

Experimental Theatre and Way Forward: Mapping the Current Trends in Modern Malay Theatre

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Abstract

Malay theatre in Malaysia has been evolving. The forms and contents of modern Malay theatre change as Malay playwrights respond to the dynamic political and social milieu. Theatre experts on local Malay theatre used the term modern Malay theatre to refer to all the plays that were written within the period of Realism during the 1960s. Solehah Ishak (1990) categorized three major theatre periods in Malay theatre, namely, *sandiwara*, realism, and experimental/contemporary theatre. However, the categorization of such periods stopped in the 1990s, even though modern Malay theatre kept on progressing until the present. With this advent progression, there is no specific category had been recorded in which able to periodize this new form of Malay theatre in history. This paper intends to trace the missing period after the Experimental Theatre trend which ended in the 1990s. Therefore, the research will focus on the works that were produced during the years 2000-2020 onwards, in which proper research has been found lacking. Using ethnographic approach, this research will attempt to reassess the facts that prove there is a continuance from the last recorded period. Findings will be beneficial for further studies, especially on the forms and contents of the works examined. Efforts to sustain modern Malay theatre history and its development is a strategy to promote Malay theatre as part of Malaysian national cultural heritage and thus in line with the Malaysian National Culture Policy that emphasizes restoring, preserving, and strengthening national culture through joint research, development, education and cultural expansion and global connections.

Keywords: modern Malay theatre, mapping current trends, globalization, heritage, national cultural heritage

Introduction

Malay theatre in Malaysia has been evolving through time. From *bangsawan* plays to contemporary plays, Malay theatre production has experienced many changes influenced by modernization in the country. The forms and contents of modern Malay theatre change as Malay playwrights respond to the dynamic political and social milieu. From the period after the Second World War until the present day, there has been no definite theatrical form that dominated local theatre productions. Theatre experts on local Malay theatre use the term modern Malay theatre to refer to all the

plays that were written during the period of realism in the 1960s. It is believed that the realistic plays then marked the breakthrough in the history of local productions. Plays like *Atap Genting Atap Rumbia* (*The Tiled Roof and the Thatched Roof*) and *Tamu di Bukit Kenny* (*Visitors at Kenny Hill*) are two plays produced in the 1960s, which reflected the advancement in local theatre trends.

When *Bukan Lalang Ditiup Angin* (*It is Not The Grass that is Blown by The Wind*) by Noordin Hassan was first staged in 1970, the play reflected the first transformation in modern Malay plays. The play, first staged in Petaling Jaya Civic Centre, shocked the audience. Throughout the play, the stage displayed no sitting room set. Noordin Hassan made a new transformation which no other playwright had done before. Many plays written by later playwrights such as Johan Jaafar, Dinsman, and Syed Alwi seemed to follow the trend of removing the sitting room as a stage prop, and therefore, this marked a departure from realistic plays. A proper set, such as a sitting room set, that was once believed to lie at the heart of realistic plays, could no longer sustain its dominance in the local productions.

New experimental plays written by contemporary playwrights during the 1970s and 1980s marked a drastic change in the theatrical scene in Malaysia. Many later productions benefited from these bold changes made in the techniques, styles, and approaches in experimental plays. Nowadays, many new eclectic approaches have become prominent in the current local productions as the local theatre scene becomes more confident and breaks away from conventional and stereotypical theatre arts. This represents a positive approach towards the advancement of theatre as an art, which reflects the current social and political stability of the country. This is seen in Krishen Jit's opinion in an interview published in *The Star*, dated 23rd May 2003, "There is something about Malaysian plays. They are more textured and complex, as there is this reluctance to make things simple. There never has to be finality" (Krishen Jit quoted in Lim, 2003, p. 3). Hence, some new theatrical styles and approaches later contributed to a more progressive development of Malay theatre productions to the present.

Problem Statement

Modern Malay theatre has been categorized into three major periods, namely, *sandiwara*, realism, and contemporary/experimental theatre. Unfortunately, no particular periodization has been made to classify the dynamics of new Malay theatre forms in the era of the millennium in Malaysia. Studies of periods and trends in modern Malay theatre stopped abruptly in the 1990s. However, there was an attempt made by theatre critics to highlight Islamic theatre trends in the 1980s after the popular experimental theatre period ended in the late 1970s. This was related to Islamic revivalism in Malaysia that shaped and influenced the theatre productions at that time. On the contrary, such attempts have created huge confrontations and debates, hence the study on classifying this trend has not achieved much attention ever since. Since there is no study or attempt to categorize a new periodization in promoting millennium theatre productions, from the year 2000 till 2020, this study is a continuation of the last effort made by Solehah in 1990. This offers a detailed study

of Malay works specifically. The new periodization is important not only because it fills in the gap left for so many years, but also because this new periodization can become a point of reference for future research and studies pertinent to modern Malay theatre in general.

Literature Review

Solehah Ishak (1990) in her article, “Trends in modern Malay theatre” deduced three major trends in local theatre productions. Namely:

Zaman Sandiwara (Sandiwara Period)

The turning point of the transitional period from traditional plays or *bangsawan* plays to modern plays, marked the *zaman sandiwara* or *sandiwara* period. Although *sandiwara* plays represent stories that are from Malay classical history which deal with Malay warriors, kings, and princes or are stories that are creatively produced by the playwrights, *sandiwara* plays still differ in many ways as compared to traditional Malay plays. *Sandiwara* plays require scripts and practice before the real performance. Traditional plays do not have a script and are performed spontaneously. A *bangsawan* play contains many episodes and sometimes is staged continuously for several nights. *Sandiwara*, in contrast, has very limited episodes. A *sandiwara* play was staged on a proscenium stage and improvises the *bangsawan* technique of extra-turn which is also known as interval during the next setting. This extra-turn is often not in line with the plot. Instead, the *sandiwara* plays use background music that is suitable for the plot during the intervals of the next setting. Though *sandiwara* has replaced many of *bangsawan*’s theatrical techniques, the performance technique is very much the same. Examples of famous *sandiwara* plays include: Shaharom Husain’s *The Hunchback of Tanjong Puteri (Si Bongkok Tanjong Puteri)*, and Kalam Hamidi’s *The Child of Vows of Seven Scared Places (Anak Nazar Tujuh Keramat)*.

Zaman Realistik atau Moden (Realism or Modern Period)

The 1960s also marked the emergence of realistic plays whose setting is the sitting room. These plays are also known as “sitting room plays” as the entire play takes place on a proscenium stage. Realistic plays have removed the extra-turn techniques and as a result, the plays are smoothly staged without any intervals in between the scenes. Plays of this period mostly deal with the Malays of the post-independence era who either lived in the *kampung* (village) or even if they lived in the *bandar* (town), they still adhered to traditional values. Often the plot will be based on the process of modernization and how the process has improved the infrastructure of the *kampung* and offer a better lifestyle for the society. Examples of famous realism plays include: *The Tiled Roof and the Thatched Roof, (Atap Genting Atap Rumbia)* by Mustapha Kamil Yassin, also known as Kala Dewata and Usman Awang’s *Flute of the Night (Serunai Malam)*.

Zaman Kontemporari (Contemporary Period)

Plays that fall under this period were written and published in the 1970s and 1980s. These plays have moved forward and left the village environment by the government's policies for restructuring the society by encouraging massive rural-urban migration and more Malay participation in the Malaysian economy. The plays were concerned with the change in the social milieu of the Malays who became the new rich Malays; the products of the implementation of the New Economic Policy of the post-1969 era. Bidin Subari's *Ayam Jantan Ayam Betina (The Cock and The Hen)* was first produced in 1973 and published in 1974. The play was produced four days after the riots; in response to the Malaysian state's efforts to improve the life of the Malays. Bidin Subari illustrates how wealth, education, and progress can raise the standard of living of the majority of the Malays. The Malaysian state has succeeded in implementing policies that encourage rural-urban migration. Bidin highlighted this vividly in his play that although these villagers have moved out from the village to the town, they are still trapped in poverty and continue to live on the fringes of these towns. It seems that these people inherit poverty and are powerless to change their lives. Bidin also pointed it out that power corrupts and is abused among the new rich Malays. The content of Bidin's play is very provocative yet the setting of the play remains in the sitting room; this kind of setting has never changed since.

Dato' Noordin Hassan represents a breakthrough in theatre experimentation, which marked the decade of the 1970s. Noordin's play, *Bukan Lalang Ditiup Angin (It Is Not The Grass That Is Blown By The Wind)* shattered the dominance of realistic plays and replaced them with experimental theatre, which was performed in experimentation theatres. The most interesting part of the play was that during the performance, the setting differed greatly from the traditional ones. The play was Noordin's response to the May 13, 1969 riot. The underlying message was that Malays should be united and take pride in their culture and tradition. The past will always be the guide, as history will repeat itself. Modernization has resulted in many ill effects and many issues being raised. Noordin Hassan and Syed Alwi were not the only two playwrights who were concerned with the change in the social milieu of the post-1969 era. The decade of the 1970s witnessed some playwrights who experimented with new theatre techniques and approaches. They used their plays to comment on Malaysian society. The period of the 1970s was also known for its "absurd plays". Playwrights such as Dinsman, Johan Jaffar, and Hatta Azad Khan wrote, directed, and acted in their plays. Dinsman with his play, *Protes (Protest)*, *Bukan Bunuh Diri (It Is Not Suicide)*, and *Ana*, are concerned with self-integrity and individualism. Dinsman's characters were often portrayed as those who wander far to find the meaning of themselves and their existence.

Johan Jaaffar and Hatta Azad Khan were more concerned with the social ills arising as a result of modernization. In Johan's *Angin Kering (Dry Wind)* published in 1976, he portrays a society falling apart because of social ills. In *Dia (Someone)* published in 1982, the playwright highlighted characters that seek the meaning of their lives, and through them, Johan aims to illustrate the eroding moral values of a society. Hatta's concern is on the moral decadence and the erosion of self-dignity of the poor and the gutter-dwellers of his society, who were left behind during the

flourishing economy and social development that is enjoyed by the society at large. This was vividly portrayed in *Mayat (The Corpse)*. In *Kerusi (The Chair)* published in 1976, Hatta warns the audience of the fact that absolute power corrupts absolutely. Theater of the Absurd became a trend in Malaysia during the 1970s and later in the mid-1980s. Playwrights like Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan, and Johan Jaaffar, presented their absurd plays to reflect the myriad meanderings of dramatists who are on the threshold of a newly restructured Malaysian society. The absurd dramatic form further illustrates the absurdity felt by these young, highly-educated Malay playwrights. The feeling of their inabilities and helplessness reflects the shortcomings of their society.

Post 1990s. Ever since the absurd theatre ala Malaysia was the prominent style found in the contemporary period of Modern Malay theatre, no attempts have been made by local theatre experts to embark on the next periodization. Solehah Ishak in her paper, “Aesthetics of Modern Malay Theatre Productions Which Are Predominantly Islamic Themes” mentioned that theatre productions took a slight turn from producing experimental plays to plays that portray Islamic themes. It was the decade that launched and perpetuated Islamic revivalism in the country (1989, p. 37). A study conducted by Fazilah Husain, Zulkifli Mohamad & Zariat Abdul Rani (2022) pointed out some elements pertinent to staging Islamic theatre suggested by the Dato’ Noordin Hassan plays that fall under this category which he termed *Teater Fitrah* or theatre of faith. It is to be mentioned that, for the plays to stage theatre of faith, the performances must adhere to apply Islamic elements in various aspects and approaches including acting, characters, and issues about Islam. The issues raised include the life history of the Prophet Muhammad PBUH, and contemporary problems faced by the Muslims today (Fazilah Husin et al., 2022, p. 144). However, it could be said that the emergence of such theatre trends was not deemed as coincidental with previously selected Malay playwrights of the 1970s since they have been predominantly concerned with Islamic themes way before. Therefore, Solehah highlighted that “but if there is to be an ‘Islamic theatre’, it must take into consideration and resolve the inherent contradictions between religion and theatre” (Fazilah Husin et al., 2022, p. 36). Hence, Islamic theatre of faith became unable to be categorized as the major theatre period after the contemporary period.

The period of 1990s witnessed many eclectic plays and indie plays became one of the major contributions to the local theatre industry during this time. Indie theatre is a new genre that developed greatly in the creative arts industry post-millennially, and Malay theatre was not excluded from its emergence back then. Syarul Azlina and Zolkipli Abdullah (2020) mentioned that the reason behind such emergence was the establishment of many Malay theatre indie groups during this time. They suggested that “the existence of indie theatres in Malaysia started with the staging of *Misi*, *Wangi Jadi Saksi*, and followed by *Jerjak*, *Parah* and other performances which keep the same characteristics as in indie theatres” (Syarul Azlina & Zolkipli Abdullah, 2020, p. 295). The plays were staged in the Theatre Store in Dewan Bahasa and Pustaka (DBP) which was known to be supporting indie group performances. Not only that, but the plays were also staged in Pentas 2, Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts (KLPAC) one of the famous indie theatre companies in this country. In Malaysia, indie theatres are usually put into motion by young activists such as

Playground Production, Instant Café Theatre Company, Rumah Anak Teater, Revolution Stage, Paradoks Production, MASK Team, Ayaq Hangat Studio, and various other productions. With small spaces, young theatre activists produced their scripts and productions.

The era of the millennium marked a different trend in the local theatre industry, in which plays that were performed in this era contained elements of different styles of surrealism and psychological representations in the plots and characters. In the blog post by Walid Ali “*Perkembangan psikologi dan trend teater millennial di Malaysia*,” he emphasized that any forms of theatre productions and performances from 2000 onward could easily be categorized as millennial theatre (2018). Millennial theatre is found to be a popular style that was popular in the West and local theatre was not left behind from its influence. Millennial theatre protested the idea of using a proper stage and it adopted free performances without any space restrictions. Nowadays, we can see these forms of free theatre styles and elements being staged in many theatre houses and the current audience welcomes such changes.

From the 1990s until the present, modern Malay theatre productions and performances have gone through so many changes, and yet there is no proper documentation has been created to record this beautiful progression in Malay theatre history. We should not repeat the past mistakes made by the earlier generations who did not see the importance of keeping a record and marking the periods in the earlier Malay theatre developments. This has created so much ignorance and confusion for the current generation about their rich cultural heritage and artistic traditions. Therefore, it is important to have a new framework to chart this progress and these developments before they become forgotten and unknown.

Proposed Methodology

This is qualitative research, in which an approach in ethnography studies would be its prime method of conduct. The researcher will study the historical and developments of Modern Malay theatre from the earlier periods up to where it was left for more than 20 years. It is the research’s main focus to identify the gap and later to create a new periodization as an attempt to continue the studies of theatre and performing arts in this country.

Next, data collection primer is very important to identify the plays that belonged to the specific periods according to when the plays were produced and staged. Among other efforts, the researcher will also be involved as an active participant in the observation of performances either live or recorded versions of collections of plays that were produced and staged during the past 20 years, beginning in the year 2000. In addition to that, through this active participating observation, the researcher will conduct interviews and surveys about the experiences of the respondents. Elements that will be emphasized in this process will be: (a) themes, (b) play structures, (c) performance concepts, (d) directors’ ideologies, and (e) issues highlighted.

Finally, this research will come to the stage of data coding. This will help further map out all the analysis and findings into a model category. From this mapping

analysis, a new category of Modern Malay theatre will be produced.

Conclusion

From the discussion stated above, it appears to be that, there is a huge gap in the unidentified category of new theatre that has been productively produced and performed for the past 20 years. Therefore, there is a call for a new category that can be a point of reference not only in the study of modern Malay theatre but also in mapping out its significance in the national art heritage of Malaysia.

It is hoped that this study will be able to fulfill one of the main objectives of the Malaysian National Cultural Policy which is to strengthen national unity and country with culture. Since Modern Malay theatre promotes harmony in a vortex of change in a multiracial nation, then it is seen as a culture capable of strengthening national unity. Not only that, but this is also seen as a potential that meets the strategy that supports this objective. Among the following strategies are; (a) The restoration, preservation, and development of culture towards strengthening the foundations of National Culture through joint research, development, education, development, and cultural relations; (b) To increase and strengthen cultural leadership through efforts to guide and train fans, support and promote culture as widely as possible as an effective development machinery; (c) To create effective communication toward national awareness, Malaysian statehood, and nationalism; (d) To meet sociocultural needs; and (e) To raise the level and quality of art at the international level.

Hence, it is important to highlight that, this newfound period, would encourage the continuance of social and cultural study which was stopped in the 1990s. This effort is crucial in bringing back the study of theatre and performance in this country and promoting the uniqueness of Malaysian art, culture, and heritage as the main catalyst for the growth in the area of education, tourism, and national culture toward globalization and its challenges.

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Biography

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