

The Further Adventures...

[**N.b.** This is the transcript of a talk given at a Panel Presentation on Malaysian Theatre at the National Institute of Education in March 2002. The other speakers were Krishen Jit, Leow Puay Tin, Huzir Sulaiman and Claire Wong. The session was chaired by Charlene Rajendran.]

One of these panellists is not like the others, and it is not only because my nose is bigger, and I get sunburnt more easily. They are Malaysians, and they make theatre in KL. I am English, and I make theatre in Singapore. When I go to KL, it is as an academic and audience member. They do, I watch. They have done a lot, I have watched a little. A little bit of knowledge *can* be a dangerous thing – but it can also generate insights that habit overlooks. I know enough to know that I don't know and, flanked by people who know most things, perhaps I have something else to offer: I call this position strategic naivety. I can only say what I saw. Let me tell you a story.

In *The Caretaker*, a classic play by the well-known British playwright Harold Pinter, a gruff group of middle-ageing men try to hold onto a stable sense of identity by threatening the others, and fussing over their belongings. One character, Aston harps on endlessly about making it out to Sidcup, a drab London suburb, for his papers. If only he can get his papers, he can settle. He'll know who he is. But I've got to get to Sidcup, he keeps saying, I've got to get myself out to Sidcup.

Walking back to my hotel from *Puppets*, which I'd been to see at the Actor's Studio Theatre under Merdeka Square last August, I was accosted by a shabby man with no front teeth who kept trying to give me tourist information. He had customized free maps of the city by penning in suggested routes tourists might take, and making little notes that listed bus numbers, and advice on such things as how to bluff your way to the top of the Petronas Towers. I was in no hurry, and he had an interesting way with words, so I let him speak. His sales patter involved alternately extolling the virtues of the city, and cursing the assorted races who, as a Eurasian, he claimed had contributed to his current state of homelessness and dispossession. After praising Princess Di to the high heavens and roundly abusing the Chinese, I told him he'd misjudged my loyalties, and that I'd rather hang out with the Chinese any day. It transpired I lived in Singapore, whereupon he launched into a slightly crazed monologue that went something like: 'Singapore, if I can only make it down to Singapore, everything will be fine. I just need to get across the

border, then I'll get a job, and train in computers, and make money. I tell you if you said to me: OK, I'll give you a job in Singapore, I'd meet you at the Causeway – I'd make my own way there. I just need to get myself to Singapore.'

In Pinter's play, Sidcup is a chimera to Aston – it represents an impossible dream of stability. He needs the thought to keep him going, but he'll never actually go. He's too scared of dashing his only hope. I gave the Eurasian man as much money as *Puppets* cost. I don't know what of his sob story was true, but the performance was infinitely better done.

Last month, I went to see *Visits*, again under Merdeka Square, by Jit Murad. A woman in the *de luxe* suite of a mental hospital is visited regularly by her prim sister-in-law, and a talkative nurse. Each visit draws out some details of the dark events that led the woman to be admitted, and the context within which such events took place. The script was extremely sharp in parts, there was a deft use of the conventions of farce, but a burdensome tendency towards melodrama. Two out of the three performers were also very strong, and the audience, who felt young, even by Singapore standards, seemed to enjoy it a great deal. The plot is too complex to explain. Suffice to say that the woman turns out to have been from a poor family, and married into a very rich one, where boredom and social pressures pushed her somewhat over the edge. What caught my attention was her description of the wild life she led before marriage. As an example, she describes going down to Singapore every weekend, to go clubbing, get drunk, and meet men. It was a passing comment, but it stuck with me. I was reminded of a man with no front teeth, sleeping rough above our heads, dreaming of Singapore.

In a recent book entitled *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur*, the cultural commentator Ziauddin Sardar writes of Malaysian independence in 1957 that it: "...made Kuala Lumpur the prime focus of all that happened in Malaysia. This was a new development, for the city had always been off-centre from its own national history. The British had always viewed it from Singapore...where they had been in greatest force" (Sardar 2000, 155-6). Watching theatre in KL, and hearing references to Singapore, I wouldn't go so far as to say that it's payback time for the historical off-centredness Sardar describes, but it's certainly intriguing to track what Singapore signifies in the grand scheme of geographical name-dropping. One thing's for sure: since Singapore and Malaysia split in

1965, the governments of both states have striven to stabilise and solidify the image they want their own citizens to have of their respective cities. References to Singapore in KL theatre indicate that the figure of the *opposite* city may be much more fluid and open to contestation.

Uda dan Dara (Uda and Dara), a new musical version of Osman Awang's tragic love story, last week. It's a strangely lop-sided affair, with an intense, rich musical score, beautiful, energised set-piece choreography, but a feeble production design. Try as they might to lift the event to the emotional pitch the love story requires, the sporadically enthralling cast is mired in a high-school rehearsal aesthetic. The show's in Malay but as the first half draws to a close, and it becomes clear our hero, Uda, must go away to earn enough money to respectably woo Dara, two words surface repeatedly in his jaunty song of resolution: *komputer* and *Singapura*. In fact, the latter appears at the end of every line, and the hope in his heart leads me to presume he's singing something like: "Singapura, if I can only make it down to Singapura, everything will be fine. I just need to get across the border, then I'll get a job in komputers, and make money. I tell you if you said to me: OK, I'll give you a job in Singapura, I'd meet you at the Causeway – I'd make my own way there. I just need to get myself to Singapura."

And off he goes, to spend the interval in Singapura, making money in komputers. It's a classic narrative device, to send one of your main protagonists away somewhere for while: Hamlet to England, for example. In the meantime, the plot can outstrip him, and make it fatally difficult to catch up when he gets back. After the show, I asked one of the directors, Krishen Jit, who had originally directed a version thirty years ago, where *that* Dara had gone. Answer: from *kampung* to the city, but that was no longer tenable. Is it the case that KL is to Singapore as the *kampung* to KL? For some people, especially those who need to earn money fast, answered Krishen, yes.

And what about theatre people? Fast money is unlikely to be the main reason, but the fact is that all these Malaysians you see before you today have made decisive contributions to the Singapura theatre scene. This is intriguing: it indicates that not only do Malaysian theatre makers construct a chimerical Singapore for their audiences, but also they play a role in representing Singapore to Singaporeans. Don't get me wrong – I'm not making out that this is a particularly conscious or deliberate effort on their part.

But it is surely not entirely coincidental that history, in particular, has been the focus of several key performances – for example Lloyd Fernando’s *Scorpion Orchid* and Puay Tin’s *The Yang Family* – written by Malaysians, but set and staged in Singapore.

That outsiders can tell the stories people forget, or are unwilling, or are forbidden to tell themselves is nothing new, nor is it specific to this region. There is, however, a particular conjunction of politics and history that makes the Malaysian insights that Singaporean habit overlooks an especially productive theatrical proposition: and they’re about to get more productive with the presentation in the Arts Festival of Huzir and Claire’s play *Occupation*. Whereas performances such as *The Yang Family* were written by a Malaysian, they remained Singaporean projects in Singapore, and KL projects in KL. I have just spent the last five days, however, observing six Malaysians tussling with the question of how to tell Singaporean history to Singaporeans, using Singaporean money. It needs to be stressed that this is not where *their* stress falls – their primary concerns seem to be with questions of responsibility, truth and the how to stage the mechanics of memory. Even at this level, however, I would argue that the process of what Claire has called in a slightly different context ‘reverse osmosis’ is at work in the particular kinds of distance and recognition they have on the place, and the stories that come out of it.

Precisely how these things work themselves out remains to be seen. ‘Reverse osmosis’ sounds like it involves some rather tricky internal contortions. But at a time when the big money in Singapore is being spent on the bland spectaculars of globe-friendly Cirque du Soleil, I’d rather watch these totally grounded acrobats of identity any day.

Bibliography

Sardar, Ziauddin (2000) *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur*. London: Reaktion Books.