

Zhao Si Anak Yatim (The Orphan of Zhao): A Contemporary Bangsawan Performance Structure

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Abstract

This investigation is in the context of my continuous learning and research on the art of Bangsawan with Rahman B. between 2000 and 2018. This is the period when Bangsawan experienced another important step in its development in Malaysia through the establishment of Istana Budaya, which led to the use of sophisticated technology in its production. This period also saw the introduction of the Semarak Bangsawan project, which has been offering monthly Bangsawan performances since 2007 to date. In my previous study on Bangsawan, I highlighted nine fundamental aspects of contemporary Bangsawan. This paper specifically focuses on performance structure, one of the nine conventions applied in a 2018 Bangsawan production titled *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim (The Orphan of Zhao)*. Through the design of the practice-led research, I defined a contemporary approach by revealing not only current visual elements in the performance, but also the theme and idea of the story, which is unusual for a traditional art form. While the structure of the performance remained true to the traditional framework of Rahman B., the visuals, the essence of the story as well as the interpretation were developed through my contemporary thinking. The performances have shown how various elements of the Bangsawan tradition can be successfully received/modified in a contemporary socio-political context. Moreover, a creative activity is an important work that has real social relevance and becomes part of performance history itself.

Keywords: contemporary Bangsawan, practice-led research, Semarak Bangsawan, Rahman B.'s conventions

Introduction

More recently, and particularly since 2000, the actual structure of a Bangsawan performance in Malaysia has been a source of contention. As someone who has followed the development of the art form over the last fifteen years, I believe that the absence of written sources of Bangsawan's structure and conventions is the main factor behind this prolonged dispute. Resources on Bangsawan's structure and conventions have fully depended on oral transmission, without any written documents to serve as references.

Thus, in 2011, I began my PhD research, seeking to establish a series of conventions as a guideline for a contemporary Bangsawan performance. Following

the completion of my degree in 2016, a series of Bangsawan conventions was produced, based on the practice of the late Rahman B. (see figure 1), a Bangsawan *guru* who was awarded National Artiste by Malaysian government in 2003 for his timeless contributions in the development of the Bangsawan art form. This paper is specifically highlighting the performance structure, one out of nine conventions that have been applied in a 2018's Bangsawan production entitled *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim (The Orphan of Zhao)*. This practice-led research involved a group of young performers who willingly participated in my production, to test the effectiveness of the conventions.



Figure 1. The late Seniman Negara Tuan Haji Abdul Rahman Bakar (Rahman B.), 2020.

The production involved 80 cast and crew (see figure 2), consisting of young performers community selected through an audition process. The practice-led component of this project involved a full theatre-making process, divided into three stages: pre-production (September, 2018), production (October-December, 2018), and post-production (December, 2018). Three nights of performances were staged from 21 to 23 December 2018 in Auditorium Tunku Abdul Rahman Malaysia Tourism Centre (MaTiC), with a duration of 120 minutes.



Figure 2. The cast and crew of *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim*, 2020.

The live performance was stage under the project *Semarak Bangsawan* (The Invigoration of Bangsawan), another community engagement organized by Jabatan Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Negara (National Culture and Art Department) or JKKN, a government agency under the Ministry of Information, Communication, and Culture of Malaysia. In close cooperation with the Dewan Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (DBKL, Kuala Lumpur City Hall) since 2007, a government agency that offers the City Hall Theatre as the city's official theatre, the project supports the monthly staging of Bangsawan productions. Providing funds and resources to institutions and individuals, it invites selected groups to produce and stage a Bangsawan performance.

My role in this performance project is mainly as a scriptwriter and director. An original script was completed based on the internationally known of *The Great Revenge of The Orphan of Zhao*, a Chinese play from Yuan era in 13th century, written by Ji Junxiang with the title in Malay: *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim* (*Bangsawan The Orphan of Zhao*). The story was adapted to the taste of a contemporary Malaysian audience while retaining the strong influence of Chinese cultures (Han Dynasty). The aesthetic and creative sides of the production were wholly designed within the framework of Rahman B.'s conventions.



Figure 3. Promotional poster of *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim*, designed by Rime Nazren Abdul Razak, 2018.

The Performance Structure

In a Bangsawan performance practiced by Rahman B., the whole composition from the overture, the acts, the extra turns until the final curtain call contribute to forming its dramatic impact, differentiating Bangsawan from the other traditional or even modern art forms. The elements of performance structure in Rahman B.'s conventions are outlined as follows:

a. Overture

Rahman B. often begins his performance with a special introductory music. Following the appointment of Rahman B. as an *adiguru* in the National Academy of Arts Culture and Heritage (ASWARA), Bangsawan at that institution was greatly influenced by the practice of his professional group Bintang Timur. Among these influences was the inclusion of that group's signature Bangsawan overture in performance which came to signify the musical identity of ASWARA's Bangsawan. Currently, this same music is also used by most contemporary Bangsawan groups in Kuala Lumpur as their opening musical number. These groups might well assume the music is the compulsory opening melody for all Bangsawan performances. There is remarkable similarity between Bintang Timur's overture music and the overture of Franz von

Suppe's operetta *Light Cavalry* that premiered in Vienna in 1866. Given the fact that Bangsawan's music reflects a mix of Malay and Western elements, this similarity should not be surprising (Tan Sooi Beng, 1993, p. 83).

The overture music is of short duration but specifically composed as the opening tune. In his productions, Rahman B. followed a convention of combining the sounds of horn and timpani at the beginning of the song, building to a drum roll at the peak, an effect which provides the audience with an adrenaline rush at the beginning of the show. After the overture segment, Rahman B.'s productions featured a fast beat opening dance (*tarian pembukaan*), accompanied by a song with lyrics that welcomed and thanked the audience for their attendance. The songs commonly used for the *tarian pembukaan* included *Bolehlah Dipandang* (It Can Be Seen) and *Rumba Rumba Rhythm*. This was followed by the recital of traditional poetry to a soft and melodious tune. The quick paced welcoming song and its soft poetic melody in the overture is designed to sway the audience's emotions.

I sought to trigger a dramatic impact in the similar way through the overture segment. Thus, in my performance, I combined the overture and poetry recital in a Prologue scene instead of presenting three consecutive opening pieces. At the beginning of the overture segment, a credit list appeared electronically on a large screen on the right stage, accompanied by an original composition by the musical director, Tengku Zainuddin. The recital of the Chinese poetry form then took centre stage, conveying the synopsis of the story in song form. Featured in dance movement that imitate the Chinese Opera form, the Prologue scene showed a narrator in Chinese Opera costume, narrates the conflict of the story (see figure 4 and 5). At the end of the Prologue scene, which was also the end of the complete overture segment, the music shifted from Tengku Zainuddin's original composition to Rahman B.'s trademark overture music, followed by the raising of the curtain of Act 1.

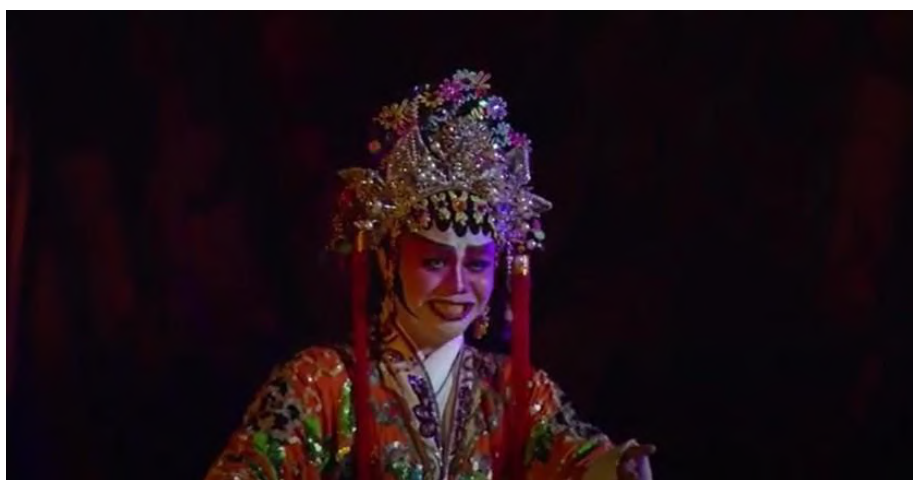


Figure 4. Mohd Nazrin Manterang performed the Bangsawan Prologue in the form of Chinese Opera, 2018.



Figure 5. Mohd Nazrin Manterang performed the Bangsawan Prologue in the form of Chinese Opera, 2018.

The changes that I made in the overture segment were intended to engage with my contemporary audience. The opening scene of *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim* provided the audience with a new look by featuring contemporary choreography by Mohammad Nazrin Manterang, followed by Rahman B.'s overture music. I decided to remove the welcome dance in order to shorten the opening. However, we retained two of Rahman B.'s essential conventions in the overture, the recital of traditional poetry, and his trademark overture music.

b. Recital of Traditional Poetry

As a Malay figure who puts Malay arts and cultures above everything else, Rahman B. made traditional poetry obligatory in all of his performances. He saw the potential of the Bangsawan art form as being a treasured repository for *adat-istiadat*, arts, and culture in the future. In Rahman B.'s productions, excerpts of traditional poetry performed in the opening segment convey the synopsis of the story presented. Normally, the poetry sets out the name of the King and the ruling country, and summarizes the conflict caused by an evil power that destroys the peace. The recital ends in cliff-hanger form, with the final stanza highlighting the sadness and sorrow of the kingdom due to a calamity.

The type of traditional poetry used depended on the culture of the story being represented in the play. For example, when Rahman B. staged *Bangsawan Laksamana Cheng Ho* with Bintang Timur Bangsawan Association in March 2009, he used the Chinese classical form of poetry (in Malay) in the opening segment. Similarly, an Indian form of poetry was used to open ASWARA's 2010 *Bangsawan* production of the Indian classic *Shakuntala*. The form of *syair* or *gurindam* appears as the most common opening poetry for Malay stories. *Syair* and *gurindam* are the principal forms of Malay traditional poetry. *Syair* is a longer piece, often an extended

narrative poem contains a story, attempts to present some sort of teaching or message, possibly moral in character. Meanwhile, a *gurindam* is a two-line piece, with a single rhyme. The *gurindam* generally contains advice or teaching, presented through elegant similes or metaphors.

I chose the form of Chinese traditional poetry for the opening poetry in *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim*. The fact that the form originated in the Chinese world reflects the culture of this play. In addition, this poetry shares a similar function with the Malay forms *syair* or *gurindam*, which is a traditional oral poetic form. Instead of directly giving the summary of the story to audience, I preferred to use poetic diction combined with music to highlight the strongest emotions in the story. Compared to the *syair* or *gurindam* which is more narrative in style and sung softly with fixed rhythm, Chinese traditional poetry is often presented by the singer in a very powerful and soulful voice. Below is the poetry sung by the vocalist Sabihah Wahid, which opened the performance. I wrote the words for the poetry and the melody was composed by Tengku Zainuddin, the music director:

<i>Di sebuah negeri bernama negeri Jin</i>	In the Kingdom of Jin
<i>Di dalam istana Maharaja Ling</i>	Within the Palace of Emperor Ling
<i>Ada dua jeneral kesayangan diraja</i>	Two generals have won the trust of the Emperor
<i>Panglima negeri yang paling berharga</i>	The most valuable is being the Royal Commander
<i>Namun dalam sebuah kapal</i>	But in a ship
<i>Hanya boleh ada seorang nakhoda</i>	There can only be one master
<i>Yang tak mahu berkongsi pangkat dan nama</i>	No one wants to share the rank and title
<i>Apatah lagi kuasa</i>	What more power!
<i>Dendam menjadi racun</i>	Revenge becomes poison
<i>Racun membakar khianat</i>	Poison fires up treachery
<i>Khianat memanggil maut</i>	Treachery invites deaths
<i>Maut menghidupkan dendam yang lain pula</i>	Death gives life to another revenge
<i>Ini kisah dendam seribu musim</i>	This is the story of a thousand seasons of revenge
<i>Ini kisah dendam si anak yatim</i>	This is the story of an orphan's vengeance

The stanzas stated the revenge and vengeance of an orphan due to the act of deception. The poetry delivers the synopsis of the story in ways consistent with the conventions of Rahman B. and it provided the audience with the key emotions of the whole play through carefully selected diction. For instance, the imagery of *revenge becomes poison* (*dendam menjadi racun*) and of *treachery invites deaths* (*khianat memanggil maut*) describes the emotion of rage and anger. Phrases such “*and this is the story of a thousand seasons of revenge* (*ini kisah dendam seribu musim*) as well as *this is the story of an orphan's vengeance* (*ini kisah dendam si anak yatim*)” symbolized the fury and anger of the deceived orphan.

c. Plot/Act

A conventional Bangsawan storyline features the journey of a hero, a characteristic shared by most Malay traditional theatre forms such as *Makyong*, *Wayang Kulit*

Kelantan and Mek Mulong. Rahman B. asserted that the first and final scene of *Bangsawan* should be placed at the palace, regardless of the total number of scenes in the play. The King is obliged to give the opening and final speech to his people, which contain moral instructions that form part of *Bangsawan*'s didactic nature.

Convention dictates that in the introductory part, the whole palace is alerted to a conflict that has arisen, followed by the orders the King has given to overcome the crisis. The hero emerges as the only person capable of solving the conflict. The hero then begins his journey to confront the evil character and after facing many constraints and obstacles, he wins the fight and restores the peace. The success of the hero marks the integrity of the royal institution.

Building the dramatic content was undoubtedly the most challenging part of adapting *The Great Revenge of the Orphan of Zhao* into *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim*. This adaptation work required setting out the story thorough the many act divisions required in *Bangsawan* that show the art of scene changes. After a dramatic Prologue scene which reveals the roots of the conflict in the story, the play starts at the palace with General Zhao pay a visit to the Emperor of Ling. In the meantime, the King, closely watch by General Tu'an Gu is releasing the arrows to the citizens outside the palace as the target. Zhao rebukes the King's attitude which he considers as an oppressing the weak people. This angered General Tu'an Gu who accused Zhao of being rude. Apparently, the King appreciates Zhao's courage and presented him with a royal necklace. This makes Tu'an Gu even angrier and starts planning revenge (see figures 6-9).



Figure 6. Act 1 in the Emperor Ling's palace. The King and his General is releasing the arrow to the citizen, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 7. Act 1 in the Emperor Ling's palace. General Zhao appears and criticizing the King's attitude which angered General Tu'an Gu, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 8. Act 1 in the Emperor Ling's palace. The King awarded the royal necklace as the appreciation of Zhao's service, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 9. Act 1 in the Emperor Ling's palace. Tu'an Gu plotting with Mei the royal concubine, to set a trap for Zhao Dun. *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

The second act introduces the character of Cheng Ying, Zhao's very loyal assistant. They are both waiting for their wives to give birth, which eventually both wives simultaneously deliver a son. When Zhao wanted to go to the palace to inform the birth to the Emperor, he was attacked by a group of people wearing masks. Zhao defended himself and killed one of the attackers. Apparently, the murdered is the royal beloved concubine. At the same time, Tu'an Gu appears and orders the army to arrest Zhao on charges of killing the royal concubine. Zhao was taken to the palace (see figures 10-13).



Figure 10. Act 2 outside the House of Physician. Zhao Dun and Cheng Ying waiting for their wives to give births, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 11. Act 2 outside the House of Physician. Zhao Dun attacked by a group of attackers, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 12. Act 2 outside the House of Physician. Zhao Dun found out the person that he murdered is Mei, the royal concubine, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 13. Act 2 outside the House of Physician. Tu'an Gu appears and accuses Zhao Dun intentionally murder Mei. He ordered his knights to take Zhao Dun before the King for punishment, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

In the Act 3 in the palace, the King is so disappointed with Zhao's actions that he killed his beloved concubine. Zhao wanted to give an explanation but was often stopped by Tu'an Gu. Due to the Tu'an Gu's incitement, the King sentences Zhao to death. Tu'an Gu also incites the King to kill all Zhao's descendants to eliminate the potential of rebels in future. In a state of sadness and frustration, the King could not think rationally and left it to Tu'an Gu to carry it out. Tu'an Gu took the opportunity to order that all Zhao's descendants be killed, including the newborn (see figures 14 and 15).



Figure 14. Act 3 in the palace of Emperor Ling. Zhao Dun defending himself in front of the King, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 15. Act 3 in the palace of Emperor Ling. The King surrenders his sword to Zhao Dun for Zhao Dun to kill himself instead of being killed by the King, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Next in the street scene, Cheng Ying finds out that Zhao's wife has committed suicide after hearing her husband was killed. A maid immediately escapes Zhao's newborn and take the child to Cheng Ying. At the same time, Tu'an Gu has ordered that all newborn boys in the state be killed if Zhao's infant has not been found. Remembering Zhao who once saved his life, Cheng Ying has decided to hide Zhao's newborn who also the Zhao's last descendant, and bring his baby instead, to the palace to be handed over to Tu'an Gu (see figure 16).



Figure 16. Act 3 in the street scene. Cheng Ying decided to take his, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Returning to the palace setting, Cheng Ying and his wife bring their newborn before Tu'an Gu and inform that it is Zhao's sought-after newborn. Cheng Ying tries to persuade Tu'an Gu, asking for mercy not to kill the child as Tu'an Gu's wife also just gave birth to a baby girl. But without a word, Tu'an Gu kills the newborn, who was actually the son of Cheng Ying and his wife, in front of their own eyes. Tu'an Gu is satisfied, but this has caused a very deep revenge on Cheng Ying (see figure 17).



Figure 17. Act 3 in the street scene. Tu'an Gu kill Cheng Ying's newborn in front of the parents' eyes, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Act 4 introduces the character of Cheng Bo (son of Zhao who was raised by Cheng Ying) currently twenty years old, and Tu'an Ni the daughter of Tu'an Gu.

These two young men are in love without realizing the dark history that has happened between their descendants. In the similar act, Cheng Ying reveals to Gong Sun that the relationship between Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni is his plan, as part of his revenge to General Tu'an Gu. He takes the revenge not only for the death of his son, but also for her wife who turn out to be mentally and physically ill after the tragic incident (see figures 18 to 21).



Figure 18. Act 4 in front of Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Bo and his friends are practicing their martial arts lesson, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 19. Act 4 in front of Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Bo informs his friends about the painting that his father currently prepares for his twentieth birthday gift, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 20. Act 4 in front of Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Ying told Gongsun about his plan to first match Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni, then to destroy the relationship in order to seek revenge, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 21. Marlenny Deenerwan, Act 4 in front of Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Ying's wife come to be ill after watching her son murdered by Tu'an Gu twenty years ago, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

In Act 5, Tu'an Gu announces his plan for the marriage of Cheng Bo and his daughter Tu'an Ni. The Act 6 is the celebration of Cheng Bo's twentieth birthday. It was at this time that Cheng Ying revealed to Cheng Bo that Cheng Bo was not his biological son, but the son of General Zhao Dun who was killed by Tu'an Gu twenty years ago (see figures 22 and 26).



Figure 22. Act 5 in the garden. The lovebirds, Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni expressing their love through a song entitled *Sehidup Semati (To Live and Die Together)*, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 23. Act 5 in the garden. Tu'an Gu appears and announces the wedding day of Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 24. Act 6 in Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Ying prepares to pull the cover of the painting to reveal it for Cheng Bo, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 25. Act 6 in Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Ying reveals that Cheng Bo is not his biological son, but the last descendants of Zhao, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 26. Act 6 in Cheng Ying's house. No words after knowing the truth. Only desire for revenge, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Act 7 is the final act where the wedding day of Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni turn into a tragedy when Cheng Bo kills Tu'an Gu in revenge for his father's death twenty years ago. Cheng Bo apologizes to Tu'an Ni by saying that Tu'an Ni may have lost a father, but he, Zhao the Orphan, has lost himself (see figures 27 to 30).



Figure 27. Act 7 in the house of General Tu'an Gu. Wedding day celebration of Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 28. Act 7 in the house of General Tu'an Gu. The celebration turns into tragedy when Cheng Bo reveals the dark secret of Tu'an Gu who murdered his father and eliminate all the descendants of Zhao, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 29. Act 7 in the house of General Tu'an Gu. Cheng Bo ended up stabbing Tu'an Gu after an intense fighting between them, causing the death of the General, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 30. Act 7 in the house of General Tu'an Gu. "I want to apologize to you Tu'an Ni, but in my heart now is a pain that has no relief. You may have lost a father, but I, Zhao the orphan, have lost myself," *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

In the conventions of *Bangsawan* reflected by Rahman B.'s practice, the journey of the hero typically involves travel across the land, forest, or sea to confront evil and to restore the peace. Because no physical journey is undertaken by the main characters in *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim*, their emotional journey becomes the fundamental element on which to plot the storyline. Cheng Ying's anger and desire for revenge activated the story by plunging Cheng Bo's life into a crisis. Cheng Bo, as a tragic hero, completed the journey and achieved poetic justice by taking revenge.

d. Extra-turn

The extra-turn is a unique feature of the *Bangsawan*. The curtains are lowered, so the crew can change the set, while in front of the curtain the audience is treated to various performances. It might be a comedy skit, traditional dances, a rendition of a popular song by a well-known singer, a magic show, or a martial arts performance. There is no exact explanation from Rahman B. or any other practitioners on the term extra-turn. Literally however, the word "extra-turn" or *giliran tambahan* in Malay, carries the meaning of an additional segment/scene/act that presented within every acts. In the past, extra-turn had no connection with the plot of the story.

The extra-turn differentiated *Bangsawan* from the other genres, even distinguishing the art form from *Wayang Parsi*. *Bangsawan* is a theatre adapted from the *Wayang Parsi* (Persian Theatre) brought in from Bombay, India. Ghulam Sarwar-Yousof (2002) traces the origin of *Bangsawan* as beginning in India, with the development of musical theatre or operatic theatre style in the north Indian province of Awadh as early as the nineteenth century. This theatre developed in the court under the ruling of the last *Nawaab* (Emperor), Wajid Ali Shah (who reigned from 1847-1856). When Wajid Ali Shah was exiled in 1856, the performers originally based in

his court, became peripatetic until a wealthy Parsi community in Bombay provided them with financial support. This became a turning point when the then unnamed art form adopted the name of *Wayang Parsi* and was performed commercially in the city's permanent theatre. The genre that in time would become Bangsawan arrived in Penang in the 1870s, following a visit by one or more troupes of Wayang Parsi, possibly from Bombay.

This is strengthened by Rahman B.'s statement that in earlier times, particularly in the era of *Wayang Parsi*, no interval segment was presented. Upon completion of the first scene, the second scene's backdrop was lowered, and the second scene began immediately. Behind the curtain, the crew changed the set and backdrop, preparing for the third scene. Upon completion of the second scene, the curtain was lifted and the next act began, with this process repeatedly done until the end of the show. At one point, this method began to bore the audience, making them lose interest in watching Bangsawan. Desperately needing to restore the audience's attention, the producers at that time came up with the idea of an extra-turn segment, featuring popular celebrities of the era. When the extra-turn was introduced, as expected, they managed to draw the audience back to Bangsawan theater. Initially, it was only a strategy to bring the audience in to watch Bangsawan. Eventually, it became an essential component of the art form, and is still one of the attractions in contemporary Bangsawan performances.

In selecting the types of extra-turns to feature in *Bangsawan Zhao Si Anak Yatim*, I felt it essential to maintain the pace and tempo of the performance. For Rahman B. the extra-turn was merely an entertainment segment while waiting for the next scene to start; hence, he was never concerned with the details of this segment of the performance. He usually allowed the music director to choose the songs and singers they deemed appropriate. However, in my performance, the extra-turn renditions were carefully selected in order to enhance the feeling of Chinese culture.

The first extra-turn song, entitled *Hoi Fut Tin Hung* (The Boundless Sea and Sky), a popular Hong Kong song in Malaysia sang by Sabihah Wahid, was followed by an agogo dance for the second extra-turn. The third extra-turn was presented in the form of a street scene and featured a martial art of Wushu presented by a group of kids from E-Martial Arts Group, Putrajaya. At the end of the extra turn, the curtain raised up as the mark of the starting of Act 4 (see figures 31 and 32).



Figure 31. Extra-turn segment. The E-Martial Art Group Putrajaya, presenting a group of children Wushu performers, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 32. Extra-turn segment. In the middle of the segment, the curtain raised marking the beginning of the Act 4, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Two of the kids, a boy and a girl, keep demonstrating their fighting skill. At one point, these kids exit the stage, immediately replacing by the appearance of Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni, continuing demonstrating their martial arts. This exchange of actors had amazed the audience, a practical yet spectacular way of informing the audience of the twenty years of time-lapse in the storyline (see figures 33 and 34).



Figure 33. Act 4 outside Cheng Ying's house. A boy and a girl demonstrating their Wushu skill, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.



Figure 34. Act 4 outside Cheng Ying's house. Cheng Bo and Tu'an Ni appears replacing the kid's actor, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Extra-turn 4 showed a performance of solo Guzheng instrument by Wan Syamel, followed by a beautiful rendition of Chinese version of *Cindai*, a popular Malay song by Sabihah Wahid. The cabaret concept of *Gamanyeh* song entertained the whole audience in the final extra-turn segment of the night (see figure 35).



Figure 35. Extra-turn segment, the performance of Gamanyeh song in cabaret concept, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

As previously noted, the selection of the extra-turn was not a crucial element in Rahman B.'s practice. However, I wished to extend the production's theme, style and key concepts into all segments (the scenes and the extra-turns) in order to increase the level of professionalism and make the show more appealing to a contemporary audience. Combining a classical Chinese story with contemporary Chinese-inflected entertainment was a strategy I used to keep the audience in the mode of pleasure associated with the performance.

e. Tasmat (Spectacle created by special effects)

Tasmat is the element of special effects or spectacle in a *Bangsawan* performance. When skillfully applied in a particular scene, *tasmat* adds to the prestige of the production through the creation of a miracle onstage through manual means, which involves the use of the human body (crew members) instead of the utilization of machine technology. Rahman B. defines *tasmat* as "a scenario that totally changes the stage visuals using explosive elements in a state of magical atmosphere". He also asserted that *tasmat* is meant to surprise and impress the audience; thus, it can only happen once throughout the show, as a second surprise would not be a surprise.

His favorite example is from his play *Bangsawan Puteri Gunung Ledang* when Tun Mamat (a Malacca warrior) follows an old woman to climb Mount Ledang. Upon reaching the top, *tasmat* occurs when the mountain changes into a palace in front of the audience, and the old woman is turned into a beautiful princess in the blink of an eye. According to Rahman B., an effective *tasmat* is produced by "cheating" the audience, making them wonder about how the trick was accomplished. The feeling of wonder was strong enough to bring viewers back again to watch the play the following night. In the past, *tasmat* was considered the measure of the quality of a performance. The creation of *tasmat* contributed to the prestige and prowess of the production and the company.

The *tasmat* in my performance took place in Act 6 when Cheng Ying decided

to tell the truth to Cheng Bo during his twentieth birthday celebration. From the beginning of Act 4, the story had established that Cheng Ying is in the midst of completing a mystery painting, that only be revealed during Cheng Bo's twentieth birthday. The painting is a picture of a newborn being stabbed with a sword. The painting was painted by the production painter on calico fabric and colored black. When installed on stage and projected spot lights from behind, combined with the stage lights design, it creates a profound tragic effect when viewed from the perspective of the audience (see figure 36). When Cheng Ying pulled the cloth to reveal this painting, Tengku Zainuddin accompanied it with a thrilling sound and music effect, with the traumatic screams of Cheng Ying's wife who had become insane after seeing the murder of her baby twenty years ago.

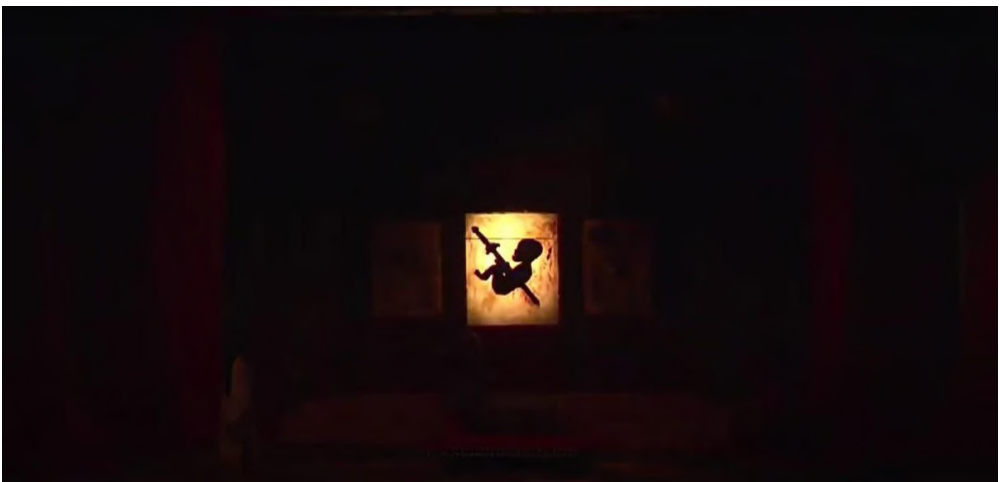


Figure 36. *Tasmat* or spectacular element generated from a painting, accompanied by the music, sound effect, lighting and sound of the mother screaming. A boy and a girl demonstrating their Wushu skill, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Such *tasmat* presentation is to return the audience's memory to the tragedy at the beginning of the story and also provide a spectacular experience of a *Bangsawan* for the audience to enjoy. I followed the concept of Rahman B.'s *tasmat* by offering a scenario that totally changes the stage visual using explosive elements in a state of magical atmosphere.

f. Closing song

As a tradition for the closing, all the actors (and crew) gathered onstage to sing the finale while saying goodbye to the audience. The song praises the audience and also offers a prayer for everyone. Below is the song typically used by Rahman B. as the closing tune for his productions:

*Terima kasih kami ucapkan
Kepada sekalian peminat Bangsawan
Kami di bawah satu naungan
Persatuan Seni Bangsawan
Bintang Timur Kuala Lumpur*

We say thank you to all
You our Bangsawan audience
We are unified
In our Art of Bangsawan
Eastern Star of Kuala Lumpur

*Alhamdulillah waja laksana
Berkatnya nabi wali saidina*

All praise be to God
Peace and blessings on the
prophet

*Hajat di hati sudah sempurna
Dijauhkan Allah bala bencana*

Our hearts are pure
Allah protects us from misfortune

This song was also used by ASWARA as their permanent Bangsawan closing song from their first Bangsawan performance in 1996. They changed the fourth and fifth line in the first stanza to the name of ASWARA.

In my performance, the closing song adapted from one of DBKL's popular theme songs entitled *Kuala Lumpur*, a song that describes the harmony and the prosperity of Kuala Lumpur. I used the melody of the song and I wrote new lyrics as follows:

*Kepada semua penonton budiman
Terima kasih diucapkan
Jauh dan dekat semuanya datang
Menyaksikan kami main Bangsawan*

To all our wise viewer
We say thank you
All have come from far and wide
To see us perform the Bangsawan

*Segala yang baik Allah yang berkati
Salah dan silap maafkan kami
Semoga kita akan berjumpa lagi
Opera Sri Bandaraya mengundur diri*

All good things come from Allah
Forgive us for our wrongdoings
We hope to meet you again
We at the Opera Sri Bandaraya bid
you farewell

Rahman B. recounted in the past the finale was often the performers' favorite segment in that audiences tended to show their appreciation by throwing gifts in form of flowers, clothing, and even money towards the stage. Audiences typically sang together with the performers, waving their hands and showing gratitude to each other. On some occasions, the main sponsor or financial patron would come onstage to meet the cast.

In a contemporary performance, though the act of throwing gifts towards the stage is no longer practiced, performers and audience members can still exchange their appreciation of one another through gestures and vocal utterances. Actors often wave their hands in the air in unison, while the audience claps vigorously and calls the names of the actors.

In my performance, the special guests of JKKN and DBKL came onstage on the closing night to meet the cast. The closing segment of Bangsawan never fails to fully engage the whole theatre because it is the time where all the performers appear

onstage in their glittering costumes and make up, under the brightest lighting effects, accompanied by the most cheerful music, listening to the appreciation from the audience before the final curtain is lowered (see figure 37).



Figure 37. The curtain call, a closing segment where all the cast and crew appear on stage to engage with the audience, *Bangsawan Zhao si Anak Yatim* Auditorium DBKL, 2018.

Discussion

Explorations involving contemporary innovation in Bangsawan production are most welcome, provided the contemporary performer understands the essential foundation of Bangsawan. By having this sense of understanding, contemporary performers are able to see the implications of their changes and adaptations. At the same time, they are also in a stronger position to identify those conventions that need to be maintained. The willingness of contemporary performers to participate in this preservation process will ensure the continuation of Bangsawan, without disconnecting its foundation from the past practices.

Overall, throughout this production process, I identified and documented Rahman B.'s (till now) orally transmitted framework, the components of which he relayed systematically for the first time to me. It has also produced a live Bangsawan performance based on his framework, that is generated from tacit knowledge, transmitted explicitly through a Practice as Research methodology, a framework that makes Bangsawan available to be performed in the contemporary arts scene in Malaysia. The application of this method opens up the opportunity for this study to be academically enhanced in future.

That Bangsawan has survived through periods of significant social and political change establishes the form as a cultural symbol. Though stories performed can vary depending on the culture one chooses to present, it is not the story or culture that matters, but rather the strong conventions that have been imprinted orally through the ages that make Bangsawan a solid Malay traditional art. The journey of Bangsawan from its traditional roots through its life as a commercial, urban, and popular theatre, enables it to stand in the twenty-first century as a contemporary

Malay traditional form, which openly interacts with and is flexible enough to absorb various cultures from all over the world.

Thus, the establishment of a conceptual framework for Rahman B.'s Bangsawan practice, aims to help young performers to better understand Bangsawan and distinguish it from the other art genres. The effectiveness of the conventions was successfully tested in this performance project. This success measured through the accomplishment of the key objective of this research by this production, that is to make Bangsawan available to be performed in the contemporary era by remain true to the key conventions.

The production process of nearly five months provided performers with a deeper understanding of the art form. With the existence of a group of trained young practitioners, the conventions can in the future be applied and practiced more effectively and continuously.

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Biography

Marlenny Deenerwan holds a PhD in Theatre Performance from Monash University, Australia (2016); a Master of Arts (2011) and Bachelor of Performing Arts in Drama (2007) from Universiti Malaya; and a Diploma in Creative Writing from the National Arts Academy, now known as ASWARA (2002). Her research spans the field of Malaysian traditional and ritual theatre as well as Bangsawan, and is currently focused on the development of DraFDidik, a model of interactive theatre as an alternative teaching and learning method for young children. She is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Faculty of Creative Arts, Universiti Malaya.