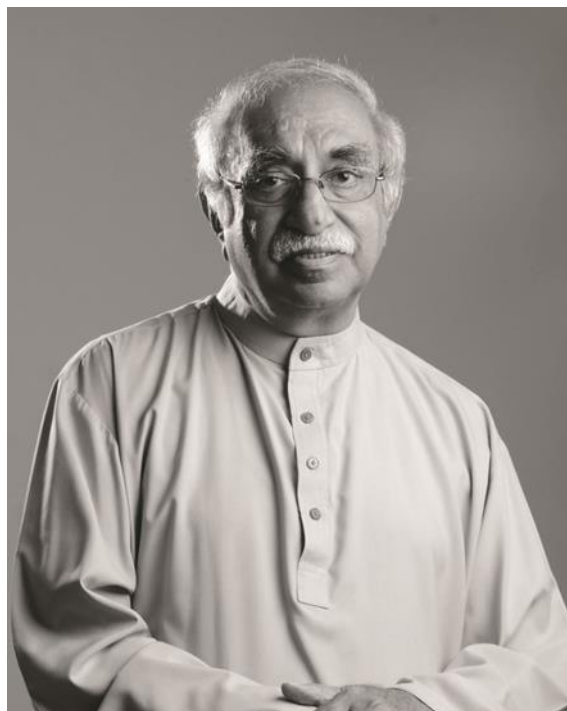


In Conversation with Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof: A Malaysian Playwright

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Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1939-) is an expert on Southeast Asian traditional theatre as well as an accomplished poet, playwright and short story writer. He pioneered the University of Science Malaysia (USM)'s Performing Arts programme in 1970. With the completion of his doctoral degree at the University

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of Hawai'i in 1976, he became the first to formally study and document the traditional Malay dance theatre known as *mak yong*.

With a teaching career spanning 48 years at the University of Science Malaysia (1970-2002), International Islamic University Malaysia (2009-2014) and University of Malaya (2014-present), Ghulam-Sarwar's students have included well-known arts, music and literary figures in the country. Ghulam-Sarwar has also served as a Malaysian cultural advisor and consultant at various national and international levels. His consultancy with the Malaysian Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage proved pivotal in *mak yong* being recognised as an item of The Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005. His contributions in the field of culture and education have earned him various national and international awards.

Parallel to Ghulam-Sarwar's accomplishments in Malaysian culture and heritage are his literary publications. His poetry publications include *Perfumed Memories* (1982), *Transient Moments* (2012), *Songs for Shooting Stars: Mystical Verses* (2011) and *Sacred Rain* (2015). Additionally, *Tok Dalang and Stories of Other Malaysians* (2015) is a collection of short stories depicting protagonists from Malaysian minority communities – Tamil Muslims, Punjabi Muslims and Sikhs. Growing up in a Punjabi-Muslim family in the 1940s pre-independent Malaya made Ghulam-Sarwar develop deep insights into the conflicting values of materialism vs spirituality, tradition vs modernity and the importance of education. These have triggered questions he feels strongly about which he addresses in his poems, plays and short stories.

The following interview was conducted over several *masala chai* sessions beginning 20 October 2017. It offers readers an insight into the motivation, inspirations and influences behind the writing of Ghulam-Sarwar's plays. It touches upon his writing process, literary style as well as the incorporation of theatre elements into his plays. Also discussed are his views on the current state of affairs in Malaysia, especially his outlook on drama in English as a playwright belonging to the second wave of the movement since the 1950s. In this conversation, *Halfway Road, Penang* (1982), *The Trial of Hang Tuah the Great: A Play in Nine Scenes* (2014), *Suvarna-Padma*, *The Golden Lotus* (2016) and the short play *Small Business Loan* (2001) are scrutinised for their content, style and approach to playwriting. The interview also delves into the challenges of being a playwright in Malaysia and dealing with freedom of expression, publication, readership and staging of plays.

Thank you for agreeing to this interview. Let's begin with your creative writing career. Why do you write and who do you write for?

I write because I feel there is a strong urge to do so. It is an expression of my relationship with the universe from its little manifestation in the human race to its greater manifestation, which is beyond imagination or conception.

As you know, I work in poetry, drama and prose. In fact, my writing went through that very same sequence. There was no particular reason for the poetry coming first. I did not plan to become a poet. It just happened, perhaps out of a natural instinct. Essentially, the writings in these genres are meant for different people. The plays have their audiences; by definition, plays are meant to be staged though they can and are also read, like prose or poetry. Drama is the most public of the genres, with prose coming next and, finally, poetry being the most “private” or personal of them. All three genres express my reactions to particular situations or issues which need not be “local”; they can and should, ideally, be universal. Poetry is written for myself; to satisfy an impulse to say something significant, even vital; to capture a sudden insight into the nature of things; to even heighten a mystical experience. Poetry is private, but the intrinsic experience behind each piece may potentially be experienced in different degrees of intensity by other sensitive souls.

How did your interest in playwriting come about?

I think it had to do with exposure, something which made me realise the full potential for drama. At the English Department of University of Malaya, we studied British and some other European plays. Not many local plays in English were available except for those in Lloyd Fernando’s *New Drama One* and *New Drama Two*. Some of the more interesting ones, such as those by Lee Joo For or Syed Alwi, had not been published. With few exceptions, these plays were realistic in style. My interest in playwriting deepened in Hawai’i. Courses in theatre history and theories, with a considerably wider range of plays, made me aware of the full potential of drama in its alternative styles. Classical Greek theatre left a strong impression in me, and so did some of the Renaissance plays, with new insights into Shakespeare. Modern theories and theatre movements, including Impressionism, Expressionism, Symbolism and several categorised into Surrealism allowed entry into both the outer and inner worlds such as those of myths and dreams. Related to some of these movements were the theories and ideas of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung. Through all these, the considerable potential for drama to explore human nature in its many dimensions came through. I was excited and impressed.

How did your interest in Asian culture contribute towards your playwriting?

My search for self-identity has been ongoing since my teens, prompted in some ways by a sense of “loss” through total Westernisation. It was a great challenge.

Initial efforts to understand Asian cultures came in tentative ways through learning the Urdu language on my own, watching Hindustani films and through whatever little I could find of Asian writings, including Rabindranath Tagore's *Gitanjali*, Kahlil Gibran's *Tears and Laughter* and a few poems of Muhammad Iqbal. Coincidentally, one of the first productions I did at the School of Humanities, University of Science Malaysia, was that of Tagore's *Sacrifice*.

My efforts to study Asian and Southeast Asian theatre provided the opening. The optional and elective courses I took at the University of Hawai'i strengthened my background in crucial areas such as Asian religions, mythologies, literatures, visual arts and history. There too I had the opportunity to work with a prominent Indian director, Shanta Gandhi (1917-2002), as her assistant director on a major production of Bhasa's play *Dream of Vasavadatta*. I believe all of this exposure contributed greatly to my creative writing.

Asian theatre provided new insights into ways in which scripts were written and staged, based on theories and aesthetic principles to which I had no previous exposure. Such opportunities served as a stimulus to fully exploit the potential of drama in terms of content, themes and styles. When it came to productions, such involvement allowed for the application of stage techniques through better appreciation of relationships between performers, performances and audiences. On the whole, I became aware of "universals" within diverse theatre traditions. The classical Sanskrit drama, for instance, had similarities with classical Greek theatre when it came to the use of dramatic material and staging techniques. The Japanese classical *noh* theatre took audiences into the mythical past and made it spiritually relevant for modern audiences whereas the later *bunraku* plays of Chikamatsu Monzaemon touched upon love suicides of honour-bound lovers based on true stories, thus combining tradition and modernity.

It is noteworthy how modern Western playwrights and theatre practitioners, such as William Butler Yeats and Peter Brook, have returned to their own past or refer to Asian cultural models to provide substance and strength to their productions. In writing *Suvarna-Padma* and *Hang Tuah*, I followed in their footsteps by returning, in some sense, to my Asian roots.

You were the third president of LIDRA (Literary and Dramatic Association) of University of Malaya for the 1963/64 academic session, after Krishen Jit and Tan Jin Chor. What were LIDRA's most remarkable contributions?

LIDRA was actually a small society because the number of English majors was small, but non-majors were also actively involved. The productions were not grand, with fairly modest plays selected. Samuel Beckett's *Waiting for Godot* was one that I recall; Jean Anouilh's *Antigone* was another. One of LIDRA's most important contributions was the fact that, for the first time in the country, opportunities became available in a local university for the development of drama

and theatre through the direct involvement of students and academics with theatre experience. Thanks to a lecturer, Anthony Price, plays unknown to most of us and even “banned” were included in the syllabus. Price also played an active role, under the banner of LIDRA, in the productions. He was later involved in the designing of University of Malaya’s Experimental Theatre. In all of these activities, LIDRA played a modest but significant role. Its major input was that of bringing drama and theatre to the community at large in a professional way. Its journal, also known as *Lidra*, which I edited for a year, supplemented all these roles by providing opportunities for students and staff to publish their creative writing. In this respect, I particularly remember working closely with James Kirkup, the author of the infamous *Tropic Temper* and a world-renowned poet.

You began as a poet. What made you come up with Halfway Road?

The May 13, 1969 riots, because it was certainly the most significant inter-racial incident since independence. It became inevitable, despite certain restrictions to staging, that racial issues were explored, and the best medium for that was certainly drama. So *Halfway Road, Penang* came into being. It delved into race relationships in a manner which no previous Malaysian playwright had attempted and became a controversial play almost overnight.

What about Suvarna-Padma and Hang Tuah? How did they come into being?

Suvarna-Padma was written in my second semester at the University of Hawai’i as a requirement of an advanced playwriting class. It is a combination of actual and fictional encounters, personal experiences and the situation in Malaysia on freedom of expression.

Hang Tuah was written in 1983 in Marawi City, Philippines. I was thinking of writing something “earth-shaking” but I could not employ mediocre personalities. To me, Hang Tuah is the most relevant figure. So, when I decided to write a play about him, I researched extensively on him, including reading *Sejarah Melayu* and *Hikayat Hang Tuah*, as he appears in legends and popular history. The key idea of the play is that Hang Tuah, who is immortal, will return to claim the legendary *keris*, Taming Sari. I wondered who or what he would be if he did return today. As such, I had to modernise him because he could not remain who he was centuries ago. In doing so, I held on to the myth of him being the hero of Melaka. I decided to make him a politician. Revisions to *Hang Tuah* were done in Malaysia upon my return from the Philippines in 1984.

What did you specifically intend to confront in Hang Tuah?

In Malaysian culture, Hang Tuah seems to be the only iconic figure. He is the ultimate symbol of the Malay people, culture, tradition, social hierarchy and feudal values. He is the epitome of the ideal Malay hero and seems to be a perfect character to be confronted in the manner already indicated.

I shifted Hang Tuah out of the traditional setting and moved him through several different time frames between the 15th century and modern times as well as vastly different settings. At each of his “incarnations,” I questioned Hang Tuah’s identity, personality and motives using the idea of a trial as a vehicle.

Having confronted Hang Tuah, torn him apart and pieced him back, you also left his fate to the audience. Why is this important?

Bertolt Brecht insisted on audience participation; he would often shine glaring lights on them and their seating was purposely made uncomfortable. Environmental Theatre productions would force audience members to move around and be involved. This was because the issues in contemporary plays are provocative and the audience must be pushed to confront them.

I did not go to that extent with *Hang Tuah* because of the nature of the play. At the same time, I did not want passive or complacent audience members or readers. Stylistically, the title character and issues raised in the play are broad and universal despite its specific connection with Malay people, history, culture and Malaysian society as a whole. As a playwright and facilitator, it was necessary for me to confront them rather than merely accept them. I do not present my own point of view or perspectives in the play. Thus, the audience has a serious responsibility to be involved, to think and to reflect upon the events unfolding before them. This calls for deep reflection upon the implications of Hang Tuah’s conduct and upon his story as he tells it himself; for his story is the story of every individual, of the community and of this nation. Following reflection and deliberation upon the completion of the trial at which they have been witnesses, they must return with a verdict.

How is Suvarna-Padma an autobiographical or semi-autobiographical play?

Writers of the world face the same existential dilemma as Vacha. Writers who live in a repressive society, under strict censorship laws, will eventually go into exile. Vacha means voice in Sanskrit and it is symbolic of freedom of expression. *Suvarna-Padma* is in a way autobiographical, in so far as I have faced challenges as a writer; but it is also universal. It voices out the need for writers all over the world to have the right to freely express themselves. This is necessary for the expression of truth and creativity.

Hang Tuah and Suvarna-Padma contain detailed staging, lighting and design elements, all of which are absent in Halfway Road. Why so?

The theatrical elements given in my plays are the result of my training in theatre. *Halfway Road* was written before Hawai'i, but it went through substantial revision. It is essentially a realistic play and as such there was little need for details on staging.

Suvarna-Padma and *Hang Tuah* were inspired by Jerzy Grotowski, Bertolt Brecht and Antonin Artaud. They were exciting because they had borrowed elements from traditional Asian genres – the text and stage elements were totally integrated and provided room for “epical” events. I thus felt that detailed guidelines, reflecting the different theories and particular elements within them should be included. While reflecting accurately the intentions of the playwright, they would also benefit future directors of these plays.

Small Business Loan is your lesser-known one-act play that reveals much about privilege, class and opportunism in Malaysia. What made you write about this?

Small Business Loan came up following a conversation I had with a Mamak³ petty trader who used to sell “junk” at a small corner stall on Rope Walk, Penang (Jalan Pintal Tali). I asked him why, despite being qualified as a Bumiputra⁴ to receive financial assistance from MARA⁵ or other agencies to expand his business, he did not make an effort to do so. He replied that he had tried, but was unsuccessful. Nobody was interested because the amount he wished to borrow was too small. Bank officers told him to think big, make bigger borrowings and make more money. They even assured him that he need not worry too much about making repayments. He felt excited by the idea and the seeming support of the bankers he met. Soon enough, however, he realised that a bigger loan meant making proportionate under-the-counter payments or “commissions” as they were referred to by the officers, up front upon application. They assured him of their fullest co-operation and assistance, including “speeding up” the process of his application. He realised that, given his financial situation, he could not even raise the advance payment expected. Could he even trust them if he did indeed beg, borrow or steal to raise sufficient money for the under-the-counter payment? *Small Business Loan* was triggered by this conversation. The whole idea, still

³ Malaysian Indian Muslims who are of Tamil background.

⁴ Literally “son of the soil,” referring to the Malays and other indigenous groups who enjoy special privileges under the government’s affirmative action plans. The special privileges are stated in Article 153 in the Constitution of Malaysia, favouring especially Malays in terms of education, housing, equity ownership, government tenders, etc.

⁵ Majlis Amanah Rakyat: Established in 1966 by the Malaysian government to provide training, guidance and financial aid to the Bumiputras in the areas of business and industry.

pertinent today, is that it is almost impossible, even for Bumiputra citizens, to get small loans from institutions especially created to assist them.

You are of Punjabi Muslim descent, an even smaller sub-set of Indian Muslims in this country. Your works have been considered as belonging to a “minority within a minority” (Kboo 112) in Malaysian literature in English. Does this put you at the crossroads or at a privileged juncture in terms of playwriting?

There are crossroads, definitely. We are all at crossroads at some point or other in time. Sometimes people are confused about my race and religion. In my career, I have had to face the dilemma of the constant “crossroader,” especially since I worked on traditional Malay theatre and culture; that made many Malay academics uncomfortable. At the same time, I feel I am privileged to be able to understand and appreciate the less explored minority cultures and manifest them in my work while also deal with strong Malay figures like Hang Tuah, Puteri Gunung Ledang and the Tok Dalang. When it comes to minorities, for example, my short stories *Dewi Ratna Sari*, *Sujan Singh*, *Meditations on the Charpoy* and *Lottery Ticket* give me a vision into the multi-dimensional society in which I live. In this straddling of several cultures, I have had considerable advantage compared to many Malaysian writers.

Hang Tuah has been a controversial and polemical figure in Malaysian history. Scholars have been debating about his identity and existence. How should Hang Tuah be viewed in your play?

Leaving aside the controversies you mentioned, at least until very recently, Hang Tuah was the only such iconic, mythic, legendary figure among Malays, a truly Malay hero. So, I revived the character and what he stands for, i.e., Malay feudal values, in a shocking and controversial way. He is after all a symbol, so I started with the premise that he has been alive all these centuries since the days of the Melaka Sultanate and he is as alive today as ever before. Interestingly, these very values were reasserted with a great dose of bravado by UMNO grandees following the party’s ignominious defeat in the May 9th general elections. I expected readers and audience to reflect upon those “precious” traditional values and reconsider their relevance in modern Malaysian society.

Tell us what you went through when putting up Hang Tuah for public performance in 1985.

One of University of Science Malaysia’s Deputy Vice-Chancellors then, Datuk Sharom Ahmat, suggested that the performing arts programme of the university should stage substantial productions, going beyond course-based requirements. The idea that we should produce *Hang Tuah* came up, and the Vice-Chancellor sent the script to the Dean of the School of Humanities for evaluation.

Permission was given to stage the play on campus. I wanted some Malay actors to be involved but problems started arising because certain people felt uncomfortable with the play. Some parties even boycotted it and several actors playing major roles were threatened with their grades being jeopardised and they withdrew at the last minute. As a result, the play was called off.

Similarly, Halfway Road, set against the May 13, 1969 riots, also put some individuals and authorities in “uncomfortable” positions, did it not?

Yes, it did. Permits had to be obtained for all performances in the country through the District offices and the police had the final say. In the case of *Halfway Road*, I was asked by the Special Branch at the Penang police headquarters to make certain changes to my script but I was unwilling. I was then asked if I could ensure that no trouble would arise as a result of the public performances of my play due to the sensitive racial issues in it. It was ridiculous. With that, I did not get the permit.

The police were also unhappy that a Malay girl was portrayed as a bar waitress. Certain people, supposedly living on Halfway Road (now renamed Jalan A.S. Mansoor), protested, claiming in letters to the *Straits Echo* that residents of their road were portrayed negatively. In my response I clarified that my play contained no such statements and that the play’s title should be taken symbolically rather than literally. All the characters are “halfway.” The older generation never had to deal with the problem of identity. The younger ones are confused. Krishna, for example, tries to cross the racial boundary but fails. All of us being “halfway” reflects the value of the play.

Malaysian drama in English is modest in its range, authorship and readership. Even as a well-established writer, you have encountered challenges in getting your works published at the local level. Would you like to comment on this?

The most persistent problem for playwrights since the beginning of Malaysian literature in English is to get publishers in Malaysia because the readership of Malaysian drama in English is the lowest of the literary genres. Publishers do not show interest in local plays because if the texts are not used in academic institutions, they cannot be sold after printing. As a playwright, I have always had to consider alternative ways of getting my work published.

The first edition of *Halfway Road* was published by Teks Publishing, a local company enthusiastic about plays and saw a potential in *Halfway Road*’s publication. Of course, the sales also greatly benefitted from the public controversy surrounding its prior performance. When the second edition was published by The Asian Centre, Penang in 2002, the controversy was long

forgotten and sales were poor. Other constraints such as marketing and distribution also led to decreased sales.

Self-publishing was an option I looked into in the mid-2010s. The potential for international distribution and availability in different formats and different prices was better and I decided to self-publish *Hang Tuah* and *Suvarna-Padma*. Ironically, Malaysians became more aware of my works as a result, but the downside is that it may have become too expensive for some readers.

Based on the reception of the Bahasa Malaysia translation of Halfway Road (Jalan Sekerat, Pulau Pinang), would you consider translating your other plays?

I have not thought about it but since you asked, I don't think there's any reason to translate my later plays. They will remain as they are. My feeling is that no translation from one language to another can be 100% accurate, unless the languages are close enough, such as in the case of European plays being translated into English or vice versa. To translate across cultures can be problematic due to different aesthetics and sensibilities.

Tell us about your upcoming plays.

I wrote *The Princess of Gunung Ledang* a long time ago. Following some further revision, it is now completed. The play is a highly critical presentation of Hang Tuah's supposed obsession with the celestial princess, Puteri Gunung Ledang. I have also been working on a yet-untitled play in which Hamlet meets Shakespeare in the after-world. Like my other plays, this one raises questions about reality and who or what we are.

I am also revisiting a translation of Kalidasa's *Shakuntala*, which was commissioned for a production by The Education and Welfare Research Foundation and Temple of Fine Arts. The play, produced by K.K. Nair and directed by Bosco D'Cruz, was staged in Kuala Lumpur from 9 to 13 March, 1982. Previous translations into English, done over several decades, in general oversimplified the text to the point that the essence of *Shakuntala* as a classical Indian play has been diluted and its characters misinterpreted. King Dushyanta, in particular, is often presented in negative terms. When not redone entirely in modern prose, Western translators used Shakespearean or Victorian English. In my own translation I tried, as far as possible, to remain faithful to the Sanskrit text and its essential meaning and spirit in compliance with Indian aesthetic principles laid out in the *Natyasastra*. A great deal of work went into the translation. I hope to realise its publication soon.

Our conversation has been mainly about your play texts. Can you briefly tell us about your involvement in theatre productions?

Generally shy of the stage, I avoided acting except when I had no choice. I have thus appeared only in a handful of productions: the *Ramayana* in English by University of Malaya's Indian Studies Department; a *moro-moro* folk play of the genre *Moros y Christianos*⁶ in Tagalog in which I played Sultan Suabdil; the Polish play *Madman and the Nun* by Stanislaw Ignacy Witkiewicz, in which I was a doctor in a mental asylum; and finally, as gamelan player in a Javanese *wayang wong*. All three were staged at the Kennedy Theatre, University of Hawai'i.

My principal interests have been directing and lighting. I started off by directing Tagore's *Sacrifice* and my own *Halfway Road* at University of Science Malaysia in 1972. Of several productions at the University of Hawai'i between 1972 and 1974, by far the most important was Bhasa's *Dream of Vasavadatta*, for which I was assistant director. At the same university, I directed the only overseas productions of *Halfway Road* and the *mak yong* play *Raja Tangkai Hati*, with my adaptation and translation of the text from the Kelantan dialect. In 1976, I produced Shakespeare's *Hamlet* translated into Bahasa Malaysia by Latiff Mohideen, who was then resident artist at University of Science Malaysia.

I designed the lighting for *Sang Kancil* (1979-80) and *Manora* (1982), both produced by the Oh Eng Sim Ballet School of Penang. *Manora* was staged in Bangkok at the National Theatre and Thammasat University. During the month-long Penang Bicentennial Festival in 1986, I worked on lighting with the Washington Ballet troupe at Dewan Sri Pinang in Penang. As with my lighting designs, two further productions are worth mentioning: Ramli Ibrahim's *Adorations* (1986) at University of Science Malaysia's Sasaran Theatre and Agatha Christie's *Witness for the Prosecution* at the Kuala Lumpur City Hall Auditorium. Besides theatre productions, I was also involved in the television series *Bailey's Bird* by Australia's John McCullum Productions, as a consultant casting director and actor in 1978. I played an antique dealer in two episodes.

Finally, as a writer, how would you like to be remembered?

I feel that my most important and meaningful literary achievement is my verse, and I would rather be remembered for my poems. A substantial number have appeared in anthologies, my own publications, literary journals as well as websites. I hope to get the entire collection published soon. The major challenge, however, will continue to lie in their being fully appreciated.

⁶ Literally, "Muslims and Christians" in Tagalog. The issues presented in this folk theatre form generally concern the conflicts between Muslims and Christians.

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