Nalan). In the Malaysian work embodied local dance heritage and cross-cultural and psychological influences are fused for secular theatre as in the work of Marion D'Cruz, Norzizi Zukifli and Zamzuriah Zahari.⁹

The magico-religious dimensions of old forms are gone. The training from youth, in a family of artists or an ongoing troupe, is gone. Understanding of western character analysis and psychological acting style is tapped. Text and narrative become set and artists move away from the semi-mystical tales of the past toward new materials, which include western classics and autobiographical materials. This theatre serves a national identity, using national language for a national audience. While such works are not seen every week or month, they move contemporary Indonesian and Malaysian theatre into a fused mode. Such confluences of traditional arts and modern stories make for vital theatre on Southeast Asian stages.

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⁹ This article gives only a small sample of many artists working in this way. Figures like Didik Nini Towok, Slamet Gundono, I Wayan Dibia, I Nyoman Sedana and many more were or are active. In Malaysia Sabera Shaik, Rosnan Rahman, Ramli Ibrahim, Muralitharan Pillai and many others deserve attention.

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