

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

23 Jalan AU5 C/3
Lembah Keramat
Ulu Kelang, Selangor
Malaysia
30 May 1982

BEB-6

Selective Breeding

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
Institute of Current World Affairs
Wheelock House
4 West Wheelock Street
Hanover, NH 03755

Dear Peter,

I first saw wayang kulit, the Malay shadow theater, in 1973 on Malaysian television. I was staying in Johore Baru and my host, an urban Malay, was looking forward to a night's entertainment with his favorite Western serial. As the set flickered to life, two intricately carved silhouettes appeared on the screen. Cacophonous music and unintelligible dialogue issued from the speaker. I was intrigued, but this plainly was not what my host had in mind. He changed the channel. Wayang, he said, was boring.

Though most Malaysians have heard of wayang kulit, few living outside a traditional context have seen a performance. Wayang is found in a variety of forms throughout Southeast Asia. Called wayang in Malaysia, Java and Bali and nang in Thailand, it has analogues in China, India and the Middle East. Though wayang is thought to have once been popular in many parts of Peninsular Malaysia, today it is extinct in all but a few areas.

Wayang in Johore today is confined primarily to the coastal town of Batu Pahat, where it is largely the province of the immigrant Javanese population. The Johore wayang is similar in character and style to the Javanese shadow theater and like it is called wayang purwa and performed in Javanese. Kelantan also has a slightly different version of the Javanese-style wayang, called wayang Jawa or wayang Melayu. The overwhelming majority of the Kelantan shadow theater, however, is the wayang Siam or the wayang Kelantan, performed in the Kelantanese dialect. Kelantan has numerous historical and cultural links with southern Thailand and the wayang Kelantan is a close cousin to the southern Thai nang talung (called wayang gedek in Kelantan). There has been much reciprocal

Bryn Barnard is an Institute Fellow studying visual communication in Southeast Asia. His current interest is the performing arts.

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BEB-7

Art and Celebration

Mr. Peter Bird Martin
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Dear Peter,

"Rak sip lor, tong ror sip mǒng": "if you love ten wheels, you have to wait until ten o'clock." This Thai pop song was all the rage during my recent visit to Bangkok, played on radio and tape by street venders, in shopping malls and on the central parade ground, Sanam Luang. Sung by the Royal Sprites, the tune is a love song of sorts, eulogizing the ten-wheeled trailer-trucks that are allowed within the city limits only after 10pm. These giant rigs rumble through the streets of Bangkok well into the wee hours of the morning, servicing the city's factories and shops. The song also has a popular rhyming rejoinder, "rak sip lor, tong ror taw mǒng": "if you love ten wheels, you'll be waiting to build a coffin." This refers, I was told, not only to the daredevil antics and spectacular accidents occasionally caused by the ten-wheelers, but also to the song's composer, Chamnong Pensuk, killed by one of the big rigs soon after the song hit the Bangkok charts.

Life isn't terribly safe for a Bangkok resident at any time of day, pedestrian or no. Restricting the ten-wheelers to the late night and early morning hours has done little to ease the city's congested traffic situation. Throughout the day and into the night the streets are choked with trucks, cars, taxis, tuk-tuks (jitneys) and hordes of motorcycles and bicycles, filling the hot, steamy air with clouds of sooty, noxious smoke that give the city an overall gray tonality, not to mention one's clothing, skin and hair. Venturing out onto the streets, much less trying to cross them, is a rather chancy affair.

Nor is there any escape on the klongs, the canals that once served as Bangkok's main thoroughfares. Linked to the Chao Phraya river meandering through the city's western quarter, the waterways also provided access to the port of Bangkok at Klongtoey and thence the sea. Most of the klongs have been filled in and asphalted over now. The remainder, cut off from the river, are

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borrowing between the two forms. Kedah and Perlis wayang also display links with the Thai shadow play.

Central to all forms of wayang is the dalang, the master of the performance who manipulates the puppets, composes the dialogue and music and provides the voices for all the characters. He also leads the accompanying musical ensemble. Depending on the type of wayang, the musicians play various combinations of drums and gongs and a quadruple-reeded oboe-like instrument, the serunai. The dalang sits behind a stretched white cloth screen that is the wayang stage. A lamp hangs between dalang and screen, above and in front of him. Puppets, flat pieces of carved and painted water buffalo hide with one or two articulated arms, are manipulated in front of the lamp, casting shadows onto the screen. Performances for most of the wayang variants normally take place in the panggung, a thatch or zinc-roofed hut-like enclosure, raised on stilts. The audience sits or stands on the ground in front of the screen to watch the shadows, though invariably a few wander back to take a peek at the action inside the panggung.

Wayang is both entertainment and ritual, appeasing the spirits and protecting the audience for the duration of the performance. Wayang stories are based on the Malay versions of the Hindu Mahabharata (as in the wayang purwa and wayang Jawa) and Ramayana (as in the wayang Kelantan and wayang gedek) epics, called Pandawa Lima and Hikayat Seri Rama, respectively. Dalang also create stories and characters of their own, interweaving them with the classical repertoire and on occasion, departing from it completely. Wayang stories have romance, conflict, comedy and allusions to contemporary events. There are hundreds of them, differing from dalang to dalang and performance to performance.

Wayang is replete with Hindu/animist ritual and ceremony, traditions that have survived despite the heavily Islamic



character of present-day Malay society. Though dalang are Muslim and dedicate their performances to Allah, the genre is suspect in the eyes of Islamic fundamentalists. In Kelantan, a state that is 90% Malay and noted for its Islamic piety, wayang performances are strictly licensed. Once an all-night affair, wayang must now end at midnight.

Islamic opposition

is only part of wayang's problem, however. In much of Malaysia it suffers from declining audiences and a diminishing pool of dalang. Tastes are changing, due in part to increased urbanization and secular education. Wayang also faces stiff competition from TV and cinema, competition that increases with rising incomes and spreading rural electrification.

Today in Johore, Kedah and Perlis there are only a few dalang and only some of these play with any regularity. In Kelantan, the highly-touted repository of Malay custom and craft, though wayang is still quite popular relative to the rest of the country it could hardly be said to be thriving. A decade ago there were an estimated 300 dalang in Kelantan. Today there are slightly better than 20. Of this number some dalang perform rarely or have no students to carry on the tradition.

Change is occurring, however, particularly in the wayang Kelantan. Though some wayang Kelantan dalang continue to rely on a conventionally styled repertoire, in recent years a more contemporary and increasingly popular group has emerged, modifying stories and characters in an attempt to keep pace with audience tastes. The hugely popular Abdullah Baju Merah has incorporated Thai puppets, Hindustani pop melodies and modern Malay joget dance tunes with traditional wayang characters and music. He plays regularly throughout the wayang (non-monsoon) season, from February to October. A Kedah dalang, Pak Noh, has also achieved widespread popularity through his heavy use of Thai puppets, a bicycle puppet and other innovations.

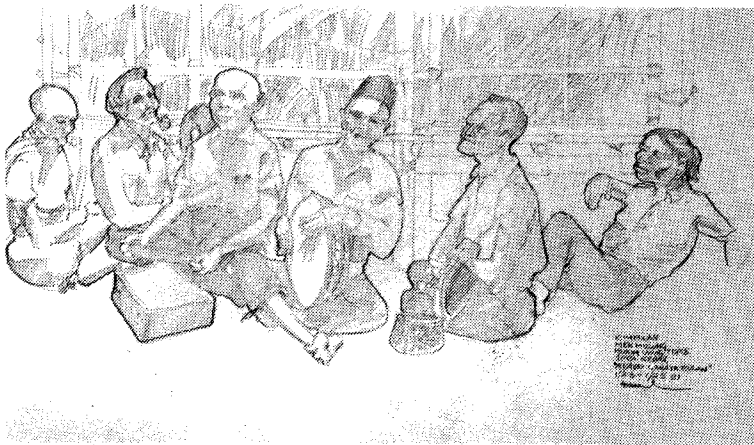
Though such changes are derided by wayang purists, they are in fact well within the tradition. Wayang, like most of the Malay performing arts, is a syncretic phenomenon that has historically absorbed material from a variety of sources. Wayang has remained a vital and responsive tradition even in the face of the discontinuities produced by an urbanizing society.

The problems of modern competition and changing audience tastes, which have sparked innovation in wayang, also plague the other traditional performing arts. Some, ossified and entrenched in a traditional village or court context, have been unable to cope with the decline in conventional patronage and are sliding towards extinction. Selampit, a Malay storytelling tradition extant in Kedah, Kelantan and Perlis, has only a few aging practitioners. Mak yong, once a popular Kelantanese village/court tradition, is decaying fast, with no formal troupe and a dwindling number of performers. The Perlis terinai court dance tradition is also suffering, as are the Kelantanese main peteri ritual spirit exorcism and the menora Siamese dance drama.

A few performing art forms, though rigidly traditional,

are managing to subsist in areas of Malaysia less subject to urban competition. Mek mulung, a dance drama first brought 80 years ago to the village of Jitra in Kedah state, is tottering, but perhaps still viable. Jitra is without electricity and far from the lights of Alor Setar, the state capital and nearest urban center. Although the performers, an aging group related by blood and marriage, can remember only 4 of an alleged total of 12 mek mulung stories, they have been able to train a few young dancers to carry on the remnants of this highly ritualistic tradition. Spared the glitter of electronic competition, mek mulung may continue to survive.

Not all traditional performing art forms are dinosaurs set to expire at the least shift in the environment. Like wayang, a few have responded positively to modernity. Innovations, wrought from within by performers and from without by scholars, students, aficionados and government officials, have produced new contexts for traditional performances, transforming moribund rituals into successful secular enterprises. Kuda kepang and joget gamelan are two dance forms that have succeeded in transcending traditional performing contexts. A trance-inducing dance performed by immigrants from Banjarmasin and Java, kuda kepang was once confined primarily to the Batu Pahat area of Johore. In recent years, however, it has achieved popularity as a secular entertainment for weddings, parties and state functions throughout Johore and other parts of Malaysia. Joget gamelan, though virtually extinct as a court maintained dance tradition in Pahang and Trengganu, was introduced to urban audiences by choreographer Ahmad Omar. Now performed by the Kumpulan Budaya Negara (the national dance troupe), and dancers like Marion D'Cruz and Azanin Ezane Ahmad, joget gamelan has become a popular national performing art, taught in schools and universities. The new national form of joget gamelan has even been brought back, so to speak, to the courts of Pahang and Trengganu, performed on request by the Kumpulan Budaya Negara in lieu of the original, for special court occasions.



State-supported organizations, like the Kumpulan Budaya Negara, have become important vehicles for the preservation, promotion and popularization of the traditional performing arts. The Ministry of Culture, concerned lest the artistic foundations of a Malay-based national culture slip into oblivion, has been instrumental in supporting traditional dance, music and theater and has encouraged their incorporation into modern productions for an urban, national and international audience.

Wayang, in particular wayang Kelantan, has been actively promoted as a symbol of Malay/Malaysian culture, both within Malaysia and abroad. Dalang are periodically invited to perform in the national panggung in Kuala Lumpur and one is a teacher at the National Cultural Complex. Another dalang, Hamzah Awang Hamat, has been sent with his troupe on numerous Government-sponsored world tours.

Creating a national art form from a provincial tradition like wayang, however, is fraught with difficulty. Whereas dance and music developed for local consumption, could conceivably be appreciated by a national audience on aesthetic merits alone, wayang is theatre, dependant on dialogue that in Johore is incomprehensible to outsiders and in Kelantan nearly so. Audience familiarity with stories and characters and empathy with the ritualistic nature of the performance are also important in traditional wayang. Nor does wayang have much appeal to most Chinese and Indians, almost half the Malaysian populace and far removed from provincial Malay culture (the 1973 attempt at televised wayang was in fact wayang Kelantan, considered to be of little entertainment value outside of the northeast coast).

Thus, attempts have been made to formulate a new wayang kulit, scripted, secularized and standardized in Bahasa Malaysia, to at least partially meet the requirements of a national audience (English language versions have also been considered for tourist consumption). Usually based on wayang Kelantan, this new wayang has been performed for urban audiences with mixed results. One version has even been used as an instrument of national policy: a dalang has been hired to perform a scripted wayang with a nationalistic message in kawasan hitam, communist-infested "black areas."

One rather innovative version of this new "wayang Malaysia" has been in progress since 1977 at Universiti Sains Malaysia. Dr. Ghulam-Sawar Yousof, a USM performing arts professor, has initiated a wayang kulit class with the assistance of Dr. Patricia Yamaguchi and Dalang Hamzah (the touring dalang mentioned above). The class has proven extremely popular among USM students. Wayang theory and history are taught by Dr. Ghulam and Music by Dr. Yamaguchi. The linchpin of the class is Dalang Hamzah, teaching dalangship and puppetmaking. Performances are given in Bahasa Malaysia.



Hamzah is a rather cosmopolitan dalang, well known to researchers and government officials. He performs classical-style wayang Kelantan in Kelantan, Kuala Lumpur and abroad. Aside from performances and University work, Hamzah also manufactures puppets and wayang kulit instruments for sale to tourists. He is the only full-time dalang, subsisting completely on wayang and wayang-related earnings.

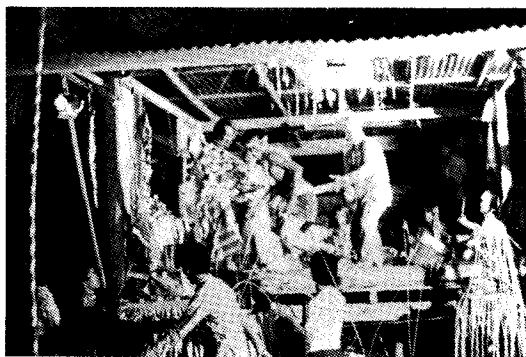
Recently, I travelled to Hamzah's village in Kelantan to see him perform the berjamu menyemah, an infrequently held wayang ceremony. The berjamu, held at the discretion of the dalang, is a propitiation of the wayang spirits, requiring special panggung decorations and elaborate spirit offerings. On the last night of the three-night performance the screen is rolled up and the dalang goes into a trance, assisted by the wayang personnel. One by one the wayang spirits enter the dalang, feast on the offerings and depart, in the process cleansing the puppets, the panggung and the dalang himself.

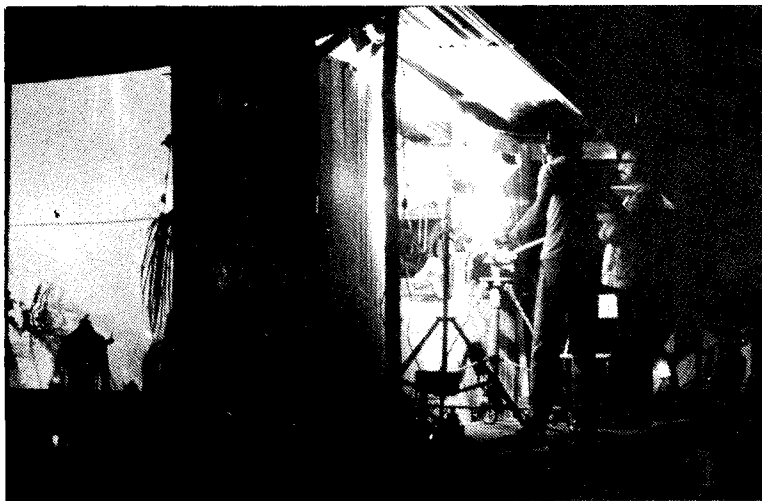
This berjamu was rather more unusual than most; it was recorded by the Universiti Sains Malaysia mobile video unit as part of a project sponsored jointly by USM and Universiti Malaya and organized by Drs. Ghulam and Yamaguchi. Videotaping was an unprecedented event in Hamzah's Kampung Gerong, transforming an already unusual performance into something of a village spectacular. The panggung, bedecked with offerings, was illuminated inside and out by 2000 watt lamps. Special windows were cut and platforms built for the video cameras and an offering table. A compressor chattered in the background, supplying electric power for the event (Hamzah has electricity, but a first-night trial with his power supply blew every fuse in his house). The crowd was sizable for a wayang performance, at one point numbering almost 1000.

After the performance I spoke with Dr. Ghulam and Dr. Yamaguchi about their video project, the USM wayang class and the state of the traditional performing arts.

BB: What is the purpose of your video project?

GS: We are trying to record sample performances of the major traditional Malay theater forms on the east and west coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Such recording is crucial at this point as most of the forms are in decline or on the verge of extinction.





Few of the traditions have been studied in any detail. These recordings will be one of the resources available for future scholars or for that matter, for future generations of Malaysians.

BB: Which forms are you recording?

GS: There are actually several research projects going on at one time. One is a documentation project

on the mek mulung. The second is a documentation project on traditional theater forms in Kedah and Perlis and third is a special project on the wayang kulit berjamu of Kelantan. When budget and time allow we've also tried to squeeze in performances of other genres. For example, on this trip to Kelantan we've recorded a performance each of main peteri, wayang Melayu and selampit. There are still a few main peteri performers left but only one wayang Melayu dalang in Kelantan now and even he rarely performs. Selampit is also almost finished.

PY: In the Kelantan style of selampit the storyteller accompanies his tale with the rebab [spike fiddle]. One the west coast, however, selampit has no accompaniment, instead the narrator gestures with his hands and arms as he tells the story. There is also another storytelling form in Kedah called awang batil, in which the storyteller accompanies himself by beating on a copper pot.

GS: Trying to fit these different performance styles into a single project is very complicated, requiring meetings with all the performers beforehand to discuss fees (as of course we pay the performers for their work) and to set dates that are convenient for all and not pantang [taboo] for anyone. We did the same for the traditional theater forms documentation project, recording the Kedah wayang kulit, Perlis jikey [dance drama] and menora as well as terinai. It so happens that Pak 'Mail, the terinai guru, is also the last remaining west coast selampit performer; so we were able to record this as well.

BB: After this project is completed which performing arts will be left unrecorded?

GS: Plenty. You see, I am particularly interested in theater and we haven't gone out of our way to record music or dance forms because our budget simply won't allow it. Selampit and

terinai were the exceptions. There are also theater forms in the other states such as Johore that need to be recorded at some future date.

PY: Joget gamelan we're not touching at all. Aside from Marion's work [Marion D'Cruz's Master's thesis: Joget Gamelan: A Study of Its Contemporary Practice] there has been little documentation of this dance form. None of the old dancers in Trengganu have been recorded for example.

BB: Why is Universiti Malaya helping to fund the project?

GS: USM is funding the mek mulung and the Kedah/Perlis documentation project. Universiti Malaya is sharing the costs for the berjamu recording because they are planning to publish Pat's dissertation [Dr. Yamaguchi's PhD dissertation: Music in the Malay Shadow Puppet Theater]. The vice-chancellor, Ungku Aziz, wants to include a section of the berjamu recording with the dissertation.

PY: There is also another project - a film project - we would like to do if we can somehow raise the M\$100,000 that would be needed to cover expenses. This would be a comparative study of mak yong, menora and main peteri in terms of dance, music and drama. Most of the work in mak yong has been done by Ghulam but it is restricted to theater. The dance and music aspects have never been explored.

GS: Nor has any in-depth study been done of menora or main peteri.

BB: Why film?

GS: It provides a permanent record, unlike video, which begins to deteriorate after a few decades. Unfortunately, film is fantastically expensive, about ten times the cost of video.

PY: This is very much a stop-gap measure. Unless a way can be found to transfer these recordings onto film, in fifty years they too will be gone.

BB: Are the wayang dalang and other performers as aware as you are of the necessity of recording their work?

GS: More and more. Traditionally it has been considered pantang to pass on information, particularly ilmu dalam [magical knowledge] to outsiders. Though the performers recognize that for knowledge of their work to survive it must be written down and recorded, even now they are reluctant to pass on really important ritual formulae. Normally a dalang or bomoh [shaman] specifies whether a particular bit of information can be passed on, never revealed at all, or kept secret until the teacher's death. I experienced this myself while researching the mak yong. One of the teachers under whom I was studying gave me information that I was expressly forbidden to reveal to anyone or write down in a book. They attach these conditions to keep the information from falling into the wrong hands. They are



particularly concerned that if rituals and the like are published in books they will be read by non-Muslims.

PY: Hamzah has also given me musical information that is pantang to pass on. Some dalang will not even pass down their puppets when they die or retire. Instead they are destroyed. Hamzah destroyed a number of very old puppet sets, perhaps 100 years old, before he realized how much value outsiders put on the puppets. Now he carves puppets for sale, though of course these have no semangat, no spirit. Selling a puppet with semangat inside would be a grave offence and very dangerous.

BB: What was the basic aim of the wayang course at USM?

GS: We hoped to create interest in wayang among people on the west coast. Such interest would indirectly benefit the tradition. Success in wayang could possibly be extended to other theater forms. In fact, a few years back at a wayang kulit conference in Port Dickson [a town in Negeri Sembilan state] the idea was mooted that each of Malaysia's universities could sponsor a traditional art form. All of the participating universities expressed interest. However with one thing and another, sponsorship never worked out at most of the institutions and it is only now that USM is getting around to setting up bangsawan [folk drama] and wayang kulit troupes.

The point is that Hamzah's teaching at USM has introduced hundreds of west coast people to wayang, if only for a semester or two. They've learned something of what it is, how it is

structured, how the music operates and how the puppets are made. There are even Kelantanese students who claim that the course was their first chance to learn about wayang. Though they'd lived in Kelantan all of their lives they'd never gone to see a performance or had seen one only in passing. One of these students, a government officer, upon his return to Kelantan got the idea of setting up a cultural complex in Kota Baru where performances of wayang, dikir barat [competitive choral chanting], rebana [a type of competitive Malay drumming], etc. could be held for urban people and tourists. So now Kota Baru has a gelanggang seni [arts arena] with cultural performances twice a week. Its not much to look at at this point but its a start.

Several police officers have also have been off-campus students and have taken the wayang course. They have gained insight into the art form and no longer treat it as heretical. One of the officers said to me, "now I know what wayang is. If one of the dalang comes to me for a license to perform now, I give it to him. At one time we were stopping these fellows from performing, saying it was haram [forbidden by Muslim law]."

Quite a few of USM's wayang students are also teachers who have gone back to their schools and are now able to talk to the students about wayang with some knowledge. I recently had a parent come to me to find out about wayang materials. It seems his daughter is going to make a wayang puppet as an exam project on the suggestion of her teacher, formerly one of our students.

BB: Do you think wayang can ever become a relevant art form for Malaysians outside of Kelantan?

GS: If you mean will it ever be able to compete with movies and TV, no. But I think it is becoming more widely known, particularly in Penang. We are also trying to create a wider base of acceptance through the creation of new wayang stories based on Malay, Chinese and Indian folk tales. West coast people do not know the Ramayana or identify with the characters. But almost every child knows Sang Kancil from folk literature. He is even evolving into a national symbol of sorts. The Monkey God is a popular Chinese story and Gulbakawali is a well-known Indian story. All of these have been used in our wayang projects involving designing and use of figures.

BB: How did you choose the stories?

GS: We had to study them very carefully. During the first year of the wayang course I told the students to write down all the Malay stories they knew. We ended up with about thirty. Of these, Hindu-based stories were eliminated as were Islamic ones because of the Islamic prohibitions against depicting the human figure. A Prophet Muhammed puppet would

have created an outrage in the Muslim community. Anything specifically Javanese, like the Panji tales, was also excised. From the remaining stories we chose those that were interesting in terms of episodes and characters that would fit the wayang mold. The first story chosen was the tale of Raja Muda. Later we added other Malay stories: Sang Kancil, Pak Pandir and Syah Kobat as well as Gulbakawali and Monkey God [this last, it should be noted, took some rather careful editing, again in consideration of potential Muslim audiences. The Pig, though a close companion of the Monkey God and an important character in the story, was excised].

BB: And puppets were designed for each story?

GS: Yes, each year a new set of puppets would be designed, under Hamzah's instruction. In some cases one character has been designed and redesigned over several semesters. Some have evolved into quite interesting figures. Students have researched batik designs and other decorative motifs that would be appropriate for their particular character. We now have about 15-20 puppets per story, altogether a sizable collection of original figures.

BB: Have any elements been kept from the wayang Kelantan?

GS: Well, the music is the same and we have kept the clowns, Pak Dogol and Wak Long. They function in the same manner as in the traditional wayang.

BB: Have audiences responded positively to this secularized form of wayang?

GS: Over the years the audiences have grown and the USM wayang troupe is well known in Penang. We haven't performed much outside the region, however.

One of the main problems is the short duration of study. Students are in the University at the most for four years and few take the course for more than a few semesters, usually in their final year. We have to keep constantly retraining dalang and musicians. So now we're trying to involve staff members in wayang to develop some sort of continuity from one year to the next.

BB: What does Hamzah think of the class?

GS: He thinks its great. In fact he has borrowed quite a number of the puppets designed in the class for his own use. I haven't actually seen them used in performance but he does keep them around the panggung.

The Universiti Sains Malaysia wayang kulit course and bangsawan troupe are only some of the measures adapted by Malaysian universities in support of the traditional performing arts. USM awards both the Bachelor's and Master's degrees in the performing arts and offers a wide variety of theoretical and practical courses in Southeast Asian and Western dance and

theater. Of the other universities (Malaysia has 5), Universiti Malaya is by far the strongest supporter of the performing arts. The Universiti Malaya Panggung Eksperimen (Experimental Theater) and Dewan Pungku Canselor (Chancellor's Hall) performing arts complex is the best equipped in Malaysia and plays host to a wide variety of local and foreign performers, both traditional and contemporary. Universiti Malaya also supports a bangsawan troupe and under the auspices of the Pusat Kebudayaan (Cultural Center) has sponsored numerous traditional research projects, including an investigation of the Johore ghazal musical genre. Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia also offers a number of performing arts courses.

University and Government support of the traditional arts, though certainly necessary, cannot substitute for audience patronage. Although the traditional performing arts are much admired by Malays as symbols of a rich heritage, most are anachronisms, little understood by the majority. Few Malays will sacrifice an evening in front of the television or at the cinema for a traditional performance. Nor is much support forthcoming from the non-Malay segments of the populace, concerned with their own performing arts or accustomed to Western entertainments.

Western-style drama, performed in Malay, English and occasionally Chinese or Indian dialects, is probably the most relevant and vital of the performing arts. Malay theater in particular has developed into a variegated and prolific genre, ranging from the popular weekly Drama Minngu Ini dramatic series (usually melodramatic productions of shaky quality) to expressive and powerful avant garde theater.

Only that small minority of traditional performing arts responsive to the shifting urban milieu will have much chance of survival in modern Malaysia. wayang, joget gamelan, kuda kepang and a scattering of others may still exist 20 years hence. The others will vanish, preserved, perhaps, in books and on videotape and film, memories of a way of life forever gone.

Sincerely,



Bryn Barnard

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