Parallel Streams

Two Currents of Difference in Kuala Lumpur’s Contemporary Theatre

Catherine Diamond

At the height of the turmoil that followed the arrest and trial of Anwar Ibrahim, the deputy prime minister who had fallen from grace, the Instant Café Theatre presented Dario Fo’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*. Performed in April 1999, the production interwove English, Malay, and Chinese languages in the dialogue. The scene of the police beating the anarchist hit a raw nerve; it too closely paralleled the photos showing Anwar with a black eye, photos that shocked both Malaysia and the world. That year, the Instant Café Theatre celebrated its tenth anniversary, having offered Kuala Lumpur audiences a continuous program of both their weekly satire series and fully staged serious plays.

A year after the above events, another production, performed in a mix of English and Malay, was set during this same period, when demonstrations protesting the detention of Anwar were being staged at Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square), the large plaza in central Kuala Lumpur. The play begins with four bystanders who, caught in the fray, rush for cover in the shopping mall beneath the square. Trapped below, the four strangers—two Malay men (an undercover cop and a cynical citizen) and two women of Chinese ethnicity (a poor little rich girl and a passionate demonstrator)—pass the time telling racy stories, contemporary adaptations of Boccacio’s classic. *The Malaysian Decameron* (2000) emerges from Malaysia’s politically plagued times. The play not only situates itself in the heart of a politically sensitive period, but replays the action on-site, in the mall under the plaza, where the characters took refuge—inside the subterranean Actors Studio Theatre. Written by filmmaker and critic Amir Muhammad, it was one of three new works produced by the Five Arts Centre’s Directors’ Workshop (Muhammad 2000).

Whether transposing a foreign drama or creating their own, many Malaysian dramatists are striving to explore their country’s rich and unique cultural makeup. But political satire is only part of Kuala Lumpur’s complex theatre scene. Also in 1999, on the other side of town, Datuk Rahim Razali was preparing *Keris Sang Puteri* (The Princess Keris), the first major professional performance in the newly opened Panggung Negara, the beautiful National Theatre. Given the largest
budget ever awarded a stage musical, it would test out the new facilities, with a cast of over 60. The premiere performance, however, was not merely a social and artistic event but one clearly tied to state politics. Presented in Malay by Malay-only actors, the Malay director expressed its goals: “We wanted a play that will instill nationalism and patriotism among people. As an inaugural production and in tandem with the recent National Day, we figured this was the right piece” (Ghani 1999). Set in the 18th century when the Malay state of Selangor fell to the Dutch, the story concerns the war between Malays and Bugis (people from the neighboring island of Celebes) that is held at bay only by the proposed union of a Malay princess and Bugis chiefain. The match is threatened when the girl falls in love with a local warrior, but in the end, she sacrifices love for the welfare of her people and their combined forces defeat the Dutch. Despite the excitement of the premiere, the play did not rouse people’s nationalist sentiments as much as the theatre building.

Although not large, the theatre scene in Kuala Lumpur reveals the many layers of interaction and exclusion at work in Malaysian society in which all relations are complicated by ethnicity, class, religion, and educational background. In the English-language theatres, not only do the dramatists and actors involved reflect some of Malaysia’s diverse ethnic population of Malays, Indians (primarily, but not exclusively, Tamil), Chinese, Westerners, Eurasians, and other mixed-race people, but also the plays they write and the interpretations of foreign works they perform often address the problems facing a diverse multiethnic society.

While traditional Chinese and Indian theatre troupes are virtually nonexistent in Malaysia, contemporary groups perform to audiences in their own languages, but only the English-language theatre is preoccupied with crossing ethnic barriers. However, it plays mostly to urban middle-class and college-educated audiences. English serves as a lingua franca among the different ethnic groups but it not only evokes overtones of colonial rule, from which it emerged, but also appeals to particular classes—which some label “yuppie.” Moreover, it runs counter to any attempt to develop a national identity based solely on Malay language and culture. Malay theatre, on the other hand, has been mostly indifferent to representing ethnic minorities and has focused on issues within the Malay community or on nostalgic backward glimpses.

Theatre written and performed in Bahasa Malaysia (Malay), the national language, is consciously involved in nation building and is therefore integral to the government’s larger plan to contribute to a Malay national culture, which, in its current state all but excludes the other ethnic groups. With the 1994 foundation of the National Arts Academy (Akademi Seni Kebangsaan [ASK]) and the opening of the National Theatre, Malay dramatists are now encouraged to present in the new venue large-scale productions based on famous episodes in Malay history and legend. While some younger Malay actors perform in the English-language companies, few if any non-Malay actors appear in the state-sponsored Malay-language productions.

Fredric Jameson contends that:

literature from the Third World, unlike First-World literature, which presumably possesses a different aesthetic value, always operates also as national allegory. That is, representations from Third World locations are historicized and politicized productions that constitute the form-specific
genre of national allegory, which by definition is both static and potentially statist. (1986:66)

This definition and distinction might be suitably applied to many post-Independence (1957) Malay plays but even more so to those officially sponsored in the last 10 years. Works based on Malay history, Malay Muslim spiritual quests, or legends of Malay royal and folk heroes, contribute to a genre of national allegory. And while realistic Malay plays also offer critiques of the corrupt bureaucracy and the materialism of the nouveaux riches, the current spate of historical plays is clearly part of a nation-building project that is exclusively Malay. At the same time, the performances by English-language troupes challenge this stasis and work toward deconstructing the mono-racial formation of history and culture by using their fragmented performance techniques and continuous investigation of the innumerable configurations of ethnic interaction to keep the multiethnic ethos in the forefront of their work.

Few writers have been more frank and critical of the intentional exacerbation of racial tension than Kee Thuan Chye. Instead of celebrating Malay history in his play *We Could **** You Mr. Birch* (1995) he allegorizes and satirizes the internecine political intrigues between the Malay rajahs, the Chinese go-betweens, and the English administrators during colonial times in order to critique the current manipulation of historical subjectivity:

Race has always been an issue in my country, even before Independence, but never has it been as serious and divisive as it is today. In the last 20 years, race-consciousness has been so institutionalized that it has virtually developed into a Frankenstein. Almost every issue is seen from the perspective of race to the point that it is impossible to obtain a consensus of public opinion on any issue.

A writer of any race communicating to such a variegated society is apt to be viewed with misgiving by some quarters. He can hardly take a stand on any issue without drawing ire or suspicion. We do not have as yet a developed Malaysian consciousness to which a writer can address his
views with sanguinity; the consciousness of race subverts such a covenant between writer and audience. (Kee 1993:145)

Given the political sensitivity toward race in Malaysia and the political proscript on any public discussion of it, theatre plays an important role in negotiations between the government (with its divisive cultural policies), Malay dramatists, and their non-Malay colleagues. Although the theatre in either language cannot be said to play to a wide audience, especially when compared to that of other media, it remains an important laboratory and a testing ground for tolerance.

All companies are subject to censorship and must submit a synopsis of each play to the police board, but this has rarely resulted in serious clashes except when a political occurrence makes the authorities particularly sensitive to criticism. Mainstream Malay theatre tends to self-censor. The underground Malay theatre is subject to closer scrutiny, but has still been able to perform some provocative works to small numbers. Many standup comedians who perform in English seem to satirize with impunity but they know that subjects such as religion are out of bounds. The ground on which all theatre operates remains slippery. Working in a volatile political and religious environment, theatre is often able to comment on issues only because of its fringe status.

Thus emerges the paradox: the Malay theatre that receives substantial support from the government is harnessed to an “important” task and so in many ways is no longer as free as it once was to explore all areas of Malaysian life. In striving to live up to its call to be useful by contributing to Malay national culture, its artistic integrity is often circumscribed by the demands of the Ministry of Culture, Art, and Tourism that funds it. English theatre, in contrast, receives little government money and must constantly solicit corporate sponsors. It is neither a potent threat (because of the small numbers it plays to) nor considered useful to national culture. Being essentially “unimportant,” it has more freedom to examine issues of its choice, often precisely those areas forbidden to the Malay theatre. However, its own subversive potential is kept in check by this same appearance of leniency toward it.

The government’s ideological and financial support for the Malay productions was initially meant to shore up a foundering traditional Malay culture, which has been struggling against the aftereffects of colonization, Chinese financial prowess, and the country’s rapid modernization, including an influx of Western popular culture. In the past few years, however, the indigenous theatre has faced a new and equally powerful threat from the fundamentalist state governments. Although the northeastern states of Kelantan and Terengganu are the original sites of some of Malaysia’s few surviving indigenous performing arts—such as *mak yong* (dance dramas) and *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry)—both have been banned by the Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), which allows tourist-only performances. The central government has fought back by inviting masters of these arts to perform and teach in Kuala Lumpur, but it can do little to nurture the arts in situ. PAS takes a dim view of what it considers unorthodox rituals of animist, pre-Islamic deities included in traditional performance. The situation is further complicated in that while Kelantan and Terengganu have embraced a more strict form of Islam, the people there are fiercely independent and resistant to nationalist intervention. Thus despite even the religious proscription, they continue to practice arts that play a more important role in their local cultural identity than any nationalist identity pursued by the central government.

The theatre in Malaysia is currently quite polarized, with the traditional forms under threat, Malay plays often being about exclusively Malay concerns, and English plays focusing on contemporary urban life, but there was a time when
all groups watched and enjoyed the same theatre. It is ironic that the government is now promoting bangsawan, formerly an extremely popular entertainment genre, as the national traditional theatre of Malaysia. Brought to Malaysia by Indian Parsees via Penang in the 1880s, bangsawan was quickly taken up by the entire population in the early 20th century, and incorporated elements from all the cultures. Resembling a vaudeville variety show, it was flexible enough to maintain a broad appeal. Bangsawan was the meeting place of all the communities, however segregated they otherwise were by work, class, education, and race. Although it did not promote nationalist sentiments, it was a “national” theatre in that it was performed in Malay, which all understood, and its songs, dances, and plays fused different ethnic genres into a commercially successful hybrid.

While much more limited in its appeal, the contemporary English-language theatre provides an alternative to the types of theatre in other immigrant nations that address issues of ethnicity and race. In contrast to immigrant countries such as Canada, the United States, or Australia where the different ethnic minorities produce their own theatres to give themselves a voice in the majority culture, or where troupes engage in “blind casting,” the Malaysian ethnic minorities are all brought together, along with Malay artists who wish to work in English, to express the urgent need for racial harmony. It has become a place of working out problems that often cannot be directly discussed. Unlike escapist television drama, the live theatre—whether comedy reviews, foreign plays, or locally written and devised scripts—is a place where some Malaysians are trying to come to grips with racial stereotyping, prejudice, and suspicions that not only permeate the society but are all too often fanned by politicians wishing to maintain the power status quo.

Sometimes, however, the obstacles seem overwhelming even in the small theatre world. The two theatres are motivated by such different operating imperatives that they seem mutually exclusive: the one governing the English theatre proclaims, “We must find a way to live with each other in peace”; while the one for the Malay theatre answers, “We must achieve parity with other ethnicities by fostering our own first.” Thus the Malaysian theatre in Kuala Lumpur is developing along two parallel lines that rarely have occasion to intersect. Both are grappling with serious cultural issues, but at the moment, neither is able to deal
directly with what is potentially the most serious threat of all: the growing gap between them.

The Historical Configuration of Ethnic Groups

To understand Malaysia’s current quandary, one must look into its colonial past and the particular division of its peoples. While kept in their discrete communities and separate spheres of influence, the ethnic groups could give the appearance of harmony, but only as long as a strong outside force—the facade of British law—ensured their segregation and overall subordination. When reforms leading to self-government were instituted after Independence in 1957, it was the Malay elite, both traditional rulers and modern professionals, who took over political power—and who, not surprisingly, legislated their own favored status as bumi-putras, “sons of the soil,” in the new nation. In addition, since most Malays had been rural farmers and fishermen, their control of land ownership and the eventual monopoly of the Malay language over national affairs meant that they could continue on unchanged, except for the inevitable impact of modernity.

The Chinese, who currently make up 30 percent of the population and are concentrated in the urban areas where they are sometimes the majority, have traded for centuries in peninsular Malaysia. Some were encouraged by the British to take up trade and others became wealthy through tin mining. But the Chinese community is divided into two large groups: the peranakan (Baba-Nonya culture) who adopted the Malay language and culture; and the more recent Chinese immigrants of the 19th century who speak Hokkien and Cantonese as well as Mandarin. The latter group, since they were already organized in clan societies and labor groups, and then later served as special administrators for the British,

5. The Malaysian government is currently promoting bangsawan, formerly an extremely popular entertainment genre, as the national traditional theatre. ASK students perform in a production of the bangsawan Haris Fadillah (1997), directed by Rahman B. and Rosminah Tahir. (Photo courtesy of ASK)
and since they had their own schools, were able to remain ethnically autonomous, attuned more to the politics in China than in Malaysia. Despite attempts by the government to improve the economic status of ordinary Malays, the Chinese still control much of the country’s commerce, often with the illegal collaboration of Malay bureaucrats. Although India’s southern empires exerted immense cultural and religious influence over the ancient kingdoms of Southeast Asia, and Indian traders were known to have arrived on the Malaysian coast in the first century, it was the British use of Indian convict labor to build roads and cities, and then the indenturing of large numbers of Tamil plantation workers to cultivate coffee, rubber, and palm oil, that increased the Malaysian Indian population. Yet it too was divided between an educated urban middle class and the laboring poor who performed the roughest work and lived a feudal existence in segregated rural communities, with access to little more than Indian overseers and minimal Tamil schooling. While during colonial times the former were merchants, police, and administrators, they have now formed an elite class of lawyers, doctors, and teachers who are often the strongest advocates for protecting the rights of ethnic minorities (Sharad 1993:132–34).

Thus the three major groups have grown and coexisted independently while under British rule. The English language became an important tool in the civil service and business, but everyone born in Malaysia understood and spoke Malay, if not with same degree of fluency. The same is not true today. While most urban Malaysians are bi- or trilingual, everyone speaks a different combination of languages.

The Precedent of Bangsawan As a Multiethnic Theatre

As Tan Sooi Beng demonstrates in her study of bangsawan (1993), this theatre was popular and vital because it embraced and exploited the full scope of Malaysia’s cultural diversity. As Malaysia’s first commercial theatre and the first created to be performed on a proscenium stage, bangsawan (meaning “of the noble class”) was derived from Indian antecedents and first known as wayang parsı. Chinese impresarios were instrumental in promoting and expanding it; Eurasians were among the most popular performers:

By the 1880s, the Parsı theatre had become so popular in Penang that its Hindustani songs were sung by Indians, Indian Muslims, Arabs, and Malays. [...] The locally born Chinese or Babas and Jawi Peranankan (Malaysian-born Indians) preferred bangsawan to the Chinese opera and Indian theatre as, being Malay speakers, they understood it better. In fact, the Jawi Peranakan were the first to promote bangsawan while the Babas started their own groups in the early twentieth century. (Tan 1993:29)

Regardless of which ethnic group took control, bangsawan’s source material was always a fusion of Malay with whatever foreign sources it incorporated. Combining the exotic and the familiar, bangsawan was the non-Europeans’ version of Western theatre modified and adapted to suit local tastes, and it was not exclusive in regard to class, race, or gender (31).

But more than that, bangsawan was a truly all-encompassing entertainment. A “typical” performance featured one full-length play, or two or three short ones, whose plots were taken from Indian or Arabic fairy tales, Shakespearean tragedies, Chinese romances, or English or Dutch plays that emphasized fantasy and mystery, especially those with aristocratic characters. Colorful costumes and spectacular stage effects were major attractions, along with the interludes between the
scenes (called “extra turns”), which included songs, pantomimes, comic stunts, novelty acts, and dances such as chorus-line cancans, rhumbas, fox-trots, and tangos, as well as Hawai’ian- and Hungarian-inspired dances. The songs and instrumental music ranged from blues and ragtime to operetta, in addition to Indian and Malay tunes. Novelty acts featured magic, acrobatics, juggling, and feats of strength. Thus bangsawan combined theatre, music hall, nightclub, and circus under one billing, all done primarily in the Malay language. As with the current popularity of “Bollywood” films throughout Malaysia, the simple escapist plots, music, and dance made it a palatable consumer product that did not deal with the issues of ethnic difference or conflict.
Although bangsawan was revived in the 1950s, it never recovered its popularity after World War II. It had been first shut down by the Japanese occupation (1942–1945) and then unable to rebuild itself or its audiences during “The Emergency” (1948–1960), the 12-year struggle between communist (primarily Chinese) insurgents and the returned British colonial government. After Independence in 1957, it reappeared but could not compete with the flood of new entertainments from the West, India, and Hong Kong, or with the sandiwara, the realistic plays that eschewed fantasy and espoused serious causes more suitable to the stature of the new nation state. The sandiwara, considered the first fully scripted modern literary dramas, introduced “historical, religious, nationalistic, and contemporary themes in keeping with the spirit of a mainstream Malay nationalism in which the leadership of aristocrats and high-status administrators was emphasized” (Tan 1993:168). In addition, many of the bangsawan performers left the stage for more lucrative and stable jobs in television and film, thus hastening the demise of the live performance form.

Despite its inability to weather political and social upheavals, bangsawan’s former popularity does demonstrate that it is possible for a theatre genre to appeal to all the ethnic groups—and in this case, the first theatre to do so was Malay-language based. The current parallelization of the English and Malay theatres is both a recent and a consciously imposed phenomenon. In the 1970s when bangsawan was virtually defunct, the government stepped in not only to revive it but also to reconstitute it to support the government’s political campaign, which was aimed at restructuring the society to eliminate the poverty of the indigenous Malays and promote bumiputra culture. Thus, after it had all but disappeared, the Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism “created a traditional past for bangsawan. Under state sponsorship, a popular type of theatre has been reshaped, ‘Malayized,’ and institutionalized for new national purposes” (Tan 1993:viii). All the foreign—i.e. Chinese, Indian, Western—plots were weeded out of the bangsawan repertoire and only Malay and Arabic stories were allowed. Abdul Rahman Abu Bakar (Rahman B.), a veteran bangsawan performer from the 1950s who now teaches at ASK and directs the annual show said:

Today, I write many Malay scripts, Malay stories […] I know that even if I write other stories, they won’t be developed. [...] In the past the selection of stories was wide […] We performed all kinds of stories. [...] Today the repertoire is limited to Malay stories. (in Tan 1973:179)

Although some bangsawan shows are presented through workshops given around the country, live performance in Kuala Lumpur currently is limited to the occasional productions of local university drama departments and the annual performances given by the second- and third-year students of ASK.

The demise of bangsawan itself has been dramatized in a musical play, Opera Ayu Cendana (1999). The heroine, a prima donna of royal descent who has left her privileged position to join a bangsawan troupe, wants to preserve the traditional form of music and dance. But the lead man wants to modernize it by introducing Western elements to make it more “popular”—a rather ironic argument given that it was originally both a fusion of Western and Asian elements and a purely popular art form (Yusof 1999). However, their debate does reveal how bangsawan’s identity has become fixed and restricted, here adding the element of nostalgia for the “traditional,” overlooking the fact that the traditional itself was once heterogeneous. Whereas a revival of bangsawan, or some contemporary version of it, could have been a bridge between the disparate cultures, its performances are instead fossilized museum pieces appealing to almost no one, and its once-popular extra turns are considered “draggy” (Ghani 1997) as they
interrupt and slow down the pace of the plot. Thus a struggling style of theatre has been made moribund, dealt its death blow by the “good” intentions of the government, which did not seem to realize that a viable popular theatre depends upon the tastes of its audience not the dictates of an enforced cultural policy.

1969: The Formation of an Official Malay Culture and the Rivalry between English and Malay

Lloyd Fernando’s novel in English, *Scorpion Orchid* (1976), was adapted into a play that was performed both in Singapore (1994) and Kuala Lumpur (1995). It captures the disturbing spirit of the pre-Independence times. Even during that period of ostensible unity against the British, racial tensions erupted into internecine battles. Whenever trouble threatened, people reverted to their own ethnic groups against all others. Fernando explores the complicated interactions of the past to counterbalance both official versions of history and the simplistic ethnic divisions perpetuated in the popular media:

The play looks back a few decades in our history to events in one place and time that could be regarded as emblematic of the depths of our society. But it is not a mere historical record. It recognizes our awareness of our different pasts. Our television programmes cater to our pasts in the slots they have created for Malay movies, Chinese movies, Tamil movies, and English movies. The play reorders these pasts in a manner suitable for contemplation. We should not be surprised if the pasts still jangle a bit, because that is true to the people we were, and to the people we are today. A fundamental truth is that our past is not culturally separable from our present. The way we look on the entire continuum makes the difference. (1995)

Although the novel was a radical indictment of false racial harmony during the colonial period and examined the possibility of a Pan-Malaysian identity, the characters in the play version fell into problematic stereotypes. The four male classmates were required to represent the four ethnic groups—Chinese, Malays, Indians, and Eurasians—and their naïve representations appeared passé to the contemporary 1990s Kuala Lumpur audience.

In retrospect, the post-Independence years between 1957 and 1969 are viewed as ones of relative peace and tolerance; both Malay and English were languages of official discourse. Although Malay was the official language, English was still the language of instruction at the universities. The years from 1964 to 1967 were planned as a transition period to allow Malay to replace English in dominance. Tun Abdul Razak, who later became prime minister, summed up the relative euphoria shared by many at the time: “We have drawn from the richness of our multiracial heritage and have built a Malaysian culture with an identity of its own. We no longer speak of a Chinese, Indian, or Malay culture. We now speak of a Malaysian culture” (Razak 1967:2).

This declaration was to prove precipitous. As long as the Chinese did not demand more political influence, and the Malays did not want more economic power, these two groups were able to coexist peacefully. However, Malays were determined to have more say in the country’s economy and the Chinese sought a greater political voice. On 13 May 1969, after national by-elections in which the Chinese attained sweeping victories that threatened to upset the Malay political hegemony, riots broke out. The violence ripped off the mask of multiracial harmony and truly shocked the nation. After the riots, along with a revival of the 1960 Internal Security Act, which allowed the government to detain people
Catherine Diamond

up to two years without trial, the Seditions Act of 1948 was invoked, prohibiting the discussion of four sensitive issues: the Bahasa Malaysia language policy, the special rights of Malays, the special roles of the Sultans and other Malay royalty, and the citizenship policy towards non-Malays. For the first time, the government began imposing a language policy to eliminate English and assert Malay as the language for all public discourse, a move that encouraged dramatists working in English to switch to Malay.

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The Promotion of Islam As the Cultural Marker for Indigenous Malays

After the language policy was established in 1970, the government sought to implement a similar national cultural policy, but faced greater resistance from Chinese and Indians who did not want their cultural identity subsumed under Malay culture and insisted on cultural pluralism. In 1971, the National Cultural Congress also declared that only literature written in the Malay language could be regarded as the National Literature of Malaysia. But dictates from the government could not automatically solve other crises occurring in the Malay community, such as the surge of rural poor moving to the cities, and the emergence of both Malay urban poor and materialistic nouveau riche classes. It was in the midst of this cultural confusion that Malays turned to religion both to identify and unify themselves as an ethnic group regardless of economic class or location.

Moreover, for intellectuals, Islam offered a solution and response to the threat of Western cultural domination, not only internally bonding the Malay people but also linking them with a vast international Islamic network: “For the Muslim World, the quest for independence from Western subjugation was, in most instances, closely connected with the Muslim search for identity” (Mutalib 1992:1). Islam offered an ideological and cultural alternative to the Judeo-Christian West. The 1979 Iranian Revolution and its establishment of a theocracy was a turning point as it galvanized the more extreme groups and created new precedents for the relationship between state and religion that found ready application in Malaysia:

Islamic fundamentalism, while different in its national and local manifestations, shares a common rejection of modernist secularism on a variety of grounds. These include the perception that modernization has failed because its secular character could not offer coherent values. In addition, modernization failed because too rapid urbanization and inadequate agricultural policies produced gross inequalities of wealth and power, leaving the peasantry often in a precarious economic situation. There is also the notion that liberalism has failed because the policies of the nationalist state systems did not allow genuine political statement and democracy. Traditional Marxism also had little to offer in the way of either ideology or successful economic programs. Marxism remained the ideology of an
elite and failed to appeal to the masses and was too closely associated with atheism and foreign domination. [...] Islam has been able to fill the gap (or at least the experience of a gap) between the promises of Westernization and/or Marxism and the actual reality of social change at the everyday level. Islam has an egalitarian appeal, an ascetic worldview, and a dynamic conception of social change and through its history provides an alternative to the Western model, which was imposed by colonization. Moreover Islam through its prayer meetings and other religious institutions provided an alternative political and social platform to state institutions, statement of oppositional and critical viewpoints which governments could not silence because religion had deep popular roots in the broader community. (Turner 1994:88–89)

Malays have embraced Islamic revivalism as a marker of their cultural ascendancy. Therefore, while language or language preference might be an indicator of ethnic affiliation, religion is perceived as a potential bridge between races as well as the wedge being driven between them, with the theatre reflecting both points of view: Islam has proved to be a double-edged sword for Malaysian culture in other ways. It has been adopted as the line of defense against what is seen, correctly or incorrectly, as Western manifestations of license, self-indulgence, and materialism. But it is also used as strategic armor against the internal foreign influences of the non-Islamic, usually non-Malay, minorities, who are allowed to practice but not promote their religions. Thus Malays are struggling between two forces: they themselves are “Other” on the world stage dominated by First World policies that their strident prime minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad is well known for vocally opposing; and at the same time, they are imposing monolithic religious and cultural policies on the minorities within Malaysia.

Although avowedly prejudicial in favoring Malay Muslims in areas of education and civil service, the national government has also had to appear as a protector of the traditional performing arts from the even more radical PAS administrations in the states of Kelantan and Terengganu, which have enacted hudud laws (a strict form of Koranic laws) to eliminate syncretic pre-Islamic rituals, including those affiliated with traditional performing arts. Deemed superstitious because they engage in magic and the conjuring of healing spirits, the shamanistic practices that provide the contexts for mak yong dance drama, manora (a trance dance), and wayang kulit siam (the predominant form of shadow puppetry in Malaysia) have been targeted as anti-Islamic, the arts themselves are banned. According to Kelantan chief minister Datuk Nik Aziz Nik Mat:

Islam does not allow for Muslims to indulge in pengkhayalan (the fantastical). Aspects like the rites of worship before the beginning of the play, fantasies and the shapes of the characters must be removed before the ban can be lifted. Other prohibitions include men and women sharing the stage as well as the worship of pre-Islamic spirits. (in Khoo 1996b)

Much of what is characteristically and specifically “Malay” is pre-Islamic and would contribute to a formulation of a Malay cultural identity if it were not being superceded by an Islamic identity based not in Southeast Asian but Arabic culture:

The native of the peninsula is becoming less of a Malay and more of a musulman. His natural ceremonies are being discarded; his racial laws are being set aside and his inherited superstitions are opposed to Muslim beliefs as much as to Western science. (Wilkinson 1966:82)
Though giving little support to the sustenance and dissemination of traditional arts in schools, the national government has singled out a few traditional artists for recognition and invited them to Kuala Lumpur since it is unable to countermand the two states’ local prohibitions. The native arts are dying out with their aging practitioners, and the lip service the Ministry pays to them in the capital does little good; too often few people attend their performances and even less stay for the complete program. Removed from their rural roots, deprived of their mystical functions, staged in halls unsuited to their intimate relation to the audience, and performed in dialects not easily understood by Kuala Lumpur spectators, they become arcane entertainments unrelated to the lives of urban residents.

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In 1993, dalang Pak Hamzah Awang Mat received the first National Artist Award, Anugerah Seni Nagara, which honors a lifetime achievement in visual and performing arts. A shadow puppet master who both voices all the characters in the plays and manipulates all the puppets, Hamzah was also a musician and instrument maker. A native of Kelantan who worked 15 years at Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang with theatre scholar Ghulam Sawar Yousof, Hamzah was brought by Yousof to the capital to teach shadow puppetry and music at ASK. However, as he has no heir and ASK students are given only a basic introduction, it is difficult to see how the art will survive.

Yousof also invited mak yong practitioner Khatijah Awang who had formed
her own mak yong troupe, Kumpulan Budaya Seri Temenggong. Troupe members now perform with ASK students in the annual school performance. Yousof teaches the background on wayang kulit and mak yong and writes the scripts, condensing plots that formerly could extend over a month to two-day presentations. Mak yong, except for a brief affiliation with the sultanate courts, has been primarily a folk art and evolved a standard repertoire of 12 stories, most of which seem to be uniquely Malay in origin. Incorporating specific pieces of music and dance, mak yong’s central roles are played by women; the clowns and the gods are usually played by men. As most of the stories concern the adventures of gods or mythical princes, it is this divine interference in human affairs along with the incantations and rituals surrounding the performances that offends orthodox Muslims (Yousof 1998).

While indigenous Malay forms are waning, Malay playwrights are being encouraged by the national government to write works with Muslim themes to bolster its nationalizing program and consolidate Islam as the state religion. Thus, rather than promote multiethnic Malaysian literature, it has emphasized the production of Islamic literature, which is de facto written by Malays. In 1978, writers were enjoined to:

Create works that can help improve the Muslims of this nation. The arts should be used as an instrument to develop and unify Islamic society. A songwriter can compose and create songs, which can influence his listener to become closer to religion. Literary people who have written the novel, the short story, poem or drama can promote the readers’ semangat (spirit) to defend the purity of Islam and to obey its rules in everyday life. (Ishak 1987:27)

In 1993, Noordin Hassan was the first dramatist to receive the nation’s highest literary honor, the 13th Anugerah Sastera Negara (National Literary Award). A former English teacher, Hassan’s characteristic style is the fusing of Malay and Islamic creativity. His personal message is reiterated through every plot line and advocates religion as the solution to all social problems. Solehah Ishak, who has translated many of his plays, contends that Hassan is aware of Malaysia’s complex cultural mix, yet by promoting Islam as the one and only panacea, he appears to address a select audience that excludes not only Malaysia’s other religions but also the Malays’ indigenous animism. In 1400, Hassan uses shadow puppetry to represent the attractive and tempting animistic element in Malay culture that must be purged. The title refers to the Islamic calendar year when the play was first performed (1981) and poses the question: What direction will Malays take at the beginning of the Islamic century in regard to religion? The main character, Dolah, sheds his non-Islamic allegiances in order to follow the pure path to salvation: “The play encourages Malays to reject animism and any other cultural syncretisms of the past that interfere with the practice of Islam, even though this may not be easy” (Zuhra 1992:202).

Hassan began writing in the 1970s when Malaysian theatre took a sharp turn from realism—which had come to be associated with colonialism—to its own variant of absurdism and symbolism. His work continues to be allegorical, with highly stylized personifications of virtues and vices. He set a trend for plays that are sukar difahami (difficult to understand) and abstract. This antirealistic approach was in part a practical response to the restrictions that followed the 1969 riots, which forced playwrights to write discreetly (Zuhra 1992:145). But he also favors a more presentational syncretic style:

His plays offer a melange of acting, dancing, and singing encompassed within a holistic Islamic motif incorporating the chanting of religious
verses, the recitation of the Koran, the promulgation of sermons, and the use of props signifying piety. [...] He calls his theatre “theatre fitrah” or “theatre of faith” and for Hassan doing theatre is a form of ibadah (an act of religious piety) aimed at giving hidayah (God’s guidance or revelation) to the audience. (Ishak 1999:195)

Hassan and other writers have also used Islam as a potential means of transcending ethnic difference. In his *Tiang Seri Tegak Berlima* (Five Pillars Stand Shining Upright, 1973), the businessman Pak Ku, a Chinese Muslim convert, offers to share his possessions with a poor Malay. Hassan reverses the popular stereotype of the avaricious profane Chinese to provide a positive model for race relations. One of the earliest plays dealing with racial interaction was Mustapha Kamil Yassin’s *Dua Tiga Kucing Berlari* (Two or Three Cats A-Running, 1963), a love story between Kuan, a Chinese Buddhist, and Rosdiah, a Malay teacher. Although their own friends can accept the alliance, Rosdiah’s father, Dahalan, cannot. Not only are religion and race important factors but during the Emergency when government forces were fighting an internal insurgency, most of the communist rebels were Chinese, and to Dahalan all Chinese were communists. Kuan not only refuses to marry the Chinese woman his parents have selected, but he also decides to convert to Islam and join the army to prove his loyalty. When he dies a hero, Dahalan confesses his own narrow-mindedness and praises Kuan. As Nur Nina Zuha points out, however:

> [T]his enlightenment and confession are “safe” because Kuan is already dead and none of the issues raised are further confronted. If Kuan had been seriously injured would Dahalan have accepted him as a son-in-law? That is, though willing to acknowledge him as a Malaysian, would he allow him into the family? (1992:118–19)

In 1970, *Warga Tak Bernama* (Household without a Name) by Aziz Jahpin won a play competition held by the Ministry. It also featured the conversion of a Chinese man to Islam, further promoting the idea that if everyone accepts Islam, then racial differences will no longer be a problem (236).

**Multietnic Representation in Malay Theatre**

Despite the sporadic appearances of non-Malay characters in their works, Malay playwrights tend to write exclusively about the Malay community. And those that do so—whether in a historical or contemporary context—are on surer ground than those who attempt to include non-Malay characters that might appear stereotyped or superficial:

Many creative works by Malay writers are purely about Malay life and society. These works therefore have no communal connotations, which might adversely affect the relationship between ethnic groups in Malaysia. The problem arises when the writer ventures into issues and problems of a national or cross-cultural nature and begins to show evidence of ineptness—in knowledge, experience, sympathy, and insight. [...] Writers who deal with subjects that have cross-cultural implications do not feel they are responsible for the presentation of the non-Malay viewpoint. Strictly speaking, Malay writers are not national writers because their inclinations both in scope and ideas do not reflect the totality of Malaysian society. (Tham 1981a:228)
Some Malay theatre practitioners have made a concerted effort to use the theatre to overcome the hostilities and suspicions among ethnic groups. There have been several theatrical experiments with mixing the races onstage even though attempts to portray clearly identified but not stereotyped members of different races in play texts have been less successful. In 1971 *Genta Rasa* (Rhythm of Feeling), sponsored by the Malaysia Arts Theatre Group (MATG), both English- and Malay-language dramatists collaborated to share their work with each other and the public at large. It was the first time that many of the dramatists had worked together. They performed outdoors on the second anniversary of the 13 May 1969 riots to an audience of 8,000 people. Everyone lived and worked together for one week in a process of reconciliation (Zuhra 1992:147).

Fernando points out that despite the political havoc that broke out in 1969, it was a period when not only Malay drama flowered, but also the fruitful interaction between the English and Malay theatres—before the government had time to enforce its exclusionist policies:

Donald Davies, a theatre columnist, formed the Malaysian Drama Council that organized the Drama Festivals of 1969, 1970 in both Bahasa Malaysia and English. They brought the two theatre groups closer than they had ever been before and Kuala Lumpur was glutted with theatre. Plays in Malay and English alternated at different venues, and a fresh and more complex point in the development of Malaysian theatre had been reached; the two main trends in local drama had converged at last. (1972:xi)

Since the 1970s, before the dominance of Islam in the Malay discourse, Syed Alwi, who was initially active in the MATG English theatre, has been directing his bilingual, multiracial plays. Before 1969 he wrote in English and participated in the productions staged by English expatriates. In 1967, he and other Malaysians gained control of MATG and although many expats left to reform as the Klang Theatre Workshop, for the first time, Malaysians were in charge of their own English theatre.

In 1973, he directed *Alang Rentak Seribu* (Alang of a Thousand Wiles), his first Malay-language play. The production was important because it brought to the stage accomplished Malay and non-Malay performers who had previously worked mainly in English-language theatres such as Farihah Merican, Rahim Razali, and Krishen Jit. This manner of casting was repeated in 1975 in his eponymous *Tok Perak* and with Syed Alwi’s other plays. Not since bangsawan had non-Malays performed prominently in Malay plays. (Zuhra 1992:150)

In 1979, Syed Alwi began mixing the two languages to reflect the creole that many people speak. When he cast non-Malay actors, not only were they required to learn Malay fluently enough for the roles, but the roles they were given were *kampung* (village) characters. Such ethnic crossing was “deliberately done because we do not want non-Malay actors to play the roles of non-Malays [only], when they can in fact behave as Malays” (Ishak 1987:141). By advocating a kind of Ionesco-like individualism, Syed Alwi tends to be critical of the bureaucratic language formula for Malaysian development currently imposed on the country:

*Bahasa Malaysia is the National Language. [...] Thus theatre in Bahasa Malaysia must be theatre that is truly Malaysian. It should at least mean that it is theatre that involves actors from all races. Together we will play. Together we will create. Together we will form a tradition of Malaysian
theatre which can communicate with as many rakyet (masses) as possible.
(Ishak 1987:141)

In his play Rakan, Teman dan Para Bangsawan (Friends, Acquaintances, and Nobles, 1980), Syed Alwi contends that Malaysia should accept its multiracial character as part of a long heritage. The plot involves a group of Malaysians (Malay, Indian, Chinese) who live in London and are doing a play together about the meaning of independence. Their play portrays famous historical characters from each race: Hang Tuah, Parameswara, and Li Po. The play-within-a-play suggests that Malaysians only get along behind the mask of Westernization. They must reject using Westernization as their primary means of communicating across racial and cultural lines in order to develop a true Malaysian identity (Zuhra 1992:232).

Most dramatists who are recipients of government backing are fulfilling the mandate to produce nationalistic spectacles. Islam is not always foregrounded in these dramas, but it underlies the Malay worldview presented in them.

In 1993, an unusual crossover occurred when a major Malay play was translated into English for performance in one of the major theatres in Kuala Lumpur:

A subdued kind of tension was felt in some theatrical quarters over the staging of Usman Awang’s Jebat in the English language. Although never published, the production, directed by Rahim Razali, who also acted the role of the archetypal rebel (Jebat) raised questions about the political advisability of a national institution such as Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism putting up a modern Malay classic into English on the national stage. [...] The full-house audiences at MATIC assumed a celebratory mood encountering the mythic rebellion against the Malacca Sultanate in English. Above all Jebat generated an optimism about future productions in English in Malaysian theatre. (Uth 1994)

Despite the interest and optimism generated by this performance, this was the only such experiment.

Syed Alwi and Usman Awang are unusual among Malay playwrights because they have included non-Malay characters and collaborated with non-Malay dramatists. In 2000, Syed Alwi began teaching at ASK, which is producing his autobiographical trilogy. The plays are primarily in English and the production of the first, I Remember the Rest House, required outside actors to perform the lead roles since the students were not fluent in English. In 2001, Syed Alwi was looking for Caucasian actors to perform the third play, The Governor’s Mansion, at the National Theatre in 2002 (Khan 2001). Thus, he is again breaking new ground by bringing his English plays into the precincts of Malay drama.

Malay Nationalist Theatre

Most dramatists who are recipients of government backing are fulfilling the mandate to produce nationalistic spectacles. Islam is not always foregrounded in these dramas, as it is in Hassan’s, but it underlies the Malay worldview presented
in them. Because of their responsibility to develop and promote a national literature, writers in Malay have had to navigate sensitive issues more circumspectly than Malay writers who write in English and are therefore excluded from the nationalist program. Many Malay-language playwrights are “prisoners of development and captives of State Structure” because of the prevailing “understanding” that writers should agree totally with the State on questions of national issues, and those who are critical run the risk of being considered subversive or communist. Furthermore, the State, through its tightly controlled system of patronage and media access, has prevented these writers from exposing truly sensitive issues. Thus writers refrain from “clearly and openly expressing [alternative] opinions” (Ishak 1987:162).

Perhaps as a result of this pressure to keep one’s creativity within the confines of political and religious acceptability, and the concurrent trend to produce large spectacles for the National Theatre, writers have turned to the safety of the past, in what some critics have called “a nostalgia for the sultanate.” Moreover, the National Theatre has specified its preference for works based on Malay myths or history. In the late 1990s there was a harkening back to sandiwara, the country’s first written dramas of the 1950s, which plumbed Malaysia’s “official” history in order to drum up nationalistic fervor in the struggle for independence. Many of the plots center on repelling a foreign invader, whether the Achenese from Indonesia or the Dutch or the English—as though the most compelling way to determine Malay identity is in conflict with a distinct non-Malay. Thus they avoid the difficult issues of the interdependent global economy in the present and instead glorify past power struggles that often culminate in a defeat or setback for a European colonial power. This may provide a modern-day wish fulfillment, but the deliberately oversimplified conflicts meant to produce reactions of pride and patriotism sometimes backfire with skeptical audiences.

In 1997, before the economic crisis during which several Asian currencies plunged, Anwar Ibrahim, then the finance minister, announced a healthy endowment for the “cultivation” and the “development” of the arts. His speech asserted that the arts community must possess a wider artistic vision, which included the generation of new ideas and the ability to grapple with technical aspects of the arts. His words were welcomed by both the Malay and English theatres, but they quickly realized that “cultivation” and “development” of the arts was to mean big-budget, extravagant productions that impressed more in their grandiloquence than in their execution (Khoo 1998).

This government directive is exemplified by The Princess Keris, only one of several such grandiose productions for which the National Theatre was built. Rubiah (1999), another spectacle, which appeared a month later, met with a more favorable response. Based on a legend from the state of Selangor, it features a woman who was a rubiah, “a holy woman, a woman hermit, a very religious woman; wife of an ulama or a woman who teaches the Quran to others” (Kadir 1999). It tells the story of a “perfect woman”—demure, soft spoken, tall, and beautiful—who possesses the powers and knowledge of the physical and spiritual worlds. She sings with the birds and dances with the fish. Yet this perfect woman, who only wants to follow the path of God, creates havoc because of the rivalries she creates in the men who desire her.

Although the National Theatre now provides a venue for nationalist plays, dramas based on official and noncontroversial historical plots have been produced frequently throughout the past decade. Reviving one of the first dramas written in Malay, a 1957 sandiwara Robonhnya Kota Lukut (The Downfall of Kota Lukut), the contemporary version emphasized a new nationalist thrust in the context of neocolonial globalization. Based on the mythical history of the district of Selangor, Kota Lukut (1997) tells of the once prosperous district, Lukut, which was:
originally a huge fort built on top of a hill. The impenetrable fort was a symbol of the greatness and might of Malay rule under the wise and fair Raja Jumaat. When his self-centered son, Raja Bot, came to power, he sold off his country for wealth. The English took advantage and opened tin mines, brought in Tamil labor, imposed a tax system and English style administration. (Abdullah and Awang 1992:270)

Director Kamarul A.R. added more songs and revised the text, but the lesson of greed leading to internal strife and foreign intervention continues to have relevance (Ahmad 1997).

The historically based sandiwara often incorporated the musical elements of bangsawan, which placed more importance on song and dance than the script, and it seems that some of the hastily contrived extravaganzas of the late 1990s followed a similar formula, although utilizing a Broadway model rather than a local one.19

The Development of the English-Language Theatre

The initial English-language theatre was performed mostly by and for British residents during the 1950s when the British returned after World War II to reestablish their colonial control. The plays performed were all British and American, and when referring to the theatre of this period, Malaysian critics now make pointed references to E.M. Forester’s amateur dramatics at the Chandrapore Club. Since the English theatre was so divorced from the Malay theatre, those involved were hardly aware that Kala Dewata, Samad Said, and Usman Awang were writing in Malay and had plays produced in different areas of the country (Yeo 1995:7).

Although the English-language theatre was directed by British residents, Malaysians of all ethnicities were involved in the performances of the primary troupe, MATG. However, they participated only in secondary roles and thus preserved a colonial structure within MATG. The Malaysians were trapped in an English theatre world; while they presented adapted Western works such as Shakespeare’s plays in a Malaysian milieu, they questioned the dearth of Malaysian plays that could be performed in English. The Arts Council launched a playwriting contest which was won by Edward Dorall, whose second play, Arise, O Youth (1966), was the first Malaysian play in English to be given a public performance. Then, in 1967, MATG changed its leadership. It was taken over by local residents, and in 1968 performed K. Das’s Lela Mayang, a story adapted from bangsawan and translated into English. The play broke new ground in identifying some of the new challenges for playwrights:

Modern English-speaking Malaysians had forgotten their own rich and varied heritage. In adopting the traditional tale of Lela and Mayang, the MATG found a way back to tradition and a way to present it to a modern audience. [...] The invisible but powerful colonial stranglehold over native creativeness was broken: a psychological barrier had been shattered. (Fernando 1972:ix–x)

*Lela Mayang*, a *Romeo and Juliet* love tragedy, is a short text that begins with Mayang betrothed to a man other than her lover, Lela, and ends with the lovers’ deaths. But, according to Fernando:

*Lela Mayang* not only points to the riches of history awaiting Malaysian writers, it is an initial demonstration of how these riches may be used. Emphasis on adaptation to the modern context, rather than simple re-
creation, is the vital requirement. Although it culled talent from the indigenous pool of Malaysian dramatists and was considered an artistic success, it drew only a few spectators since even audiences were unprepared for a Malaysian play in English after being accustomed to Wilde, Shaw, and Shakespeare. It showed that not only new plays but also new audiences had to be developed from scratch. (1972:xv)

The English-language theatre in Kuala Lumpur today is no longer struggling with either its identity or audience numbers but is producing both foreign and locally written scripts to small but consistent audiences on a regular basis. Ann Lee, writer, director, and one of the founding members of Kuali Works, contends the audience for English theatre does not exceed 6,000 (Lee 2001). It is, however, developing and expanding more than the Malay theatre and reaching out to young Chinese performers and talented Malay graduates from ASK who have found nowhere to go in Malay theatre. As the official Malay theatre becomes more exclusive, the English theatre is taking up the slack and becoming more heterogeneous.

**Actors Studio Theatre**

Founded in 1989 by two actors, Lebanese/Australian Joe Hasham and Mamak Faridah Merican, Actors Studio Theatre has been privately run since 1995—the first such English theatre company in Kuala Lumpur. It has become the juggernaut that is driving contemporary Malaysian theatre, not only by producing mainstream Western works as well as local plays by young and experimental artists, but also by providing several venues that are both affordable and suitable for local productions. It now manages two small theatres, a café bookstore, classroom, and rehearsal space underneath Independence Square, and, in 2000, with the aid of a consortium of Chinese businessmen, converted a cinema into their largest theatre yet. At a new location, in the upscale neighborhood of Bangsar, the new theatre is used by such a wide variety of local artists that it is the most active center for the performing arts in Malaysia and perhaps the region as a whole. Along with other English-language companies—including Five Arts Centre, Instant Café Theatre, Dramalab, Straits Theatre Company, and Kuali Works and others—they comprise one of the most vibrant and experimental theatre scenes in Southeast Asia.

Hasham and Merican have striven to produce and direct works that are not only entertaining but also relevant to their own social concerns. Their first production, *Norm and Ahmed* (1989) by Australian writer/director Alex Buzo indirectly addressed Malaysia’s racial conflicts via Australia’s. Hasham played the redneck Australian, Norm, and Mustapha Nor, director of the Malay-language Centre Stage, played the Pakistani immigrant, Ahmed. The relationship resonated in unexpected ways, given the different views of the ethnically diverse audience (Dorall 1989). Hasham and Merican also produced the satiric plays of resident Tim Evans, which featured the comical “pseudocolonial” British male in post-colonial Malaysia. Other productions have included *Trees* (1997), which addressed sexism and environmental degradation; and *As Is* (1993), confronting the threat of AIDS.

The productions of Actors Studio Theatre always involve multiracial casts, and its policy is to practice “blind” casting rather than having actors represent their own ethnic groups, as was done in Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid*. Though AST’s performances rarely clash with the majority Malay/Islamic perspective, a small furor was caused by one Malay critic over a kiss between a Malay actress and a non-Malay actor in a 1993 production of *A Street Car Named Desire* (Ali 1993), showing that such sensitivities continue to simmer beneath the surface.
Hasham and Merican, also veteran actors, are committed to building the theatre culture in Kuala Lumpur by establishing professional standards, keeping their facilities available to other groups and fostering amateur and children’s arts programs. They keep a line of communication open with ASK, whose students come to the Actors Studio Theatre for lighting and technical experience. Merican, who has been the producer for some of the National Theatre productions, is unique in her ability to operate in both the Malay and English theatre worlds, although she is constantly aware of the compromises she is making. At the gala opening of the Bangsar Theatre in February 2001, she felt unable to invite certain Malay officials because champagne was served and she did not want to compromise their Islamic customs proscribing alcohol (Merican 2001).

Actors Studio has rarely put on Malay plays, either translated or written in English. However, in 2000, Merican began sponsoring plays in Malay in an effort to draw Malays who generally see the space as the provenance of English “yuppie” theatre. Merican directed an updated version of Hamlet to appeal to young Malays, casting several well-known young actors from Malay television and stage. In 2001, she acted in a revival of Ribut (Thunderstorm), the modern Chinese classic that premiered in Malay in 1984 at the Centre Stage. In that first production, Merican played the frustrated and emotional young wife; this time she played the older mother who becomes aware of the family’s tragic secret before the others but is unable to prevent it from destroying them. Directed by an inexperienced ASK graduate and performed by a cast of both media professionals and student novices, the performance reflected this unevenness. Still, it marks a success at Actors Studio, reminding the Kuala Lumpur audience that they once had a greater choice of plays in Malay.

The group next plans to do Usman Awang’s Uda dan Dara, a popular musical play with a tragic love story in February 2002. This process of presenting plays in Malay is significant because not only is the establishment English theatre reaching out to Malay actors, but also because young Malay actors have fewer qualms than their more well-established elders about the stigma of appearing in the venue associated with English commercial productions. Still, the decision to produce Malay performances on the premises has brought with it new pressures. In order not to offend the Malay audiences they want to draw into the theatre, Actors Studio has decided not to advertise Carlsberg beer, one of its main sponsors (Merican 2001).

**Five Arts Centre**

Krishen Jit and Marion D’Cruz began Five Arts Centre in 1984, making it the oldest ongoing arts collaborative in the country. It presents theatre, music, visual arts, dance, and children’s performance. Several of its members are significant contributors to Malaysian performing arts, but Jit is arguably the most important figure in Malaysian theatre. Like Merican, he began in the Malay theatre. He rose to prominence in the 1970s, participating in the radical experiments of the Malay theatre of the absurd, and then switched to the English theatre in which he now creates multiethnic, multilingual performances. One of his most ambitious productions to date is Family (1998), his adaptation of The
12. For Family (1998), Krishen Jit adapted Leow Puay Tin’s The Yang Women Warriors to create a site-specific environmental piece. The play took place in an abandoned Chinese mansion that had been slated for demolition, allowing the director to do with it as he pleased. (Photo by S.C. Shekar)

Yang Women Warriors by Leow Puay Tin, which was first performed as The Yang Family in Singapore for the Cutting-Edge Festival in 1996. A site-specific environmental piece, it was billed as “an installation event” and took place in an abandoned Chinese mansion that had been designated for demolition, allowing Jit to do with it as he pleased. The play was written in loosely linked “modules” and Jit took advantage of this to fragment it further, having some modules performed simultaneously, so the audience could choose which part to watch when, moving from room to room. The original script concerned the matriarchal dominance in an immigrant Chinese family, in which all the men had gone away to work or encountered mishaps and perished, leaving only women in the household. This strictly Confucian tale about immigrants who grow rich in their
adopted country is augmented by eight “parallel texts.” Jit commissioned eight local writers to compose various scenes regarding families of other ethnicities. These alternative texts were each performed repeatedly by individual actors in different spaces at the same time as the main text, but were not directly related to the events in the main play. As most of the parallel texts were irreverant, not only did they expand the dimensions of the script, making it more inclusively “Malaysian,” they also satirized the concept of “Asian values,” a politically fabricated ideology that subscribes to patriarchal authority as a pan-Asian theme linking all of Malaysia’s ethnic groups.

Jit further deconstructed traditional hierarchies by cross-gendering the Yang women. However, rather than explore real gender issues, such as the struggle of an all-female family in a patriarchal society, this move tended to reinforce gender stereotypes and offer camp entertainment. The one intriguing gender duality was that the matriarch herself was played both by a man and a woman. In Family, the carnival-like atmosphere and the intriguing conversions of the rooms, which resembled installation art works rather than stage sets, served as ample visual stimuli. However, on top of this, Jit’s use of masks, cross-dressing, audience interaction, stylized movement, and the martial arts tai chi and silat—seemed a bit of postmodern overkill: an event to be experienced but not engaging on a deeper level.

In April 2000, Five Arts Centre sponsored two locally written monodramas under the title The Other, performed by young but well-known actors: Joanna Bessey is a Eurasian performer who often appears in Actors Studio productions and is a familiar face in television dramas as well; and Huzir Sulaiman, a writer who runs his own Straits Theatre Company. The inspiration for the title came from the ethnic category on official forms, “lain-lain” (Others), in a specific reference to those of mixed race; however, to incorporate the two very different plays in the same bill, director Jit chose it to mean “someone different from the ordinary.”

Bessey’s Who’s Looney, Man? (2000) is a loose text that worked as a mere framework for her buoyant movement. A postcolonial pastiche developed by the actress and director from Tim Toyama’s Karmatic Convergence, it investigates the Eurasian dilemma. Although plagued initially with tiresome clichés—“at school, the little girl didn’t belong to either group”—the merger of innovative signs and energetic acting made some scenes memorable. The last of an Irish-Chinese family line whose members have all ended up in the “looney bin,” she goes through the antics of trying to protect her sanity against overwhelming odds. In one scene, demonstrating the outsider who does not fit anywhere, she attempts to complete a puzzle of wooden blocks. As she crams and jostles the blocks into the frame with increasingly frantic desperation, she recites Blake’s poem, “Tyger! tyger! burning bright/ In the forests of the night/ What immortal hand or eye/ Could frame thy fearful symmetry/ [...] Did he smile his work to see?/ Did he who made the Lamb make thee?” Given her intensity and Eurasian ethnicity, the poet’s words take on a controversial meaning as every individual, like the “tyger,” has a God-given form, and difference is to be celebrated as God’s creation not quashed to comply with human narrow-mindedness.

Jit offered a more probing account of interracial relations in A Chance Encounter, presented in March 1999. A two-character play, it was performed trilingually by Faridah Merican and Foo May Lyn. Some disgruntled expat members of the audience demanded their money...
back because they had come expecting English theatre (Jit 2000). But critics Sherry Siebel and Eddin Khoo both thought the piece broke new ground, the latter praising it as:

one of the most powerful works of Malaysian theatre in recent times. From the onset, it chose subversion as its ethos, deconstructing all accepted notions of memory, language, and location but with such poignant
Kuala Lumpur

and poetic veracity that the truth of its representation will linger and pro-
voke for a long time to come. (1999)

The piece impressed the two critics because it delved deeper into the psyche
of difference, an area taboo to all the groups involved. The play was created
collaboratively by the actors and director Krishen Jit from an idea that arose 15
years earlier. Foo played Anita, a Cantonese cosmetic saleswoman and Merican
is Fatimah, a Mamak housewife who spends time in the shopping malls and finds
herself at Anita’s counter. While they engage in “girl talk” about superstitions,
cellulite, and men, revelations about Fatimah’s unhappy marriage surface as she
complains about the inequality of Islamic family law. This in turn provokes com-
plaints by Anita about her mother, whom she once caught having an affair.

Through several encounters, ostensibly to try new cosmetic treatments, Fa-
timah recalls a little girl who reminds her of Anita. Suspecting Anita is in fact
this girl, Fatimah brings a photograph of her mother and tries to show it to her,
but Anita avoids the subject and offers a free makeover instead. She finally closes
the issue by saying her mother is dead. On her last visit, Fatimah tries to make
amends by saying she made a mistake, and Anita really could not be the girl at
all. Anita responds by singing a Cantonese song, effectively shutting out the other
woman, who does not understand. The characters, who had gradually opened
up to each other, end up shutting each other out more completely; in the process,
their common Malaysian-ness is revealed to the audience, but the women them-
selves deny it. The humor of their initial exchange helps to establish audience
sympathy for the characters before their bond unravels. Jit, commenting on the
play, said, “Foreigners come here [to Malaysia] and assume that we are interacting
fully. But most of us are not. About 10 percent of us are actually involved in such
interactions, and I am trying to show this 10 percent” (in Ambikaipaker 1999).

Khoo adds that not only was the play delivered mostly in Malay by actors who
frequently appear in English theatre, but that the language was not the “calculated
Malay of officialdom, but the natural inflections of the language that govern our
every day interaction. The play went a long way in deconstructing all the notions
of a strictly defined linguistic theatre” (1999). Siebel concurred:

The message of the play is that we are Malaysians first, and Malay, Chi-
nese, Indian, or lain-lain second, that preconceived impressions of other
races are more often than not a whole lot of rubbish, and that if we are to
go forward, we must do it hand in hand. (1999)

However, none of the critics notes that both of the
characters are lonely women who, as women, share
many of the social inequities that transcend ethnic dif-
ference. Moreover, they do not succeed in infiltrating
the family; that is, as soon as the family situation is
brought up, their rapprochement disintegrates. It is not
insignificant that the tentative comradery shatters when
the family boundaries are penetrated, even in memory.
The play reflects the possibilities but, even more point-
edly, confirms the difficulties of maintaining a lasting
harmony once certain safe areas are transgressed.

The sensitive situations that arise from interracial
marriage are addressed in another trilingual play, Lina
and Lijah (2000), devised in a Five Arts workshop for
young directors. Directed by Malay Nam Ron, it ex-
plored the unspoken tensions in the acrimonious

15. In A Chance En-
counter (1999), actresses
Faridah Merican and Foo
May Lyn offer a probing
account of interracial rela-
tions through the characters
Anita, a Cantonese cosmetic
saleswoman played by Foo,
and Fatimah, a Mamak
housewife played by Meri-
can. (Photo by S.C.
Shekar)
relationship between a Malay woman and her Chinese daughter-in-law. The suspicions and animosities remain palpable but are never allowed to come out into the open to be directly addressed.

Kuali Works

Another group that focuses on women in multiethnic relationships is the five-woman company Kuali Works (kuali meaning “wok”). The company’s best-known productions include KL-KO (1996) and Hang Li Po (1998). Ann Lee, the director and writer for the group, who hails from Sabah of a Chinese mother and English father, does not plumb on her own Eurasian identity, but explores racial issues through the interactions of well-known figures and ordinary people.

The two works mentioned above featured Chinese Malaysian dancer, Mew Chang Tsing, who is director of her own modern dance troupe, River Grass. In KL-KO, Tsing played the feisty Tan Ai Leng, a Muhammad Ali fan. Ai Leng is a worker in an electronics factory and is therefore one of the unsung heroines responsible for Malaysia’s economic development. She dreams up the idea of challenging Mike Tyson to a fight, a desire that becomes more urgent when her best friend, a Malay, is molested at work and is unable to confront the man. Aside from its humorous feminist twists, the play emerges from a specific event in Malaysian politics: the chief minister of Melaka was charged with having had sex with a minor. While the scandal was brewing, the press suddenly changed its focus from the minister to the young teenage girl, who was reported to have “allegedly slept with five or seven other men.” As a result, the minister got off scot-free and the girl was ruined (Lee 2001).

The play was a call for a rematch, and was written when Tyson’s unseemly behavior was much in the news. In this case, class and gender inequalities supersede racial dissension. A fixed match was staged and Ai Leng gets her knockout. Although this might seem to undermine the whole point, Lee manages to both celebrate Ai Leng’s courage and determination, and at the same time satirize the absurd extremes to which the government’s rallying call, “Malaysia boleh” (Malaysia can do it), is taken. The play was performed in Chinese (Cantonese), Malay, and English and tried to accurately imitate the linguistic flexibility that goes on in day-to-day Malaysian discourse (Lee 2001).

Tsing also starred in the one-woman show Hang Li Po, about a figure famous in Malaysian official history as the Chinese princess who was given by the Emperor of China to the Sultan of Melaka. This unofficial version tells the story of the immigrant, addressing how everyone is an immigrant. It establishes the Malacca Straits as a confluence of various peoples trading with one another, arguing that the currently employed rigid categories are masks concealing the much more interesting and colorful intermixing of the past. Hang Li Po was brought to Melaka in the 15th century as a symbol of friendship between China and the Malay Sultanate. It is a taboo to criticize her for the Chinese are proud to have a princess as their first representative.

Lee and Tsing try to investigate the true nature of Hang Li Po’s status. Tsing first appears as the princess, then a concubine, and finally, a child bride, a victim given against her will, merely one of the many objects offered. The next scene is a fight between the famous Malay woman warrior, Tun Fatimah, and Hang Li Po as a Chinese woman warrior; they employ gung fu and silat, with Tsing playing both parts. Their struggle represents the competition between cultures, but they come to a mutual understanding and accept each other’s presence.
Next Tsing becomes a tour guide for Melaka, and then moves on to being the first Malaysian astronaut to train at NASA to go to Mars. Finally the fantasy is juxtaposed with reality as her ultimate manifestation is as a Filipina maid, the new “global citizen” found everywhere but hardly empowered. Thus, the full range of Malaysian female immigrants is portrayed, suggesting both that the princess herself was just another objectified female and that all groups of Malaysians have been on the move at some point in their history (Tsing 2001).

**Instant Theatre Café**

During the Anwar debacle, several theatre troupes put together a festival called “You Have Ten Minutes,” in which all performed short plays to respond to Anwar’s arrest and its political implications. Performed at Actors Studio, it was initiated by Jo Kukathas, one of the founding members of Instant Café Theatre (ICT), who thought the occasion needed a larger more united voice than that supplied by her popular satirical troupe alone (Kukathas 1999).

ICT regularly crosses all boundaries, and evenhandedly targets every group with its humorous sketches. It thrives on caricature and satire, and has succeeded for so many years not only through the wit of its performances but also from its uncanny ability to tap the anxieties of the moment, though Kukathas says they avoid the “easy targets.” ICT is utterly irreverent, bounding through “sensitive taboos” as if they hardly existed except as material for satire. The group was formed in 1989 by four friends after “Operation Lalong” in 1987, when hundreds of people in opposition parties were arrested. Feeling impotent to combat the situation, they decided to make fun of it. Everyone thought they would be shut down immediately (Kukathas 1998).

ICT has continued unimpeded for 12 years and is now more cynical, more mature, and sharper in its attacks. The group does not have a manifesto and did not want to be held to any particular point of view that might hinder their development; rather, their credo is flexibility and freedom to alter their course as events warrant. However, they do have recurring characters to interpret events, and they have become popular favorites.

A significant aspect of ICT’s sketches—and much of Kuala Lumpur’s stand-up comedy—is that the actors often play characters of ethnicities different from their own. Jit Murad’s character, Renee Choy, a foppish Chinese hairdresser, offers his view on any current issue based on information he has garnered from his clients, the mistresses of Malay politicians. Kukathas plays Ambrosia, a Chinese beauty queen, as well as a Malay bureaucrat who is always “an expert in something.” They play with racial stereotypes, and in one skit hold a contest, “The Racial Stereotype of the Year Award.” Nor are they afraid to reveal the faces behind the masks that all of the ethnicities wear in front of each other, as well as among their own kind. With one routine, the troupe angered some members of the Indian community who felt that since they live under attack anyway, it was a cheap shot to reveal their faults to others. The sketch in question showed the smiling hypocrisy of two Indian lawyers, each expressing petty and vicious envy behind the other’s back.

ICT is one of the few groups in the country that tackles any subject it pleases, perhaps because they perform in English to a fairly small audience, thus limiting their sphere of influence. Kukathas, however, says the group plays extensively for businesses at their end-of-year celebrations, and their audiences are comprised of all the employees and employers. They have also been approached by television producers who each time include the caveat that they tone down their material, which they have always refused to do. On the question of self-censorship, which operates so strongly in Malaysia, Kukathas contends that ICT works on the opposite assumption: “Say exactly what you think and let others prevent you; per-
haps the prevention might be the most dramatic thing that can be said on that subject. One only loses if you self-censor; you should go to your limit” (2000). Commenting on the difference between their work and what passes for satire in Singapore, Kukathas says, “Satire must attack those in power; Singaporean satire addresses social mores and lets people laugh at themselves, but never critiques the real sources of power” (2000).

In addition to its regular comedy work, ICT stages a full production every year that also addresses Malaysia’s particular interface of race and politics. Thus, it has produced Death and the Maiden (1994), Accidental Death of an Anarchist (1999), Midsummer Night’s Dream (1992), and, in 2000, The Merchant of Venice, which had a Chinese businessman playing Shylock, the moneylender for Malay traders, with not only racial prejudices boldly paralleled, but also recognizable political figures clearly impersonated.

**The Next Generation**

Three groups of young people have entered the Kuala Lumpur scene to have their say about political duplicity and the social divide. The plays they create reflect not only their concerns with these issues, but the varying intensity of their emotional involvement.

**Theatre Muda**

Exploring the more commonplace anxieties of urban youth, three young dramatists under the guidance of Charlene Rajendran, who directs in Five Arts Centre’s youth wing, Theatre Muda, devised My Grandmother’s Chicken Curry &... (1998, restaged in 1999). The three actors—a Chinese, an Indian, and a Malay, all students at ASK—play a total of 36 characters. The underlying theme rests on the necessity of making choices while the loosely structured plot centers on a search for a missing friend. Many of the scenes deal with interethnic love relations and conflicts with parents. Rajendran comments that the young people she works with are:

![Image of Charlene Rajendran and ASK students rehearsing for My Grandmother's Chicken Curry &... (1998, restaged 1999). Much of the play deals with interethnic love relations and conflicts with parents. (Photo by Simon Yap)
on the one hand, quite passionate about certain aspects of their lives; they have this desire to break free and be independent. But because they have lived with social mores that are generally nonconfrontational and passive, they are ill-equipped to cope with a crisis, such as the missing friend. They talk about it, but they don’t do much about it. (in Hamzah 1999)

**Article 19**

Also receiving support from Five Arts, but taking a more political stance, is a group of high school graduates calling themselves Article 19, after the U.N. article guaranteeing freedom of speech. Idealistic and materialistic, satiric toward government and society alike, they are worried about their own and Malaysia’s future. While the majority of Malaysian youth may be apolitical, Mark Teh and his friends formed the group in 2000 in reaction to the government’s 1975 Universities and Colleges Act, which, still in effect, prohibits students from partaking in political activities. According to Marion D’Cruz, the politicization of this generation occurred as a result of the dramatic events of 1997, when they experienced their first big economic crisis (2000). With the devaluation of the ringgit, young people suddenly saw their futures as uncertain and their careers threatened. The following year, they witnessed their first big political crisis, the arrest of Anwar Ibrahim, and all the lies, political cover-ups, and demonstrations that followed. The formerly complacent students had their faith badly shaken. As with ICT 10 years earlier, Article 19 needed to express their criticisms and anxieties, although they did so in a more serious fashion.

**Kecoh** (Chaos, 2000) the group’s first public production, was composed of vignettes, such as “In Search of a Riot” about a young woman’s dilemma over whether to listen to her own conscience and attend a political protest or to submit to the demands of her parents and friends. In “Rediscovering Amy,” a male actor plays a young woman stuck in an abusive relationship. The part was not played in drag; the male actor was used to alienate the audience to emphasize that such behavior is neither normal nor natural regardless of the victim’s gender. “A Touching Story of Ali” was a shadow puppet play exposing the stereotypes of Malaysia’s ethnic groups in a global context.

Although none of the participants involved had had any formal stage training several found parts in film and television after Kecoh (Teh 2000).

**Lebih Kecoh** (More Chaos) was staged in July 2001 to popular and critical acclaim. Teh and his cast dyed their hair red, white, and blue, the colors of the Malaysian flag, and performed on a completely white set. Mark Teh’s vignette juxtaposed aspects of colonial, official, and nonofficial Malaysian history by focusing on the character of Hang Tua, a hero famous in Malay history for his extreme demonstrations of loyalty to authority. Teh reveals that Hang Tua was not Malay at all, but an Orang Asli, an aboriginal. After the show, the actors engaged the audience in a political discussion that became so heated that the actors were able to steal off stage without any cessation in the debate.

18. Kithrona Ramday, Gabrielle Low, and Mark Teh in “In Search of a Riot,” a vignette from the Article 19 production Kecoh (2000). Directed by Kithrona Ramday and written by Mark Teh, the piece focuses on a young women’s dilemma over attending a political protest. (Photo courtesy of Article 19)
The Alternative Stage

Article 19’s Malay-language counterpart, The Alternative Stage (TAS), is a group of “angry” young Malay men, some of whom are part-time teachers at ASK. ToeMoe (tech), Nam Ron (director), and Faisal Tehrani (writer) are passionate both about theatre and Malaysia’s social and political situation. ToeMoe and Nam Ron, graduates from the first class at ASK (1998), benefited from having the best teachers Malaysia and Singapore could offer, many from the different ethnic groups involved in English-language theatre who, since those first optimistic days, have been replaced by an all-Malay staff. The young part-time teachers lament the move, acknowledging that ASK offered the best environment and opportunity for Malay and non-Malay theatre practitioners to come together. It was an important bridge between the two theatres, which has now been severed (ToeMoe 2001). Though openly acknowledging his debt to mentors like Krishen Jit, Nam Ron knew he had to break out and work on his own. No one was going to hire such a young person to direct one of the spectacles at the National Theatre, nor did he want to remain under the shadow of those in the English theatre. Alternative Stage Company is the only group that has been formed by former ASK graduates (Nam Ron 2001).

The group put on their first original work, Misi (Nurse), in 2000. Although critical of Malay politicians, the production was funded by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, the national publishing house, which allowed it to go on tour to several towns, including those on the islands of Sabah and Sarawak. Despite earlier successes with Lina and Lijah, and John Osborn’s Angry Young Men (1999) performed at the Actors Studio theatre, it was Misi that launched Nam Ron as an important new force. Performed in MATIC, one of the city’s major theatres, it features only two characters, a paralyzed tycoon, representing the finance minister who was believed to have been one of the main conspirators against Anwar Ibrahim, and his male nurse, a socialist who plots revenge because his mother became paralyzed after working in the tycoon’s house.

In Misi, as in Lina and Lijah, the home is a microcosm of Malaysian society. Nam Ron sees the country as a “household”; “Race relations in our country look good on the surface but in many of my observations, there’s something underneath seething uneasily. And yet the many races in our country have to coexist” (in Leong 2000). In 2001, TAS adapted Julius Caesar, using only the two main characters, and combined it with the local legend of Raja Bersiong, a vampire-like king who likes the taste of people’s blood, again to satirize the Anwar-Mahathir relationship (Tehrani 2001).

Islands in the Streams?

At the 2001 gala opening of its Bangsar Theatre, Actors Studio invited an array of performers to contribute to a benefit performance, including Guna, director of Sutra, an Indian dance troupe; Dama, a Chinese orchestra that for this occasion played Malay tunes on Chinese instruments; Bernard Goh and his Hands percussion group of Chinese drums and aboriginal instruments; and Sunetra Fernando’s Rhythm in Bronze, a contemporary fusion gamelan. ICT, Comedy Court, and comedian Harith Iskander also contributed their talents. An enthui
A siastic reviewer, describing the prevailing gaiety at the event, used the unusual metaphor of “pus,” saying, “these performers were the white blood cells fighting infection” (Lou 2001).

To actually accomplish ethnic harmony, present-day Malaysians are first going to have to wrest their history out of the hands of academics and bureaucrats, and rediscover the richness of their mutual heritage(s).

But some practitioners do not see this united front as a cause for celebration. Janet Pillai, one of the driving forces behind Theatre Muda, objects not only to the glib sense of community, but also to its homogenizing effect. She contends that these urban dramatists have already lost their essential cultural distinctions and so such work is not really an encounter with difference, but a celebration of sameness (Pillai 2001). She believes in maintaining language differences onstage, despite the problems it causes for the audience. It keeps fresh in peoples’ minds the actual divisions that exist in the country, and reminds them that they must live with real difference and not expect, or strive toward the “melting pot” ideal. It is not possible to create a theatre that appeals to all, nor should it be attempted. Pillai’s view will remain an important challenge for the Kuala Lumpur theatre scene to look to whenever it finds itself becoming too complacent or riding on its accomplishments.

The debate goes on. Although he is a newspaper critic of the English theatre and an advocate for the maintenance of traditional Malay arts, Eddin Khoo believes that Malaysian theatre must push forward a Malay theatre which must first overcome the “diffidence that prevents playwrights and theatricians from providing that added edge, asking that awkward question” (1998). Sumit Mandal, in contrast, argues that English can be used to make a truly representative Malaysian statement:
Compelling artwork and ideas are advanced in this language [English] that articulate a common local identity in creative ways and serve as a means by which Malaysians negotiate and resist the hegemony of cultural globalization. (2000:1003)

At the 1991 meeting of “Vision 2020 and the Building of Malaysian Nation,” National University of Malaysia academics blasted the continued use of English both by non-bumiputras and bumiputra elites. Showing a vehement dislike of cultural pluralism, they want the previously devised National Cultural Policy firmly implemented to enforce Malay cultural hegemony (Joned 1994:53). In 2000, the government was promoting a new buzz word, “muhhibah,” or “goodwill,” to be employed as an ideal for race relations. To actually accomplish ethnic harmony, however, present-day Malaysians are first going to have to wrest their history out of the hands of academics and bureaucrats, and rediscover the richness of their mutual heritage(s) as Malaysians, finding common ground, and otherwise finding ways to preserve the important cultural differences:

If Malaysian theatre possesses a defining moment, it rests in the challenge of legitimizing the art of being allowed to imagine our history. In this, it must serve as a platform of opposition. Not necessarily in a revolutionary sense, but as an instrument for inquiry, as a means to challenge, even defy, the history that continues to be thrust upon us in the form of textbooks and official edicts. Theatre must emerge as an experience for exploring the evolution of the self of this nation. (Khoo 1999)

In the Malay theatre, language plays a less significant role than the underlining Muslim worldview, for it is religion that links the Malay theatre practitioner with a cosmopolitan Islam that offers an ideological alternative to Western bourgeois capitalism. On the other hand, the urban ethnic minorities have banded together, using English-language theatre to connect them with a global network that supports their cultural autonomy. Supporters of their own unique multiethnic society like to compare it with the popular rojak salad, made of local fruits that are covered with crushed peanuts and a sweet and pungent fish sauce. The fruits are still distinguishable—the sauce does not conceal them but adds its own unique flavor, creating a taste that it seems you need to be Malaysian to love.

Notes

1. In 2000 Panggung Negara, the National Theatre, had its name changed to Istana Budaya, or Palace of Culture. I use “National Theatre” because it refers more clearly to what it actually is.

2. Because they had to hastily put together the performance, the creators did not have time to perfect both script and production elements. According to one reviewer:

   The backdrop was lavish, the costumes magnificent, but it failed in the most important aspect. It failed to touch the audience’s heart. [...] When the performance ended, an audience member commented, “Perhaps we should have developed our theatre industry first before building such an extravagant theatre.” (Bissme 1999)

3. Although Malay, Chinese, and Indians make up most of the population, Malaysia has many other ethnic groups such as the aboriginal Orang Asli, and the indigenous peoples of Sabah and Sarawak. These people, along with Eurasians and all other mixed-race people are officially designated as “lain-lain” or Others, and are rarely considered in the racial equation.

4. I will use the shorter “Malay,” for as one commentator has pointed out, the term awkwardly translates as “Malaysia language” rather than the adjectival form “Malaysian language.” Although Bahasa Malaysia is used in English texts, the term now used in Malay texts is Bahasa.
Melayu. Place names in Malaysia have also undergone a change so that Malacca is now spelled Melaka.

5. The Ministry of Culture, Arts, and Tourism was formerly the Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sports and changed its title in 1996. The Minister of Culture, Arts, and Tourism, Datuk Sabbaruddin Chik, has said:

In order to meet its objectives, Panggung Negara will need to play a role effectively in churning out stage productions that are of great quality as part of the programme. [...] The Ministry feels it is time to introduce a type of ethics for theatre which will create a conducive ambience for the audience, more satisfaction and concentration, create a better focus on the cast’s acting, encourage a neat and tidy image, and improve the image of theatre on the whole.” (in Ghani 1996)

6. The Chinese comprised a much larger proportion of the population before the Chinese-dominated city of Singapore became independent in 1965.

7. Baba Nonya is the other more common term referring to this community—Babas are the men, Nonyas, the women. Both terms refer to the same group.

8. ASK produced its first bangsawan in 1996, Raja Laksamana Bentan, written by Rahman B., about the love, vengeance, and tragic death of Raja Andak Laksamana, who is wooed by two princesses. Raja Laksamana Bentan is a Malay play; in 1997, ASK performed Haris Fadillah, an Arabic moral tale adapted to a Malay context, which was allowable because of their common Islamic ideology. Tengku Haris Fadillah, a spoiled prince who indulges himself with mistresses and physically abuses his virtuous wife, is sent out by his father to acquire the necessary knowledge for ruling the country. His mistresses want expensive presents when he returns but his wife requests only four dinars’ worth of akal (wisdom). On the way, he is robbed and returns home a filthy beggar whom the girls reject and the wife serves with respect, thus teaching him the wisdom of humility. Behind the lavish costumes, song, and dance, bangsawan always has a moral, but in this case, it was clearly enacted to dispel the qualms certain Muslim members of the cast had about performing it, since Islam proscribes men and women appearing on stage together.

9. When writing about Fernando’s play version of Scorpion Orchid, Samad describes how difficult and dangerous it is to even obliquely broach the four sensitive issues:

Malaysia is a country in which the elements of race, politics, religion, tradition, history, education, and language are related intimately and often in unhealthy ways. To some extent, to speak of one is to explore all. Four of these constraints are enshrined in the Constitution of Malaysia as being beyond question. They are race, language, religion, and royalty. Given the inextricable linkage of these four elements and their relationships with the others, the situation becomes complex in the extreme, and volatile. (Samad 1996)

10. Members of the 1971 National Cultural Congress felt obliged to distinguish the true national literature from all other literature written in the country:

Literatures in other bumiputra languages could be regarded as Regional literature, while literatures written in Chinese, Tamil, and English were to be regarded as Sectional literature. Sectional and Regional literatures are still considered Malaysian literature but because they limit their audiences to particular groups, they could not be regarded as National literature. (Ishak 1987:16–17)

11. Whether an Islamic coreligionist of a different ethnic group is an insider or an outsider seems to be determined on a case-by-case basis. A Chinese Muslim could be accepted as an insider while the Muslim Indonesian workers who came to Malaysia to work in the 1990s were treated as second-class. Even though they share the same basic language, strong nationalistic sentiments predominated over Muslim identity.

The other religions must accept their secondary status as Islam is the state religion, although Malaysia is not yet a theocracy. While Hassan may promote Islam in his plays, writers of other religions may not. It has been noted that other groups, in their explorations of interracial relationships, have often left out the topic of religion; although religion underlies many of the tensions between theatrical characters, it is not addressed. Lee Kok Liang notes:
It is impossible to write honestly in SE Asia today without touching a raw nerve now and then;—however, I also found that one aspect, frequently if not often missing in the writings of non-Muslim or non-Semitic religions, is the role that religion plays in one’s life—by that I mean a vast empyrean of feelings on the question of life and love and how some people are guided. In Southeast Asia the meeting and clash of different religions and their resolutions have not yet been worked out and yet every day, the nuances are there for all to see. (in Lim 1993:229)

12. Ghulam-Sawar Yousof suggests the situation is slightly more complicated and has not been objectively covered by the Kuala Lumpur–based press, which is more closely aligned with the government party, United Malays National Organization (UMNO). The Malaysian wayang kulit is based on the Ramayana, and even though it incorporates outside stories and local legends, it adapts them into the Ramayana framework or attaches them to marginal plots, or branch stories (cerita santing), in the epic. There was some complaint in the Kelantan government about this exclusive reliance on a Hindu narrative, not on the wayang kulit form itself. However, the two are intrinsically intertwined, and Yousof contends that the dalangs, whose entire training is based on Ramayana, would not know what to do without it. For a thorough discussion, see Yousof’s Panggung Semar (1992).

13. A 200-year-old dance drama performed in the courts and supported by the sultans, mak yong originally was not performed in public. The 12 extant texts combining romance, humor, and operatic singing are generally based on Malay tales and legends. In the 1920s, the courts lost their status and could no longer support the performers, so they formed itinerant troupes in the countryside. But villagers were easily bored by the long arias and slow dances and the troupes shortened the plays and emphasized the healing and spiritual rituals and the comedians (Sheppard 1982:37).

In 1997, ASK presented as its first mak yong performance, The Conch Shell Prince (Anak Raja Gondang). Originally taking 40 days to complete, Yousof shortened it from its five-day village version to a two-evening script. Usually done in Kelantese dialect, the language was modified for the Kuala Lumpur audience. Women play the primary roles of king (pak yong tua), queen (mak yong), and prince (pak yong) as well as the chorus (jung dondang), while the clowns are male. Every performance begins and ends with the pak yong tua leading the song and dance Menghadap Rebab (Salute to the Rebab), the Malay three-stringed spiked fiddle (Yousof 1997).

The transition from dance to drama, from female dancer to male character, is rather abrupt: the pak yong tua simply places her hands behind her back and immediately assumes a stance of royal authority. The story involves the king, who banishes his wife after finding out she has given birth to a conch shell. She leaves the shell in the care of an old man and, returning to find it empty, accuses him of eating its contents. However, the shell gives birth to a mischievous prince who leads other children in games and pranks, which go too far when they shave and circumcise the royal cock attendant! The king investigates and discovers the malefactor is his own son. The plot is frequently interrupted by clowns who comment on the story, making comparisons with contemporary society (Tahrir 1997).

14. Pak Hamzah and Khatijah died within months of each other in 2000 and 2001 respectively, leaving ASK bereft of traditional masters.

15. Drama is considered the lowest of the literary arts in Muslim culture. No dramatist in Malaysia has won such recognition before or after Noordin Hassan. Faisal Tehrani says that Anwar Ibrahim supported Hassan’s award. Surely Hassan’s use of theatre for the promotion of Islam was instrumental in his being considered worthy. However, in a critical review of a 1997 production of his The Five Pillars Stand Shining Upright, this focus on Islam was deemed too narrow:

The play undeniably targeted a niche audience. It was not universal enough to attract wider attention. If you were not a Malay or a Malaysian Muslim, you couldn’t possibly understand the issues posed by the production, neither would you bother to ponder some of the tedious details it presented. (Kadir 1997)

16. The one Malay group that has consistently remained outside of government projects has been the Centre Stage. Started in 1984, it both formed a troupe and set up a five-year training program, independent of government support and frequently subject to official harassment. Founded by respected director Mustapha Nor, along with Normah Nordin and
Najib Nor, two directors with backgrounds in design, the group has produced mostly foreign dramas in translation.

Centre Stage has often found itself at odds with government bureaucracy. In 1999, it presented Mahkamah Keadilan (Court of Justice) by Egyptian playwright Tawfik Al-Hakim. Directed by Normah Nordin in a circus style with masks, the play critiqued the local jury system. Not only were lawyers and judges in the audience, but also a government minister who attended the last performance and said that if he had known what had been showing, he would have banned it. Nordin also attempted a feminist interpretation of Penyerahan Puteri (The Submission of the Princess, 2000), based on accounts in the historical record Sejarah Melayu (The Malay Annals). She explored a range of women’s roles, represented by the three princesses, casting them from traditional fatalists to emancipated women of the future, she concluded that all women really want is to be “treated with respect as human beings,” but, she said, the audience found the production strange and “too artistic” (Nordin 2000; Nor 2000).

17. During the 1980s, while Anwar Ibrahim was the minister of culture, he reconfirmed that Malaysia could have no national culture that was not synonymous with Islam. Anwar himself reveals the schizophrenic attitude toward the theatre, first condemning it as khalwat, an activity proscribed by Islam, both because of its representation of human characters and because women and men appear onstage together; and then endorsing it by attending performances in Kuala Lumpur. It is unclear to what degree this was an honest change of heart or merely the means to politically woo the middle class.

18. Several recent plays such as Noordin Hassan’s Cindai, which played in the National Theatre in 2001, feature a woman as the epitome of virtue, yet the modern actresses are often not versed in classical performance and have difficulty performing the classical dance movements included in the spectacles. A performer who specializes in classical female roles is Azanin Dato’ Ahmad. In 1978 she founded Susana Cultural Centre. An individual practitioner who works independent of government programs, she teaches and performs dance dramas based on mak yong movement but with stories about the lives of famous Malay women in history. She is primarily patronized by Malay royalty and corporations (Ahmad 1999).


20. “Mamak” refers to people of Indian ancestry who were born in Malaysia and whose families converted to Islam in Malaysia.


22. When MATG was transformed into a fully Malaysian organization, several Malay playwrights remained suspicious of its members (Ishak 1987:67). Such a stigma exists for Actors Studio as well. Having been identified as “English” and “Western” by many Malays, Malay dramatists feel it is more politically correct to keep their distance from its venues.

23. Although Eurasians form a very small portion of the population, they have an influence and mass media representation far beyond their numbers. They seem to be popular with producers for their appearance—an Asian version of a Western face. Many are involved in contemporary film and theatre, and Eurasians have always been important as performers in Malaysian bangsawan and Indonesian komedie stamboel. In nationalist and ethnic struggles, however, they were often targeted as a despised group, which attempted but inevitably failed to straddle the warring colonial and native worlds.

24. The theme of intermarriage draws occasional attention from Malay writers and appeared more often in the 1970s, partly owing to the fact that some Malay politicians at the time advocated intermarriage as a means of communal integration. In Malay literature it invariably involves a Malay man and a non-Malay woman. When a Malay woman is involved, the man is a convert to Islam, or the woman turns out to be an adopted non-Malay. The purity of “Malayness” is thus preserved (Tham 1981b:272–73).

25. Although unable to break into the established Malay theatre, The Alternative Stage is getting
some moral support from older dramatists who are no longer practicing. Safe in administrative posts, they nostalgically see their younger selves in the group, which is fired with the same enthusiasm that they had in the 1970s; the group, in turn, sees itself as the second stage of those earlier experiments, evolving from them. But more than these comfortable bureaucrats, Mark Teh and Faisal Tehrani admire Nasruddin Rais, a 1970s theatre activist and political exile who, after many years, has returned to Malaysia and has been performing his piece of “nontheatre theatre,” Tok Apoo. Banned from public performance but, nonetheless, presented at political meetings, it is a blatant piece of antigovernment propaganda. Its daring appeals to the young men, as does Rais’s criticism of his own generation, which he accuses of “selling out.”

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