

Mapping the History of Malaysian Theatre: An Interview with Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof

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It seems that a rich variety of traditional theatre forms existed and perhaps continues to exist in Malaysia. Could you provide some elucidation on this?

If you are looking for any kind of history or tradition of theatre in Malaysia you won't get it, because of its relative antiquity and the lack of records. Indirect sources such as *hikayat* literature fail to mention anything. *Hikayat Raja-Raja Pasai* mentions Javanese *wayang kulit*, and *Hikayat Patani* mentions various music and dance forms, most of which cannot be precisely identified, but there is no mention of theatre. The reason is clear enough. The *hikayat* generally focuses on events in royal court, while most traditional theatre developed as folk art, with what is known as popular theatre coming in at the end of the 19th century. There has never been any court tradition of theatre in the Malay sultanates. In approaching traditional theatre, my own way has been to first look at the proto-theatre or elementary forms before going on to the more advanced ones. This is a scheme I worked out for traditional Southeast Asian theatre.

Could you elaborate on this?

Almost all theatre activity in Southeast Asia fits into four categories as follows: Proto-Theatre, Puppet Theatre, Dance Theatre and Opera. In the case of the Philippines, one could identify a separate category for Christian theatre forms. Such forms don't exist in the rest of the region. In Malaysia there are several minor Islamic forms which have remained relatively inactive, but these can be fitted into the four categories.

Proto-theatre forms are relatively simple, even basic. Chronologically they are also the earliest, but dates mean nothing here. They fit into two broad groups: those related to story-telling and those which are ritualistic in character. Story-telling forms are represented by *selampit*, *tarik selampit* and *awang batil*. As

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far as the second category, Puppet Theatre, is concerned, we have only one general form in Malaysia. This is *wayang kulit*, or the shadow play. Until the early 1970's four styles of *wayang kulit* were active in different parts of peninsular Malaysia: *Wayang kulit Siam* (renamed *wayang kulit Kelantan*), *wayang kulit gedek*, *wayang kulit purwa* and *wayang kulit Melayu*. Today, the last of these no longer exists. To the third category, Dance Theatre, belong three major forms: *mak yong*, *lakon chatri* (better known as *menora*) and *mek mulung*. As far as Opera is concerned the most important example is *bangsawan*, while a lesser form, *jikey*, may also be occasionally seen.

What about the Islamic forms that you mentioned earlier?

Perhaps it is better to refer to them as Middle-Eastern, rather than Islamic, due to their dramatic content. I can think of two, both relatively minor and rarely seen: *hadrah* or *hadrah noge* and *hamdolok*. The first, performed in Kedah, is an extension of *bangsawan* with a combination of songs known as *hadrah*, performed at weddings, to welcome guests and visitors. *Hamdolok*, performed in Johore, is a sort of comic opera, with themes and aesthetics reflecting Middle-Eastern culture. Overall, Middle-Eastern, even Islamic influences, most of them coming through Java, may be seen in music and dance forms such as *dabus* in Perak, *kuda kepang*, the hobby-horse dance active in Johore, and the popular *zapin* dance.

Tell us a bit more about the three types of the story-telling variety of the Proto-Theatre.

Each of the three story-telling forms is performed by a solo artist. His tales have existed in the oral tradition and continue to be preserved in artistes' memories. The stories are presented with or without musical accompaniment. *Awang batil* is the most elaborate. The performer uses a brass bowl (*batil*) and an oboe (*serunai*). Placing the inverted *batil* on his lap, the seated performer produces different sounds or pitches by striking it. Other paraphernalia include masks and a *keris*. The single artist enacts all characters in his story through improvised dialogue. He is thus simultaneously a narrator, a musician and an actor. *Selampit* is active in Kedah and Kelantan. The Kedah *selampit*, is performed without musical accompaniment. Instead, the performer strikes his body while vocally producing sounds or mimics musicians such as oboe (*serunai*) or gong-players. In the Kelantan *tarik selampit* the storyteller uses a three-stringed *rebab*. There is not as much improvisation or dialogue, but some vocal music is included.

How is the ritual variety of the proto-theatre different from the story-telling form?

In *belian*, *bagih* and main *puteri*, the story element and thus entertainment is no longer an important consideration. Performances involve shamans (*bomoh*) who deal with beings of the invisible world – spirits, ancestors, culture heroes as well as gods – through trance. Invocations and propitiations are used, essentially to keep harm at bay and to seek favours from invisible entities. All three genres are based on two vital concepts, those of *angin* and *semangat*, even if different techniques are used.

In traditional theatre and shaman rituals, *angin* is a technical term. It can be explained as some kind of intense urge, desire or fixation. There are *angin* connected with hereditary occupations – the desire to be a king or queen, a *bomoh*, midwife, a warrior or *silat* exponent, for instance. There are *angin* related to performing arts – *joget*, *wayang kulit*, *mak yong* and so on. And there are *angin* associated with particular mythical characters in *mak yong* stories – Dewa Muda, Dewa Pecil, Gerak Petra. These are usually tragic figures, and *angin* named after them are among the most powerful. The operative concepts in *angin* may be seen as comparable to those that lie at the root of the Oedipus complex or what one may call the Hamlet complex. If they remain unfulfilled, or are continuously suppressed, it could result in emotional and psychological problems.

Semangat, on the other hand, is usually translated as vital substance, spirit or soul. Nine or ten terms, including “*jiwa*,” “*sokma*,” “*roh*,” and “*arwah*,” have been traditionally used by the Malays to refer to “soul.” These are derived from animism, from Hinduism and Buddhism, and from the Semitic traditions. *Semangat* represents the lowest level. It is a kind of fundamental energy or vitality found universally in everything, even in so-called inanimate objects. Certain objects like the *keris* are considered sacred because they possess greater *semangat*. This is also the case with a “sacred” place (*puaka*), or a person like a saint (*wali*). Malay tradition regards the Sultan’s person as “sacred” because he possesses greater *semangat*, re-interpreted in terms of *daulat*, which means charisma, but given the cultural background of the Malays, it is certainly more than that.

In ancient communities there persisted a strong view that trimming of nails or cutting of hair at night, would, through sympathetic magic, result in harm to those to whom the hair or nails belonged. This was possible because hair and nails contain more *semangat* than other parts of the body, with the exception of the bones. In our three examples of ritual proto-theatre, the entranced *bomoh* sucks out illnesses, energises weakened *semangat* or restores stolen *semangat*. He also cures a whole range of *angin*-related illnesses, making use of the shamanic main *puteri* dance as well as traditional theatre forms.

Let’s move on to wayang kulit or the shadow play. Since the form is practiced in many countries, where did it first originate and how did it come to Malaysia?

There is no easy answer to this question, as the shadow play is widely distributed in a variety of styles between West Africa and Fiji. Existing theories place its origins in India, China, Java or Central Asia's Indo-European root-culture which spread west from Central Asia into Europe and east into South Asia. The strongest of the theories trace it to India or Java. In Java, wayang kulit is believed to have been active from long before the arrival of Hinduism in the early centuries CE. In Malaysia wayang kulit Siam, based in Kelantan, is the most important form of shadow play. It uses a local version of the *Ramayana* story. This genre had its roots in Java, and may have reached southern Thailand and Kelantan in an earlier form late during the Majapahit period just before the introduction of Islam into Java. In Java the ancient wayang kulit purwa was substantially transformed to make it acceptable to Muslims. Over the centuries many regional or local variants developed to cater for particular needs, such as the recording of local history, retelling legends, religious propagation, nationalist interests and education. At the same time, in keeping with the genre's original purpose, several important ritual varieties of wayang kulit continue to be active to this day, particularly in Bali.

Wayang kulit gedek, originally *nang talung* from southern Thailand, became adapted into a Malaysian form. It uses stories based on *Ramakien* (the Thai *Ramayana*), as well as Thai and Malay folk tales. The wayang kulit purwa active in Johore, which uses the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*, is essentially the same as in Java. New styles, resulting from restrictions imposed on wayang kulit have come into existence in Malaysia, but these have failed to generate any excitement or sustained interest.

What are the different types of Dance Theatre? Tell us about their origins and development in Malaysia.

In Southeast Asia there are literally hundreds of dance-theatre forms. The most important Malaysian example is *mak yong*. Then there are *menora* and *mek mulung*. All three are strongly associated with Thailand, but only *menora* is Buddhist in its dramatic content and spiritual meaning, several of them derived from the life histories (*jataka*) of the Buddha. Performances take place for healing purposes, to fulfil vows and to mark the death of priests attached to Thai-Buddhist temples.

There are views that *mak yong* originated in Thailand, in Indonesia or even in Cambodia among the Cham people. It has strong animistic, Buddhist, as well as Javanese elements. My own investigations indicate its possible origins in animistic rituals or shamanism. In Malaysia there is a persistent belief that *mak yong* developed as court theatre in the ancient Hindu or Buddhist kingdom of Langkasuka and was thus for centuries the most important form of "Malay"

court entertainment. This idea, advanced by Mubin Sheppard,² holds no water. Yet, somehow, this seems to be the “official” Malaysian stand regarding mak yong. The reality is that mak yong has always been ritualistic folk theatre.

Mak yong began to undergo significant changes in the early 20th century due to the influence of a Kelantan prince, Tengku Temenggong Abdul Ghaffar (1875-1935), who built a cultural village in Kota Bharu to serve as a venue for traditional theatre performances. During field research on mak yong in 1975, I was fortunate to meet one of the prince’s last wives, Zainab binti Samad, then in her seventies, as well as several of her companions. From them it was possible to confirm that mak yong was never court theatre in Kelantan in the early 20th century or at any earlier period. In the 1970’s mak yong became significantly glamorised and commercialised with performances moving outside Kelantan, particularly to Kuala Lumpur. Over the decades the number of performers has dwindled considerably, to the extent that this genre is threatened with extinction. Today, despite an official ban by the PAS government, folk-style mak yong continues to be active, particularly in its ritual form, disguised as main puteri. Mek mulung may originally have had connections with mak yong since they share a highly important story, *Dewa Muda*. This genre is still performed in its original location in Wang Tepus village in Kedah by an all-male troupe.

Tell us about the constituent elements and history of the Opera forms.

The term opera is applied principally to bangsawan which developed in the late 19th century. Essentially this is sung and spoken drama, performed on a proscenium stage, with painted scenery, improvised acting, stereotyped characters and so on. This kind of theatre developed in India in the mid-nineteenth century, possibly inspired by court performances in the province of Oudh or by British and European plays staged in Bombay in permanent theatres during the 1860s. During the time, local Zoroastrian (Parsee) merchants in Bombay provided support for the development of this first form of urban theatre; it thus came to be known as “Parsee theatre.” Combining western elements with those derived from Indian folk theatre forms, such as dances and songs, as well as an extensive repertoire of European, Persian, Middle Eastern as well as Indian stories, Parsee Theatre developed its own unique character based on a formula that was to have a considerable and lasting impact on South and Southeast Asian theatre and later, the cinema. It was thus a precursor to modern theatre.

By the 1870s and 1880s well-known Indian companies, now performing outside their homeland, took Parsee theatre to London, Rangoon, Penang and

² Mubin Sheppard, “Ma’yong the Malay Dance Drama.” *Tenggara* 5: 107-108.

Singapore. Historically, Penang proved particularly important. It is believed that a Parsee theatre company reached the island in the 1880s to perform for the “sepoys” regiments and resident or expatriate Indians. With the return of this company to India, a Penang merchant reputedly acquired its paraphernalia. Using these he developed a local version of Parsee theatre, known as *wayang Parsi tiruan* or Imitation Parsee Theatre, using stories from the established repertoire, *Bahasa Melayu* for spoken passages and Hindustani for songs. With further localisation this genre, through the inclusion of Malay and Southeast Asian stories into its dramatic repertoire, as well as other aesthetic changes, came to be named *bangsawan*. From Penang, *bangsawan* spread rapidly within Malaya as well as in neighbouring territories.

How has it come to be known as bangsawan, and how did the form become so popular in Malaysia and the region?

That’s a much-debated topic. The word itself means “noble” and refers to members of royalty. This has been interpreted to mean that *bangsawan* received royal support, or even that it was in some ways “court” theatre. There is no evidence for this. To me this is just another example of Malay feudalism and nostalgia for a so-called glorious past. A more plausible view for this theatre form to be called *bangsawan* is that most of its stories, borrowed or local, were centred on royal households or noble characters.

As the first form of urban theatre staged in Bahasa Melayu, *bangsawan* immediately gained popularity. Previously visiting troupes performed folk-theatre genres in the towns. In these there were always problems with dialect. The new theatre genre appealed to a wide audience; it gave opportunities to members of virtually every community to participate in some capacity or other. The Chinese, the Malays, the *Mamak* (Indian-Muslims), the Arabs, the Eurasians and others got involved as entrepreneurs, as performers or in some other capacity. Many companies were established by various communities in Penang, as well as, later on, in Singapore, Sarawak, Brunei and Indonesia. As did the Parsee theatre in India, *bangsawan* spawned or inspired the development of other similar genres in the region: *stambul* or *komedie stambul* in Sumatra; *ludruk* and *ketoprak* in Java; *likay* in Thailand and Laos and *yikee* in Cambodia. Meanwhile, interestingly, the Spanish zarzuela, musical theatre like Parsee theatre and *bangsawan*, was introduced into the Philippines at about the same time as the development of *bangsawan*. From this the local variant, known as *sarsuwela*, developed; it remains active to this day.

How is the traditional theatre in Malaysia changing? Would it be fair to say that it is slowly dying out?

Change is inevitable. For one thing, compared to other countries, in Malaysia there is little respect for tradition. Not all change is bad of course, and adjustments may be needed to suit the current situation. But when performances veer from conventions radically, there is certainly a danger they may lose authenticity. Authenticity and preservation of traditional genres are important for many good reasons, apart from being heritage. Several outstanding examples can be used as models: the manner, for instance, in which Indian, Chinese and Japanese performing art forms have been preserved; the way in which our Southeast Asian neighbours have managed to preserve their traditional theatre genres.

The answer to your second question is “yes.” The most important traditional theatre forms had their roots in animism, Hinduism or Buddhism, often developing from elementary rituals. All performances involve ceremonies based on pre-Islamic traditions to prepare performance spaces and performers, while also ensuring protection for audience members. Even the training system requires performers to go through a process of initiation or paying homage to teachers. There are also other specific issues. The dramatic content, based on Hindu epics or indigenous myths is obviously a cause for concern. In mak yong women play men’s roles, and performances can at times get vulgar. All these are sources of confusion and conflict, particularly these days, with the emphasis on Islam and Islamisation.

Despite such controversies wasn't mak yong given recognition as an item of World Heritage by UNESCO? Why is it in decline then?

It is really an irony that mak yong was declared as an item of the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO in 2005. I wrote the proposal for the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage. But virtually nothing happened after the recognition. Hardly any of the detailed proposals in the Candidature File have been implemented. If they had been, mak yong would have been thriving locally and would have achieved international acclaim, like the Cambodian Royal Ballet or the Indonesian wayang kulit purwa. Both of these important art forms also received UNESCO recognition. There are other good examples in Asia of how traditional heritage of performing arts has been preserved with or without UNESCO support. But we Malaysians are different. We want the name and the prestige, but when it comes to action we turn into stone. The only thing left for mak yong, it appears, is to die out. That is bound to happen; heritage or no heritage.

Islam is one of the contributing factors for its decline, as I have suggested earlier. Then there is the question of relevance. The content of performances, derived from ancient myths and legends no longer has any appeal even to the elders, what more the youngsters brought up on other staple diets. There is thus

an emotional, psychological and even a spiritual gap. Opportunities to watch performances no longer exist, with the lack of sponsorships and older artistes dying out. Few young Malays have even watched a single performance in their entire life. They have no *angin* for these traditional forms of artistic expression. Today the greatest *angin* is *angin duit* (the urge to get rich in the fastest and easiest manner), and the acquisition of power and status. Loss of patronage is a factor. While traditionally social conditions allowed for performances at harvest time, weddings and such situations, this is no longer the case. Even village fairs (*pesta*) rarely take place and when they do, pop singers or comedians are featured rather than traditional artists. Modern media such as films and television have played a role in the decline. Villagers would rather watch a Bollywood blockbuster in the comfort of their homes than a wayang kulit. In the traditional milieu the elders had good reasons to perform. Today with the spread of education and changing values such reasons no longer exist. For better income a villager would rather work in a factory or become a *che'gu* or *pegawai kerajaan*, with a lifetime job and pension to boot. Who wants to be a *dalang* or a mak yong dancer? At one time, many Kelantanese performers flocked to Singapore to work in factories or at construction sites. They were paid S\$ 80 a day. Among them were talented musicians. The interesting thing is that they started doing *dikir barat* there, until it became popular, perhaps more popular than even in Kelantan.

Would modernisation of the genres help to reinstate them in the contemporary society?

In the case of wayang kulit, there have been efforts at the creation of new forms with less controversial stories taking the place of the *Ramayana*. However, these modern versions have failed to attract audiences. An important performance of the mak yong play *Raja Tangkai Hati* was staged at Istana Budaya (National Theatre). I prepared the script. The sophisticated technical facilities at Istana Budaya were utilised to the maximum, while many of the traditional aspects of mak yong were retained albeit compromised. Even this, while fascinating as a production, aroused a degree of consternation at the so-called efforts to place mak yong “on the world stage,” to transform a rural theatre genre with its own quiet beauty so that it could come up to the level of Broadway productions. There appeared to be a clash of cultural and aesthetic values. Mak yong practitioners in general, while prepared to accept a measure of change have, on the whole, been inflexible on the stories and the necessity of certain rituals. With these gone, mak yong would not be mak yong, they said. And so stories built around the adventures of deities and culture-heroes from the Malay’s pre-Islamic past continue to be staged to this day with equally ancient rituals. This is a serious and glaring contradiction with all that Islamisation means and stands for.

How about the bangsawan? Why is it in decline?

Following the Second World War the Malay film industry came into being, with the first studios in Singapore. Many bangsawan artistes flocked to that island to get involved. This shift paralleled the history of Hindustani films in Bombay. There too Parsee Theatre performers pioneered the earliest films. The early Malay films from 1940s to 1950s – the first being *Laila Majnun* – were directed by Indian directors from Bombay or Madras. The influences of Indian theatre and cinema were very strong, with the borrowing of content going on until after World War II. These contributed to what was most appealing in Malay films. This appeal and the sheer variety of films proved fatal to bangsawan.

But there was also the question of the relevance. After independence efforts were made to change bangsawan into a Malay art form. Groups were made up entirely of Malays and the selection of plays increasingly reflected traditional Malay values. Non-Malays, particularly the Straits Chinese or *Peranakan* in Penang and Singapore, unable to accept this, withdrew totally. By the end of the 1960s bangsawan had become outdated, its content irrelevant in a modernising multi-cultural Malaysia. Technically it was cumbersome, with constant changes of backdrops, and “extra-turns” performed between acts; this made performances, typically with ten or more scenes, really long. Bangsawan failed to evolve like the Filipino *zarzuela*, which exists to this day in several different versions, some highly sophisticated. Bangsawan is still occasionally staged out of a sense of Malay nationalism and nostalgia for the past. Apart from that, this theatre form means very little. It looks like its demise is imminent.

Is nothing being done at all to revive the traditional theatre forms in the country?

Not really. There is no interest in most of the older genres; they have become outdated or controversial due to the inherent presence of traditional beliefs, the connections with the invisible world. And then there are the new realities and challenges. The government is interested to bring back bangsawan. There have been several feeble attempts, but no concerted effort. Things have been dismal so far. It’s a question of genuine interest and commitment.

How and when did modern drama emerge in Malaysia? Who were some of the pioneering groups?

Following bangsawan there came *sandimwara*, which, developing after World War II, made use of semi-permanent sets instead of painted scenery. Scripts took the place of scenarios. The acting became more realistic. The long waits between acts and the extra-turns were removed. However, there was still music and

singing. Sandiwara gave way to modern drama in the 1950s. Modern drama was developing in many parts of the world, in imitation of western realistic plays. In this country such plays began to be written in both Bahasa Melayu and English. After all, English was our colonial language and the language of education. There were in fact many more English language than Bahasa Melayu playwrights in the 1960s. I believe this has been true even for the succeeding decades.

The Kuala Lumpur Theatre Club and Penang Players were the oldest groups. Both were started by British expatriates after World War II. A third group, the Malaysian Arts Theatre Group, had a mixed membership. With English literature having an important place in the school curriculum, particularly in Forms V and VI, theatre productions were fairly common, with Shakespeare being attempted even though it was the most difficult thing to do. Western musicals were also popular. Among the people involved were staff and students of the English departments at the University of Malaya in Singapore (later renamed the University of Singapore) and the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur. At the university's Kuala Lumpur campus, which opened in 1959, the Literary and Dramatic Association (LIDRA) came into being in 1962. Productions were directed by academic staff members, with Anthony Price being a key person in the early sixties. Off campus, the Kuala Lumpur Theatre Club and the Malayan Theatre Arts Group were active, the latter organising playwriting competitions and festivals. Prominent early playwrights included Edward Dorall, Lee Joo For and Syed Alwi. Some of their plays appear in the two volumes of *New Drama* published by Oxford University Press in 1972. Several independent volumes of Lee Joo For's plays were also published. I was involved in LIDRA as a Committee member and as editor of their journal with the same name, although my primary interest was poetry.

How has the May 13 incident affected the Malaysian theatre scene?

May 13, 1969 can be seen as a tragedy or as a boon, depending on which side of the divide you are placed. It was to change the face of the country. In my view, apart from the economic changes, it was a disaster, particularly as far as education went. There was a drastic drop in the quality of education; from this we will never recover. As we have already seen, there was a fairly active drama scene in Kuala Lumpur and to some extent in Penang following the independence in 1957. In the aftermath of 13 May 1969 everything came to a standstill because of the decisions taken at the National Cultural Congress. These included a downgrading of the English language. Like many others, Edward Dorall discontinued writing; he saw no future for drama in English. Lee Joo For migrated to Australia as did Ee Tiang Hong, the country's best-

known English-language poet at that time. After 1969 there was a gap until around 1975.

Somehow this is where I came in. I wrote my first play “Halfway Road, Penang” after the May 69 incident, and as a result of that incident. In 1971 I produced and directed this play as the first production of University of Penang, later renamed Universiti Sains Malaysia. The title of the play is derived from the name of an actual road in Penang, now renamed Jalan Sekerat. For me the name became a potent symbol of the times. I wrote two further full-length plays, “Suvarna Padma” (Golden Lotus) and “The Trial of Hang Tuah the Great,” in addition to several one-act pieces.

Were there new playwrights after May 13?

Not immediately, but following a hiatus several became active. Chin San Sooi wrote a few important plays as did K.S. Maniam. Maniam was to become one of the biggest names in Malaysian English writing with his plays and novels. There were other writers, mostly in fiction such as Lee Kok Liang and Shirley Geok-lin Lim. But the advantage had clearly shifted to Singapore after this incident. However, a new generation of playwrights also came into being; Kee Thuan Chye is the most famous of them. Then there is Huzir Sulaiman, and several other unpublished writers. It appeared that English language drama had made a comeback of sorts. Much has been happening in terms of writing and production. One of the most exciting things was that even veterans like Lloyd Fernando and Wong Phui Nam decided to write drama. But one major problem remained and still does – that of censorship.

How has censorship played out in the growth or stagnation of Malaysian literature?

Censorship hinders creativity as well as literary productivity. This is one of the reasons why we do not have quality in Malaysian literature. One of Chin San Sooi’s plays, “Refugee Images,” could not be performed for a long time. It touched upon the incident involving Vietnam boat refugees and the way Malaysians treated them. An international uproar developed when the former Prime Minister, Dr. Mahathir Mohamed suggested that the refugees be pushed back into the sea. There were other plays which were regarded as sensitive and thus disallowed. Censorship has certainly been a factor in the decline of drama and the lack of quality in our literature as a whole, no matter what the language is.

My play “Halfway Road, Penang” was also not allowed to be staged, but it was staged however. I wrote “Halfway Road” in 1971 and applied for a permit when USM planned to stage it. After a long delay, when I went to check on the matter at the Special Branch of the Penang Police Headquarters, I was told that

no permit would be issued. The play was too “sensitive”; performances could apparently cause fights in the theatre, even racial tension. I tried to convince them that the play condemned rather than condoned the interracial conflict in the country that had erupted on May 13, 1969. This explanation, however, did not help me to secure a permit. I don’t know if anyone in the Special Branch had even read the play. It was after the intervention of USM’s Vice-Chancellor, Tan Sri Hamzah Sendut, who took up the matter with the then Minister of Home Affairs, Tun Dr. Ismail, that authorisation was given for performances, but only on campus. On-campus performances do not require permits, but there are certain restrictions. Over all, delays and non-issuance of permits can cause a great deal of inconvenience.

Is there a case of self-censorship as well?

It is bound to happen. If you do not censor yourself, you cannot get your work staged or published in the country. All three of my plays are considered controversial. I tried to stage “Trial of Hang Tuah the Great” on the USM campus, but faced many difficulties. The play was written as a challenge. During a discussion before my sabbatical in the Philippines, Datuk Sharom Ahmat, one of the Deputy Vice Chancellors at USM, raised an important question. Why was it that the only performing arts programme in the country was unable to do “big” things? *Hamlet* had been USM’s best production up to that point, and that had run into problems. I mentioned the constraints. But the discussion triggered off something -- the idea that I should write a play that would be meaningful to Malaysians, in terms of content and also be exciting as a production. When it came to appropriate subject-matter, the closest thing I could think of was Hang Tuah. Everybody could relate to him, and Hang Tuah was a controversial figure to begin with. I wrote “The Trial of Hang Tuah the Great” in the southern Philippines. I combined techniques derived from Brechtian Epic Theatre and Artaud’s Theatre of Cruelty. Theatre of Cruelty has a special appeal for me; it captures in essence the entire history of theatre from ancient to modern times, in a sort of return to rituals of antiquity. Rituals such as those connected with Dionysus are the very basis of theatre; they are immensely important in understanding theatre and its original purposes.

For the proposed production, I wanted a multiracial cast; I wanted a Malay to play Hang Tuah. When I started working on it there was anticipation, uncertainty, fear and all kinds of emotions. Other lecturers were already warning their students not to get involved. At the eleventh hour, a week or two before the opening, the leading actor withdrew. He had been coerced to do so. I had to cancel the play. I still have copies of the poster that was printed.

Why was a play based on the story of Hang Tuah found controversial?

My play is not a retelling of the traditional story; it is a reinterpretation, even a confrontation with the traditional story in the manner of Grotowski. Several issues are raised in it. First of all, who is Hang Tuah? Is he real? Is he Malay or Chinese? Legend has it that he never died, that he will come back and claim Taming Sari. If he's alive today, who is he? I had to find appropriate symbols. These had to be somehow connected with a modern notion of Hang Tuah.

What about your other full-length plays? Do you have any plans of staging or publishing them?

“Suvarna Padma” (Golden Lotus) is also thought-provoking. It is about the dilemma of a writer in a restrictive society and some of the challenges he faces, the compromises he has to make on a personal as well as public level. I named the central character Vacha, which in Sanskrit means “Voice.” It's about the stifling of the voice, of conscience and of creativity.

As for staging “Suvarna Padma” and “The Trial of Hang Tuah the Great,” I do not think the authorities will allow them, not as public performances. Perhaps they can be staged outside the country. There was some interest in staging “Hang Tuah” in Singapore following a seminar there. I certainly intend to publish the plays. Then they can at least be read locally and internationally. They are highly important plays. “Hang Tuah” won a consolation price in a Shell-sponsored competition held by *The New Straits Times*. I was told it was the best entry received but the judges had to be cautious.

In your view, what are the areas in which Malaysian theatre scene and literature generally need to improve? How do you envision the future of literature in the country?

The first problem is language. With few exceptions, Malaysians cannot write well in English. The number of those who can is small. The second problem we have is censorship. At one time I organised an event in Penang, gathered young writers from all languages and discussed what they were saying in their works. They were concerned mainly with social issues, family and so on. Today, I am sure they have larger issues, given recent developments in the country. There are many serious concerns; there is anger; there is frustration. Look at HINDRAF. I don't know if Tamil writers are picking up these issues. There are too many handicaps, too many constraints. This is a pity because the physical facilities have improved considerably.

However, there are some good plays by well-trained authors – writers who benefitted from broad exposure. We have theatre practitioners working in smaller circles such as the Instant Cafe, with limited audiences. The issues they raise are significant, even daring. But they are not allowed to perform for bigger audiences. The authorities tolerate a certain measure of dissent through such

channels. However, this also means that they are able to keep track of who is doing what. We are becoming closed groups, often single-race groups, with little inter-communication. What are the burning issues? Can these be touched upon? One would have to be interested in something to be able to write about it. Otherwise, there would be no enthusiasm. We cannot write on important issues; here almost everything is regarded as sensitive, taboo. Even the fate of foreign workers who are treated no better than slaves, certainly an important issue, is a “sensitive” one. Such issues cannot be articulated. Indonesia has no censorship. Neither has India. And you can see the level of their literatures, including drama. In the case of India, there is a vibrant literature in English as well as in local languages. Translation bridges them.

We will never produce a W.S. Rendra or a Vijay Tendulkar here. Here, among the English language writers, there is a kind of malaise; they do not know what to write about, they have just lost interest and the few good ones have migrated. This is, of course, not a new phenomenon. I have mentioned Ee Tiang Hong. He was of Baba descent, and yet could not find a place in this country. He went off into exile fairly early. Others followed. Then there are those who have not moved, but have gone into internal self-exile.