

Postcolonial Predicaments in Malaysian Theatre: The Work of Ghulam Sarwar Yousof, Krishen Jit, and Faridah Merican

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Abstract

Choices by Anglophone educated artists in developing Malaysian Theatre from the 1970s have defined three major directions that persist in theatre education, writing, and production: (a) a heritage, scholarly, and literary focus exemplified by scholar-writer Ghulam Sarwar Yousof working from a University platform; (b) performance as socio-political critique exemplified by director Krishen Jit who began in academia but manifested his political activism in journalism collective creations at Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur and beyond; and (c) urban professional repertory producing as exemplified by Faridah Merican whose economic realism and fund raising as a producer-actress-director at KLPac (Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre) helped develop a repertory model for developing contemporary Malaysian Theatre in Kuala Lumpur and Penang. The current generation of theatre leaders carry forward the hybridity forged by these three ethnic “outsiders”—all Malaysians of South Asian descent. These artists developed the postcolonial model of urban and academic theatres that persist to the present.

Keywords: Faridah Merican, Five Arts Centre, Ghulam Sarwar Yousof, Krishen Jit, Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, Malaysian postcolonial theatre

Introduction

The Malaysian transition from a colonial to postcolonial theatre is exemplified by the work of three major figures, all born in 1939 and all Malaysians of Indian descent who came of age in the Anglophone educational system and urban middle class in the 1940s to the 1960s, and who helped forge the post-colonial models of theatre practice and its dissemination in higher education from the 1970s to the 1990s. Their influence looms large to the present: as scholars, directors, actors, and writers these figures helped mould the Malaysian theatre landscape in both Penang and Kuala Lumpur where much of the theatrical activity is still concentrated and where perhaps ironically Anglophone theatre still persists in part due to their use of this language medium.

Ghulam Sarwar Yousof (1939-2022), Krishen Jit (1939-2005), and Faridah Merican (1939-)¹ have impacted theatre performance in diverse ways. I will use Ghulam Sarwar Yousof as a model of heritage and scholarly research in performing arts in the university sphere. While his first interest was literature, his attention to indigenous traditions tried to mend the fissure of colonial disruption to help

“tradition” extend and reinvent local performance. Krishen Jit, best known as a director, remains an exemplar of a critical postmodern not-for-profit theatre that, while aware of and sometimes dipping into indigenous roots, used drama as a forum for socio-political-intercultural debate. Faridah Merican, producer, actress, and director, sees theatre as a site where artists of all ethnicities, ages, and inclinations can potentially share the stage. While the former two found early homes in the university system, Faridah’s sphere, until recently, was in media and advertising with strict attention to the economics and fundraising that are part of the arts in capitalist cultures. This paper will begin with Ghulam Sarwar Yousof’s attention to heritage, move to Krishen Jit’s theatre of socio-political critique, and end with Faridah Merican’s creative space making.

Ghulam Sarwar Yousof: Reinventing Traditions and Heritage Building

Ghulam Sarwar Yousof [hereafter Ghulam] made primary impact on theatre as a scholar and professor teaching at Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM, 1970-2002), Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK, National Arts academy), International Islamic University Malaysia (2009-2014), and Universiti Malaya (UM, 2014-2022).² As the son of a Penang textile merchant of Punjabi origin, Ghulam took his BA at Universiti Malaya in 1964 where he was involved in the drama society LIDRA. After graduation he planned to do an MA in what was then called “third world” Anglophone literature. But before he began graduate work, he was hired in 1969 to teach part-time at USM while working in his father’s business.

Humanities scholarship in post-independence Malaysia was undergoing a postcolonial revisioning. The Eurocentric focus of the British colonial educational system was being questioned as former colonial subjects sought independent identity. Literature, even in the western academy, was being rethought with inclusion of oral traditions and performance studies. Asia’s intricate theatres—India, Japan, China, and Indonesia—were now being studied with enthusiasm in the western academy. European modern drama with its textual primacy and realistic acting/staging was being challenged by models of Brecht, Grotowski, and guerrilla theatre. Were such new approaches—performance and cultural studies methods, which rethought storytelling, theatre, and dance—apt for independent Malaysia? Had heritage forms already been quashed, or might they serve as postcolonial models? Ghulam, heretofore educated in an Anglophone environment of literary written texts, was minimally acquainted with theatre *qua* performance. When Vice Chancellor Hamzah Sendut invited Ghulam to found a performing art programme at USM, Ghulam responded, “What the hell is performing arts?” However, as he took his students to Kedah and Perlis to do field work on indigenous theatres, noting ritual openings, trance connections, and mythic narratives, he rethought what theatre meant. (Ghulam Sawar Yousof, personal communication, June 6, 2014).

Ghulam and the department’s direction were affected by the political situation. In the Cold War era, the U.S. competed with the U.S.S.R. to win Southeast Asian hearts and minds. The “soft power” of educational funding was being deployed by the U.S. to leverage influence.³ The Marxist vs. Western democracy/capitalism

rivalry had shifted from East Asian hotspots—China in the 1940s and Korea in the 1950s—to focus on Southeast Asia by the 1960s and 1970s, as the Southeast Asian War expanded. A generation of Americans who served in the Pacific theatre in WWII and the Korean war, had returned to American universities to study on the G. I. Bill. Many focused on the Asia-Pacific cultures they had encountered while in the military and then taught at the tertiary level. By the 1960s these newly minted professors were establishing programmes that expanded literature and arts studies beyond the western canon. Emerging programmes in ethnomusicology, dance ethnology, and Asian theatre were established in American universities where area studies funding grants from the U. S. government was available, including the University of Hawai’i and the University of Michigan. Scholarships were readily granted for supporting promising students and academics from Southeast Asia, the American Congress hoped such students might rise to leadership positions and influence “third world” nations to favour western democracy and capitalist enterprise.

Influential figures for USM included Robert Van Neil (1922-2012) of Dutch descent, who had served in the Philippines in WWII and then studied in Indonesia (see Van Neil, 2012), and James R. Brandon (1927-2015), who served in Japan during the Korean War and then served as a cultural officer at the US embassy in Jakarta before conducting research on Japanese and Southeast Asian theatre (see Jortner & Foley, 2011). Each would become important for Ghulam. In 1967 Van Neil, by then a Southeast Asian history professor at the University of Hawaii, had applied to the U.S. Commission on International and Cultural Affairs for funding, submitting a “Proposal for Training Indonesian Historians” (Van Neil, 2012). Indonesia was still in the chaos of the Sukarno-Suharto transition that resulted in the mass killings of perhaps half a million so-called “communists.” Yet, Van Neil’s idea of implementing a humanities curriculum that included art, drama, and journalism interested government offices in Washington that were dealing with Southeast Asia. The model was likewise welcomed by Malaysian academic leaders at the newly founded USM (1969), since it offered a postcolonial approach which highlighted local culture and creativity, promising a break with the British system and its subaltern thinking.

From 1971 to 1973 Van Neil served as the Foundation Dean of the Humanities School at USM. Ghulam moved into a full-time position with Van Neil’s support and was tasked with developing the first formal performing arts program in Malaysian higher education, though, of course, drama had long been an important extra-curricular activity of students at University of Malaya (see discussion of Krishen Jit’s work at UM below). Ghulam, as he developed the program, invited practitioners of traditional puppetry (*wayang siam*’s Dalang Hamzah Awang), dance drama (*mak yong*’s star Seri Panggung Khatijah Awang). He would also hire figures from the popular urban improvised theatre (*bangsawan*’s Mak Mina Yem and Pak Ilias), as well as modern icons such as Krishen Jit to advise and teach in a course of study, which mixed courses in indigenous genres with contemporary western experimentation and developing Malaysian modern scripted drama. James Brandon, then head of the Asian Theatre PhD programme at University of Hawaii was the theatre consultant on Van Neil’s USM project: Brandon soon would be Ghulam’s PhD advisor. Brandon’s student Roger Long, who was still finishing his dissertation on *wayang kulit jawa* for the University of Hawaii, came to teach at USM in 1972

(see Foley 2011). Belgian director Tone Brulin shared European avant garde ideas. The period was marked by a strong flow of arts practitioner-educators between USM and Hawai'i.⁴

Students, it was envisioned, would be prepared to make their own combinations of old and new, rural and urban, to develop new arts which could exemplify the emerging nation. This mixture of indigenous and experimental performance courses would, with time, be exported to other Malaysian tertiary education institutions as graduates of the USM programme (for example, Hatta Azad Khan, Zainal Abdul Latiff, Marion D'Cruz, Rosmina Tahir, etc.) took up faculty positions across the nation. Thus, the American model, prompted by the Cold War use of education in influencing potential allies, helped to advance postcolonial performance education.

A second context for the programme at USM was the National Cultural Policy which dictated focus on Malay culture as central to Malaysian identity. Following the May 13, 1969, riots that pitted Malay Malaysians against Malaysians of Chinese descent, *bumiputra*/indigenous Malays called for economic advancement and affirmative action for Malay Malaysians who, although they were the majority, were economically behind compared to the urban Chinese and Indian Malaysians, many of whose families had immigrated during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. By 1971 social policies were implemented to ensure Malay culture would be the base of national identity. Though the Chinese and Indian Malaysians, as well as mixed race individuals, might have lived multiple generations in the country, these groups were seen as subsidiary.

Thus, in planning for developments in the new programme, Ghulam was responding both as a national citizen and a private individual to both Cold War and national political dynamics that created both opportunities and limitations. Though arguably the "heritage" of arts of ethnically mixed in Penang could have included Chinese *xiqu* (opera) and Fujian hand or iron-rod puppetry and Indian dance forms like the twentieth century revisions of courtesan dance including *bharata Natyam*, *odissi*, and *kathak*), it was primarily Malay forms that were installed as studio classes.⁵ In the early 1970s this Malay focus was indeed embraced with enthusiasm by Ghulam along with most Malaysians, regardless of their ethnicity. Place-based arts and nationalist feeling coincided. However, inequities would become clearer with time and even the lack of deep support of the heritage Malay disciplines by some in the government would become apparent. The Islamic revival, which arguably began with the 1979 Iranian revolution, would make the arts a target as Sunni followers increasingly questioned elements like cross-gender representations, women on stage, rituals, and the mythos of traditional stories.

For the programme to advance at USM it required Ghulam to retrain himself. In the colonial era, English was the language of education and government, and immigrant groups from China and India did not need to merge to a full degree linguistically with the Malay majority. But now Malay language and cultural forms were "core." The 1971 National Cultural Policy affirmed non-Malay elements should only be included as they fit with a Malay Islamic centre.⁶ Thus, the USM arts programme, led by a Malaysian of Indian heritage would prioritise Malay forms, since government funding often was predicated on the degree of "Malay"-ness.

Reprogramming was a challenge to someone like Ghulam, who came of age when English was the medium of education, bureaucracy, and cross ethnic communication. Ghulam, regarding his lifelong preference for English, wrote in a blog post as late as Sept. 1, 2016:

I cannot think as effectively in any other language. It is natural for me to use English for the purpose of creative writing . . . My view is that the writer should choose the language he can handle best and all writing by Malaysian writers is Malaysian. (Ghulam, 2016)

But not everyone agreed. Malay poetry, novels, dramas were more likely to garner support and in the 1970s, Ghulam, as all professors, was required to sit for tests in Malay. The medium of instruction shifted from English, to English-Malay bilingualism, and finally Malay for instruction.

Ghulam only encountered *mak yong*, the genre that would become his life-long research specialty, in 1969 at a theatre conference at the University of Malaya.⁷ At the same event he met ethnomusicologist William Malm of the University of Michigan who had, in 1968, researched the music of this Kelantanese dance drama. Ghulam, in my interview with him in 2014, noted “Mak Yong did something to me... I felt good vibrations about it” (Ghulam Sawar, personal communication, June 6, 2014). He chose art as his dissertation topic when he entered the PhD programme in Hawaii with funding from the East West Center, an institution established by the U. S. Congress in 1960 to strengthen relations between peoples of Asia, the Pacific, and the United States through scholarships and academic exchange.

Malm had recorded in 1968 ninety hours of *mak yong* performance, and Ghulam would meet him again in Hawaii, where Malm was, in 1973, temporarily a Senior Fellow visiting the East West Center’s Cultural Learning Institute. Malm’s presence and research materials became the basis of Ghulam’s production (1973), a *mak yong* version of *Raja Tangkai Hati*, using the University of Hawai’i (UH) theatre and music students to present this Kelantanese art, with choreography reconstructed from Malm’s tapes by UH dance ethnologist Judy van Zile.⁸ This was probably the first attempt by a Western cast to do a traditional *mak yong* performance. Later Ghulam would watch all Malm’s Kelantan footage in Michigan where Malm had returned; perhaps ironically these American experiences were his first in-depth exposures to the form. Then in 1975-1976 in Kelantan, Ghulam worked with Seri Temenggong Group whose star was Khatijah Awang. Her son served as Ghulam’s field assistant, helping him even as he was still learning the Malay language, especially Kelantanese dialect. Thus, Ghulam became an anthropologist of the arts, working to understand Kelantanese rural culture, which differed radically from his multicultural urban Penang. With Ghulam’s return to USM in 1976, he would bring Khatijah and Dalang Hamzah to teach *mak yong* and *wayang*, respectively. The department developed training for both students and community members. In 1978 Ghulam helped to organise a Festival of Penang, expanding to include *bangsawan* performance workshops; yet, for Ghulam, this popular improvised theatre lacked the ritual, healing, and mythological connections that made Kelantan’s traditional arts so appealing.

In time, Ghulam was doing fieldwork throughout Southeast Asia and guest teaching at the University of the Philippines in Quezon. Over the years his Malay/Thai research covered *wayang gedek*, *wayang siam*, *nora chatr* as he wrote on the traditional arts of all areas in the Southeast Asian region (see Ghulam 1994). Additionally, over his career he authored a number of plays (*Suvarna-Padma*, *The Golden Lotus*, written in 1972, published in 2015; *Halfway Road*, 1982; *The Trial of Hang Tuah the Great*, written in 1983-84, published 2014; *Small Business Loan*, 2001). Yet these are all modern scripted dramas in which language predominates in narratives focused on contemporary political issues of the nation. They do not tap the traditional theatre he focused on as a scholar. Ghulam Sawar noted, “My plays, I think, are quite significant in what they say. And because of what they say they are also considered ‘sensitive’ in Malaysia” (Ghulam Sawar, personal communication, June 6, 2014). *Halfway Road* could not get police permission to play in Penang—police found a Malay girl as a barmaid disturbing, and that the public felt the title maligned the site (Halfway Road, now Jl. A.S, Mansoor) (Yau & Raheem, 2018, 170). The nuance of a country halfway toward freedom went over the head of the censor. *Trial of Hang Tuah the Great* was suspect in that it accused the ultimate hero of the Malay race for failing the nation. Hang Tuah is charged

with causing the May 13 riots in Kuala Lumpur in the year 1969; with the subversion of the New Economic Policy . . . being involved in bribery, corruption, and other allied crimes against the country, the Malay race, and their religion. (Ghulam 2014a, p. 95)

The audience is left to decide his guilt/innocence.

In *Suvarna-Padma*, *The Golden Lotus* (2015) a poet faces a censorious society where creativity is crippled. Literary awards depend on kowtowing to the government officers who want intellectuals to support the “party” and ignore the corruption. These are plays about the cultural politics of contemporary Malaysia. The hero commits suicide rather than play along with the system. He is called Vacha (“speaking clearly” in Sanskrit) and deplores the state of society.

Vacha: The error they have committed recently. . . From the simplest measures to promote local industries to the largest projects . . . built with European assistance. The exploitation of religion and corruption is so rampant—it’s sickening. It’s oozing out of the skin of every government official from the highest to the lowest. . . How can I write what the state expects me to? (Ghulam, 2015, pp. 17-18)

For imaginative responses to traditional theatre, one must go to Ghulam’s short stories and poetry. Two stories, “Tok Dalang,” which presents a puppet master going into trance mid performance, and “Mak Yong Dancer,” share fictive versions of experiences Ghulam likely encountered in field research (2014, pp. 156-182, pp. 44-59). For example, the latter story has the narrator, a journalist visiting a somewhat faded *mak yong seri panggung* (probably modelled on Khatijah Awang), hoping to

pry out the secret knowledge that Malay traditional forms claim to hold. The journalist knows the challenge:

The intense beauty of mak yong, manifested particularly in its dance and music, was unquestionable. Its spiritual side had been hinted to me many times . . . But no one was prepared to go beyond the basics. Was it at all possible that, at last, through Mak Su I would reach deeper into the soul of mak yong? (Yousof, 2014b, p. 49)

Though he has written on many genres of Southeast Asian theatre, *mak yong* in the style of Khatijah Awang has predominated in curricula he mounted and researched. While he has discussed the links to *main peteri* often, he delves only lightly into the psycho-social outcomes and healing methodologies of the form. Perhaps he encountered more the *lahir* (case) explanations in his fieldwork and not always the *batin* (spirit), as inner knowledge in traditional Southeast Asian genres is usually held only for children of the artist's families and Ghulam, while supportive, was a Malaysian-Indian outsider. Ghulam's writing is strong in describing rituals (in some cases trying to revive faltering practices like the *sembah guru* [respecting the teacher] initiation of a dancer). His photo and video resources are rich, but Ghulam never really trained as a practitioner, and perhaps this limited his perspective. Perhaps a performance ethnologist must enter the form to fully understand the questions that he/she needs to ask. Training allows fundamental analysis of movement, improvisation technique, music, mantra, and full socio-mythic meanings. That he began research as the Islamic revival was threatening the form as "un-Islamic" was a problem. By the 1990s fundamentalism led to the banning of traditional arts in their home area, Kelantan. This situation of threat that the Kelantanese arts have experienced has certainly caused traditionally trained practitioners to self-censor, altering answers where anything might be seen as un-Islamic (*shirk*). Arts which are already designed to be secret are even harder to research in times when they are perceived as against received religion.

Ghulam's greatest contribution to Malay theatre is his development of a curriculum requiring performing arts students to study heritage dance, drama, and puppetry forms. This model at USM was later exported in part to ASK/ASWARA in Kuala Lumpur, where Ghulam helped form the theatre program in the 1990s, taking with him Dalang Hamzah and Khatijah Awang. UM and other institutions would include heritage classes, too. Ghulam's efforts would result in the two major artists he championed being recognised as National Artists (Seniman Negara)—Hamzah in 1993 (see Ghulam, 1997) and Khatijah in 1999. The 2006 designation of *mak yong* as Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO (2006) was due, in Ghulam's estimation, to his work. When culture department officials had failed to write a convincing proposal on first efforts, "They came to ask for help. They hadn't done it properly . . . [I told them] 'Let me do it alone'" (Ghulam Sawar, personal communication, June 6, 2014).⁹

He created the file, chose the performers to present to adjudicators, developed the script, and met with the UNESCO officers. His detailed proposal had a six-year plan for training a new generation and was accepted. It called for the creation of a permanent training centre in Kuala Lumpur, regular conferences, international

touring, etc. Though the designation was achieved, his plan was never implemented. Instead, he noted, the minister gave the funding to ASWARA (where *mak yong* continues to be taught, but sometimes in an adaptation of Disney's *Cinderella*, rather than a traditional *mak yong* narrative). In Ghulam's perspective the government preservation was a failure: "Nothing has happened till now . . . Nothing will happen," he stated (Ghulam Sawar, personal communication, June 6, 2014).

His writing struck a similar note:

It is likely that existing Malay performing arts will not survive for long. Indeed, it appears as if their fate has already been sealed. They are doomed . . . The problems are the result of the prevailing attitudes, values systems, and the pressures of modernization. . . [T]he future of the traditional Malay performing arts as well as the artists involved in them is at best bleak. (Ghulam, 1992, p. 220)

Ghulam's work ensures that consciousness and focus toward the past is a part of Malaysian theatre training. He also created a valuable archive, where if and when a full revival is sought, rich resources are ready to tap. The short university courses, meeting once a week for some months, cannot create a *dalang* or *seri panggung*. Skill in movement, music, improvisation, and repertoire are too complex to "fit" the adumbrated modern educational format, not to mention the more metaphysical skills of controlling trance, mastering mantra, and detailing ritual offerings. Ghulam's students like Anne James and Marion D'Cruz, both dancer-actors who have helped develop Five Arts Centre and participated in other theatre/dance groups, have only been given a taste—yet they have worked to impart the vision of the significance of traditional arts to their students. Perhaps someone will, using Ghulam's archives, later carry his research to conclusion.

Ghulam was the scholar-chronicler of the theatre of the Malay past. He was an "outsider" who valued and promoted Malay traditional arts and followed where the scholarship led, acknowledging the Javanese and Thai influences rather than stopping at national borders. He protected and preserved local religious insight regarding teacher-student relations and animistic and trance potentials of traditional arts as forms were attacked by religious fundamentalists. He showed the path of championing study of the Malay theatrical past as a conduit to the theatre of a Malaysian future.

Krishen Jit: Exploring Postcolonial Directions

Krishen Jit (1939-2005), trained as a historian, is best remembered as a director and theatre critic whose work navigated postcolonial history's wavering winds.¹⁰ He was born in Kuala Lumpur to a Punjabi family and his first role at eight years was Rama in a 1947 production at Gombak Lane Hindu Temple. He attended The Victoria Institution, a leading secondary school in Kuala Lumpur, where in colonial-era education, drama was part of the programme—since this was then the norm in elite British public schools. As he took up a major in history at the University of Malaya (UM) in 1959, he was doing stage work in the important amateur theatre, Malaysian

Arts Theatre Group (MATG) in Kuala Lumpur. MATG's European members at the time would play the leads, while the Malaysian locals did technical work or carried spears. It was a revolution in casting when Jit played Julius Caesar in 1959, the first Malaysian to play a lead role. Jit, with Tan Jin Khor, founded the University of Malaya Literary and Drama Association (LIDRA) in 1960. Finishing his undergraduate degree, he accepted a 1962 Fulbright Scholarship to do a history MA at University of California Berkeley, entering the campus as the Berkeley Free Speech movement, civil rights, and Vietnam war agitation activism mounted. Brechtian productions, guerilla theatre, and theatre for social change were endemic to American campus life in the 1960s. Jit returned to UM in 1967 to teach history and used his tools of political-cultural analysis in both his acting and directing for MATG and UM's Cultural Centre.

In the wake of the May 13, 1969, incident, Jit joined with other like-minded cultural leaders to demand that drama help redress social and economic inequity in Malaysia's young democracy. At the 1971 National Cultural Congress, he joined with important writers, directors, and actors Syed Alwi, Rahim Razali, and Usman Awang on a statement/paper, "Our Theatre . . . Where Are Your Roots," which

advocated a theatre practice that thematically drew from local history and culture. It also suggested that theatre practitioners employ traditional theatre to enrich practice, citing Syed Alwi's use of *Wayang Kulit* in the flashback scene of *All the Perfumes* [1968] as an example. The paper criticised the dependency on Western theatre and noted that theatre practice was only accessible to a small English-educated elite. (K. Rowland, as quoted by Luminosita, 2005)

Though himself primarily Anglophone, Jit in this period embraced Malay language and culture. He switched from English to Malay language drama, helping found a bilingual publication (*Seni dan Teater* [Art and Theatre]) for MATG and instituting MATG's multi-lingual performance festival Genta Rasa in Kuala Lumpur in 1971. He worked for over a decade in Malay language theatre; Audre Lorde's maxim—"the master's tool will never dismantle the master's house . . . they will never enable us to bring about genuine change"—seemed to exemplify his rejection of English as a medium for Malaysian performance in that period. The focus on Malay characters/stories may have hastened his withdrawal from acting—his accent when speaking Malay was pronounced.

The who's who of intellectual Malay playwrights found in Jit a director who brought their scripts to life. He directed major Malay language productions of Usman Awang, Dinsman, and Syed Alwi. Jit was central to the success of Noordin Hassan's plays and wrote about Noordin in international publications, including the works *It Is Not Tall Grass Blown by the Wind* (1970) and *Don't Kill the Butterflies* (1983). In an earlier essay, I argued that Jit's work can be classed as a "people's theatre" of the late twentieth century—socially engaged theatre aimed at empowering audiences to better the world (Foley, 2022). Rather than seeking Aristotelian catharsis, Brechtian theatre wants the viewer to do something and so eschews realism as a mode in hopes that audiences will get to work mending the world. Theatre was for Jit a site of socio-political dissection to get audiences to do something. While Jit sometimes used

elements borrowed from traditional performance, as in Syed Alwi's *Tok Perak* which features a *bomoh* (shaman) type character, the focus in Jit's productions was to construct a dramatic action (often text/plot centric) to make socio-political points about contemporary Malaysian society.

From 1972 to 1994 Jit was Malaysia's foremost theatre critic via the weekly column "Talking Drama with Utih" for *The New Straits Times* (see Rajendran, 2007). The name Utih was borrowed from a character in the play *Uda dan Dara* by Usman Awang. Utih is a wise but quizzical village elder. As an example of Jit's critical style, take a 1986 column where he challenged the arts community:

I have but one wish this year, and one resolve. I would like to see a play that is engaged with the deep social and political questions of our day... Few theatre people have thought of doing theatre that will cause the audience to sit and stare at themselves. We are living in a decade of entertaining theatre, expensive theatre, professional theatre. All is promise, little has been particularly successful. (Jit, January 19, 1986, as quoted in Rajendran, 2007)

By the 1980s Jit had returned to Anglophone theatre: English, belonging to no specific ethnic group was now for him neutral ground, where all Malaysians could meet without the cultural baggage that the NEP/NEC had wrought. Rising Islamic fundamentalism with heightened censorship of the arts by the 1980s was adding to the obvious inequities of the NEP economic policy of "Malays-first" in academia, government jobs, and, sometimes, corruption. Jit espoused theatre as an open, multilingual, multi-art space where the rising tide of censorship on political, social, and sexual issues should not prevail. Grants to do additional research study interacting with Richard Schechner's Performance Studies programme at New York University made Jit want to keep in contact with developing transnational intercultural work. He networked with modern drama groups throughout Southeast Asia, resulting in his contributions to scholarship on Asian Theatre (see Jit, 1993). English helped bridge gaps. With Chin San Sooi, K. S. Maniam, Redza Piyadasa, and Marion D'Cruz, he founded Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur to provide a free space for discussion of the Malaysian postcolonial predicament. Multiculturalism, he felt, was already a natural part of the Malaysian psyche:

I actually believe that in the case of plural societies such as Malaysian and Singapore, and even certain parts of India, multiculturalism is in one body. We tend to think of it as a negotiation between one body and another, but I actually think it is in one body and in many ways, I have been trying to excavate that in one way or another. (Rajendran, 2012, p. 11)

His Anglophone 1984 *Here and Now* presented in 1985 was a particularly hard-hitting statement. This was an adaptation of Orwell's novel by Chinese Malaysian Kee Thuan Chye (1954-), a graduate of USM's performing arts programme who earned his living as a journalist for the *New Straits Times*. Kee had hoped to do graduate work in theatre as USM, but due to the pro-Malay affirmative action policy, the scholarship went to a Malay, who Kee felt was less qualified (T. C. Kee, personal communication, 2013). Ethnicity in this play created the hierarchy.

“The Party” was Malays supporting “Big Brother” (who was meant to represent then Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad). “Proles” were the Sino- and Indian-Malaysians.

Kee’s play opened with Party members denouncing rock music and dancing as “obscene” and “against our religion” (referring to the censorious environment in the Islamic revival). “Big Brother” states,

Our war is a war of peace. . .you must put your faith in the party. You must put your faith in God, observe the principles of our religion. You must uphold our culture. Do not let it be shaken by foreign influences. . . . Party members must unite, one and all with no exceptions. As for the Proles who have made their homes in this nation. . . they must understand that above all else the party members must be kept happy. Party members must not feel threatened or deprived in this land that is rightfully theirs. (as quoted in Rowland, 2015, pp. 38-39)

The performance climaxed as the journalist hero (a stand in for author Kee himself) asked the audience:

Are you all going to sit here and do nothing? The hope of the nation lies with you! Are you going to sit here and let it go to the dogs? Stand up! . . . Stand up for your freedom, for racial equality and integration, for humanity and justice, for truth, for a nation capable of greatness! . . . You have the power to bring about changes. . . Yes! Yes! Yes! (Kee 1987, p. 70)

In his later career, Jit increasingly directed in Singapore, collaborating with Substation, Wild Rice, and other important groups. Singapore, seeking to promote itself as a global city, was easing up on censorship and sought to establish itself as a cosmopolitan centre through sponsorship of the arts with growing intellectual freedom and English as an international language. This was at a period when Malaysian censors were clamping down, and Jit had retired from UM. One of Jit’s mentees Mark Teh credits Jit with:

making some very clear and self-conscious moves...casting actors against their given ethnic and gender identities, using multilinguality in performances, experimenting with devised and visual performance...

I always felt that Krishen was running a marathon—you could get the shape of his directorial career by looking across different performances from different periods, and make the links where he changed directions, what persisted in the works, and how it fricitioned with what was going on in Malaysia and the region. This can be attributed to his training as a historian and a parallel career as a cultural critic for the NST [*New Straits Times*] for 22 years—he was an intellectual. While he loved the theatre, his curiosity for theory, popular culture, and what could constitute performance was inspiring. (Teh, quoted in Devan, 2018)

Rajendran, Takiguchi, and Nge (2018) reflect on how Krishen was perceived by his peers. He was seen as a mentor guiding them toward a more perfect society. If Ghulam’s work signalled toward the Malay past, Jit and his intellectual progeny, most of whom taught arts in tertiary institutions, gathered evidence from the present to

move Malaysian society toward a more multicultural democratic future. Jit's was thinking persons' theatre, music and dance might enter, but political messaging and cultural analysis were core. His work argued that real independence would only come when all Malaysians were treated equally.

Faridah Merican: Making Space for the Creative Spirit

In contrast to the two professor-researcher-practitioners discussed above with past or future foci, the producer-actress-director Faridah Merican has been concerned with the now.¹¹ She has worked at creating spaces where developing urban artists of all ethnicities can share in open dialogue. The productions can be new or based on tradition; they may be co-productions with international theatres (from Singapore or beyond) or funding groups (for example the Japan Foundation); they may be western classics, West End wonders or Malay musicals, large or intimate, but always they must be driven by the intellectual enthusiasms of emerging directors, choreographers, and performers.

Faridah was raised in Penang's (then Georgetown) multi-ethnic environment as a descendant of the important Indian-Muslim trader, Kapitan Keling, Cauder Mydin Merican (1794-1834). Penang, with its high density of Chinese immigrants, exposed her to Hokkien and Cantonese, as well as Malay and English. Her father, Basa Merican, taught English Literature at Penang Free School. She attended St. George's Girls School where she began acting in plays. Later, while studying at Kota Baru Teacher's Training College she played Kate in *The Taming of the Shrew*. She worked as a primary school teacher, but the low salary led her to shift to first, radio (news broadcasting and talk shows), and then, by 1963, television—media which broadcast in English in the late colonial period. At RTM (Radio Televisyen Malaysia) she worked with Leslie Dawson (her first husband), Syed Alwi, Krishen Jit, and Rahim Razali among others and became deeply engaged in local theatre. She worked for advertising firms (S.H. Benson and Ogilvy and Mather), gaining understanding of producing, casting, and budgeting. Faridah's participation in both media and stage work made her pragmatic as to what can play and how to pay. Theatre in urban Malaysia of the 1960s had seen the fading of *bangsawan*, which was commercially viable prior to the war, but had, post WWII, lost audiences to new media. No urban artists in the 1960s earned full livelihood as actors, directors, or writers for the stage. Theatre spaces rented by the amateur groups for short production runs were located in government buildings or educational institutions like UM. No stages were owned by the theatre company.

In 1989 Faridah married her second husband, the Australian actor of Lebanese descent Joseph Hasham (1948-), who, after his graduation in 1968 from NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art) in Sydney, had a successful career in television acting in Australia through the 1970s. He had in 1984 established with others a commercial media production company in Malaysia, which by 1987, was doing all its production work in Kuala Lumpur as GHA Images (later as APV [Asia-Pacific Videolab]). The couple, in 1989, established the Actor's Studio to train performers in Stanislavski and other techniques (voice, movement, improvisation)

with coursework inspired by Hasham's training at NIDA. Many who would become luminaries of contemporary theatre were among the early cohort, including Mark Beau de Silva (currently a resident director at KLPac), Tiara Jacquelina (founder of Enfiniti Academy of Musical Theatre and Performing Arts and noted stage and film actress), Patrick Teoh (radio and television broadcaster and stage and film actor), and others.

The couple's efforts to create an actor training programme and grow it into a commercial theatre was modelled in part on the successful Studio Theatre of Joy Zinoman (1943-). Zinoman, an American actress-director, spent time in Malaysia as a diplomat's wife, teaching at UM and participating in local productions with Faridah. Zinoman, on returning to the U. S., had established a company, first as an actor training programme, and then as a full functioning theatre in Washington D. C. in 1978. Visiting Zinoman in the U. S. gave Faridah and Joe the vision of what could happen: a place where classics, new work, and collaborations with other companies could thrive within a space owned by the troupe.

While Zinoman was talented at fundraising, she was also pragmatic regarding the need for financial independence. In an interview Zinoman notes: "I am not interested in artists who will not be responsible for what they're doing and the money they're spending and what the toll is in human and financial terms. I think this [financial pragmatism] helps you gain freedom, not lose it" (Trippet, 1996). Joe Hasham noted:

We visited Joy. . . in Washington. We were so inspired by her theatre that we thought, "This is the kind of thing we want!" . . .

This vision of a theatre run by artists for artists became the model for the Actors Studio. The first space we found was underneath the Dataran Merdeka (Independent Square) at the city centre of Kuala Lumpur. We opened a 153-seat theatre there in 1995. We then added a 90-seat blackbox and our Academy facility with 4 studios. (Japan Foundation, Performing Arts Network Japan, 2015)

They soon forged links to other groups: My Dance Alliance (Mohammed Anis Nor, Joseph Gonzalez, and others have been presidents), Hands Percussion group (led by Bernard Goh and Eric Ch'ng), Nyoba Kan Buto dance company (Lee Swee Keong, director and playwright), Huzir Sulaiman's Straits Theatre Company, and comedian Harith Iskandar's Happy Hours comedy series. Faridah noted: "It was a time when Malaysian theatre started to bloom. I think the existence of that venue facilitated it and enabled theatre to really grow" (Japan Foundation, Performing Arts Network Japan, 2015).

When a flood destroyed the company's space, the current location of Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Company (KLPac) in Sentul, which had been owned by Malaysian Railways but being developed by the YTL corporation, became available. Support of the Datin Seri Endon (wife of Tun Abdullah Ahmad Badawi who was then Prime Minister) was instrumental. Using the idea that the arts could be an enhancement and good business for the development of the area, KLPac opened in 2005.

Both the training given in the studios with classes for children to seniors and the theatre spaces where orchestras, theatre, and dance abound, allowed for developing professional training and a corresponding platform for performance (with rentals to outside groups helping to subsidise the group). Faridah noted: “We just wanted to give them [Actors Studio students] the possibility of learning some of the skills of drama, dance, and music. We realised that our education and schooling system in Malaysia did not cater for the performing arts . . . But, when we started The Actors Studio, there was nothing. Nothing to help the students to develop their creative skills” (Japan Foundation, Performing Arts Network Japan, 2015).

Faridah is routinely hailed as the first lady of Malaysian Theatre. KLPac and Actors Studio and the many allied groups work to create space for Malaysian voices: musicals, dramas, orchestral events, short play festivals. Productions in Chinese and Malay as well as English grace the KLPac stages. In 2019 the group launched a degree-bearing professional theatre programme through Taylor’s University with Faridah and Hasham in the lead. Though their Penang stage failed in the pandemic period, KLPac, despite closure for 377 days, has shown resilience. The company leverages government and corporate subsidies with box office revenues, grants from international foundations (for example Japan Foundation), rentals, and co-productions with other companies in Malaysia, Singapore, and beyond. There is a will and so they find a way. Their current group of resident directors/conductors/choreographers includes Mark Beau de Silva, Zhafir Muzani, Lee Kok Leong, Cheryl Mah, Andrea Sim, and Keith Toh along with many others in stage management, design, and other areas.

Mark Beau de Silva in a 2014 interview notes that the group does what it can to avoid the kind of restrictions that may cause the government-supported groups to self-censor. While the group may have run-ins now and then in mounting a show, often in that case they may not charge tickets (as happened with, for example, the *Vagina Monologues* in 2002). The theatre has also staged works on gay themes. It upended expectations about Malay classics. For example, Faridah directed a 2015 version of Usman Awang’s *Uda dan Dara* (Uda and Dara) which explores class exploitation in Malay society—a poor young man falls in love with a rich elite-class girl. Faridah made the male lover Chinese, disrupting ethnic expectations, and using this device to probe the pro-Malay affirmative action policy. Under Faridah and Joe Hasham’s direction, KLPac directors will do “whatever we can get away with” as they seek creative expression and freedom of speech (M. B. de Silva, personal communication, June 5, 2014)

The programming is diverse and primarily judged on the basis of creative merit and support of the artists who lead the projects. This may include semi-heritage works as with Zamzuriah Zahari’s *Jalan Primadona* (2015) monodrama which is based on Zamzuriah’s own experience as a *mak yong* artist challenged by the religious fundamentalists. *Jalan Primadona* was a mixture of modern acting and the complex dance of *mak yong* as Zamzuriah played eight characters. She noted:

“Sixty percent of what you will see on stage is based on my own experiences as an artiste,” says Zamzuriah, who is a full-time lecturer in ASWARA. She explains that her journey as an artist has never been a smooth one, and she has gone through many

conflicts. “It is not easy to be a female artist because people are always judging you,” explains Zamzuriah. (*A Thespian’s Journey*, 2015)

Zamzuriah teaches *mak yong* at ASWARA and seeks to make it a basis of contemporary creative work. Her *Titis Sakti* (Powerful Drops), produced by KLPac, was a *mak yong* adaptation of *A Midsummer’s Night Dream* for Shakespeare’s 400th birthday.

A May 2023 production for KLPac’s thirtieth anniversary is an example of the group’s cross-group, multicultural, and Southeast Asian focus that featured Faridah as an actress. This was *Mama Looking for Her Cat* by Singapore writer Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002), directed by Singaporean Benjamin Ho. This was a co-production with Ho’s Paper Monkey Theatre. Ho was a mentee of Kuo and has done previous productions/adaptations of this play which combines Malay, Tamil, English, Mandarin, and Chinese dialects (Hakka, Hokkien, Cantonese), all without subtitles. It deals with issues of miscommunication and the possibilities of real understanding across generations and ethnicities. An old Hokkien speaking woman seeks her lost cat as her Anglophone-/Mandarin-speaking offspring realise how little they know about their mother in seeking to find her. She has better rapport with an old Tamil-speaking man than her own children.

The 1988 ensemble piece was developed by Kuo as a showcase for students in his Practice Performing Arts School, who he trained to meld modern performance with Asian roots. The script was meant to test the budding actors’ skill of expression that could go beyond language. It was Singapore’s first multilingual, multiracial play and, in many ways, remains a quintessential work about the Malay-Singapore reality of a busy younger generation ill-equipped to speak to or understand the elders of many different roots who have birthed their society.

Ah Tao. . . Mama loses her cat and when her children refuse to help, she looks for the prized feline herself. What is a simple enough search on the surface delves into deeper issues such as loneliness, displacement, and the loss of connection to one’s roots. Mama’s journey becomes a metaphor for the larger societal changes... with the cat symbolising a gradually eroding sense of home and belonging. . . As the police interrogate her children about their missing mother, . . . they realise that not only do they not know their mother very well anymore, but also that she seems to love her cat more than she does them. (Gopinath, 2023)

This inclusive script demands that actors communicate across generations and languages. As Faridah played the role of the missing mother, she was sharing the stage with the multiethnic and multigenerational cast that is a microcosm of the shared Singapore-Malaysian reality. For Faridah and KLPac, diversity is a strength, and crossing borders is what the stage does best, and this can model the society.

ASEAN as a region is very rich and has much to offer. We should open up our borders more freely so there is a smooth flow of good leaders and intellectuals that will benefit our population. We’ve waited too long for this freedom of movement to happen. (Sagoo, 2020)

KLPac is about promoting the movement of artists, ideas, languages, and genres, and training the creative society she (Faridah) wants to be in. In the microcosm of KLPac, where joy in the arts prevails, the perfect society, where dialogue is possible and collaboration is the norm, is already present.

Conclusion

Ghulam Sawar Yousof, Krishen Jit, and Faridah Merican have been important for the development of postcolonial Malay Theatre and have created varying models of how to do it, reinforcing heritage, emphasising political efficacy, and making space for creative exploration. Their students have risen to leading roles in Malaysian arts of the 21st century and are likely to persevere in the models they have forged. I have argued that Ghulam emphasised knowing the past to create the future, Krishen concerned himself with affecting the society that would become, and Faridah pays attention to making space for the creative in the here-now of Malaysian society. Their work has affected performance and arts education in Malaysia in important ways and is likely to continue to do so for the foreseeable future.

Notes

¹ For the purposes of this paper, I will use the first names of the figures discussed as this is how they are best known in Malaysia and follows the practice of the Indonesian and Malay world, especially for luminaries.

² Biographical information is based on a personal interview. See also Ghulam (2016), Yau and Rajeem (2018), and Alvi and Vengandasamy (2022). For his comments on field work experiences researching individual Malaysian traditional theatre (including *mak yong*, *wayang gedek*, *wayang siam*, *nora chati*, and *bangsawan*) see also Ghulam (1976, 1992, 1994a, 1994b, 1997, 2004, 2011, 2019).

³ The USSR was of course then engaged in its own educational outreach endeavors.

⁴ See *The Leader* (2008), the USM alumni magazine, for various articles and images of early USM performing arts history as remembered by founding faculty and students. https://usmalumni.usm.my/images/09_The_Leader_vol3_no3_Sep2008_1.pdf.

⁵ Though conversant in Indian traditions in theory and practice from study at the University of Hawai'i and an assistant director for Shanta Gandhi on a version of *Vision of Vasuvadatta*, Ghulam did not emphasise research in Indian drama specifically, though he did a translation of one Sanskrit play (*Shakuntala*).

⁶ The 1971 National Culture Policy posits: 1) "National Culture must be based on the indigenous culture of this region" 2) "Suitable elements from other cultures may be accepted"; and 3) "Islam is an important component in the formulation of national culture" (see Prime Minister's Office of Malaysia, n. d. <https://www.pmo.gov.my/2019/07/national-culture-policy/>).

⁷ For a sense of this very important conference see the resulting publication edited by Mohd. Taib Osman (1974).

⁸ For details on the production, titled *The Spell of the Giantess*, see East-West Center (1973). <https://scholarspace.manoa.hawaii.edu/server/api/core/bitstreams/5453989d-1583-4e5e-a924-70fc47d7d85d/content>).

⁹ While Ghulam Sawar certainly led the work, efforts and research of others, including Patricia Hardwick on *mak yong* (see Hardwick, 2009 and 2020) and Patricia Matusky (1994) on

Kelantanese music, were of assistance.

¹⁰ See his curriculum vitae at Five Arts Centre website (Jit, n.d.). https://www.fiveartscentre.org/u/doc/Krishen%20Jit%20timeline_26042023.pdf. For various discussions his work, see Diamond (2002), Lo (2004), Nanney (2009, 2012), Nur Nina Zuhra (1991, 1992), Luminosita (2005), Nge (n.d.), Rajendran (1994, 2004, 2007, 2012, 2013), Rajendran & Wee (2007), Rajendran, Takiguchi, & Nge, eds. (2018), Rowland (n. d., 2003, 2015), Rowland et al. (2020), Soleh Ishak (1986) and Devan (2018). Jit's own writing on Southeast Asian topics includes Jit (1984, 1989a, 1989b, 1993a, 1993b, 2002).

¹¹ For information on Merican and KLPac see Diamond 2002, Japan Foundation, Performing Arts Network Japan 2015, Lo (2004), Sagoo (2020), Jacobs (2023), and Gopinath (2023).

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Biography

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