

# Staging difference in modern multicultural Malaysia : the politics of Krishen Jit' s theatre

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**NANYANG  
TECHNOLOGICAL  
UNIVERSITY**

STAGING DIFFERENCE  
IN MODERN MULTICULTURAL MALAYSIA:  
THE POLITICS OF KRISHEN JIT'S THEATRE

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SCHOOL OF HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES

2012

# **Staging Difference in Modern Multicultural Malaysia: The Politics of Krishen Jit's Theatre**

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## Abstract

This dissertation examines the theatre of Malaysian director Krishen Jit (1939-2005), and argues that his stagings of difference articulated a critical politics of inclusivity that proposed an alternative multiculturalism within which tensions and contradictions of being modern and Malaysian could be articulated and questioned. In a plural and postcolonial context, that deals with nation-building amid the conflicts of being multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual, Krishen's theatre generated frames for negotiating multiplicity as simultaneously operative between *and* within cultures, to acknowledge the inter-connectedness and mix that mark modern and multicultural identities. I contend that Krishen's approach to reworking the boundaries of culture resisted state-sanctioned definitions of identity that perpetuated reductive and essentialised constructs, which effectively denied the imbricatedness and hybridity that characterise everyday life. The dissertation will analyse how the choices he made in staging locally written scripts about contemporary Malaysian life deliberately emphasised the permeability of boundaries, the intersections and overlaps of cultures, the improvised languages for coping with difference, and the transitory nature of cultural shifts, to assert a valuable revisioning of multicultural society as interstitial, and neither a melting pot that merges differences, nor parallel streams that perpetuate segregatedness.

The dissertation analyses Krishen Jit's theatre from the 1970s till his untimely passing in 2005, and locates his work against a backdrop of Malaysian socio-political change. It demonstrates how his theatre moved from one phase of contemporary experimentation to another, building on early foundations of syncretism and fusion to develop complex, inter-disciplinary and multi-layered performances that foregrounded the in-between spaces of reinvention and flux. It asserts that Krishen's ability to juxtapose and weave several cultural vocabularies, traditional and modern, local and foreign, as expressions of contemporary Malaysian society, enabled him to contribute to the contemporisation and indigenization of Malaysian theatre in aesthetically significant ways.

## Introduction

I actually believe that in the case of plural societies such as Malaysia 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. (emphasis mine)<sup>1</sup>

What makes the work of a contemporary theatre director important in relation to issues of cultural difference? As a live and multi-dimensional medium, theatre can evoke a reviewing of the norm by enacting and embodying alternative imaginings of culture and identity. It has the capacity to recast Selves as inclusive of its Others,<sup>2</sup> thereby reconfiguring inter-relatedness across, between and within cultural spheres. In so doing, theatre reworks how difference is experienced and perceived, through consciously staging stories and characters that confront and negotiate issues of plurality in contextually grounded frames.<sup>3</sup> Aspects of everyday life are thus selected and reframed through aesthetic choices that suggest varied interpretations of meaning. These are meant to question settled assumptions about structures of society, culture, power and history.

In Malaysian director Krishen Jit's theatre, a major focus of his work was the politics of difference in modern and multicultural Malaysia. Multiculturalism, usually regarded as a way of recognising cultural difference in society, tends to demarcate between one race or ethnic group and another. Communities are categorised according to their histories, languages, belief systems, customs and a range of cultural markers that separate one from another. However it is not often

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<sup>1</sup> Krishen Jit, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2004.

<sup>2</sup> I use the terms 'Selves' and 'Others' to refer to notions of difference that are perpetuated by boundaries of culture within a plural and postcolonial context such as Malaysia. These largely racialised constructs were derived from colonial, and later nationalist, processes of social categorization, where 'other-ing' occurs as part of a policy of differentiated identities. Here the notion of Selves and Others does not refer to the divide between white and non-white identities, as in much postcolonial theory. Instead it often applies to cultural and political divides that are perpetuated through essentialist and discriminatory policies within nations and societies.

<sup>3</sup> I use the term 'difference' to refer to the relations of power and mutuality that pertain when multiple cultures interact and thus have to negotiate the boundaries between and across these known and recognised categories. This draws from Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2004), 50, and his definition of 'difference' compared to 'diversity'. Bhabha asserts that the former is 'the process of the enunciation of culture as "knowledgable", authoritative, adequate to the construction of systems of cultural identification' and 'a process of signification through which statements of culture or on culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity'. In contrast 'diversity' is the 'recognition of pre-given cultural contents and customs' and 'the representation of a radical rhetoric of the separation of totalized cultures that live unsullied by the intertextuality of their historical locations'. As such difference is negotiated through discursive formations, and not reductive essentialised frames.

that multiculturalism is seen as operating within the individual, as a result of choices or socialisation that allow for integrated mixes of diverse cultures. To do so is to assert, as Krishen did, that ‘multiculturalism is in one body’ and not just a ‘negotiation between one body and another’. This questions normative ways of viewing cultures which tend to impose monocultural frames that deny the mixes within. It points to difference as an integral aspect of identity and thus performs the politics of alterity as a counterpoint to mainstream and officially-sanctioned categories.

Krishen Jit, acknowledged doyen of experimental theatre in Malaysia, was noted for his provocative stagings of contemporary culture and identity which grappled with the conflicts and contradictions of being Malaysian. His work aimed to provoke critical insights about the richness of mixed identities in a society with traditional roots and histories of difference. In this way he resisted communalist and unitary cultures, and questioned policies and practices of dividedness. From the 1970s till his passing in 2005, Krishen’s <sup>4</sup> directorial vision was largely focused on the politics of cultural difference and what it meant for Malaysians to be officially defined as culturally singular, yet unofficially constituted of a mix of diverse cultural dimensions. These ranged from race and language, to lifestyle, class and beliefs. His theatre embodied the possibilities of an alternative multiculturalism by blurring the boundaries that separate cultures, generating cultural fusions and creating assemblages of difference that nurture inclusive frames for being and becoming Malaysian. This contested the mainstream state-sanctioned idea of Malaysian plurality as parallel cultures that rarely interact. Instead it asserted the importance of cultural intersections and overlaps that express variegated ways of being Malaysian which rarely fit the prescribed and assigned notions of identity.

Krishen’s work also highlighted the tensions and fractures of being caught in a nexus of change and the conflicts of being pulled in different directions, as a result of having to negotiate modernisation while under pressure to sustain inherited identities. The ‘negotiation’ of difference between cultures was acknowledged as a complex process because it questioned settled assumptions about what it meant to fit in and be accepted, especially when there were mixed loyalties and multiple affiliations of cultural belonging. However the contradictions of tradition

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<sup>4</sup> Although it is common academic practice to refer to persons by their surname, I have chosen to refer to Krishen Jit as Krishen for the following reasons. Firstly, even though his full name was Krishen Jit Amar Singh, making Singh his official surname, Krishen rarely used his full name and was widely known as Krishen Jit, his given name. Secondly, in some Asian cultures, there is a common practice of referring to the person by a given name rather than the surname. For this reason Krishen was often referred to as Mr. Krishen rather than Mr. Jit or Mr. Singh.



and modernity were a further feature in negotiations of cultural difference. The need to adapt to urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation in a racialised society that needed to sustain cultural particularity, created further questions about progress and development in contemporary society. Hence Krishen's intent to excavate how difference operates *within*, and not just between, boundaries was demanding, and required acute sensitivity to the politics of Malaysian society. The reality of ongoing prejudices and resentments, which curtail efforts to forge deeper solidarities across cultural divides, were recognised as aspects of the Malaysian experience that had to be grappled with. Yet the aspiration to transcend these barriers was always present as part of a critical response to the hegemony. Using theatre, Krishen enlarged ways of thinking and experiencing this possibility through performances that acknowledged the ties that bind, as well as the broken cords that pose challenges to building social cohesion.

This dissertation argues that Krishen executed powerful stagings of cultural difference in modern, multicultural Malaysia because he dealt imaginatively and critically with questions of inter-, intra- and multi-cultural negotiations, in a plural and postcolonial society that still struggles with issues of segregatedness and polarisation. Malaysian policies of nation-building have essentialised identity according to politically assigned racial, religious and language-based categories. This has led to designations and perceptions of culture that are largely divided along these ethno-religious lines. The state has also effectively marginalized hybridized cultures which occur as a result of cross-boundary interactions, and that continue to expand despite the deterrence. To empower critical and inclusive alternatives, Krishen's work sought to validate these mixes and resist pressures to sustain a politicised 'purity' of cultures. He did this by elucidating the porosity of cultural boundaries as negotiated in everyday life. In so doing he also articulated the capacity of cultures to be adaptive, and thus allow for reinventions without fear of dissolution. Actors belonging to one race were consciously cast by Krishen to play characters of another race, and thus provide a commentary on the politics of racialisation by asserting inter-ethnic embodiments of identity. His theatre reflected how shared experience within a national context enabled intersections and overlaps of cultures, without loss of cultural situatedness. Elements of a particular traditional form were intertwined or juxtaposed with modern styles or other traditional vocabularies, to suggest how these cultures are in fact inter-connected and their meanings relational within this context. The interdisciplinary collages and fusions Krishen created on stage performed a mixing and combining of cultures without denying the origins of

multiplicity. This was also evident in devised multilingual plays where language could be experienced as a composite of varied influences, reflecting the shifts that occur across time and space. Non-formal and improvised languages of interaction were performed as ordinary aspects of life in multicultural society, and legitimised as useful communicative strategies to bridge the gaps of difference. Krishen's work also engaged the space of transition in constructs of culture as an opportunity to explore the interstitial and indeterminate possibilities that emerge between different cultural spheres. These were often critiques of what is established and sanctioned, thus resisting these rigidified frames. In these varied approaches to interrogating and explicating ideas about culture and identity, Krishen asserted the importance of difference as an inherent part of being and becoming Malaysian.

Thus Krishen's approach to theatre consciously reconfigured contemporary Malaysian culture as permeable, discursive, mixed, intersecting, overlapping, and in constant shift. He contested rigid and enforced categories that delineated Selves and Others as devoid of similarity or connection. He also demonstrated how the multi-dimensionality of theatre could produce aesthetic forms for enacting these ideas, to make them accessible as embodied experiences, rather than just as written or verbalised concepts. This meant that the stories about Malaysian culture that Krishen brought to life on stage articulated aspects of difference through multiple performative texts, offering multi-perspectival interpretations of culture that reflected varied dimensions of Malaysian life. However the contextual framing of these varied approaches, which pertained to the socio-political climate of the time, was important to understanding their significance and reading how the work commented on issues of culture and identity. The task of 'excavating' how 'multiculturalism is in one body' was underpinned by a politics of advancing inclusivity and deepening a sense of social justice within a contemporary Malaysian landscape of racialised politics and differentiated histories. Accordingly, these efforts produced interstitial spaces of commonality where boundaries of race, religion, language, class and other divisions were redefined to accommodate greater inter-connectedness and reduce prejudice, bias and divisive practices in the process.

### **Difference in Multicultural and Modern Malaysia**

Malaysia is a plural and postcolonial nation which gained independence from British colonial rule in 1957. It is made-up of different Asian cultural groups who have co-existed for

several centuries and continues to be demarcated by racial, religious and linguistic lines that are officially defined. Multiculturalism in Malaysia is thus particular to this context, and in many respects unlike the multicultural terrain of western nations such as Australia, Canada and Britain, where there is a dominant western culture that has in recent years sought to accommodate the non-western cultures that represent its new migrant communities. Malaysians of different racial, religious and linguistic backgrounds are broadly categorized into three major cultural groups, namely Malays, Chinese and Indians, with a range of other ethnicities who are relatively less prominent in political terms. The Malays, who constitute approximately 50% of the population are seen as the rightful heirs of the nation, and accorded special position by virtue of their cultural heritage. They are entitled to privileges of affirmative action that include political advantage, economic leverage and educational support. Non-Malays, which consist primarily of Chinese and Indians, who together make up approximately 30% of the population, are recognized as citizens but not entitled to the same benefits and opportunities accorded to Malays. In addition about 10% of the populace consist of a range of ethnic groups from the East Malaysian states of Sabah and Sarawak such as the KadazanDusun, Melanau and Iban; and indigenous groups from West Malaysia such as the Sakai, Negrito and Temiar. Those who do not fit into these ethnic groups, such as the Eurasians, are categorised as Others and constitute a very small minority.

The state also officially delineates between citizens who are classified as indigenous and non-indigenous, or *bumiputera* and non-*bumiputera*, according to their racial-religious assignation.<sup>5</sup> In terms of political power *bumiputeras* are further classified according to whether they are Malay *bumiputera* or Other *bumiputera*, to demarcate between those who are entitled to the ‘special position’ of Malays and otherwise. Hence the political category of *bumiputera* is further mediated by the category of race.<sup>6</sup> This is perpetuated despite the fact that race is a

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<sup>5</sup> The Malay term ‘bumiputera’ has come to denote ‘sons of the soil’ although it literally means ‘prince’ (putera) of the ‘earth’ (bumi). This applies only to the politically assigned ‘indigenous’ people of Malaysia who have ‘special rights’ based on this claim of heritage. It is not an ethnic term but a political one that has grown to include Malay *bumiputeras* and non-Malay *bumiputeras*, such as the indigenous people of Sabah (eg. KadazanDusun) and Sarawak (eg. Iban). To date West Malaysia remains prominent in political governance and cultural dominance, to the detriment of most East Malaysians whose cultures are largely marginalized even though they are officially classified as *bumiputera*.

<sup>6</sup> ‘Population and Vital Statistics,’ Department of Statistics – Malaysia, accessed June 14, 2011.

[http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download\\_Buletin\\_Bulanan/files/BPBM/2011/APR/05\\_Population.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.my/portal/download_Buletin_Bulanan/files/BPBM/2011/APR/05_Population.pdf).

According to official figures, the Malaysian population in the first quarter of 2011 was 28,477, 600, of which approximately 60% are *bumiputera*, with 50% Malay and 10% non-Malay or Other *Bumiputera*. Among the non-

widely contested category because the construct of race provides a way of sustaining certain cultural practices and political hegemonies. Ironically the original inhabitants of West Malaysia, namely the *Orang Asli* (Original People) communities, who pre-date the arrival of Malays in this peninsula, are not considered Malays and thus deprived of the special position given to Malays. The overall complexity of this situation raises several questions about national identity and political acceptance making issues of cultural difference particularly relevant to questions of belonging and social cohesion. Hence the process of Other-ing in Malaysia is acute, and the nation struggles with issues of equity and entitlement as its population is deeply polarised.

Yet matters pertaining to race, religion and language, where the boundaries of culture are officially prescribed on the basis of history and tradition, are rarely disputed; as these have been deemed 'sensitive issues' by the state and are to be avoided in order to maintain harmonious co-existence. Malaysians tend to accept their designation as Malay, Chinese, Indian, Iban, Melanau, and so on, with little attempt to alter these constructs. In view of the fact that the Malaysian Constitution defines a Malay person as someone who is Muslim as well, race is often tied to religion. Thus Indians are associated with being Hindu, Chinese with being Buddhist or Taoist, Eurasians with being Christian, and the *Orang Asli* with being animist. In a similar vein, language use is linked to racial groups, and seen as markers of communal identity. Even though Malay is the national language and spoken by most Malaysians, it is not the most commonly used language or mother-tongue of many non-Malay Malaysians. Hence it is still regarded as a language of the Malays, and Chinese and Indian languages, which are still extensively used, mark the cultural differentiation of these racial groups as well. English, the only non-racially based language, is associated with the urban and educated elite, as well as a remnant of British colonial rule. So since English is now acknowledged as a global language of business and power, it remains a language of a privileged minority. In addition to religious affiliation and language, physical features such as skin colour and facial contours, as well as cultural customs such as food and dress, also demarcate racial difference. However these realms are acknowledged as more flexible and are thus less patrolled in most instances. They also point to the reality that despite the delineations of race, religion and language, these boundaries shift, are permeable and often produce overlaps.

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*bumiputera* the Chinese constitute roughly 25%, and there are about 8% Indians. The rest are made up of Malaysians in the category of Others, and non-Malaysian residents. Although *bumiputera* is a political and not ethnic term, it is listed as an 'ethnic group' in official data.

These aspects of identity were pertinent to Krishen's theatre and the dramatisation of conflicts of power in relation to the hierarchies of Selves and Others. Difference was a means of structuring and giving order to the social valence of separate and defined identities. When prescribed difference was adhered to, it reiterated and often reinforced a sanctioned norm. When this authority was subverted by resisting the imposition of assigned categories, alternatives that were potentially more inclusive and open to reinvention emerged. With this in mind, I contend that Krishen's theatre attended closely to the dynamics of cultural difference by staging theatre texts that highlighted issues of identity. It sought to enlarge discourses for reworking these frames to make them more adaptive, variegated and fluid. He developed approaches to staging that performed how ideas about difference could be further enlarged and moderated through performative inflections of meaning that validated the mix rather than endorsed a singularity. This provoked audiences to rethink their settled assumptions of cultural delineation and consider alternative negotiations of multiplicity and the tensions therein. Hence when Krishen deliberately cast against race in a Malaysian context, he encouraged an active viewing that recognised links across cultures rarely seen as linked. This foregrounded the dynamics of alterity that allowed for doubleness and ambivalence in performance. The performativity of the body was reworked to show how boundaries are porous, thus questioning the boundedness of cultural representation. When actors depicted several characters within a single performance, this challenged audiences to read and identify the different stereotypes, as well as the subversions of these qualities, to make sense of the vocal and physical variations being presented. Juxtapositions of several vocabularies of culture, verbal, sonic, movement and visual, reflected the multiple layers of influence in Malaysian life, and produced experiences that allowed audiences to engage in concrete and tangible embodiments of mixes as positive reconfigurations of a Malaysian community. The sense of theatre being a space of transition, where change was always present and the possibility of reinvention made palpable, initiated a process of challenging expectations and revising settled assumptions.

The challenges of dealing with socio-cultural modernisation, most evident in urban society becoming materialistic, industrialised, cosmopolitan and globally oriented in the process, were further inflected with issues of postcolonial nation-building that entailed creating political stability through managing conflicts of racialised privileging and entitlement. I have thus chosen to locate Krishen's theatre within a framework of socio-political change in the Malaysian

context, and make links between the shifts that took place in nation-building with the theatre that Krishen initiated as a response to these developments. Three main aspects of contextually-based difference in Malaysian culture featured prominently in Krishen's theatre, and influenced how he portrayed the tensions and contradictions of being multicultural and modern.

First, Krishen engaged with the multi-racial, multi-religious and multi-lingual interactions of Malaysian society, to create performances that highlighted the crossings of culture as ordinary aspects of daily life. The assembling and re-assembling of different kinds of mixing pointed to a capacity for inventing and re-inventing ideas about Selves and Others. Second, Krishen reworked normative notions of Selves and Others to challenge simplistic binaries in a historically differentiated society, and asserted inter-relatedness across these varied boundaries. He initiated ways of performing contemporary identity as complex interpellations of the Self and Other and pushed for ways of embodying Malaysian culture that exceeded the stipulated norms of sanctioned categories, prescribed identities and official histories. Third, Krishen dealt with the modernizing aspect of Malaysian society that desired a sense of rupture from the past while wanting to sustain cultural rootedness. Concerns about cultural loss and displacement amid tensions of contemporary acceptance, belonging and entitlement, were examined with a deep awareness of the struggles involved in creating a Malaysian identity that could reinvent itself yet maintain cultural particularity.

Hence Krishen dealt with an emergent sense of contemporaneity through engaging with flux, uncertainty and indeterminacy. He initiated ludic and open approaches to culture and identity to allow for unpredictability and spontaneous possibilities of renewal. In seeking to incorporate tradition, history and memory into the contemporary, his work also problematised the notion of the modern, largely associated with the West, by articulating the dynamics of a Malaysian modernity – particular to a plural, postcolonial and Asian culture that produced its own versions of contemporary culture and identity. This marked it as significantly different to a western modernity that tended to become deracinated and lose connections with a sense of tradition.

The alternative multiculturalism that Krishen created in his theatre was thereby an ongoing response to this complex terrain of cultural difference that he engaged with from the 1970s till the early 2000s. It was an important contribution to expanding the limits of contemporary theatre, as imaginings of Malaysian culture often reflected singular frames of

racial identity, particularly in the 1970s and 1980s. Krishen's challenging of fixed, narrow and reductive constructs was driven by his conviction that in order to advance ideas about Malaysian culture, difference needed to be recognised as historically relevant, *and* part of a progressive movement towards the future. This motivated his intent to 'excavate' how 'multiculturalism is in one body', rather than settle for mainstream frames that precluded this possibility. Krishen's stagings of culture were thus deliberate interventions to alter a context where cultural difference was framed as oppositional Otherness, perpetuating dividedness within a national boundary. Hence his work encouraged multifarious expressions of Malaysian culture to underline that all contextually grounded forms were equally valid. In addition, Krishen's achievement was his forging of a lived aesthetic space for engaging with the politics of culture, creating performances that embodied and enacted alternatives, exceeding the limitations of verbal declarations and official rhetoric. This not only provided a counter-discourse to state-sanctioned and mainstream norms, but also empowered reconstitutions of the contemporary.

### **The Politics of the Contemporary**

The question of what makes theatre contemporary in a Malaysian context, in comparison to being modern or traditional, offers no neat answers. Instead it raises more questions about inclusion and exclusion. In Krishen's view '[I]t is not simply the style or the aesthetics but the context gives us many clues as to what is contemporary and what is traditional'.<sup>7</sup> Krishen also identified the contemporary as that which 'contends with the tensions and contradictions that are precipitated in present-day society'.<sup>8</sup> Hence it was not about specific forms or practices, but the 'context' and an attitude of 'contending with' that marked the contemporary to identify it as particular, situated and resistant to norms. Seeing as for Krishen 'the one rule in theatre is that there is no rule', being contemporary was largely about keeping an 'open attitude' in order to 'keep learning' and thus develop fresh and emergent responses to everyday life, politics and cultural shifts in society.<sup>9</sup> This can be seen as Krishen's way of remaining 'liquid' in philosopher Zygmunt Bauman's terms, and thus able to engage in a 'freedom of self-creation'<sup>10</sup> that allowed

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<sup>7</sup> Krishen Jit, 'Wrap-Up Question and Answer Session – 26 October,' in *Coping with The Contemporary: Selves, Identity and Community* (Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd., 2004), 84.

<sup>8</sup> Krishen Jit, 1990, 'Pan-Asean performance encounter,' *New Straits Times*, Nov 18, 1990.

<sup>9</sup> Krishen, quoted in Himanshu Bhatt, 'Acting out of the box,' *New Straits Times*, no date, 2004.

<sup>10</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008), 87.



for ‘assembling’ and ‘disassembling’ identities,<sup>11</sup> in order to reflect the ‘simultaneous allegiances’<sup>12</sup> that constitute the contemporary experience. For Krishen this meant remaining alert to the concerns, questions, conflicts and tensions of being Malaysian in a differentiated society, without resorting to simplistic constructs that denied complexity or became reductive, and thus irrelevant to purposeful reimaginings of inclusivity.

In my view Krishen’s theatre aimed at ‘contending with’ settled assumptions about culture, by not only casting new light on concepts of identity but also examining what was complex, uncertain and indeterminate in urban life. He observed the Malaysian context closely and reflected on its ambiguities, conflicts and tensions with the view to interrogating and revising what was presumed to be normative and exceptional, mainstream and marginal. In this regard his theatre-making produced a politics and aesthetics that subverted the norm, with the intent of ‘excavating’ frames that would allow for greater openness to heterogeneity. While Krishen was attentive to the shifts and stresses of his time, he also pushed against predictable interpretations of the present to incorporate unusual, disjointed, and at times obscure ideas about what it meant to be Malaysian. His acute capacity to extrapolate fresh meanings about the politics of culture and identity stemmed from his willingness to consider alternative perspectives, that highlighted what was often unseen or unheard due to hegemonic insistence on the dominant. Krishen also sought to engage with the historicity of difference in society, and thus incorporated aspects of the past in the present as a means of framing the contemporary as an assemblage of multiple continuities.

These approaches to staging culture in theatre reflected the ‘antinomies of contemporaneity’ that in art critic Terry Smith’s view are associated with the tensions of ‘multeity, adventitiousness, and inequity’.<sup>13</sup> The push and pull of diverse cultures in flux, negotiating uncertainties of the random and unpredictable, and dealing with the disparities that predominate in everyday life were a critical part of Krishen’s explorations of Malaysian identity, particularly in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, which formed the base for most of his work as a theatre director. It was here that Krishen engaged closely with the politics and practices of his time, without necessarily being fully in synch with the movements and trends that emerged. As

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 13, 72-3.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 86.

<sup>13</sup> Terry Smith, ‘Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,’ in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 9. These ideas will be further explored in Chapter One.



such the ‘antinomies’ demanded a precarious balancing that was often on the edge of a known and entrenched boundary, while stretching beyond to locate an emergent alternative. As a result his work was often ‘untimely’ and focussed on the ‘fractures’ in society, which enabled him to peer into the ‘beam of darkness’ that complicates the process of viewing and apprehending the dynamics of reality.<sup>14</sup> These qualities of contemporariness, as defined by philosopher Giorgio Agamben, stress the ability to negotiate the ‘present’ as inflected by the past, marked by a discontinuity, and constantly in shift between varied states of transition. They are embodied in Krishen’s theatre through the choices made to direct scripts that questioned the smooth surfaces of the norm, and experimentations with staging strategies that expanded the possibilities of disjuncture and fragmentariness.

If indeed there is in today’s world a growing consciousness of the need to deal insightfully with issues of difference in modern and multicultural contexts, it is in part the result of a frustration with current practices that are narrow, rigid and prejudicial. As a Malaysian who was born and lived most of my life in Malaysia, my motivation to document and research Krishen’s work as a site of thought-provoking stagings of Malaysian culture and identity that are ‘convivial’<sup>15</sup> and refute reductive, essentialist norms, stems in part from my own concerns about the way Malaysian society continues to be divided and polarized by communalism and racist politics. Having worked closely with Krishen in a range of theatre projects in the 1990s, I had the opportunity to observe and experience some of the philosophies and processes that he used to engage with the tensions of multiplicity in the Malaysian context.<sup>16</sup> I realised that his approach was to primarily encourage and provoke alterity despite uncertain outcomes or the risk of perceived failure. He took on the task of getting to the undercurrents of change and modernity, in

<sup>14</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is the Contemporary?’ in *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 39-54. These ideas will be further explored in Chapter One.

<sup>15</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xv. The concept ‘conviviality’ is used by Gilroy to refer to ‘the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain’s urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere’. Gilroy claims that one of its virtues is its ability to go further than simply refuting ‘absolute or integral races’, which accords a ‘radical openness’ that ‘turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification’. This will be explored further in Chapter One.

<sup>16</sup> I was directed by Krishen in three performances in the 1990s, *The Sandpit* by K.S. Maniam in 1990 and 1991, *The Cord* by K.S. Maniam in 1994 and *Family – A Visual Performance Event* by Leow Puay Tin in 1996. I was also part of the contemporary gamelan ensemble that performed in *Scorpion Orchid* in 1995, which Krishen co-directed. He was also the Artistic Director of the Director’s Workshop in which I participated as a new director in 1998. As a member of Five Arts Centre, a visual and performance collective that Krishen co-founded. I participated in the workings of the company in several ways and was involved in a range of production roles such as Publicity Manager and Assistant Producer, for several other productions that Krishen directed.

order to unearth what he believed was critical about the politics of difference – namely the need to recognize multiplicity as present both within and between individuals and communities. Furthermore, as a Malaysian who is more mixed than pure, and thus does not fit the state-sanctioned frames of identity, I was inspired by the alternatives that Krishen devised as they offered empowering revisions of possibility and potential in the shifting reconstructions of Self and Other. It is through this imaginative openness and attention to contextually grounded histories that the process of bridging the gaps and healing the rifts can be initiated. It is my conviction that a close look at and appreciation of what Krishen did in Malaysian theatre is one way to contribute towards the process of review and renewal in societies of multiplicity.

The dissertation is organized as a chronological analysis of Krishen's directorial work from the 1970s till his final production in 2005; to articulate how there were several phases in his stagings of cultural difference that ranged in political motivation, cultural perspective and aesthetic effectiveness. As will be seen, his earlier experimentations in the 1970s and 1980s focused on how to create syncretic performance styles using inter-racial casting and multi-cultural fusion that looked mainly at differences between and across cultures and identities. This provided important foundations for his later explorations of how to excavate and embody difference 'within' cultures. The interdisciplinary collaborations and devised multi-lingual texts that he developed in the 1990s and early 2000s were thus critical advances which pushed for ways of reimagining Malaysian cultures and identities in the intersections and overlaps of performed vocabularies of difference, and also underlined their historical distinctness and situatedness. By this stage Krishen was able to point to the boundary, move across and between it, and yet depict how its appearance was also an indication of its dis-appearance, intertwining, intersection and blurring.

Chapter One provides an overview of why cultural difference is important to an understanding of Krishen's directorial vision, and his ability to articulate and comment on issues of culture and identity in modern, multicultural Malaysia through contemporary and experimental stagings of theatre. It first looks at the story of Krishen's life and how his theatre practice emerged in relation to the many cultural influences that informed his growing up, education, cultural environment and personal motivations. It then moves on to briefly outline the wider Malaysian political context, suggesting why cultural difference was a central concern in

the nation, and discussing how shifts in policy influenced the politics of Krishen's work. I then move on to look at Krishen's theatre as experimental and contemporary, engaged with issues of the present-day in ways that exceeded the modern and incorporated the historical and traditional. Through this process Krishen forged an alternative multiculturalism through juxtapositions and interweavings of cultural difference that pushed boundaries of theatre-making and expanded the spaces for reviewing Malaysian identity.

Each subsequent chapter will then focus on a particular stage in Krishen's theatre practice, including insights into selected performances he directed that demonstrated these developments most cogently. The analyses will be based on published and unpublished scripts, available video documentation of performances, theatre reviews, published writings, and recorded interviews with some of Krishen's collaborators.

Chapter Two looks at Krishen's work in the 1970s when he began to stage modern Malaysian identities as discursive formations that allowed for permeable boundaries. He explored alternative performance strategies for looking at depictions of modern society, such as inter-racial casting and physically stylised enactments of scripts, to expand how constructs of culture could be reshaped. *Teater kontemporari* (contemporary theatre), a movement that consciously incorporated a mix of traditional and contemporary elements to indigenise modern Malay theatre was instrumental in shifting the politics of Krishen's theatre practice from a largely neo-colonial orientation, towards a strongly national and postcolonial position. In this phase of his practice Krishen stopped doing English language theatre and moved to Malay language theatre as a response to the events of May 1969, in which racial riots between Chinese and Malay Malaysians pointed to deep fractures in society. While this entailed repositioning his own practice within a wider national push to endorse and elevate Malay language and culture, Krishen also sought to articulate how it was possible for Malay language theatre to exceed its culturally exclusive domains and reflect a heterogenous Malaysian sensibility. Two productions he directed during this period, *Tok Perak* (1975), by Syed Alwi and *Bukan Bunuh Diri* (Not Suicide, 1977) by Dinsman exemplified this. In *Tok Perak* Krishen cast non-Malay actors as Malay characters to rework notions of identification as exceeding racial categories. Unlike in English language theatre where inter-racial casting was common, this was a rare practice in Malay language theatre as few non-Malays participated in this Malay dominated sphere. This also meant challenging notions of Malay-ness by asserting that it could incorporate non-Malay

features as well. The approach enlarged the meaning of the story, about an itinerant medicine-seller who seeks acceptance in a Malay community, to make it symbolic of a wider yearning for belonging in a polarised Malaysian society. In Dinsman's monologue *Bukan Bunuh Diri*, Krishen looked at conflicts of difference within Malay culture to express how the margins within a majority culture are also made invisible through exclusion. He cast Khalid Salleh, an experimental visual art and performance artist, who was also a street medicine-seller, in the role of an erudite university scholar grappling with existential questions of life and religiosity. Krishen drew on Khalid's unconventionality and raw physicality as a street performer to cull a style of performance that embodied the character in an elemental and instinctive manner – contradicting conventional ideas of intellectualism as cerebral and studied.

Chapter Three examines Krishen's theatre in the 1980s when he explored multi-layered approaches to staging theatre, but with English language texts that localised the language and dealt with multi-cultural issues. His achievement in this phase was the forging of cultural fusions and multi-cultural performative texts that heightened the politics of difference as critical to the dramatic tension. Krishen's decision to relocate to English language theatre was the result of a growing nativism in Malay language theatre and a significant shift in English language theatre to move towards indigenous and contextually grounded work. In a modernising society that recognised English as a global medium of transaction, it became less associated as a colonial language and provided the appeal of being 'neutral' by virtue of being non-racialised. Thus Malaysian playwrights and directors experimented with how English language theatre could embody and enact a pluralistic vision of society without denying historical roots. Krishen created experimental processes for staging a multiplicity of ideas, images, textures, and rhythms, to reflect the nuances of English as a Malaysian language. In *The Cord* (1984), written by K.S. Maniam, Krishen explored a highly gestural style of physical theatre to perform the intensities of cultural alienation and socio-economic disenfranchisement, encapsulated in a highly poetic text about Indian-Malaysian estate-workers who were part of a colonial plantation economy. The performance also made links between the worlds of privileged English-speaking theatre-goers and impoverished working-class labourers. Here Krishen asserted a need to see the margins of society as inter-connected with the privileged, by performing notions of alterity as prevalent at both ends of the hierarchy. In Kee Thuan Chye's *1984: Here and Now* (1985) the politics of socio-political hierarchy were emphasized further in a play about the politics of an Orwellian

dystopian future, in which a trans-racial futuristic Malaysia is crippled by the tyrannical rule of a totalitarian leader. In this production Krishen articulated a multi-layered interpretation of the script, creating a fusion of cultural elements that incorporated Malay, Chinese and Indian references through movement, sound and visual vocabularies. Hence audiences were provoked to read into the symbolic reworkings of cultural frames, and recognise the subversion of polarised politics that was being enacted, and not just spoken, on stage.

Chapters Four and Five focus on Krishen's theatre in the 1990s, during which he directed a large and diverse body of work as a result of expanding opportunities for theatre and his choice to dedicate more time to theatre-making. In Chapter Four I focus on large-scale interdisciplinary collaborations in which cultural multiplicity was performed as a complex assemblage of multiple elements that were juxtaposed together. Here Krishen used the multi-dimensionality of theatre to develop pluralistic interpretations of scripts, which also reflected a rooted yet cosmopolitan sensibility that acknowledged multiple belongings when cultures intersect and overlap. The scope for elaborate productions was enlarged in the 1990s, when an economic boom and increased funding for the arts allowed for more ambitious ideas to be realised. Collaborating with a wide range of visual artists, musician-composers and dancer-choreographers who, despite their individual artistic style and aesthetics, shared a politics of inclusivity, Krishen's achievement was to produce stylized theatrical languages that reflected these mixes. In Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1995), which Krishen co-directed with director-actor Joe Hasham, the story of four friends dealing with racial difference amid socio-political turbulence in the 1950s was staged to highlight how sonic and movement texts that framed the spoken dialogue could dramatise the underlying anxieties of the period and articulate its relevance to the present-day. Collaborating with dancer-choreographer Aida Redza and musician-composer Sunetra Fernando, Krishen developed the staging of the play as a sensuous weave of multiple texts, rhythms and textures that embodied the in-betweenness of cultures in shift. In *Family – A Visual Performance Event* (1998) which Krishen co-directed with visual artist Wong Hoy Cheong, the directors evoked a sense of the carnivalesque in a site-specific performance that consciously created a random ordering of scenes and multiple simultaneous performances of the main text with several other parallel texts. These were written and curated to prise open the meanings of the script on which the performance was based, namely a play written by playwright-performer Leow Puay Tin about a migrant Chinese family who struggle through loss and pain to achieve success.

Differences of time, space, and cultural milieu were conflated to create a ludic depiction of cultural history and community identity. Fragmented events and non-linear narratives sought to communicate that multiplicity was not just historical, cultural and textual, but spatial, temporal and corporeal as well.

Chapter Five moves on to examine how Krishen's intimate and small-scale theatre in the 1990s developed ideas for performing cultural difference through devised multi-lingual plays and scripted monologue performances. The approach he took in these productions was to collaborate closely with actors and draw extensively from physical and spoken languages observed and experienced in everyday interactions. This enabled him to forge performance vocabularies that depicted mixed cultures as part of ordinary life, exceeding formal structures and codified behaviours often associated with singular and unitary cultures. These were particularly valuable during the late 1990s, when political and economic turbulence in the nation led to widespread dissatisfaction with the government, and prodded stronger motivation to engage with solidarities across cultural boundaries. Hence performances that embodied the multiplicity 'within' bodies were potent metaphors for asserting a need to accommodate and adjust to differences in society at large. In *A Chance Encounter* (1999), a play devised by Krishen with actors Faridah Merican and Foo May Lyn, the story looked at what happens when the markedly different worlds of a Chinese cosmetic sales-woman and a Mamak (Indian-Muslim) housewife collide by chance at an urban shopping mall. The improvised spoken languages and gestural expressions devised by the actors performed what happens when two people bridge dichotomies spontaneously, and evolve languages that go beyond rules and formal codes of behaviour to accommodate particular contexts and personalities. Even though they part company by the end of the play, unable to sustain their sense of connection, their capacity to transcend the gaps pointed to a potential for mutuality when the need arises and there is shared intent. Likewise, in writer-performer Huzir Sulaiman's monologue *Election Day* (2004), which centred round real events that occurred during the 1999 General Election in relation to a campaign for an opposition candidate, Krishen demonstrated how different identities can be performed by one person through seamless transformations that perform the similarities and differences of multiple characters. In his direction of actress Jo Kukathas, who played a range of racially distinct characters through accent, gesture and physical stance, Krishen examined how the politics of reinvention is simultaneously linked to processes of reiteration and subversion.



Hence he complicated prescribed notions of Selves and Others, by showing how these constructs were too deeply imbricated to be effectively kept separate.

Finally Chapter Six looks at Krishen's work in the early 2000s, the last phase of his directing career, when he staged ideas about difference in the spaces of transition. This was a time when Malaysia was experiencing political transition as well. Krishen experimented with dramatisations of unscripted links between different segments of a production, to suggest how improvised interludes can provide opportunities for inter-connections across time and space. These in-between moments inflected the meanings of the short plays and musical compositions he directed, making links between cultural spheres and identities that would otherwise have remained neglected. In this regard difference became a focus in itself, challenging performers and audiences to constantly shift between alternating cultural spheres. In *7-Ten* (2003), Krishen directed seven ten-minute plays, written by different writers on a range of topics. Here he staged the unwritten transitions between the plays to perform how these varied worlds intersect with each other, and co-exist within the same imaginative and physical space. Using an ensemble of actors who played multiple roles, the actors also performed scene changes and moved from one play into another, as if shifting in and out of different dimensions of culture while occupying the same the stage. Krishen went further in the performance of *Monkey Business* (2005), which was not a play but a reworking of contemporary gamelan music, in which he worked with musicians to dramatise stories about the gamelan. Here he introduced each musical composition as a score with a story about the musicians and their relationship with the instruments and form. In so doing he not only theatricalised a non-dramatic form, but also made accessible the motivations that shift the gamelan, a traditional classical Malay music form, towards a more contemporary trans-ethnic association. In my view, this phase of Krishen's theatre marked the beginning of a new approach to staging difference that was in fact a culmination and moving on of earlier explorations, in that it went beyond the text as given and opened up the spaces before and after the text - not just dealing with the layers of meaning contained within different texts, but performing the spaces of connection between them.

This dissertation will argue that Krishen's artistic and cultural achievement in theatre was his increasing ability to engage with, critique and go beyond an inherited race-based idea of a Malaysian community, through the use of complex and layered theatre forms that investigated culture and identity as sites of permeable, discursive, intersecting, overlapping and fluctuating

dimensions. This resisted the mainstream and official ideas of national culture in which multiplicity is presented in separate parallel streams, fixed in rigid structures of Selves and Others. In his productions, Krishen's intent was the reworking of cultural identities through exploring the dynamics of difference in relation to the larger socio-political shifts that occurred in the Malaysian context. Ideas that promoted inclusivity, mutuality and equity were consciously crafted to empower agency and enhance respect. Krishen's work also articulated the indigenous historicity of heterogeneity and hybridity, moving away from notions of authentic, unitary and originary identities. As a result Krishen's artistic innovations were valuable for their reinvention of performance conventions and vocabularies, that tended to be limited by cultural association as relegated to one or another race-based category or domain. It also nurtured a space to reimagine a Malaysian community able to transcend divisive norms of cultural categorisation by questioning the validity of prescribed and perceived boundaries.



## Chapter 1

### **Cultural Difference in Malaysia: A Context for Krishen Jit's Theatre**

I feel we don't ask enough questions about our normative behaviour. We are not investing enough into what we are as Malaysians. I am trying to penetrate the whole issue of how we imagine our community. Even if it is 'imagined', what is it that is imagined?<sup>1</sup>

Contemporary experimental theatre sets out to question normative ideas, and the director is challenged to create performances that articulate these interrogations of culture through imaginative processes that reflect on issues in everyday life. The objective is to provoke questioning through frames, critiques and comments on the complexities of being human, and produce new lenses for viewing culture and identity. Krishen's intent to 'ask enough questions' about the meanings of being and becoming Malaysian, and his commitment to 'investing enough' in the process of understanding and re-imagining a sense of community, were crucial to the politics of his theatre. They indicated his attentiveness to the complexities and undercurrents of Malaysian life and provided him with deep insights about 'what we are as Malaysians'. Krishen's stagings of Malaysian culture examined closely the diverse workings of identities in shift, and thereby embodied ideas and images that could 'penetrate' the many concerns, anxieties, fears and settled assumptions about what constitutes a modern and multicultural Malaysian 'community'. His work authored ways in which assumed and assigned identities could be reworked to become less rigid and more inclusive, thereby incorporating that which was marginalized and excluded. This was aimed at raising questions about how what is 'imagined' can be reconfigured to propose alternative possibilities of living with cultural difference as part of contemporary culture.

An inclusive and open sense of 'community' – whether lived or imagined– is crucial to questions of belonging and acceptance, particularly for citizens of a multi-racial, multi-lingual and multi-religious society. Theatre, as a live and multi-dimensional medium, generates a brief moment of community by bringing together audiences and performers into a temporary relationship of shared experience. The oscillating relationship between performers and audiences

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<sup>1</sup> Krishen Jit, quoted in Mohan Ambikaipaker, 'Cultural Encounter,' *The Edge*, March 15, 1999.

engenders a co-creation of meaning and value. This generates a valuable, even if brief, connection between multiple individuals who come together as audience members and performers to engage with and encounter ideas about Selves and Others. This offers a potent site for attending closely to the ways in which a national or cultural community can be apprehended, particularly when issues of difference are a source of divisiveness in the wider context. To ask questions about one's community in a creative and aesthetic space is to consciously participate in its formation and re-formation. It is to interrogate the lines of division and the boundaries that define the dynamics of inter- and intra-cultural interaction. This works to 'penetrate' issues by initiating dialogical processes that look squarely at the face of the community, with its several strengths and weaknesses, and approach the questions that lie therein with curiosity and courage. Krishen's sustained interest in expanding the space for this kind of 'investing' in imaginations of 'what we are' stemmed from a desire to validate the mixes in society, and encouraged ways of engaging with 'community' beyond presumed, stipulated, official and mainstream defines.

In this chapter I argue that it is important to look at cultural difference in the context of Krishen's life, Malaysian history and the politics of contemporary theatre, in order to appreciate the value of the work that Krishen created. I will first give a brief outline of Krishen's life and contend that because Krishen was himself located between stipulated boundaries, the tensions of cultural difference became an important dimension in his thinking about what it meant to be Malaysian. This fuelled his desire to expand the space for alternative ideas about cross-cultural interactions, and recognise the value of cultures that were mixed and open to reinvention. I will then assert that cultural difference is a crucial aspect of Malaysian society as a result of its history and politics. For this reason Krishen's work spoke directly to issues of national and cultural identity, and his efforts to express how difference is inherent to an indigenous contemporary Malaysia were geared towards empowering inclusivity and inter-relatedness. In this respect, Krishen's theatre advanced ideas that resisted the official tropes of the state, which perpetuated polarisation and segregatedness. Finally, I contend that Krishen's politics and aesthetics as an experimental theatre director were related to ideas about the 'contemporary' which pertained to concepts of flux, uncertainty, open-endedness and ambivalence. This involved going beyond ideas of the 'modern' as a sense of rupture from the past and looking instead at the conflicts and tensions of disjuncture, anxiety, ambiguity and unsettledness in society. Krishen's work consciously incorporated aspects of the traditional and historical in

reinventions of the present, to emphasise a need for rootedness and generate contextually grounded approaches to indigenise modern Malaysian theatre. This contested the idea that modern identities were necessarily westernised and homogenised, to assert a local particularity and contemporary indigeneity that drew from a diversity of sources without losing situatedness.

### **The Story of Difference in Krishen Jit's Life**

Krishen's experience of the inherent multiplicity of Malaysian culture began in his earliest years when he encountered different cultures as part of everyday life. This section looks at how his life was characterised by cultural, social and political multiplicity, and contends that this made his work rich with a lived sense of what it meant to negotiate difference as integral and common to being Malaysian. For Krishen, difference was not just a political idea or aesthetic experiment; it was an embodied reality that informed his daily decisions – from what to eat and which language to speak. These were choices that Krishen interrogated and reflected upon to inform his critical perspectives of what it meant to be multicultural and modern in Malaysia.

As a child growing up in Kuala Lumpur, which was then the capital city of British Malaya, Krishen's world was characterised by the presence of several languages spoken, diverse customs practiced and multiple cultures performed.<sup>2</sup> Born on July 10, 1939, to Punjabi-Sikh immigrant parents from India, Krishen Jit Amar Singh grew up in a merchant family that traded in carpets, fabrics and garments. He lived and attended school in Batu Road (now Jalan Tuanku Abdul Rahman), which is located in the heart of the business area. It was thus occupied by a diversity of peoples. It was in this environment that he first enjoyed the pleasures of consuming a wide range of cultural activity. His recollections of these initial forays into observing the diversity of life that surrounded him include stories of how he moved freely between sneaking into cinemas to watch Hindustani movies, staying out till late to peek at cabaret dancers, and being transfixed by Chinese Opera on open air stages.<sup>3</sup> In a recorded interview with Kathy

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<sup>2</sup> See Zianuddin Sardar, *The Consumption of Kuala Lumpur*, (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2000), 46-74, for details of the history of multiplicity in Kuala Lumpur. Up to 1957, when Malaysia attained independence from British colonial rule, British Malaya was run as the Federated Malay States, the Unfederated Malay States and the Straits Settlements. Kuala Lumpur was initially a tin-mining related city that eventually became a centre of trade and administration, and eventually the capital city of the nation. The population of the city was marked by a wide diversity of people, who consisted of native dwellers, recent settlers, immigrant workers, foreign traders and colonial officers.

<sup>3</sup> Theresa Manavalan, 'Krishen Jit – a lifetime of theatre,' *Sunday Style*, March 14, 1999. Manavalan's article on Krishen's achievements in theatre gives details of some of his childhood years, including aspects of the 'illicit relish' with which he would sneak out of his home to watch an array of performances. This included Hindustani

Rowland in 2003 he recounted how he used to watch street performances and was ‘entranced’ by them, and even at the young age of eleven, began to contemplate why he was so ‘involved in watching people’.<sup>4</sup> This fascination with the multiplicity of human behaviour and cultural practice, as experienced in everyday life and performances on the street, informed Krishen’s style of theatre. Journalist Theresa Manavalan described this as a desire to ‘capture Malaysiana, its peculiarities, its personalities, its clichés, its conundrums, its spontaneity, [which is] as much [a part] of the context as it is the methodology’.<sup>5</sup> These aspirations can be linked to his experiences of cultural multiplicity while growing up, which unfortunately were scarcely reflected in official depictions of being Malaysian.

The commitment to forging indigenous and contextually grounded performance, able to reflect the lives, social spheres, conflicts and concerns of contemporary Malaysians, was not something that was always part of Krishen’s theatre practice. As will be seen, it emerged in response to a range of circumstances that prodded Krishen to rethink his purpose and position in Malaysian theatre. To begin with, Krishen’s initial involvements as a performer in theatre were far from aligned with his later efforts to make work that focussed on local cultures, with indigenised aesthetics. He was initially part of a colonial enculturation process for the educated elite, in which English language theatre was seen as a space that offered colonial subjects opportunities to become closely acquainted with English culture, its values and norms. As a student of the Victoria Institution, a premier secondary school established in 1893 during the colonial era, Krishen was an active member of the Victoria Institute Drama Society, and acted in scripted English plays from the western canon.<sup>6</sup> He later became a member of the Malayan Arts Theatre Group (MATG), an expatriate-led western-oriented amateur drama association, in which Krishen worked at first as crew member and later as actor. Here Krishen encountered the hierarchies of colonial difference in theatre, where until 1959 all lead parts were played by

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movies at the Coliseum cinema, and ‘performances of *bangsawan* (popular Malay opera), Chinese opera and the pretty *joget* (Malay dance) girls’ at B.B. Park.

<sup>4</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.

<sup>5</sup> Manavalan, ‘Krishen Jit’.

<sup>6</sup> In 1957 Krishen played the lead part in *Tobias and the Angel* by James Bridie, (cited in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, ed. Kathy Rowland, 233), a story from the Book of Tobit that deals with the relationship between a young man Tobias and the Archangel Raphael, who helps him overcome a range of struggles along his journey. This performance of a young man aided by an ‘angel’ was in many respects akin to Krishen gaining the confidence to overcome a stutter as a result of a dynamic drama teacher Yvonne Stanley, who convinced him that theatre would provide the necessary impetus towards this end. Krishen, in Manavalan, ‘Krishen Jit,’ refers to how ‘the stutter vanished’ after he participated in theatre.

expatriates, even though Malaysian independence was attained in 1957.<sup>7</sup> Notably, it was Krishen who was the first local who performed the title-role in a play produced by the MATG, namely William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*. Krishen was alert to 'the issue of power' that 'kept coming up' in relation to casting, as local actors were always given minor roles, and seen as submissive characters who made up the 'crowd'.<sup>8</sup> As such his conscious decisions to cast against race, as will be seen in this dissertation, were geared towards highlighting the dimension of positionality and hierarchy in cultural politics.

It was not until the 1960s, as an undergraduate student of history at the University of Malaya, that Krishen began to veer away from the western canon in a bid to engage with more local and regional perspectives. In 1960, together with fellow-student Tan Jin Chor, Krishen co-founded the Literary and Dramatic Arts Society (LIDRA), where he began to direct plays that engaged with Asian cultures and identities. In 1961 they staged Rabindranath Tagore's *Sacrifice*, in which Krishen played the part of the Old Priest. In the story, Jaising, a child servant of the Old Priest is faced with the dilemma of whether to remain loyal to traditional authority or abide by a powerless young friend. This central paradox reflected the tensions of seeking change and revising ideas about how a Malaysian community could be re-envisioned through theatre, by suggesting that it was necessary to confront the contradictions of loyalty and liberty in order to engage with modernity. At the time, little was done to recognise the role of the arts in contributing to nation-building as this was neither a priority of the state nor of society. Thus the politics of language and culture, particularly in English language theatre, were not taken seriously. Yet stagings of Asian cultures enacted on the English language theatre stage were early efforts to revise this.

The traumatic race riots of May 1969, in which Malay- and Chinese-Malaysians clashed violently with each other on the streets of major urban centres in Malaysia, was what prompted Krishen to rethink his position as a theatre-maker. It pushed him to 'think differently about this country' and made him aware of 'the great divide' between Malays and non-Malays, subsequently prompting him to shift his position in order to 'understand our roots as a nation'.<sup>9</sup> The facade of Malaysians from different cultural backgrounds living together in harmony had been shattered, and this resulted in massive changes in economic, political and cultural policy,

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<sup>7</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Krishen, quoted in Manavalan, 'Krishen Jit'.

that effectively reshaped the frames of Malaysian identity. Faced with disturbing questions of what it meant to be Malaysian, when there were deep fractures in the community and radical shifts in public policy, Krishen revised his politics of theatre and relocated to Malay language theatre. He did this in order to localise his participation in theatre and be able to connect with the majority population, rather than be limited to an educated elite.<sup>10</sup> As a result he stopped doing English language theatre throughout the 1970s and started experimenting with Malay language theatre and directing stories about Malay culture. This entailed his having to learn the Malay language and culture, and confront his own status as a non-Malay Malaysian in a Malay-dominant sphere. He had to deal with what it meant to belong to a nation with a racially mixed populace, which was governed by a state that was intent on reiterating the position of a single race, namely Malay, as the elevated core of cultural identity. The implications of this move will be explored further in Chapter Two, where I examine how Krishen tried to broaden the meanings of Malay-ness in order to make it more inclusive. However at this juncture it is significant that he was willing to make big changes in his own politics and practice to question what it meant to be Malaysian.

The focus he gave to rethinking the boundaries of culture and identity persisted throughout Krishen's theatre career as a director. He continually questioned assumptions about how cultural definitions and prescriptions could be challenged and reworked towards greater openness and fluidity. Just as the idea of a nation as an 'imagined community', as proposed by anthropologist Benedict Anderson, emphasises processes of 'shared imaginings' through widely accessible platforms such as print media,<sup>11</sup> Krishen's work sought to reconstruct ideas about the Malaysian community through the 'shared experience' of theatre, and de-emphasised notions of community as primarily linked to physical or cultural lineage. It was geared towards articulating Malaysian identities in ways that drew from the 'national' yet demonstrated an ability to exceed and question these tropes. In that sense his work echoed the questions of historian Partha Chatterjee, where the need to ask 'whose imagined community' and thus attend to alternative fragments of culture that resisted a 'normalizing project' of 'nationalist modernity', became

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<sup>10</sup> A range of leading English language theatre practitioners who were Malay-Malaysians, such as Syed Alwi, Rahim Razali and Faridah Merican, also made a conscious move to relocate to Malay language theatre in order to decolonise their own theatre practice and create more inclusive work that could be enjoyed by a wider cross-section of Malaysians. However for them, the move was less radical as they were already fluent in Malay and part of Malay culture. For Krishen this entailed a radical shift to reinvent himself as well.

<sup>11</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London & New York: Verso, 1991), 39-43.

more important.<sup>12</sup> This broadening of possibilities for conceiving and performing what was Malaysian was his contribution towards enlarging the meanings of being and becoming Malaysian, in both real and imagined terms. As will be seen in this dissertation, Krishen's work operated against a backdrop of the larger socio-political shifts which impacted on how he chose to represent a sense of community and conflicts of identity.

To be true to this sense of openness and review, Krishen's career as a theatre director spanned a range of positions and processes, the result of his continual interrogation of what was relevant to contemporary imaginings of 'what we are as Malaysians'.<sup>13</sup> His full-time job as a history lecturer at the University of Malaya from 1967 till his retirement in 1994, points to the fact that in the 1970s, 1980s and early 1990s, Krishen did theatre as a part-time activity.<sup>14</sup> However as theatre was his main interest, over the years he allocated increasing amounts of time and energy to this work. While his training as a historian equipped him with skills in researching ideas and forging links between the past and present, and deliberating on the importance of tradition in modernity, it was his instincts as a director and deep engagement with theatre that compelled him to delve further into the medium. While Krishen was never formally trained in theatre, his avid and rigorous research, investigation and application of ideas led to his becoming a prominent director in Malaysia, with a reputation that extended to neighbouring Southeast Asia. He learnt about theatre by watching theatre, observing rehearsals, and reading widely about the politics and theories of performance that informed his practice. This equipped him with a wide range of ideas about how to experiment with and critique theatre.

Apart from directing theatre, Krishen was also a theatre critic who did more than just review performances. He proactively sought to enlarge the discourse on what was relevant to an imagining of a contemporary Malaysian community by advocating that all styles and approaches to performance could be seen as relevant. He did this by writing about a range of types of performance that were created and performed in Malaysia, and how they were significant to Malaysian culture and identity. This questioned boundaries of language, style, form and race, as demarcations that segregated creative production as well. Thus his weekly column entitled

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<sup>12</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1993), 3-13.

<sup>13</sup> Krishen, quoted at the start of the chapter.

<sup>14</sup> Krishen was an undergraduate history student at the University of Malaya in the 1960s, and then went on to become a postgraduate Masters student in American History in the University of California at Berkeley in the United States of America in 1962.



*Talking Drama with Utih*,<sup>15</sup> published for twenty-two years in the largest Malaysian English Language daily, the *New Straits Times* (NST), while focused on theatre, spanned all manner of performance from contemporary dance and classical music, to poetry readings and traditional performance forms. It ran from 1972 till 1994, making it the longest running arts column in Malaysia. Krishen also wrote in Malay,<sup>16</sup> and came to be respected as arguably the only bilingual theatre critic of his generation, whose politics was clearly to create more overlaps between cultural sectors in the arts community.<sup>17</sup> In 1986 a collection of the Utih articles was translated into Malay and published by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, (Malaysian Language Council) entitled *Membesar Bersama Teater* (Growing Up With Theatre). It remains the only publication of its kind.<sup>18</sup> To date, no reviewers or scholars have written as extensively in both Malay and English nor critiqued performance in Malaysia in as wide a sense as Krishen did.

In addition to writing reviews, Krishen also wrote scholarly articles that theorised and analysed the politics of contemporary theatre-making in Malaysia and in the Southeast Asian region, primarily in neighbouring Singapore, Indonesia, Thailand and the Philippines. These were published in a range of sites including academic journals on Asian and Southeast Asian theatre, as well as scholarly books on theatre.<sup>19</sup> Here he examined traditional theatre forms and how they were valuable to processes of indigenising contemporary theatre. He also looked at

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<sup>15</sup> Krishen's pseudonym, Utih, was taken from the name of a character in National Laureate Usman Awang's play *Uda dan Dara* (*Uda and Dara*). This character is a wise albeit eccentric older man in the village, whose insights into the human condition are perplexing but nonetheless revered for their capacity to provoke thought. In making known his opinions and giving out advice, Utih does not adhere to custom or convention. He thus stands out for his radical thinking and strong critique. In several ways Krishen's column would perform similarly and give voice to views and concerns in ways that provoked varied responses, in agreement or otherwise. Krishen's co-direction of the play *Uda dan Dara* will be discussed in Chapter Six.

<sup>16</sup> These articles were published in Malay literary criticism journals such as *Dewan Sastera* published by the *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* in Kuala Lumpur. They dealt with issues of how to contemporize Malay language theatre and the struggle of artists to indigenize the arts to resist westernization as the only form of modernization.

<sup>17</sup> Kathy Rowland, 'Introduction' in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, ed. Kathy Rowland, (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003), 19, notes how 'the Utih articles' were in fact 'an appraisal of the arts from the 70s to the 90s' primarily because Krishen 'defied the monolithic privileging of English at the NST', and refused to 'locate language at the centre of theatre discourse'. Even though this led to his being 'accused of being either too pro-English or too pro-Malay-theatre by practitioners on both sides of the language divide', he was persistent in his attempts to look at the multiplicity of Malaysian culture as inter-related parts of each other, rather than divided along communal lines.

<sup>18</sup> Much later, in 2003 a collection of his articles was published by the Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, Singapore, in a volume entitled *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, edited by Kathy Rowland. This brought together his thinking on art-making and theatre practices in the region, which had been published earlier in collections of writing on Malaysian and Southeast Asian theatre and international journals, such as *Tenggara: Journal of Southeast Asian Literature* and the *Asian Theatre Journal*, where he also served as contributing editor from 1984 till 1990.

<sup>19</sup> These included publications in journals such as the *Asian Theatre Journal* and *Tenggara: Journal of Southeast Asian Literature*; and writing for *The Cambridge Guide to World Drama* edited by Martin Banham and published in 1988, as well as *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* edited by James R. Brandon and first published in 1993.



how cultural fusions were a combination of local and western approaches that expressed a contextually grounded contemporaneity. These efforts did not delineate difference as exclusive. Instead, these mixes of culture encouraged more integrative frames for apprehending modernity.

Krishen's exposure to more anthropological frames of theatre experimentation occurred while he was a Visiting Scholar of Performance Theory at New York University in 1980, at the invitation of performance theorist pioneer, Richard Schechner, under the Andrew Mellon Fellowship. During this nine-month stint, Krishen watched varied performances and rehearsal processes that experimented with contemporary and avant-garde frames for theatre-making, such as elements of random and chance, as well as the politics of the body in society.<sup>20</sup> He also attended formal theatre classes, which exposed him to discourses on the relationships between anthropology and theatre that were being explored by Schechner and anthropologist Victor Turner. Krishen refers to how the experience 'put me in touch with how tenuous the separation is between traditional and contemporary, popular and high [culture]', and led to his developing what he called a 'systematic way of thinking about juxtaposing contemporary and traditional ideas, images and metaphors' in which he became 'less self-conscious about it (mixing cultures)'.<sup>21</sup> This intellectual environment prodded Krishen to examine how theories of performance and culture, such as deconstruction and postmodernism, impacted ideas of the contemporary. He began to think of how to harness more open and fluid approaches to theatre-making, engaging with fragmentation, non-linearity and open-endedness, to embody a Malaysian modernity.<sup>22</sup> This was evident in many of the choices he made for staging local scripts, as will become evident in this dissertation.

In the 1980s Krishen moved back to making theatre in English, but this time with a commitment to locally written scripts that dealt with Malaysian stories, characters and issues. Here he aligned with local writers, who worked to assert English as a local language, and

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<sup>20</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003, recalls how he was deeply influenced by artists such as Spalding Grey and Robert Chaikin, contemporary and experimental theatre practitioners, whose work he witnessed and whose ideas challenged his views on theatre.

<sup>21</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.

<sup>22</sup> Marion D'Cruz, in telephone conversation with Charlene Rajendran, 2006, pointed to the pivotal role that Krishen's time in New York played in his future explorations of the relationship between experimental theatre and culture as rooted in contextually grounded histories. She referred to how 'when he came back, he was experimenting with greater confidence because his work was now informed by critical discourse that was shared with other practitioners he had met and worked with in New York. He was engaging with performance in more boundary breaking ways and able to theorise his own work. Able to make the connections that located his work in a wider sphere of theatre-making.'

recognise its right to being part of Malaysian culture. He was no longer limited by a Malay-centric focus and sought to weave cultural elements from diverse origins and histories, to depict a Malaysian contemporaneity. This engaged with the idea of pluralistic roots as critical to forging multi-cultural identity. In a rapidly modernising society, where the pressures to adapt to urbanisation, industrialisation and globalisation included the need to resist cultural homogenisation and dissolution, the need for alternative imaginings of modern indigeneity became more urgent. English language theatre offered a suitable site for doing this as it was less bound by communal concerns and aspired towards greater cosmopolitanism. Krishen recognised the advantages of a more inclusive scope for creative expression and consciously pushed the limits of cultural boundaries by staging the cultural mixes and overlaps of everyday life. This will be explored in Chapter Three, detailing how Krishen's theatre in the 1980s developed to produce increasingly effective and thought-provoking strategies to embody his politics of difference.

To create a more supportive environment for experimental contemporary theatre-making in Malaysia, Krishen also initiated and participated in ongoing dialogue with like-minded practitioners in theatre and other artistic disciplines. The formation of Five Arts Centre (FAC) in 1984, a visual and performing arts collective committed to producing new work that was local, experimental and interdisciplinary, was part of a broader move to encourage this approach.<sup>23</sup> It was co-founded by Krishen and four fellow-artists - writer-director Chin San Sooi, dancer-choreographer Marion D'Cruz, playwright-novelist K.S. Maniam, and visual artist-curator Redza Piyadasa - to formalise a need for alternative arts spaces that pushed the boundaries of Malaysian creativity by interrogating what it meant to be contemporary in the local context. While most theatre in FAC was in English, as this was the shared language of those involved, there was a conscious effort to indigenise the work through Asian-ised non-verbal texts of movement, sound and visual art. Thus it used the 'neutrality' of English as a non-racialised language in Malaysia, to expand the boundaries of cultural production. It did this by playing with ways of mixing formal and colloquial, standard and non-standard vocabularies, to inflect the meaning of English

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<sup>23</sup> The Five Arts Centre then became the company which produced most of Krishen's work and provided the creative and production support he needed for many of his critical experimentations in theatre. For a comprehensive list of productions Krishen directed, see *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position* ed. Kathy Rowland. (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003), 233-238.

as a local language. This was part of a postcolonial reclamation of modern theatre that was evident in neighbouring nations such as Singapore, Indonesia and the Phillipines.

Krishen's ongoing research into the dynamics of contemporary Southeast Asian performance prompted him to watch, analyse and connect with ideas about performance across the region. In 1987, Krishen went on a three-month sabbatical trip to neighbouring nations to study the work of fellow practitioners, such as Kuo Pao Kun from Singapore, Ariffin Noer and Putu Wijaya from Indonesia, and Amelia Bonifacio from the Philippines. He was interested in how they were approaching the task of developing local experimental theatre that expressed the modernity of urban Southeast Asia, while digging into its traditional forms and historical roots.<sup>24</sup> Some of these early conversations later led to trans-national collaborations and inter-cultural dialogues, most evident in his work with TheatreWorks in Singapore, where he was invited to become Dramaturg in 1988.

In the 1990s, Krishen expanded his theatre practice to incorporate a wide range of approaches and styles, reflecting the larger shifts in English language theatre in Malaysia. An economic boom and policies of cultural liberalisation led to a surge of interest in contemporary theatre in the urban capital of Kuala Lumpur. There were more theatre companies and practitioners committed to developing contextually grounded, indigenous, and modern stagings of culture and identity. As a result, Krishen's work also enlarged its scope as he worked with diverse theatre companies and collaborated with artists from several disciplines and backgrounds. This led to large-scale interdisciplinary performances, devised multilingual plays, and small-scale monologue productions; all of which excavated ideas about multiculturalism and the politics of difference as experienced and expressed within and through the body, the space and the multi-dimensionality of theatre as a medium. This will be examined in Chapters Four and Five.

Krishen's interest in experimental juxtapositions of performance style, cultural vocabularies, and artistic forms, also fed into his role as a theatre educator. In the 1990s, Krishen designed curricula for theatre programmes in the University of Malaya and the Akademi Seni

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<sup>24</sup> Krishen's essay entitled 'A Survey of Modern Southeast Asian Drama' which was first published in *Tenggara: Journal of Southeast Asian Literature* in 1989, provides an expansive view of how theatre in the region was negotiating issues of content and form at the time. Krishen also went on to write more detailed articles on 'Contemporary Theatre in Malaysia', and 'Modern Theatre in Singapore: A Preliminary Survey', where he was most involved and informed of developments and processes of theatre-making. These were also published in *Tenggara: Journal of Southeast Asian Literature* in 1989. They have since been reprinted in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position* ed. Kathy Rowland. (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003).

Kebangsaan (National Arts Academy), where he infused his conviction of the need to integrate diverse cultural forms and approaches to theatre-making in the development of theatre training and thinking. Thus in these state-run institutions of higher learning, where the trend had been to emphasise Malay culture to the point of neglect of non-Malay cultures, Krishen designed curricula that provided a critical mix of Malay and non-Malay, traditional and contemporary performance forms and histories, to encourage an apprehension of Malaysian theatre as connected to these varied sites of artistry and thinking. Students were thereby exposed to several cultural traditions and stylistic conventions, giving them a broader view of how to approach their own practice as young Malaysians, and inspiring them to produce politically critical and aesthetically indigenous work.<sup>25</sup> Here too he was advancing a capacity to ‘excavate’ multiplicity as part of a Malaysian heritage.

Krishen’s vision for theatre, which was consciously geared towards rethinking identity and performing an inclusive imagining of Malaysian community, benefitted from his wide experience and capacity to be involved in several kinds of arts discourse. Apart from the medium of theatre, Krishen also participated in the contemporary visual arts scene, serving as a member of the Malaysian National Art Gallery Board of Trustees from 1990 till 1994,<sup>26</sup> and contributing to writing on the visual arts.<sup>27</sup> This willingness to take on a critical understanding of diverse arts mediums enhanced his ability to ‘imagine’ how theatre could become more open to multiple and wide-ranging approaches of viewing and staging culture.

In the final phase of his theatre directing, namely the early 2000s till his passing in 2005, Krishen responded to the larger political climate which was marked by a sense of transition. During this period Krishen revised earlier positions of only doing local plays, to include foreign scripts, and he also extended his commitments to directing outside Malaysia as well. As part of his own ongoing reflexivity and reinvention, he returned to looking at the significance of Malay culture from within English language theatre, which marked a reconsideration of work he had done in earlier years. However his achievement was in the way he experimented with how

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<sup>25</sup> Information gained from Namron, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006. Namron, currently a director-playwright-performer in contemporary Malay language theatre, was a student of Krishen’s at the Akademi Seni Kebangsaan in the mid-late 1990s.

<sup>26</sup> Rowland, *Krishen Jit*, 237.

<sup>27</sup> Krishen wrote important articles on the contemporary visual arts scene in Malaysia, including the ‘Introduction,’ in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art*, edited by T. K. Sabapathy and published by the National Art Gallery, Kuala Lumpur in 1994, in conjunction with an exhibition to celebrate 35 years of the National Art Gallery in Malaysia.

transitoriness could be depicted in imaginings of Malaysian society in flux. Here qualities of indeterminacy, transformation and unsettledness were emphasised, and Krishen attended to the suturing of difference. This pointed to inter-connections, yet also emphasised the dis-connections of disparate elements, thus commenting on the tensions of inter-relatedness across diverse contexts. This will be examined in Chapter Six.

Krishen's untimely passing in 2005, after over three decades of being intimately and extensively involved with the contemporary performing arts in Malaysia, was met with deep sadness and the realization that in many ways it was the end of an era.<sup>28</sup> In 2002, he had been given the inaugural Cameronian Arts Awards for Lifetime Achievement, and this was but one marker of the immense contribution he had made. As tribute to his pioneering work of 'celebrating original Malaysian creativity in as varied and alternative ways as possible', ASTRO, a major corporate media company in Malaysia, and primary sponsor of Five Arts Centre since 1995, has established a Krishen Jit ASTRO Fund that gives annual grants to artists engaged in experimental arts work in the Malaysian context.<sup>29</sup> Much like the man, the grant is the only one of its kind. More importantly, Krishen's work continues to encourage artistic production towards an apprehension and articulation of difference as an integral dimension of Malaysian culture, as well as of the broader contemporary condition. Its value to the Malaysian imaginary lies in its rare spirit of intervention and responsiveness to cultural difference, able to 'imagine' and thereby elucidate the complexity of issues related to being and becoming a modern and multicultural Malaysian society.

### **Cultural Difference in Malaysian Society**

The centrality of cultural difference in the story of Krishen's life is not unlike that of its presence in Malaysian history and politics. Changing constructs of race, language, community and nationality have impacted on ways in which the state and society have responded to issues of identity and subjectivity. As a multiracial, multireligious and multilingual nation, questions of how to deal with the cultural composition of Malaysian society have been at the forefront of

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<sup>28</sup> This is reflected in several articles and outpourings of grief that were expressed after his passing. In particular, it is strongly articulated in Kee Thuan Chye, "Krishen will remain a hero for generations to come," *thestaronline*, accessed April 29, 2005.

<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2005/4/29/nation/10823938&sec=nation>.

<sup>29</sup> 'Krishen Jit ASTRO Fund', Five Arts Centre, accessed, June 30, 2009.

<http://www.fiveartscentre.org/d/2009%20Krishen%20Jit%20ASTRO%20Fund%20application.pdf>.

Malaysian politics throughout its development as a nation. Questions of managing differences between a racial majority accorded particular privileges, and comparatively marginalised minorities deprived of these advantages, continue to stir strong emotions among the Malaysian populace and occupy a major part of everyday negotiations. Thus, how to organise society such that issues of entitlement, acceptance and belonging are settled amicably, have remained challenging, in view of the fact that policies perpetuating segregation and dividedness have created tensions and conflicts which impede the capacity for social cohesion and national solidarity. This section argues that the history and politics of Malaysian society needs to be understood in relation to frames of cultural difference that are an integral part of being and becoming a Malaysian community. It will outline a history of how cultural difference has been a critical part of the formation of Malaysia and point to significant events that have had particular effect on how Malaysian identity has been constituted. It will also briefly suggest how this influenced developments in Krishen's theatre.

The formation of Malaysian society, as marked by the prevalence of cultural multiplicity, can be seen as occurring in three main phases. First, at the time of the Malacca Sultanate in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, then during the British colonial period in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and finally since independence from colonial rule in 1957. Multiplicity is not new to the region, and as anthropologist Robert Hefner points out, the history of the region was conducive to economic 'pluricentricism' which led to 'interethnic collaboration and rich cultural exchange' that created a 'permeable ethnicity'.<sup>30</sup> Thus cultural difference as a deeply rooted aspect of history needs to be acknowledged as normative in the mixes of culture, and recognised as inherent to Malaysian heritage. This offers a crucial alternative narrative, to contest the monocultural official histories that not only prioritise Malay hegemony, but also neglect and erase non-Malay participation in Malaysian society. It also helps broaden efforts towards generating 'counter-hegemonic' discourses that 'provide different insights and perspectives on the country's history and development as compared with those emanating from the dominant body of knowledge and curriculum found in the official or government-sanctioned view of Malaysian history and society,' as these tend to neglect the multiethnicity of Malaysian identity and focus only on

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<sup>30</sup> Robert W. Hefner, 'Introduction: Multiculturalism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia,' in Robert W. Hefner ed. *The Politics of Multiculturalism: Pluralism and Citizenship in Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia*. (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2001), 13-14.

Malay participation.<sup>31</sup> Krishen's work to rethink and revise these notions was part of his politics of making theatre that would reiterate the value of mixed and overlapping cultures in a contemporary Malaysian community, and reiterate their importance in imagining an alternative and modern multiculturalism.

In the first stage of Malaysian cultural diversity, the port of Malacca (now Melaka), situated on the western coast of what is now Peninsula Malaysia, was the site for people from nearby areas such as the archipelago of islands that is now Indonesia, to as far away as China and India, Europe and the Middle East, to do business, visit, work and even settle. It had become one of the busiest sites of trade, particularly for spices from the region, and goods from China and India, that were exchanged at the maritime crossroads of the Straits of Malacca. This made Malacca a cosmopolitan and global city in which people from a range of backgrounds mingled and met, to buy and sell their wares, but also invariably to participate in an exchange of cultures. As historians Barbara W. Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya point out, by the time Malacca was founded in the early 1400s, 'the Malay archipelago had for hundreds of years been part of a complex trading network threading through the entire Southeast Asian region and stretching from Africa to China'.<sup>32</sup> Its location at the crossroads of major shipping routes meant that it had begun to integrate differences into its society. The cultural influences of India and China were already significant in the Malay archipelago and the localisation of these influences had begun to contribute to the particular characteristics of what would become Malaysia, by 'deepening and enriching an already vital culture'.<sup>33</sup> Hence, while the number of migrants from distant lands was relatively small at the time, these foundations for a multicultural society that could adapt to diversity and develop its own sense of cultural identity must be noted.<sup>34</sup> The Golden Era of Malacca, which was seen by 15<sup>th</sup> century Portuguese traveller, Tome Pires, as having 'no equal

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<sup>31</sup> Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, 'Introduction' in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 1.

<sup>32</sup> Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1982), 11.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, 16. Also see Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 11-21 for further discussion on early trade and cultural influence in Malacca.

<sup>34</sup> See Khoo Kay Khim, 'The Emergence of Plural Communities in the Malay Peninsula before 1874,' in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 11-32, for discussion of how apart from Malacca, there were also plural communities developing in other parts of the Malay Peninsula.



in the world',<sup>35</sup> ended in 1511 when Portuguese imperialists captured Malacca and thus began a period of colonial rule in what later became British Malaya.

The period of the Malacca Sultanate is now regarded as foundational to the shaping of Malay-Malaysian governance and the establishment of a Malay-Malaysian culture.<sup>36</sup> It was during this period that Islam became a dominant religion in the region. When the Sultan and his court embraced Islam, it shifted the cultural orientation of the Malacca kingdom from Hindu-Buddhist beliefs to an Islamic focus. The 'ruler's conversion' was effectively a 'watershed in Melaka's history',<sup>37</sup> making Islam the 'official' religion of what is ostensibly the first Malay-Malaysian system of governance.<sup>38</sup> This turning-point eventually led to what is now a constitutional definition of being Malay-Malaysian as inseparable from being Muslim. Language also played a crucial role in identifying Malacca with being Malay, as the widespread use of the Malay language, despite the prevalence of other languages, meant that it became a lingua franca among people of difference. This reiterated the importance of Malay culture, such that even though the Malay language is a composite of several influences and can be traced to earlier kingdoms as well,<sup>39</sup> it remains a symbolic marker of Malay power and identity in the Malaysian context. Thus, even though the society of Malacca was already multi-cultural and incorporated influences from several sources, it was nonetheless regarded as a distinctively Malay cultural space which gave little official recognition to the participation and influence of non-Malay cultures. Hence state-led discourses of national cultural roots tend to be dominated by exclusivist Malay ideas and frames.

Yet the process of cultural diversification had begun to take place among individuals who interacted and intermarried with people from cultures different to their own. This produced what

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<sup>35</sup> Tome Pires, cited in Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 39.

<sup>36</sup> Malay, as an ethnicity, is not confined to Malaysia, but spans Aceh and Palembang in neighbouring Sumatra, and other areas in the Malay archipelago such as Riau and Lingga. Hence the notion of a 'Malay world' extends beyond Malaysian shores. Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 95, point out that 'strong regional affiliations and local identifications with variant versions of Melayu (Malay) culture' were evident in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries. Hence Malay-Malaysians are among a range of Malays in the region. In fact a mix of several other ethnicities has effectively been flattened out for political reasons, which will be discussed later in the section.

<sup>37</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 55.

<sup>38</sup> See Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 53-58, for discussion on the importance of Islam in Malay governance during the Malacca Sultanate.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*, 57.



is now known as Peranakan<sup>40</sup> culture, in which non-Malay and Malay cultures have interwoven to create a hybrid. It signifies those who integrated Malay culture into Chinese and Indian cultures as a way of life, without converting to Islam, and thus remained officially non-Malay. Peranakans speak a version of Malay as their mother-tongue and perform identity as an overt mix of more than one culture. This is evident in their preparation of food, their way of dressing and the customs practiced during community events. Historian and political scientist Farish Noor argues that although the term Peranakan ‘refers to a specific community of racially-mixed Malaysians of double, if not multiple, cultural origins’, it is possible to claim that ‘much of Malayan society was – in the true sense of the word – *Peranakan*’ because of the ‘state of fluidity, flux and inter-mixing’ that occurred.<sup>41</sup> Thus the notion of identity as an assemblage of difference is not a recent phenomenon, and Krishen’s efforts to ‘excavate’ difference within the body and ‘invest’ in reimagining how community could be reconfigured, drew from these early processes of adaptation that constitute part of being in a plural society. Krishen’s efforts to stage the inherent presence of difference on stage was one way to validate and thus encourage an acceptance of how ongoing flux need not be framed as threatening to situated and historical cultures. In this way theatre performed the changes in society, suggesting how reconfigurations of political units of classification can occur.

The second phase of considerable change in the demographics of the population occurred in the later parts of British colonial rule, by which time the many states that now constitute West Malaysia became known as British Malaya.<sup>42</sup> The economic development that was fuelled primarily by British finance, led to a large influx of Chinese, and later Indian migrant labour, to provide much needed workers in tin-mines and rubber plantations owned and managed by

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<sup>40</sup> ‘Peranakan’, is based on Malay word *anak*, which means child. The word *beranak*, with a different prefix, means to give birth to. And thus *per-anak-an* can be seen as referring to ‘people born of the place’, with no particular reference to a categorised culture.

<sup>41</sup> Farish Noor, ‘The Lost Tribes of Malaysia: The Construction of Race Politics from Colonial Era to the Present,’ in *What the Teacher Didn’t Tell You: The Annexe Lectures (Vol. 1)* by Farish Noor (Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books: 2009), 80.

<sup>42</sup> Even though the British had been involved in trade and making colonial inroads since the late 1700s, it was not till 1919 that the entire Malay Peninsula came directly under British control in one form or other. Organised as the Straits Settlements (SS), the Federated Malay States (FMS) and the Unfederated Malay States (UMS), a combination of systems of governance characterised the range of British influence and changes to society. Compared to the SS and the FMS, the UMS witnessed the least amount of British intervention and thus became less advanced, materially and economically. As such, much of the migration that occurred was to the SS and FMS, where larger urban centres with opportunities for diverse kinds of employment emerged as well.

private entrepreneurs.<sup>43</sup> The migrants from China who began to move to Malaya in the late 1800s were largely tin-miners and traders, with some becoming planters who pioneered commercial agriculture in Malaya.<sup>44</sup> Indian migrant labour saw a surge in numbers when Malaya became a plantation economy in the early 1900s and supplied most of the world's natural rubber, and later palm oil as well. The rubber boom required not only rubber tappers but also labourers to develop infrastructure such as railways and roads to meet the demands of a flourishing export industry. They were largely brought from India as indentured labour, many of whom stayed on in Malaysia. The association of racial identity with occupation began to occur during this period, with Malays being seen primarily as farmers, fishermen and clerical workers on one end of the spectrum, and members of an aristocratic ruling class on the other. The Chinese were regarded as business-people, tin-miners, money-lenders and urban workers, and the Indians viewed primarily as manual labourers, with some Indian migrants also occupying urban jobs such as teachers, lawyers, engineers and civil servants as well.

The process of categorising the populace in order to conduct various colonial censuses, and thus classify people according to the needs of the colonial administration, led to the listing of dominant racial groups inhabiting British Malaya. These were the Malays, Chinese, Indians and Others, a category created to include anyone who did not fit the definition of the three primordial Asian identities deemed significant to Malayan identity. As historian Tim Harper notes 'the emerging ethnic patchwork was becoming more rigidly bounded by administrative categories which, over time, took on a political meaning'.<sup>45</sup> Thus by 1911, when the first Federated Malay States census was conducted, the 'primary category of belonging had become "race", as race became more central to late Victorian categorisations of the world'.<sup>46</sup> This preoccupation with race was also perpetuated by post-independence national leaders who put in place political structures that continue to delineate Malaysian identities according to these categories. That Krishen continually sought to make performance that would render permeable these rigid boundaries, was his attempt to reinstate the richness of inherent difference that could otherwise be erased by official processes of standardising, and thus limiting, cultural identity.

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<sup>43</sup> See Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 211-222.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid*, 215.

<sup>45</sup> T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 27.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*.

This flattening out of difference within each official racial category, that was begun by a colonial administration but perpetuated by the Malaysian government post-independence, effectively removed an important dimension of cultural variety in order to streamline a populace. Seen as a way to simplify complexities and create order, the naming process became an important signifier of identity and official categories of culture became entrenched as hallmarks of ancestry, belief and behaviour. Yet the historical diversity of ethnicities, languages and cultural practices within each of these broad labels indicates multiplicity within each category, community, and perhaps even within the individual body. Just as the Malays are constituted of people who are originally from diverse parts of the Malay archipelago, and were thus originally Bugis, Javanese, Minangkabau, Achenese and so forth, so are the Chinese and Indians made up of a range of groups. Hokkien, Cantonese, Hakka, Teochew and Hainanese communities continue to be marked by language, custom and clan membership among the Chinese. Similarly Tamil, Punjabi, Malayalee, Gujarati, Bengali, Sindhi and other Indian groups, mark and maintain their differences through language and cultural practices, such as ritual, food and dress. In contrast, few Malays in Malaysia sustain cultural links with their diverse roots, as it is politically expedient to blend into the nationalist notion of Malay-ness as singular and undivided. However the attempt to recover and reclaim the difference of Malaysian society as critical to its well-being, such as in Krishen's theatre, meant contesting the politics of officially imposed identities. To enlarge the space of alternative possibility, Krishen attended to the variety of cultures and their inherited, lived and imagined histories that formed the fabric of Malaysian life.

Thus it is important to recognise cultural plurality in terms of racial and linguistic difference, as a documented part of Malaysian society since pre-colonial times, even though the structures of racial categorisation that prevail are a legacy of the colonial system. J.S. Furnivall, a British colonial officer and writer, proposed the concept of a 'plural society' to describe societies such as those found in colonial Malaysia and Singapore, in which there were 'two or more elements or social orders which live side by side, yet without mingling, in one political unit'.<sup>47</sup> This concept is still referred to more than half century later, in relation to contemporary imaginings of national identity. The challenge of attaining what anthropologist Robert Hefner terms a 'democratic citizenship' in 'deeply plural countries' which have to negotiate divisions in

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<sup>47</sup> J.S. Furnivall, cited in Hefner, 'Introduction', 4.

society remains an uphill struggle as modern notions of the nation often emphasise the importance of homogenisation and originary culture to establish its validity.<sup>48</sup>

However historian Cheah Boon Kheng describes Malaysia as a nation ‘based upon cultural differences’, yet able to work towards ‘evolving a political culture that takes account of its plural culturalism’.<sup>49</sup> In this respect contemporary Malaysia has ‘moved away from the Furnivallian concept of a “plural society”, in which different ethnic communities merely remain separate and do not bond, mingling only in the market-place’.<sup>50</sup> Cheah asserts that Malaysian society has become more inter-related and mixed, such that the process of nation-building is ‘based on the theme of the making and sharing of the Malaysian nation *among* its multi-ethnic citizens’ (emphasis mine).<sup>51</sup> Cheah’s revisioning of Malaysia as being ‘based’ on difference points to the interactions *among* different cultural groups who are able to re-imagine their community as constituted of difference, rather than singularity. His distinction between ‘plural culturalism’, a term he uses, and Furnivall’s ‘plural society’, suggests that the former is more ‘evolved’ and thus less reductive, allowing for fruitful interactions across cultures. As with Krishen’s theatre, the assertion is that the ‘mingling’ does not just occur in the informality of the ‘market-place’ but in a range of sites, and for several reasons. As a result the ‘making and sharing of the Malaysian nation’<sup>52</sup> can be participated in by diverse individuals and communities.

Having given brief outlines of the circumstances that produced cultural difference in the first two phases of the formation of Malaysian society, I now focus on the third phase, which is the period during and since independence from British colonial rule in 1957, and how Malaysians have come to understand their place in society in relation to issues of racial multiplicity. To begin, it is worth noting that the Malaysian nation was formed in two stages, with racial composition being a central concern that led to particular choices made. On August 31<sup>st</sup>, 1957, a narrow peninsula on the southeastern tip of the continent of Asia, located between the Straits of Malacca and the South China Sea, became free from colonial rule and was called Malaya.<sup>53</sup> It consisted only of what is now West Malaysia. On September 16<sup>th</sup>, 1963, the nation

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<sup>48</sup> Hefner, ‘Introduction,’ 1.

<sup>49</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 233.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 235.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>53</sup> This date is still celebrated as *Hari Merdeka* or Malaysian Independence Day, although in 1957 the nation, was still known as Malaya.

grew considerably in size when the island state of Singapore, as well as British North Borneo, later divided into two East Malaysian states called Sabah and Sarawak, became part of the nation to form the Federation of Malaysia. Since then, the name ‘Malaysia’ has remained, although the nation was again modified on August 9<sup>th</sup>, 1965, when Singapore separated to become its own nation. The reasons for this re-shaping of the Malaysian boundary were primarily about the need to ensure a clear majority of *Bumiputera*-Malaysians that would put non-Malays in an undisputed minority position. The Malay term ‘*bumiputera*’ literally means ‘prince’ (*putera*) of the ‘earth’ (*bumi*), but has come to denote ‘sons of the soil’, namely the indigenous people of Malaysia who have ‘special rights’ based on this claim of heritage. It is not an ethnic term but a political one that has grown to include Malays, and non-Malay Malaysians, such as the indigenous people of Sabah (eg. KadazanDusun, Melanau) and Sarawak (eg. Iban, Bidayuh).<sup>54</sup> Hence the inclusion of Sabah and Sarawak, and the exclusion of Singapore, which was predominantly Chinese, was strategic in creating a nation that consisted of a clear Malay majority, and thus legitimised the politics of Malay dominance. Non-Malays were granted the right to citizenship, but regardless of how long they had been domiciled in the country, they were, and are, not eligible for *bumiputera* status. This remains an issue of contention.<sup>55</sup>

To understand why the politics of race remains central in the discourses of culture and identity in Malaysia, it is important to note that from the very onset of the nation’s formation, questions of how to structure a society characterised by cultural difference have been pivotal. The negotiations that went into brokering a deal for self-rule between the British colonial rulers and those who would become Malayan, then Malaysian, political leaders were replete with discussions about how to manage ethnic diversity. At the core of this issue was the concern about securing the rights of Malays, now politically labelled *bumiputeras*, as elevated from those of non-Malays. The British colonial powers had all along given priority to Malay interests as Malay Sultans were recognised as leaders of the Malay community in the various Federated and Unfederated Malay States that had been formed. Thus when the British proposal of a Malayan Union that gave equal recognition to all ethnic groups was made in 1946, there was strong

<sup>54</sup> However to date West Malaysia remains prominent in political governance and cultural dominance, to the detriment of most East Malaysians whose cultures are largely marginalized even though they are officially classified as *bumiputera*.

<sup>55</sup> See Azly Rahman, ‘On the Problem of “Ketuanan Melayu” and the Work of the Biro Tata Negara,’ in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future* eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 271-287, for discussion on the need for a ‘new Bumiputeraism’ that allows for all Malaysians to be categorized as such.

protest from many Malays, who felt that their special position in society would be compromised.<sup>56</sup> Conservative and right-wing Malay leaders wanted to ensure that the new constitution made provision for the 'special position' of Malays with Malay reservations of land, quotas for public service and education, the institution of Malay as national language, and Islam as official religion - establishing Malay hegemony in the nation. Subsequently the Federation of Malaya was declared in 1948 as an alternative that would protect the special privileges of the Malays, and make citizenship for non-Malays more restrictive.<sup>57</sup> By this stage the ethnocentric Malay elite had organised themselves as a political entity, the Pertubuhan Kebangsaan Melayu Bersatu (United Malays National Organisation – UMNO), which became the most potent voice of the Malays behind which the Malay masses rallied.<sup>58</sup> Efforts to create inter-racial alternatives such as the PUTERA-AMCJA coalition<sup>59</sup> which proposed a People's Constitution and advocated the right to equal citizenship regardless of race were thwarted. This was because British colonial powers favoured traditional rulers and the Malay elite in UMNO, and thus inter-ethnic trust was weak.<sup>60</sup> Malay radicals and leftist groups such as the Kesatuan Melayu Muda (Young Malay Union – KMM), who were more open to a less racialised imagining of an independent Malaya were sidelined in the process and UMNO went on to become the main political party in the formation and history of Malaysia. Hence relations between Malays and non-Malays have always been affected by the tensions of political inequity and socio-cultural disparity.

Chinese and Indian political parties were also formed during this period of intense negotiation, to represent the interests of the two major non-Malay communities in British Malaya. The Malayan Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malayan Indian Congress (MIC) eventually joined together with UMNO to form an Alliance, that went on to win the first

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<sup>56</sup> See Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 264-269.

<sup>57</sup> The Federation of Malaya was translated into Malay as *Persekutuan Tanah Melayu*, which means Federation of Malay Lands, and thus emphasised the position of the Malays above other races.

<sup>58</sup> UMNO was established in 1946, to contest the terms of the Malayan Union, and assert that Malays be given special privileges in the constitution of the independent nation. See Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 267.

<sup>59</sup> The PUTERA-AMCJA coalition consisted of Malay and non-Malay parties. PUTERA (Pusat Tenaga Rakyat) comprised Malay parties such as Parti Kebangsaan Melayu (Malay Nationalist Party), the Angkatan Pemuda Insaf (Movement of Conscious Youth) and Wanita Sedar (Movement of Conscious Women). The AMCJA (All Malaya Council for Joint Action) was a coalition of civic and political organisations set up primarily by Chinese-led groups.

<sup>60</sup> Ariffin Omar, 'The Struggle for Ethnic Unity in Malaya after the Second World War,' in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman. (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 45-57.



elections in the Federation in 1955.<sup>61</sup> This meant that the Alliance Party was legitimised by the Malayan electorate and became the primary power in the transition towards full independence. However there were a range of disputes and difficulties in transcending the different aspirations of the leaders and their membership, as issues of citizenship and concessions for non-Malays preoccupied talks about the sharing of power. But the pact that was eventually made by the three parties has withstood the test of time and remains to this day. A ‘historical bargain’,<sup>62</sup> often also referred to as the ‘social contract’,<sup>63</sup> was struck up between Malay and non-Malay leaders to accept the political primacy of the Malays. This asymmetrical and ethnically-differentiated citizenship in which ‘Malays enjoy constitutionally sanctioned advantages over non-Malay citizens’ has generated a climate in which cultural difference has become a marker of power and position.<sup>64</sup> Hence even though difference has always been part of Malaysian history it has been a fractured relationship between different segments of society, rather than a mutually respectful one. Even if alliances were formed, these were often for political expediency rather than oriented towards building deep solidarity.

The Alliance, which later became the Barisan Nasional (National Front - BN) in 1970, has since grown to include several other parties. However its core political identity is still presented as an alliance of Malay, Chinese and Indian membership. Hence the politicization of racial difference in the Malaysian context makes racial identity a critical dimension of social and cultural identity. Issues of acceptance, belonging and entitlement are closely related to the power relations of race, with Malays being politically dominant and non-Malays having to adjust to this hierarchy of political positioning. Even though gender, social status and economic class continue to play an important role in determining power, there is still an official assignation of racial

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<sup>61</sup> The MIC, formed in 1946, and the MCA, formed in 1952, negotiated the positions of their parties and the communities they represented with UMNO. See Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 277-282; Harper, *End of Empire*, 317-334, for discussions on the formation of the strategic Alliance between UMNO, MCA and MIC.

<sup>62</sup> Cheah, *Malaysia*, 39.

<sup>63</sup> Mavis C. Puthuchear, ‘Malaysia’s “Social Contract”: The Invention & Historical Evolution of an Idea,’ in *Sharing the Nation: Faith, Difference, Power and the State 50 Years After Merdeka*, ed. Norani Othman, Mavis C. Puthuchear & Clive S. Kessler, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Institute of Research and Development, 2008), 1-28. Puthuchear argues that the ‘social contract’ argument, which gained prominence in the 1980s, and makes claims that Malay supremacy is guaranteed for perpetuity, needs to be reviewed. She argues that Malay privileges were accorded during the forging of the constitution based on the understanding that they would be reviewed regularly. This political bargaining process was not intended to lead to Malay-centred nationalism that would effectively reduce other Malaysians to ‘secondary’ citizens who would suffer an ‘indelible mark as eternal outsiders’ (16).

<sup>64</sup> Hefner, ‘Introduction’, 29. Hefner also discusses how the ‘provisions for Malay affirmative action were to become the basis for far more ambitious programs of Malay affirmative action’ which deepened ethnic cleavages. Yet even within this climate of divisiveness there were always individuals who ‘migrated out of old ethnoreligious enclaves’ to produce new solidarities based on religious beliefs or other shared concerns.



identity that tends to dominate notions of Malaysian community. This is also tied to issues of religion, as Islam is inextricably linked with Malay culture. It has since become a ‘sensitive issue’ to question the ‘special position’ of the Malays and their privileges accordingly.

Krishen’s attempts to reconfigure how Malaysians perceive themselves as individuals and communities, by making theatre that would provoke a rethinking of the boundedness of identities and cultures, were set against this backdrop of cultural differentiation. As the nation went through a series of changes in the process of modernisation, industrialisation, urbanisation and globalisation from the 1970s till the early 2000s, so did Krishen’s theatre practice, as will become evident in the following chapters of this dissertation. Krishen’s capacity to draw on what was both embedded and emergent in society, his ability to respond to change and critically review his own work, and his vision to weave multiple vocabularies of difference to express an alternative modernity in Malaysia, demonstrated the remarkable insights and skills he had as a director of contemporary theatre. ‘Investing’ into what it meant to ‘penetrate’ issues about being and becoming Malaysian meant knowing and understanding the landscape of politics and history, in order to creatively respond to these terrains with depth and criticality. However it also required being able to rethink the normative, and thus re-imagine what was possible as alternatives that resisted the state-imposed hegemony. The task of recasting the frames of ‘community’ in a contemporary context demanded a capacity to see beyond the ordinary, contemplate issues that were often neglected, and foreground ways of healing socio-cultural fractures without denying their prevalence and pain. This meant continually questioning and contesting settled assumptions, while positing provocative frames and alternative embodiments that were relevant to a variegated landscape of ongoing change and repositioning. In this sense, Krishen’s stagings of cultural difference were grounded in the politics and history of Malaysian society, yet also alive to the artistic challenges of the contemporary.

### **Contemporary Theatre as a Stage for Alternatives**

As a contemporary and experimental theatre director, Krishen dealt with difference as part of his politics of culture, and as a critical aesthetic aimed at challenging artistic boundaries. In the productions he directed, content was closely linked to form, just as politics were tied to artistic considerations, and the intent was to create modes of staging texts that would express the dynamics of a multicultural, modern and changing society. I argue in this section that his work is

best viewed as contemporary theatre that consciously generated an alternative multiculturalism within a modern Malaysian context. His continued experimentation with form and his commitment to political ideas about culture and identity linked the work to modernist and avant-garde approaches in the West, in that it was concerned with reworking notions of theatricality, textuality and performativity.<sup>65</sup> However because Krishen's work was grounded in a Malaysian context, his theatre requires a frame that is more reflective of a localised modernity and indigenous experimentation, even if influenced by artistic developments from abroad. As Krishen continually revised his position and shifted between different explorations of theatre-making, it is also important to incorporate the flux and open-endedness that marked his theatre career. Thus I contend that notions of the 'contemporary' provide for this broad and expansive scope, and allow for an overarching reading of Krishen's work.

To begin with, it is necessary to recognise that Krishen's early experimentations in theatre, namely in the 1970s, were part of a Malay language theatre movement called *teater kontemporari* (contemporary theatre), which distinguished itself from *drama moden* (modern drama). *Drama moden* was an earlier approach to modernising Malay language theatre that imitated western script-based naturalistic dramas, but depicted local stories and dealt with issues of a modernising Malaysian society. However *teater kontemporari* sought to decolonise local theatre from this mimicry of western forms, and instead incorporated traditional and folk elements that were particular to a Malaysian imaginary. It also moved towards conceptual, abstract and non-linear performance modes, that characterised a more fragmentary and experimental approach to theatre-making which resisted conventionality. This can be linked directly to the formal experimentation of western modernist performances, as well as the rebellion against a cultural bourgeoisie that marked the historical avant-garde. But the Malaysian *teater kontemporari* was in fact largely influenced by developments in Indonesian theatre, and was thus engaged with a regional reworking of theatre practices, even as it reflected an ongoing

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<sup>65</sup> See Olga Taxidou, *Modernism and Performance: Jarry to Brecht* (New York, Palgrave, 2007), xv-xvi, for discussion of 'modernist performance' as located 'between the modern literary innovations of a predominantly Anglophone Modernism – in many ways obsessed with the word – and the Continental experiments of the avant-garde, seen to be obsessed with the performing body'. See Gunter Berghaus, *Avant-garde Performance: Live Events and Electronic Technologies* (New York, Palgrave, 2005), 13-20, for discussion on the political functions of art in relation to established institutions in society, changing conditions of contemporary life and notions of how the Historical Avant-Garde is closely related to a sense of Modernity.

westernisation of style as well.<sup>66</sup> As Krishen himself notes in his article on ‘Contemporary Malaysian Theatre’, first published in 1989, the ‘dialectic between tradition and modernity emerged as one of the major themes of contemporary Malaysian theatre’ and the ‘unhalting experimental zeal of contemporary theatre’ produced a reworking of how theatre was envisaged and performed.<sup>67</sup> It became more integrative of multiple influences and thus increasingly adaptive to revisions of culture and identity. Unfortunately this phase of experimentalism was ‘blunted’<sup>68</sup> in Malay language theatre by the early 1980s, as a result of growing pressures to uphold conservative religious beliefs about art. However it did initiate an important process of reworking how the ‘contemporary’ in Malaysian theatre could be reflected in reconfigurations of cultural forms and socio-cultural values. Hence much of Krishen’s work, which built on early foundations of working in *teater kontemporari*, explored the contemporary as an advancement of the modern, in that it integrated the traditional, folk *and* modern as collages of the present that did not reject the past. In so doing, it experimented with form as a way of resisting prescribed norms of mainstream culture and performance.

Contemporary cultural fusion was not entirely new to performance in Malaysia. In the late 1800s and early 1900s, *bangsawan*,<sup>69</sup> a form of popular opera performed in Malay, provided an early example of ‘pluralist participation and multiculturalism’ in performance, that ‘attracted multiethnic audiences’ in British Malaya.<sup>70</sup> This commercial urban-based form reached its peak in the 1920s and 1930s, but suffered the impact of the Japanese Occupation during World War II, and was seriously depleted by the 1950s.<sup>71</sup> Ethnomusicologist Tan Sooi Beng identifies how *bangsawan* ‘exemplified the multi-ethnic character of society’ in its content, form and the mixed backgrounds of the performers.<sup>72</sup> It appealed to mixed audiences by drawing from ‘stories of different nationalities and ethnic origins, and adaptations of literary classics of Europe, America,

<sup>66</sup> See Nur Nina Zuhra, *An Analysis of Modern Malay Drama* (Shah Alam: BIROTEKS (Biro Penyediaan Teks), 1992) 142, for discussion on *teater kontemporari*. This will be examined further in Chapter Two.

<sup>67</sup> Krishen Jit, ‘Contemporary Malaysian Theatre,’ in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, ed. Kathy Rowland, (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003) 58-59.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

<sup>69</sup> The word ‘*bangsawan*’ means ‘aristocracy’ in Malay, as most plays were about royalty and this became the mainstay of the form.

<sup>70</sup> Tan Sooi Beng, ‘Crossing Stylistic Boundaries and Transcending Ethnicity through the Performing Arts,’ in *Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries: Everyday Forms of Inter-Ethnic Peace Building in Malaysia*, edited by Francis Loh Kok Wah, (Puchong: The Ford Foundation, Jakarta and Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia [Malaysian Social Science Association], 2010), 224.

<sup>71</sup> See Tan Sooi Beng, *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera* (Penang: The Asian Centre, 1993), 16-32, for discussion on the development of the *Bangsawan* form.

<sup>72</sup> Tan, *Bangsawan*, vii.

Asia and the Middle East,' and by incorporating 'new trends in dance, music and instrumentation' to reflect indigenous and modern approaches to performance.<sup>73</sup> As a result the performers had to learn a range of performance vocabularies and become adept at switching between different cultures. It was in many respects a form of local theatre that articulated how difference between and within cultures, was part of Malaysian history, especially in terms of local urban performance.

In this regard Krishen's efforts to 'excavate' how 'multiculturalism is in one body',<sup>74</sup> and not just between bodies, was part of an earlier process of creating an alternative multiculturalism in theatre; one that reflected the mix of cultures in everyday life. It opposed the officially sanctioned idea that different cultures in Malaysia operate as separate strands that do not intertwine. His work dealt with inter-, intra- and multi-cultural interactions, to assert a complex and changing fabric of permeability, intersection, overlap and transition, from within the frame of a national boundary. Thus, while it dealt with different cultural forms and vocabularies, it was not intercultural in the established sense. Interculturalism in theatre has been associated with performances that bring together cultures from different nations, in which forms and styles from markedly different traditions are combined to showcase a meeting point of distinct vocabularies of performance.<sup>75</sup> Krishen rarely worked with artists from different countries, focussing his efforts on engaging local artists from diverse backgrounds that, as a result of Malaysia's history of cultural multiplicity, ranged Indian, Chinese, Malay, and Eurasian. Some of his collaborators were trained in particular performance forms – traditional and contemporary – but these were often fused to perform an imbricated mix rather than foreground the separations between them. He rarely drew from traditional performance forms that were not closely linked to Malaysian culture, choosing to defamiliarise what was familiar rather than incorporate what was markedly foreign. Thus Krishen's theatre was not part of an established form of interculturalism that consciously negotiated cultures as distinct across inter-national boundaries of difference. Furthermore, Krishen had reservations about the politics of interculturalism that accepted neat identities as defined ethnically, linguistically or nationally, and which could become

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<sup>73</sup> Tan, 'Crossing,' 224-5.

<sup>74</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2004.

<sup>75</sup> See Patrice Pavis, 'Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?' in *The Intercultural Performance Reader*, ed. Patrice Pavis, (London: Routledge, 1996), 1-26, for definitions of interculturalism. Also, Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert, 'Toward a Topography of Cross-Cultural Theatre Praxis,' *The Drama Review* 46.3, Fall 2002, 31-53, for discussion on issues of terminology in relation to cross-cultural theatre.

representative of 'pure' existences interacting with each other.<sup>76</sup> It is important to note that Krishen's work was not simply intracultural either, in that it did not only look at differences within a culture with shared origins. Intraculturalism is defined by a negotiation of diversities within avowedly singular cultures that point to the multiplicities often ignored or sidelined in favour of a unitary category.<sup>77</sup> Instead Krishen's work brought together cultures that are seen as having markedly different historical roots, even though located within a national frame, and he explored the multiplicity between, with, and across a range of boundaries.

To engage with postcolonial history and contemporary globalisation, Krishen's theatre also played with a mix of elements from Asia and the West in ways that challenged notions of their clean separatedness. It produced what cultural theorist C. J. W-L. Wee describes as a 'discrepant Anglo-Asian multicultural' in which 'the West is indigenised' and made to operate as part of an Asian cultural identity.<sup>78</sup> This does not entirely curb 'the clutches of racial-cultural essentialism or nativism' but it does confront the problems of categorisation when boundaries are blurred.<sup>79</sup> Notions of what is distinctly Asian or from the West are in themselves problematic, as they often represent partial ideas about culture in a manner that suggests an absolute definition. Yet these terms are still relevant, as they articulate the broader differences that do prevail between an 'East' and 'West', particularly in countries like Malaysia that have been colonised by the 'West' and continue to exoticise themselves as being distinctly of the 'East'. Malaysian tourism advertisements use the tag-line 'Malaysia, Truly Asia' to suggest an essentialised 'Asia' that is defined by its distinctive cultural multiplicity. Ironically, the mixes that have emerged historically, and the modern fusions of culture that mark a contemporary Malaysia are kept to a minimal in the marketing of Malaysia as a land of diverse cultures. Instead polarized differences are highlighted in the performativity of traditional costumes, lifestyles and even artistic mediums, to showcase a range of co-existing cultures and identities.

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<sup>76</sup> Krishen Jit, 'Multiculturalism: Sources and Opportunities,' in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position* ed. Kathy Rowland (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Art Centre, 2003), 114-120. Such reservations resemble those of Rustom Bharucha in 'Interculturalism and its Discriminations: Shifting the Agendas of the National, the Multicultural and the Global,' in *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking Through Theatre in an Age of Globalisation* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 25-56.

<sup>77</sup> See Rustom Bharucha, 'Introduction,' in *The Politics of Cultural Practice: Thinking through Theatre in an Age of Globalization* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2001), 7-13.

<sup>78</sup> C.J. W-L Wee, 'The Indigenized West in Asian Multicultures,' *Interventions* 10:2 (2008): 204.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

Krishen's multiculturalism in theatre contested this frame by highlighting what Paul Gilroy calls 'postcolonial conviviality', in which 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction' among different cultural groups have made 'multiculture an ordinary feature of social life in Britain's urban areas and in postcolonial cities elsewhere'.<sup>80</sup> This acknowledges how race and other forms of entrenched difference have come to occupy a central concern, but instead of reiterating divisive processes it generates 'more complex and challenging narratives, which can be faithful to the everyday patterns of heterocultural metropolitan life by reducing the exaggerated dimensions of racial difference to a liberating ordinariness'.<sup>81</sup> In so doing it generates improvisational and imaginative expressions of multiplicity that validate the mixes and endorse tacit knowledges about dealing with heterogeneity. It is unafraid of uncertainty and approaches the incompleteness with creative curiosity. This marks a contemporary 'community' no longer bound by its racialised identities as the primary markers of Selves and Others.

Hence the question of what makes theatre contemporary in a Malaysian context, in comparison to being modern or traditional, is one that provides no simple responses but often raises more questions about what marks the contemporary. In Krishen's view '[I]t is not simply the style or the aesthetics but the context gives us many clues as to what is contemporary and what is traditional'.<sup>82</sup> Contributing to a dialogue session at the Asian Contemporary Theatre Festival Conference in 2002 entitled 'Coping with the Contemporary: Selves, Identities and Communities',<sup>83</sup> Krishen was making the point that it was not just the form or technique that determined the use of 'contemporary', but the positioning, politics and approach of the work in relation to aspects of location and temporality that were critical. In this regard Krishen's work was contemporary as it posited an 'alternative' multiculturalism that contested the state's insistence on sustaining cultural categories as parallel streams of difference, and reconfigured these tropes by giving emphasis to the intersections and overlaps. Thus it responded to its context by contesting the norms of time and space.

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<sup>80</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), xv.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 119.

<sup>82</sup> Krishen Jit, 'Wrap-Up Question and Answer Session – 26 October,' in *Coping with The Contemporary: Selves, Identity and Community* (Singapore: The Esplanade Co Ltd., 2004), 84.

<sup>83</sup> This was organized by the Esplanade Theatre in Singapore and held on 26 and 27 October, 2002. The curators for the conference were T. Sasitharan and the late Kuo Pao Kun, who were founding members of the Theatre Training and Research Programme, which looked closely at issues of the 'contemporary' as a combination of the traditional and modern in Asian theatre and training.



Krishen also identified the contemporary as that which ‘contends with the tensions and contradictions that are precipitated in present-day society’.<sup>84</sup> Again it was not about specific forms or practices, but an attitude of ‘contending’ that marked the contemporary as resistant and questioning. It was not concerned with expounding a modernist ‘truth’ or ‘ideal’, but sought to wrestle with the fractures, antinomies and discontinuities of culture instead. In Malaysia it was the ‘tensions and contradictions’ of dealing with what it meant to be simultaneously insider and outsider, modern and traditional, local and global, mainstream and marginal that marked how difference was often experienced. These were never simple binaries that demanded straightforward choices of either-or. Instead the challenges of contemporary life entailed grappling with questions of how to meet the demands of diverse pressures, and cope with being pulled in multiple directions. Thus Krishen sought to produce styles of performance that were multi-layered, and thereby expressive of these varied questions.

Difference as a process of alterity, continuous change and conflicting forces, was dug into theatrically. Krishen grappled with how to stage what art critic Terry Smith identifies as the ‘antinomies of contemporaneity’, which are ‘multeity, adventitiousness, and inequity’.<sup>85</sup> This meant performing the dynamics of the contemporary as located in ‘a direct experience of multiplicitous complexity’<sup>86</sup> which conveyed the textures of being in ‘multiple temporalities’ and pulled in ‘multifarious directions’.<sup>87</sup> In concrete terms, Krishen made choices to decentralise the main spoken texts and add divergent perspectives that allowed for unpredictable connections to emerge. He also played with relations of power, often reversing the norm, to demonstrate the range of possible viewings that can occur when constructs are recognised as discursive rather than fixed. This encouraged audiences to cultivate ‘radical disjunctures of perception’ and ‘mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world’, so that multi-perspectival approaches to watching theatre could be cultivated.<sup>88</sup> The non-linear, fragmentary and discontinuous facets of style, particularly in collages, fusions and assemblages that juxtaposed diverse elements of culture, were thus opportunities to experience a ‘jostling contingency of various cultural and

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<sup>84</sup> Krishen Jit, ‘Pan-Asean performance encounter,’ *New Straits Times*, November 18, 1990.

<sup>85</sup> Terry Smith, ‘Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,’ in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2008), 9.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.



social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between'.<sup>89</sup>

In effect, staging the contemporary in Malaysia demanded an ability to apprehend context with critical insight, and questioning approaches that recognised difference as a critical feature of multiplicities between and within individuals and communities. Philosopher Giorgio Agamben, in his essay 'What is the Contemporary?', identifies the contemporary individual as someone 'more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time' because of a 'singular relationship with one's own time, which adheres to it and at the same time, keeps a distance from it'.<sup>90</sup> This quality of being 'untimely' suggests managing a simultaneous synchrony and discontinuity, that allows for a '*relationship with time that adheres to it through a disjunction and an anachronism*'.<sup>91</sup> Krishen's work drew closely from the issues and events of his time, yet consciously alienated, abstracted and defamiliarised the ordinary to underline how disjunctures and displacements prevailed within what was known and familiar. His interpretations of scripts were attentive to the time and place of their stories, yet he constantly stretched their meanings to exceed spatio-temporal limits, and thus created perspectives that problematised neat delineations of meaning. Thus, what did not 'fit in' often pointed to the crux of what it meant to 'fit in' – whether in relation to race, class, gender, religion or ideology.

Furthermore, in Agamben's terms the contemporary person can also 'see' and deal with the 'obscurity of the present', and is able to 'firmly hold his gaze on his own time, so as to perceive not its light, but rather its darkness'.<sup>92</sup> As such the contemporary is less likely to be 'blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage[s] to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights'.<sup>93</sup> This means peering deeply into what is little seen, and thus cultivating a vision that is acute to what happens in the shadowy and obscure spaces of margins, fringes and peripheries, where the 'darkness is not a form of inertia or of passivity', but a 'beam' that illuminates what cannot be fully comprehended or grasped. For this reason it is both present and distant, as a 'light that strives to reach us but cannot'.<sup>94</sup> Krishen often focussed on concepts and stories that emerged from the margins, and developed interpretations of culture that unearthed what was rare

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid.

<sup>90</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?' in *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40-1.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 44-5.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 46.

and irregular, in order to peer into the ‘darkness’ and depict the ‘shadows’ therein. He generated opportunities for contemplating the unseen, unvoiced, untouched, untasted and unheard, as unacknowledged realms of culture that were no less present, even if relegated to the ‘unlived’ aspects of the present.<sup>95</sup> Krishen’s staging of cultures as recognisable and familiar, yet resistant to fixed and rigid outlines, was also his way of playing with the visibility and performability of identity as mixtures of what lay in the light, as well as the darkness, and the shadows in between.

Finally, Agamben distinguishes the contemporary as one who has ‘a relationship with the past’, despite being acutely tuned to the present.<sup>96</sup> This includes being able to perceive ‘the indices and signatures of the archaic in the most modern and recent’.<sup>97</sup> This is part of a ‘distancing and nearness’ that generates a capacity for recognising and developing a ‘secret affinity between the archaic and the modern’, and produces a ‘form of an archaeology’ which does not ‘regress to a historical past, but returns to that part within the present that we are absolutely incapable of living’.<sup>98</sup> When Krishen dug into, prised open, and then put together layers of the present and past to ‘excavate’ the multiplicities ‘in one body’ of Malaysian culture, his intent was to create a tangible ‘affinity’ between what was old and new, distant and near, known and unknown. It also recognised the present as a ‘broken vertebrae’ where the ‘exact point of this fracture’ was the location of the contemporary, who is both ‘too soon’ and ‘too late’.<sup>99</sup> Inasmuch as Krishen was alert to the shifts and moods of his time, he was also engaged in how they related to a distant and near past that was intangible yet palpable. This meant engaging with what was little attended to because it did not comply with state-sanctioned or mainstream ideals of behaviour and belief.

Even though difference is very much part of an everyday reality in Malaysia, it is largely avoided as a point of focus for critical interrogation. Due to a political climate of scrutiny that has created a corresponding tendency among Malaysians to be non-confrontational in matters of cultural sensitivity, issues of ethno-religious and linguistic divide emerge commonly in ordinary parlance, but are not critically discussed in the public media to reflect a multiplicity of perspectives. Perhaps it is also because, as art historian T.K. Sabapathy points out,

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<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid. Agamben qualifies the ‘archaic’ as close to the ‘origin’, and thus ‘not only situated in a chronological past’ but also ‘contemporary with historical becoming’ in the same way that ‘the embryo continues to be active in the tissues of the mature organism, and the child in the psychic life of the adult’.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 47.

The pursuit or cultivation of difference has dual consequences. On the one hand it can lead to tolerance and understanding of otherness, thereby engendering a number of practices and ideologies, even if some of these are opposed to one another; in these ways the cultural map of a society or nation is enriched by pluralism. On the other hand, the pursuit of difference can lead to polarization, to the establishment of dominance and privileged spaces, and to the consequence of marginalization.<sup>100</sup>

Thus steering a narrow path to keep a balance and avoid falling into the pitfalls of ‘polarization’, while expanding the potential to be ‘enriched by pluralism’, requires skill and ‘courage’.<sup>101</sup> Hence Krishen’s approach to difference as integral to a political consciousness and artistic imagination, required a strong conviction and boldness to prioritise the notion of ‘difference as a root’<sup>102</sup> rather than as tokenistic or incidental. In Sabapathy’s terms, ‘difference as root’ meant dealing with difference ‘as a dynamic cause which must necessarily give rise to tension or conflict and therefore never be taken as a given, but one which has to be defined, re-defined, negotiated and managed continually’.<sup>103</sup> This facilitates awareness of cultural difference as crucial to the historical and contemporary in the Malaysian context, and interrogates how multiplicity in culture is experienced and lived. The failure to do so results in a disconnection with this ‘root’ and a loss of ‘dynamic cause’. As Sabapathy suggests, it is within the ‘tension or conflict’ that an opening arises for not only definition, but ‘re-definition, negotiation and management.’ These offer possibilities of cultural renewal and rejuvenation that allow for significant shifts in artistic production.

Krishen’s theatre was thus a complex and in-depth response to his personal multicultural history, the socio-political context of a differentiated Malaysian society, and the wider developments in artistic discourse that impacted on a sense of the contemporary. The following chapters deliberate on how the choices he made when staging plays reflected his questioning of what it meant to be Malaysian, and the importance of articulating how cultural difference can be negotiated positively in a multi-racial, multi-linguistic and multi-religious society. These were not approaches commonly taken in the theatre scene, and thus seen as experimental and resistant to a conventional and established process of representing culture and identity. As such, they

<sup>100</sup> T. K. Sabapathy, ‘On Vision and Idea: Afterthoughts,’ in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* ed. T.K. Sabapathy, (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994), 109.

<sup>101</sup> Agamben also identifies ‘courage’ as a critical quality of being contemporary because it entails sustaining conviction and clarity amid ongoing uncertainty. See Agamben, ‘What Is’, 46.

<sup>102</sup> Sabapathy, ‘On Vision’, 108.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

contributed to an important recasting of what it means to be modern, multicultural and Malaysian, even as they acknowledged the challenges of reviewing the present as a space where the uncertainties and ambiguities of the ‘untimely’, ‘fractured’ and ‘unlived’, perceived in the ‘beam of darkness’,<sup>104</sup> are embodied, articulated and performed as integral aspects of a contemporary Malaysian community.

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<sup>104</sup> Qualities of ‘the contemporary’ identified by Giorgio Agamben, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

## Chapter 2

### Early Experiments in Malay theatre in the 1970s: Permeable Boundaries

The 1970s was a time of intense questioning about the state of Malaysian society, coming out of a traumatic event [the racial riots of May 13, 1969]. There was a lot of confusion, uncertainty and a very profound loss of confidence in what was Malaysian politics, and Malaysian culture...We were being pushed to ask 'what was Malaysian culture?'<sup>1</sup>

The events of May 13, 1969, when racial riots between Malaysians of Chinese and Malay descent led to approximately 200 deaths and more wounded,<sup>2</sup> have had deep and lasting impacts on the developments in Malaysian society. The memory of May 1969 continues to inform perceptions and prejudices related to issues of race in Malaysia, as the divisive construct of racial difference has been disruptive to national unity. The impact on Krishen's theatre reflected some of these concerns, as his own 'intense questioning' that came about after May 1969 led to a conscious attempt on his part to address issues of cultural difference within a Malaysian context. His experimentations in the 1970s, when he cast against race and thus foregrounded the idea of cultural identity as permeable and discursive, were important attempts to reconfigure the frames of Malay and non-Malay identity, positing alternative ideas of 'what is Malaysian culture'. His deliberate choice to cast non-Malay actors as Malay characters in plays about Malay society enlarged the scope of Malay culture so that it began to incorporate the heterogeneity in Malaysian society. In addition, Krishen explored difference within the Malay community, to underline how marginality also operated *within*, as well as between, cultural categories. These interventions were conscious attempts to evoke dialogical frames about how the processes of 'confusion, uncertainty and a very profound loss of confidence' could be examined, articulated, and thus performed in theatre.

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<sup>1</sup> Krishen Jit, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.

<sup>2</sup> See Kua Kia Soong, *May 13: Declassified Documents on the Malaysian Riots of 1969* (Kuala Lumpur: Suaram Komunikasi, 2007), 8-9. While the official figures assert that 196 people were killed, with a further 180 wounded by firearms and 259 by other weapons, Kua refutes this number to assert that it is way below the real number of fatalities. He points to recently declassified documents to show that the fatality toll was much higher, but this was concealed to 'cover up' the ethnic identity of the victims, who were primarily Chinese. The lack of transparency and accountability on the part of the state in relation to this issue has created resentment among non-Malays.

This chapter argues that Krishen's achievement in the 1970s was his stagings of cultural difference in Malay language plays, which revised notions of race as a naturalised essence to perform it as a construct that includes 'syncretised' recreations of 'cultural texts' and generate new meanings to old references.<sup>3</sup> Having moved to Malay language theatre from English language theatre to focus on 'what was Malaysian' from the perspective of the majority culture, he questioned the fixity of official cultural categories. His choice to cast against race and experiment with unconventional performance vocabularies, challenged the notion of distinct cultures and fixed behaviours as critical to a sense of order in society. Krishen made permeable the boundaries of identity and in so doing provoked inclusive reviewings of what was Malay, non-Malay and Malaysian. Krishen's work acknowledged that what it meant to be Malaysian was continually mediated by questions of racial categorisation, that were aspects of national history inherited from colonial policies of divide and rule. However he asserted ways of reworking these frames without subscribing to the idea that these norms were absolute and totalising, thus attempting to provide a sense of rootedness and indigeneity while transcending the need to provide unitary and homogenous authenticities.

Focussing on Krishen's work in the 1970s, this chapter will first look at the significance of the events of May 13, 1969 and the subsequent shifts in economic and cultural policy that impacted on notions of identity. This will provide a backdrop against which Krishen's work needs to be seen. The introduction of the New Economic Policy and the National Cultural Policy had serious implications for culture and identity, and will be discussed in relation to these issues. I will then look at how *teater kontemporari* (contemporary theatre), a development in modern Malay language theatre that had its heyday in the 1970s, pushed for shifts in modernising theatre to reflect a local aesthetic *and* national agenda. It sought to indigenise theatre by prioritising what was Malaysian, and initiating contextually grounded approaches that resisted a western-centric dominance of how the arts was modernised. It combined aspects of the traditional, folk and classical with the modern, to forge syncretic frames of producing contemporary imaginings of Malaysian identity. Engaging within this frame, Krishen experimented with ways of staging Malay plays to provide revised notions of Selves and Others. These processes were foundational

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<sup>3</sup> See Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2-7, for discussion on syncretised theatre in postcolonial contexts. The notion of 'theatrical syncretism' and 'cultural texts' will be further examined in this chapter.

in his continued approaches to creating theatre that was simultaneously rooted and modern. I then analyse how the choices Krishen made in two Malay language theatre plays that he directed - *Tok Perak* by Syed Alwi in 1975, and *Bukan Bunuh Diri* (Not Suicide) by Dinsman in 1977 - were powerful examples of how and why Krishen's participation in Malay language theatre was significant in challenging normative ideas by performing alternative configurations of culture and identity.

### **Rethinking Malay Culture and Boundaries of Identity**

Questions about what it meant to be Malaysian in the aftermath of the May 13, 1969 racial riots, affected all racial groups as the challenges of holding together as a nation and managing cultural difference became urgent. The economic and social disparities in society required serious attention, and thus changes in government policy were necessary to restructure allocations of material, financial and cultural resources to redress these imbalances. Pressures of modernisation also entailed adapting to new lifestyles and value systems brought about by urbanisation and industrialisation. However, state-led initiatives to valorise Malay culture as the core of Malaysian identity in order to regain the confidence of the Malay voters had effectively deepened the divide within the Malaysian community, as non-Malays were further marginalised. Undercurrents of tensions between Malays and non-Malays fuelled feelings of resentment about political entitlement and cultural belonging. However the need to put aside these dissatisfactions, in order to restore social and political stability, took precedence. Non-Malays acquiesced and appeared to accept the need to redress imbalances and elevate the position of the Malays. This required all groups to be able to negotiate issues of culture and identity in a climate of change, and rethink the frames of Selves and Others towards a new kind of co-existence and national identity. This section will briefly outline how state-led economic and social restructuring produced an important reconfiguration of Malaysian society which impacted culture, language and identity. It was the context in which Krishen's theatre staged Malay culture as inclusive of difference rather than as a singular and unitary construct, and asserted a more contemporary perspective of culture that resisted the reductive essentialisms of official rhetoric.

The racial riots which had erupted on May 13, 1969 exposed the deep insecurities of Malaysians who were no longer confident of the Alliance government's ability to protect their interests. Grievances about the lack of equal opportunity in education, economics and social



mobility became apparent in the results of a federal elections held on May 10, 1969. Even though the Alliance coalition secured a majority and retained power, their popularity had dropped significantly from 58.4 percent to 48.5 percent.<sup>4</sup> Opposition parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP) and Gerakan (Movement) which were primarily Chinese-led, gained significant victories. This meant the Chinese vote had largely deserted the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA). Indians also showed little support for the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC). In addition growing numbers of Malays voted for the Pan-Malayan Islamic Party (PMIP), signifying their disappointment with the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), the leading component of the Alliance. But more significantly the results 'exposed deep and abiding concerns among all communities regarding their situation within the new Malaysian nation'.<sup>5</sup> What did it mean to be Malaysian when racial allegiances appeared to override a sense of national belonging?

The facade of multi-racial harmony was ripped apart when violence between Malaysians of Chinese and Malay descent broke out on the streets of Kuala Lumpur and other major cities in West Malaysia on May 13, 1969. What caused and sparked the racial riots remains a controversial question, as some accounts blame the opposition supporters who consisted primarily of Chinese-Malaysians, and others accuse the UMNO supporters who were Malays.<sup>6</sup> However the issue at hand, as sociologist Kua Kia Soong argues, was 'the election results pointed to a growing polarisation which indicated that the policies of the Alliance Party had not succeeded in convincing the majority of the West Malaysian population of the need for continuing to support the ruling party's policies'.<sup>7</sup> This lack of faith in the ruling party led to a desire for change and the vote was an expression of dissatisfaction. The Malays were frustrated with the proportion of local and foreign Chinese-ownership of the economic wealth in the country, while the Chinese and Indians resented the political advantage and special privileges accorded to Malays. The majority of Malays were also disgruntled by poor access to higher levels of education and being thus effectively kept out of professional sectors in society. This

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<sup>4</sup> See Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1982), 297-300 for details on the 1969 election results.

<sup>5</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 297.

<sup>6</sup> A victory celebration was held on May 12, 1969, by supporters of the DAP and Gerakan, and this was followed by a counter-rally staged by UMNO supporters the following day. However the actual provocations and instigations of violence are an area of continued debate. See Kua, *May 13*, 41-59.

<sup>7</sup> Kua, *May 13*, 38.

was largely due to the medium of education at tertiary institutions being English, while most rural schools used Malay as the language of instruction. As such most Malays remained in the rural areas and those in urban spaces held jobs at lower levels of the economy. The Alliance government, led by Malaysia's first Prime Minister, Tunku Abdul Rahman, was seen as having secured only the interests of the ruling elite, thus failing the wider populace of Malays that it was meant to protect and provide for.

Hence the need to regain confidence and restore stability after the events of May 13, 1969 was urgent in the lives of Malaysians during the 1970s. To respond to this critical situation the state initiated a range of measures and set about making massive changes to restructure the economy and education system. One of the first moves was to create a Department of National Unity to 'formulate a national ideology and new social and economic programmes'<sup>8</sup> that would produce a more coherent society. One outcome was the formulation of a national pledge known as the Rukunegara (National Principles), which articulates 'Malaysia's national ideology' and is meant to 'serve as a guideline in the country's nation-building efforts'.<sup>9</sup> It points to the need for unity, equity, justice and diversity as central concepts in the attainment of a democratic and progressive society. This includes five principles that form the basis of this aspiration – belief in God, loyalty to King and Country, upholding the Constitution, sovereignty of the Law, good behaviour and morality.<sup>10</sup> First proclaimed on August 31, 1970 by the Yang DiPertuan Agung, Malaysia's King, it was a declaration of the need for Malaysians to above all, unite and join efforts towards building a society able to live in peace and prosperity. All Malaysians were encouraged to adhere to the ideals expressed and work towards the betterment of society through this frame. Yet there were limited cultural vocabularies to concretise these ideas and few attempts made to forge a 'Malaysian culture' that embodied alternatives which looked beyond race without erasing its cultural valence. Krishen's theatre, as we will see in this dissertation, was one such attempt.

One reason for the lack of integrated alternatives was an official over-emphasis on Malay as the dominant culture in national imagining, which then reiterated the valorisation of one racial group above others. A marked change that occurred post-1969 was the implementation of the

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<sup>8</sup> Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 298.

<sup>9</sup> 'Rukunegara,' myGovernment: The Malaysia Government's Official Portal, accessed November 4, 2011. <http://www.malaysia.gov.my/EN/Main/MsianGov/GovRukunegara/Pages/GovRukunegara.aspx>.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

New Economic Policy (NEP) in 1971, which was instituted to eradicate poverty and eliminate the association of ethnicity with economic function. The focus was to elevate the status of the marginalised among the Malays, who were rural, poor and uneducated, thus confined to jobs that were seen as lacking in professional status. The NEP, drawn-up as a 20-year plan, was meant to ‘make up the economic deficit of Malay nationalism’<sup>11</sup> by ensuring that Malays gained a bigger share in the economy and a new Malay business class could emerge.<sup>12</sup> This process of modernising Malays also entailed revising socio-economic and education policies to consolidate the position of Malays, Malay culture and the Malay language. What mattered was raising the position of the Malay community by making them more modern, affluent, urban and educated, in order to enhance their social position. This was done by providing affirmative action for Malays in areas of education, employment and business opportunities, through quota systems that allocated a large portion of scholarships, financial loans and jobs to Malays. It was meant to alter perceptions that Malays were rural, poor and uneducated, particularly when non-Malays, especially the Chinese, were seen as urban, wealthy and more literate. Issues of poverty among non-Malays were not given priority, and this further underlined the government’s bias towards the Malay community.

The government also took major steps to underline the importance of the Malay language as symbolic of the dominant position of Malays and Malay culture in the nation. While Malay was already the national language, English had thus far been the main language of education, particularly at tertiary levels, and used in important official domains such as the courts, financial sectors and government offices.<sup>13</sup> Earlier recommendations, such as in the Razak Report (1957) and the Rahman Report (1960), that Malay be made the medium of instruction in all government schools, had thus far been ignored. But after May 1969, the National Language Bill (1967) and the National Education Act (1961) emphasised the need to strengthen Malay as the language of the nation, which would serve to integrate a multicultural community.<sup>14</sup> Hence it was made the

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<sup>11</sup> T. N. Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 368.

<sup>12</sup> See Andaya and Andaya, *History*, 302-316.

<sup>13</sup> See Harper, *The End of Empire*, 299-307 for discussion on the struggle of the Malay language in relation to colonial governance and politics of culture.

<sup>14</sup> Kathy Rowland, ‘The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999’ (MA diss., National University of Singapore, 2004), 54-59. Rowland points to how issues of language were dealt with after May 13<sup>th</sup>, 1969, and argues that the ‘struggle over language was played out primarily between English and Malay’ (54) as this pertained to education and social position.

medium of instruction in all government schools at primary and secondary level, and eventually in tertiary institutions as well. This was a critical shift away from English, and extended to not only decolonise the workings of nationhood, but more significantly at this juncture, to demonstrate a real commitment to making Malay the language of all Malaysians. This also signified to non-Malay Malaysians, for whom Malay was rarely a mother-tongue, that in order to become part of a Malaysian community it was necessary to be fluent in Malay. As the language was associated with a racial group more than a national identity, this suggested that becoming more Malaysian also entailed becoming 'more Malay' as well, and that raised concerns for those who sought to sustain their cultural distinctness, for example the Chinese and Indians.

Apart from changes in the economy, education and language, there was also a move by the state to define what was desirable in Malaysian culture and give greater emphasis to elements of Malay culture as the core of a national identity. The National Cultural Policy, which was formulated in 1971 after the National Cultural Congress was held from August 16 - 20 of the same year, proposed three main criteria for the founding of a National Culture, bearing in mind that Malaysia's multi-racial harmony had become fragile.<sup>15</sup> The first was that Malaysian culture should be based on Malay culture as the constitutionally recognised indigenous culture of the land. Second, elements from 'other', namely non-Malay, cultures that were deemed suitable could also be included as part of national culture. And third, Islam should remain a crucial component of cultural values and practices. This has been seen as a document that was 'put together in too great a hurry' and 'remained contentious'<sup>16</sup> as a result of its exclusivity in a multi-racial and multi-religious society. However, to date, this policy has not been superseded by a more inclusive and contemporary official reformulation of what constitutes Malaysian culture.

The overt focus on Malay-ness as the core component of national identity relegated non-Malay cultures to a further position of marginality, despite the token acknowledgement of their presence in society as 'other' cultures. Although in his opening speech at the National Cultural Congress, Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak had reassured non-Malays that 'Malaysia's multi-

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<sup>15</sup> Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan (Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, Malaysia), *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan*. (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan, Belia dan Sukan, 1973), vii.

<sup>16</sup> Ghulam-Sarwar, Yusoff, 'The Culture Issue - Whither National Culture?' ProjectMalaysia, accessed November 4, 2011.  
<http://www.projectmalaysia.org/articles/the-culture-issue-whither-national-culture.html>.

racial society cannot be forgotten in deciding the country's national culture',<sup>17</sup> the lack of a pluralistic vision made it difficult for non-Malay citizens to identify with what was being developed as 'national culture'. Seeing as Article 160 in the Malaysian Constitution defines a Malay as 'a person who confesses the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, (and) conforms to Malay custom',<sup>18</sup> the outlining of what was suited to a National Culture was clearly geared towards focussing on the experiences and imaginings of the Malays, to the near exclusion of 'others'. Even though the Malay language was becoming more prevalent as a language of education and official discourse, it did not lead to more non-Malays becoming Muslim or practicing Malay customs. Thus what it meant to be part of 'Malaysian culture' was an area of 'intense questioning' as there were few spaces that looked at how Malay cultures and non-Malay cultures were interconnected, and thus reflective of a multi-racial Malaysian populace.

A further area of change in Malaysian society was brought about by processes of modernisation that put pressure on Malaysians to revise their notions of culture and identity. The state's drive towards economic development by moving from a plantation economy towards more manufacturing and industrialisation was aimed at reducing dependence on the fluctuating markets for raw materials such as rubber and tin. This led to an increased number of factories and industrial plants that offered new kinds of employment, attracting young men and women from small-towns and villages to leave their homes in order to join a paid-workforce. The increasing migration from rural to urban centres entailed more Malaysians having to adjust to a more pluralistic environment, and adjust to negotiating mounting cultural differences. Life in the city, compared to the village, thus meant dealing with people of varying belief systems and practices. Becoming a modern Malaysian demanded a willingness and capacity to engage with multiplicity in society as ordinary and non-disruptive to identity. Conflicts and tensions about this process of change were often dealt with in Malay language plays of the time, to reflect challenges of becoming modern and Malay when much Malay culture and custom were still linked to traditional and folk aspects of identity. This adaptation precipitated new questions about what it meant to be Malay. Here Krishen's highlighting of difference within the Malay

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<sup>17</sup> Cited in Kua Kia Soong, *The Malaysian Civil Rights Movement* (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information Research Development, 2005), 24.

<sup>18</sup> 'Constitution of Malaysia,' Confinder, accessed April 19, 2011.  
<http://confinder.richmond.edu/admin/docs/malaysia.pdf>.

community was important in drawing attention to multiplicity within a seemingly homogenous sphere.

Urbanisation also produced a wider secularisation of lifestyles, giving credence to greater individualism, intellectual liberty and personal choice. These were often the product of western modes of modernity which sometimes led to a conflict of values. Questions emerged about the cultural validity of inherited modes of behaviour and belief, such as traditional cultural practices and folk forms of healing. Yet these were also spaces for sustaining cultural distinctness and discarding them would mean surrendering to a largely westernised modernity. Even if, as anthropologist and philosopher Ernest Gellner argues, the role of culture in the modern world is no longer to ‘underwrite a people’s status and identity’ but to provide literacy in a ‘codified culture which permits context-free communication, community-membership and acceptability’ within the ‘mobility and anonymity of modern society’,<sup>19</sup> the constitution of those codes in Malaysia were highly contextualised, and based largely on being Malay and non-Malay. Thus developing a sense of modernity that was contextual and particular to varied interpretations of Malaysian identity – Malay and non-Malay – was a challenge which required a willingness to experiment with culture, and in Krishen’s terms, ‘think differently about this country’.<sup>20</sup>

Krishen’s relocation to Malay language theatre signalled that it was possible to reinvent oneself by gaining fluency in a language, and become adept in understanding the cultural histories and practices of a community that was not officially assigned to one’s identity. As an Indian-Malaysian, Krishen participated in the enactment and embodiment of Malay culture, to subvert the idea that Malay culture was exclusive to Malay-Malaysians. He also advocated approaches to viewing the transitions and changes in Malay culture as symbolic of all Malaysian cultures that were experiencing the shift to modernity, and thus having to revise their sense of Selves and Others. The opportunity to experiment with how this could be done was available in the sphere of *teater kontemporari*, which I will now examine as an important site in recasting the bounds of Malaysian culture and identity.

### **Experimental Approaches in *Teater Kontemporari***

<sup>19</sup> Ernest Gellner, ‘Adam’s Navel: ‘Primordialists’ Versus ‘Modernists’,’ in *People, Nation and State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, eds. Edward Mortimer with Robert Fine, (London: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd., 1999), 33.

<sup>20</sup> Krishen, quoted in Theresa Manavalan, ‘Krishen Jit – a lifetime of theatre,’ *Sunday Style*, March 14, 1999.

It [the 1970s] was also a period when there was a strong sense of transition between people moving from the country, from the *kampong* (village), into the city – particularly young people. And this transition was paralleled by the transition between traditional cultures and values and what might be called contemporary cultures and values. There was this kind of a cusp that we were living in, which we didn't realise then, and it was very dynamic, because things were happening very fast.... It was reflected not only in the content, but in the form of theatre, where the living together of traditional and contemporary theatres lent strong images to the stage.<sup>21</sup>

The challenge for theatre to respond critically to the crisis of what it meant to be Malaysian in contemporary society entailed being able to work with 'a strong sense of transition' rather than settled norms about what was involved in the politics of identity. Negotiating the tensions between traditional and contemporary 'cultures and values', required being open to reinventions of content and form. It also entailed engaging with the pressures of being in a 'kind of cusp' that was 'very dynamic because things were happening very fast', and thus forging responses that were alert to these shifts. The 'living together of traditional and contemporary theatres' was indicative of cultural boundaries being pushed to accommodate different perspectives and recognise identity as discursive. This section argues that it was *teater kontemporari* which embraced this development in society, and pushed the boundaries of Malaysian theatre in the 1970s by experimenting with traditional and modern elements of performance vocabulary. These performances were meant to provide alternative experiences of contemporary Malaysian culture, and thus resist the mainstream tendency to portray culture as singular and unitary. I contend that Krishen's participation in this realm provided important foundations in his practice of staging cultural difference as it began his commitment to focusing on local stories and issues, while questioning the meanings of what it meant to be Malaysian in a society of differentiated identities and cultures. His attempts to reconfigure Malay culture as an expansive category by consciously casting non-Malays as Malay characters and attending to differences within Malay culture, underlined his intent to stage inclusivity and expand cultural reinvention.

*Teater kontemporari*, which became an identifiable style of Malay language theatre in the mid-1970s, was a discernible 'break' from *drama moden* which had emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a process of modernising local theatre. While *drama moden* was based on western

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<sup>21</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.



naturalistic drama but using local content and the Malay language, *teater kontemporari* sought to differ in a range of ways. First, in the attempt to decolonise and indigenise theatre it incorporated local traditional performance forms such as the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), *silat* (Malay martial art) and *bangsawan* (popular Malay opera). Second, it used frames of fragmentation and non-linear approaches to storytelling and thus created opportunities for estrangement and disjuncture, highlighting the fractures and ruptures in society. This helped to disrupt notions of time and space, and depict the unsettled mood of the period. Finally it drew from western modernist forms such as expressionism and absurdism, which were particularly evident in texts that grappled with issues of displacement and disillusion. The combination of these approaches was geared towards encouraging a notion of contemporariness that was rooted in Malaysian histories of performance, while remaining open to influences from avant-garde experiments abroad, both in the region and in the west.

It also produced a Malaysian form of ‘syncretic theatre’ which theatre scholar Christopher Balme identifies as ‘one of the most effective means of decolonizing the stage, because it utilizes the performance forms of both European and indigenous cultures in a creative recombination of their respective elements, without slavish adherence to one tradition or the other’.<sup>22</sup> It reworked the power relations between the West and non-West, while asserting a new form of indigeneity that did not deny the influence of the West. As Balme notes, ‘theatrical syncretism is in most cases a conscious, programmatic strategy to fashion a new form of theatre in the light of colonial or post-colonial experience’ and thus ‘cannot be grasped purely as an aesthetic phenomenon but must be embedded in a concept of cultural interaction and change’.<sup>23</sup> In *teater kontemporari* this meant seeing the modern as part of being Malaysian, yet weaving in aspects of tradition to resist ‘slavish’ mimicry of the West. Creating a ‘Malaysian culture’ that was made up of ‘cultural texts’<sup>24</sup> that could reflect the multiplicity in society was integral to rethinking limiting norms. Balme stipulates that ‘cultural texts’ are not just ‘logocentric’ texts, but include ‘iconographic and performative cultural manifestations’ which are ‘fully

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<sup>22</sup> Christopher Balme, *Decolonizing the Stage: Theatrical Syncretism and Post-Colonial Drama* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1999), 2.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 2-3.

<sup>24</sup> Balme, *Decolonising*, 4.

comprehensible within the culture that produces and uses it'.<sup>25</sup> Thus the performative dimensions of the written scripts were increased.

The main intent of *teater kontemporari* practitioners was to give priority to 'sources of inspiration from their own imagination and background and from the indigenous traditional theatres of the country', and thus develop a 'Malaysian theatrical identity on the modern stage' that was informed by this consciousness.<sup>26</sup> As theatre scholar Nur Nina Zuhra observes, '[C]ontemporary [Malay] playwrights viewed realism as a Western form of theatre that was inappropriate in an era of intensified efforts to promote Malay culture'.<sup>27</sup> The need to inject modern local theatre with forms that were distinctly Malay, and thus linked to a history of performance in the nation, was important to seeing the historical, folk and traditional as part of the modern. Hence even though many *teater kontemporari* plays exhibited 'some aspects in common with Western and Indonesian contemporary theater, contemporary Malay playwrights eschewed being imitators and did not want to depend upon foreign models'.<sup>28</sup> This sense of seeking artistic independence and wanting to 'give the modern theater a distinctly Malaysian identity'<sup>29</sup> fuelled an enthusiasm for experimentation. Krishen himself referred to this as an 'unhalting experimental zeal' that lasted throughout the 1970s, and only began to wane towards the end of the decade. This was a result of a resurgent Islam in Malaysia that frowned upon the 'sins of polytheism and nihilism' in plays that explored existential concerns without censure.<sup>30</sup>

Among the early proponents of *teater kontemporari* was the playwright-director Noordin Hassan, who from the 1960s had begun to experiment with *bangsawan*, *boria* (a call-and-response form of sung procession) and other traditional forms, to create non-linear scripts that resisted the naturalism of *drama moden*. He also questioned the politics of Malay feudalism, evident in the play *Hujan Panas di Bumi Melaka* (Foreboding in the Land of Melaka, 1964) which reworked the constituent myth about two legendary warriors from the Malacca Sultanate - Hang Tuah and Hang Jebat.<sup>31</sup> Noordin's<sup>32</sup> play *Bukan Lalang Di Tiup Angin* (It is Not the Tall

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Nur Nina Zuhra. *An Analysis of Modern Malay Drama* (Shah Alam: BIROTEKS (Biro Penyediaan Teks), 1992), 142.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Krishen Jit, 'Contemporary Malaysian Theatre,' in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, ed. Kathy Rowland, (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003), 59.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 52.

Grass that is Blown by the Wind, 1970) commented directly on the events of May 1969, to engage with issues of 'self-apprehension' through a 'surrealistic imagination that intervened to relocate folk characters and folk theatre images in a contemporary ambience'.<sup>33</sup> This was achieved by creating opportunities for 'interaction between traditional and Western performance modes and aesthetics'.<sup>34</sup> Nur Nina cites this as the moment when 'experimental theater began' as it was not only a 'deliberate and radical departure from realism' but 'became accepted as the creative style of the day'.<sup>35</sup> It was bold in its assertion that Malay culture needed to move towards symbolic representations that were open, suggestive and metaphorical, rather than literal and tied down by limited interpretations of meaning. This also pushed for theatre to provoke audiences to rethink the exclusivity of cultural roots, and question official definitions of Malay and Malaysian.

A capacity to 'understand our roots as a nation'<sup>36</sup> had become a growing imperative among theatre practitioners such as Krishen, Syed Alwi and Rahim Razali, who had previously been involved primarily in English language theatre and made a deliberate choice to move to Malay language theatre in order to deal with the 'transition' that was taking place in society. Syed Alwi had already begun a process of indigenising Malaysian English language theatre in the 1960s, when together with writer K. Das he 'led a historic coup against the expatriate-controlled Malayan Arts Theatre Group (MATG) establishment' in order to localise the leadership.<sup>37</sup> Syed subsequently became its first non-expatriate Chairman and declared the aim of making 'Malaysian Theatre' by producing work that was 'by Malaysians and for Malaysians'.<sup>38</sup> Syed later wrote, directed and performed plays in Malay that emphasised folk elements that were being marginalised by a modernisation of society, and often created protagonists who were mavericks in society, such as in *Alang Rentak Seribu* (Alang of a

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<sup>32</sup> As Malay names do not conventionally have a surname, individuals are usually referred to by their given names even in formal discourses. Thus I will use the given name for reference and refer to Noordin Hassan as Noordin rather than Hassan, and will do so with other Malay names as well.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 52-3.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Nur Nina, *Modern Malay Drama*, 142.

<sup>36</sup> Krishen, quoted in Manavalan, 'Krishen Jit'.

<sup>37</sup> Rowland, 'Politics of Drama,' 33. The MATG was a theatre group that used to stage English plays, and which Krishen had participated in, as discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>38</sup> See Rowland, 'Politics of Drama,' 33-34.

Thousand Wiles, 1974) and *Tok Perak* (1975) which will be examined in detail later in this chapter.

The importance of Malaysian theatre strengthening its ‘roots’ was emphasised during the National Cultural Congress, when theatre artists Usman Awang, Syed Alwi, Rahim Razali and Krishen co-wrote and presented a paper entitled ‘*TeaterKu... DiMana Akar Mu?*’ (My Theatre...Where Are Your Roots?).<sup>39</sup> The paper, which examined the state of theatre in Malaysia at the time, critiqued the fact that there was ‘no practice or institution of Malaysian theatre in which Malaysians could present and see themselves in an artistic form that was as old or as young as themselves’ (*tidaklah ada peraturan atau institutsi teater Malaysia, di mana orang-orang Malaysia boleh mempersembahkan dan melihat diri mereka yang sebenar digambarkan dalam satu bentuk seni setua dan semuda diri mereka sendiri*).<sup>40</sup> It asserted that there was too much of an urban elitist focus, and advocated a vision for a more egalitarian theatre called *teater rakyat* (people’s theatre), in which the ‘search for roots’ focused on everyday stories that performed the ‘conflicts and contradictions’ of ordinary life in society.<sup>41</sup> This meant that theatre needed to not only be decolonized of western influences, but also take seriously the need to indigenise modern theatre by drawing from local and quotidian vocabularies of culture and performance.

The problem with the paper was that it also framed traditional and folk forms from Malay and non-Malay cultures, such as the Chinese Opera, Wayang Kulit and Indian dances, as communally oriented and not as suited to a ‘national’ imaginary.<sup>42</sup> These were seen as ‘performing images of other countries, other people, other cultures’ (*mempertunjukkan gambaran-gambaran negara-negara lain, orang-orang lain, kebudayaan-kebudayaan lain*)<sup>43</sup> because they did not reflect the everyday lives of Malaysians, to enable ordinary people to see themselves depicted on stage. In this sense it was a paper that paradoxically did not discriminate

<sup>39</sup> Usman, Awang, Krishen Jit, Rahim, Razali and Syed, Alwi, ‘TeaterKu ..... Di Mana AkarMu,’ in *Asas Kebudayaan Kebangsaan: Mengandungi Kertaskerja Kongres Kebudayaan Kebangsaan dari 16hb Ogos – 20hb Ogos 1971* (Kuala Lumpur: Kementerian Kebudayaan Belia dan Sukan Malaysia, 1973), 383-399.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 386.

<sup>41</sup> In the paper, the writers use the phrase *konflik dan kontradiksi dalam masyarakat* (conflicts and contradictions in society) in several instances, to reiterate the importance of dealing with *kebiasaan cara hidup* (ordinary way of life) in making theatre that grappled with ideas about *Malaysia Hari Ini* (Malaysia Today).

<sup>42</sup> Even though the Wayang Kulit (shadow puppetry) is regarded as part of Malay heritage, its origins in India have meant that its form and content are heavily influenced by Indian epics, particularly the Ramayana and Mahabharata, and styles of performance which have since been adapted to local revisions.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 385.

between Malay and non-Malay as much as it seemed to attend to the gaps between rural and urban, poor and wealthy, classical and quotidian. However seeing as Malay was the culture of the majority, this was acknowledged as the most suitable source from which to create a *teater rakyat* and non-Malay cultures were sidelined. The focus was on the Malay community and not on racial multiplicity in society, failing to recognise difference as part of its history and roots. As a result, elements from non-Malay cultures were hardly incorporated into Malay language theatre, even in *teater kontemporari* which was more conscious of alterity and difference. The stories and scripts performed were almost entirely about the Malay community and this politics of Malay language theatre would eventually be the reason that Krishen himself chose to rethink his decision to ‘only direct and act in Malay’,<sup>44</sup> as it became too exclusive. Having aligned with the process of giving centrality to Malay language and culture, he then revised his views, as will be seen in the following chapters.

Hence the period of the 1970s, during which Krishen was extensively involved in *teater kontemporari*, was significant in that there was a growing intent to interrogate and extend the boundaries of Malaysian identity. However the focus was largely on Malay language and Malay culture and what it meant to contemporise culture within this frame. The broader challenge was to notions of authority within a Malay establishment, rebelling against feudal frames of power that silenced the voices of critique and question. These emerged strongly during a period of student activism in the early 1970s, when university students demonstrated against injustice and inequity to express ‘the feeling that expectations arising after 1969 were as yet unfulfilled’.<sup>45</sup> In the work of younger artists such as Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan and Johan Jaafar, there was a clear priority given to articulating the struggles of being young, educated, and more often than not, male, in the Malay community. Questions of whether to adhere to religious piety or subscribe to scientific objectivity, values of collectivism or individuality, and conflicts of how to negotiate demands of modernity, surfaced regularly. Krishen described this as a ‘poignant empathy with Malay urban youth, culturally and physically disoriented by their abrupt move from the *kampong* (village) to the city’.<sup>46</sup> In particular, Krishen viewed Dinsman’s theatre as centred on the ‘troubled and ruminating self’ which ‘echoed a young generation, restive with

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<sup>44</sup> Krishen Jit, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Nur Nina, *Modern Malay Drama*, 152.

<sup>46</sup> Krishen, ‘Contemporary Malaysian Theatre,’ 57.

traditional values but uncertain about modern persuasion'.<sup>47</sup> Dinsman's scripts took on aspects of Western absurdism, such as the elusiveness of meaning and the emptiness of purpose, as will be explored later on in this chapter in relation to Krishen's staging of *Bukan Bunuh Diri* (Not Suicide) by Dinsman.

Krishen's involvement in *teater kontemporari* was significant in showing that in the 1970s, for all the emphasis on Malay culture and identity, it was possible for a non-Malay to participate in the reworking of what it meant to be Malaysian from within a Malay-dominant sphere. As he was avowedly the only non-Malay key player in the movement, his presence as director, critic, and occasionally as actor, signalled the fact that this political and aesthetic revamping of culture was not only accessible to those who were ethnically Malay. It was however significant that Krishen committed to learning about Malay culture and becoming fluent in Malay, indicating that a willingness to acquire these skills was crucial to the process of participating in rethinking Malay culture. Hence the transition between viewing Malay language theatre as exclusively about Malays and opening up possibilities for including aspects of non-Malay identities, was a hopeful shift towards a more multi-racial imagining of Malaysian culture. The choices Krishen made in the two plays that I will now turn to, *Tok Perak* by Syed Alwi and *Bukan Bunuh Diri* by Dinsman, expanded the scope of *teater kontemporari* by underlining the importance of cultural difference in staging reconstructed ideas about what was Malaysian. By casting actors who were visibly identified as different from their characters in racial and social terms, Krishen subverted an expected norm. Instead he pointed to the capacity of theatre to stage the body as a site of multiple codes and thus be representative of different meanings. This rendered it a discursive and syncretic space for renewed imaginings of Selves and Others. As there are no video recordings of these performances, I will rely on published scripts, interviews and reviews for my analysis. In view of this I am unable to analyse particular gestures and performance styles, except where these are explicitly referred to in the sources used.

### **Revisioning Racial Identity in Syed Alwi's *Tok Perak***

In Krishen's direction of *Tok Perak* by Syed Alwi, he explored two main strategies for articulating an inclusive politics of difference, and recasting Malaysian identities as discursive

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 56.

formations of multiple cultural spheres. He consciously chose to cast non-Malay actors as Malay characters in a play about Malay society, and thus asserted the possibility of redrawing cultural boundaries by mixing what was Malay with non-Malay. He also looked at the politics of marginality in Malay society, by casting well-known educated and urban Malay actors in roles that were rural, unsophisticated and thus distant from their everyday realities. This was an attempt to forge links between seemingly disparate worlds and bridge dichotomies by conflating what was often kept apart. Krishen also experimented with modernist approaches to staging that were non-linear, fragmented and included the use of projections on screens to enhance the sense of multi-dimensionality in the cultural texts produced. I argue that these early experiments with how to stage contemporary Malaysian culture as inherently heterogenous were foundational in his later works as they were the start of Krishen's contextually grounded styles of theatre-making, in which difference was a conscious politic and aesthetic that emerged from ordinary questions such as what it meant to be Malaysian, whether as Malay, non-Malay, urban or rural.

The play, *Tok Perak* looks at the conflicts of belonging and acceptance when choices are made by an individual to veer from the norm, and live a life that is seen as outside the boundaries of an established community. The protagonist, Tok Perak, is a folk character who is an itinerant medicine-seller who travels from one place to another and is constantly in a state of being 'between' various locations. He is defined by his individuality and known as one who keeps 'turning up with all his quirks and eccentricities, arriving with all his bits and pieces, and moving on with all his idiosyncracies' (*Tok Perak timbul dengan anu-anunya, Tok Perak tiba dengan apa-apanya, Tok Perak terus dengan saja-sajanya*).<sup>48</sup> When he seeks to settle down and secure the comforts of domestic life, social acceptance and community belonging, he confronts the prejudices of those who find it hard to admit him into their conventional lives. Even though the community appears to broaden its views and seek modernisation on the surface, the narrowness of cultural values creates apprehension about a man like Tok Perak because he will not conform. As long as he remains an 'outsider' he is tolerated, but when his attempt to integrate means a reconfiguration of the meaning of identity for others as well, he is viewed with unease. This lack of tolerance and respect for alterity pointed to the challenges of incorporating difference, especially when it conflicted with settled notions of custom, behaviour and belief. Eventually

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<sup>48</sup> Syed Alwi, *Tok Perak* (Kuala Lumpur: Teks Publishing, 1985), 98.



Tok Perak decides to leave, preferring the liberty of continual journeying and spaces of transition, to the constrictive and conservative notions of mainstream society.

The question of what and who was acceptable was a growing dilemma for many Malays, particularly those who moved from the village to the city, trying to adapt to modernisation and urbanisation. This was a frequent theme in *teater kontemporari*, which challenged ideas of cultural conventions and the fixity of values. Practitioners were often seen as ‘alternative’ members of society who stood out for being radical and different, such that Tok Perak’s maverick quality and conscious position of outsider was associated with the playwright-director-performer Syed Alwi himself. Writer and critic Salleh Joned, likened Syed with the central character, suggesting that the playwright demonstrated similar qualities of being between worlds and always deliberately an ‘outsider’.<sup>49</sup> Krishen reiterated this when he referred to Syed as someone who ‘struck up the stance of outsider’ due to his Western liberal convictions of the importance of ‘the autonomous self in the face of the collective demands of society’.<sup>50</sup> In this regard, the play *and* the stance of the playwright deliberately questioned the meaning of Malayness in the face of modernity and progress, especially as Malay culture prioritises the collective and discourages individualism. Based on a real world character named Wak Malaya, who was infamous in Malaya for his captivating presence and performance skills, and whom the playwright watched and admired as a teenager, Tok Perak is thus an unusual character even within traditional culture, as he does not conform to communal living.<sup>51</sup> In addition, by the 1970s travelling medicine-sellers were regarded as undesirable for two main reasons – the shift to western forms of medicine as more scientific and thus reliable, and the increasing fundamentalism in Islamic practice that sought to purge all unorthodox forms of cultural practice. Thus Tok Perak also symbolised the elements of culture that were faced with extinction due to being ‘outside’ a stipulated boundary, and thus ‘different’ from a sanctioned mainstream community.

In the play, Syed questioned the social and cultural prejudices that relegate Tok Perak to a position of marginality, even though he embodies an important cultural heritage. The story is set in the small, royal town of Kuala Kangsar, in the state of Perak, located on the central

<sup>49</sup> Salleh Joned, ‘*Tok Perak – Kenapa Pementasannya Yang Pertama Tidak Memuaskan* (Tok Perak – Why the First Staging was Unsatisfactory)’ in *Tok Perak* by Syed Alwi, (Kuala Lumpur: Teks Publishing, 1985), xx.

<sup>50</sup> Krishen, ‘Contemporary Malaysian Theatre,’ 55.

<sup>51</sup> Information gained from Syed Alwi, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

western coast of Peninsular Malaysia. Here, a Malay community is seen to be struggling with the pressures of becoming modern and urban, while trying to remain culturally rooted. This is further complicated by the entry of Tok Perak, who questions their ideas of morality and custom, challenging notions of what is valuable in Malay culture. When he suddenly falls ill on his travels, he is taken in by a widow, Azizah and her three children, Hamid, Hasnah and Hamzah. Inasmuch as they help to look after him as he recovers, he also contributes to their well-being by providing companionship, support and advice where needed. On the one hand he is made welcome by the family, particularly Hamid who is inspired by his skills and decides to become his apprentice. But Tok Perak realises that he is still considered an outsider by the rest of the community. His beliefs and practices are not consistent with the conservatism of Malay-Muslim values that delineate his practice as un-Islamic. As time passes, Tok Perak proposes marriage to Azizah and she accepts, despite initial reservations about the liaison expressed by Hasnah. But after a period of trying to adapt and become a regular part of the community, he returns to his travelling ways. In effect, he rejects the lure of communal comfort in favour of individuality, eccentricity and idiosyncrasy. In this respect he is more contemporary in spirit than even those much younger and seen as modern in the community, such as Hasnah who is a nurse who longs to work in a hospital in the big city and rejects the knowledge of Tok Perak's healing processes. They may aspire towards a material modernisation, but disregard an accompanying freedom of spirit or embrace of uncertainty.

Krishen staged these issues of acceptance and belonging in ways that recast cultural boundaries and advanced flexible ideas about the Malay community as symbolic of Malaysians at large. Dramaturgical choices were made to highlight the mix of cultures within Malay society, and suggest that multiplicity exists within the category. First, by casting the playwright Syed Alwi as Tok Perak, Krishen suggested that the maverick who is outcast by virtue of being opinionated and wilful about his autonomy, does not merely apply to the unschooled, rural, and folk character who wanders from town to town. This marginality can also be felt among educated, urban and modern individuals who choose to locate themselves between cultural spheres as a politic of reinvention. Syed's conscious shift to make theatre that reflected a radical and questioning approach, both in English and Malay language theatre, associated him with unconventional individuals who resisted authority when it imposed criteria that curtailed liberty and autonomy. As such when he performed Tok Perak on stage, he became both the odd and

eccentric medicine-seller who fascinates his rural customers, as well as the erudite theatre practitioner who challenges his urban audience about what they see as acceptable in culture. This doubleness produced an ambivalence that opened up the interpretation of Tok Perak as a cultural figure, no longer reducible to a single interpretation.

Second, the main roles of Azizah and Hamzah were played by Faridah Merican and Rahim Razali respectively; well-known urban, educated and modern Malay actors, who signified a link between the worlds of the big city and the small town, pointing to similarities that pertain between the capital city Kuala Lumpur and small-town Kuala Kangsar. Like Syed and Krishen, they were also part of a shift among some theatre practitioners from English to Malay language theatre, and thus recognised as bilingual actors, fluent in English and Malay. Thus when Faridah and Rahim enacted small-town characters, reluctant to change their lifestyles and become modern, they performed the conflicts that occur even among urban Malays, about how to mediate between cultural loyalty and openness to change. To Malay language theatre audiences who were primarily Malay, their presence pointed to the ongoing adaptations of being modern *and* Malaysian. Hence when Azizah, accepts Tok Perak's proposal of marriage, the character creates a possibility of change by enlarging her scope of what is acceptable in her family, and her community; and the actor, Faridah, is seen to represent this politic. The boundary is allowed to be fluid in order to include the outsider who attempts to adapt to the community. Even if this does not eventually suffice in convincing Tok Perak to stay on, it is an important marker of a willingness to be inclusive of difference.

Third, and most importantly, Krishen cast non-Malay actors as important characters in the world of Tok Perak and the family of Azizah, to point to a wider multiplicity in society.<sup>52</sup> This performed how bodies which are racially identifiable as 'other' can be recast beyond their visible identities to become permeable texts. It reworked ideas about racial identity as necessarily inscribed on the body and thus singular, to perform connections of Self and Other as inter-related and mutually constitutive. If a Malay character could be played by a non-Malay actor, then Malay-ness, like other racial categories, was contingent and not immutable. In particular the casting of Indian-Malaysian actor Vijaya Samarawickrama as Zakaria, the brother of Azizah,

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<sup>52</sup> It is significant that non-Malays were cast in major roles, indicating it was not just a token representation of the Other, such as in colonial English language theatre that Krishen had experienced in the 1950s, where locals were given minor roles, often as non-speaking members of a crowd.

produced a staging of the Malay family as a metaphorical space that included both Malays and non-Malays. This became dramatically potent when Zakaria questions Tok Perak about his intentions in staying on with Azizah's family, stating that 'Azizah is a widow' (*Azizah tu janda*) and 'Tok Perak is an outsider' (*Tok Perak orang luar*) and thus 'the people here don't quite like Tok Perak hanging around for long' (*Orang di sini tak berapa sukakan Tok Perak bertanggak lama*).<sup>53</sup> At this point Vijaya, the non-Malay actor, became the insider and Syed, the Malay actor, was the outsider, due to the social roles they played, and not the physical and cultural features their bodies signified.

Apart from staging multiplicity within the family, Krishen also deliberately cast Tok Perak's four female attendants as Malay, Chinese and Indian, to perform the character's symbolic presence as part of a Malaysian community, and not just a Malay one. The four women, played by Malay-Malaysian Norhayati Hashim, Indian-Malaysian Joshi Biswas, and Chinese-Malaysians Vivienne Lee and Monica Voon, represented the multicultural composite of Malaysian society. This portrayed Tok Perak as a man without racial bias in his choice of attendants. That these roles are not racially specified, also suggests that the playwright left this option open to the interpretation of the director. Nonetheless, that there were two Chinese, one Indian and one Malay actor among them, makes the non-Malay majority an interesting twist in the tale. If Tok Perak is a Malay folk-character associated with a vanishing Malay way of life, then those who travel with him and to whom he returns at the end, are a mix of Malay and non-Malay - depicting him as Malaysian, and not just Malay.

The roles of Mahaguru, who is Tok Perak's mentor, and Barupajayapura, a fellow-medicine seller, were also played by non-Malay actors. Here Indian-Malaysian actors, K.K. Nair as Mahaguru, and Leslie Dawson as Barupajayapura, two well-known actors on the English language theatre stage, were seen not only speaking Malay but inhabiting these Malay folk-character roles. This expressed a transition in theatre in which actors unfamiliar with performing in Malay had to adapt to the demands of acting and sounding like a Malay person. These initial stages of shift and reinvention were presumably awkward, if not clumsy at times. For non-Malays to pick up the rhythms and accents of Malay in order to sound like 'insiders', much experience was needed. Thus different degrees of fluency and multiple accents would have been

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<sup>53</sup> Syed, *Tok Perak*, 27.

heard on stage as a result of casting actors who were still getting accustomed to performing in Malay. Audiences fluent in Malay were prodded to see and hear how these differences inflected the meaning of the play, to make it more representative of a contemporary society with mixed identities.

Krishen's experimentations with translating the script onto stage were driven largely by the way the play was written, which fused traditional, folk and modern elements to forge an indigenous Malaysian style. It played with the idea of modern culture as a collage of elements that included the new and old. In Krishen's words,

[T]he play juxtaposed folk performance events (*silat*, *wayang kulit*, and the versifying *syair*), modernistic images from film and slides, with an intricately textured realistic play. The mixed means performed was an analogue of the protagonist's state of mind.<sup>54</sup>

Here Malay life, much like everyday Malaysian life, was experienced as 'mixed means', and the attempt to stage the 'protagonist's state of mind' through 'performative means', rather than mere spoken text, stressed the multi-dimensionality of theatre, in which more than one text can be performed simultaneously. This was opportunity to put together different layers of meaning rather than settle for one line of narrative. In *Tok Perak* this evoked an experience of unsettledness and transition that reflected the mind of the protagonist. Fragmentation and non-linearity were used to defamiliarise the everyday, and intensify the tensions and conflicts between and within characters. For example the use of screens on stage to create shadows and project filmed sequences, conflated technological advances with mystical occurrences. Tok Perak's haunting dreams were staged using live actors to create shadows that externalised the internal movements of his mind. The play of filmed sequences to show the departure and arrival of trains, and aspects of urbanisation which threatened traditional life, symbolised the changes affecting the community. When the characters were seen as shadows on one screen, juxtaposed with images of the railway station and trains on another screen, and film clips of Tok Perak in his 'new life' on yet another screen, it collaged the different worlds that Tok Perak was negotiating as part of his fragmented mindscape.<sup>55</sup> The intersecting images on the screens suggested the changes in his life. As representations of different cultural spheres that impacted on him, they

<sup>54</sup> Krishen, 'Contemporary Malaysian Theatre,' 55.

<sup>55</sup> Syed, *Tok Perak*, 23.

pointed to how these were no longer simple binaries that existed in oppositional polarity, but interlinked aspects of a single identity and reality. Likewise in the wedding scene between Tok Perak and Azizah, the incorporation of *syair* (a Malay folk form of singing) and *silat* (a Malay martial art) engaged performers in a collage of performative vocabularies, that ranged from segments of realistic drama when performing the dialogue of the script, to presentational movement and song. Audiences were presented with the traditional as an aspect of the contemporary in a symbolic reinvention of how intertwined vocabularies created in-between spaces where more options for cultural reinvention were possible. Thus Tok Perak as a character caught in the ‘cusp’ of change was depicted in the way the story was told on stage, and his conflicts were depicted in the interstices of different worlds moving closer, as forces of change altered the dynamics of identity.

The 1975 production of *Tok Perak* has been described by Krishen, in his capacity as a theatre scholar and reviewer, as the ‘first multi-media event in Malaysian theatre’.<sup>56</sup> This marked the event as the beginning of new experimentations with technology and the performing body on the modern Malaysian stage. That Krishen, as a non-Malay director, helmed this production and took on the artistic leadership to create a work that would articulate a glimpse of what it meant to work towards a modern and multicultural embodiment of Malaysian culture within Malay language theatre, was significant. Even though the effort was indubitably collaborative and thus a shared imagining, the main responsibility of executing this vision of a contemporary Malaysian production, lay primarily in his hands.<sup>57</sup> Thus even if this staging was met with criticism, firstly, for its lack of effective synthesis between the multi-media elements and, secondly, for the failure to fully embody the inner tensions of Tok Perak’s mental state, there was acknowledgement that Krishen’s skill as director, in pushing theatre towards more mature imaginings of the contemporary, was not to be disputed.<sup>58</sup> He was part of an important shift towards re-envisioning

<sup>56</sup> Krishen, ‘Contemporary Malaysian Theatre,’ 55.

<sup>57</sup> Apart from the well-known cast already mentioned, it was also a collaboration of several pioneering artists from varied backgrounds, who combined their efforts to realise this cutting-edge performance. On the creative team of designers were leading modern visual artists Syed Ahmad Jamal, Joseph Tan and Sulaimen Esa, whose participation in theatre signalled a more interdisciplinary approach to developing a contemporary performance form. It also marked a desire to draw from a wider artistic base, and thus improve the professional level of engagement.

<sup>58</sup> Salleh Joned, ‘*Tok Perak – Kenapa Pementasannya Yang Pertama Tidak Memuaskan*’ in *Tok Perak* by Syed Alwi, (Kuala Lumpur: Teks Publishing, 1985) xx-xxxiii. Salleh’s review of the production points to these problems, and asserts that Krishen was not able to fully realize the potential of the text. The use of multi-media was seen as gimmicky and in need of greater stylization in order to create a more aesthetic means of conveying the

Malaysian culture as constituted of difference and inter-related across varied boundaries of identity. This was also mediated by ways in which technology symbolised modernity and impacted on the live viewing process, an aspect of performance that emerged in Krishen's theatre throughout his career. However this was never a primary concern, as Krishen was far more interested in the actor as the main focus on stage. Whether as a site of multiplicity within, or as a text for reconfigurations of the norm, the politics of identity in Krishen's theatre were primarily executed in the portrayals of culture through the actions and presences of the performers on stage, as will be further examined in the next section.

### **Recasting the Modern Malay in *Bukan Bunuh Diri* by Dinsman**

Krishen's direction of Dinsman's monologue *Bukan Bunuh Diri* (Not Suicide) in 1977 experimented with the politics of what it meant to cast Khalid Salleh, an unconventional performer and individual in contemporary Malay society, in the role of a rebellious scholar Adam, who questions the cultural values and beliefs of Malay society. Here Krishen examines notions of marginality within urban and educated Malay society, unlike in *Tok Perak* which was set in a small-town community. The play is about the emotional and spiritual struggles of Adam, a young man and Malay-Muslim intellectual, who decides to take his own life in order to meet directly with God. He believes this is the only way to settle his agonising doubts and questions about human existence. Aware that suicide is in opposition to Islamic tenets, he is willing to explore the limits of this possibility by rationalising his choice as a sincere move towards engaging with God, rather than rejecting God. Hence he is willing to risk condemnation by his community, if it means fulfilling his larger purpose in life. The irony is that as an educated young man who is meant to symbolise the hopes and aspirations of his community, he becomes a source of contention. He fails to contain his pursuit of knowledge within an acceptable boundary, and thus becomes a misfit. Hence modernization, through education and scientific rationalism, is seen as threatening to cultural commonality, because it gives too much credence to the individual's right to question.

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fragmentation. In addition Salleh was disappointed with the characterisation of Tok Perak, particularly at the end of the play, when his performance of a final speech to the audience lacked a critical dynamism and thus failed to communicate the enigma of the character. However Salleh accedes to the fact that the work Krishen did was important in advancing the process of experimentation, as a first step in the life of the play.



Similar to Tok Perak, Adam, faces issues of acceptance and belonging, as he is alienated for being unable and unwilling to comply and fit into society. He admits that even ‘after years of trying, these efforts yield no meaning’ ((D)ah bertahun-tahun saya cuba, tapi tak memberi erti).<sup>59</sup> In fact ‘what drives him round the bend’ (yang menyebabkan saya bingung), is that ‘others can’ (mereka boleh) while ‘I cannot’ (saya tak boleh).<sup>60</sup> During his ruminations, he speaks to *Tuhan* (God) who remains silent and unseen, and other characters such as *Bapa-Yang-Tidak-Kelihatan* (Father-Who-Is-Never-Seen) and *Dewi-Yang-Tidak-Kelihatan* (Angel-Who-Is-Never-Seen), who manifest only as lights or voices. Their attempts to persuade him against his actions are futile, as he remains tormented by a desire to get to the crux of his existential dilemma. As an articulate and learned student, Adam symbolises a radical yet credible revision of identity. While he is at odds with conservative norms such as submission to authority and unquestioning obedience, he is unwilling to abandon the cultural frames from which they stem. Thus his struggle is part of an ‘untimeliness’ that stirs questions about contemporary life, which pertain to his time, yet exceed its norms of enquiry.<sup>61</sup> The challenge to be modern and Malaysian in the 1970s was particularly acute for Malays who were becoming urbanised in large numbers and having to shift cultural perspectives. It involved dealing with difference amid pressures to maintain cultural distinctness. Religious beliefs were a critical part of this process of reinvention, as faith and piety were often at odds with secularisation and materialism. Hence the urban young male scholar who decides to refute convention and take on his own journey of spirituality is regarded with disapproval for his non-conformity, yet admired for his courage and conviction in rational enquiry. The character Adam in Dinsman’s *Bukan Bunuh Diri* reflected this ethos of feeling a certain pride in being educated and erudite in society, even though he is relegated to being an outsider in his community because he rebels against sanctioned norms.

Krishen’s staging of the work enlarged the concerns about what is involved in a contemporisation of the Self, when social expectations discourage an exploration of radical alternatives. These ideas were already present in the script, but Krishen’s interpretation dug further into the undercurrents of these tensions. By casting performer Khalid Salleh, who was

<sup>59</sup> Dinsman, ‘*Bukan Bunuh Diri*’ in *Bukan Bunuh Diri* by Dinsman, (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1975), 72.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Giorgio Agamben, ‘What is the Contemporary?’ in *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40-41.

unusual in both his artistic practice as well as social position, Krishen consciously pushed a boundary about how to depict a ‘scholarly’ and ‘religious’ person on stage. Khalid was not a known actor in Malay language theatre at the time.<sup>62</sup> He was however a member of an experimental and visual performing arts collective called the Anak Alam (Children of Nature), whose site-specific works were often raw, informal and spontaneous ‘happenings’ that challenged audiences to rethink their social and cultural ideas.<sup>63</sup> In addition he had been a traditional medicine seller, like Tok Perak, who used to peddle his wares on the streets of Kuala Lumpur. This is where Krishen first saw him in ‘performance’ and was interested by the prospect of drawing from this vocabulary of voice, gesture and movement to create a stylised enactment of Adam.<sup>64</sup> Therefore Khalid was something of a ‘wild card’ that represented the unconventional artist, located on the margins of the formal art world. He had never acted in a scripted play, and unlike most others Krishen had worked with thus far, he was not accustomed to performing on a conventional stage. This aspect of his persona corresponded with Adam, in that both actor and character were unusual within their cultural spheres. Krishen’s dramaturgical strategy was to draw on this reality to inflect the meanings of the script.

The performance embodied how social constructs become limiting when they do not admit interrogations of the norm, even within the allegedly avant-gardist frames of *teater kontemporari*. By drawing on Khalid’s experience and skills as a performance artist and street medicine-seller, Krishen experimented with depictions of a learned character that were raw and elemental, rather than cerebral and socially constructed. As such, difference as alterity and non-conformity were embodied in an unusual performance of visceral physical expressions and heightened performative energies. This enactment reworked stereotypical notions of the normative modern Malay, and Malaysian, which tended to veer towards an urbane image, physically contained and focussed primarily on logocentric notions of sophistication.

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<sup>62</sup> Khalid Salleh has since gone on to become a very well-known performer on stage and screen in Malay films and theatre performances. He has also written and directed plays in Malay.

<sup>63</sup> Krishen Jit, ‘No More Child’s Play, Anak Alam has Gone Formal,’ in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, ed. Kathy Rowland, (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003), 139-142. In the late 1970s Krishen wrote about Anak Alam as a having ‘accrued a special identity’ that made them ‘different from the rest of the theatre groups in the city, if not the country’ (139). One reason for this was that ‘theatre was only one of their many pursuits which included poetry, painting and music’ and another was their ‘casual, childlike approach to theatre’ (139).

<sup>64</sup> Information gained from recorded interview with theatre practitioner Janet Pillai, conducted by Charlene Rajendran, 2007.

Krishen's approach to staging the play was to initially devise a physical vocabulary with the actor, and then add on the spoken text as a further layer of dramatic meaning. Krishen wanted to draw from Khalid's experience as a performance artist and street medicine-seller, using his instincts and skills of engaging audiences that were not confined to usual theatre-making styles. It also incorporated the dynamics of a street medicine-seller, whose ability to draw customers relied on a strong capacity to elicit interest and captivate attention through an intensity and enlargement of physical and vocal energies. To do this Krishen forged a rehearsal process in which Khalid was encouraged to respond to the text through improvisations that empowered Khalid with his own somatic insights about ideas in the play. Khalid recounts how Krishen focused on 'exploring and excavating' (*mencari dan menggali*)<sup>65</sup> a range of physical actions that stemmed from the actor's body and memory, without referring to the text. These 'kinesic codes'<sup>66</sup> which were derived from gestures and expressions created by Khalid to embody the character, formed a cultural text that was particular to the performer and his cultural identity. The spoken text was engaged only when the actor was familiar with the inner rhythms and tensions of the character. The process was aimed at creating a portrayal of Adam that embodied the visceral physical energies of his dilemma, rather than be limited to the brooding cerebral tensions of the verbal text. Dinsman recalls Khalid's performance as powerful and engaging because the nuances of the text were embodied with depth and profundity, signalling that an 'excavation' of something deeply truthful about Adam's dilemma had been unearthed.<sup>67</sup> Khalid's presence as someone who was different, by virtue of his charismatic physical energy and vocally intense portrayal of Adam, revised notions of the physically contained and vocally reserved 'scholar' into a physically animated radical thinker.

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<sup>65</sup> Khalid Salleh, 'Bukan Bunuh Diri bersama Krishen' (Not Suicide with Krishen) in *Pentas*, Vol. 1, No. 4, (Kuala Lumpur: Istana Budaya, 2006), 12-13. This commemorative article by Khalid on working with Krishen, articulated the impact of his directorial approach in their only working collaboration. Khalid expressed his initial hesitation about performing in theatre, and articulated his value for Krishen's decision to draw from his extensive experience as a medicine seller who performed on the street, and his work with Anak Alam. This entailed spending many hours improvising and working with repetition, and in so doing developing a vocabulary of 'musing, blabbering, getting angry, becoming sad, being happy, laughing, jumping, running, walking, crying, fighting with an absent person, clowning, singing, doing acrobatics and many more' (*termenung, membebel, marah, sedih, gembira, ketawa, melompat, berlari, berjalan, menangis, berlawan dengagn seseorang yang tidak ada di hadapan mata, berjenaka, menyanyi, membuat gerak-gerak akrobatik dan berbagai-bagai lagi*) in order to cull a style that was physically expressive and emotionally true.

<sup>66</sup> Balme, *Decolonizing*, 221.

<sup>67</sup> Dinsman, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

This tension of being caught between contradictory forces of liberal enquiry and unquestioning acceptance was a quality of contemporariness that Krishen often articulated in his theatre. It also marked the transitions that engaged the imaginations of practitioners like playwright Dinsman in his engagement with *teater kontemporari*.<sup>68</sup> Having directed and performed the premier production of the play in 1975, Dinsman was also identified with the character Adam for his rebellious and irreverent articulations. Dinsman was himself a young scholar of religion, anthropology and sociology, who experienced the multi-directional pushes and pulls of his culture, and epitomised the ‘angry young man’ of his time. Dinsman also wrote, directed and performed in other plays that looked at themes of rebellion and non-conformity, such as *Jebat* (1973) and *Protes* (Protest, 1974). Krishen refers to Dinsman as a writer who ‘demonstrated a knack for making shocking and clever images on the stage’<sup>69</sup> and became ‘the only genuinely cult figure in Malaysian theatre’ because he ‘created a series of startling personas’ who ‘echoed a young generation, restive with traditional values but uncertain about the modern persuasion’.<sup>70</sup> There was a boldness, unafraid of censure by the state, that exemplified Dinsman’s theatre, and echoed what came to be associated as the ‘absurdist’ writers who, ‘freed of many rules that existed before the 1970s, have become unpredictable’.<sup>71</sup> This ‘restive’ quality prodded a capacity to take risks and confront the unease and anxiety that percolated among those who sought to become contemporary.

Hence this highly physical and heightened style of performance that Krishen explored in *Bukan Bunuh Diri* was a radical revision of the modern individual, as it underlined the instinctive dimensions of the human being, rather than prioritising materialistic and rationalist aspects. To enhance the attention to the body, the stage was kept completely bare - even though the script

<sup>68</sup> Others included Johan Jaafar, Hatta Azad Khan and Noordin Hassan, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>70</sup> Krishen, ‘Contemporary Malaysian,’ 56.

<sup>71</sup> Krishen Jit, ‘Absurd’ Theatre – A Yes and No’, in *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position*, ed. Kathy Rowland, (Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003), 146. Krishen questioned the assignment of ‘absurdism’ to writers such as Dinsman, Johan Jaafar and Hatta Azad Khan, asserting that it was a word ‘much abused in its cavalier usage’ (144). In his view the plays ‘did not adhere to basic absurd propositions’ (144) such as existentialism, positing instead the presence of God as an ‘anchor and navigating force’ (145). He argued that even though there were some techniques and images that linked with the Western absurdist, the ‘thinking most of them promote and the thematic and emotional thrust of their plays’ (144) was ‘far more optimistic about the future than that usually assumed by Beckett, Ionesco and the other well-known absurdist.’ (144). In Solehah, Ishak, *Protest (Modern Malaysian Drama): Dinsman – Hatta – Johan* (Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, 1992), xxx, a translated collection of Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan and Johan Jaafar’s plays, Solehah claims that ‘whatever the misgivings and despair’ felt by the playwrights, the ‘plays somehow end with hope and belief in their society’.

specifies the setting as inclusive of large piles of books all over the stage, with a very high pile in the middle, just below a noose that hangs from the ceiling. The noose was retained, and became more prominent as a symbol of religious and social constraint, rather than just a means to suicide. Khalid performed bare-bodied, wearing but a pair of trousers, to further underline the baring of the persona in the process of unravelling questions and confronting obsessions with truth. In this manner Krishen reinterpreted the play to symbolise how pursuits of inner truth through a process of intense questioning, required an openness to being ‘stripped’ of conventions and ‘laid bare’ on stage. This also aligned with the intent expressed by Krishen and other theatre practitioners in the essay written for the National Culture Congress, to develop a *teater rakyat* that drew from the quotidian vocabularies of the street, as discussed earlier in the chapter. The push to strengthen artistic roots based on everyday interactions, rather than codes of custom, convention and formal practices of tradition, was aimed at legitimising ordinary life as part of an egalitarian politic.

In his direction of *Bukan Bunuh Diri*, Krishen staged difference within the Malay community as symbolic of ideological multiplicity within Malaysian society. Khalid occupied a marginal position in society as an unconventional Malay-Muslim, willing to be a medicine-seller despite it being an aspect of folk culture that was increasingly frowned upon by Muslims seeking to purge their practice of Islamic practices that were regarded as un-Quranic. However he was also someone who could be seen as modern in his capacity as an alternative artist, whose individuality and questioning of classical mores of art making made him willing to challenge the establishment and sites of authority. Hence his playing the role of Adam conflated the restive probings of the learned scholar with the radical urban artist, to suggest that a challenge of authority, whether religious, social or artistic, was entailed in a process of contemporariness. Difference as alterity and deviation from the norm, was a characteristic of any deep encounter with new ways of being Malaysian – a quality that society needed to embrace in order to move on to less exclusionary frames for becoming modern and multicultural.

In the 1970s, the Malaysian state’s drive to elevate and endorse Malay language and culture as central to national identity, as articulated in the National Culture Policy, led to questions about what it meant to cultivate a process of becoming Malaysian that was modern and multicultural. How could non-Malays participate in forging a national culture that was primarily linked to an exclusive space in which their histories and traditions were not represented?

Krishen's attempts to introduce staging approaches that could enlarge the frames of what was 'Malay' as being symbolic of what was 'Malaysian' were evident in his casting of non-Malay actors as Malay characters, and interrogating settled assumptions of what was 'Malay' to suggest that it too could be reinvented to include marginalised aspects of behaviour and ideology. Audiences were pushed to view theatre as a site for reconstructions of identity, rather than just reiterations of the norm. Hence notions of Selves and Others were seen to have porous boundaries, and cultures were staged as open to reconfiguration – even if this was more an exception than a norm in Malay language theatre.

The intent was also to express the dynamics of 'transition' that characterised what Krishen saw as the 'cusp' of rapid reinvention being experienced at the time.<sup>72</sup> The push to become modern impacted on a sense of the traditional, and frames of culture were pushed to accommodate these shifts. The contradictions of being 'untimely' by questioning normative expectations and resisting imposed conventions of belief, often led to 'disjunction' and 'anachronism' that complicated the meanings of culture.<sup>73</sup> This process also disrupted unitary and singular constructs of culture, making the performance of characters such as Tok Perak and Adam expressions of the rebellion and idiosyncrasy that roughened the allegedly smooth surfaces of community and society. Their stubborn conviction in the value of choice and individualism challenged notions of stipulated customs, and pushed for flexible options that allowed for unpredictability and persistent flux. Thus even the prescribed official category of 'Malay', like 'Malaysian', needed to be seen as a negotiation of difference.

Krishen's participation as a non-Malay director in *teater kontemporari* was significant because it symbolised a critical openness to difference within a largely Malay-dominated sphere. However, this shared effort to broaden notions of Malay-ness was short-lived, as by the late 1970s there was a growing Malay nativism and Krishen's participation in Malay language theatre was questioned. Despite his fluency in the language and commitment to developing indigenous Malaysian theatre, he was regarded by some as an 'outsider' whose credibility was disputed. In 1979 Krishen was appointed Artistic Director of a retrospective of nine modern Malay plays to celebrate the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Malay Studies Department of the University

<sup>72</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003. Also quoted earlier in this chapter.

<sup>73</sup> Agamben, 'What is' 40-41, examines 'disjunction' and 'anachronism' as aspects of the 'untimely' that pertain to the 'contemporary', as discussed earlier in Chapter One.

of Malaya. Soon after this, several anonymous letters were circulated to question this appointment, alleging that since he was not Malay he was unfit for the task. Krishen responded to ‘the accusations that I was not qualified culturally because I was not Malay’<sup>74</sup> by realising the limitations of working in Malay language theatre, which was burdened with having to be representative of a narrow nationalist identity. Having participated in a more colonial theatre scene in the 1950s and 1960s, and thus experienced the exclusionary practices of being Other-ed in those terrains, Krishen was once again faced with his racial difference as a barrier to inclusivity and acceptance. Thus Krishen revised his earlier decision to only make Malay language theatre, and moved back to English language theatre – with the intent to participate in a more neutral and inclusive domain, that would allow for more pluralistic stagings of contemporary Malaysian identity. This can be read as his unwillingness to continue being aligned with a state-led push to impose limits on what was central to being Malaysian. Having begun to experiment with possibilities of reworking the fixity of essentialised cultural boundaries in the 1970s, Krishen’s politics of theatre went on to initiate ways of performing multi-cultural texts across and between frames of identity in the 1980s.

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<sup>74</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003.



### Chapter 3

## Expanding Frames for Malaysian Culture in the 1980s: Multi-cultural Texts

It is not right to abandon part of our history, which is English....I wanted to show a sense of what it was like living here, what is happening here [in Malaysia]. A sense of difference between what is official, what is public, what is private, what is alternative.<sup>1</sup>

The move to recognise English as an important part of Malaysian history, and thus a valid aspect of ‘what is happening here,’ was a major shift in Krishen’s theatre in the 1980s, and one that reflected the larger forces of modernization in society as well. Malaysia in the 1980s witnessed the liberalization of the economy, an enlargement of investment opportunity, expanding industrialization and increasing urbanisation. This created new questions about what was contemporary, as culture and identity were pushed to balance many divergent influences from within and beyond the national boundary. The task of dealing with multiple forces of change simultaneously, while trying to sustain cultural particularity, produced a greater awareness of difference as an important dynamic in modern society. Krishen’s theatre reflected this ethos by engaging with the politics of postcolonial reinventions of national identity, staging the local as a mix of Western and Asian influences, particularly in relation to the reclamation of English as a Malaysian language. He focused on locally written English language scripts that juxtaposed and collaged local elements of culture in content and style. This resulted in a broader experimentation with staging approaches, using different cultural vocabularies and forms to develop new indigenous forms of Malaysian theatre. There was a concerted effort to ‘show a sense of what it was like living here’ and ‘a sense of difference’ that represented often neglected cultures in Malaysian society.

I argue that Krishen’s achievement during this phase of his theatre-making was his attention to how English language theatre could initiate an alternative multiculturalism, by connecting rooted histories with a pluralistic sense of the contemporary. He also dealt with differences between social, ideological and cultural spheres, increasingly prevalent in urban

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<sup>1</sup> Krishen, quoted in Jhybe, ‘The Art of Being Krishen,’ *New Straits Times*, August 22, 2001. Krishen made this statement in response to questions about his work in the 1980s, and the shift he made from Malay language theatre, where he felt there was ‘a self-denying atmosphere’ which led to theatre ‘turning into itself’.

society, which had to balance the forces of modernization, westernization, as well as localization. The ‘sense of difference’ that existed between varied perspectives - official and unofficial, mainstream and alternative, public and private - gained prominence in his work and was reflected in the multi-cultural texts that represented heterogeneous value systems and cultural practices that were inherent to being Malaysian.

In this chapter I argue that Krishen’s choice to move back to English language theatre in the 1980s, having spent approximately ten years doing only Malay language theatre, was critical to his developing ways of staging a more multi-cultural vision of Malaysian culture, as he was no longer constrained by a Malay-centric cultural domain. This was an important shift towards creating the alternative multiculturalism in theatre that marks his achievement as a Malaysian theatre director. He explored urban, modern and mixed Malaysian cultures as they were emerging in a modernising society, and grappled with how to depict the tensions that surfaced through these changes. Perceptions of Selves and Others were being modified by shifting power relations and revisions of cultural positions in relation to race. While there was less anxiety among Malays about the socio-economic position of the Malays compared to the 1970s, there was growing resentment among non-Malays about the privileging of Malay identity. Krishen’s theatre was thus part of an effort to examine these conflicts of racialised politics, and critique the reductive discourses that perpetuated essentialist identities. English language theatre provided a ‘neutral’ terrain in which to engage, as English was the only non-racialised language in the Malaysian context. Thus issues of race could be questioned and the discourses critiqued with less sensitivity and censure, even though this also meant being limited to the urban and educated upper- and middle-classes. Furthermore some playwrights writing in English had begun to ‘Malaysianise’ the language by indigenizing its rhythms and nuances with local inflections, words and syntaxes. Thus when Krishen collaborated with these writers, he sought to stage their scripts in ways that expressed a ‘sense of what was happening’ through staging approaches that translated the politics of these ideas onto stage. The variegated sense of Malaysian identity became more overt in his interpretations of text, and Krishen used the multi-dimensionality of theatre to explore how pluralistic layers of interpretation could generate integrative imaginings of contemporary culture. These interpellations of the modern and traditional through spoken, sonic and movement texts, expressed a sense of how socio-political change in society contributed to aesthetic reinventions of culture on stage.

The chapter first looks at the socio-political climate of the 1980s, and the rapid changes that took place as a result of the new leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, who focused on economic growth, industrialisation and urbanization in his effort to modernize the nation. It discusses how the tensions of cultural difference became more complex, despite a shift towards socio-economic liberalism, as there was a parallel move towards religious conservatism and racial chauvinism among the Malays. This fuelled a desire among non-Malays for an increase in cultural and political representation. The increased confidence in society, after recovering from the trauma of May 1969, allowed for bolder assertions of non-Malay cultures to be accommodated and recognised. As a result more space was created for articulations of Malaysian multiplicity. I then argue how experimental English language theatre responded to this context and initiated indigenous forms for performing these ideas. Krishen's theatre became more assertive about the need for non-Malay cultures to be articulated as integral to Malaysian contemporariness, through indigenised and modernised approaches, that were similar to those he had developed in *teater kontemporari*. He focused on physical stylization and developing non-verbal layers of performative texts, to expand scripted meanings and create more dialogical processes of performing and viewing theatre. Thus his work continued to examine the permeability of cultural boundaries, but in relation to the interweaving of diverse cultural elements. When different cultural references were conflated and performed as inter-related fusions, the divides were blurred between one culture and another. This directorial approach was part of his critique of the continued cultural polarisation by the state, and an increasing totalitarianism in executions of power. I contend that Krishen's ability to dramatise the politics of multiplicity and stage aesthetic experimentations of cultural difference, was particularly evident in two productions in the 1980s that I will analyse in detail, namely *The Cord* by K.S. Maniam in 1984,<sup>2</sup> and *1984: Here and Now* by Kee Thuan Chye in 1985.

### Negotiating Modernisation and Tensions of Multiplicity

The 1980s was a time of increased confidence in Malaysia, as the nation moved from the confusion and anxieties of the post-1969 period to embrace the drive towards material

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<sup>2</sup> *The Cord* was produced in 1984, and then restaged in 1986 for performances in Singapore. Krishen also directed the play in 1994, when I was part of the production, playing the role of Kali/Lakshmi. As there are no video recordings of the 1984 and 1986 production, I have based my analysis on interviews, reviews and published articles about the production. I have also made links with the 1994 production.

modernization, economic development and technological progress led by Prime Minister Mahathir. However these shifts also created new pressures about how to advance inter-racial relations and democratise the politics of being Malaysian. Despite the increased prosperity that came with augmented international trade and investment, the issues of differentiated political position, social acceptance and cultural belonging continued to afflict Malaysians who felt marginalised by their lack of agency and entitlement. Negotiating between conservative and liberal, traditional and modern, mainstream and alternative also demanded an acute capacity to rethink norms and be open to ways of reviewing culture. A ‘politics of recognition’ that was able to deal with concerns of equity, individuality and a secure space for dialogical participation<sup>3</sup> was increasingly needed, and yet there was little opportunity to advance these ideals of an egalitarian society. This section looks at how the new leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir generated a burgeoning modernization and liberalism, alongside a growing conservatism. I argue that this inherent contradiction produced a new propensity, as well as urgency, to confront issues of cultural difference in Malaysian society. This was the landscape in which Krishen’s theatre intervened to propose alternative imaginings of community, that critiqued the hegemony and thus resisted prescribed notions of ‘what was happening’ and ‘what it was like to live’ in Malaysia, primarily from the perspectives of those on the margins of society.

The appointment of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad as the new Prime Minister of Malaysia in 1981 was to have far reaching consequences on the development of the nation, as will be seen in this and following chapters. Mahathir gained a reputation for his relentless implementation of change, geared towards transforming the nation from being primarily focused on agriculture to a diversified economy with burgeoning opportunities for manufacturing, technology and knowledge-based industries. Within Malaysia he was accorded the title of *Bapa Pemodenan* or Father of Modernisation, for his role in propelling infrastructural developments that led to an

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<sup>3</sup> Charles Taylor, ‘The Politics of Recognition,’ in *Multiculturalism: Examining the Politics of Recognition* ed. Amy Gutmann (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1994), 25-74. Taylor posits a ‘politics of recognition’ in multicultural societies, where even if the principle of equity is refuted, mutual respect across lines of difference is advocated. He thus asserts a need for ‘reciprocal recognition among equals’ before a ‘principle of universal equality’ can be achieved. (39). Issues of individual vs. collective identities also become a point of contention as the community may hinder personal autonomy. Hence Taylor argues that a dialogical character of identity that enjoys a safe space to ‘converse’, ‘exchange’ and even ‘struggle’ with issues of culture, is crucial to advancing a society of cohesion and confidence. (32-4). However in the Malaysian context, where racialised policies of affirmative action and political privilege create deep divides, it is difficult to encourage ‘reciprocal recognition among equals’, and thus ‘recognition’ continues to be a struggle for those in officially designated peripheral positions.

export-oriented economy.<sup>4</sup> Further afield he was also noted for being a champion of the Third World, who advocated indigenous approaches to modernization in his bid to resist western domination and raise the profile of Asian-based models instead. His 'Buy British Last' and 'Look East' policies in the 1980s extolled Japan and South Korea as hallmarks of Asian innovation and success. These policies were geared towards showing that an emulation of the West was no longer needed, and it was time to shift attention to the 'economic miracles' of the East. In addition Mahathir believed that 'their [Japanese and South Korean] moral and cultural pillars: a strong work ethic, worthy Eastern values, a capacity for learning, courage to compete, self-reliance, and national pride', were more valuable as examples for Malaysia to emulate in its own creation of an indigenous modernity.<sup>5</sup> This can be seen as a radical move to urge Malaysians to look beyond narrow nationalist notions of identity and adopt values that were embedded in cultures of the East. Ironically these values were also associated with Chinese migrants, who tended to be demonized by Malay nationalists for supposedly dominating the Malaysian economy.

The need to rework attitudes and reinvent culture to meet the demands of modernity was a strong concern during the Mahathir era, as there were simultaneous pressures from conservative segments of the populace to resist these processes of change. In particular an Islamic resurgence, a ripple effect of the Iranian Revolution in 1979, led to a rise in religious extremism. This perpetuated notions that Islam was incompatible with modern education, material affluence and secular technology. As a result the Malay populace, particularly those in rural areas, were confronted with the tensions of being located between a strong economic and social drive towards embracing modernization, and a religious and moral imperative to remain loyal to traditional ways of life by resisting liberal changes. The Islamic opposition party Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS), was seen as a supporter of a more radical and less corrupt Islam, which attracted rural and conservative Malays who were often conflicted about becoming urban and veering away from conventional lifestyles. As a result, Mahathir had to attend to the insecurities of the Malay populace by not only ensuring the growth of their socio-economic capacity, but also convincing them of the possibility of modernizing without threatening the purity or authenticity of cultural and religious identity. This was necessary to

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<sup>4</sup> Cheah Boon Kheng, *Malaysia: The Making of a Nation* (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2002), 189.

<sup>5</sup> Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism* (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), 68.

consolidate the Malay vote, which was split among the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), the Malay-led ruling party, and PAS. To counter this political ‘threat’ he implemented policies of Islamization that would reframe UMNO as the legitimate party of the Malays, in all aspects including religion.<sup>6</sup> His incorporation in 1982 of the spirited youth movement leader, Anwar Ibrahim, can be seen as a strategic move to make UMNO important as a religious defender for the Malays, as much as their political champion. This is because Anwar was at the time the head of the Angkatan Belia Islam Muda (Islamic Youth Force of Malaysia or ABIM), a non-partisan organization ‘committed to an activist, reformist Islam’ which was ‘strongly critical of corruption and social injustice and openly critical of UMNO and the government it led’.<sup>7</sup> Thus his recruitment into UMNO gave credence to UMNO’s intent to change and focus more consciously on religious matters as well. Economic, social and material modernisation was thus mediated by an emphasis on ethno-religious priorities to curb secularization and deracination.

This ongoing paradox between a liberal and conservative stance was something that marked Mahathir’s leadership in the 1980s, and impacted the developments of cultural identity and social cohesion<sup>8</sup>. His early years are seen as a liberal phase that emphasised economic and social reforms, enlarging investment and financial opportunity while advocating work attitudes of being ‘clean, efficient and trustworthy’ (*Bersih, Cekap dan Amanah*). This was followed by an authoritarian phase when he clamped down on rising political dissent and civil rights movements, most overtly in what is now called Operation Lallang in 1987. During this widespread sweep, more than a hundred individuals from diverse organizations and political groups were arrested and detained under the Internal Security Act, which allows for detention without trial.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Mahathir’s strong attacks on the judiciary when it opposed his views, such as when he enforced amendments to the Constitution that led to a loss of its independence from the executive, reinforced a growing authoritarianism. This effectively curtailed civil liberties and the space for political disagreement. The repressive measures taken during this phase were primarily to silence his critics, and get rid of opponents whom he saw as a threat to

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<sup>6</sup> See Khoo, *Paradoxes*, 163 -181 for further discussion of what Khoo terms ‘Mahathir’s Islam’.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 160.

<sup>8</sup> See Cheah, *Malaysia*, 205-219. Cheah points out that Mahathir’s ‘open and liberal’ phase of administration lasted from 1981 till 1988, and ‘constrasted sharply’ with his ‘authoritarian’ phase between 1988 and 2001.

<sup>9</sup> See Kua Kia Soong, *The Malaysian Civil Rights Movement*, (Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information Research Development, 2005), 89-102.

his position. This was an aspect of Mahathir's leadership that contributed to his becoming known as a totalitarian leader.

Thus the ongoing contradictions of being modern and Malaysian entailed having to balance opposing pulls. This meant being able to assert positions of power assigned and accorded by the state, while admitting to a corresponding powerlessness that was imminent in the face of a shrinking democratic space. While non-Malays had to negotiate their constitutional status as peripheral in comparison to Malays, they were also prodded by the new climate of an increased liberalism which produced an assertion of dissenting views, even if it was sometimes followed by escalating censure. This led to new initiatives about the right to cultural representation with which to engage the state, alongside a willingness to risk retaliation in order to lobby for the right to enlarge the non-Malay cultural presence. At the centre of this process was dissatisfaction with the National Culture Policy that had been created in the 1970s, as discussed in the previous chapter.

While the 1970s had been dedicated to rebuilding the morale of the Malays through the state's endorsement of Malay special rights, culture and language, the following decade witnessed a corresponding will among Chinese and Indians to demand greater equity and assert a need for recognition. Controversial decisions by the state in the early 1980s, such as the restriction of lion dance performances (a Chinese traditional dance often performed on auspicious occasions), and the subsequent rejection of the Merdeka University proposal to set up a Chinese-language tertiary-level education institution, prodded the Chinese community to come together and assert their right to sustain the practice of their cultural customs, and gather support for advancing their socio-economic mobility.<sup>10</sup> On March 27, 1983, the major Malaysian Chinese associations organized a Cultural Congress in Penang to unanimously accept a Joint Memorandum on National Culture that had been drafted by Dong Jiao Zong (United Chinese School Committees Association of Malaysia) and the Selangor Chinese Assembly Hall, established Chinese organisations that lobbied for cultural recognition.<sup>11</sup> The document 'totally rejected the national cultural policy and provided a multi-cultural alternative as the way

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<sup>10</sup> See Tan Sooi Beng, 'Counterpoints in the Performing Arts,' in *Fragmented Vision: Culture and Politics in Contemporary Malaysia*, ed. Joel S. Kahn and Francis Loh Kok Wah (Sydney: Allen & Unwin Pty Ltd, 1992), 288-291, for discussion on the efforts of Chinese cultural groups to sustain and indigenize Chinese culture in the 1980s.

<sup>11</sup> Kua, *Malaysian Civil Rights*, 29.



forward'.<sup>12</sup> This was met with little support from the government, and perhaps even perpetuated a form of censure that was noted as the rise of an 'intolerant attitude of government officials toward the cultural activities of the non-Malays'.<sup>13</sup>

Nonetheless this process of demanding more recognition of non-Malay cultures gained momentum, as the Indian community also saw the need to make their discontent with Malay cultural hegemony known. On May 27, 1984, the first Malaysian Indian Cultural Congress was held to advocate the idea that national culture should 'evolve through the natural process of interaction and interchange among the cultures of the various races and not through domination by a majority group'.<sup>14</sup> Here again the resentment towards the state for neglecting non-Malay cultures was made evident, and the question of how to manage cultural difference in ways that assured all communities of security and recognition became pertinent. It also pointed to a new spirit of resistance among non-Malays, unwilling to be treated as citizens without a voice, and for whom cultural representation, not just economic status, had become important to a sense of dignity and respect. As Kua notes, the 'national culture controversy continued throughout the Eighties with various educational and religious issues erupting and causing grave effects on inter-cultural understanding'.<sup>15</sup>

Yet while these incidents were evidence of a growing contestation of the Malay hegemony, pushing for more integrative and pluralistic approaches to culture, they still operated within essentialised frames of Malay, Chinese and Indian racial constructs. There was little coming together across cultural boundaries, as political parties in the ruling coalition *and* the opposition were still largely associated with racial groups. As a result, Malaysian modernity on an official and political level, was still inflected by issues of cultural segregation and polarization in terms of personal *and* community life. Even though professional spheres, especially in urban centres, became increasingly secularized and deracinated by adopting westernised modes of behaviour and identity in the public and corporate workspace, there was still a preoccupation with what it meant to be Malay, Chinese and Indian in private and domestic spheres. Relatively little effort was made to attend to the mix being Malaysian.

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 31.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 34.

With this in mind, it is important to note why English language theatre became a site for articulating a multi-cultural perspective that performed the dynamics of racial interaction in Malaysian society. By the 1980s English was little regarded as a colonial language and largely associated with global business and urban modernization. Unlike Malay, English was not the bearer of national or racial identity. Malay had by this time been securely established as the language of governance and the primary medium of instruction in education, such that there was less insecurity among Malays about its position in society. Chinese and Indian languages were mainly seen as vernacular mother-tongues that sustained cultural identity, and were spoken by those who belonged to the respective ethnic groups. Thus English was effectively the only non-racial or ‘racially neutral’<sup>16</sup> language in the Malaysian context, making it less burdened with cultural baggage. This encouraged greater flexibility with language use, as adaptations of language were not seen as threatening to cultural identity for any particular group. In addition, English language theatre practitioners and audiences were often urban, educated and from a diversity of backgrounds that reflected the racial diversity in society. This meant they had greater liberty to comment on and respond to cultural issues without having to champion dominant views about race in their imaginings of the Malaysian community.

In this vein, Krishen’s work in English language theatre in the 1980s was marked by a commitment to staging what it meant to localize urban and educated cultural domains that were simultaneously influenced by westernized mores as well as rooted histories and indigeneity. His work also expressed the challenges of being on the political periphery, whether as non-Malays or liberal Malays, and questioned what it meant to belong to Malaysian society. The question of how to generate aesthetic frames that would resonate and communicate these ideas effectively was complex, as efforts to contemporize theatre were invariably linked to the relationship of content and form. How English language theatre in Malaysia embraced this challenge will be discussed in the next section.

### **Localising Contemporary English Language Theatre**

MUTHIAH: What are you saying? Speaking English?

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<sup>16</sup>Jacqueline Lo, *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore*. (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 35.

RATNAM: The language you tried to teach me so many years ago. The language you still think is full of pride. The language that makes you a stiff, white corpse like this!

MUTHIAH: But you are nothing. I'm still boss here.

RATNAM: You try so hard. Like you tried to teach me that language. Everything happens naturally. Now the language is spoke like I can speak it. (*He goes into pidgin English.*) 'You want go *jamban*<sup>17</sup>, not 'Could you show me the bathroom, please!' You can talk to me in the language we all know. I can speak real-life English now.<sup>18</sup>

English language theatre in the 1980s experimented widely with ways of indigenizing content and form by incorporating elements of local culture in both scripting and staging choices. This approach towards decolonising theatre, most evident in Malay theatre's *teater kontempori* in the 1970s, had begun in English language theatre in the 1960s but became prominent only in the 1980s. More writers sought to Malaysianise their scripts by using local stories and creating versions of English that went beyond formal and standard usage to reflect local rhythms and nuances of spoken Malaysian English. This 'discrepant Anglo-Asian multiculture'<sup>19</sup> also led to experimentations that wove local cultural performance forms with western modes of theatre, reflecting the diverse cultures and influences that prevailed in Malaysian society. This section argues that changes in English language theatre pushed the boundaries of modern multi-cultural theatre by suggesting ideas for a 'national culture' that was not tied to a single race, but made up of multiple imaginings of contemporary Malaysia. It also devised innovative ways of embodying these ideas through verbal and non-verbal texts, layering the meanings that were created. The section will then consider how these developments in English language theatre enabled Krishen to expand his directorial vision of cultural difference, as the climate of questioning about what it meant to be modern and multicultural in Malaysian society extended beyond racial boundaries. The sense of growing interest in the importance of cultural recognition, particularly among marginalized and non-Malay Malaysians, meant that challenges to authority were not just political but cultural, social and aesthetic as well. In effect the courage to 'speak real-life English' in situations where it was not sanctioned, as the character Ratnam did, was symbolic of validating the situatedness, immediacy and grit of 'real-life' cultures. Cultural mixing that produced 'pidginised' vocabularies of performance was a significant part of the experimental

<sup>17</sup> 'Jamban' is the colloquial Malay word for toilet.

<sup>18</sup> K.S. Maniam, *The Cord*, (Kuala Lumpur: Aspatra Quest Publishers Sdn. Bhd., 1983), 33.

<sup>19</sup> C.J. W-L Wee, 'The Indigenized West in Asian Multicultures,' *Interventions* 10:2 (2008): 204.

process. Krishen's theatre contributed to this diversity and enlargement by pushing the limits of how to perform localized variations of Malaysian languages, and forge a multi-cultural English language theatre that proposed an alternative 'national culture' as well.

The initial moves towards making English language theatre a space for contemporary Malaysian cultures to be articulated, reflected on and interrogated took place in the 1960s. Malaysian writers such as Edward Dorall, Lee Joo For and Patrick Yeoh had begun to explore the use of Malaysian idioms and cadences in their scripts, which were mainly about local characters located at the crossroads of change. As Rowland points out the 'use of Malaysian English on stage was an acknowledgement of the validity of the local patois, as opposed to the practice of "standard" English'.<sup>20</sup> This marked a process of legitimising local spoken forms of language in scripted plays, when the common practice assumed conformity with formal rules and standards for speaking and writing English. The language of Dorall's play *A Tiger is Loose in Our Community* (1967) was described by literary scholar Lloyd Fernando as 'the fragmentary speech which can be heard throughout Malaysia as a self-sufficient dramatic instrument'.<sup>21</sup> To consciously adopt this form of 'fragmentary speech' was again to prioritise that which was lived and experienced in everyday life, rather than valorize the colonial canon and western repertory as the primary resource of English language theatre in Malaysia – a form of *teater rakyat* in English.<sup>22</sup> As literary critic Margaret Yong points out in her article 'Malaysian Drama in English',<sup>23</sup> efforts to 'Malaysianize' and 'discover a Malaysian voice in theatre in English'<sup>24</sup> were geared towards finding a 'coherent expression for its sense of the multi-cultural ethos in which it operated'.<sup>25</sup> This area of artistic enterprise 'began as a drama without local roots in the region's theatrical traditions'<sup>26</sup> and was thus 'post-colonial' in its aspirations to assert politically independent yet culturally valid standpoints. It was in this regard a modernizing of theatre, by

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<sup>20</sup> Kathy Rowland, 'The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999' (MA diss., National University of Singapore, 2004), 34.

<sup>21</sup> Lloyd Fernando, quoted in Rowland, 'Politics of Drama', 34

<sup>22</sup> English language theatre in Malaysia is admittedly a legacy of British colonialism, and thus the shifts to decolonize were more complex than those in Malay language theatre, because apart from language use, there were also prevailing attitudes about what constituted good theatre, and why plays written in 'proper' English qualified for this standard. As noted in Chapter One, this was something Syed Alwi and K. Das from the MATG had also set out to accomplish. See Rowland, 'Politics of Drama', 31-36.

<sup>23</sup> Margaret Yong, 'Malaysian Drama in English: Is there a Case for a Post-Mortem?' *Theatre Research International* (1983) 8: 234-246.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 240.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 236.

producing a rupture with the colonial past. But it was simultaneously a contemporary effort to seek out links with alternative pasts that offered more rooted frames through which to negotiate the present.

Theatre companies such as Phoenix 61 and the Kuala Lumpur Theatre Club (KLTC), prioritized syncretic approaches to theatre by incorporating traditional cultural elements in performance. Their attempts to explore ways of localizing English language theatre focused on staging fewer plays from the Western canon and choosing more Asian and African plays.<sup>27</sup> These texts often focused on indigenous histories and forms which pushed for an acknowledgement of modern English language theatre as constituted of multiple influences and varied histories of identity. Yet the task of depicting this complex collage of influences and dimensions was an intricate challenge. It required an ability to create connections between disparate dimensions of cultural representation in order to apprehend them as inter-related.

Playwright-director Chin San Sooi was one of the pioneers of experimental English language theatre, who incorporated local traditions and Asian legends into contemporary Malaysian performance. In 1974 he collaborated with *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) puppeteer Mutalib Hussain to form a contemporary group called Kelana Phoenix,<sup>28</sup> which enabled him to integrate an unscripted traditional Malay performance form into scripted English language drama. His theatre group, Phoenix 61, went on to use elements of *wayang kulit* together with Chinese Opera when it staged *Lady White*, an adaptation of the Chinese legend of Lady White Snake, written and directed by Chin in 1977. Chin's approach to indigenizing English language theatre was to develop opportunities for 'experimentation with and incorporation of traditional forms drawn from the richly varied cultural heritage of Malaysia's multi-ethnic populace'.<sup>29</sup> In his view this would 'lead to the evolution of a uniquely Malaysian modern theatre'.<sup>30</sup> He brought together Chinese and Malay traditional forms within modern English language texts to suggest

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<sup>27</sup> Phoenix 61, led by Chin San Sooi, staged *Gbana Bendu*, an African play by Pat Amady Maddy in 1976 and *The Battles of Coxinga*, a Japanese Bunraku play by Chakamatsu Monsaemon translated by Donald Keene, in 1979. The KLTC, led by Vijaya Samarawickrama and Mustapha Noor, also performed Asian plays such as Filipino playwright Amador Daquilo's *Wedding Dance* in 1975 and in 1980, *Perhiasan Kaca*, a Malay translation of Tennessee Williams' *Glass Menagerie*.

<sup>28</sup> 'Kelana' is the Malay word for traveler or wanderer, which can also refer to a man from ancient times. The Phoenix is a fictitious creature, regarded as highly auspicious in Chinese culture, and rarely found in Malay culture. However the Phoenix is also a signature motif of the Chinese Peranakans who symbolise an assimilation of Chinese and Malay cultures. Hence the idea of joining the Kelana and Phoenix points to an aspiration for cultural interactions that allow for mixing and integration that nonetheless sustain a historicity as well.

<sup>29</sup> Kee Thuan Chye, 'Supreme Optimist of the Stage,' (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1980), 37.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

ways of integrating cultural practices, without losing their particularity. Yet he was conscious that the ‘influences [of traditional forms] must be integrated with modern forms in ways that effect new and enhanced modes of expression’.<sup>31</sup> Otherwise the juxtaposition and experimentation would occur without critical reinvention.

The aim to rework English as a Malaysian language that could reflect the diversity of society was also an important move to assert a more modern, mixed and urban everyday reality that reflected English-speaking Malaysians who were not as strongly tied to their sense of racial identity as perhaps to their social and linguistic profile.<sup>32</sup> Most urban Malaysians speak at least two languages. They also move between a range of cultural spheres that use language differently, and thus have grown accustomed to being located between varied cultures rather than securely entrenched in only one. Playwrights such as K.S. Maniam, Kee Thuan Chye and Leow Puay Tin, whose works first became prominent in the 1980s, created scripts that drew heavily from their own experience as urban Malaysians who questioned the aspirations of becoming modern, while remaining rooted to a situated past. Their histories ranged from growing up in rural and small towns, to big city contexts where varied degrees of cultural plurality informed their experience. Yet cultural difference, whether racial, class-based, gendered or ideological, was a critical dimension of the conflict and tension in the drama of their plays, and this reiterated the necessity of recognizing multiplicity as inherent to modernizing Malaysian identities.<sup>33</sup> Their plays often included aspects of ritualistic or traditional performance vocabularies to infuse the staging with heterogenous cultural imaginings, and thus embodied the interplay of difference. Building on the earlier works of practitioners such as Chin, they also pushed for the language to reflect the poetic references and symbolisms in the story, as will be seen later in this chapter.

These attempts to make English language theatre contemporary and distinctly Malaysian were also attempts to resist a singularly nationalist Malay-centric identity that tended to disqualify expressions of identity outside a limited boundary. Theatre scholar Jacqueline Lo has

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Susan Philip, ‘Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia,’ (Unpublished PhD dissertation: Australian National University, 2005), 32-37, discusses how Malaysians who choose to write in English often occupy ‘an “in-between” position’ as they are ‘less sanguine about the cultural roots assigned to them by public policy’ and are thus willing to ‘question imposed racial and cultural identities’. As a result there is a greater acknowledgement of cultural hybridity and the possibility of ‘border-crossings which would be difficult or impossible with other languages’.

<sup>33</sup> While gender differences can be seen as an implied dimension of many of these works, it was most evident in Leow’s writing, with an emphasis on the woman’s voices, and female characters in her plays. This will be examined further in Chapter Four.

pointed to the work of Maniam and Kee as part of a ‘politicised theatrical renaissance in the mid-1980s’<sup>34</sup> in which the National Culture Policy was contested and shown to be ‘a formalized political discourse that attempts to impose specific ideological constraints on the process of representation and identification’, but ‘should not be confused with the desires of the people’.<sup>35</sup> Thus ‘competing ideologies’<sup>36</sup> which contested the hegemony continued to emerge even if in marginalized spheres, and gave voice to alternative perspectives of contemporary Malaysian identity. Lo comments on how the state regarded the National Theatre much like its National Literature, relegating all non-Malay literatures as ‘Sectional Literature’ and thus unsuited to a central imagining of Malaysian culture.<sup>37</sup> Yet a ‘combative sensibility’<sup>38</sup> in English language theatre, willing to assert a broad diversity of cultures and languages as valid in the Malaysian context, produced a revitalization of English language theatre. Alternative representations of what it meant to be Malaysian, endorsed the idea that an indigenized urban sensibility was becoming more prominent as well as popular.

In Krishen’s view,

If the prevailing trend [towards indigenizing English language theatre] holds, we might soon witness a full-fledged revival of home-grown dramas in the English language. The future plans of some influential theatre groups working in the English language disclose a new-found confidence in the worth of local plays.... It has something to do with the new place of English in the national consciousness.... The battle for the national language has been fought and won, and English no longer threatens the paramouncy of *Bahasa Malaysia* [Malaysian Language, Malay].<sup>39</sup>

This ‘new-found confidence in the worth of local plays’ indicated a growing desire to support and embrace what was Malaysian within English language theatre, and thus support the trend towards nurturing ‘home-grown’ rather than imported theatre. So even as the nation modernised by seeking to export its produce, so too did English language theatre produce more ‘local goods’ that were made up of a ‘mix’ of local materials.

Krishen’s theatre staged locally written scripts in ways that emphasised the multiplicity in society, drawing on the way these plays dealt with issues of difference. To embody and

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<sup>34</sup> Lo, *Staging Nation*, 5.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>39</sup> Krishen Jit, ‘The English-Language Drama,’ *New Straits Times*, October 13, 1985.



perform the kinds of issues that were being explored it was necessary to move away from merely text-based interpretations, and include non-verbal responses such as movement and sound texts that inflected the meaning of the spoken text *and* the performing body. This shift also staged the politics of difference for it to be experienced through multi-dimensional means. Hence his experimentations began to take on inter-disciplinary approaches. To do this he began working with dancer-choreographers, musician-composers and visual artists to develop multi-layered stagings for performance. This opened up possibilities for viewing culture as a collage of multiple vocabularies and diverse influences, and engaged audiences in ‘watching’ theatre as an active process that was ‘committed to the way of choice’<sup>40</sup> rather than to the assumed interpretations of meaning. How audiences ‘saw’ and understood the juxtapositions and interactions across boundaries would moderate the larger implications of the story, conflicts and themes performed.

Krishen’s attempts to deepen a sense of participation and community through critical and imaginative reworkings of culture in theatre were evident in his work with Five Arts Centre, an inter-disciplinary arts collective he co-founded in 1984, as mentioned in Chapter One. The intent to encourage collaborative work that drew from different perspectives and skills was geared towards ‘lead[ing] Malaysians to a finer appreciation of their plural and multidimensional artistic heritage and promise’ through works that ‘reflect a Malaysian social context’ and the ‘building of a regional perspective’.<sup>41</sup> The motivation outlined by the company was to generate ‘alternative art forms and images in the Malaysian creative environment’ in order to contribute to the role of the arts in the ‘growth of a Malaysian identity in the arts’.<sup>42</sup> This idea of nurturing a ‘Malaysian identity in the arts’ through creating works that provoked participants to deconstruct segregated notions of culture and rethink unitary frames of Selves and Others, urged Malaysians to draw on their ‘plural and multidimensional artistic heritage’ as a resource for the revisioning of ‘plural and multidimensional’ identities. It also allowed Krishen to expand the discourses on cultural difference with collaborators who shared this ideology.

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<sup>40</sup> Paul Woodruff, *The Necessity of Theater: The Art of Watching and Being Watched*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 83. Woodruff identifies theatre as the ‘art of finding human action worth watching for a measure time in a measured space’ (19) and thus asserts the ‘need’ to watch as a need for ‘agency’ that comes with ‘choice’ (70).

<sup>41</sup> Quote from *New Directions: Programme for 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations*, 1994, 6.

<sup>42</sup> Quote from *Programme for Five Arts Centre: 20 Years on the edge*, 2004.

Krishen also began to devise theatre with actors in a dialogical and process-oriented approach to culling new languages for English language theatre. The devised play approach was used to invent new texts that were more reflective of spoken languages and not just written ones. Krishen embarked on his first devised play, *Tikam-Tikam: And the Grandmother Said...* in 1983, working with actor-playwright Leow Puay Tin to create a non-linear, fragmented performance with live gamelan music<sup>43</sup> as a time-keeping device. Inspired by the work of American experimental artist, Spalding Gray, which Krishen had watched while he was in New York in the early 1980s, elements of chance and random were used to structure a story-telling experiment in which Leow told unscripted stories about her childhood, triggered by words randomly selected by members of the audience. It recast the intersubjectivity between actor and spectator by challenging the audience to interpret the work as a spontaneous and improvised text, rather than one in which ideas were thematically structured and unified. The demands of 'watching' in this instance were to participate in a playful concoction of possibility rather than expect a logical and linear narrative. The work also highlighted the spoken qualities of English that were less formal and more colloquial, endorsing this as an important Malaysian voice.<sup>44</sup> The gamelan music served to underscore and interact with the Anglophone local voice in a distinctly Malay vocabulary, providing an experience of Malaysian cultures in dialogue and disjuncture. Hence the inter-play of difference was heard alongside being watched.

Hence Krishen's achievement in the 1980s was his ability to generate and participate in a revisioning of English language theatre, as an important reconfiguration of what was 'local', and how this could be seen as Malaysian theatre. His directorial vision expanded to create innovative performance styles that were attentive to the dynamics of locally written scripts in English. The aim was to enact their symbolic and cultural meaning through a layered interpretation of character, story and context. He did this by continuing his explorations of inter- and intra-racial differences. He also enlarged the meanings of scripts by adding layers of non-verbal texts such as movement and sound, to reflect a broader diversity. This not only added dimensions of

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<sup>43</sup> The gamelan is a musical ensemble found in several parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, consisting of a range of instruments such as tuned bronze gongs, kettle gongs, metallophones, xylophones, drums, bamboo flutes and sometimes a plucked or bowed string instrument. There are several variations of the gamelan, the most popular being Javanese and Balinese gamelan. However in Malaysia it is the Malay gamelan that is most prominent, acquiring its own standard of instruments and repertoire of music. Krishen's experimentations with the gamelan would continue in later years, as will be seen in the following chapters.

<sup>44</sup> Krishen's continued exploration of devised theatre, where he mixed different languages and language registers, will be examined further in Chapter Five.

meaning but also produced less bounded representations of culture. This was his way of asserting that Malaysian theatre should embody, stage, and perform notions of the multiplicity inherent in society, while questioning what it meant to be Malaysian within the tropes of being modern. This was a critique of an officially sanctioned ‘nationalism’ that was ‘exclusive’ and thus denied of its pluralist history. I now analyse two performances Krishen directed, that exemplify these approaches and argue that they are a significant contribution to Malaysian theatre.

### Connections between Disparate Spheres in *The Cord* by K.S. Maniam

GOVINDAN: Learned the ways of the white man. Tail down when the shiny car comes.

CHEVUDON: Worked hard. Promoted.

GOVINDAN: Learned all the tricks. Kowtowed. Comes now. Greet him for our pay. Cuts pay to keep us quiet. White boss satisfied.

*(Muthiah is wearing the type of tropical toppee white managers were fond of. He has trousers on and a thin, leather belt. He wields a shiny baton.)*<sup>45</sup>

The challenges Krishen faced in staging K.S. Maniam’s play, *The Cord*, were primarily to develop a style of performance that would suit the stylized text. It was written as an invented form of English which included Tamil inflections of language and localized idioms of meaning. As seen from the excerpt above, this was not a grammar that simply included suffixes like ‘lah’ and ‘man’, which are more common in localizing Malaysian English. Instead it was an intense, poetic and sparse language to communicate the simplicity, yet harshness, of being dominated and exploited. Translating the text onto stage also entailed developing connections between the worlds of impoverished and rural Malaysian-Indian estate labourers depicted in the play, with multi-racial, professional and urban audiences located in the capital city of Kuala Lumpur. It looked at issues of marginality and disenfranchisement as shared conflicts across these separate spheres. Krishen’s achievement was his ability to connect these disparate worlds by interrogating normative ideas about race, class and language, through stylised enactments of character. Using enlarged gestures and stylised vocalisations of text, he suggested symbolic interpretations of cultural identity. He also forged links to show how the struggles for recognition in the periphery are not distant to those at the centre, as overarching abuses of structural power pertain to both, albeit in different manifestations.

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<sup>45</sup> Maniam, *The Cord*, 24.

The story of *The Cord* engages with the duality of what it means to belong to, and yet aspire to break away from, a deprived community where there is deep bitterness and resentment about being powerless to resist structures of abuse. The story centres on the strained relationship between three men: Muniandy, an upright and conscientious estate worker, who migrated to Malaya from India; Ratnam, his listless and lazy son, who was born in Malaysia and feels entitled to more material wealth than he has; and Muthiah, a pompous and vindictive estate administrator, who is eventually revealed as the biological father of Ratnam, having raped Muniandy's wife, Lakshmi. Ratnam's dream of owning a Yamaha motorcycle, the modern symbol of freedom and flight from destitution, leads to his scheming to make Muniandy give him money for his purchase. Enlisting the help of a wily woman neighbour, Kali, they manage to goad Muniandy into once again going into a trance and playing the *uduku*, a drum that can 'compel him to relive his past', and thus soften his stance about granting his son's wishes.<sup>46</sup> The ritual that is enacted leads into a dream sequence in which the tale of Lakshmi's rape by Muthiah is unravelled. As a result the cords of familial ties and community respect that have bound the three men together dissolve into a mutiny of anger. This pushes them to fight against each other in an attempt to retrieve their sense of dignity and respect. They do this, only to discover that 'the simple cord of humanity',<sup>47</sup> their inextricable mutual dependence on each other, fails to provide them with solace or recompense in the face of 'an emptiness' and a 'terrible loneliness'<sup>48</sup> created by greed, lust and aggression. This leads to a severing of the 'cord' that binds Muniandy to Muthiah, having been loyal to his superior and trusted him as a friend. However it does strengthen the 'cord' between Muniandy and Ratnam, as they recognise in each other the unfulfilled dreams of a noble and dignified life. Muniandy eventually tells Ratnam that his money is buried near Lakshmi's grave, suggesting he is free to avail himself of it.

The play is set in a Malaysian plantation estate, among a community of working class Indian-Malaysians who are poor, uneducated and struggling to cope with meeting their basic

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<sup>46</sup> The *uduku* or *udukku* is a hand-held, hollow double-ended drum which tapers towards the middle from either side, for ease of holding. It thus looks like an hourglass. The pitch of the instrument can be varied either by tightening or loosening the rope that provides tension to the leather surface. It is usually played for temple ceremonies and in some traditional art forms. It is also a drum associated with the Hindu goddess Kali. K.S. Maniam, 'Preface,' in *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and The Plays*, by K.S. Maniam, (London: SKOOB Books Publishing, 1994), x-xi, defines the *uduku* as an instrument that can put a person 'into a trance and so compel him to relive his past'. In so doing the *uduku* 'becomes transformed into a dramatized conscience of the individual and of society'.

<sup>47</sup> Maniam, *The Cord*, 67.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

daily needs. Cheap labour from South India that was imported into Malaya in order to support the British colonial plantation economy during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, led to large numbers of Indian, mostly Tamil, workers migrating to Malaya and eventually staying on to become citizens of the nation. However most remained confined to meagre working conditions and miserable education opportunities, making it difficult to progress.<sup>49</sup> The relationship between Muniandy and Muthiah becomes symbolic of the humiliation suffered by workers who had to endure the crippling effects of abusive masters. Muthiah also represents the power of colonial influence, in his lauding of power over the other workers, and his persistent attempts to ‘colonise’ Ratnam by teaching him how to speak proper English, as quoted at the start of the previous section. This infuses his presence with an additional layer of power that symbolizes the ‘neo-colonial’ presence within communities supposedly independent and free. It points to how English became a vehicle of manipulation rather than an instrument of liberation for those who did not have access to learning and wielding it appropriately.

The playwright-novelist K.S. Maniam was unlike most other English language writers who tended to have origins in urban and English-speaking backgrounds, as he was from a working-class family and Tamil was his mother-tongue. He had attended a Tamil estate school for a year, and knew the difficulties of being a plantation worker as his parents also tapped rubber in order to supplement their paltry incomes as hospital attendants. His writing often engages with the physical and psychic spaces that are the landscape for this marginalized community’s self-apprehension and identity. The bleakness of this context is something Maniam makes evident as a reason for looking at this segment of society, which is ignored and admittedly kept out of a national vision.<sup>50</sup> Journalist Joyce Moy notes that Maniam examines ‘the weathering of culture and tradition against adaptation to another country and questions the

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<sup>49</sup> See Barbara Watson Andaya and Leonard Y. Andaya, *A History of Malaysia*. (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 1982), 181-183, for description of conditions under which labour from India was brought into British Malaya. Andaya and Andaya point out that ‘low wages, indebtedness, poor social status and physical isolation kept estate Indians apart’ (182), separating them from more affluent urban Indians and other communities. As a result, they were poorly represented culturally and few efforts were made to improve their situation.

<sup>50</sup> Mandal, ‘National Culture Policy,’ in *Globalization & National Autonomy: The Experience of Malaysia*, eds. Joan M. Nelson, Jacob Meerman & Abdul Rahman Embong, (Bangi: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies [ISEAS], with Institute of Malaysian and International Studies [IKMAS], 2008), 274-5. In his discussion of the configuration of national identity through the National Culture Policy Mandal suggests that Tamil labour was not just marginalized but seen as ‘extraneous’ to the Malay experience, and thus neglected with a view to even ‘causing hurt’ as these ‘immigrants’ were deemed undesirable, and thus their cultures regarded as ‘unsuitable’ in forging a national identity.

cultural heritage left behind for future generations of migrant communities'.<sup>51</sup> This dilemma is particularly acute for impoverished estate-worker Indian-Malaysians who feel left out of a national imagining and struggle to negotiate their national identity as marginalised citizens. Deprived of access to political and social power, their recourse is to tradition, history and cultural memory to preserve and strengthen their dignity.

Krishen's approach to staging a play about ethnically Indian estate workers, to make it relevant to a contemporary Malaysian audience that was multi-racial and rarely from a working-class background, entailed a range of strategies for creating links between the context of *The Cord*, and ordinary life in urban Malaysian society. As noted by reviewer C.N.G. Runte, the task of making the play 'acceptable to urban audiences who are generally ignorant of its setting' was Krishen's task; and that he was able to do so a 'reflection of the talent of the director'.<sup>52</sup> By casting English-speaking performers, who were themselves urban and educated, Krishen and the actors had to bridge the cultural gap between their everyday lives and the world of the play. In order to embody characters such as Ratnam, Muniandy and Kali, the actors had to recognize shared desires and fears, such that they could empathise with and enact the motivations and impulses of the characters they played. This entailed recognizing that despite material and socio-economic differences, there were points of similarity and connection, such as the pressure to fulfill modern dreams of wanting to own symbols of luxury, and resenting histories of origin that reveal dark moments of violence and gender-brutality. It also required a capacity to imagine these worlds as inter-connected by virtue of sharing a national frame. Thus practices of segregation took on metaphorical associations.<sup>53</sup> Muniandy's disdain for his neighbours, due to his sense of position and superiority paralleled the prejudices in society that often stemmed from prejudice and pride. Likewise Muthiah's alignment with colonial power, by dressing like a colonial officer pointed to a common willingness to become 'outsider', if it accorded the privileges of a higher position and the right to subdue others.

These thematic links emphasized the human condition as more alike than different, and Krishen's efforts to articulate these ideas on stage were evident in the physical language he

<sup>51</sup> Joyce Moy, 'Discord in estate of Man,' in *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and The Plays* by K.S. Maniam, (London: SKOOB Books Publishing, 1994), 95.

<sup>52</sup> C. N. G. Runte, 'Krishen strikes the right cord,' in *Sensuous Horizons: The Stories and The Plays* by K.S. Maniam, (London: SKOOB Books Publishing, 1994), 103-4.

<sup>53</sup> Information gained from performer Anne James in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006. James performed in both the 1986 and 1994 production. These correspond with my own reflections as one of the performers in the 1994 production.



improvised with the actors to envision the world of the play. He developed a highly stylized and gestural language for performing the text, such that the rhythms of the text were verbalized and physicalised as poetic expressions of near mythical worlds. Seeing as the language spoken was not naturalistic, as they were not speaking Tamil, it engaged the aesthetics of the text by generating stylized physical responses in the non-verbal text of the body. Performing on an almost bare stage with very few props, the actors had to rely primarily on their bodies and voices to articulate the characters. They did this through enlarged movements and heightened executions of action. This meant that characters were realised through non-realist interpretations of the text, in which the actors created textures, sounds, movements, gestures and actions that brought to life the inner worlds of the characters. Instead of having to depict the characters naturalistically, the actors could 'invent' physical languages to embody the crucial qualities being expressed. Muniandy's uprightness was evident in his tense and angular shoulders, just as Kali's craftiness was articulated in her rounded and salacious movements. Hence the transformation of urban and educated actors into rural and unschooled characters was experienced as intense enlargements of the human being, pushing beyond literal representations to suggest symbolic and archetypal ones instead.

While in 'real-life' the characters in the play would not have spoken in English but in Tamil, Maniam develops a 'fictional language',<sup>54</sup> that is particular to the play and its world.<sup>55</sup> This is especially evident in Act Three, when scenes from Muniandy's first arrival in Malaysia and his process of acculturation to the new land are enacted in a dream sequence. The language is minimal and filled with symbolic images, almost like a code that is unnatural yet clear in its meaning. This is most potent in Muthiah's seduction of Lakshmi, where she is first seen going to fetch water, and Govindan, one of the workers, calls out 'Beautiful vase you got there',<sup>56</sup> referring to both the mimed object she carries, and her body. Later Muthiah echoes this when he

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<sup>54</sup> In a recorded interview with Kathy Rowland, 2003, Krishen described the English that was invented by Maniam as 'fictional English' which was also 'not not-English'. This is because it was grammatical and yet drew on local tone and colour to depict the deeper rhythms of Tamil, the non-English language that was being reflected. He also felt Maniam had broken through the barriers of stereotypical language that tended to convey a vernacular Malaysian English by simply including suffixes such as 'lah' and 'man'. Instead his language was more stylized and at times poetic.

<sup>55</sup> Kee Thuan Chye, 'Seeker of "the Universe in Man",' in *just in so many words: view, reviews & other things* (Singapore: Heinemann Asia, 1980), 12-16. Maniam acknowledged that while he may write in English, 'a lot of the characters actually don't speak English in real life.... So the writer's difficulty is to find out what the people's English is' (15).

<sup>56</sup> Maniam, *The Cord*, 22.



says ‘The vase! The vase!’<sup>57</sup> on seeing her returning. He first politely asks for ‘Just a glass of water’<sup>58</sup>. But later, when he eventually rapes her, he shoves decorum aside and says ‘Let me take water from that pot’ and ‘with my bare hands’<sup>59</sup> to mark the transgression. Lakshmi’s line at the end of her ordeal is simply ‘The pot is broken! The water runs!’<sup>60</sup> Hence the stylised and intense physical execution that was developed for the text gave poetic force to these words.

As the story deals specifically with an Indian-Malaysian community, Krishen also pushed to expand the implications of cultural heterogeneity by including non-Indian actors. This was something he had explored in the 1970s as part of his effort to make cultural boundaries permeable, and show bodies in performance as porous sites of meaning. In the 1984 production, which was also mounted as the inaugural production of the Five Arts Centre,<sup>61</sup> Krishen cast writer-performer Kee Thuan Chye, a Chinese-Malaysian, as Muthiah. Unlike in *Tok Perak*, where there were several non-Malay actors playing Malay characters, Kee was the only actor cast against race in this production. This introduced the idea that the character was different on several fronts, and further complicated ideas of power and authority. Chinese-Malaysians, acknowledged as a comprador class during colonial times were seen as socio-economically superior to Indian-Malaysians because they wielded more wealth and were better educated. Thus Kee’s presence as Muthiah signified several kinds of Other-ing, juxtaposing the racial with the economic and social. Here again Krishen was provoking an understanding of Malaysian multiplicity as both inter- and intra-cultural. Reviewer Caroline Ngui noted that Kee’s presence gave her ‘a few disturbing moments’ because of ‘a Chinese guy playing someone called Muthiah in a play so richly Indian’, but she moved on to say that ‘after these first few moments, it did not matter’.<sup>62</sup> Ngui pointed out that Kee ‘played a very believable bad guy’<sup>63</sup> but did not comment on whether Kee played a believable ‘Indian’. It may not have been as critical in his role as the ‘bad guy’ and thus the outsider to the community. According to Kee, Krishen was trying to ‘do

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> This production was also performed in Ipoh in 1984, and then subsequently restaged for performances in Singapore in 1986, first as an abridged version and then as the full play for the Singapore Drama Festival. It was the first time a Malaysian English play was invited to perform in Singapore, and just as in Kuala Lumpur, it was warmly received and applauded for its ground-breaking experimentation.

<sup>62</sup> Caroline Ngui, ‘The Cord: A tangle with revenge and humanity,’ *New Straits Times*, January 14, 1986.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

away with racial trappings' and get 'straight to the core' of the character by looking at 'archetypes' and how they represented power.<sup>64</sup>

In 1994, Krishen re-staged the play as part of the Five Arts Centre's 10<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebrations, which included a retrospective of K.S. Maniam's plays. Here, he cast Malay-Malaysian actor Hamzah Tahir, as Ratnam. Again only one character was cast against race. In contrast to the earlier production, reviewers of the 1994 version described Hamzah as 'evidently miscast'<sup>65</sup> and 'totally miscast',<sup>66</sup> with no elaboration as to why this was so. While aspects of the production, such as poor pacing, lack of aural clarity and incongruity of style were alluded to as a whole, only one actor was singled out as being unsuited to the role rather than poorly directed or untalented. In fact Tamara Karim refers to Hamzah as a 'young talented actor' but failed to be 'believable' in a main role.<sup>67</sup> It is possible that audiences struggled to accept Hamzah as Ratnam due to his 'presence' being unlike the others. Hamzah was a Malay language theatre actor who was acting in English for the first time. Thus he was perceived as 'different' by virtue of his accent, and Krishen's instruction was for the actor to speak English as he usually did, rather than put on an 'Indian' accent. Yet this attempt to blur the boundaries of English language theatre and localise it further, met with resistance from some viewers.

The process of indigenizing contemporary Malaysian theatre by introducing traditional and modern elements of performance as intertwined with each other, was also an important aspect of the production. Apart from dealing with questions of acceptance and belonging, the play grapples with the contemporary struggles of desiring modern luxuries, such as the Yamaha motorcycle, the 'Japanese machine' that 'everyone's riding',<sup>68</sup> while under pressure to retain traditional allegiances, such as links with the 'Big Country'- here referring to India, the land of roots and traditional histories for the community.<sup>69</sup> This symbolized the steady erosion of traditional customs, such as visits to the temple and performing rituals for the dead. Hence the playing of the *uduku*, a traditional drum used in real-life rituals, became a marker of the reaffirmation and incorporation of an eroding traditional Indian culture as part of a Malaysian contemporary vocabulary. In the play, the *uduku* symbolizes an important link with cultural

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<sup>64</sup> Kee Thuan Chye, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

<sup>65</sup> Eddin Khoo, 'The broken Cord,' *Sunday Star*, April 3, 1994.

<sup>66</sup> Tamara Karim, 'Flawed Cord,' *The Malay Mail*, March 29, 1994.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Maniam, *The Cord*, 5.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 36-7.

heritage, and is imbued with mystical qualities that transcend the pressures of change. It is given to Muniandy by his ‘saintly grandfather’<sup>70</sup> just before he embarks on the journey to Malaya. He describes it as a drum that ‘became my guru’ and ‘gave me strength to live’<sup>71</sup> because it provided ‘a voice larger than your own to guide’; thus when it drums ‘all the karmas of our existence are revealed’.<sup>72</sup>

In the performance, when the *uduku* was played by Muniandy, Krishen ensured there was a marked shift of mood on stage to signal the transition into the trance and dream sequence that followed. The characters in the dream sequence appeared wearing white half-masks that covered the tops of their faces. These were modern masks, rather than traditional ones, which conveyed a neutrality that de-exoticised the ritualistic elements of the scene. This gave the impression of ghostly figures emerging from a troubled past, suggesting connections with the unlived and untimely. It also created a mystical sense of reality, when the actors spoke using elongated vowels in an almost chant-like delivery of their lines. The ‘fictional language’ of Maniam’s script evoked a performative language that was meant to suggest an alternative aesthetic of something new emerging, even if from the past more than the present. The past, as a distant memory that continues to haunt the present, was performed as an intense unravelling of uncertainty and pain. This was not a nostalgic recollection of a golden age. Associations of a glorious tradition being evoked, such as ‘of pygmies who became giants and ‘courage that never dried up’, were illusions that suggested the past was also unable to compensate for the present.

Krishen also introduced elements from *kalari payat*, an Indian martial art form that is practiced by certain communities from Tamil Nadu and Kerala, for the staging of the fight scenes between Muniandy, Ratnam and Muthiah. The actors were exposed to training sessions with traditional martial art experts to acquire basic skills in the form. This was then used to create fight scenes that were dramatically compelling but, more importantly, this enabled English language theatre audiences to encounter ways in which a traditional form infuses a contemporary performance. It also meant that the performers had to negotiate their relative unfamiliarity and adopt a new physical vocabulary that they could wield in performance.<sup>73</sup> This echoed

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 15-6

<sup>73</sup> Information gained from interview with performer Hamzah Tahir, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

experimentations done with *silat*, a Malay martial art form, in *teater kontemporari* performances that sought to generate performance languages that drew from traditional local sources.

In *The Cord*, Krishen took on the politics of enacting how a marginal community of Indian-Malaysian estate workers can be seen as inter-connected with those in the urban centre of a modern and multicultural Malaysia, without denying the particularity of either sphere. The inter- and intra-cultural aspects of culture were examined as multi-layered dimensions that could be staged as different interpretations of meaning. Likewise the simultaneity of the modern with the traditional in English language theatre not only blurred the boundaries between them, but showed how locally devised English-es could be performed to symbolize a contemporaneity of mixed elements. These juxtapositions were also contestations of officially separated cultures that tend to separate the traditional from the modern, positing the former as the basis for cultural authenticity and the latter as primarily western. Performing an alternative multiculturalism in modern Malaysian theatre was therefore not merely about combining different racial elements, but initiating languages of performance that would produce vocabularies for expressing counter-hegemonic ideas about contemporary culture and identity. This was something Krishen explored further in his interpretation of Kee Thuan Chye's *1984: Here and Now*, which I turn to in the next section.

### **Multicultural Dystopia in Kee Thuan Chye's *1984: Here and Now***

(*The TV screen lights up to reveal BIG BROTHER giving a speech.*)

BB: The Administration will not entertain any view that questions the policy on national culture. The policy clearly states that the national culture will be based on Party member culture. The people must help speed up the implementation of the national culture with dedication, responsibility, and sincerity. The Administration cannot guarantee the tiger dance<sup>74</sup> a place in the national culture. It is not a question of all races being represented but whether the traditions of each race can enrich and contribute greatly to the national culture.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> The 'tiger dance' alludes to the lion dance, that was being restricted by the authorities, as discussed earlier in the chapter. See Kua, *The Malaysian*, 25, for discussion of how suggestions made by then Home Minister, Ghazali Shafie, for the lion dance to be 'modified' into a 'tiger dance, accompanied by music from the gong, flute, tabla or gamelan, indicated that it should be stripped of its Chinese identity and reconfigured into a multicultural dance. That the same was not applied to Malay traditional forms as well, created resentment among the Chinese, who felt their cultures were being threatened while Malay cultures were being preserved.

<sup>75</sup> Kee, *1984*, 258.

Krishen's direction of Kee Thuan Chye's politically critical play, *1984: Here and Now*, was an early example of his multi-disciplinary approach to interpreting scripts. Here a range of performative texts were elicited in response to the written text, to develop multiple layers of meaning on stage. Visual, movement and sonic texts were created to suggest alternative frames for understanding the spoken text, and thus provide expansive and dialogical processes of engaging with theatre. Apart from generating an aesthetic of difference as enriching to an understanding of Malaysian society, it also made the work a political comment on singular and unitary cultures. His use of multi-racial casting to challenge the normative politics of race in Malaysia was pushed further when compared to his earlier work. Here Krishen complicated ideas of an ideologically constructed group identity, as deliberated in the script, to underline the inescapable race factor in the Malaysian context as necessarily interpellated with socio-political frames - even when there was an attempt to move beyond race. A 'national culture' based on 'Party member culture' was symbolic of officially sanctioned 'Malaysian culture', or more specifically 'Barisan Nasional (National Front) member culture'. Thus Krishen's directorial challenge was to inflect these notions with broader meanings of how parochialism and prejudice impacted society. I argue that through the staging choices Krishen made, he interrogated and reconfigured the reductive tropes of culture to enlarge their meanings beyond simple binaries of Us and Them.

The play, based on George Orwell's well-known political novel, *1984*, is about a futuristic Malaysian society governed by a totalitarian regime. The people are oppressed by having their thoughts and actions patrolled. They are also separated into those with power and those excluded from power, and discriminated accordingly. There are the Party Members who rule, the Proles who serve, and the Kloots who signify a common enemy of outsiders. As in the novel, the people are ruled by a despot named Big Brother who appears on large posters with the slogan 'Long Live Big Brother', and as screened projections - ubiquitous and intrusive but never physically present. At the heart of the play is the relationship between Wiran, a Party Member who works as a journalist, and Yone, a Prole with whom he falls in love.<sup>76</sup> Their romance cuts across the boundaries that keep them socially separated, and this threatens their safety. They are

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<sup>76</sup> Wiran is similar to the character Winston Smith, in Orwell's novel, and Yone to Orwell's Julia, whose attempts to contest and oppose the oppressive powers in their world become threatening to their own safety and welfare.

susceptible to being accused of ‘immoral proximity’<sup>77</sup> as forces of fundamentalism are rife, and their liaison is seen as a failure to uphold the laws that prevent the union of Party Members and Proles. This pointed directly to the situation in Malaysia where inter-racial and inter-religious marriages were frowned upon as they denoted a gradual erosion of cultural differences. Also, the Islamic resurgence and growing communalism further reinforced firmly entrenched ideas about the need to uphold ethno-religious lines of division. Hence Wiran and Yone represented individuals on separate sides of a dividing wall, questioning the reasons for their separatedness, and thus hoping to bring down the barrier in order to be together.

It is this environment of censure and discrimination which prods Wiran to question the policies and decrees that impose barriers between members of the same society. As a Party Member located within the domains of power, he becomes disillusioned with Party ideology and this leads him to join the ‘Movement for a New Brotherhood’ which ‘believes in the idea of a truly integrated nation’.<sup>78</sup> The Movement consists of Party members and Proles who try to overcome dictatorship and complacency by organizing events that range from seminars to demonstrations, in order to politicize and democratize people. This envisioning of an inclusive alternative mirrors the attempts by individuals and groups in Malaysia who sought to engage in non-discriminatory practices of citizenship and social interaction. Even if seen as idealistic and unattainable, it was no less an attempt to counter the increasing sense of totalitarianism that impacted on everyday life. Fear of censorship and the pressure to conform were aspects of living in materially modern Malaysia as well.

The characters in the play are broadly divided into those who believe in and conform to the Party ideology, a small minority who question and oppose it, and a broad spectrum of those who remain indifferent and unwilling to choose sides. In this respect it reflected the political climate in Malaysia, where most people conformed or remained indifferent, with only a few willing to risk the repercussions of confrontation. Thus Wiran’s refusal to submit to authority, despite brutal interrogations and threats to his life, is symbolic of a capacity to refute dictatorial structures and fight for individual liberty and choice. When Wiran is eventually confronted by accusations of being a ‘diehard dissident’ who has to learn to ‘toe the Party line’ to remain safe, he resists these threats and stands up to the system - even when it is suggested to him that Yone

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<sup>77</sup> Kee, 1984, 262.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 258.

is a Party plant tasked with framing him.<sup>79</sup> The play ends with Wiran being pursued by the Party police, as he continues to resist submission and conformity. He turns the question of how to deal with his predicament by appealing to the audience as he runs and hides among them. At this stage there are sirens and whistles and the sounds of running feet, with search spots that scan the whole performance space, including where audiences are seated. The playwright specifies that when Wiran has been located by a search spot he ‘addresses the audience urgently, moving among them as he speaks’.<sup>80</sup> He confronts them with the option of taking action, and moves on to say,

If you believe in all these, say yes! If you love this nation and feel a sense of belonging, say yes! You have the power to bring about changes. Unite! Stand up and say yes! Yes, the future lies with you! Yes, you will rise above fear and complacency! Yes! Yes! Yes! Yes!<sup>81</sup>

Krishen’s challenge was to create a performance that would resonate with audiences and move them to act by saying ‘Yes’ at the end. He had to stage the play beyond simplistic binaries of Us and Them, and embody the complexities of socio-political divisions that went beyond race, religion or class. Among urban and multi-racial English language theatre audiences it was important to look at how the play was more about misuses of power among those who wielded position and authority, than mere political rhetoric or social prejudice. As Krishen himself noted in response to the play,

Theatre is a very special zone, a place where we can play at things we can’t do in life (because we are too smug or comfortable or concerned for our well-being). It’s a place where we can play, and in playing, we allow people to experience things in safe precincts.<sup>82</sup>

Hence his efforts to ‘play at things we can’t do in life’ became the basis for making decisions about how to translate the script onto stage. One simple choice he made, with agreement from the playwright, was to turn on the house-lights instead of using a search spot when Wiran runs into the audience.<sup>83</sup> This moved from a separation of actors and spectators to a blurring of the boundaries between them.

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 271.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 272.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Krishen quoted in Maureen Ten, ‘Just When We Thought It Was Safe To Go To The Theatre Again,’ in *1984: Here and Now*, Kee Thuan Chye, (Petaling Jaya: K.Das Ink, 1987), 93-96.

<sup>83</sup> Information gained from Kee Thuan Chye, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.



His dramaturgical approach of using a multi-racial cast who sometimes played more than one character, intertwining cultural vocabularies to inter-connect different spheres of tradition and modernity, and layering the spoken text with visual, sonic and movement texts that diversified the associations of meaning, challenged norms of audience viewing and produced an experience of the play that was aesthetically and politically engaging. Drawing from the present-day reality, traces of the past, and visions of the future, he ‘played’ with the mix and collage of what constitutes contemporary and changing societies. Journalist Rehman Rashid states that in so doing he had ‘given the cast the chance to do a play in which they are not characters living a myth, so much as themselves living an alternative reality’.<sup>84</sup> But as Rehman also points out, there was uncertainty as to the meaning of the ‘Yes!’ in a ‘packed house’ that ‘was on its feet and applauding’.<sup>85</sup> Was it mere compliance with the actor’s request? Did it stem from a transitory surge of shared crowd feeling? Or was it real conviction about the need for change? Whatever the case, ‘the fact of what is being said’ and ‘the fact of its being said’ remained significant.<sup>86</sup> It was theatre ‘on its feet’, and responding to the political and cultural climate with an urgency and edge that was rare in English language theatre. This was cultural and political difference willing to ‘stand up’ and ‘speak up’ to try and make a difference.

The production was undoubtedly a radical moment in Malaysian theatre history, as its political content and the events surrounding its production aroused much interest. Kee’s blatant criticism of government policy, in being willing to ‘call a spade a spade’,<sup>87</sup> touched on ‘sensitive’ issues such as the National Cultural Policy and racial discrimination in a direct and confronting way. Arts writer Kit Lee described it as a ‘radical departure from the constrictive norms of decorum, of protocol, of respectability’<sup>88</sup> which was for some ‘an unexpected shot in the arm’.<sup>89</sup> Much speculation that the play would not be allowed to continue, as the permit to perform was withheld by the authorities until two weeks before opening night, drew intense

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<sup>84</sup> Rehman, Rashid, ‘Rare Event When Beliefs Were Stated Without Fear,’ in *1984: Here and Now*, Kee Thuan Chye, (Petaling Jaya: K.Das Ink, 1987) 104.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 255. This phrase is used in the play, when characters discuss the role of the mass media and debate the need to be honest.

<sup>88</sup> Kit Lee, ‘Big Brother Lives: Introduction,’ in *1984: Here and Now*, Kee Thuan Chye, (Petaling Jaya: K.Das Ink, 1987), v.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., vi.

curiosity and resulted in packed houses over five nights.<sup>90</sup> The play, first staged in 1985 by the Five Arts Centre with Krishen as director, has since been referred to as the ‘first English-language agit-prop drama to be staged in the country’,<sup>91</sup> and one which displayed an ‘open challenge of ethnicity in all aspects of Malaysian life’.<sup>92</sup> The unprecedented nature of the script and production marked it as an important landmark in Malaysian theatre.

This ‘open challenge of ethnicity’ was not merely in the articulation of spoken text, but in the staging of the script that opened up how identities, as cultural theorist Stuart Hall suggests, are ‘constituted within, and not outside representation’.<sup>93</sup> The notion of identities as ‘more a product of the marking of difference and exclusion, than they are the sign of an identical, naturally-constituted unity’,<sup>94</sup> was critical to realizing the deeper politics of the play. The ways in which difference was constructed and reiterated became the site of contention, as these were the signifiers of power and polarization that reduced social cohesion. Racial polarization between Malays and non-Malays in Malaysia could be seen as a parallel with Party Members and Proles. Yet Krishen cast actors from different races as both Party Members and Proles, with some performers in the ensemble playing characters from both sides of the divide. The fact that Wiran and Yone were played by Malay-Malaysian actors, Salleh Joned and Fatimah Abu Bakar respectively,<sup>95</sup> ensured that the performance was not a simple targeting of Malays as sole perpetrators of prejudice. Neither was it a staging of non-Malays as mere victims of discrimination. This pushed beyond the literal meaning of race, already evident in his earlier work. But more significantly, it pointed to the complicity of those who aligned with tyrannical power and the susceptibility of those who opposed it, regardless of racial identity. Krishen also began to cast across gender, with actress Sukania Venugopal playing the role of Shadrin, the

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., iv. Lee notes that people had to be turned away the last three nights, and the issue of the permit and ‘Police Special branch scrutiny’ made it an ‘event not to be missed’.

<sup>91</sup> Helen Gilbert, ‘Introduction,’ to *1984: Here and Now in Postcolonial Plays: An Anthology* ed. Helen Gilbert, (London: Routledge, 2004), 250-253.

<sup>92</sup> Rowland, ‘The Politics of Drama’, 116.

<sup>93</sup> Stuart Hall, ‘Who Needs Identity,’ in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, (London: SAGE Publications, 1996), 4.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Both bilingual, Malay-Malaysian performers, Salleh and Fatimah were journalists and writers, who were known for their relatively open and broad-minded views in the mass media. Thus they represented liberal and non-conformist segments of Malay society. In addition, Kee Thuan Chye, the playwright, a journalist himself, also performed in the ensemble. Thus the presence of these ‘voices’ among the cast added an edge of reflexivity. Not only was their voice on stage a palpable one of protest, it was linked to their voices in print as well. Their real-life personalities were in effect ‘ghosting’ their characters on stage, to suggest that their roles and the lines they spoke were edged with this reality as well.

Chief Interrogator, who most taunts Wiran when he refuses to comply with the Party rules.<sup>96</sup> The body was presented as a permeable signifier, prodding audiences to apprehend these shifts and participate in the rethinking of Selves and Others. What mattered was the association made by the viewer to recognize the actor as Party Member or Prole, depending on displays of attitude and physical appearance.

To imbue the bodily text with a further layer of meaning, costumes were used to provide a second skin to the racialised bodies of the Malaysian performers. In a national context where bounded identities are seen as rigidly imposed and uncontestable, this was a further effort to render these texts porous and open to reinvention. Designed by arts producer and designer Elizabeth Cardoso, the designs incorporated stylized as well as naturalistic elements in a mix that complemented the performance style. The Party members wore uniform-like outfits that hinted at aspects of Malay, Chinese and Indian dress to suggest a ‘nationalised’ similarity with traces of differentiated identities. They wore straight cut trousers and a range of tops to signify their position in the party. Those with higher rank wore military-looking jackets with pockets, while those in subordinate roles wore a less officious long top that had a high-necked collar and slits down the side. These aspects of the design are identifiable in many Asian outfits such as the Indian *sherwani* and the Malay *baju melayu*.<sup>97</sup> Hence they referenced Asian-Malaysian identities in a fusion of design elements. In contrast the Proles wore everyday ‘civilian’ clothes to suggest that wider differences between them were still evident, and the impact of a ‘national’ culture had less physical impact. So there were performers who wore the Muslim headscarf, Indian *veshti* and the Chinese *samfu*, with others clad in jeans and t-shirts, associated with modern life and the west.<sup>98</sup>

This process of intertwining cultural elements was also evident in the movement and sonic vocabularies that Krishen developed in collaboration with fellow artists, to portray the multiplicity of Malaysian society. While each vocabulary had distinct histories that marked them

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<sup>96</sup> While Krishen’s work in the 1980s was primarily oriented in patriarchal views of society, that rendered few opportunities for contemplating gender differences as crucial to a reshaping of politics, his casting of Venugopal was an important shift towards this. This would however become a more prominent dimension of his work in the 1990s, as will be seen in Chapters Four and Five.

<sup>97</sup> The *sherwani* is a long Indian male shirt that has a high collar and slits on the side, while the *baju melayu* is Malay male shirt that is similar in design, though sometimes without the high collar but with an open round neck instead.

<sup>98</sup> The *samfu* is a pant-suit with a short blouse and close fitting trousers worn by Chinese working women and the Indian *veshti* is a loose cotton sarong worn by Indian men.

as Malay, Chinese, Indian or Western, they became imbricated when combined to depict diversity as inherent, rather than imposed. In the performance of the ‘tiger dance,’ choreographed by contemporary dancer-choreographer Marion D’Cruz, a fusion of Chinese and Malay dance forms was used. Apart from references to the then controversial Chinese lion dance, the performance also drew from a Malay processional dance form called the Barongan, which incorporates the large puppet-like head of a mythical creature that could combine features of a tiger and dragon. The ‘tiger head’ that was specifically designed for the play was based on the large puppet-mask that is used in both these dances to lead the troupe. This not only created resonances with the topical issue of how non-Malay cultures were being impinged upon, but also suggested ways of reinventing culture to diffuse tensions across boundaries. Similarly the original music for this segment, composed by musician-composer Michael Veerapen, incorporated varied sounds using an electronic synthesizer, gamelan instruments and Chinese gongs, to reflect the blend and juxtaposition of cultures. This was effectively suggesting that if representations of culture consciously enlarged the dimensions of their constitution, then a greater sense of inclusivity was possible. The dance, which first occurs in Scene 3 and then again at the beginning of Scene 11, is part of a demonstration calling for freedom, equality, and justice. The tiger, a symbolic figure of strength in the Malaysian national logo, was recast to become a symbol of resistance to totalitarian power, rather than an emblem of established authority.

Krishen also examined the relationship between traditional forms and modern-day technologies as a reflection of the discursive nature of identity. He looked at how meaning is constructed in the *use* of the form and not its implicit association, suggesting that identities could be similarly defined through the use of different elements and not just their presence. Big Brother’s presence and gaze was staged primarily through technology. He appeared on a large central screen that was meant to look like a television set, several television monitors on stage, and a ‘huge picture of Big Brother’ in the middle of the stage.<sup>99</sup> His large scrutinizing image reduced the live bodies to relatively small and puny presences, and to enlarge his power further, his voice was amplified through electrical speakers. Hence modern technology was wielded to exert control over behaviour and thought, and not suggest liberation in any progressive sense.<sup>100</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Kee, 1984, 254.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid. At several points in the play, there are projections of images that arouse the ensemble to react with aggressive retaliation. These include people dancing to disco-rock music, a romantic scene from a soap opera, and the Kloots in training for battle, at the start of the play. The playwright specifies that when the crowd gathered see

However when the traditional form of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry) was used in Scene 14, this too became a means of using the screen for wielding power and advancing corrupt practices. In this scene a meeting is held between Inner Party members who are brokering power to personal advantage. Krishen used live actors behind a back-lit screen, whose side profiles were thus seen in shadow. This created a semblance of being two-dimensional puppets. The characters spoke in a stylized voice, using rhythms similar to the way a *dalang* (*wayang kulit* puppeteer) would voice his puppets. They began each line with a long vowel sound that corresponded with the movement of the hand, to signal the character was about to speak. They also moved like puppets, with extended arms bent at the elbows, and arched spines to elongate the neck and head. Their jerky movements corresponded with their speech, again in the style of the *wayang kulit*. This captured a sense of how a traditional vocabulary could become a metaphor for the power relations being depicted, in that the Inner Party Members were never seen except as abstractions, and thus like Big Brother their appearance was always moderated. It also implied that those in the ruling elite tend to be hidden or screened from view, as shadows that are never fully known.

The style of performance that Krishen used to bring together these different elements of multiplicity in the text was one that did not aim at a consistent aesthetic. It was itself informed by the play of difference. In some scenes the actors adopted more naturalistic ways of moving and speaking, while in others they took on heightened and stylized vocabularies. This suggested an ongoing shift between the everyday and the symbolic. It also allowed for movement between an imaginative space informed by the future, and that of present-day reality. The sense of ‘play’ about serious political issues was fictionalized on stage, but pointed clearly to the reality on the street. In this regard the staging created what Krishen termed a ‘safe precinct’<sup>101</sup> in which to question the status quo without making direct reference to particular people or groups. It also avoided prescribing simplistic answers or suggesting quick solutions. Instead the imperative was to recognize the Self in the Other, and realize a need to say ‘yes’ to a ‘sense of belonging’ and the will to ‘rise above fear and complacency’.<sup>102</sup>

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these images they ‘break into a frenzy’ and ‘throw a string of adjectives at what is being seen on the screen’ such as ‘Obscene’, ‘Trash’ and ‘It is against our religion’.

<sup>101</sup> Krishen, quoted in Ten, ‘Just When,’ 94.

<sup>102</sup> Kee, 1984, 272.

The 1980s was marked by the ambitious and bold political leadership of Prime Minister Mahathir, who pushed for the nation to modernise and advance economically and technologically in order to become 'developed' in material, infrastructural and financial terms. However cultural struggles persisted in relation to the divide between Malay and non-Malay communities, pointing to a lack of 'progress' when it came to issues of bridging these dichotomies and advancing multi-cultural representations of 'national culture'. English language theatre was one of the few sites where stories about people from multi-ethnic backgrounds were more common, encouraging audiences and performers to rethink the constructs of identity in Malaysia. Thus it was conducive for Krishen to develop an alternative multiculturalism in which pluralities were explored between and within cultures in this sphere. He experimented with inter-racial casting to inflect notions of race as closely related to histories of class and social position, to suggest that race operated as part of a multi-layered framing in perceptions of identity. He also created fusions of diverse cultural vocabularies to suggest that contemporary Malaysian culture was a concoction of varied elements which were individually distinct, yet when combined together became inter-related aspects of each other. Just as performers and audiences in English language theatre were made up of varied backgrounds and historical roots, so were the images, sounds, movements and languages of characters and contexts presented on stage. If in *The Cord*, Muthiah, an Indian-Malaysian character was played by Kee Thuan Chye, a Chinese-Malaysian actor, then the doubleness of his presence made it impossible to reduce his identity to a simple reading of one thing and not another. Likewise, the performance of the 'tiger dance' in 1984: *Here and Now*, was not just a protest against a particular group of people but performed as a demonstration of how seemingly oppositional cultures, such as Malay and Chinese, can be linked through creative reinvention.

Krishen's theatre also articulated contestations of political hegemony by looking at how issues of social justice and agency impacted on relations between Selves and Others. Theatre as a space for active 'watching', in which making interpretive choices about meaning was necessary in order to apprehend the conflicts and tensions of the story, was used to unsettle reductive ideas of culture and provoke questions about the machinations of political power. Here the 'beam of darkness' illuminated the 'fractures' and 'broken vertebrae' in society, if only to suggest

possibilities for contemplation, if not restoration.<sup>103</sup> Hence, whether in relation to Muniandy's urgent need to restore a severed father-son relationship with Ratnam by openly confronting his abuser, Muthiah, in *The Cord*, or Wiran's plea for audiences to 'stand up' and believe in their 'power to bring about changes'<sup>104</sup> in *1984: Here and Now*, the performances emphasised the options to reclaim agency and empower mutual respect through conscious interventions of change. The Other was never simply a stranger who was completely different and disconnected to the Self, but often an integral part of subjectivity and identity. Hence to contest the relations of power between Selves and Others was also to critique the constitution of the Self as well.

Part of Krishen's politic was thus to show that 'what was happening here' needed to be interrogated and challenged in order for the nation to 'develop' on socio-cultural fronts as well. In a nation with many different communities living together, it was important to show how these separate spheres interact and intersect, and do not just exist as parallel strands. Theatre as a space for intertwining these strands generated spaces where reinventions could occur with greater freedom and fluidity. As such there were no demands of 'authenticity' to curtail what was possible. Hence the weave of multiple texts and cultural elements was not just explored to showcase diversity, but also to examine how intersections and overlaps produced new imaginings of culture that exceeded the inherited frames of race, religion, class and nationality. As such, they encouraged a broader and inclusive view of what it meant to be modern, multicultural and Malaysian. This was something that Krishen would continue to investigate and 'excavate' in the 1990s, particularly as his directorial vision expanded to include interdisciplinary collaborations and heterogenous layerings of scripts in performance.

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<sup>103</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?' in *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 45-7. Agamben examines these concepts in relation to the 'contemporary' as discussed in Chapter One.

<sup>104</sup> Kee, 1984, 272.



## Chapter 4

### Interdisciplinary Performance in the 1990s: Intersections and Overlaps

In 1990, many Malaysians welcomed Mahathir's Vision 2020 which espoused commitment to forging a *Bangsa Malaysia*, a Malaysian nation, which transcended ethnic identities. This objective was to be achieved partly through the creation of an 'economically just' society with inter-ethnic parity. The need to develop a *Bangsa Malaysia* had drawn attention to the issue of equality for all citizens, be they *Bumiputera* or non-*Bumiputera*.<sup>1</sup>

The early 1990s in Malaysia were propelled by an economic boom that affected all areas of life. This was most evident in the changes to urban environments, where a growing number of skyscrapers and megamalls dotted the landscape, and signified bold aspirations to become modern and developed. Urban Malaysians became more cosmopolitan in their lifestyles and value systems, incorporating aspects of the local with the global, balancing the contradictions of these opposing pulls. The in-between spaces of difference, where intersections and overlaps of multiple spheres could accommodate increasing flows of culture, expanded and gained complexity in the process. This was reflected in Krishen's theatre, as will become evident in this chapter. But despite the technological progress, material advancements and apparent cultural liberalization championed by Prime Minister Mahathir himself, prejudicial policies that produced disparities in terms of political entitlement still fuelled resentment and prejudice. As political scientist Edmund Terrence Gomez points out, there was still room for greater 'inter-ethnic parity' and 'equality for all citizens'; and as a result, *many*, even if not *all* Malaysians, 'welcomed' the introduction of the *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race) concept, as it 'espoused commitment' to moving beyond the divide between *Bumiputera* and non-*Bumiputera*, Malay and non-Malay. Yet the political will to realize a 'nation which transcended ethnic identities' was lacking. As historian Sumit Mandal noted, there was still an 'absence of a shared public space within which

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<sup>1</sup> Edmund Terrence Gomez, 'Introduction: politics, business and ethnicity in Malaysia – a state in transition?' in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, equity and reform*, ed. E.T. Gomez, (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 3.

social and cultural differences may be negotiated by dialogical means'.<sup>2</sup> Hence the rhetoric was not translated into concrete realities that demonstrated *real*, rather than '*espoused* commitment' to forging a *Bangsa Malaysia*. However Krishen's theatre was a 'shared public space' where this was consciously attempted through interdisciplinary and collaborative means.

The developments in contemporary English language theatre in the 1990s took up the challenge to articulate alternative and inclusive imaginings of Malaysian culture, and reflected a strong commitment to the ideals of 'inter-ethnic parity'. Even if still limited to upper- and middle-class participation, due to English being the language of the urban elite, it was nonetheless a space for envisioning multi-ethnic and trans-racial notions of Malaysian contemporaneity. I argue that Krishen's large-scale work in the 1990s created complex aesthetic frames for experimenting with how interdisciplinary performance could perform cultural mixes and overlaps. It thus enlarged the in-between spaces to allow for new articulations of difference to emerge. This portrayed contemporary Malaysian culture as more than fusions or syncretisms, to suggest an understanding of multiplicity that was like an 'assemblage' of several influences. In philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's terms, an 'assemblage' is that which 'necessarily changes in nature as it expands its connections'.<sup>3</sup> Thus an assemblage of cultures necessarily encounters shifts in the meanings of culture, as links are extended with other cultures. Difference was not simply about negotiating Others but about how Selves become re-constituted through Others, and continually change through 'expanded connections'. The meanings of Otherness are thus reworked to reduce estrangement and enlarge connectedness.

Krishen's work became noted for his efforts towards forging 'transethnic solidarities', where in Mandal's terms it was possible to experience 'Malaysians participate in society without respect for ethnic backgrounds'.<sup>4</sup> This had been a critical part of Krishen's approach to staging Malaysian identity in the preceding decades, as discussed in Chapters Two and Three. But his work in the 1990s gained complexity because the interdisciplinary artistic collaborations he initiated led to multi-layered interpretations of scripts. In this regard he cultivated a 'critical

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<sup>2</sup> Sumit Mandal, 'Transethnic solidarities, racialisation and social equity,' in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, equity and reform*, ed. E.T. Gomez, (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 50.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 8.

<sup>4</sup> Mandal, 'Transethnic', 50.

cosmopolitan imagination’ which sociologist Gerard Delanty characterises as ‘situated and open, dialogic and transformative’.<sup>5</sup> This enabled Krishen to express how heterogeneity in Malaysian society could be enacted through a weave of different performance texts such as sound, music and visual art. These were used to dramatise the politics of identity in the story and intensify the inner tensions of cultural conflict as well. Audiences were thus provoked to make meaning of these intersections and overlaps by recognising the inter-connectedness of different cultural vocabularies, as symbolic of links between cultures in society.

This chapter looks at Krishen’s achievements in large-scale interdisciplinary performances, and examines how they advanced new paradigms for staging issues of cultural difference in the 1990s. I will first provide a brief overview of the socio-political climate in the early 1990s that produced new cultural concepts such as *Bangsa Malaysia*, and how these developments pertained to Krishen’s theatre. In the following section I consider particular changes in contemporary English language theatre that responded these socio-political shifts, and examine how they influenced Krishen’s theatre-making in relation to the large-scale interdisciplinary productions he directed. (Krishen’s small-scale devised and monologue theatre, which he also directed in the 1990s, will be analysed in Chapter Five.) I will then analyse productions in which Krishen’s interdisciplinary collaborations exemplified his achievements of what it meant to stage a modern Malaysia. Here Krishen’s work embraced a ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’<sup>6</sup> in which there was a greater capacity for intersections and overlaps, even as

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<sup>5</sup> Gerard Delanty, ‘The cosmopolitan imagination: critical cosmopolitanism and social theory,’ *The British Journal of Sociology* Vol. 57, Issue 1, 25-47, (London: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), distinguishes the cosmopolitan imagination as being ‘a form of cultural contestation’ rather than just a global trend of incorporating different cultures. It is ‘reflexive’, ‘internalized’ and ‘defined by an openness’ (38) which engages the tensions between the local and global, universal and particular as the ‘basic animus’ (35) of cosmopolitanism. It thus attends to the politics of difference within as well as between cultures.

<sup>6</sup> Mitchell Cohen, ‘Rooted Cosmopolitanism,’ in *Toward a Global Civil Society*, ed. Michael Walzer, (Oxford: Bergahn Books, 1995), 223-234, proposes the idea of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ as a ‘dialectical concept’ that ‘accepts multiplicity of roots and branches and which rests in the legitimacy of plural loyalties, of standing in many circles, but with common ground’ (233). This revises normative notions of cosmopolitanism which suggest a flattening out of historical and cultural difference, in favour of trends emergent in the large western metropolis. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, eds., *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), provides a comprehensive range of deliberations on the links between the national and the cosmopolitan and the ensuing relationships between them that are not necessarily oppositional. Bruce Robbins, ‘Introduction Part I: Actually Existing Cosmopolitanism,’ in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, eds. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 1-19, discusses the various cosmopolitanisms, including ‘vernacular’, ‘discrepant’ and ‘rooted’. Pheng Cheah, ‘Introduction Part II: The Cosmopolitical – Today,’ in *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling beyond the Nation*, eds.

situated and particular identities were sustained. These performances exceeded Krishen's earlier work, in that they went beyond cultural fusions and blurring boundaries to assert a layered interconnectedness. The two productions are Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* (1995),<sup>7</sup> which Krishen co-directed with director-actor Joe Hasham; and *Family – A Visual Performance Event* (1998), where Krishen and visual artist-curator, Wong Hoy Cheong co-directed a site-specific performance based on a text by Leow Puay Tin. These performances were important because of their rich reflections on the ideals and problems of creating a *Bangsa Malaysia*, and their capacity to embody a vision of contemporary Malaysian multiplicity that encouraged audiences to rethink culture through 'dialogical means'.<sup>8</sup>

### **The Challenges of *Bangsa Malaysia***

The early 1990s in Malaysia, particularly in the capital city Kuala Lumpur, was a time of economic boom that changed the landscape of urban life in significant ways. It created an enlarged urban middle- and upper-class whose lifestyles and value systems became a complex mix of the local and global. This reflected a 'rooted cosmopolitanism' which acknowledged the mixes and overlaps within cultures, even when there were 'plural dimensions of human identity which don't rest easily with each other, and sometimes not at all'.<sup>9</sup> The fluidity of being between one cultural realm and another became more common. Thus while notions of being Malay, Chinese and Indian continued to have social and political significance, the inter-related notions of being Malaysian, global and cosmopolitan were also gaining ground. This section examines how particular changes in Malaysian socio-politics in the early 1990s encouraged more inclusive frames of culture, and the state began to support inter-ethnic, even if not entirely trans-ethnic, frames of identity. It argues that the buoyancy of the economy reduced anxieties about inter-racial conflicts, creating more focus on economic status than on cultural recognition when

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Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 20-44, looks at how the 'cosmopolitical' is a 'mutating global field' in which the opposition between cosmopolitanism and nationalism is question, and the hyphen between the nation and the state inform the relationship with the global.

<sup>7</sup> As there are no available video-recordings of the production, I have based these observations on the unpublished playscript and my memory of the production. Having been one of the performers in the contemporary gamelan ensemble, I watched several rehearsals and was present at all the performances.

<sup>8</sup> Mandal, 'Transethnic', 50.

<sup>9</sup> Cohen, 'Rooted', 224.

compared to the 1980s. The move to commodify and capitalise on Malaysian multiculturalism as a selling point for global tourism also produced less unitary Malay-centric official representations of Malaysian culture. However, these notions of multiculturalism were still reductivist and presented as parallel streams of co-existence. Within this context, Krishen's theatre took on the challenge of asserting an alternative multiculturalism that challenged the state's version of essentialised cultures, to embody the overlaps and intersections that in fact echoed the ideals of a *Bangsa Malaysia*.

While the early decades of Malaysian nationalism had been focused on Malay culture and history, the early 1990s was a time of shifting the focus towards more inclusive frames. As seen in Chapter Two, the New Economic Policy (NEP, 1971-1990) and National Culture Policy provided a clear focus for reinforcing the centrality of the Malay position and identity in the early years of modernisation. But the introduction of the National Development Policy (NDP, 1990-2000), to replace the NEP, and the launching of Prime Minister Mahathir's Vision 2020, altered this focus. The NDP was geared towards a liberalisation of the economy that would fuel faster economic growth through increasing privatisation, industrialisation and technological advancements. As part of this shift, Mahathir presented his aspirations for Malaysia to become a fully developed nation by the year 2020 in a working paper entitled 'The Way Forward - Vision 2020'. Within his projections of what it meant for Malaysia to become fully developed, Mahathir introduced the idea of a *Bangsa Malaysia* (Malaysian Race), which in his terms,

... means people who are able to identify themselves with the country, speak *Bahasa Malaysia* (the Malaysian Language) and accept the Constitution. To realize the goal of *Bangsa Malaysia*, the people should start accepting each other as they are, regardless of race and religion.<sup>10</sup>

This promoted the idea that it was necessary to initiate a national culture that looked beyond racial and religious categories once there was economic parity among races. The need to 'start accepting each other' suggested this was still not being practiced, despite being an independent nation for more than three decades. The 'anticipation that ethnicity would subside as a factor of

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<sup>10</sup> Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamed, cited in Francis K.W. Loh, 'Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse,' in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, eds. Francis K.W. Loh and Khoo, Boo Teik, (London: Curzon Press, 2002), 33.

politics’<sup>11</sup> in the emphasis towards economic growth for all races, was ‘in tune with the neo-liberal thrust of globalism’<sup>12</sup> that also saw state-driven efforts to move towards more deregulation and cultural liberalization. As political scientist Francis Loh notes, there was ‘a shift from a more exclusive to a more inclusive notion of nationhood’.<sup>13</sup> This was evident in the reconfiguration of what was crucial in Malay identity, and reflected in the reduced significance of Malay emblems of culture, such as the position of Malay rulers and the diminishing priority of the Malay language. Thus the state was looking to promote a Malaysian identity that reflected a diversity of cultures, even if still separated by categories.

However the term *Bangsa Malaysia* was itself laden with questions about how to imagine and experience national identity that transcended race. As *Bangsa* is a Malay word that can mean both ‘race’ and ‘nationality’, *Bangsa Malaysia* conflates race with nationality to create a ‘Malaysian national-race’ that groups members of all races together, seemingly erasing boundaries between them. Yet if it remained a Malay-based construct, lodged in Malay culture, Malay language, and a constitution that prioritised Malays, then it appeared more like a project to *assimilate* other races. In addition, the envisioned ideal of racial equality that was alluded to by no less than the Prime Minister was met with little enthusiasm among the majority population of Malays, who believed this would jeopardise their special position. The concrete details of what it would take to realise the goal of a *Bangsa Malaysia* were never made clear, and thus the idea was met with more scepticism than enthusiasm.

Furthermore, the Malays were being pushed to modernise and become *Melayu Baru* (New Malay) - able to adapt to the demands of the modern world and yet retain crucial elements of conventional Malay-ness. This was Mahathir’s way of shaping a Malay community that would valorise entrepreneurial skills and no longer depend on the patronage of the state. It was also an attempt to corporatize Malay culture by aligning it with global culture. The ‘New Malay’ was effectively a *glocalised* Malay who represented a ‘new Malaysia’. This was someone with a capacity to participate professionally in secular, economic and technological spheres, while

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<sup>11</sup> Johan Saravanamuttu, ‘The Eve of the 1999 General Election: From the NEP to Reformasi,’ in *New Politics in Malaysia*, eds. Francis Loh & Johan Saravanamuttu (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003), 1.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>13</sup> See Francis K.W. Loh, ‘Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse,’ in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, eds. Francis K.W. Loh and Khoo, Boo Teik (London: Curzon Press, 2002) 28-34.

sustaining a communal connection that prioritized religious beliefs, cultural practices and traditional values in domestic and social terrains. Nonetheless, the majority of Malays, mostly rural and distanced from an urban sensibility, were barely affected by these provocations. From their perspectives there was little motivation to change. Thus when historian Khoo Boo Teik critiques the Mahathir 'dream of creating a *Bangsa Malaysia*' as yet another 'Mahathirist contradiction' because his politics were clearly based on ethnicised approaches to governance, Khoo also admits it is important to consider the 'dream' as part of his larger plan to see Malaysia as a fully developed nation, where economic progress would exceed race-based politics and lead to a 'full partnership' between Malays and non-Malays.<sup>14</sup> This 'dream' is echoed in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, as well as in other plays that were written during the 1990s, seeking to express what it meant to move beyond race yet retain a sense of difference as part of Malaysian history.

The continued struggle to manage racial difference in socio-political terms did not mean there were no significant changes. Material wealth and affluence played a major role in cutting across race among those in higher social echelons. Economic buoyancy produced a larger urban middle- and upper-class of Malaysians, and there was more concern about issues of capital gain than national cohesion, civil liberty or cultural representation. Thus in Francis Loh's view, 'developmentalism' replaced 'ethnicism', creating more tolerance for the disparities across racial boundaries and giving priority to economic and material well-being. The 'consuming individual' valorised 'political stability' above social equity, in order to enjoy the 'freedom' to express the self through purchase rather than political purpose.<sup>15</sup> Culture, in terms of its dissolution or the recognition of difference, became less of a priority. Individualism exceeded communal priorities, and this augured well for consumerism, extravagant lifestyles and a burgeoning appetite for luxury and branded goods. As a result, the desire to become bourgeois and correspondingly, 'consume' art as part of an upper-class urban mentality, created a larger market for cultural products and arts events. This impacted on the contemporary theatre landscape and will be examined further in the next section.

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<sup>14</sup> Khoo Boo Teik, *Paradoxes of Mahathirism*, (Kuala Lumpur: Oxford University Press, 1995), 334.

<sup>15</sup> Loh, 'Developmentalism', 41-49.



Another dimension of change was that the state also saw an economic value in ‘selling’ Malaysian multiplicity as a desirable commodity to a growing international tourist industry. The Tourist Development Corporation of Malaysia (TDC), initially an agency under the former Ministry of Trade and Industry, was moved to the Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism (MOCAT) when it was created in 1987, and subsequently became the Malaysia Tourism Promotion Board (MPTB) in 1992.<sup>16</sup> The officially sanctioned link between culture and tourism, made evident the state’s intent to capitalise on Malaysia’s diverse heritage in arts and culture and profit from a growing travel industry. In the early 1990s it initiated a widespread tourism programme that commodified Malaysia’s cultural diversity to promote the country as an ideal destination in which to experience an alleged totality of Asian cultures. Using the slogan ‘Malaysia, Truly Asia’, the Malaysian Tourism Board marketed the idea that Asian diversity, encapsulated mainly in Chinese, Indian and Malay cultures, could be experienced in one place. In addition, the traditional was located alongside the modern, such that exotic food and ritualistic performances could be experienced in the contemporary comfort of luxury resorts and air-conditioned urban shopping malls.<sup>17</sup> Ironically this reiterated the notion that Malaysians could be essentialised into a ‘truly’ identifiable ‘Asian’ construct that was itself a rare concoction of distinct multiplicity – old and new, traditional and modern.

However the ‘real life’ of Malaysians negotiating cultural difference was sadly missing from this image of a multicultural ‘paradise’. The unique ‘selling points’ for the MPTB were the essentialised cultures that co-existed in parallel streams, instead of the intersections and crossings that were lived on a daily basis. These everyday ‘convivialities’<sup>18</sup> that attended to the emergent aspects of cultural change and interaction were barely seen as suitable for commodifiable exoticisation. Cultural theorist Paul Gilroy claims that one of the ‘virtues’ of looking at the ‘convivial’ is that it enjoys a ‘radical openness’ which then ‘turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification’.<sup>19</sup> These emergent in-between cultures were missing

<sup>16</sup> ‘About Us.’ Tourism Malaysia, accessed November 11, 2011. <http://corporate.tourism.gov.my/aboutus.asp>.

<sup>17</sup> Tourism Malaysia, the official website for Malaysian tourism includes a description of the country as follows: ‘One of Malaysia’s key attractions is its extreme contrasts. Towering skyscrapers look down upon wooden houses built on stilts, and five-star hotels sit several metres away from ancient reefs. Cool hideaways are found in the highlands that roll down to warm, sandy beaches and rich, humid mangroves.’

<sup>18</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (Columbia University Press, New York, 2005), xv.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

from the MPTB representation of Malaysian multiculturalism. Instead of refuting ‘fixed, and reified identity’<sup>20</sup> in order to generate improvisational and imaginative expressions of multiplicity that allowed for a dynamic mix, there was a reiteration of primordial identities that sustained the divisive official rhetoric.

Krishen’s theatre was however a space that did attend to these ‘convivial’ and inter-related aspects of culture, and posited frames of cultural multiplicity that challenged the mainstream and official tropes of Malaysian identity. It also developed what cultural theorist Chen Kuan-Hsing terms ‘critical syncretism’, in which there were spaces that encouraged ‘becoming others to actively interiorize elements of others into the subjectivity of self, so as to move beyond the boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed’.<sup>21</sup> This meant acknowledging the mutual imbrication of Selves and Others, as well as playing with the inter-relatedness that made it possible to interrogate ‘boundaries and divisive positions’ and thus dismantle their power to curtail choice and agency. This was an evolved stage of the ‘intense questioning’ and ‘theatrical syncretism’ that Krishen began in the 1970s. Here he did not just show how cultural boundaries were porous and permeable, but went further to ‘interiorize elements of others’ by using movement, sonic, visual and spoken texts from different cultures within a performance. This performed how individuals and cultures were complex composites that incorporated difference to expand a sense of contemporariness. Hence his experiments in contemporary English language theatre in the 1990s were concrete embodiments of how Malaysians could create alternatives that were mixed, intersecting and overlapping, embodying the aspirations and contradictions inherent in forging a *Bangsa Malaysia*.

### Enlarging the In-Between Space for Experimentation

The support for English language theatre in Malaysia, particularly in the fast-growing capital city of Kuala Lumpur, increased significantly in the early 1990s. More urban professionals sought bourgeois lifestyles and cultivated an appetite for attending performances, purchasing arts works and ‘consuming’ culture that would elevate their social position. Theatre

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Chen Kuan-Hsing, ‘The Decolonization Question,’ in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, eds. Kuan-Hsing Chen with Hsiu-Ling Kuo, Hans Hang and Hsu Ming-Chu, (London: Routledge, 1998), 25.

benefitted from this surge of interest and many new developments occurred in the 1990s that were unprecedented in the terrain of contemporary English language theatre in Malaysia. Several new theatre companies were started, and increased corporate and state funding for the arts made it possible for some theatre practitioners to become fully professional and earn their living entirely from theatre. New theatre venues, funded by both private and public institutions, were set up and they generated a range of activity, including festivals and training opportunities for aspiring theatre practitioners.<sup>22</sup> A wider diversity of performance-making and viewing became available, and English language theatre became a significant dimension of the cultural spectrum in Malaysia. This made it conducive for Krishen's theatre to expand in its approach, style and experimentation. Krishen also challenged his own artistic expertise by seeking interdisciplinary collaborations with a wide range of artists, visual artists in particular. His artistic vision grew to incorporate a more regional sense of contemporariness, looking beyond Malaysia to engage in issues of theatre-making. This section looks at how the changes in English language theatre led to a new climate of theatre production for practitioners, and how it impacted on the choices Krishen made during this period. It argues that Krishen's capacity to make further advances in his staging of an alternative multiculturalism in theatre was possible because of the larger shifts in society that were creating more rooted and cosmopolitan frames for identity. Collaborations with different artists made his work more expressive of the conflicts and contradictions of multiplicity, through interdisciplinary performance that enlarged the spaces for looking at how overlaps and intersections produce new experiences of culture.

English language theatre in Malaysia became a more officially recognized part of Malaysian culture in the 1990s, compared to its position in earlier decades. As a result more acknowledgment was given to how English language scripts and performances were part of an indigenous and local sensibility. This was due in part to a 'softening political stand towards English', which included amendments to the Education Act of 1996 that allowed for English to be used at tertiary level in order to make Malaysian graduates 'more competitive in the global market'.<sup>23</sup> This was a further development of changes begun in the 1980s, as discussed in

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<sup>22</sup> See Kathy Rowland, 'The Politics of Drama: Post-1969 State Policies and Their Impact on Theatre in English in Malaysia from 1970 to 1999' (MA diss., National University of Singapore, 2004) 129-175, for extensive discussion of the developments in English language theatre in the 1990s.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 131-2

Chapter Three, when English was seen by the state as a ‘neutral’ language for modernisation. Efforts were boosted in the 1990s to stress the utilitarian value of English, and the population was encouraged to improve their standards of competence in English. The colonial association with English was diluted but not denied as, apart from providing access to a global market, it also added another dimension to Malaysian heritage as a boost to tourism. Thus theatre in English gained recognition as part of Malaysian culture and an earlier need to ‘prove’ its local value had diminished. As a result there was less need to ‘indigenise’ English language theatre with local and Asian influences, and more interest in making it ‘international’ by drawing from the metropolitan west. This aligned with a certain urban, westernised and cosmopolitan sophistication that was growing in the arts industry as well.

To enhance its image as a nation that endorsed multicultural diversity and allowed for non-Malay languages to be represented as part of its cultural identity, the state also increased its support for English language theatre. As Kathy Rowland points out, ‘English [language theatre] appeared to move into the realm of acceptability’ in relation to the state, as there was even support for English translations of Malay plays, particularly those presented by well-known bilingual theatre artists who were Malay, such as theatre stalwarts Syed Alwi and Rahim Razali.<sup>24</sup> The state also began to include less Malay-based stagings of culture as part of its official purview, and thus encouraged English language theatre practitioners and companies to participate in state-funded arts festivals that celebrated the new Malaysian identity. In the mid-1990s, English language theatre companies were invited to stage large-scale performances in the MATIC (Malaysian Tourism Information Centre) Auditorium as part of *MalaysiaFest*, a festival of cultural events organized by the Ministry of Culture Arts and Tourism (MOCAT). Substantial state-funding was allocated to one production a year, and resources such as rent-free or discounted rates for rehearsal and performance spaces were made more readily available as well. More corporate and public support in terms of funding and infrastructural sponsorship made it possible to initiate work on a larger scale and experiment with bigger creative teams and casts.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 138-9. Rowland notes that the ‘re-entry of Rahim and Syed Alwi into theatre in English, which both had left after 1969, offers an insight into the ‘changing fortunes of the English language’, as it pointed to a greater broadmindedness on the part of the state and Malay language theatre practitioners, to support work in English as well as Malay.

<sup>25</sup> One example of this development was in 1997, ASTRO, Malaysia’s first satellite television station, embarked on long-term sponsorship of two theatre companies, Five Arts Centre and DramaLab. This included covering the cost

In some cases theatre companies collaborated with each other to pool their resources in joint productions that brought together creative, administrative and technical personnel. In 1995, Five Arts Centre and The Actors Studio co-produced Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* for *MalaysiaFest*, and this was the first English language theatre play that was showcased by MOCAT. It was co-directed by Krishen Jit, from Five Arts Centre, and Joe Hasham, from The Actor's Studio. From 1995-1997, Krishen co-directed three of the *MalaysiaFest* English language theatre performances. Apart from *Scorpion Orchid* in 1995, he and Hasham co-directed *The Trees* by Malik Imtiaz Sarwar in 1997. He also co-directed *Storyteller*, a musical by Jit Murad, with Zahim Albakri from DramaLab, in 1996. These were large-scale interdisciplinary collaborations in which Krishen and his co-directors worked with choreographers and musicians. Together they created elaborate performances that staged an alternative multicultural Malaysia, exceeding the tropes of Malaysian tourism or official state representations of culture. They underlined how cultures in Malaysia were inter-related and not neatly delineated, and initiated styles of performance that showed how the juxtapositions and interpellations were in fact aspects of Malaysian indigeneity. In this manner they questioned the mainstream portrayals of Malaysian multiplicity by positing more inter- and trans-ethnic imaginings of contemporary society.

The kinds of plays that were being written for the English language theatre stage in Malaysia also reflected more diverse ideas of what it meant to be Malaysian, modern and multicultural, when compared with earlier decades. There were more attempts to express 'rooted cosmopolitan' imaginings of Malaysian culture in which 'multiple belongings' and 'overlapping allegiances'<sup>26</sup> were foregrounded as ordinary aspects of Malaysian life. To span a range of differences within individuals and cultures was increasingly acknowledged as part of contemporariness, and more efforts were made to validate these choices. A broader range of

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of rental for separate offices and a joint rehearsal space, as well as salaries for an administrator and producer. It meant theatre companies such as Five Arts, which had operated largely out of personal sponsorship and individual homes, could hire full-time theatre workers and rent spaces where they could set up an office and rehearsal venue. They could also undertake to plan a season of work, compared to just ad hoc performances. This signalled a commitment to making theatre a serious profession, in a climate where privatization and the spirit of entrepreneurship were being espoused as the way forward. See Kathy Rowland, 'Politics of Drama', 144-149, for further discussion of state and corporate sponsorship in the 1990s.

<sup>26</sup> 'Multiple belongings' and 'overlapping allegiances' are phrases frequently used in the discourse on cosmopolitanism, to discuss identity constructs as inherently plural even in seemingly homogenous cultures. They challenge the idea that 'singular' belongings and 'distinct' allegiances, ideas propagated by nationalism and communalism are the only valid basis on which to build a sense of social cohesion.

playwrights were emerging, as new theatre companies were created and thus there was a bigger demand for scripts. Writers such as Jit Murad and Malik Imtiaz Sarwar, whose work was performed as part of *MalaysiaFest*, as mentioned earlier, were young Malay writers, who chose to write in English, and thus altered earlier notions of English language theatre writers being largely from non-Malay backgrounds. The conscious choice to write in English rather than Malay was explained by Jit as a ‘resistance to having the idea of “Malayness” prescribed to me by voices of authority’.<sup>27</sup> Thus the aspiration was to go beyond these boundaries and look at culture from a range of perspectives, including non-racialised or trans-ethnic lenses.<sup>28</sup>

Within this context of expansion in the 1990s, Krishen’s theatre became markedly diverse as a result of three main factors. First, he retired from full-time lecturing at the University of Malaya in 1994, and thus devoted most of his time to directing. He stopped writing reviews and continued to teach theatre, but only on a part-time basis. Second, Krishen began to develop a more regional perspective on contemporary theatre, travelling to various parts of Southeast Asia to observe and engage in dialogues with contemporary theatre practitioners. This widened his understanding of how to recreate and reinvent local performance vocabularies through indigenous experimental approaches to theatre-making that were often about the interactions between the traditional and the contemporary.<sup>29</sup> This also led him to direct regularly in the neighbouring city-state of Singapore, where he was appointed Dramaturg of the avant-garde theatre company TheatreWorks from 1988 till 1994. Krishen collaborated closely with Ong Keng Sen, Singaporean director and artistic director of TheatreWorks, on several projects that focused on indigenizing contemporary English language theatre by initiating interdisciplinary

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<sup>27</sup> Jit Murad, cited in Rowland, ‘Politics of Drama’, 165.

<sup>28</sup> *Storyteller* by Jit Murad is about a fictional storyteller’s encounter with a community of contented villagers who live in close synchronicity with Nature and are faced with the challenges of change that come from the ‘outside’ world. They are not specified as belonging to any particular race, which suggests they could be ‘global villagers’ in their trans-ethnic identity. Likewise, *Trees* by Malik Imtiaz Sarwar was a dramatisation of a short story about the importance of Nature in preserving the sanctity of life. Here too, the issue of human beings alienated from their inner selves served to encourage a rethinking of global capitalism and the seduction of material wealth, rather than emphasise a preoccupation with racial constructs. The staging of both these plays saw the directors draw from Southeast Asian vocabularies of music and movement to underline a regional sensibility as part of being Malaysian.

<sup>29</sup> Among those whose works were influential in this process were Singaporean writer-director Kuo Pao Kun, Indonesian writer-directors Putu Wijaya and Arifin Noer, Filipino writer-director Amelia Bonifacio and researcher Nicholas Tiongson, who were pioneering contemporary theatre artists in the Southeast Asian region.

frameworks for experimenting with modernity in Southeast Asia.<sup>30</sup> Krishen's close involvement with TheatreWorks also led to several exchanges between Five Arts Centre and TheatreWorks in the 1990s, which Ong describes as part of a 'Malayan' sensibility that recognised the close links between Singapore and Malaysia, and nurtured continuing cultural ties across the national boundary.<sup>31</sup> Third, Krishen responded to the advances in the Malaysian arts terrain, which became more interested in inclusive ideas about culture and identity, and thus increasingly open to the challenging interpretations and staging strategies he provoked for active viewing.

Two major developments in relation to Krishen's stagings of difference emerged in these large-scale interdisciplinary productions he directed. First, Krishen's collaborations with multi-disciplinary artists led to performances that embodied and enacted more complex processes of interaction between different cultural vocabularies. Elements of movement and music became critically linked to dramatizations of scripts, and thus inflected their meanings. For example, in the production of Malaysian writer-performer Leow Puay Tin's play, *3 Children*, which Krishen co-directed with Ong Keng Sen in Singapore in 1988, and then again for an international tour to Tokyo, Yokohama and Kuala Lumpur in 1992, the directors created a rigorous working process. It involved actors in extensive imaginative explorations of the movement vocabularies used in performance. This non-linear play tells the story of three modern adults who embark on a fantastical journey that delves into childhood memory, as they go in search of an elusive sanctuary. The script specifies the use of Chinese Opera gestures and staging elements such as a bare stage with only a table and three stools, and incorporates rhythms of Hokkien (a Chinese dialect) into the text. Thus the directors' task was to translate this fragmented, dream-like and abstract world, inflected by traditional vocabularies of performance, onto the contemporary stage. To integrate elements of modernity and tradition, the East and West, in a stylised and highly physical enactment of the text, the directors created a process of training and preparation in which the actors had to learn physical skills and vocabularies, like learning new languages, in order to 'speak' them on stage. They had to learn Tai Ici, Chinese Opera, and go on field trips to

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<sup>30</sup> This included the TheatreWorks Flying Circus Project, begun in 1996, in which Asian traditional practitioners engaged with contemporary performers in transmission of traditional techniques which were then deconstructed to meet with the instincts and abilities of the contemporary performer in his/her context.

<sup>31</sup> Ong Keng Sen, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2007.



Malacca, a small historical city in Malaysia, where the play is set.<sup>32</sup> This was aimed at equipping the actors with what the directors termed a ‘biological behaviour’ and subsequently ‘biological memory’ that became ‘entry points into the psychological stances of the characters’.<sup>33</sup> Not only did this provide the actors with sensuous and physical connections with the cultural milieu of the play, the use of contrasting physical vocabularies also ‘evoke(d) a poetic expression that would match that of the play’ and thus enable a resonant ‘gesture language to effect the relentless state of transformation in the performance’.<sup>34</sup> The directors also collaborated with musician-composers Mark Chan and Sunetra Fernando, who experimented with traditional, folk, experimental and popular music, to develop a soundscape that incorporated elements of Chinese, Malay and western influences. This provided a ‘poetic expression’ of non-verbal sounds that added further nuances of mix and overlap, to enhance the sense of ‘relentless transformation’ and an ongoing interweave of cultures. The result was a complex assemblage of contemporary culture as an ever-shifting aesthetic that emerged as a fleeting yet vivid articulation of what it meant to be ‘Malayan’, modern and part of a wider multi-cultural sensibility of artistic production.

Another development in Krishen’s theatre was his close collaboration with visual artists, who were not just engaged to design sets but invited to install their works as part of the performance. This collaborative dialogue with the visual arts was not new to Krishen’s process in theatre, having worked with major artists such as Ismail Zain and Syed Ahmad Jamal in the 1970s. But it developed significantly in the 1990s, in large part due to his association with artist-curator Wong Hoy Cheong. Wong’s insights and skills as a multi-disciplinary artist<sup>35</sup> allowed for strong visual direction, and generated bold engagements with materials and space as dynamic texts within theatre. In 1994 Krishen collaborated with Wong as visual director, to develop a

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<sup>32</sup> Getting urban and often culturally westernised actors to learn Asian vocabularies of physical movement was something Krishen had begun to do in *The Cord*, where the three main actors had to learn *kalari payat*, an Indian martial art form, as mentioned in Chapter Three.

<sup>33</sup> Krishen and Ong, ‘Director’s Notes,’ in *3 Children*, by Leow Puay Tin, (Singapore: NUS Theatre – Southeast Asian Play Series, 1992), x-xiv.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Wong had been involved in performance in a range of ways prior to co-directing with Krishen. Apart from his own interest in theatre, he had directed, produced and designed for theatre in a range of performances. As someone who had also created installations and been a performance artist, his capacity to weave the multiple trajectories of visual arts practice were crucial in bringing together the different elements in the direction of *Family – A Visual-Performance Event* that will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

complex envisioning of K.S. Maniam's *Skin Trilogy* as a site-specific performance in which visual artists, dancers, musicians and actors created separate but inter-related performance texts, which were combined to create a multi-dimensional and multi-perspectival response to the script. The three plays were about a futuristic Malaysia in which race becomes a dystopian form of control and power. They examine how three Malaysian couples from the three main racial groups, Malay, Chinese and Indian, are caught up in a fictional future of depersonalized belongings, struggling to sustain connectedness with each other and their communities when strong forces continuously push them apart. The performance was held over three weekends at the former National Art Gallery in Kuala Lumpur, previously the colonial Majestic Hotel building that had been converted into a gallery space. Well-known Malaysian visual artists Bayu Utomo Radjikin, Hasnul J. Saidon, Liew Kung Yu, Nur Hanim Khairuddin, Simryn Gill and Zulkifly Yusoff, were invited to create installation works all over the gallery space as their response to the playwright's text. Musicians led by Sunetra Fernando, and dancers led by Lena Ang, were also invited to create work that would be performed simultaneously with the scripted text, within and around these installations. The actors, who rehearsed the text with Krishen, focused on how to inhabit and enact the story. When the three groups of performers finally came together in performance, the instruction was for musicians and dancers to respond to the actors as well as the installations in the space, and create their own interactions and intersections as they saw fit. There was no scripted sequence or rehearsed format for the interactions. The purpose was to place audiences in the in-between space of creative production, where they were invited to engage in an experience of spontaneous connections that moderated the text way beyond its spoken dimensions.<sup>36</sup> The visual texts, in the form of the installations and the art gallery itself, were permanent fixtures in an otherwise ephemeral experience, prodding audiences to interact critically with theatre as a site where multiple layers of aesthetic and political meaning are connected through a shared frame – in this instance the space *and* the script. A multicultural future was thus envisaged in a multi-dimensional performance of diverse artistic expressions that

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<sup>36</sup> Soon Choon Mee, *Pengarahan Teater: Suatu Kajian Tentang Sumbangan Krishen Jit* (Directing Theatre: A Study on the Contribution of Krishen Jit), (Kuala Lumpur: unpublished MA thesis, University of Malaya, 2001), 201-236, analyses Krishen's staging of *Skin Trilogy* and discusses his reasons for allowing the musicians and dancers a certain autonomy that was unusual in theatre-making, as the director is usually responsible for weaving the various performative elements together. She points to his interest in decentralizing the text, as well as allowing for multiple performative layers to interact organically in an attempt to collaborate with fellow artists in more egalitarian ways.

did not delineate culture according to bounded notions of race, but projected ideas of a more expansive in-betweenness that was inter-ethnic, yet conscious of the power relations between Selves and Others.

The two plays that I will examine in the following sections will show how these earlier attempts to wield different performative texts as dramatisations of the story enabled Krishen to advance his ideas about how issues of cultural difference could be staged with greater depth and intricate nuances of meaning through interdisciplinary work. They also articulated ideas about envisioning a Malaysian future that resonated with the *Bangsa Malaysia* concept, but concretised these notions and confronted the conflicts that emerged in efforts to imagine its embodied possibility.

### Staging Multi-Cultural Tensions in Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*

GUAN KHENG: I'll tell you one thing this bloody mess has made me realise. I'm Chinese. Nothing will change that.

PETER: Yeah. You be Chinese, I'll stick with the Brits, Santi can go back to Madras, and Sabran back to Kuala Pilah. All those talks we had in the hostel, those nights we stayed up and dreamed – that was stupid, wasn't it?

*(They wander about, taking one direction first, then another. Sounds of unrest in the city in the background. PETER lags behind.)*<sup>37</sup>

*Scorpion Orchid* by Lloyd Fernando is a play about four friends from different racial backgrounds, who struggle with a sense of cultural displacement when caught up in the turbulence of the early 1950s in Singapore, then part of British Malaya. The conflicts they face as young, educated, urban, male individuals who have to choose between racial, national and social identities that contradict each other, commented boldly on the problems of multi-racialism in Malaysia. The play pointed to how cultural difference has been a significant part of the history of Malaysian nationhood, and grappled with questions of what it meant to negotiate multiplicity, when surrounding forces of politics and communalism veered towards singularity. In the production that Krishen co-directed with Joe Hasham in 1995, the directors worked carefully to bring out the politics of this history by bringing to life the inner tensions of the play through

<sup>37</sup> Lloyd Fernando, *Scorpion Orchid*, unpublished script, 30.

incorporating non-verbal texts as well. Krishen and Hasham worked closely with musician-composer Sunetra Fernando, and dancer-choreographer, Aida Redza, in an interdisciplinary collaborative process. They enlarged the interpretive possibilities of the script by generating layers of sound and movement that would dramatise the script, apart from heightening its intensity. This articulated a dialogical approach to the meaning of the play by allowing for the multiple performance strands to impact on each other. These were put together to create many intersections and crossings, rather than neatly delineated parallel narratives. This section looks at how the performance embodied a politics of cultural difference, in a form that allowed audiences to experience the ‘critical syncretism’<sup>38</sup> of Malaysian multi-culture, and enacted its conflicts and contradictions through dialogical means.

The play, based on Lloyd Fernando’s novel of the same name published in 1976, highlights how the beginnings of Malayan society were burdened with issues of belonging and rejection in the new politics of nationhood. The four main characters, Sabran, Santinathan, Guan Kheng and Peter, who are Malay, Indian, Chinese and Eurasian respectively, question the meaning of becoming Malayan citizens when each is made to feel a different sense of security, insecurity and entitlement. As undergraduates at the University of Malaya, then located in Singapore, they are on one level well-positioned as educated, urban young men, who share aspirations for a just and equitable society once the British colonial powers leave. However on another level they are forced to rethink these ideals when faced with their differentiated positions in society, by virtue of their race. Hence Sabran, as a Malay man, has a greater sense of clarity and confidence about his loyalty to a Malay-led independent nation, while the rest are made to feel anxious about whether they will be accorded shared rights to dignity and respect. In this regard the play looked at what it meant to be a Malayan, which effectively signified being Malaysian. It showed how the early constructs of the nation-state were already plagued by conflicts of disparity and how to deal with multiplicity within Malay-centric constructs of national identity. Eventually the four friends dispersed and chose to be ‘left alone’<sup>39</sup> – signalling their disenchantment with initial ‘dreams’ of unity, camaraderie and solidarity.

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<sup>38</sup> Chen, ‘Decolonization’, 25.

<sup>39</sup> This is a phrase echoed by one character after another towards the end of the play, when each one confronts an inability to get beyond their differences, and thus choose to part company from each other.

Literary scholar and writer, Lloyd Fernando, examined a period that was in his terms ‘emblematic of the depths of our society’ because the struggle to deal with the ‘plurality of the people’ began in these early stages of nationhood.<sup>40</sup> Inasmuch as there was a sense of hope and promise in the lead up to independence from colonial rule in 1957, there were also conflicts manifested in violence and ruptures of the social fabric prior to this event. Racial riots and union strikes that occurred in the early and mid-1950s were the result of irreconcilable differences between segments of society seeking to wield power. Amid the turbulence of this wider context, the characters in the play have to confront mindless brutality as a result of this fragmentation, such as when Peter is attacked by strangers who appear to target him for being Eurasian. The racial group Eurasian was seen as being in favour of colonial rule, and thus associated with being more ‘white’ than ‘coloured’, and hence ‘foreign’ not ‘local’. This makes Peter susceptible to being targeted as the ‘enemy’ during the anti-colonial period. The four friends are also seen dealing with the dissolution of their lives, as the play begins with Santinathan’s family preparing to return to India even as he decides to stay behind and take his chances with the new Malaya. Hence, despite generations of multiplicity in the country, it was, in Fernando’s terms no less a challenge to ‘start learning from scratch how to live with each other’<sup>41</sup> as the nation was preparing for self-rule. The ‘bloody mess’ and the ‘unrest’ that prod Guan Kheng and Peter to ‘stick with’ their assigned racial identities, as seen in the excerpt at the start of this section, and thus abandon the shared dreams that transcended these divides, symbolised the difficulties of sustaining friendship and solidarity when they are pulled in ‘one direction first, then another.’ This was relevant to urban Malaysia in the 1990s, where despite economic affluence and political stability, questions of belonging and acceptance still created unease. There were strong doubts that a *Bangsa Malaysia* could be realised.

The play is about the history of the Malaysian nation and issues of identity in Malaysian society, although set in the port-city of Singapore during pre-independence Malaya. The politics of racial difference is negotiated in a context where the Malays are seen as dominant and non-Malays struggle to deal with the implications of this reality. In Krishen’s view race relations was ‘something very real in Malaysia’ in the 1990s, and thus in his terms, even though ‘the play is set

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<sup>40</sup> Lloyd Fernando, ‘Writer’s Notes’ in *Scorpion Orchid* Programme Booklet (Kuala Lumpur: 1995).

<sup>41</sup> Lloyd Fernando, quoted in Joanna Abishegam, ‘Lloyd Fernando – from page to stage,’ *Sunday Style*, September 17, 1995.

in the 50s, it [the production] won't be recapturing the past but will be very much about the present'.<sup>42</sup> This was a change from when Krishen first co-directed the play with actress-director Lok Meng Chue in Singapore, as a TheatreWorks production in 1994. There the play worked very differently because in Krishen's opinion, 'Singapore in the 50s was very remote for the Singaporeans' and thus the performers and audience 'related to it with more of a sense of nostalgia than an issue which impinged upon them'.<sup>43</sup> In contrast the immediacy of race relations was potent in 1990s Malaysia, and continued to manifest itself in tensions of prejudice.<sup>44</sup> Even among the urban educated elite, who formed the majority of the English language theatre audience, conflicts of loyalty and the precarity of cultural ties produced anxieties that resembled those of the four young men in the play.

To convey an alternative multiculturalism in theatre, the directors used a range of strategies to develop a 'radical openness'<sup>45</sup> in staging cultural identity that consciously reduced the 'dimensions of racial difference'.<sup>46</sup> This was evident in the staging of the main characters, who were cast and costumed in ways that dismantled stereotypical appearances of race. Hence Santinathan played by Hans Isaac, and Sabran played by Zahim Albakri, were performed by actors of mixed race, and thus visually conveyed a less 'fixed and reified identity'.<sup>47</sup> They did not look 'typically' Indian or Malay and this challenged audiences to rethink notions of racialised individuals. In contrast Guan Kheng, played by Chinese-Malaysian Keith Liu, and Peter, played by Eurasian-Malaysian Vernon Adrian Emuang, *were* performed by actors of the 'same' race as their characters. However the four friends were costumed to look more similar than different. They wore trousers and shirts that flattened their racial identities, revising the primordial links of traditional identity as the main demarcation of their identities. It also portrayed their similarity as a result of sharing English as a language and having a Western

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<sup>42</sup> Krishen quoted in 'Two heads must surely be better than one,' *Sunday Star*, September 3, 1995 (writer unknown).

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Susan Philip, 'Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia,' (Unpublished PhD dissertation: Australian National University, 2005) 249-251, discusses the politics of race in the play, and how Fernando's 'inclusion of the historical frame locates contemporary race relations within a long tradition of underscoring difference' (251). However Philip also suggests that 'the performance brings together elements of Malaysian culture in an intentionally hybrid form which challenges the pessimism of the text' (249).

<sup>45</sup> Gilroy, xv.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., xv.

education. Hence what it meant to be Malayan was moderated through these dimensions. In so doing the directors also pointed to their connectedness as friends of a shared social space, while the play dealt with issues of how these links were made fragile due to a politics of dividedness.

One of the main challenges of interdisciplinary and collaborative work was to negotiate differences among the creative team to allow for plural perspectives and interpretations. The two directors, Krishen and Hasham, were markedly different in their theatre experiences and approaches, and this demanded a shared politic of dialogue and trust to allow for the skills of both to be given space. Hasham was noted for his skills as a director of naturalistic plays, whereas Krishen's work was often non-naturalistic and experimental. Thus the directors developed a working method that drew from these strengths, devising ways to combine their aesthetic impulses and creating a dynamic that allowed for dialogue and different views to inform their directorial process.<sup>48</sup> They applied this to the ways in which they incorporated the sonic and movement texts, working in collaboration with musician-composer Sunetra Fernando and dancer-choreographer Aida Redza, to envisage and translate how the play could be experienced through non-verbal interpretations. This produced a multi-layered performance text in which the play was experienced through the enactment of the script, as well as through the deliberate addition of movement and sound.

The performance became more of a sensory spectacle than an intense historical drama, and the audience were prodded to connect with the tensions of the past and present through the multi-dimensionality of theatre. Apart from the main characters, the large cast consisted of an ensemble, which also played minor characters and generated many images, movements and sounds that depicted the mood and atmosphere to suggest what it was like in the socio-political context of the time. To push this dynamic into the audience, a *hanamichi*-like platform was built above the central aisle in the MATIC auditorium to extend the stage into the audience.<sup>49</sup> As the ensemble moved up and down this platform, the audience was brought into close proximity with the action. There was also a live contemporary gamelan ensemble and jazz duo which created a sonic landscape to intensify and underpin the cultural and emotional movements in the drama.

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<sup>48</sup> Information gained from Joe Hasham, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

<sup>49</sup> A *hanamichi* is an aspect of stage design in Japanese kabuki theatre, in which a long raised platform runs from the back of the theatre, through the audience, and connects with the main stage. It is used for entrances and exits, as well as asides and smaller scenes.



The movement text was developed to further dramatise the emotions of the play and physicalise the turmoil of this historical period through stylised gestures and actions of the ensemble. These were ‘ordinary’ people, consisting of males and females from a range of backgrounds. They were not specified characters in the script, but symbolic of the larger masses that were involved in the events of the day. Led and choreographed by Aida Redza, a contemporary dancer-choreographer trained in contemporary, traditional, Western and Asian dance forms, the ensemble conveyed the underlying atmosphere and often unspoken feelings of the play using a vocabulary of codified movements and stylised everyday gestures, derived from improvisations in rehearsal. Aida’s choreography emphasised the inner tensions of the situation by ‘adding active rhythmic emotion’<sup>50</sup> and in this way enacting strong images, corporeal shapes and movements of forceful energy to convey an abstract yet recognizable turbulence. For this reason Aida drew on the agitated, visceral and forceful movements that were improvised and choreographed with the ensemble to stage expressionist dramatisations of particular scenes. These were put together in consultation with the directors, to create a tangible sense of the violence and confusion that marked the chaos of the time.

This was particularly powerful in the scene when Sally, a young woman who is a close friend of Sabran, Santinathan, Guan Kheng and Peter, is raped on the street by a nameless mob.<sup>51</sup> The script specifies that the scene should be staged like a ‘nightmare’ in which ‘silhouettes dance around her menacingly’.<sup>52</sup> This conveyed the sense that the rape was executed by a force that could not really be identified. Ironically, Sally’s real name is later revealed as Salmah, which transforms her identity from being non-Malay, to Malay, and this further complicates the symbolism of her being raped. As someone whose racial identity is kept ambivalent, she represents the mixed and uncertain identities that inhabit the land. When two police officers, Adnan and Ganapathy, discuss their problem in catching the culprits, they note that ‘formerly it was only one group, no mixing’ and ‘you could tell the pattern [of rapists] from that’ because there were ‘race habits’.<sup>53</sup> In this instance, which they refer to as a ‘multiracial rape’, the officers

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<sup>50</sup> Aida Redza, ‘Choreographer’s Notes,’ in *Scorpion Orchid* Programme Booklet, (Kuala Lumpur: 1995).

<sup>51</sup> Lloyd Fernando, unpublished script of *Scorpion Orchid*, 35.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 48.

have no ‘hunch’ and that leaves them confused.<sup>54</sup> The racialised identities of victim and perpetrators are put forward as mixed, uncertain and thus effectively irrelevant, suggesting it is their humanity, or lack of it, that is more important when it comes to violence and abuse. Here again the performers in the ensemble are more similar than different, even though they are recognisably from one cultural group or another when seen individually. When placed together, their difference becomes negligible.

The ensemble, consisting both multi-racial male and female performers, performed this ‘multiracial rape’ using Aida’s ‘active rhythmic emotion’. That they became nameless and faceless by being cast in dim light and performed by unnamed characters, suggested a representation of the larger forces of power that work for and against those who are vulnerable in a tide of brutality. They were seen encroaching around Sally, moving in circles and curtailing her space for escape. They gradually became more menacing, using their legs and hands to create more threatening movements that built up in speed and size to create a climactic attack. At the point of climax, Sally screams and there is silence. She is then slowly lifted by members of the ensemble above their heads, elevated to heroic stature. Supported on the hands of those who carry her, her body is still but her emotions move from a weak passivity to an empowered reclamation of her dignity. Much like a heroine being lifted high and hailed by the crowd, she ironically gains most power when she is at her most fragile – a metaphor for the soon to be ‘liberated’ land being at its prime potential in its moment of deepest vulnerability. From this elevated position she delivers a monologue, in which she laments her life and the shame she has borne. Her voice becomes increasingly angry, finally declaring her despair at being left alone. The transformation from a site of destruction to one of empowerment is performed by the same bodies, emphasising how the perpetrator and the victim are both present within. Here the directors stage the inner conflict of the scene using the physical movements of the ensemble as important extensions of the spoken text. This unscripted translation of the event articulated an ‘in-betweenness’ in which victims and victors were interwoven, and hence embodied an interstitial space of identities and positions. Within this zone, rigid and reified identities become irrelevant, and the horrors of the un-lived and untimely are manifest in trans-racial, yet clearly gendered, brutality.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

Similarly, the sonic text for the performance also engaged with this interstitial and experimental space for reinvention. This was created and directed by Sunetra Fernando, a contemporary musician-composer, trained in both western classical music and Malay gamelan. Most of the music was original and written by Fernando (also the daughter of playwright Lloyd Fernando), to 'heighten a scene dramatically' as well as 'probe into a scene'.<sup>55</sup> The music was meant to underpin the emotional conflicts of the characters, while also reflecting the plural cultural dimensions of the performance. To do this, Fernando drew from two distinct music forms and traditions – both of which were familiar in an urban Malaysian context, but rarely brought together in the same space. They were a contemporary Malay gamelan ensemble, which played music composed by Fernando in response to the script; and a jazz duo consisting a pianist, David Gomez and singer, Junji Delfino, who performed jazz standards such as *Tea for Two*. The two streams of sound were never played together, and situated on separate sides of the *hanamichi*-like platform. They represented the two worlds of the play – namely the Malaysian ensemble of characters, and the fading colonial world that was still present, even if only in a few scenes. While the former was being pushed and pulled in order to become a refashioned composite of diverse influences, the latter simply reflected the sounds associated with a bygone era.

Hence the sounds of the contemporary gamelan, an assemblage of tonal qualities that included Chinese gongs, the recorder and bass drums, reflected a reinvention of the classical Malay form by incorporating non-Malay instruments as well. Drawing on both percussive and melodic segments, the music generated a wide range of textures and moods, often to drive the tension or sense of mystique further. It enlarged the emotions on stage by underpinning the events portrayed on stage. It used calm, lilting and at times haunting sounds, when the four friends journeyed into the jungle during dream-like sequences in the Prologue and Epilogue, that linked the past with the present; but moved into restless, cacophonous and clashing sounds when there was violence on the street, such as when Peter was attacked and Sally was raped. The sounds produced different kinds of connections with the story. These ranged from the more primal references of the gamelan and its associations with the Malay dominated history of the land, to contemporary reinventions of the gamelan that pointed to reconfigurations of cultural

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<sup>55</sup> Sunetra Fernando, 'Music Director's Notes,' in *Scorpion Orchid* Programme Booklet, (Kuala Lumpur: 1995).

identities. It pushed the drama to intensify the unspoken aspects of being caught in a time of turbulence. These were not familiar tunes being played to create ambience. Unlike the gentle, ebullient sounds of the jazz duo, they were meant to *perform* the drama, not just support it.

This dramaturgical approach to incorporating different sonic vocabularies was an ongoing aspect of Krishen's attempts to recognise the simultaneous presence of both Asian and Western cultures in contemporary Malaysia, while acknowledging very different ways in which they impacted on culture. Within this experimental Anglo-Asian frame, local and foreign cultures were continually reinvented in contemporary indigenisation to express emergent conflicts and concerns. However this process was rarely applied to foreign popular forms that were widely consumed, whereby they were reshaped to reflect a local reality. Hence the jazz duo performed the songs as they were commonly heard, not changing the tunes, words or styles involved. However the Malay gamelan, as a classical form of music associated with a particular cultural community, was wielded to connect with a story about Malaysian multiplicity, and pushed to become an instrument that was not limited to Malay culture.<sup>56</sup> In so doing, the directors generated a way of experiencing English language theatre in Malaysia as closely related to vocabularies of non-English cultures. These were not common associations as the English language was and still is, perceived as distanced from local cultures and thus more Western than Asian. In contrast the jazz standards reflected a world that was more settled and at ease with itself, not seeking to be reconfigured in order to adapt to rapid change. As such it did not reflect the inner tensions of the play, but provided a soothing layer of sensuous pleasure – an ironical twist, considering the political implications of colonialism. The provocation to English language theatre audiences to rethink their own cultural affiliations and engage with broader mixes of multicultural experimentation was evident.

In terms of Krishen's development as a director, the work exceeded his earlier attempts at interdisciplinary performance in that the sonic and movement texts were a more critical dimension of the dramatic unfolding of the play. Compared to his work in *1984: Here and Now* and *3 Children*, the multi-sensory aspects of non-verbal text became integrated and crucial aspects of how the story was experienced. The interactions of the directors with both

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<sup>56</sup> This exploration of the gamelan, and collaboration between Krishen and Sunetra Fernando, will be examined further in Chapter Six, where I analyse a contemporary gamelan performance called *Monkey Business* in which Krishen theatricalised a classical Malay music form.

choreographer and composer pushed the limits of what it meant to weave different performative vocabularies together, while allowing for each strand to inflect the other. The physical movements enlarged the dynamics of the soundscape while also enhancing the drama. This created a multi-textual layering of the spoken text. In a play about multicultural tensions that questioned the capacity of multi-racial Malaysians to co-exist, it was significant that the performance combined the Western music of a jazz duo, Asian elements of sound in the contemporary gamelan, and a culturally non-specific vocabulary of movement performed by the ensemble, to develop a ‘critical syncretism’ that moved ‘beyond the divisive boundaries and divisive positions historically constructed’.<sup>57</sup> This capacity to play with the inter-play of cultural meanings incorporating wide-ranging parallel texts became even more evident in *Family – A Visual Performance Event* that Krishen directed with visual artist, Wong Hoy Cheong, which I turn to in the next section.

### A Carnival of Parallel Texts based on *Family* by Leow Puay Tin

#### TAKING STOCK

(*Time – Present. Other topical items can be added to the survey.*)

CAST: (*Take turns to address audience*) Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you all for coming to help us celebrate Mrs Yang’s birthday today. Some of us are her direct descendants, while others are related by blood or marriage. Our ‘clan’, if we may use the word loosely but proudly, now spans four or even five generations...

Yet on this most happy occasion, she [Mrs Yang] also feels a little sad. She says, “It’s my fault. I have been too much out of touch with my people. I see some faces I can recognise but I do not remember their names....”

So we propose to hold a quick survey now. And we are videotaping this survey, so that she can view it whenever she wants to refresh her memory of who we are.<sup>58</sup>

The site-specific performance of Leow Puay Tin’s play *Family* was an unusual event in Malaysian contemporary English language theatre for several reasons, perhaps most notably because it was performed as part of a birthday celebration for a character called Mrs Yang in an

<sup>57</sup> Chen, ‘Decolonization’, 25.

<sup>58</sup> Leow Puay Tin, *Family*, in *Playful Phoenix: Women Write for the Singapore Stage*, ed. Chin Woon Ping (Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings, 1996) 248-9.

old disused mansion located close to the city centre of Kuala Lumpur. Produced by Five Arts Centre in 1998, it was titled *Family – A Visual Performance Event* to highlight the fact that it was not a conventional theatre performance, but an interdisciplinary ‘event’ that also underlined the inter-relatedness of the visual with the performative. The co-directors, Krishen and visual artist, Wong Hoy Cheong, made several choices to decentralise the main script and add to it a range of parallel texts that enlarged and interrupted the meanings of the story. Also, as an ‘event’, audiences were meant to approach the experience with openness and thus participate in the experiment of an unconventional unfolding of stories and images. This section looks at the conscious attempt by the directors to diversify the meanings of the written script by including additional scripts that were performed alongside the main text and incorporating a strong visual dimension through the use of a non-theatre space. It argues that this was a new approach to Krishen’s staging of contemporary Malaysian culture. In this production Krishen was strongly influenced by Wong’s inputs as a visual artist and curator, with whom he had collaborated in another site-specific performance, *Skin Trilogy*, as mentioned earlier. However this time round, the interactions between the performance, the visual and the site were calibrated with more care and the directors felt that ‘what was obfuscated in *Skin*, we have hoped to clarify in the current performance’.<sup>59</sup> The two directors worked very differently, Wong being more concerned with overall conceptual frameworks and Krishen with actor-based responses to texts. However their combined imaginations and experience led to a provocative reviewing of how to stage theatre that drew from multiple histories and disciplines.<sup>60</sup>

Leow Puay Tin’s script, *Family*, looks at the challenges faced by poor Chinese migrants who moved to Malaya in the early 1900s, and how they were confronted with the conflicts of dealing with cultural change. When pressures to sustain strong bonds of family are in conflict with the forces of modernisation, do filial piety and loyalty take priority or are they compromised in order to gain expediency? The play centres on the life of Tan Neo, later Madam Yang, a resilient and charismatic Chinese woman who joins her husband who has come to Malaya in the

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<sup>59</sup> Krishen and Wong Hoy Cheong, ‘Directors’ Notes’ in *Family – A Visual Performance Event* Programme Booklet (Kuala Lumpur: 1998).

<sup>60</sup> Information gained from Wong Hoy Cheong, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2007.

hope of a better life.<sup>61</sup> This symbolised the pioneering spirit of the early migrants to Malaya. However she is widowed at a young age and struggles to prevail despite a series of calamities that befall her family. She manages to go from rags to riches, with the help of her seven daughters-in-law, who are also widowed early in life. In her later years she struggles to accept how her descendants, particularly her grandchildren, abandon aspects of her culture by failing to adhere to Chinese custom and tradition. They are enticed by alternative constructs of identity, and veer away from cultural norms such as devotion to the family gods and loyalty to the Yang clan. They adopt other religions and marry outside their assigned race, disappointing Tan Neo and failing to live up to her expectations. But she remains a powerful matriarch with her ability to adapt and this enables her to continue having a commanding presence among her family. It also raises questions about what it takes to sustain family unity amid change and cultural dissolution – not unlike the challenges of creating national solidarity.

The play is a contemporary adaptation of the Chinese legend of the Yang women warriors, who during the Song dynasty took up the leadership of their people as army generals.<sup>62</sup> Despite the odds against a woman succeeding in the business world, Tan Neo manages to become a wealthy ‘empress’ of a large business empire.<sup>63</sup> Starting out as a meagre *kueh*-seller,<sup>64</sup> barely able to feed her young and large family, she relies on diligence, thrift and determination to fight for the survival of her offspring. She and her daughters-in-law are in this sense ‘warriors’ of their context, having battled against the enemies of poverty, marginality and displacement, to become respected and revered. Leow’s examination of contemporary Chinese-Malaysian culture and the politics of gender in a modernising Malaysian context was also evident in her earlier plays such as *3 Children*, discussed earlier in this chapter; and in *Ang Tau Mui: A Modern*

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<sup>61</sup> In Leow Puay Tin, ‘Playwright’s note,’ in *Family*, 162-166, Leow notes that although the story is set in Singapore ‘the location is not crucial, and the family could just as well have been Malaysian’. This points to the shared histories of Singapore and Malaysia in the early years of post-colonial rule, as well as the similarities of Kuala Lumpur and the city-state of Singapore even after they parted ways.

<sup>62</sup> This idea was initiated by Ong Keng Sen and the play was commissioned by TheatreWorks in Singapore. It was first directed by Ong in 1996 as part of The Cutting Edge (no, not the arts festival...).

<sup>63</sup> See Philip, ‘Re-scripting’, 206-214, for discussion on Leow’s examination of gender politics within a Chinese and Confucian cultural frame, that moderates a Malaysian modernity, and thus questions the patriarchy in literal and symbolic terms.

<sup>64</sup> *Kueh* or *kuih* is the Hokkien and Malay word for sweetmeats, which is widely used to refer to Malay, Chinese and Indian sweetmeats in Malaysia.



*Woman* (1994),<sup>65</sup> which is a monodrama about an urban toilet cleaner who questions notions of identity and asserts an alternative modern self from her marginalised location.<sup>66</sup> However it is in *Family* that Leow's exploration of inter-generational difference becomes most evident, as Tan Neo is faced with a sense of displacement among her own family, and this intra-cultural alienation becomes symbolic of a wider disjuncture in society. In many respects the young members of the Yang family are examples of *Malaysia Baru* (New Malaysia), not unlike the *Melayu Baru* that Prime Minister Mahathir had sought to develop among the Malays, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

Krishen and Wong sought to interrogate 'the survivalist and expansionist instincts of an immigrant Chinese family' within an open frame of contemporary Malaysian culture, that would 'stir the cultural baggage of the audience' regardless of their particular racial identity.<sup>67</sup> Chinese-Malaysians were renowned for being successful in financial and business arenas. Thus the challenge was to make the play extend beyond a particular racial community, to suggest its relevance to all Malaysians. In particular because the urban aspiration for economic affluence cut across all racial groups and corporate Malaysia in the 1990s constituted a mix of Malaysians from diverse backgrounds. Hence the directorial choice by Krishen and Wong to inflect the story of a Chinese-Malaysian family with a range of parallel texts written by non-Chinese Malaysian writers, was aimed at locating the central story within a wider space of multi-cultural imaginings and ideas. They invited well-known and emergent writers, such as Amir Muhammad, Brianna Shay, Bernice Chauly, Kam Raslan, Mohan Ambikaipaker and Charlene Rajendran (this writer) to contribute texts that would be performed by solo actors as parallel events occurring alongside the main script. These were meant to reflect how the wider cultural space in Malaysia was constituted of multi-cultural components, and thus the story of Tan Neo and her family was not to be experienced in isolation. Instead it was inter-connected with other stories of individuals and

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<sup>65</sup> Krishen directed Leow in the first production of *Ang Tau Mui* in 1994, and then subsequently in 1995 and 1996, when it was performed at The Cairo International Experimental Theatre Festival. For the 1996 production, Krishen also collaborated with Wong Hoy Cheong to develop the monologue performance into an ensemble production.

<sup>66</sup> See Mohan Ambikaipaker, "'A Dream Is Like Life": Reading Ideology and Identity in the Plays of Leow Puay Tin,' (MA thesis, Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, 2002), for extended discussion of how Leow's plays challenge dominant representations of class, gender and cultural difference through narrative and representative strategies in her writing.

<sup>67</sup> Krishen and Wong Hoy Cheong, 'Directors' Notes' in *Family – A Visual Performance Event Programme Booklet* (Kuala Lumpur: 1998).

families. Furthermore, audiences were invited to choose what they wanted to see and hear, thus having to develop their own interpretations of how these separate spheres were linked or disconnected. They had to contend with partiality and interruptedness, as the performance was not intended to provide a complete and absolute portrayal of characters or circumstances. This chaotic atmosphere was meant to disrupt the smooth linearity of narratives, and suggest a disjointed carnivalesque vision of cultural identity.

The approach to staging Leow's text as a Bakhtinian 'carnival' was alluded to by the directors in their programme notes. They emphasised their 'quest for entertainment' but chose to play with elements of chance and fragmentation to subvert the normative.<sup>68</sup> This created a ludic and provocative frame for reviewing culture and identity. It entailed using three main devices of reworking how the play would be experienced, and engaging the audience in a playful process of making choices about how to encounter the 'events' in the performance. First, the play was not performed in linear sequence. Instead, at the start of each day's performance an emcee-facilitator would welcome the audience to the birthday party of Madam Yang, and then explain to them that this was not a regular theatre performance. Scenes would be performed in a sequence that was chosen by a random process. A member of the audience was invited to spin a wheel that had the scene numbers on it. When the wheel stopped, the number at the top would determine the scene to be played and their order for each evening. Not all scenes were played every time, and thus the play was never performed in completion.<sup>69</sup> Thus meaning was staged as both non-linear and incomplete – to suggest an imaginative reinvention of how stories and identities are apprehended and produced. In order to participate, the audience had to play along, by becoming part of the celebration as well as the choice-making process of how the story would be told.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> In Leow Puay Tin, 'Playwright's note' in *Family*, 162-166, Leow writes that the play is, a 'rambling epic of sorts that covers nearly a century of a family's history' (162). It is written as scenes arranged in chronological order, which Leow refers to as 'building blocks or modules' (162), which can be performed in any order. This freedom is offered to provoke multiple interpretations and stagings that draw on the several stories as a 'starting point' (162) rather than a prescription for performance. She even suggests that selections can be 'pre-determined' or 'left indeterminate' and sequenced in a 'completely random order' (164) – as was done for the production whereby audiences selected the sequence of scenes through a game of chance at the beginning. Hence her main request was that there be 'no rewriting' and 'supplementary textual material must be clearly credited and made known' (163). The 'Playwright's note' was performed as one of the parallel texts in the performance by Charlene Rajendran (this writer).

Second, the scenes were performed in several different spaces all over the venue. Thus the audience had to move around and choose what they wanted to see, as there would sometimes be simultaneous events, such as the performance of the parallel texts mentioned earlier. This meant that audiences could experience two events at the same time, such as if they watched a scene being performed downstairs in the outdoors, while also listening to a text being conveyed in a room upstairs as well. The potential for juxtapositions that mediated meanings and thus reiterated the indeterminacy of how cultures are inter-related and thus modulated, led to Tan Neo's story sharing overlaps with stories about non-Chinese communities, and vice versa. The audience also had to negotiate the site and allow for fluid and unpredictable beginnings and endings as one event could begin before another ended. Having no curtains or light cues to signal when a new scene was starting or ending, audiences were challenged to make links between the ongoing interruptedness and fluctuations in everyday life. Moving in and out of different rooms within the house, and shifting from one space to another outside the house as well, they had to be willing to relocate themselves and attend to the dynamics of ongoing flux. In Krishen's terms the directorial choice to avoid the usual practice of audiences 'sitting down passively' and empower them to 'decide what they want to see', was to push them towards 'making their own performance of the play'.<sup>70</sup> As co-director Wong pointed out, 'it's all about making choices...like when you drive from your house to KL [Kuala Lumpur], [and] you're bombarded by so many messages', this too was a 'decentralisation of themes' to enact 'separate declarations of an issue or states of mind'.<sup>71</sup> This performed a playful sense of storytelling that in Gilroy's terms 'turns attention toward the always unpredictable mechanisms of identification'.<sup>72</sup>

Third, and perhaps most significantly, the venue was itself an important text in the staging of the performance, and audiences were invited to respond to this dimension as an important part of the meaning-making process. The chosen site for the performance was a grand colonial mansion with a large compound situated on Jalan Tun Razak, one of Kuala Lumpur's busiest main roads. This was in the vicinity of several skyscrapers including the iconic Petronas Twin Towers, which offered its own commentary on entrepreneurial histories and the politics of

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<sup>70</sup> Krishen quoted in Gerald Martinez, 'Offbeat location for The Family,' *The Malay Mail*, March 30, 1998.

<sup>71</sup> Wong, quoted in Sulin Chee, 'Multiplicity in a mansion,' *Sunday Magazine*, April 5, 1998

<sup>72</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial*, 14.

affluence in Malaysian society.<sup>73</sup> The house had once belonged to the family of prominent lawyer and entrepreneur Yong Shook Lin, who was the first Chinese-Malaysian lawyer to be admitted to the Malayan bar, and who subsequently set up his own legal practice in 1918 under the name Messrs Yong Shook Lin - which also became the first legal firm to be established by a local advocate and solicitor.<sup>74</sup> This historical link with a pioneer and respected member of the Chinese-Malaysian community made the site highly relevant to the fictional fortunes of Madam Yang, who represented an alternative imagining of Malaysian culture by being a woman and thus rarely visible in the official histories of migrant communities. The property had been subsequently purchased by the PhileoAllied bank as prime property investment, indicating its real-estate value and the likelihood of the building being destroyed to make way for more lucrative use of the land. Audiences were prodded to engage with the space as its own text, not only to reiterate the history of the site in the context of the city, but also to recast the play as part of a larger story that could be found in the 'ruins' of the city, and not just among the shiny monuments of skyscrapers that were often seen as its pride and glory. Visual art reviewer J. Anu noted that the venue was even 'liable to steal the show' as it 'adds overpowering dimensions' to the text.<sup>75</sup> This indicated how publicity for the 'event' reinforced the idea that this was not just a theatrical performance, and 'sold' an experience of the site as an attraction in the 'arts market' of modern Malaysian life and culture. As audiences moved through the space, they were invited to forge their own stories of what it meant to be contemporary and Malaysian in a context of several contrasts and contradictions.

To expand on this dimension, and elucidate the interactions between the script and the site, the house was consciously curated by Wong and staged as a layer of text. There was a 'visual staging' of memorabilia found in the house, and other installations that expressed varied responses to Leow's script. Led by landscape architects and artists Carolyn Lau and Sek San, the

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<sup>73</sup> This was a contrast to Ong Keng Sen's version in Singapore, which was staged in a disused shop-house, located in Amoy Street, part of the Chinatown district. This version highlighted the humble beginnings of the family, closely linked to Singapore's identity as a nation of primarily Chinese migrants. It also incorporated parallel texts but these were focused on the need for advancement and progress such as in the recorded speeches of former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew.

<sup>74</sup> 'The Firm,' Shook Lin & Bok, accessed November 11, 2011. <http://www.shooklin.com.my/thefirm.htm>.

The firm is now known as Shook Lin and Bok, a major legal firm in Malaysia, with a branch in Singapore that is now autonomous but continues to bear the same name.

<sup>75</sup> J. Anu, 'Saga revolves around bizarre set,' *Sunday Star*, April 12, 1998.

house was transformed from an abandoned abode to a ‘gallery’ of quirky installations. The use of a range of materials, such as shards of broken glass, piles of used bricks, woven rice noodles and carefully folded origami mobiles, conveyed a combined sense of disuse as well as a playful reinvention of ordinary materials. Chandeliers made of red *ang-ku-kueh*, a type of sweetmeat that is referred to in the play, as well as a museum-like exhibition of unwanted objects found in the house that once belonged to the occupants, conflated the imagined worlds of Madam Yang with the traces of the actual house. It also played with how a ‘home’ could be transformed into a ‘stage’ for playing roles, and encountering oneself through interactions with multiple others. It suggested that like the ‘home’, the nation was also a site where diverse roles of Self and Other were enacted, and this led to a range of encounters across cultural categories and constructs.

One other dimension that added to the sense of carnival was the use of an eclectic soundscape, designed in part by Krishen and Wong, with additional original compositions by musician-composer Chang Sang Teck. Apart from providing a valuable dynamic of sense-surround, particularly in a large and diffuse performance space, it created another layer of cultural references, introducing many more parallel texts into the mix. Consisting of a collage of experimental, popular and original music, the amplified sounds, recorded as well as those that were sung by the cast, engaged the audience in both familiar and new sonic texts. Chang’s compositions ranged from a rhythmic and catchy chant using hip-hop rhythms and Chinese folk tunes for the *Song of the Family*,<sup>76</sup> to a haunting contemporary score for *Storm Four*<sup>77</sup> in which Tan Neo faces her death and is reluctant to part with life. The haunting score was sung by Yudi, a well-known Chinese contemporary singer, who was part of the ensemble of performers. Krishen and Wong also incorporated old favourites from the 1960s such as *Oh Malaysia* and other Anneke Gronloh hits,<sup>78</sup> as well as music by Meredith Monk.<sup>79</sup> The diversity of styles that spanned recent and past hits to experimental avant-garde compositions, demonstrated how a

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<sup>76</sup> Leow, *Family*, 204-5.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 265-269

<sup>78</sup> Anneke Gronloh is an Indonesian singer whose songs became famous throughout Southeast Asia in the 1960s. One of these hits, *Oh Malaysia*, was particularly popular in Malaysia, as a ballad that celebrated the beauty and charm of the country.

<sup>79</sup> Meredith Monk is an American avant-garde composer, singer and creator of a range of performative works, particularly known for her extended vocal technique. She is highly reputed for experimental, interdisciplinary performance that engages music with movement, light with sound, image with object, to challenge normative viewing and listening processes.

mixed sonic landscape was not unusual to an urban Malaysian audience. It also indicated how the directors were not just engaged with enacting the spoken texts and curating the visual dimension, but involved in experimenting with sonic elements as well. This aspect of interdisciplinary collaboration meant a willingness to play with artistic boundaries as permeable, such that the interactions across disciplines became more fluid.

The style of performance that was created by the directors to enact the main story was a highly physical and intense energy that conveyed both play and seriousness. This allowed for a dynamic of enlarged and stylised actions to convey a sense of carnival, and evoke a quality of heightened interaction. To deal with an open space and connect with audiences that were spread out in different places, it was necessary for the performers to be larger than life. The multi-racial ensemble which consisted of mostly Chinese-Malaysians, as well as Indian, Malay and Eurasian backgrounds, performed multiple roles as members of Madam Yang's family. This reflected how the notion of the 'family' was much like the idea of the Malaysian 'nation', in that it was a composite of several cultures framed by their social and political connections, as well as by a shared space in which to live and call 'home'. For most of the performance they wore simple earth coloured long tunics, which enabled them to switch in and out of playing male and female, old and young roles. This was in contrast to when they first entered for the birthday party, where they were costumed in outlandish and lavish outfits designed by fashion designer Victor Goh, to mark their bourgeois and upper-class status as descendants of Madam Yang in her later years. Wearing lush furs, colourful feathers, tuxedos, ball-gowns and tiaras, the party began as a bizarre masquerade with the actors' faces painted white to give a ghostly pallor, and add a mask-like appearance that was suited to the carnivalesque atmosphere. Unlike the rest of the ensemble, the character of Madam Yang was played by the same two performers throughout – a female actor, Pearly Chua and a male contemporary dancer, Lee Swee Keong. This was to underline her importance and abiding presence, as well as extend her role as both masculine and feminine.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>80</sup> This directorial choice produced an inversion of stereotypical gender roles as Chua was the taller of the two and given several lines to speak whereas Lee was mostly silent. In addition Chua often used *wushu*, a Chinese martial art, in her vocabulary of movement, to indicate strength and warrior-like qualities. Conversely Lee created a gentler and more nubile articulation of his role, drawing from free movements that were less culturally specific. While the two Madam Yangs were dressed and moved similarly when they were first seen together as they made a grand entrance for Madam Yang's birthday party, there were other episodes when they performed separately and with quite different interpretations of the character.

This was not something specified in the script, but a directorial choice to broaden the meaning and raise questions about the performativity of gender. Playing the central character of Madam Yang as different yet connected, was yet another device for staging the story as a range of parallel texts that were inter-related as well as distinct.

The production was described by one reviewer as a ‘theatrical piece that defies genres and classifications’, which was an opportunity for audiences to ‘become wonderfully contaminated by the stories of people similar and dissimilar to themselves, and yet not have to feel the need to be exclusionary or discriminatory’.<sup>81</sup> In many respects this ‘contamination’ staged the dynamics of what connects as well as severs interactions between cultures. It allowed for the inevitability of crossing boundaries and the clash that can occur at intersections. Thus the ‘invitation’ to enjoy a playful encounter with difference through the ‘birthday celebration’ of a grand matriarch, was in many respects a provocation to participate in the reworking of Malaysian society and make it more appreciative of the mixes and overlaps that occur in daily life. This too was an important aspect of ‘development’ in a nation seeking to realise this aspiration.

English language theatre in the 1990s witnessed a marked expansion in interest and activity as a result of larger changes in Malaysian society. Not only was urban society seeking to articulate cosmopolitan expressions of itself by incorporating local and westernised ideas and lifestyles, there was also a shift by the state towards incorporating the English language as part of its ‘national’ identity and heritage. Having participated in reworkings of English language theatre as part of Malaysian history and identity in the 1980s, Krishen built on these foundations to broaden how theatre could express the tensions of being contemporary through aesthetic innovation. His achievement was to produce stagings of Malaysian culture that performed histories of difference, and articulated multi-ethnic delineations without being bound to rigid definitions of ethno-religious categories. In this respect it participated in the imagining of an inclusive *Bangsa Malaysia*. As seen in this chapter he did this by interweaving different elements of culture into revised associations of cultural meaning, and thereby extending the scope of what individual cultures meant in relation to each other. When the contemporary gamelan was used in *Scorpion Orchid*, it challenged audiences to negotiate how vocabularies of

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<sup>81</sup> Mohan Ambikaipaker, ‘Story of a migrant family,’ *The Edge*, April 6, 1998.



traditional Malay identity could incorporate aspects of non-Malay culture. Likewise in the interplay of Tan Neo's distinctly Chinese-Malaysian story with non-Chinese stories of family and identity, the meaning of being Chinese-Malaysian was articulated as interwoven with other Malaysian stories. By combining different texts that were overlapping, intersecting and working alongside each other, the experience of being and becoming Malaysian was concretised as a constant negotiation of multifarious difference - with a sense of the present closely imbricated with the past, and thus rendering histories and identities as discontinuous if not fractured as well.

The use of multiple and reconfigured texts also pointed to the overarching frame of a shared nation, where history, memory and identity could be reinvented and reclaimed. The presence of the ensemble in *Scorpion Orchid*, consisting of individuals from a mix of backgrounds, genders and ages, created a strong sense of unspoken intensity that underpinned the drama of the four main characters. Similarly, the ensemble of actors from varied cultural backgrounds who played the characters of Madam Yang's family, added a dimension of openness and indecipherability to the audience's experience of the story. It intertwined those who were culturally different and alike into a shared frame of family stories and inter-generational conflicts. However the option to subvert this norm by moving in a different direction and watching from an alternative perspective was made available in the site-specific performance where simultaneous performances in multiple locations made this a concrete choice. While these large-scale performances emphasised the codified vocabularies of artistic form, the small-scale work that I will look at in the next chapter underlined Krishen's capacity to also draw from the everyday and ordinary aspects of life, and stage a more common experience of cultural multiplicity in modern Malaysia.

## Chapter 5

### Actor-based Collaborations in the 1990s: Everyday Mixes

There is something in the mix of what we are as Malaysians that brings us together but also detaches us from each other. And we are unable to find this *sense of commonality* that is deep enough. That's partly because we are unable to give up any of our history. We are unable to give up our identifiable history in order to build a new one. We are not willing to give up this sense of I come from India etc... (emphasis mine)<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the early 1990s, when Malaysia experienced economic buoyancy and socio-political stability, the late 1990s was far less optimistic as a result of an Asian financial crisis and political turmoil within the nation. The controversial dismissal of the then Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim in 1998, and the subsequent allegations against him of corruption and sexual impropriety that led to his political castration, proved to be a turning point in the Malaysian political landscape. It resulted in a serious disenchantment with the government and the popular *Reformasi* (Reform) movement being formed. Precipitated by the Asian financial crisis in 1997, which created a growing awareness that policies of economic neo-liberalism had mainly served the interests of the ruling elite, the spirit of *Reformasi* was agitated by disappointment and anger with the Mahathir administration and its misuses of power. A new political 'sense of commonality' developed among citizens of all backgrounds, who came together to express solidarity against the government. Widespread dissent and public protests that took place as part of the *Reformasi* movement indicated a widespread refusal on the part of the populace to accept top-down rhetoric. Solidarities across race, religion, class and politics were consolidated through bottom-up efforts against the ruling powers. However cultural 'commonality' that grappled with what Krishen termed the 'mix of what we are as Malaysians', and thus examined what 'brings us together but also detaches us' in relation to culture and identity, was rare. Thus alternative frames of cultural inclusivity, beyond just resistance to the government, were critical in creating links between Malaysians that would generate a willingness to 'give up our identifiable history in order to build a new one'; and thereby cultivate a sense of 'I come from Malaysia' rather than 'I

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<sup>1</sup> Krishen Jit, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2004, discussing the frames for his devised play, *A Chance Encounter* (1999).

come from India' or 'I come from China', as Krishen suggested in the quote above. What it meant to feel this sense of belonging, while still struggling with the difficulties of prejudice and resentment, was something that Krishen attempted to deal with through alternative imaginings on stage.

In this chapter I argue that Krishen's small-scale theatre from the 1990s onwards performed rich expressions of 'multiculturalism in one body', which he had been working on to 'excavate in one way or another' since the 1970s.<sup>2</sup> Here he drew extensively from physical and spoken languages derived from everyday life, to express the tensions of being modern and multicultural as ordinary aspects of being Malaysian. In the devised multilingual performances and monologue theatre he directed, Krishen combined a mix of cultures and languages to show how common interactions consisted of these mixes and overlaps. This differed from much of Krishen's earlier work that sought to indigenise contemporary theatre by using traditional forms and codified artistic vocabularies, as discussed in previous chapters. Here Krishen's theatre performed a multiplicity 'within', based on collaborations with actors that underlined the potential of the quotidian. These processes of forging an alternative multicultural theatre derived from the skills, imaginations and ideas of the performers, rather than co-directors, choreographers, visual artists and composers. For this reason, it brought to bear the 'mix of what we are as Malaysians' and worked to 'find' embodiments of contemporary culture that were easily accessible and clearly reflective of real life in Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> Cultural difference was thus staged as part of daily living rather than an exclusive purview only for those who choose to deviate from a norm. Instead it was articulated as inherent to Malaysian identity in historical and contemporary terms. This allowed for imaginative insights into what builds 'a sense of commonality', as well as into some of the hurdles towards this end. In a time of socio-political volatility and anxiety, these approaches were critical in asserting how bottom-up processes of reconfiguring identity were already part of contemporary Malaysian reality.

This chapter will first introduce the political and economic events that created a sense of turbulence during the late 1990s, and articulate why they led to marked changes in the social and cultural terrain. A desire for political alternatives propelled the need to challenge structures of

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<sup>2</sup> This refers to Krishen's stated intent of 'excavating' how 'multiculturalism is in one body' rather than just between bodies, as discussed in the Introduction.

<sup>3</sup> Krishen quoted at the start of the chapter.

power, which in turn led to new initiatives for doing so. I discuss why this change was important in raising questions about how to improve solidarity and manage difference as non-disruptive. The next section looks at specific developments in contemporary English language theatre during this period and the escalating interest among practitioners to stage critical responses to the political tensions. A new climate of boldness engendered overtly oppositional performances, reflecting the wider dissent in the nation. I then look at how Krishen's work continued to comment on issues of politics, but as they were experienced in everyday life and inter-personal interactions. Hence the devised performances he created and the monologue scripts he directed often critiqued negotiations of power through the lens of daily realities, asserting a politics of change that was conscious of the hurdles involved in transforming prejudicial attitudes in racialised cultures. I then analyse two productions directed by Krishen, a multilingual devised performance in 1999 entitled *A Chance Encounter*, directed and devised by Krishen with performers Faridah Merican and Foo May Lyn, and writer-dramaturg Leow Puay Tin; and a monologue entitled *Election Day*, written by Huzir Sulaiman and performed by Jo Kukathas in 2004. These performances were important for the ways in which they performed the mix of cultures 'within' bodies as seamless, integrated and open to revision, while being insightful about the challenges of working towards 'commonality' in contemporary Malaysian society.

### **Dissenting Voices and Demonstrations of Protest**

Malaysian society in the late 1990s was gripped by a sense of anxiety that resulted from a downturn in the economy and subsequent political instability. A growing disenchantment with the ruling powers, who had favoured the elite few to the detriment of the many, produced a shift in public consciousness about the need for major political change. The popularity of the Barisan Nasional (National Front, BN) ruling coalition was being significantly diminished as allegations of corruption, cronyism and nepotism increased, and public trust in the government eroded. This led to fresh questions about what it meant to be modern and Malaysian, which were unlike those of an earlier generation, who responded to the racial riots in 1969 by trying to unite as a nation through a central state-led re-imagining of culture and identity, as discussed in Chapter Two. By the 1990s, there was a stronger motivation among the populace to critique discriminatory structures of power and work towards a widely participatory democracy that would prioritise justice and equity for all Malaysians. This was in part due to a growing modernisation of the

populace, less willing to simply conform to feudal systems of power and state-sanctioned dictates of political and cultural values; and the introduction of concepts such as *Bangsa Malaysia*, coined by Prime Minister Mahathir himself, to promote ideals of a 'national race' that transcended ethno-religious divides and generated inter-ethnic parity, as discussed in Chapter Four. As a result, the support for political alternatives that emphasised 'a sense of commonality',<sup>4</sup> rather than reiterations of essentialist tropes of identity increased significantly, as these were seen as crucial to building better social cohesion. This section will look at some of the political developments that led to this change, and argue that this new climate of *Reformasi* and rethinking Malaysian identity provided an important backdrop against which Krishen's small-scale theatre was potent in its commentary of Malaysian society.

The Asian economic crisis of 1997, which affected East and Southeast Asia and had a marked impact on the Malaysian economy, led to a serious crisis of confidence in the government's ability to secure economic well-being for its populace. The sharp devaluation of the Malaysian currency exposed weaknesses in an economic system that had become over-dependent on international finance capital and profit-seeking activities. Neo-liberal policies that had increased privatisation and deregulation in the early 1990s, as well as patronage practices that favoured political cronies, and state-created rent-based incomes, were also seen as contributing factors to the economic meltdown. Hence the cry for an end to 'corruption, nepotism and cronyism' that echoed across the region, particularly in Indonesia and Thailand, was also voiced in Malaysia and galvanised a range of individuals and groups to rally together and express dissent and dissatisfaction against the government.<sup>5</sup>

Apart from economic woes, there was also deep displeasure about the way in which political issues were being managed. The events that surrounded the sudden dismissal from office of then Deputy Prime Minister, Anwar Ibrahim, on September 2, 1998, added further fuel to the anger and resentment against the ruling party. The sacking of a Deputy Prime Minister, followed by accusations of corruption and sexual impropriety, was unprecedented in the history of Malaysian politics. It thus shook the nation, as Anwar, who had risen to power under Mahathir's mentorship, was widely expected to become the next Prime Minister. While the two

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<sup>4</sup> Krishen, quoted at the start of the chapter.

<sup>5</sup> See Francis K.W. Loh, 'Developmentalism and the Limits of Democratic Discourse,' in *Democracy in Malaysia: Discourses and Practices*, eds. Francis K.W. Loh and Khoo, Boo Teik, (London: Curzon Press, 2002), 19-20.

leaders were reputed to be in disagreement about how to handle the financial crisis and other issues of transparency in governance,<sup>6</sup> this drastic step of removing Anwar from political office was shocking for Malaysians. It further reinforced growing perceptions of Mahathir's authoritarian leadership such that Anwar's subsequent detention without trial under the Internal Security Act (ISA) from September 20, 1998, till early 1999, and other actions taken by the state to politically castrate him, became widely regarded as desperate measures taken by Mahathir to oust a 'rival' rather than punish a 'criminal'.<sup>7</sup>

The controversy that erupted surrounding the dismissal of Anwar and the unjust treatment meted out to him created deep dissatisfaction among the general public, as it indicated the severely diminished capacity of the state to ensure due process. There was a new level of intensity about the questioning of authority because the degree of silencing of a public figure had not been witnessed in this extreme degree in Malaysia. This was most powerfully illustrated when Anwar was beaten up while in prison by no less than Rahim Noor, then Inspector General of Police. The image of Anwar's black eye, the outcome of police brutality, became symbolic of a wider travesty against the populace at large. As political scientist Edmund Terrence Gomez points out, the 'manner of Anwar's public humiliation and prosecution visibly revealed the subservience of the media, police and judiciary to the executive'.<sup>8</sup> If a powerful politician could be susceptible to this degree of humiliation and cruelty executed by the state itself, then what more the ordinary citizen?

Hence the public, who were suddenly made to feel powerless against an authoritarian regime, acted to break the silence of compliance, and spoke out against these power structures and practices. The *Reformasi* movement, which was targeted against the BN and the Mahathir administration for its abuses of power, was most evident in the widespread anger and frustration expressed in street rallies and mass demonstrations that occurred in the nation's capital, Kuala

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<sup>6</sup> Gary Rodan, *Transparency and Authoritarian Rule in Southeast Asia: Singapore and Malaysia*, (London: Routledge, 2005), 126, identifies Anwar's approach to the crisis as leading towards greater transparency, and points out that Mahathir did not support this move as it was seen as a threat to the political basis of UMNO. Nonetheless 'transparency took on overt political meanings and embraced a more generalized system of openness and accountability that extended to political office, the public bureaucracy and associated institutions, as well as the strategic role of a free media in the transmission and analysis of information and news'.

<sup>7</sup> See Marzuki Mohamad, 'Legal coercion, meanings and UMNO's hegemony,' in *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension*, ed. Edmund Terrence Gomez, (London: Routledge, 2008), 37-40.

<sup>8</sup> Edmund Terrence Gomez, 'Introduction,' in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, equity and reform*, ed. E.T. Gomez, (Oxford: Routledge Curzon, 2004), 2.

Lumpur. Solidarities were created across differences of race, religion, class and politics, to challenge the ruling powers, and fight for justice in the interests of the ordinary citizen, who was made to feel extremely vulnerable in the machinations of corrupt power. As Gomez notes the ‘primary concern of the reformists was to transform the way authority was exercised,’ and to resist the ‘unaccountable abuse of power to protect vested political and economic interests’.<sup>9</sup> Thus despite the deployment of coercive measures by the state to dissuade citizens from participating in these demonstrations, such as the use of tear gas and water cannons to disperse peaceful protestors, the movement was able to garner support and persist in its efforts to oppose the government.<sup>10</sup> This was a rare moment in Malaysian politics as it indicated a new capacity among the populace to withstand threats from the authorities, and assert their right to expressing oppositional views.

Another positive development that emerged was how the call for *keadilan* (justice) that marked the *Reformasi* movement grew beyond the Anwar ‘cause’ to encompass other aspects of civil rights.<sup>11</sup> In its demands for justice and equity it called for the repeal of coercive laws such as the ISA (which allows for detention without trial), greater accountability and transparency in government, and an end to repressive practices such as corruption, cronyism and nepotism. In political scientist Francis Loh’s terms this was effectively a demand for ‘change of government’.<sup>12</sup> The realisation that long-term change was necessary also prodded opposition politicians to work towards a two-party system to curtail the dominance of the ruling BN, which had been in power since the nation was formed in 1957. The founding of a new opposition party that purposefully called itself *Keadilan* (Justice) and thus represented the urgent need to

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<sup>9</sup> Gomez, ‘Introduction’, 2.

<sup>10</sup> See Sabri Zain, *Face Off: A Malaysian Reformasi Diary* (Singapore: BigO Books, 2000), for details of the events that took place during these demonstrations.

<sup>11</sup> Carolina Lopez C., ‘Globalisation, state and g/local human rights actors: Contestations between institutions and civil society,’ in *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension*, ed. Edmund Terence Gomez, (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 59, identifies the ‘government’s treatment of Anwar’ as the ‘catalyst that gave birth to the *reformasi* movement’ and asserts that it was Anwar’s supporters who pushed for ‘broader issues of justice, participatory democracy, the rule of law and the repeal of existing coercive laws’. But as Edmund Terence Gomez, ‘Introduction: Resistance to change – Malay politics in Malaysia’ in *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension* ed. Edmund Terence Gomez (London and New York: Routledge, 2008), 1, also points out, the movement went ‘beyond Anwar’ to become ‘a major site of resistance to Mahathir and his form of governance’ even though it did not succeed in removing Mahathir from power.

<sup>12</sup> Loh, ‘Developmentalism’, 20. Loh links the demand for *reformasi* with the ‘burgeoning popular movement in the mid-1980s, which similarly called for “rule of law”, “participatory democracy” and “accountability”’, but was ‘nipped in the bud’ when mass arrests were conducted under the ISA as part of Operation Lallang, as mentioned in Chapter Three.



emphasise transparency and accountability in government represented a new envisioning of Malaysian society. Instead of being racially constructed like the constituent parties in the BN Alliance, it was multi-racial and focussed on human rights causes. Since the main leaders of this party, such as Anwar, had been part of a racially-based political ideology prior to this, their participation in rethinking ethnocentric constructs of nationhood signalled a need for change. The party then proceeded to spearhead the creation of the Barisan Alternatif (Alternative Front, BA), a coalition of opposition parties comprising the already established Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Rakyat Malaysia (Malaysian People's Party, PRM) and the Parti Islam SeMalaysia (Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party, PAS). Perhaps it was not since pre-independence years, when Malaysians of diverse convictions banded together to resist colonial rule, that such displays of solidarity across several political boundaries were tangible. In fact 'the emergence of the multi-ethnic, multi-religious BA coalition where parties representing the different cleavages in Malaysian society were represented', was seen as a 'harbinger of a more unified, democratic and egalitarian Malaysian society'.<sup>13</sup> Despite the turmoil and instability, a hopeful transformation towards a society that was able to transcend racial divisions without denying cultural difference was envisioned.

This reshaping of Malaysian politics through bottom-up initiatives that prioritised participatory democracy and de-emphasised racial politics impacted on aspects of identity and culture in a modernising and globalising society. It encouraged a stronger commitment towards generating a 'sense of commonality' that was able to put aside cultural differences without denying particularity. As political analyst Marzuki Mohamad notes 'upward social mobility' had 'created a new consciousness about the meaning of self in the intricate web of state-market-society relations', and this led to 'new legal parlance, or rather the rediscovery of old terms, such as 'rule of law', 'social justice' and 'constitutionalism', which contradicted and challenged 'state created legal meanings inherent in its instrumentalist-purposive view of the law, leading to societal pressures for legal change'.<sup>14</sup> Civil society organisations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), such as SUARAM and HAKAM,<sup>15</sup> which were non-racialised, but

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<sup>13</sup> Gomez, 'Introduction', 4.

<sup>14</sup> Marzuki Mohamad, 'Legal coercion, meanings and UMNO's hegemony,' in *Politics in Malaysia: The Malay Dimension* ed. Edmund Terence Gomez, (London: Routledge, 2008), 29-30.

<sup>15</sup> SUARAM, or Suara Rakyat Malaysia, which means 'Voice of the Malaysian People', is a human rights organization in Malaysia that was created after the events of Operation Lallang in 1987. HAKAM, or Persatuan

focused on drawing attention to human rights abuses meted out against all Malaysians, were revitalised by a growth in public interest in issues of social justice and the rule of law. As sociologist Carolina Lopez C. points out, ‘this was a defining moment in the history of Malaysian civil movements, for it marked an unprecedented unity among a large number of the population, collectively and openly voicing concern about the need to respect and protect basic civil rights’.<sup>16</sup> The strategic use of virtual technologies and the Internet to subvert the state’s control of information through the mainstream media such as the newspapers, radio and television, meant that alternative voices were also made more accessible. Although measures such as censorship were taken by the authorities to try and curtail these interventions, the irony was that preceding policies of liberalization had set the stage for these developments to persist despite threats of penalty.<sup>17</sup>

In this environment of increased public dissatisfaction with the way the state was handling the economic and political crises, several sites of performed resistance to the Mahathir administration emerged. These ranged from street demonstrations to agit-prop performances at political rallies. In particular, the urban, professional and middle-class sector, which had expanded as a result of the economic boom in the early 1990s, became more vocal in challenging the government, even if they were often the beneficiaries of state policies such as affirmative action or patronage. They sought more critical and candid lenses with which to view the developments of Malaysian politics, and this generated a more open climate for dialogue.

In this context, Krishen’s small-scale theatre was an important space that articulated how everyday life was rich with a *politics* of culture that was in fact closely tied to a *culture* of politics. Cultural links across difference occurred in daily life, and it was important to recognise the inter-plays of power and positioning that contributed to its subjectivity and agency. Here he directed intimate actor-focussed performances that expressed how Malaysians were participants in, and not passive recipients of, cultural reinvention. Thus they were able to surpass the reductive norms of official categories of Selves and Others. It was a space that attended to the

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Kebangsaan Hak Asasi Manusia, which means ‘National Human Rights Society’, is also a human rights organization that works to defend and promote civil liberties in Malaysia.

<sup>16</sup> Lopez C., ‘Globalisation,’ 60.

<sup>17</sup> For discussion on arts censorship and the right to freedom of expression, see Eddin Khoo, Ramdas Tikamdas and Elizabeth Wong eds. *Freedom of Expression in the Arts* (Kuala Lumpur: National Human Rights Society [HAKAM], 2003), which examines issues of state policy in relation to arts events and the problems of securing permits and licenses during the late 1990s and early 2000s.

‘convivial’ and inter-related aspects of culture, to do the ‘creative and negative thinking’ that sociologist Paul Gilroy asserts is required to ‘generate more complex and challenging narratives’. These spaces are ‘faithful to the everyday patterns of heterocultural metropolitan life’; where instead of increasing the ‘exaggerated dimensions of racial difference’ they point to a ‘liberating ordinariness’ instead.<sup>18</sup> Hence even when there is uncertainty, and indeterminacy, they are approached with creative curiosity. This frame for making theatre, using common experience to illustrate socio-political struggles, was something Krishen had been experimenting with in the 1970s and 1980s, but which I argue was most effective in the devised multilingual and monologue theatre he directed in the 1990s onwards. In a new climate of contemporary English language theatre seeking to enhance its political relevance, this was also part of a wider aesthetic in the Malaysian arts scene.

### **A *Reformasi* of Contemporary English Language Theatre**

During the period of frequent public protests and mass demonstrations in the late 1990s, the tensions on the street were often more compelling and dramatic than those on stage. It was thus necessary for theatre practitioners to make work that grappled with the emergent questions of what was pertinent to a refashioning of Malaysian identity, in order to resonate with the urgent issues of the time. This section will examine some of the developments in English language theatre that produced a bolder critique of the Malaysian status quo, and sought to perform the fractures, disjunctures and disenchantments in society through aesthetic choices that articulated an oppositional stance to the government. It considers how some theatre projects were particularly potent in staging cultural and political difference as integral aspects of Malaysian life, to represent the growing solidarities across race and ideology that were occurring in the wider political arena. This avant-gardist approach was aimed at addressing issues of political concern through aesthetic means, and asserting a politics of identity on stage that aligned with a politics of dissent on the street. I argue that Krishen’s small-scale theatre, which since the mid-1990s had looked closely at how to draw on languages of the everyday to articulate the tensions and conflicts of multiplicity, was an important contribution to this enlargement of the role of theatre. It questioned what was regarded as ‘normative’ by showing how a simultaneity of several

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<sup>18</sup> Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, (Columbia University Press, New York, 2005), 119.

different 'norms' demanded a more open and expansive frame for an inclusive Malaysian identity. It was no longer sufficient to simply indicate inter- and intra-cultural crossings, but necessary to portray the multiplicity 'within' cultures that effectively revised the meanings of how these boundaries operated. Not only were they permeable, porous and in flux, they were simultaneously markers that created detachment and distance as well. Hence the embodiment of contemporary cultural identity entailed a capacity to deal with what art critic Terry Smith called a 'jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities', that were 'all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them.'<sup>19</sup> I argue that Krishen's devised and monologue theatre was particularly effective in showing this dimension of Malaysian contemporaneity because it depicted the inter-relatedness of cultures by showing how they were differentiated, constantly moving closer and further from each other, and yet deeply imbricated such that they could not really be separated.

The growing concern in the late 1990s about what it meant to negotiate political tension and economic instability in order to regain social cohesion, particularly among the urban, educated and middle-class who had been largely indifferent to politics in the early 1990s, meant a stronger will to confront issues of socio-cultural conflict. Alongside frequent stories of violent incidents and police brutality, the media often carried reports of detentions and arrests, as well as new cases of political scandal being exposed. This impacted on a sense of individual and communal social position and cultural identity, as boundaries of difference were shifting all the time. Thus the challenge for experimental and contemporary English language theatre practitioners was to respond to these events with depth and insight, so that their work went beyond simple demonstrations of dissent. Just as Malaysian society was going through a process of *Reformasi* by seeking a wider range of perspectives with which to apprehend the disturbing events occurring on political and economic fronts, theatre audiences were developing an increased appetite for radical perspectives in performance that confronted the implications of these events for culture and identity.

Experimental English language theatre had always occupied a marginal space in the Malaysian cultural landscape, even though it gained more recognition from the state and

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<sup>19</sup> Terry Smith, 'Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,' in *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee, (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 8-9.

increased support from a modernising urban populace in the early 1990s, as mentioned in the previous chapter. Even though it was never a widespread medium of the arts, unlike television or film, it had played a critical role in challenging mainstream notions of culture and staging alternative frames of Malaysian identity, as practitioners were often from widespread cultural backgrounds and seen as unconventional in their views of culture, politics and aesthetics. The political events that surrounded the Anwar dismissal and arrest produced a range of responses from artists willing to be directly involved in opposing the coercive tactics being used to silence dissent and penalise protesters. While artists in contemporary and experimental theatre had always been seen as critical of the state, there was little overt oppositional or agit-prop theatre that declared a specific intent to point fingers directly at the state. However the *Reformasi* movement precipitated a change in theatre as well. Under the umbrella of *artisproactiv*, a newly formed collective of arts practitioners who felt a critical need to discuss how the arts community could respond to the nation's precarious political condition in 1998, several individuals created visual and performance works that were exhibited and staged in various venues all over the capital city of Kuala Lumpur, from October 27 till November 11 that year. The multi-disciplinary and multi-lingual festival entitled *ada apa?* (what's up?), included a theatre section entitled 'You Have Ten Minutes', alluding to the warning to disperse issued to demonstrators by riot-police, that was commonly heard on the streets before tear gas and water cannons were unleashed. That the festival was allowed to go ahead, despite a few incidents to mark a close patrolling and curtailing of liberties during the events, is more indicative of the minimal reach of the alternative arts scene than a liberal attitude on the part of the state.<sup>20</sup> However what is significant is the deliberate coming together and initiative taken by artists to put aside aesthetic and cultural differences and band together under one socio-political umbrella of questioning abuses of power. This was not something done regularly in the Malaysian arts scene, and was evidence of an increased desire to critique and question the state through a growing 'sense of commonality' in the Malaysian arts terrain as well.

An increasing number of theatre performances in English language theatre also asserted a need to comment directly on the political situation, and stage works that would move audiences to take action in relation to their own agency, rather than simply applaud the artistic efforts on

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<sup>20</sup> For details on the *ada apa* festival see Rowland, 'Politics of Drama', 167-8.

stage. Adaptations of already established scripts as well as new works were created to highlight the need for urban middle- and upper-classes to rethink their comfort zones of compliance and passivity. One example of this was the Instant Café Theatre's (ICT) adaptation of Italian playwright-director Dario Fo's *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* in May 1999, which pointedly 'cast' Mahathir as the tyrannical dictator by simply having an outline of his image framed and hung up on stage. The original play, a political farce set in Italy of the 1960s, is the story of an imprisoned activist who manages to outwit the police officers conspiring to execute his 'accidental' death. Based on the real life events of activist Giuseppe Pinelli, who is widely believed to have died in custody as a result of police brutality, the play exposes the corruption and violence of the state at a time of intense turmoil. Jo Kukathas, director of the ICT performance, adapted the play to the Malaysian context with clear allusions to Anwar as the 'prisoner' facing similar 'threats' and Mahathir as the brutal power behind the conspiracy. Held in May 1999, just before the General Election in November of that year, the performance also became a platform to urge audiences to register as voters. The implication was that the travesty of power taking place on stage was a reflection of what was happening on the streets and in the nation at large. It underlined the importance of moving from indifference to action. Applause alone was not sufficient. Spectators were pushed to acknowledge their responsibility and intervene accordingly, using the charge of emotion derived from the fictional realm of performance, as fuel for active change in the real political world.

The pervasive presence of the *Reformasi* mood in several spheres of Kuala Lumpur life also generated performances that made direct references to the events and effects of street protests and demonstrations. Writer-filmmaker Amir Muhammad's *The Malaysian Decameron*, performed in February 2000 as part of the Five Arts Centre's Director's Workshop, was a theatrical and localized adaptation of 14<sup>th</sup> century Italian author Giovanni Boccaccio's classic collection of stories about the Bubonic Plague in 14<sup>th</sup> century Europe. The play looked at the plight of four young Malaysians of diverse cultural backgrounds who are caught in a city-centre basement shopping area, and restricted from leaving due to street protests and police crackdowns in the area above them. Staged in The Actor's Studio Theatre, which at the time was located in the basement of the Dataran Merdeka, an actual site for several large protests and police crackdowns, the play used the performance venue where it was performed as symbolic *and* literal. It parodied the fears and anxieties of middle-class Malaysians, concerned largely with the

disruption to their weekend shopping sprees, and showed how a consumerist society was encouraged to pretend nothing was amiss and sustain its focus on spending-power while the price for resistance was taxed with the penalties of punishment. Conflating the stage with the street, it pushed audiences to acknowledge the proximity of real events with the fictional.<sup>21</sup> In many respects, it took what was happening in real life and translated it onto stage, with close references to the actual events of the everyday as a way of contending with ‘the tensions and contradictions that are precipitated in present-day society’.<sup>22</sup>

The interrogation of ‘normative behaviour’ by questioning ‘what we are as Malaysians’ and ‘how we imagine our community’ was something that Krishen had emphasised in his theatre since the 1970s, and it strongly underpinned his approach to devised theatre in the 1990s onwards. His work in English language theatre had thus far been primarily text-driven and based on locally written scripts in English, even when there was extensive experimentation, such as in his direction of site-specific performance as discussed in Chapter Four. However his experimentation with devised multi-lingual theatre, in which he was not confined to a single language as used in a script, was an advancement of his stagings of cultural difference in Malaysian theatre. Here Krishen collaborated with performers who were bilingual or trilingual, who then used their ability to speak multiple languages to create texts that moved in and out of these different vocabularies. To devise the text, the actors were involved in researching their own lives and relationships, drawing from real experiences, intersecting diverse voices and references, while inhabiting the same space on stage. Within the devised process, Krishen was at greater liberty to produce texts that emerged from the physical impulses of characters. He drew on the multi-dimensionality of theatre as the source and not the embellishment of verbal text. This meant using the action or gesture as the starting point for the ‘word’, inverting the convention of the written text as the initiator of physical action.

In *US: Actions and Images* (1993) Krishen devised a play with five young actors of different race, social class and religion, and together with them staged a strong imagining of multiplicity within society. In a complex interweaving of different stories voiced in multiple languages, Krishen developed a stylised form of storytelling that was improvised and created

<sup>21</sup> See Catherine Diamond, ‘Parallel Streams: Two Currents of Difference in Kuala Lumpur’s Contemporary Theatre,’ *The Drama Review* 46: 2 (T174), Summer 2002, 7, for further discussion of ICT’s *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* and Amir’s *Malaysian Decameron*, as political satires that reflected the political turbulence of the time.

<sup>22</sup> Krishen, ‘Pan-Asean performance encounter,’ *New Straits Times*, November 18, 1990.



with the actors involved. The performance articulated stories of real events from the lives of the actors, based on the themes of cultural upbringing and family ties. It was a collage of five personal histories, memories and stories about growing up in Malaysia and belonging to a particular cultural sphere, with each story belonging to the actor concerned. These were performed as intersecting strands that wove in and out of each other, to show the interconnectedness of separate realms. In Krishen's view it was 'a performance piece devised by five actors and the director in search of their personal and public identities in a multi-racial society'.<sup>23</sup> He used the actors' reminiscence and roots to 'illuminate social conditions and archetypal situations'.<sup>24</sup> Consisting of three women and two men, who were Chinese, Malay and Indian-Eurasian, urban and rural, upper, middle and working class, the performers represented some of the mix in Malaysian society, but were not meant to be stereotypical or representative of all sectors of their culture.

In this production Krishen was 'interested in 'the changing stances on race and ethnicity among young Malaysians',<sup>25</sup> and how theatre enabled a transformation from the 'raw event to dramatic image'.<sup>26</sup> One example of this was a moment in the play when the Indian-Eurasian performer, Sunetra Fernando, related the story of her paternal Sri-Lankan Singhalese grandfather's death in Singapore, then part of Malaya, and the grief of never knowing the location of his grave. As a musician-performer trained in Western classical forms as well as traditional Malay music, Fernando expressed her unspoken inner sorrow of cultural longing and loss through her singing voice and the *rebab*, a two-stringed spike fiddle, often associated with healing rituals in Malay traditional performances.<sup>27</sup> Having narrated the circumstances of the death in English, Fernando's main language of spoken expression, she shifted to singing in a Malay traditional style while playing the *rebab*, which produces a sound akin to the melancholic tone of the human voice. As she did this, her voice and the sound of the *rebab* melded into one, as did her body with the instrument she was playing, manipulating and moving with the bow in a

<sup>23</sup> Krishen, 'Director's Notes,' in *US: Actions and Images* Programme Booklet, (Kuala Lumpur: 1993).

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Krishen, commenting on *US: Actions and Images* in 'Director's Notes,' in *Work: The Malaysian Way* Programme Booklet (Kuala Lumpur: 1996).

<sup>26</sup> Krishen, 'Director's Notes' in *US: Actions and Images*.

<sup>27</sup> This was not the first time Krishen was collaborating with Sunetra Fernando. As discussed in Chapter Four, he had worked with Fernando as musician-composer in two productions, namely *3 Children* and *Scorpion Orchid*. However this was the first time Fernando performed as an actor.

lament of lost histories and forgotten pasts. Even as there was cultural erasure due to the unmarked grave, Fernando was reconstructing a new heritage for herself - one that syncretised her English speaking Indian-Eurasian background with traditional Malay culture. Working to recast this 'music' as but one of the vocabularies of Malaysian culture that needs to be re-assigned to more than just one racial community, Krishen created an opportunity for her to invent an adaptation of its instrument, sound and repertory, as intersected with her officially non-Malay identity. This indicated how theatre could not only recast identities, but also provide vocabularies for expressing these shifts beyond the spoken and written. The embodiments were also part of the 'convivialities'<sup>28</sup> that Malaysians encountered and participated in frequently, legitimising the vocabularies and languages that emerged from personal history and memory as important resources for reflections on the subjectivities of Selves and Others.

Krishen also directed monologue performances in the 1990s, in which solo actors had to transform seamlessly in and out of a range of characters which were all culturally different from each other. This articulated another kind of multiplicity within, as it showed how there was a 'critical syncretism'<sup>29</sup> at work in the body of the performer. It required an actor to be able to switch from one accent into another, and shift between several physical postures and gestures to enact the diversity of identities on stage. Krishen's direction of Singapore-based Malaysian actress Claire Wong in the 2001 production of Huzir Sulaiman's political satire *Atomic Jaya*, involved Wong researching the physical and vocal inflections of fourteen characters listed in the play, to find the gesture, voice and physicality for each one. The play is about a young and upcoming Malaysian nuclear physicist, Dr. Mary Yuen, who is entrusted with building Malaysia's first nuclear bomb. The parody of state and individual hubris, seen in aspirations of high modernity that were unattainable, commented directly on the contradictions of Malaysian life; in which high levels of technology and soaring ambitions co-existed with low levels of competence and weakening investor confidence. The characters in the text ranged from the bright and capable female nuclear scientist, to a pompous Malay army general, a sycophantic Indian nuclear scientist, a wily Chinese smuggler and a high-sounding British broadcaster among others. The task was then to weave them together in a seamless fabric of storytelling that allowed

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<sup>28</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial*, xv.

<sup>29</sup> Chen Kuan-Hsing, 'The Decolonization Question,' in *Trajectories: Inter-Asia Cultural Studies*, eds. Kuan-Hsing Chen with Hsiu-Ling Kuo, Hans Hang and Hsu Ming-Chu, (London: Routledge, 1998), 25.

the spectator to envisage the array of characters, while tracing the story through the eyes of the protagonist. Wong's interpretations of the characters in the play, from the point of view of the protagonist Dr. Mary Yuen, were then direct comments on notions of how these varied aspects of Malaysian and foreign cultures were all connected to each other. The characters were created in an improvisatory process that Krishen directed, to enable the actor to evolve a physical and vocal vocabulary that conveyed her own versions of the play.<sup>30</sup> In this regard it was not unlike Krishen's work with Khalid Salleh, in *Bukan Bunuh Diri* in the 1970s, as discussed in Chapter Two. However in this text, the actor played several characters and thus the multiplicity of society was embodied vividly in the performance.

In Krishen's small-scale theatre, his approach was to prioritise a collaborative process with the performers and thus devise languages for performing Malaysian multiplicity that prioritised the vocabularies of everyday life, rather than traditional forms or formalised codes of theatre. In this regard it was performing Chen's 'critical syncretism' which 'interiorize elements of others',<sup>31</sup> as well as Gilroy's 'convivialities' that point to a 'liberating ordinaryness'.<sup>32</sup> This was most relevant in the late 1990s when the need to endorse a quotidian capacity to execute and experience 'a sense of commonality' was crucial, despite the unwillingness to 'give up identifiable histories', to generating a positive and hopeful engagement with a wider movement of reform in society. The two plays that I will now analyse built on earlier processes of actor-collaboration and were particularly powerful in their expressions of the complexities and challenges of this task. I contend that Krishen's primary achievement in these works was his ability to create stagings of cultural difference that were deeply nuanced and layered with several ideas about modernity and multiplicity, and readily accessible to a contemporary Malaysian audience.

### **Devising Languages of Commonality in *A Chance Encounter***

In the devised play *A Chance Encounter*, Krishen engaged with the idea of a 'makeover' as an overarching metaphor in a story about two women who meet at a cosmetics counter in an urban shopping mall. It explored issues of cultural commonality and detachment, and the

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<sup>30</sup> Information gained from Claire Wong, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2007.

<sup>31</sup> Chen, 'Decolonization,' 25.

<sup>32</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial*, 119.

attempts to overcome feelings of isolation, by making temporary links across boundaries that divide. The effort to positively transform a situation and improve relations across difference was shown as endearing but also discomfiting, as by the end of the play the two women part company due to irresolvable tensions between and within them. I argue that in this performance Krishen's directorial vision to stage cultural difference as integral to contemporary Malaysian identity exceeded his earlier work. This is because even though it articulated the positive intersections of culture that do occur in Malaysian society, as seen in previous chapters, it went further in foregrounding the disconnections and fractures that prevail despite attempts to build commonality. In this regard, the 'makeover' was recognised as temporary, and a cause for questioning. It thus does not deny the flaws beneath the facade of smooth skin. Using ordinary vocabularies of physical gesture and mixed spoken languages, Krishen drew from the tacit knowledge available to ordinary Malaysians. This legitimised everyday mixes as valuable counterpoints to official segregatedness.

The story looks at the lives of two characters, Anita, a young Chinese-Malaysian cosmetics saleswoman, and Fatimah, an elderly Mamak (Indian-Muslim) housewife, who encounter each other by chance and become friends for a brief period. Despite belonging to different generations and cultures, they make conversation about everyday life in between talking about cosmetics products. In the process they reveal similar interests about popular movies and attitudes to life. They also grapple with similar tensions of rejection, a sense of loneliness, and the frustrations with not being able to 'makeover' their respective situations. Anita longs to live a glamorous life among movie stars and bright city lights, while Fatimah wishes for a supportive and loving family life. But the two women feel unable to attain what they desire, and 'make-do' with what they have. They also discover historical links between them that indicate they were once neighbours and knew each other, but had since lost touch. Their cheerful banter is then inflected by a painful past. Hence the façade of being able to put on a brave front and hide the cracks in their story is revealed as a thin external layer that soon wears out. The temporary gloss of being able to share a connection with a stranger, who lightens the burden of existence, begins to fade. Eventually they resume separate paths after a brief shared moment.

In Krishen's view, the idea of the makeover reflected something about the way Malaysians attended to issues of cultural difference, particularly in times of political tension. He believed that Malaysians had been constantly 'making ourselves over', particularly after the

events of May 13, 1969, ‘in some ways very positively and in some ways very disastrously’.<sup>33</sup> But these changes had always remained ‘cosmetic’, and thus the coming together and transcending of differences was temporary. There was still a ‘built-up paranoia’ that rejected that ‘part of the self which is the most troubling’<sup>34</sup> and prevented a deeper reconciliation. As the characters entertain notions of a life other than the ones they have, and amuse each other in the sharing of these dreams, the reality of an ugly underlying truth surfaces to disrupt the fantasy. This disturbing ‘part of the self’ consists of prejudice, fear, disenfranchisement, and a lack of trust in the ‘other’. This is the result of ongoing pressures to sustain an image of Self feels animosity to the Other. It also points to a reluctance to let go or ‘give up’ histories that limit ‘a sense of commonality’.<sup>35</sup> The imaginative makeovers of temporary camaraderie between the two women end up putting more distance between them, because they never really confront the root of their problems. The work of real transformation entails more than skin-deep alteration. In the wider context of *Reformasi*, the play highlighted the challenges of creating sustainable commonality that goes deep enough to withstand the pressures of distancing and detachment.

The story of the two women is staged as a series of friendly meetings at the cosmetics counter where Anita works; in an urban shopping mall that marks a neutral and public space where both characters are free to invent and perform a sense of themselves. The context is open to a range of possibilities as it is devoid of particular cultural associations, apart from the overriding forces of capitalism and urbanisation. Their encounters also signify the multiple random meetings that occur on an everyday basis in many an urban metropolis. Performed in Kuala Lumpur in 1999, this aspect of the play was particularly relevant at the time, as many urban Malaysians began to question what it meant to forge connections with ‘strangers’, who shared similar concerns about Malaysian life and politics. The street demonstrations that were held as part of the *Reformasi* movement and the growing support for civil society organisations that brought together individuals of diverse backgrounds, as discussed earlier in the chapter, made these ‘chance encounters’ increasingly important as opportunities to engage with Others, and rethink the constructs of Self. As with Amir Muhammad’s *The Malaysian Decameron*, mentioned in the last section, shopping was often associated with a denial of harsh political

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<sup>33</sup> Krishen, discussing this production in a recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2004.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Krishen, quoted at the start of the chapter.

realities. But this was questioned in both these plays, to suggest that all aspects of life, including consumerism, were impacted by political shifts and instabilities. Anita and Fatimah, although seemingly unaffected by partisan politics, are nonetheless restless and struggling to cope with feelings of alienation that resonated with the frustrations of those resisting the authorities.

In his structuring of the performance, with the dramaturgical assistance of playwright Leow Puay Tin, Krishen allowed for a sense of exuberant hope in the first half of the play, that stemmed from the transcending of difference. This then transformed in the second half, to become more pessimistic about the capacity to sustain these connections. After the initial cheerful banter between the two women, who laugh about their desire to be more beautiful and tease each other about having movie-star fantasies, the audience encounters the bleak aspects of their life. Here the characters performed intermittent monologues about their inner lives, revealing a bitterness they otherwise concealed. Fatimah laments the neglect and indifference of her husband and children, who take her for granted and relegate her to domestic servitude. Correspondingly Anita's reminiscences of her childhood are plagued by memories of an abusive mother and a sense of being abandoned. The two women reflect on the loneliness they face as women estranged from the deeper ties of family, and unravel their heartache as a result of being powerless to change things. Here their relative marginality as women is marked as an aspect of difference that is often ignored in the politics of reform.

What makes this 'chance encounter' dramatically significant is that the two women are most unlike each other in terms of age, ethnicity, religious beliefs and social disposition. Hence they represent polarities in society. But it is their interactions and capacity to bridge these gaps that becomes an important dimension in the play. In appearance the two characters reflected the contrasts of their personas. Anita, played by actress Foo May Lyn, was well-coiffed and dressed in a neat, slick red and white uniform of a short tight skirt and jacket, with a matching scarf and high-heeled shoes. She was the urbane professional, well-groomed and skilfully made-up to convey an image of someone in touch with contemporary life. In comparison Fatimah, played by actress Faridah Merican, was seen as domesticated and out of touch with modern trends. She wore a loose green *baju kurung*<sup>36</sup> and flat-soled sandals, with her uncoiffed shoulder-length hair falling naturally around her neck, to convey a sense of someone who does not keep up with

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<sup>36</sup> A Malay traditional outfit for women, consisting a knee-length loose-fitting blouse with long sleeves, and a flowing ankle length skirt.

fashion or attempt to modernise her appearance. Thus Fatimah was seen as communal, traditional and restricted by her conventional identity as wife and mother, while Anita was individual, modern and resistant to conservative values in society.

The language that was devised in order to convey what it took for these two women to converse with each other drew on improvisations led by Krishen with the actors, with the view to concocting a spoken text that was closely linked to the way it was embodied and enacted. They used different physical and verbal communication that reflected the linguistic and cultural identities of the characters, inventing a language of their own.<sup>37</sup> This showed how communicative strategies across boundaries of culture often adapt formal codes of language to initiate their own rules of speaking and understanding each other. Anita, being the more cosmopolitan of the two, moved freely between varieties of English, Malay and Chinese, as these were languages she could wield, albeit with different levels of fluency. Fatimah was less adept at switching, speaking mainly Malay, even though she understood some words in English. This conveyed a sense of a character more tied to her cultural identity despite living in the city. However the mix of languages used between them indicated how multicultural life in Malaysia entails being able to access these mixed vocabularies, often improvised on the spot and reflective of the individuals who speak it. In this instance, the mix of Malay, English and Chinese languages was a spoken patois that blurred the formal boundaries between these languages to create a fluid movement across linguistic divides. It also drew on everyday vocabularies of culture to express how the ability to negotiate difference was common to Malaysians, despite political frames that precluded these options.

The physical gestures that were devised to enact and embody the characters were as important as the languages they spoken in the signification process, as words were often linked to actions. When Anita wanted to explain the use of cosmetic products to Fatimah, she often physicalised what she meant in order to illustrate the meanings of words that were difficult to translate from English to Malay. For example, to demonstrate the process of anti-aging creams she squeezed and pulled at her skin to show the difference between wrinkled and smooth surfaces. She demonstrated ‘toning and firming’ by physically outlining her svelte figure and pointing to how it “*jadi satu S la!*” (“becomes like an S you see!”), indicating curves in the right

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<sup>37</sup> Information gained from Faridah Merican, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.



places. Anita also translated some of the terms from English to Malay quite literally, such as “*makan itu lemak*” (eats the fats) for anti-cellulite and “*kasi kilat*” (gives shine) for light-reflecting creams, which enabled her to explain complex words to Fatimah and create her own code of cosmetic language. Here the terminology for a cosmetic makeover was seen as obfuscating to the ordinary shopper, but made accessible through the imaginative translation that also provides humour in the interpretation of what the process and products are meant to do. This was symbolic of much political rhetoric such as discourses of democracy, reform and egalitarianism, that often lacked a grounded reality as little was done to translate these concepts into real ‘language’ that could be spoken, lived and understood freely.

Krishen was interested in exploring how language, whether English or Malay, was spoken in a variety of ways, often not recognised by the authorities and hence ignored in the cultural landscape. Thus in his view, the language for the play was not simply ungrammatical or what tends to be called ‘broken’ English or Malay, but ‘an invented language that is not-not Malay’<sup>38</sup> – or for that matter, ‘not-not English’. This allowed an actor to create ‘a language for the stage that is not real but conveys the ideas necessary with a Malaysian accent, tone and colour’.<sup>39</sup> The staging of languages in flux, much like characters, cultures and identities in shift, was a strong symbolic articulation of the way modern Malaysians deal with their context and histories in multicultural society. For these reasons the production was regarded by one reviewer ‘as undeniably one of the most powerful works of Malaysian theatre in recent times’ because of its ability to

...possess a defining moment, [which] rests in the challenge of legitimising this [immigrant] vision of history.... as an instrument for inquiry, as a means to challenge, even defy, the history that continues to be thrust upon us in the form of text books and official edicts... as an experience for exploring the evolution of the *self* of this nation.<sup>40</sup>

Just as Anita and Fatimah are compelled to reinvent the way they relate to each other in order to find links that transcend their differences, so too do ordinary Malaysians create ways of surpassing boundaries, and in so doing ‘challenge, even defy’ what is prescribed by ‘text books and official edicts’. Krishen was ‘legitimising’ this ‘vision of history’ and thus giving voice to

<sup>38</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Ray Langenbach, 1999.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Eddin Khoo, ‘Leaving nothing to chance,’ *The Sunday Star*, March 28, 1999.

the margins by acknowledging and endorsing the languages and vocabularies that emerged from the fringes. It also allowed for the 'self' to recognise and accept its several 'others' within, as a form of Gilroy's 'liberating ordinariness'.<sup>41</sup>

The spoken and physical languages that were created thereby enabled a brief 'makeover' for the characters to enjoy each other's company and connect beyond their differences. However, just as their communication was sometimes disrupted by moments of misunderstanding and confusion about language, so too was the smooth surface of light humour between them tarnished by the darker layers of their inner lives. The histories beneath the surface were recognised as obstructions in the process of building friendship, like old fractures that impede a sense of well-being. While the stories they reveal provided a sense of culture and identity, they also perpetuated questions of self-worth and agency. Histories and rootedness were not just a resource for notions of belonging and validation. They were also a cause of stress and strain. The past was seen as exacerbating the present difficulties of life because they revealed unresolved abuses of power. Anita was adamant in refusing to confront the reality of her past, even though Fatimah kept alluding to a bygone era that connected them both. By the end of the play, Anita is seen speaking over Fatimah's attempts to reconnect their histories as she exfoliates Fatimah's skin. Her voice gets louder as she rubs Fatimah's facial contours and gradually becomes more aggressive with the older lady's skin. It highlights Anita's refusal to allow the deeper layers of self to be penetrated by Fatimah's recollections, even as she works to remove dead and superficial layers of Fatimah's skin. Anita struggles to appear 'blemish-free' and fights to keep the deep scars of the past hidden. She seeks to stay radiant in the bright glare of the halogen lights and shrugs off Fatimah's attempts to rekindle old memories as they threaten her facade. Eventually Fatimah accepts defeat and stops the process so she can leave. They part with a cordiality that is indicative of both denial and pride – neither willing to let down their guard to reveal the vulnerability and pain within. Furthermore, they both resume the isolation and anonymity symptomatic of a depersonalized existence that befits their cosmetic urban context.

The difficulty of transcending difference was staged as the challenge to overcome deep-seated resentments of the Other, and not the fear of unfamiliarity with the Other. For all the ability of the two characters to make links through telling each other stories, and improvising

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<sup>41</sup> Gilroy, *Postcolonial*, 119.

languages that entailed devising particular communicative strategies, there was still a deep divide that could not be bridged. For Anita it is the shame of her past and a sense of blame that curtails her ability to trust Fatimah. For Fatimah it is an insistence on going back to the past and an inability to recognise Anita's unwillingness to revisit those histories. Hence the two women fail to make their commonality last and part as estranged friends, having met as strangers. Krishen was thus expressing how the choice to engage and live with difference is rarely as hopeful as it appears, because the process is ridden with obstacles that diminish mutual respect, trust and understanding between and within selves. Just as everyday life held the promise of transcending difference, it also contained the pain of a 'broken vertebrae' that fractured social relations and curtailed forging bonds of commonality.<sup>42</sup> This aspect of how to negotiate multiplicity and live with diversity within a shared frame informed much of the devised theatre Krishen initiated, as well as the monologue performances he directed, such as in the play *Election Day*, which I turn to in the next section.

### **Multiplicity 'In One Body' in *Election Day* by Huzir Sulaiman**

Krishen's direction of Huzir Sulaiman's *Election Day* highlighted how one actor playing different characters from diverse backgrounds can perform the way 'multiculturalism is in one body'.<sup>43</sup> This expressed a clear alternative to the dominant notion of multiculturalism, which negotiates difference as parallel streams that do not mix. The play is a monologue in which the protagonist Francis, an Indian-Malaysian, recalls the events that occur on the day of the 10<sup>th</sup> General Election in Malaysia, November 29, 1999, and ponders why it creates a sense of unease within him. His story focuses on how he and his two housemates, Fozi, a Malay-Malaysian, and Dedric, a Chinese-Malaysian, are involved in the fever of a heated election campaign that preoccupies their attention during the day. However these events are intertwined with growing tensions that surface between them as a result of a mutual attraction for Natasha - a woman first introduced as Fozi's girlfriend but later discovered to have had relationships with Dedric and Francis as well. As Francis narrates these events, largely from his perspective, he also conveys

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<sup>42</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?' in *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 47.

<sup>43</sup> Krishen, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2004. This refers to Krishen's stated intent to 'excavate' the workings of how 'multiculturalism is in one body' as part of his approach to creating contemporary Malaysian theatre, as discussed in the Introduction.

the differing views of the other two main characters. This requires the actor to transform from one character into another, as a form of storytelling that distinguishes each one without costume or make-up changes. The actor performs changes of accent, gesture and physical movement to depict specific personalities and peculiarities. This section looks at how the play was a metaphor of the struggles of co-existence when there are rivalries between ‘housemates’, and how Krishen staged the play to suggest that the negotiation of these tensions between the characters enables a stronger capacity to deal with problems of difference in a polarised and fractured society. Hence even as the actor manages the task of seamlessly shifting from one character to the next, and transforming his/her body and voice to depict the differences between them, these conflicting perspectives within a single ‘body’ were also articulated as the cause of a certain restlessness – something that the protagonist Francis is seen to struggle with through the play.

The story of Francis, Fozi and Dedric, and the challenges they face in sharing a house together, was symbolic of the shared Malaysian nation. Just as the three men have to put up with each other’s individual quirks and habits, so too do the multiple races living together have to continually negotiate their differences. While the three men in their thirties are able to put aside their political and ideological differences in order to rally behind a candidate standing for a General Election, when it comes to personal matters of the heart they are unable to settle the rivalries between them. Hence whether while driving to the voter centre or in-between cajoling voters to choose their candidate, the three men reveal their concern about the outcome for the election amid a preoccupation with the ‘beautiful, alluring, enchanting, bewitching Natasha’.<sup>44</sup> This eventually drives a critical wedge between them, such that by the early hours of the next morning, when election results indicate the opposition is losing ground and tensions are raging high at home, Natasha returns and all is revealed. Francis admits that he is in fact an undercover cop who has been spying on Fozi and Dedric and conspiring to frame them as a threat to society because they support the opposition political party. Having spun several lies about his housemates in order to set them up against each other, he confesses to being an instrument of the state, assigned to quash efforts seen as detrimental to the popularity of the ruling regime. However what really drives him is a selfish desire to eliminate the competition for Natasha. This

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<sup>44</sup> Huzir Sulaiman, *Election Day*, in *Eight Plays*, by Huzir Sulaiman, (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2002), 152.

consuming lust becomes an emblem of a dangerous greed for power that thwarts other efforts to build social cohesion in the nation.

So inasmuch as the three men can express a sense of solidarity by volunteering their services to help in the campaign of an opposition candidate, R. Sivarasa, who represents an alternative to the ruling party, their relationship is severed when it comes to their individual ambitions to win Natasha for themselves. The play of political rivalries, seen in the larger competition between the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN) alliance and the Barisan Alternatif (BA) coalition, was interwoven with the personal enmity of three housemates who eventually split up because they could not resolve a major rift between themselves. Thus what transpired on a wider national level, in relation to a new climate of politics and the call for reform, was recognised as a challenge on personal levels of trust and respect. This inability to transcend difference due to personal bitterness and resentment was also evident in *A Chance Encounter*, as discussed in the previous section. However in *Election Day* the fact that it was one actor performing all the characters pointed directly at how Malaysian society is made up of different cultures, at odds with each other even when they appear to cooperate on a political front. Hence the tensions of identity reflect these inner unresolved questions of political loyalty and personal rivalry.

The play commented strongly on the politics of the late 1990s, and made references to real events that preoccupied Malaysians at the time. Drawing on the highly charged political environment that resulted from the *Reformasi* movement, the play uses factual material of events that occurred on November 29, 1999, which indicated how the heated competition between the BN and the BA created much anticipation about the outcome of the General Election. The text also drew from playwright Huzir Sulaiman's real experiences and observations as a volunteer in the campaign for R. Sivarasa.<sup>45</sup> These were harnessed to evoke vivid memories among the audience, and link the fictional story of invented characters with the drama of the real situation. Memories of intense optimism and anxiety while waiting for the results to be known were evoked by actual recordings of the live announcements and news reports in the public media.<sup>46</sup> The text also satirised the way in which these rivalries were played out by pointing to the fancy

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<sup>45</sup> R. Sivarasa, well-known human rights lawyer, was running for the first time against incumbent BN candidate Ong Tee Keat in the large urban constituency of Ampang Jaya in Kuala Lumpur. Due to Sivarasa's longstanding support of the arts, and his reputation as a public intellectual, several artists of varied disciplines were involved in his campaign. This was unusual in the Malaysian political landscape.

<sup>46</sup> Sulaiman, *Election Day*, 151, 165-73.

uniforms and expensive umbrellas of the ruling BN, compared with the make-do efforts of the opposition BA.<sup>47</sup> Similar to the devised plays Krishen directed, which used real events and experiences from the lives of actors, this play was rich with a range of references to everyday life in contemporary Malaysian politics. As such the ordinary events of the time were historicised, even as they became symbolic of something larger – namely the challenges faced by Malaysians in reshaping their political terrain. However the crux of the story was not the outcome of the election, but what happens when the apparently ‘alternative’ option of three very different men sharing a house is faced with betrayal and personal animosity.

The play was first directed by Krishen, and performed by playwright-actor Huzir Sulaiman, less than a fortnight after the actual General Election in 1999. It was a topical response to the political climate of the time, as it commented on the revitalised interest of an urban populace in opposition politics, and made reference to the recent political, social and cultural alliances that were forged to consolidate power against the ruling BN. Krishen worked with Huzir in an improvisatory process to develop the script, finalizing details only in the final few rehearsals.<sup>48</sup> In this sense the play was partially devised in the rehearsal process, albeit initiated by the playwright-actor and not the director, as with Krishen’s devised works discussed in the previous section.<sup>49</sup> This collaborative effort was not unlike other projects in which Krishen approached directing as a response to ideas from other artists, rather than an initiative singularly led by him. Therefore his capacity to work in a range of ways was part of the difference within his own body of theatre work, in approach, style, aesthetic and politics.

However I have chosen to analyse another production of *Election Day* that Krishen directed in 2004, when he collaborated with female actor, Jo Kukathas. By casting a woman instead of a man Krishen enlarged the performativity of difference, engaging with the politics of gender, apart from race, class and politics. Not only was the actress playing a male role as Francis the protagonist, she was also depicting men of varied cultures, namely Fozi and Dedric as well. The Malaysian identity as a composite of all these possibilities was compellingly located through the character with the least political leverage, namely Francis as a member of a small

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 155.

<sup>48</sup> Information gained from Huzir Sulaiman, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2007.

<sup>49</sup> The input of the director became part of developing the eventual script that was then later published as part of *Eight Plays* (2002) a collection of Huzir’s plays. Krishen also later directed Huzir in *The Smell of Language* in 2000, written by Huzir. He also directed plays written by Huzir but performed by other actors, such as *The Sisters Four Fernandez* in 2000, *Atomic Jaya* in 2001, and *Notes on Life, Love and Painting* in 2004.

minority group, the Indian-Malaysians, and actor Kukathas as an Indian-Malaysian woman. In addition she enacts the one mysterious female character, Natasha, about whom few details are given. Here the performance transcends aspects of race, class and politics to draw attention to the constructs of gender in the play of power. This offers a critique of a patriarchal system that is dominated by men, and marginalises women as mere objects of desire rather than subjects with agency.

Furthermore Kukathas represented the politicised actor engaged in performative critique. She was noted for her politically satirical work in Instant Café Theatre, as discussed earlier in the chapter, as well as her activism in civil society and human rights groups. Krishen thus tapped on her reputation as an outspoken participant in the arts scene to suggest a porosity between the actor and character as commentators of politics.<sup>50</sup> That the three men who are besotted by a woman are brought to life in the context of a woman's body, plays with a reversal of power relations. While in the text Francis is the main character as storyteller and protagonist, in performance it is the constantly implied presence of Natasha that gains prominence. When Kukathas eventually plays Natasha, in the final moments of the play, her female body alludes to the fact that the three men have in fact been 'played' by a woman. In this regard, Krishen's directorial choice to collaborate with a female actor allowed for a further dimension of critique – reform was not just needed in relation to a change of political leadership but also with regard to structures of social and cultural hierarchy that privilege men over women.

As reinvented representations of their race, class, profession and age-group, the characters presented 'alternative' cultural stereotypes. They were not typical of their 'race' and yet identifiable as racialised individuals. Francis' role as the main conspirator and undercover cop contradicts his middle-class Indian, educated and English-speaking background, which usually denotes political indifference about political machinations of the state. Dedric, a Mandarin-educated activist, intense and earnest in his desire to overthrow the ruling government, is a far cry from the ruthless mercenary Chinese businessman whose concern is for profit at all cost. Likewise Fozi, a Western-educated architect-turned-furniture-artist, harbours no aspirations to become part of the Malay ruling elite, but instead displays contradictory allegiances by

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<sup>50</sup> Kukathas was one of the main organizers of the *ada apa?* festival mentioned earlier in this chapter. See Diamond, 'Parallel Streams', 35-6, for discussion on ICT's reputation for political satire and Kukathas' politics of theatre.



enjoying a bohemian lifestyle while affiliated to PAS, the puritanical Muslim party.<sup>51</sup> Thus the challenge for Krishen and Kukathas was to embody these characters as ‘real’ people whom the audience could identify with, empathise with, as well as laugh at. This involved making links with cultural stereotypes as well as expanding them to suggest each identity as particular in its own way.

Kukathas’ portrayals of the characters in the play were skilfully executed through swift transformations from one physicality and vocal inflection to another. Her ability to mark distinct ways of speaking the text and embodying the specific traits of the characters indicated a close engagement with the script that was then translated into actions, gestures and accents that communicated the relevant associations of meaning. Francis, the grouchy Indian cop with bad health was embodied as slouched, coughing and speaking in a low-pitched husky voice, to suggest a disgruntled and troubled demeanour. This hinted at the marginality of his racial position and the unease of being part of a small minority. However he was also erudite and witty, taking pleasure in eloquent descriptions of what took place, contradicting his otherwise resentful self. This contrasted with Dedric, the earnest and intense activist, who was portrayed as straight-backed, angular and stiff-limbed with a relatively high-pitched voice to connote an ongoing anxiety and agitation about what was at stake. This contrasted with the more common stereotype of the Chinese as aggressive survivalists. Yet Dedric was also seen as compassionate and caring, providing a counterpoint to his more calculating qualities. Fozi, the easy-going bohemian architect, was depicted as relatively carefree with a relaxed body and cool swagger that complemented his slow paced speech, hinting at derogatory colonialist notions of the indolent Malay. However he was the most highly educated of the three men, and a marked contrast to notions of the devout and pious Muslim that he professed to be. Thus there were three complex characters that Kukathas needed to portray while negotiating the mix of different aspects of each character.

Krishen’s approach to developing this vocabulary of performance was to engage the actor in drawing from ordinary and stereotypical ideas of human behaviour, as envisaged by the actor in relation to these roles. These accessible codes of communication were then inflected through the interpretive representations of the performer. As such the collaborative process between

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<sup>51</sup> See Huzir, *Election Day*, 144-5, for relevant sections in the script.

director and actor entailed improvising the enactments of these ideas, and then deliberating on how they would impact on audience perceptions of identity.<sup>52</sup> Kukathas' swift movements in and out of the characters required a process of complex viewing for audiences who had to interpret these codes and understand how they worked in relation to each other. The spectator's ability to decode these markers of identity was crucial to the meaning of 'the mix of what we are as Malaysians'.<sup>53</sup>

This became most pertinent when the codes that had been set up were then deconstructed to make a point about settled assumptions. The link between difference and sameness was also articulated in Krishen's direction of the way the three characters were seen in relation to each other. On one level, the three men were presented as different aspects of a single entity; different cultures within a nation, varied personalities within a community, multiple roles played by an individual. On another level, the three men were also seen as similar, and this sameness suggested a commonality that cut across their differences. Apart from having shared concerns about the outcomes of the election, the three men were also anxious about their relationship with Natasha. Krishen made a point to underline this dimension by diminishing the qualities of difference between them at a critical juncture in the story. When the play reaches a climactic end, and Francis reveals to Fozi and Dedric that he has betrayed them by not only spying on them but also sleeping with Natasha, the tension escalates. Natasha then confirms that she has been with all three men. At this dramatic point the police enter to arrest Dedric and Fozi on account of their 'subversive' activities. In Kukathas' depiction of the anger, betrayal and bitterness that the three men feel at this point, she created a growing similarity in their physicalities and voices. Whereas earlier the three men were seen as markedly different, they were now seen as increasingly alike. Their looks of disdain and the deep-throated growls of anger and futility rendered them more similar than before. Hence when it came to the crunch about deep-seated resentment and jealousy, the human being was performed as more alike than different. In this respect it exceeded Krishen's earlier articulations of difference in monologue performances.

This approach to cultural representation, which consciously reconfigured identities as different but related, utilised the play as a site for exploring what Krishen described as 'how

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<sup>52</sup> Information gained from Jo Kukathas, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

<sup>53</sup> Krishen, quoted at the start of the chapter.

ridiculous and bizarre we can be as Malaysians',<sup>54</sup> even while delving into the tensions of 'Malaysian election fever'.<sup>55</sup> The 'unease' from the stomach ache that Francis experienced was thus a trace of the ongoing political 'dis-ease' that continued to afflict efforts to democratise society through everyday actions that empowered agency. In this regard the ordinary person who chooses to alter the norms of daily life to make them inclusive was recognised as a 'threat' to the ruling powers, and decisions were taken to disrupt the movement for 'reform'.

In the late 1990s, the importance of 'bottom-up' approaches to theatre-making that prioritised the convivialities of lived experience in ordinary Malaysian life were important contributions to revisioning society as active in its political and cultural renewal. As a result of the *Reformasi* movement, efforts to rethink how Malaysian society could grapple with entrenched racial differences, and move towards alternative political systems gained support. In the small-scale theatre that Krishen directed, he asserted the need to understand how, when 'multiculturalism is in one body' it can then reassemble norms of Selves and Others to reflect their mutuality; and thus provide alternatives to the segregatedness of official cultures and identities. In collaboration with performers, Krishen developed improvisations on selected themes to draw from their memory, imagination and interpretive perspectives about being Malaysian as inflected by the multiplicity in society. Thus when Anita and Fatimah began to converse in *A Chance Encounter*, not knowing anything about each other, they performed how language was one medium that can be reconfigured to surpass cultural, generational and linguistic boundaries. Spontaneous improvisations that wield new and invented vocabularies were reflective of common transactions that symbolised rarely acknowledged tacit knowledge. However when the two women part, unable to resolve their differences, Krishen also pointed to the deep fractures in society that are visible in the 'beam of darkness' that illuminates the 'broken vertebrae' of contemporary culture.<sup>56</sup> Likewise in *Election Day*, that the three housemates live under one roof suggested a willingness to exceed cultural differences, and even work together on an election campaign that signalled hope. However their competitiveness in relation to Natasha, a shared object of lust, disrupts this idealised metaphor of co-existence.

<sup>54</sup> Krishen, quoted in Bissme, 'Back to the polls,' *The Sun*, February 11, 2004.

<sup>55</sup> Krishen, quoted in Rubin Khoo, 'Flexing theatrical muscle,' *StarTwo*, February 9, 2004. 21.

<sup>56</sup> Agamben, 'What Is' 46-7.

Hence it is not their cultural differences or ‘identifiable histories’<sup>57</sup> that come in the way, but personal resentments and bitter rivalries that lead to a severing or distancing of relationships. Here Krishen provoked audiences to see how identities can be multiple and diverse within bodies, and yet the conflicts of being pulled in multifarious directions prevent ongoing bonds of mutuality when the political and personal intent to do so is lacking.

Hence the transitions between severed connections and the aspirations of a ‘deep enough’ commonality were sites of creative possibility that allowed for alternatives to be imagined and performed. This concept of transition as a space for re-connection and transformation would become a political consideration in Malaysia in the early 2000s, and a critical dimension of the next phase of Krishen’s theatre, which will be examined in the next chapter.

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<sup>57</sup> Krishen, quoted at the start of the chapter.

## Chapter 6

### Final Stages in the Early 2000s: Transitions and Transformations

Try not to do what we have done before, try something apart from our culture and try to get more involvement from the audience. If everyone in the fraternity from the actor, director, to producer aspires *to do something different*, [something] they have never done before, each year, it would add so much more colour and variety to the local theatre scene. (emphasis mine)<sup>1</sup>

The early years of the twenty-first century have been seen as an ‘era of transition’<sup>2</sup> in the Malaysian socio-political landscape, during which the nation shifted from one phase of political leadership to another. As seen in Chapters Three and Four, Prime Minister Mahathir pushed for several developments towards modernising Malaysia during his time in office, and the 1980s and 1990s witnessed the outcomes of his bold and forthright style of governance. After twenty-two years in power he retired from office in 2003, and his Deputy since 1999, Abdullah Badawi succeeded him. Unlike his predecessor, Abdullah was seen as a moderate and upright leader whose approach was to develop a just and open society through reforming what had become a corrupt system. He was also an Islamic scholar and his focus on strengthening the role of Islam in society added credibility to his image as ‘Mr. Clean’.<sup>3</sup> This made him highly popular, even though he was regarded as a ‘Gentle’ and not ‘Great Leader’.<sup>4</sup> However, despite Abdullah’s attempts to transform governance, few major changes took place in his early years of office. Hence the transition from Mahathir’s leadership into the Abdullah premiership was characterised by a lack of vigour and clarity, which led to an ensuing uncertainty and ambivalence about what lay ahead for Malaysia.

Krishen’s theatre during this period engaged with the mood of indeterminacy and flux by experimenting with the idea of transition as an important concept for examining ideas about cultural difference. Instead of just looking at the permeability, mix, overlap and

<sup>1</sup>Krishen, quoted in Gerald Chuah, ‘Take a bow, Krishen,’ *New Straits Times: Life and Times*, March 8, 2003.

<sup>2</sup>Ooi Kee Beng, *Era of Transition: Malaysia after Mahathir*, (Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2006), examines the first two years of the Abdullah Badawi administration, and describes it as a time of ‘transition’.

<sup>3</sup>Cindy Tham, ‘Appraisal time for Abdullah,’ in *Tipping Points: Viewpoints on the Reasons for the Impact of the March 8 Election Earthquake*, ed. Oon Yeoh, (Petaling Jaya: The Edge Communications Sdn. Bhd., 2008) 3.

<sup>4</sup>Ooi, *Era*, xxii, refers to Prime Minister Mahathir as a ‘Great Leader’ and the period after his leadership as a ‘post-Great Leader period’ to highlight the marked change between Mahathir and Abdullah. However this is seen as more of an ironical reference as Ooi also points to the problems with Mahathir’s governance and Abdullah’s attempts to rectify some of these practices. In Abdullah’s favour Ooi compares Abdullah’s more peaceful stance of a ‘focused tortoise’ with Mahathir’s style that resembled an ‘impatient hare’ (12).

intersections of cultural difference, Krishen now attended to the transitoriness of contemporary reinvention. He explored what it meant for the meanings of written scripts to be inflected by the transitions that came before and after they were performed. He also looked at the transition of a classical Malay music form into a contemporary Malaysian performance form, suggesting that what lies beyond the defined and identifiable is a mix of uncertainties that produce new possibilities. In this respect the work pointed to the larger transition occurring in the nation, where what came after the Mahathir 'script' appeared to be an in-between time of shift, rather than the start of a new 'play'. If Abdullah's approach was milder, and one that lacked conviction and boldness, this too could be seen as a text in itself, prodding change through its apparent insignificance.

In this chapter I will first look at some of the changes that took place in Malaysian socio-politics in the early 2000s, and discuss why the early years of Abdullah's leadership were a time of transition despite expectations of political transformation. Notwithstanding the proclaimed rhetoric of cleaning up the corruption in government and developing more just systems, little change was evident, and this was a disappointment to the public. In addition his attempts to rework Malaysian culture by looking at issues of religion rather than race were still laden with problems of communalism and segregatedness, as this continued to prioritise concerns of the Malay-Muslim but not Malaysians as a whole. As such there was a need to grapple with contemporary Malaysian identity as increasingly defined by issues of ethno-religious divide, yet having to embrace fluidity through multi-racial frames of identity. In the next section I look at how Krishen's work during this period took on new approaches to theatre, even though there was relatively little change in contemporary theatre as a whole. He returned to looking at issues of Malay identity in the Malaysian context and revised an earlier decision not to direct foreign scripts, embracing how a politics of transition stretched his own practice. This was most evident in his development of ideas for staging transition in two productions, *7-Ten* (2003) and *Monkey Business* (2005) that I analyse in the following sections. I argue that here, Krishen generated experiences of constant shifting between separate spaces, involving a dynamic of to and fro, creating a vivid and tangible sense of transitoriness in theatre. This choice to put together an assemblage of texts and perform the transitions that linked them pushed his earlier executions of multiplicity a step further. By staging the suturing of texts, Krishen was also underlining how performance is both joined and severed by boundaries that are created and then dissolved in the process of interrogating difference, and dismantling its power to define culture.

## Political Leadership in Transition

The early 2000s witnessed few major changes in Malaysian politics, apart from the change in leadership that led to Prime Minister Abdullah Badawi taking office. After twenty-two years of Mahathir-ism, the nation had to adjust to a new climate of leadership, particularly because the contrast between the two leaders was marked. Mahathir had a reputation as a strong and forceful leader who had raised the profile of Malaysia in the international arena and propelled significant advancements towards the modernisation of the nation. He had created a particular notion of successful leadership, being associated with making aggressive, even if controversial, changes and initiating ambitious goals. Although the last stages of his time in office were riddled with political crises and a loss of support for United Malay National Organisation (UMNO) and the ruling Barisan Nasional (BN), he was nonetheless regarded as a dynamic and shrewd leader. Hence the task for Abdullah to takeover and transform the nation in ways that would undo some of the damage that took place while Mahathir was Prime Minister, was a large and difficult one. This section looks at some of the approaches taken by Abdullah to deal with the problems he inherited, and how this impacted on Malaysian culture and identity, particularly with regard to ongoing issues of inter-racial relations and forging solidarity.

The Abdullah leadership started off with the promise of ‘ushering in a new era of good governance, tolerance, moderation and sensibility for the nation’.<sup>5</sup> The landslide victory for the BN government in the March 2004 General Election, soon after Abdullah’s appointment, proved the new Prime Minister gave the ruling party a positive boost, as he led the alliance to win more than 90% of the seats in parliament. This was because of his reputation as an honest politician who was sincere about his intent to get rid of ‘corruption, cronyism and nepotism’, problems associated with the Mahathir-led government. However Mahathir’s consolidation of executive powers during his time in office had led to a loss of independence for the judiciary and a steadily mounting authoritarian approach to leadership.<sup>6</sup> This generated a reliance on selective patronage and feudal systems of governance, and

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<sup>5</sup> Lim Teck Ghee, ‘Foreword,’ in *Lost in Transition: Malaysia Under Abdullah*, by Ooi Kee Beng (Malaysia and Singapore: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD], and Institute of South East Asian Studies [ISEAS], 2008), x.

<sup>6</sup> See Edmund Terence Gomez, ‘Introduction’ in *The State of Malaysia: Ethnicity, equity and reform*, ed. E.T. Gomez, (Abingdon: RoutledgeCurzon, 2004), 14-18.



impeded Abdullah's attempts to get rid of corruption and graft, as 'norms' of governance were riddled with unethical practices that had been allowed to perpetuate.<sup>7</sup>

While the early years of Abdullah's leadership saw 'the opening up of greater public space for discussion and criticism', political analyst Ooi Kee Beng notes that 'the quality of political repartee has been very low'<sup>8</sup> and thus the capacity to revise and reform negative practices correspondingly limited. The 'culture of corruption' and a 'confrontational style of politics' were deeply ensconced in the system, and this prevented more democratic and dialogical approaches from emerging, let alone taking root.<sup>9</sup> This was due to Abdullah's weak management of socio-political problems which indicated a partiality towards sustaining the status quo rather than taking tough steps to make significant changes. Hence confidence in his leadership began to wane when his efforts indicated a lack of ability to take the tough measures needed. During the March 2008 General Election, the BN suffered its worst losses and lost its two-third majority in parliament. This was unprecedented in the history of Malaysian politics. The downfall, referred to as a 'political tsunami' or 'election earthquake',<sup>10</sup> led to Abdullah's popularity diminishing further and mounting calls for his resignation eventually led to his stepping down from office in March 2009. The initial years of Abdullah's leadership were thus a time of transition, when the shift from a period of *Reformasi* in the late 1990s, to the 2008 political tsunami, occurred. While Abdullah did not meet the expectations of the wider populace in terms of being able to 'clean-up' corrupt practices in the system, he did however allow for a context in which other kinds of changes could take place. This included less race-based rhetoric in favour of religious discourse, which did not however lead to a less divided society.

Abdullah's attempt to make significant changes in relation to issues of culture and identity were evident in his championing of the concept of *Islam Hadhari* (Civilisational Islam), which focused on a perception of Malay-Muslim identity as modern and moderate. This move gained favour locally and internationally as it was intended to 'shift Islam's focus

<sup>7</sup> See Francis Loh, 'A Season of Silly Events: Stuck between the Old Politics of Ethnicity and the New Democratic Politics' in *Old vs New Politics in Malaysia: State and Society in Transition*, (Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD] & Aliran Kesedaran Negara [Aliran]), (2009), 21-29.

<sup>8</sup> Ooi Kee Beng, 'Introduction: The Limits of Silence,' in *Lost in Transition: Malaysia Under Abdullah*, by Ooi Kee Beng, (Malaysia and Singapore: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD], and Institute of South East Asian Studies [ISEAS], 2008), xviii.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, xviii-xix

<sup>10</sup> For extended discussions and multiple perspectives on the significance of the 2008 elections, see Kee Thuan Chye, ed. *March 8: The Day Malaysia Woke Up*. (Rawang: Marshall Cavendish Editions, 2008), and Oon Yeoh, ed. *Tipping Points: Viewpoints on the Reasons for the Impact of the March 8 Election Earthquake*. (Petaling Jaya: The Edge Communications Sdn. Bhd., 2008).

from its sanctioning function to its civilizing potential'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, Islam was positioned as a religion that encouraged aspirations of modernisation through advancements of knowledge and inter-cultural relations, to counter notions of Islam as a closed, parochial and outdated belief system, unable to keep up with changes in a global society. Launched by Abdullah soon after he took office in 2003, *Islam Hadhari* was seen as a project towards reconciling Muslims in the modern world with material progress, endorsing economic growth and political democratisation as mutually compatible within a frame of Islamic beliefs. It was also an effort to counter the wider demonization of Islam which occurred after the attacks on the World Trade Centre in New York on September 11, 2001, that set in motion a growing fear of 'Islamic terrorism' as inherent to Islamic ideology. These global changes increased the awareness among Malaysians that narrow and rigid ideas of religion were not tenable. It was important to recognise a need for constant revision in order to remain relevant to a wider discourse on Islam. Since Malaysia sought to retain its international reputation as a moderate Muslim nation, it was necessary to rethink how Malay-Muslim identity could be reconfigured in the wake of new global prejudices against Islam. This too was a space of ongoing transition that became more prominent in the early 2000s.

Hence Malay-Muslim identity remained a central concern in the government, and not Malaysian identity as a whole. Little was done to encourage inter-racial and inter-religious discourses that would help forge a modern and moderate Malaysia, able to deal with opposing pulls of secularisation and fundamentalism. Instead Islam was used as an exclusive way to unite Malays and foster deeper intra-Malay solidarity, as this had become a major concern of the UMNO-led ruling alliance. As sociologist Manuel Castells notes, religion has had a 'decisive role in nurturing the construction of resistance identities against the dominance of market values and the so-called Western culture in the process of globalization'.<sup>12</sup> In the Malaysian context this meant strengthening Malay-Muslim identity in order to counter a global western hegemony and sustain loyalties to community and nation, while creating trans-national links with other moderate Muslims. However it also resulted in widening the divide between Muslim and non-Muslim, which basically mirrored and reinforced the separation of Malay and non-Malay.

Decisions taken by the state to favour Islamic law over civil law intensified the religious bias. This was evident in controversies surrounding issues of religious freedom that

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<sup>11</sup> Ooi Kee Beng, 'Islam as a Tool of Modernization' in *Era of Transition: Malaysia after Mahathir*, by Ooi Kee Beng (Singapore: Institute of South East Asian Studies [ISEAS], 2006) 115.

<sup>12</sup> Manuel Castells, *The Power of Identity*, (West Sussex: Blackwell, 2010) xxi. See also 12-29.

emerged during the time, particularly in relation to the funeral of M. Moorthy, and the Lina Joy appeal.<sup>13</sup> M. Moorthy, an Indian-Malaysian, was given a Muslim burial by the state in 2005, despite his family insisting that he was Hindu.<sup>14</sup> Moorthy became a national hero in 1997, when he succeeded in climbing Mount Everest as a member of the first Malaysian expedition to attempt this feat. The events surrounding his funeral angered many non-Muslims because it indicated a lack of protection for non-Muslims under the civil courts, as Islamic law was given priority. In the case of Malay-Malaysian Lina Joy, after a long process of appeals, in 2007 the Federal Court finally refused her the right to have her conversion from Islam to Christianity made official on her identity card.<sup>15</sup> This denial of her choice was again seen by several Malaysians as an infringement of civil liberties and human rights. These events consolidated the idea that the state was not sincere about its intent to foster ideas of 'moderation' and 'civility'. Within this context, attempts to look at inclusive frames of inter-racial interactions, particularly across the Malay and non-Malay divide, were critical to providing counterpoints to state dominated discourses.

The events of the late 1990s, in which there was widespread dissent and demonstrations of protest against the government as discussed in Chapter Five, had begun a process of socio-political change in society. Participatory politics gained more ground among a wide cross-section of society, a shift most evident in urban middle-classes who had been largely indifferent to issues of civil liberty. Even if the outcomes of the larger movements of a desired reform were as yet unknown, there was a steadily growing conviction that the systems perpetuated in the past were no longer helpful in the progress of the nation. Thus formal and non-formal efforts to build solidarity across ethno-religious divides were crucial to sustaining a 'spirit of counter-discourse,' which advocated constructive critiques of segregatedness and promoted inclusive frames of national identity.<sup>16</sup> These processes raised questions of social justice and what it meant to be Malaysian, amid prevailing anxieties about political and economic uncertainty.

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<sup>13</sup> See Francis Loh, 'Merdeka, Modernity and the Lina Joy Controversy,' in *Old vs New Politics in Malaysia: State and Society in Transition*, (Kuala Lumpur: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD] & Aliran Kesedaran Negara [Aliran]), 2009), 223-232, for further discussion.

<sup>14</sup> 'Muslim burial for Malaysian hero,' *BBC NEWS* Online, accessed August 10, 2011.  
<http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4563452.stm>

<sup>15</sup> Shaila Koshy, 'Crucial decision in Lina Joy case,' *thestar online*, accessed August 10, 2011.  
<http://thestar.com.my/news/story.asp?file=/2007/5/30/nation/17874155&sec=nation>.

<sup>16</sup> Francis Loh, 'NGOs and Non-Formal Politics: Build Participatory Democracy and the Autonomous Public Sphere,' in *Old vs New Politics in Malaysia: State and Society in Transition*, by Francis Loh, (Kuala Lumpur, Strategic Information and Research Development Centre & Aliran Kesedaran Negara [Aliran], 2009), 39-51.

Unlike the turbulence that occurred in May 1969, and then later in September 1998, when there were visible and widespread demonstrations of dissatisfaction, the early 2000s reflected unease and anxiety that was less overt. In political sociologist Rustam Sani's terms, the concept of 'nation' as a 'unifying influence around which human efforts may [be] suitably crystallised for the benefit of people's individual and collective development'<sup>17</sup> was sorely lacking due to growing communalism that created divisiveness and animosity. By this he meant that despite nearly fifty years of nationhood, Malaysia was '*just a state without nation* – or, at least, *a state with several competing nations*' due to the increased racial and political polarisation propagated by 'culturally insulated social institutions'.<sup>18</sup> In order to become a '*real nation*' Rustam advocated the need to shift from 'a state constituted by a multiple of nations competing for supremacy of percentages',<sup>19</sup> towards one that simply sought to eradicate injustice across the board. In other words, the need to move beyond ethno-religious divides was critical to forging a viable nation, able to transcend the deep divides that had been perpetuated by the state for half a century, although initiated earlier during the colonial era. Yet this did not appear to be a primary focus for the state. Despite the rhetoric in the early 1990s to foster multi-racial equity, as seen in Chapter Four, the financial turbulence of the late 1990s that disrupted a sense of smooth progress towards greater economic equity across races also impeded efforts to foster cultural solidarity. As a result the setbacks in political, social and cultural progress can be seen as a shift towards a new process of change, the details of which are beyond the scope of this study.

Krishen's theatre in the early 2000s, particularly the performances that dramatised transitions, reflected how Malaysian society was going through a new phase of cultural imagining. Like much of his previous work, it reflected the idea that '*several competing nations*' could co-exist as one, as long as they attended to the links that connected them and recognised how different stories and perspectives present in society could be closely connected without needing to be assimilated. However he also set out to convey a stronger experience of many jostling voices seeking to be heard. In this regard he articulated ideas about what it meant to be a '*real nation*'<sup>20</sup> within a period of flux – struggling with issues of justice as well as cultural difference. I suggest that Krishen's theatre created a 'stage with

<sup>17</sup> Rustam Sani, 'Merdeka! But are we a nation yet?' in *Failed Nation? Concerns of a Malaysian Nationalist*, by Rustam Sani, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre [SIRD], 2008), 63.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

different stories' as a metaphor of the '*state with several competing nations*',<sup>21</sup> to engage with issues of difference between, within and across cultures, and to show how despite the appearance of these varied 'states' being separate and 'competing', they were in fact deeply connected. It enacted the state of flux as a positive opportunity for rethinking the constructs of culture, and rendered each story as less 'culturally insulated'<sup>22</sup> by virtue of being sutured with other texts. This performed the composite of texts and transitions as a further development in the staging of cultural difference in contemporary Malaysia in the early 2000s.

### Negotiating Uncertainty in Contemporary Theatre

Little significant change was evident in English language theatre in the early 2000s, compared to the marked shifts that took place in previous decades as discussed in earlier chapters. Dwindling audiences and limited funding as a result of the financial downturn in the late 1990s were among the reasons for fewer new initiatives.<sup>23</sup> The state's focus on generating large-scale productions for the new National Theatre, also known as Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture), led to fewer resources allocated to other theatres and this produced a growing divide between Malay theatre and non-Malay theatre.<sup>24</sup> Hence Krishen's prod 'to do something different' indicated there was a wider lassitude that he sought to question – especially because the nation needed to keep experimenting with alternative notions of Selves and Others to generate hopeful possibilities for dealing with Malaysian culture. Apart from reiterating his politics of continual reinvention and interrogation, it also suggested a need for theatre practitioners to rethink what was relevant in the contemporary context. The larger context of political transition created indeterminacy about future orientations for Malaysian society, but this too could be a resource to imagine notions of community and commonality. This section looks at some choices Krishen made in his final phase of theatre directing, and how his continued engagement with cultural difference in Malaysia was articulated through these aesthetic strategies. It will argue that his work during this period recognised the potential for transition to encourage new approaches to staging multi-cultural identity.

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> See amir hafizi, 'Local theatre in the doldrums,' *The Malay Mail*, March 22, 2005.

<sup>24</sup> See Catherine Diamond, 'Parallel Streams: Two Currents of Difference in Kuala Lumpur's Contemporary Theatre,' *The Drama Review* 46, 2 (T174) Summer 2002, 8-13, for discussion on large-scale productions in Malay and the polarisation of theatre in Malaysia as a result of the growing gap between independently-run English language theatre and state-supported Malay language theatre.

Krishen's ongoing shifts between different approaches to theatre throughout his career, suggested his theatre practice was an ongoing transition that precipitated the new, even as it drew from the old. This approach of initiating different ways of making theatre, which he had developed most clearly in the 1990s, as seen in Chapters Four and Five, enabled him to experiment even further in his final years of directing. In contrast to his earlier focus of only doing local plays, in the early 2000s Krishen also directed western and foreign scripts to suggest it was necessary to look beyond the nation to understand culture and identity in a global society. This meant reviewing his decision made in the 1970s, which was to focus only on Malaysian writing and indigenous staging. The change was also explained as Krishen being 'seduced by the mainstream' and wanting to try his hand at 'commercial' theatre.<sup>25</sup> This shift was in part related to his decision to expand his directorial presence in neighbouring Singapore, where he helmed several productions with theatre companies such as ACTION Theatre and W!LD RICE, noted for their popular productions of foreign scripts as well as locally written plays. There he directed a range of performances, including western plays such as *Proof* by David Auburn, *Iron* by Rona Munro and a localised adaptation of *The Visit* by Friedrich Durrenmatt.<sup>26</sup> These well-known and widely produced plays were staged as part of an attempt by Singapore theatre practitioners to become more cosmopolitan, and thus reflect on issues of contemporary life that were not limited to specific cultures and identities. Although they were not typical of the genre of plays Krishen was associated with, which were local, experimental and non-naturalistic works, he took up the challenge of doing text-bound theatre, which was also read as a 'survival instinct' that enabled Krishen to 'change with the scene'.<sup>27</sup> Similarly, in Malaysia Krishen directed *Art* by Yasmin Reza, an award-winning play originally written in French, translated into several languages and produced in many parts of the world. The play is about three urban professional men who deliberate the value of purchasing an expensive art canvas that appears to have nothing on it. Krishen's direction of the work for Straits Theatre Company in 2001, suggested that his ideas about what was relevant in the local contemporary scene were now inclusive of what was ostensibly foreign, as this allowed for a cosmopolitan and trans-national imagining of culture in Malaysia.

<sup>25</sup> Kee Thuan Chye, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

<sup>26</sup> *Proof* and *Iron* were produced by ACTION Theatre in Singapore, in 2002 and 2003 respectively. *The Visit of the Tai Tai*, a localised adaptation by Ivan Heng of *The Visit* by Friedrich Durrenmatt, was produced by W!LD RICE in 2004.

<sup>27</sup> Ong Keng Sen, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2007.



Thus Krishen reinvented his own practice by taking on projects that required him to engage in new skills and negotiate collaborative relationships. These were often unlike those he had developed before. This reiterated his conviction that ‘the one rule in theatre is that there is no rule’, and illustrated how he kept an ‘open attitude’ in order to ‘keep learning’.<sup>28</sup> It suggested that his work was always in transition, rather than seeking to settle into a particular method or style. By continually questioning his own position, and making changes in order to expand the scope of theatre, he reiterated an underlying principle of theatre-making that marked his whole career. This was a need to embrace difference as a political frame for looking at cultures, and an aesthetic that incorporated change and multiplicity to remain open-ended and pluralistic.

However inasmuch as Krishen was now willing to take on directing foreign scripts in order to broaden his own scope of theatre-making, a major priority in his work was still to engage with Malaysian culture and its politics of identity. Two productions Krishen directed in 2002 illustrate how he looked afresh at the politics of being Malay in the context of contemporary theatre, which had not been a primary focus for his work in the 1980s and 1990s. Here Krishen took on re-writing and co-directing a Malay play, *Uda dan Dara*, originally written by Malaysian National Laureate Usman Awang; and collaborating with a British-based Malaysian writer, Rani Moorthy, in *Manchester United and the Malay Warrior*, a play about a Malay legend and an English football club.

In *Uda dan Dara*, Krishen and co-director, Joe Hasham, contemporised the well-known Malay play from the 1970s to make it representative of life in 21<sup>st</sup> century Malaysia. Regarded as the first Malay-Malaysian Broadway-style musical, the play was first performed in 1972 and has since been recognised as a modern Malay classic.<sup>29</sup> The story is about the painful romance between Uda, a young man from a poor rural family, and Dara, his betrothed, whose family try to prevent their marriage because they are wealthier. It looks at issues of prejudice and discrimination within a Malay community, articulating the need to see problems of difference ‘within’ cultures. In the 2002 version, Krishen and Hasham rewrote the script with permission from the playwright, and adapted the context from a rural setting to an industrial town. The co-directors, who had collaborated previously, as discussed in Chapter Four, were however rewriting and adapting a text in Malay for the first time. This

<sup>28</sup> Krishen, quoted in Himanshu Bhatt, ‘Acting out of the box,’ *New Straits Times*, date unknown, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> When it was first performed in 1972, Krishen was producer, and Faridah Merican, who was co-producer with Marion D’Cruz for the 2002 version, played the lead female role of Dara. This signified Krishen’s long association with the play, and how he was revisiting his own history in theatre with a new and critical revisioning.



meant negotiating the different cultural and aesthetic perspectives between them through a complex process of interaction, as the Australian-born Hasham was not fluent in Malay and Krishen had to bridge the gaps of language and culture for him.<sup>30</sup> However this was part of an important adaptation that sought to update the text from the 1970s to the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Apart from the rewriting of the text, the work was also changed from a musical into an opera, with new music composed by Malaysian musician-composer Sunetra Fernando and British musician-composer Adrian Lee. Their work was a ‘juxtaposition of a number of styles and genres’ which transformed an older Malay musical into a contemporary Malaysian opera.<sup>31</sup> Boi Sakti, Indonesian contemporary dancer-choreographer, also collaborated on the performance to create movement text that infused multiple dance styles and a stronger sense of regional influence. This pushed Malay language theatre to consider ways of exploring how the canon of Malay plays could be revised to suggest new interpretations.

In *Manchester United and the Malay Warrior* Krishen combined this ‘return’ to Malay culture with his growing openness to what was ‘foreign’. Here he directed a performance that explored ideas about a legendary Malay hero named Hang Tuah, and links between this 15<sup>th</sup> century Malay warrior, and a contemporary English football club Manchester United, a fast-growing global phenomenon. He collaborated with United Kingdom-based Malaysian writer-performer Rani Moorthy on a multilingual play written by Moorthy, making it the first time Krishen was working with a Malaysian writer based in Britain. This too was a revision of his earlier positions about only working with locally-based writers. The play was about the chance meeting in a Manchester cyber café between Kamal, a Malaysian student in his twenties, and Alice, a 69 year old English woman who has memories of living in Malaya during the colonial period. Their meeting triggers the magical appearance of Hang Tuah and his troupe of *bangsawan* (popular Malay opera) performers, who are trying to rescue a kidnapped Malay sultan. In the quest to find the sultan, the characters find themselves embroiled in a football match with the famous football team, Manchester United. The play was, in Krishen’s view, ‘based on a series of stereotypes’<sup>32</sup> that included real and mythical, local and foreign characters who represented multiple perspectives of social and cultural history in a process of flux. It was, in Krishen’s terms, a ‘serious play’ that he wanted to do ‘in such a way that it’s very entertaining’.<sup>33</sup> His

<sup>30</sup> Information gained from Joe Hasham, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.

<sup>31</sup> Krishen quoted in Rizal Johan, ‘Home-grown opera’, *The Star*, February 22, 2002.

<sup>32</sup> Krishen, quoted in Manveet Kaur, ‘Getting a kick out of Hang Tuah,’ *New Straits Times: Life & Times*, April 30, 2002.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

achievement was to translate the seemingly unrelated cultural spheres of historical and contemporary Malaysia, and modern day Manchester in the United Kingdom, into comprehensible connections that suggested links beyond the limits of time and space. This was done by involving the Malaysian actors and one English actress in a series of improvisations about the main themes, over a period of ten days, several months before the production. The play was thus developed through a devised and scripted process, not new to Krishen's approach of staging experimental texts, as discussed in previous chapters. Krishen chose to work with young Malaysian performer-choreographer Mohamad Arifwaran, who played the part of Kamal and choreographed the production.<sup>34</sup> This forged close links between the movement vocabulary and the dramatic text, to weave the disparate cultural spheres closer together. The performance combined a 'blend of Malay folklore and contemporary living', as well as 'Western theatre, *silat* (a Malay martial art), *bangsawan*, virtual reality, animation and music',<sup>35</sup> to weave a fabric of contemporary life as engaged in multiple cultural discourses, local and global, national and inter-national. Here again the intent was to engage audiences in Malaysia and England to apprehend links between heterogenous spheres of culture, and thus participate in a reworking of cultural relatedness.<sup>36</sup>

Even though the production was not well-responded to, as reviewers felt there was too much obfuscation of the text,<sup>37</sup> Krishen's value for the 'sharp presence of difference in a collaborative work,' even if it would 'make the piece look and feel bouncy, turbulent and perhaps unfinished', indicated his willingness to steer away from 'smooth, fluid work that has purged much that made the differing collaborators stimulating'.<sup>38</sup> In his view '[C]ollaboration makes you aware of difference', and it was through 'contestation and dispute' that an 'edginess' prevailed.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps this value for 'edginess', was what later led him to focus on the 'edges' between different texts, and provoked a review of the transitions between texts as well. Krishen's efforts to alter his own practice, taking on the challenge of making work that was atypical of his usual approaches, foregrounded a sense of indeterminacy and

<sup>34</sup> See Krishen Jit, 'Director's Notes,' *Manchester United and the Malay Warrior*, Programme Booklet, 2002, for further details.

<sup>35</sup> Krishen, quoted in Manveet Kaur, 'Getting a kick out of Hang Tuah,' *New Straits Times: Life & Times*, April 30, 2002.

<sup>36</sup> Krishen directed Moorthy's text for performances in Kuala Lumpur and Manchester, Britain, where it was staged as part of the Manchester Commonwealth Games Arts Fest in June 2002. The play was produced by Five Arts Centre and Rasa, Moorthy's Manchester-based company.

<sup>37</sup> See Jerome Kugan, 'Avenging the death of culture,' *Options*, May 27, 2002, 18; and Brian Yap, 'Who Is The Real Hero?' *KLue*, accessed May 21, 2002. <http://www.klue.com.my/article.cfm?id=1352>.

<sup>38</sup> Krishen, 'Director's Notes,' in *Manchester United and the Malay Warrior* Programme Booklet, 2002.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

unpredictability as aspects of ongoing contemporary experimentation in his practice. I now turn to Krishen's direction of two productions, *7-Ten* and *Monkey Business*, which I argue were particularly powerful in staging cultural difference because of the way they dramatised the space of transition. This choice to attend to the spaces between different segments, enabled Krishen to suggest that it was as important to look at the entry points and endings of 'stories' as the actual themes and ideas in the 'stories' themselves.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, he engaged with how contemporary gamelan was a cultural form in a phase of transition itself.

### Performing the In-Between Spaces in *7-Ten*

In *7-Ten*, Krishen directed a production that consisted of seven different short plays, and dramatised the space of transition between these individual scripts. The seven ten-minute plays, written by seven theatre practitioners of varying experience and practice, were performed as segments of a larger whole; with the spaces of transition between them as important opportunities to reconfigure how they developed meaning in relation to each other. It was an attempt to stage contemporary culture as a composite of varied stories. In addition it explored how the interstitial spaces between different segments of the performance, usually glossed over as a quiet scene change, could be used to articulate deeper meanings about this multiplicity. The production also brought together a range of Krishen's approaches to theatre, because it presented several styles of performance depending on the text and Krishen's interpretive approach. This ranged from the naturalistic and highly physical, to the satirical and abstract. Hence difference was an integral part of the aesthetic, and thus particular depictions of culture as conveyed by the script were experienced as aspects of a larger creative heterogeneity that developed meaning in relation to each other. In this section, I examine how Krishen's experiment with staging difference in *7-Ten*, particularly in the space of transition between stories, performed a complex reimagining of how cultural multiplicity in Malaysia could be reworked to become more inclusive, even when increasingly uncertain, indeterminate and transitory

Krishen's choice to direct several short plays within a single production was part of a larger attempt to 'do something different' and put together different voices, in order to explore how this depicted a sense of the fragmentariness of culture.<sup>41</sup> Having worked with

<sup>40</sup> I use the word stories, rather than plays, as I am referring to the stories in both the short plays in *7-Ten* as well as the stories in each musical score for *Monkey Business*.

<sup>41</sup> Krishen was interested to create a platform for staging short plays, having directed *Squeeze and Squeezability* – *Six 10-Minute Plays* in Singapore in 2002, as part of Action Theatre's 10-minute play festival. *7-Ten* was produced by Five Arts Centre, Kuala Lumpur.

multi-layered and parallel texts in the past, as discussed in previous chapters, this was a new way of staging multiple ways of being Malaysian using separate scripts that could be seen as unrelated to each other. He invited seven writers, Alfian Saat, Charlene Rajendran (this writer), Huzir Sulaiman, Jit Murad, Jo Kukathas, Leow Puay Tin and Mark Teh, to write ten-minute plays for this project.<sup>42</sup> Krishen also chose to work with this frame in order to ‘encourage people to write plays’,<sup>43</sup> and ‘present to the Malaysian audience a more cohesive collection of existing playwrights’.<sup>44</sup> There was no overarching theme specified, and thus the issues were varied. They included stories about personal conflicts within intimate relationships to capitalist obsessions and the erosion of ethics in urban and modern society. Most plays highlighted the intensity of social and individual anxiety amid fears of displacement and loss, suggesting the tensions of the contemporary, which art critic Terry Smith refers to as the ‘fast-growing inequalities’ within the ‘jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities’.<sup>45</sup> The performance entailed staging a range of settings and writing styles, transporting audiences between domestic, commercial and political worlds, and enacting characters using naturalistic, absurdist and satirical modes.

Krishen’s direction of *7-Ten* pushed the boundary of his own stagings of Malaysian cultural multiplicity in two significant ways. First, it demonstrated how separate plays written by diverse writers could be put together within a single production, to convey ideas of contemporary life as ‘jostling’ between varied voices, and shifting across different perspectives and cultural spheres. This could be seen as a metaphor for different identities within a single nation or society, and the value of positioning them as related aspects, even though they had separate origins. As there were no specified links between each play, it was the imaginative interpretation of the performance that forged connections or developed lines of separation. Here Krishen was not merely extricating diversity within a single story or overarching theme, but examining how multiplicity operates between and across several stories, albeit short ones. This consolidated ideas about how Malaysian culture needed to be experienced as several stories sutured together, in order to dissolve the fixity of the barriers between.

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<sup>42</sup> All the writers are Malaysian and had worked with Krishen in the past, except for Singaporean writer Alfian Saat who was working with Krishen for the first time.

<sup>43</sup> Krishen, quoted in Sheila Singam, ‘Full meal with 7 Ten,’ *Options*, May 19, 2003.

<sup>44</sup> Krishen, quoted in Nilukse Koswanage, ‘Cohesive collection,’ *StarTwo*, May 23, 2003.

<sup>45</sup> Terry Smith, ‘Introduction: The Contemporaneity Question,’ *Antinomies of Art and Culture: Modernity, Postmodernity, Contemporaneity* eds. Terry Smith, Okwui Enwezor and Nancy Condee (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008), 8-9.

Drawing on a range of devices and strategies for interpreting the seven different texts, Krishen elucidated each story or theme according to the demands of the writing and his own interpretation of the work. Some texts, such as Jit Murad's *Malam Konsert* (Night of the Concert), were more naturalistic and thus performed in a fairly straightforward style of psychological realism. This story about a divorced young Malay-Muslim couple, who discuss their young child amid tensions of their past love, represented the conflicts of estrangement when there are shared ties that perpetuate a link between two people. Thus Krishen staged the work as a gentle and tender conversation between the two characters, whose unspoken inner tensions are revealed in their silences more than when they speak. In contrast, Mark Teh's *Daulat*, lent itself to Krishen's trademark of highly intense physical enactment. Distinct among the other plays for its non-linear and abstract quality, the text pointed to urban chaos and disillusionment about identity amid the question of national allegiance. Using a traditional Malay word for its title, *Daulat*, which means unswerving loyalty and service to the ruler, the play parodies the meaning of cultural belonging, as the characters, a young urban couple, mock the meanings of national pride and honour. In this play Krishen pushed the quality of irreverence and rebellion beyond just verbal declarations of anger and frustration, by developing a physically visceral performance text. Unlike the couple in *Malam Konsert*, who were engaged in simple actions of packing a weekend bag for the child's visit to his father's home, the couple in *Daulat* engaged in intense physical seduction and emotionless sexual encounter, using a range of dance and martial art movements as they discussed the politics of dogma and deliberated on the need for personal choice. Furthermore, while the ethnicity of the Malay-Muslim couple in *Malam Konsert* was significant, in that it pointed to the modern Malay whose family life suffered from the pressures of increasing individualism, the couple in *Daulat* were framed as trans-ethnic and thus reflective of a deracinated identity. Hence cultural identity across the plays was shown as a combination of the racial-religious frame, with the urban and modern construct of having no roots in traditional constructs. The difference between the two couples marked a contrast of content and style, and provoked audiences to make shifts between one kind of intimacy, or the lack thereof, and another.

The second major contribution in this work was the way Krishen staged the spaces of transition between these individual plays to articulate how the links between different stories were also relevant to ideas of cultural identity. This meant that the plays were purposefully sutured to each other in performance, rather than neatly delineated as separate stories without points of connection. Again, while Krishen had worked with the overlap of different cultural

vocabularies and performance forms, he had not consciously dramatised the space of transition between the end of one and the start of another distinct text or story. This was the new metaphor of transition that emerged in his work, to suggest that negotiating cultural difference entails constantly moving to and fro, between one cultural realm and another. Thus to represent this dynamic on stage required getting audiences to experience this ongoing shift as well. The stage as a site of ongoing transition emphasised the ephemerality of theatre as well as the temporariness of contemporary cultures.

To enact this idea in *7-Ten*, Krishen worked with an ensemble of nine actors who played different roles in different plays. By using the same performers across and between the plays, the physical stage became an organic platform of change and multiplicity, able to oscillate between different cultural milieus, while physically engaged with the same bodies. The cast also performed the process of transition between plays by becoming the stage-crew. This meant that the performers were not only in transition themselves, but also performed the transformations of the stage. They improvised and rehearsed these sequences alongside the scripted texts they performed.<sup>46</sup> Thus instead of reverting to blackouts on stage for the changing of props and switching of roles, Krishen used the spaces between to portray the interstices and slippages of culture where unexpected connections can emerge in the ‘watching’ of the play.

For example, the transition between Alfian Saat’s *Not In* and Charlene Rajendran’s *Polishing* allowed for a deeper interpretation of both plays that would not have been possible if viewed individually, without a conscious dramatising of the spaces between. After Alfian’s *Not In*, in which two erudite urban young women at a t-shirt stall in an urban shopping mall argue about the right to personal expression and the effects of consumer apathy, a chorus of performers entered the stage to set up the stage for *Polishing*. With loud agitated mutterings that sounded as if they were speaking a melange of Indian languages, they created an atmosphere of intense dissatisfaction. They also transformed the stage from the setting for an urban shopping mall to an upper-class Indian-Malaysian home. As the ignominious chorus argued with each other through sound and gesture, they cleared the larger than life Hello Kitty backdrop that framed the t-shirt stall. They then set up a dais-like platform on which two women dressed impeccably in plush silk saris, suggesting upper-class taste and sophistication, were seated with their feet on stools in front of them. During the transition,

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<sup>46</sup> Information gained from Lim How Ngean, a member of the ensemble, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2006.



starting from the sophisticated intellectual confrontation between the two Sociology graduates who challenged each other's views about civil liberty and responsibility, the mood shifted to one of emotional disagreement, in which the working-class interacted using large gestures and loud mutterings, with sensuous and heightened expressions of anger and irritation. It then transformed further into a hushed space where only the soft-spoken voices of the two upper-class women mattered.

Yet the remnants of earlier agitations were palpable. Krishen's amplification of the tension in *Not In* introduced the conflicts of the two women in *Polishing*, in which an adult niece and her aunt grapple with the politics of keeping up appearances in society, even as they struggle to deal with patriarchal abuse within the family. In both plays the characters were at odds with the social roles they were expected to play. Just as the young woman at the t-shirt stall refused to simply take 'no' for an answer and insisted on asserting her right to choice, so too did the adult niece question the need to uphold the facade of domestic harmony. As a result, they were unable to fit in and fulfil expectations of their culture and prescribed identity. The link between a trans-cultural shopping mall environment and a highly specific upper-class Indian home, articulated the notion that urban Malaysian life was characterised by ongoing transitions between globalised frames of deracinated identity, and local domains of particularity and situatedness. By forging links across the plays, Krishen was able to prod audiences to see the inter-connectedness between them, and thus move in and out of plays to realise the jostling and weave of meanings that were being performed in the process.

Links made in the transition also allowed for additional layers of meaning to inflect the workings of each play. Hence the depiction of Indian migrant labour to clear the t-shirt stall and set up the dais hinted at the flows of labour and economic forces that shuttle between the commercialism of a shopping mall and the domestic manoeuvrings of a home. The chorus of workers were later seen seated in a row on the floor in front of the dais, polishing brass objects in silence during *Polishing*. The entrapment of the two women seated precariously on the dais created a layer of irony, since compared to their 'servants' they were more confined and less able to move. Their highly-strung voices and tense physical postures suggested there was little room for manoeuvre despite being elevated and positioned as privileged in social spheres. This provided a further opportunity to look at the reversals of power that come with twists of fate and fortune. In addition, traces of an actor's performance in a previous play were allowed to surface as inter-textual developments and thus inflect the way meaning was generated. The two actors who had played the opinionated young women



in *Not In*, Jerrica Lai and Melissa Saila, then performed the role of voiceless servants sponging the physical bruises of the two upper-class women in *Polishing*. From being argumentative subjects in one play, they transformed into submissive objects in the next.

As performers shifted simple minimalist props and sets around the stage and changed from one costume into another, they were effectively performing the transformation of multiple worlds within the same stage, evoking the imaginative capacity of the audience to access the signs and symbols used to represent these spheres. From being voiced performers in one play to portraying voiceless performers in another, the actors shifted in and out of different states to convey ongoing transitions. Not only were the performers playing different characters and performing different functions, they inhabited multiple temporalities by enacting stories from different worlds, and this complicated the viewing process by disrupting any semblance of continuity or verisimilitude. Audiences were challenged to make sense of what it means for a performer who plays a character with agency in one play, to transform into an object without power in another. Bodies, cultures and identities became pliable, borderless and open to interpretation, depending on the context of the play and how it was being staged. The transition was thereby transformed into a space of possibility, staging inter-connectedness and unpredictability, rather than simply something to be gotten through.

In this regard, Krishen articulated a politic of re-imagining Malaysian society and the nation as a space for multiple stories and perspectives, where opportunities to be one thing *and* another become real options. He also negotiated a process of transition as opportunity for reinvention. Within the interstice, he created an open and ludic space where imaginative approaches to links and disconnections could heighten the staging of ideas. Audiences could be provoked to deepen their interpretations of meaning, by seeing the way stories were sutured to become extensions and commentaries of each other. While this approach did not appeal to all viewers, some lamenting the lack of depth and structure due to the brevity of each play and the diverse use of staging techniques that did little to mark a coherent aesthetic,<sup>47</sup> those whose appetites were gratified by the fragmented approach to inter-relatedness applauded Krishen's efforts.<sup>48</sup> The play of spaces between, and the idea of cultures in transition, was a significant extension of Krishen's own practice, and it precipitated a further exploration of cultural difference in relation to a performance form in transition, as seen in his final production *Monkey Business*.

<sup>47</sup> See Martin Vengadesan, 'Seven out of ten,' in *StarMag*, June 1, 2003; and yaanie, 'Unsatisfactory "quickie",' *The Malay Mail*, June 2, 2003.

<sup>48</sup> See Kunbek 'of mamak stalls and national depression,' in *New Straits Times*, June 2003; and Jerome Kugan, 'Give me 10 more minutes,' *Options*, July 2003.

### ***Monkey Business* and a Performance Form in Transition**

Krishen's final directorial work, *Monkey Business*, performed ideas about cultural difference within a frame that he was experimenting with for the first time, namely a contemporary gamelan performance. Here he grappled with the dynamics of working with a traditionally delineated Malay classical music form, the gamelan,<sup>49</sup> and staged how it could be theatricalised and contemporised to embody a multiplicity of cultural meanings. Instead of limited associations with a single cultural sphere, namely Malay-ness, it was articulated as a space for multi-cultural expressions of Malaysian identity. In this instance Krishen engaged with a performance form undergoing its own transition, and thus adapting to new demands of contemporariness such as openness, indeterminacy and a jostling of ideas. This contrasted with the traditional associations of the gamelan as a specific, known and contained space of cultural production.<sup>50</sup> In this section I argue that Krishen's achievement in this work was to rework the art form in collaboration with contemporary musician-composers, and suggest how it could become a space for cultural reinvention through theatrical enactment. This meant reconfiguring prescribed associations of how the gamelan was meant to represent cultural affiliation for players from multi-ethnic backgrounds. Furthermore, by working with a known Malay art form and expanding its boundaries to become inclusive of a wide range of influences, Krishen was asserting how a Malay-based focus in culture could be transformed to incorporate the mix of Malaysian identities, such that it was no longer regarded as threatening to non-Malay cultures nor as a form of cultural dissolution to have these changes occur. Instead, as a transition towards further experimentations and reinventions, it could provide opportunities for playful and creative revisions of how Malaysians could challenge the political hegemony, without having to reject the cultural components associated with the dominant power.

*Monkey Business* was essentially a performance of contemporary gamelan pieces written and performed by Rhythm in Bronze (RiB), a group of musicians committed to

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<sup>49</sup> The gamelan is a musical ensemble found in several parts of Indonesia and Malaysia, consisting a range of instruments such as tuned bronze gongs, kettle gongs, metallophones, xylophones, drums, bamboo flutes and sometimes a plucked or bowed string instrument. There are several variations of the gamelan, the most popular being Javanese and Balinese gamelan. However in Malaysia it is the Malay gamelan that is most prominent, acquiring its own standard of instruments and repertoire of music.

<sup>50</sup> See Tan Sooi Beng, 'Crossing Stylistic Boundaries and Transcending Ethnicity through the Performing Arts,' in *Building Bridges, Crossing Boundaries: Everyday Forms of Inter-Ethnic Peace Building in Malaysia*, ed. Francis Loh Kok Wah, (Puchong: The Ford Foundation, Jakarta and Persatuan Sains Sosial Malaysia [Malaysian Social Science Association], 2010), 223-236, for discussion on contemporary gamelan in Malaysia and how it has produced multi-ethnic fusions of sound.

playing the gamelan while working to contemporarise its form and content.<sup>51</sup> The group consisted of urban Malaysians from diverse cultural backgrounds, interested in playing the gamelan and transforming its associations through experimental processes. Previous RiB performances had seen experiments in altering how gamelan music is played. While ordinarily gamelan players remain seated and relatively casual throughout their playing, RiB performances saw musicians move from one instrument to another and take on a style of playing that intensified the mood of the music, by showing emotion and dramatising the contact between performers. As Fernando noted, in the past the group have ‘incorporated gestures and communicating with our audience aside from just music’.<sup>52</sup> However in *Monkey Business* Krishen expanded this approach further and introduced a more complex inter-disciplinary process to radically change how gamelan could be experienced and embodied. Referring to the performance as ‘Rhythm in Bronze Gamelan Theatre,’ the naming signalled the difficulty of finding suitable labels for the kind of work it was, being after all a ‘maiden attempt’<sup>53</sup> to bring together aspects of theatre in a gamelan performance that was aesthetically experimental yet socio-politically relevant.

Krishen’s directorial role was to extend the possibilities of staging contemporary gamelan as an art form that could adapt to new impulses and ideas in culture.<sup>54</sup> Working closely with Artistic and Music Directors Sunetra Fernando and Jillian Ooi, Krishen sought ways to transform the musicians into performers who did more than just play their instruments. He developed approaches to staging the music such that it became a theatrical form of storytelling as well. As part of the experiment, Krishen also invited dancer-choreographer Judimar Monfils to collaborate with the musicians, and thus heighten the

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<sup>51</sup> Founded in 1997 by Sunetra Fernando, a musician, composer and ethnomusicologist who pioneered the work of reinventing the gamelan and developing an audience for contemporary gamelan in Malaysia, the company has gained a reputation for presenting gamelan music as a contemporary reinvention of the classical form, that appeals to wide-ranging audiences. Their repertoire stretches across traditional and contemporary works, with an emphasis on the latter, which often includes instruments that are not part of the usual gamelan, such as Chinese *shigu* drums and the electric guitar. The composition of the group is itself continually in flux as members vary in their levels of commitment and availability. It consists of a range of urban professionals, mostly women, from varied cultural backgrounds, attracted to the aesthetics of gamelan music, some of whom are full-time musicians.

<sup>52</sup> Fernando, quoted in amir hafizi, ‘Monkey Business: Rhythm in Bronze to emphasise performance elements in upcoming production,’ *The Malay Mail*, March 22, 2005.

<sup>53</sup> Himanshu Bhatt, ‘Gamelan with ...ooh, muscle!’ *New Sunday Times*, April 3, 2005.

<sup>54</sup> As noted in earlier chapters, Krishen had worked with the gamelan in theatre since the 1980s, and was curious about how the form could contribute to experimental theatre, indicating his belief in its potential for adaptation. As a musical ensemble that often accompanies performance forms in the region, the gamelan is closely linked to theatre, dance and ritual in Southeast Asia. Hence Krishen’s interest in this form was also tied to his intent of creating inter-disciplinary performance forms that linked with situated histories and identities. The gamelan is played in a range of traditional performances that include the *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), traditional dances like the *legong*, religious rituals and community ceremonies. It thus has a widespread presence and is associated with a range of spaces and functions in Malaysian and Indonesian culture.

physical responses and express interpretations of the sound through a vocabulary of movement. This revised normative notions of gamelan concerts as constituting an ethereal programme of harmonious sounds played by calmly seated musicians, who are one with their music. Instead the performance was energetic, at times chaotic, and highly theatrical.

To expand the scope of the gamelan as a performance form, Krishen incorporated dramatic interpretations of the music. He did this by getting the musicians to play the music in ways that articulated the narratives of their musical scores, which sometimes also included spoken texts. As part of the project, Krishen encouraged the musicians to ‘write something based on [their] experiences centred on the gamelan’,<sup>55</sup> and take on the challenge of playing these works as movers and actors, as well as musicians. In effect he wanted them to bring to life their compositions by expressing how these ideas articulated the nature of relationships between their lives, their instruments and the form. As a result he recast the medium as one that could not only be performed with more intensity and movement, but also unravel aspects of personal narrative and cultural histories. With a multi-racial and multi-religious mix of players, this produced a complex articulation of the multifarious ways in which urban Malaysians negotiated their links with a Malay cultural form. It expressed how these differences constituted an assemblage of ideas about what is Malaysian, and why taking on a cultural form that ‘belongs’ to an Other, matters in the imagining of inclusive community and commonality. It enhances the capacity to understand the Self as a composite that includes dimensions of the Other, thus reducing the distances between.

So, as with *7-Ten*, Krishen staged a series of ‘stories’, but this time about the gamelan and how urban Malaysians who play the gamelan forge their own links with the form, and thereby reinvent its cultural meanings. To underline each ‘story’ as distinct, Krishen ‘cast’ the performer-composer as the ‘protagonist’ in the dramatisation of their own pieces of music. This heightened their presence to suggest a clear ownership of the narrative and dramatisation of the sound. It also reworked how musicians articulate themselves in gamelan performances by emphasising particular individuals, rather than have them blend into the ensemble. Each ‘story’ then signified a specific journey and approach to cultural reworking, with different portrayals of the musician’s relationship with the gamelan. As a multi-cultural ensemble, consisting women and men from Malay, Chinese, Indian and other backgrounds, the work reflected a wide range of feelings and concerns, symbolising a wide relationship with society and the nation at large.

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<sup>55</sup> Jillian Ooi, quoted in amir hafizi, ‘Monkey Business’.

For example in Sunetra Fernando's *From Here To There*, Krishen directed a staging of her role as protagonist in a manner that made the conflict of her drama explicit. At a climactic moment Fernando rose from her instrument to step into a spotlight, where she performed a recitative about the questions that formed the motivation for her piece. This pertained to the anxieties that plagued her desire to reconfigure gamelan. Her main line, '*bagaimana lahir kebaruan tanpa silap?*' (how can reinvention be born if there are no mistakes?), followed by '*kedepan tidak, kebelakang jangan*' (obstructions in moving forward, restrictions in moving backwards), conveyed the dilemma of being in transition. Plagued by questions of what is right and wrong, the importance of taking risks and embracing 'mistakes' became a significant part of moving on. The politics of Fernando's piece also underlined her identity as a non-Malay woman leading an ensemble of mostly female gamelan players, in a reinvention of a Malay classical music form that is largely dominated by Malay men.<sup>56</sup> Difference is thus acknowledged as a hurdle, but one with possibilities for reconfiguration. This reversal of traditional roles opened up how the gamelan, like other aspects of prescribed culture, could be refashioned with imaginative and thoughtful engagement.

However the complexity of the task was also recognised as demanding and isolating. Fernando's depiction of a desperate cry for understanding came through the urgency in her voice as well as her physical stance and facial expression. She portrayed the struggle and pain of feeling the need to do something, but with little assurance of what needed to be done, embodying the difficulty that comes with risk-taking in innovation, and thus being in transition. This underlined how transitions allow for expansive opportunities in which to transcend the 'obstructions' and 'restrictions' as long as there is courage to confront the uncertainties of unpredictable outcomes. In many respects this was resonant of Krishen's approach to theatre-making, riddled with questions about what was needed to initiate change, and marked by 'mistakes' about what it took to enable its realisation.

Seen in this light, the performance asserts a reinvention of the form, which simultaneously reassigns ownership and entitlement beyond a race and gender boundary. In other words the contemporary gamelan accorded a legitimate space for rewriting one's connection and disconnection with cultural assignation and essentialism. This was relevant to both Malays and non-Malays, questioning settled assumptions about what it meant to be

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<sup>56</sup> This echoed earlier explorations of identity and culture through music and narrative, when Krishen worked with Fernando in *US: Actions and Images*, as noted in Chapter Five, to perform reconfigurations of the self, using diverse elements of culture, history and memory.

assigned a particular cultural identity, and then realise its inapplicability in real life. This was most evident in Mohd. Sobri Anuar's *Main-Main in Details* (Playing in Details), which deals with a Malay man's sense of displacement due to his inability to play the gamelan. This piece includes a significant portion of verbal text, in which the 'protagonist', played by Sobri, declares to the audience his feeling of inadequacy when required to keep time or play an instrument that requires repeated patterns of sound. Staged in a manner that located Sobri within a circle of instruments played by women, he was literally surrounded by mischievous representations of his cultural nemesis. As they challenged him in a friendly, and at times flirtatious, manner through sound and gesture, to attempt the gamelan, his meagre efforts were scorned with laughter. But this discomfort and awkwardness did not prevent him from continuing his pursuit of trying it out to gain credence. A versatile and trained actor, Sobri's crossing of performance boundaries to participate in a gamelan performance was also part of the inter-disciplinary and multi-cultural terrain that Krishen was consciously drawing attention to. As he began to play the gamelan with his co-performers, he gradually relaxed into the possibility of adapting the form to his particular ability, rather than succumbing to the pressures of conforming to what was prescribed. The transition of the gamelan, from one set of associations to more open and inclusive imaginings encouraged a review of how cultural vocabularies can adapt to the wider shifts in society.

Apart from the portrayal of cultures and forms in transition, Krishen also staged the transitions between each music score, similar to the way he staged transitions in *7-Ten*. Instead of a seamless silent shift from one piece to the next, the performers moved the instruments around to reconfigure the space to suit the next composition and its style. As they did so, the performers 'monkeyed about'. At times they created a jungle soundscape with their voices, at other times they laughed as if in humorous conversation. At one point they moved around like monkeys, literally creating 'monkey business' on stage by 'monkeying' with the instruments, and their narratives. They were executed as conscious breaks in the soundscape to disrupt any semblance of simple cohesion, and articulated a politics of difference that was reflected in the wide-ranging stories being told. This also created a ludic and carnivalesque atmosphere, something that Krishen has explored in his earlier inter-disciplinary and site-specific performances, as discussed in Chapter Four. The sense of mischief and playfulness reiterated a sense of the fluidity and transitoriness that was significant of the contemporary, and the humour that can be generated in the interstitial spaces of multi-cultural interactions. It generated a 'multiplicitous complexity' with 'multiple temporalities' experienced in 'multifarious directions', which meant that all kinds of



possibilities were entertained without having to be rationalised.<sup>57</sup> Furthermore, ongoing shifts between one sphere and another suggested that movements across time and space contributed to reshaping the stage from one kind of set-up to the next. Here, as in *7-Ten*, Krishen engaged the performers in making the set changes, and thus performing the transitions as related aspects of the main performance. However in this production Krishen collaborated with a choreographer, and thus the materiality of the instruments and the corporeality of the players' bodies, were articulated with a stronger aesthetic ability to wield these resources as rich performance texts.

As a primarily non-verbal medium, the work demonstrated Krishen's interest in the potential of the gamelan to transcend the limitations of theatre by not having to subscribe to the categorisations of language that can make mixing difficult. A bi- or multi-lingualism in music is often far easier, as evident in world musics that draw on several traditions of sound, without need for 'translation' or verbal 'interpretation'. The syncretism that Krishen had aimed to achieve in earlier multilingual performance and fusions of cultural vocabularies, as seen in previous chapters, was pushed further in the contemporisation of the gamelan. Apart from the obvious juxtaposition of Chinese drums with Malay gongs 'conversing' with each other in Bernard Goh's *Borderless*, there were also moments in which images of Chinese ritual, sounds of Buddhist chant and Christian incantation, were present as elements in the musical scores written by the players. These introduced critical reinventions of gamelan, which was otherwise noted in Malaysia for being exclusively Malay, and thereby ostensibly Muslim. As inter-racial reworkings of the form they suggested that it was possible for even 'sensitive issues' of religion to be revisioned through aesthetic means, particularly at a time of intensified Islamisation, as discussed earlier in the chapter.

The dialogical process that Krishen developed in *Monkey Business*, collaborating with musicians and a choreographer to effectively 'theatricalise' a music form, succeeded in breaking the boundaries of how gamelan was experienced by performers and audiences alike. Audiences were provoked to make sense of these alterations to the form, and interpret the significance of the individual stories depicted in the music, and thus make links between the conventional space of gamelan and its reshaping of cultural identities. This was sometimes seen as more 'cerebral' than 'affective', and less appealing to some audiences.<sup>58</sup> However,

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<sup>57</sup> Smith, 'Introduction', 9.

<sup>58</sup> See amir hafizi, 'Too much Monkey Business' in *The Malay Mail*, April 5, 2005, and Bhatt, 'Gamelan with...' for reviews that found the theatrical dimensions of the performance unpleasant and thus disruptive to the appreciation of the work. In hafizi's terms 'the dramatic bits overshadowed the music', while Bhatt found the



this was the risk of experimentation that Krishen was used to taking, and the price of apparent ‘mistakes’ that engendered productive ideas for future exploration. Unfortunately Krishen was unable to see to the finish some of the ideas he initiated, due to his being taken ill and having to be hospitalised in the crucial final days of rehearsal leading into performance.<sup>59</sup>

This execution of cultural difference was clearly an evolved outcome of Krishen’s many explorations into how multiplicity can be staged. Yet he maintained a highly collaborative process that engaged the ideas and impulses of the musicians he worked with. His reliance on the ensemble to take up his suggestions and follow them through forced him to work in a closely interactive manner with each performer, particularly in relation to a form that was not his area of expertise. This built on the actor-based collaborations he had developed in the 1990s, as discussed in Chapter Five. However this time he was adventuring into a medium that was not his forte. Hence his appreciation of the trust and openness of the players was acknowledged, openly aware that his capacity to shift a boundary was only possible with their combined energies. Alluding to himself first as an ‘imposter’ and then as ‘pretentious and presumptuous’ in attempting to ‘lead a gamelan,’ Krishen articulated how the process had ‘humbled’ him, even as he learnt from the ensemble and was ‘intimated with a new respect and admiration for their work’.<sup>60</sup> Krishen recognised the value of collaboration with the ensemble by emphasizing that

[W]ithout the ensemble, I am nothing. With them, I have joined to adventure into untraveled frontiers. The frontier is located in the intersection between music, dance and drama. The connections as we have explored have been extremely porous.<sup>61</sup>

This ‘adventure into untraveled frontiers’ allowed for a diversity of interactions between the players and their stories, working with their instruments and the form of contemporary gamelan that was emerging through the varied explorations of culture and identity. Just as the spaces of transition were divided and filled by constant comings and goings, so were the uncertainties and ambiguities about being contemporary and Malaysian - ‘assembled and reassembled’ to convey a liquidity of cultures and identities.<sup>62</sup> This in-between space that

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work ‘more cerebrally affecting than emotionally stirring’, suggesting an imbalance that was ineffective for this viewer.

<sup>59</sup> Although Krishen was unable to see the production through to performance, he remained connected to the process, even if only from an Intensive Care Unit in a hospital ward. Krishen delegated the responsibility of directing to Chee Sek Thim, Lim How Ngean and Zahim Albakri, three younger directors whom he had worked with in the past. In many respects this was typical of Krishen’s commitment to younger generations of theatre-makers, with whom he engaged deeply as colleagues who would propel the future of Malaysian theatre.

<sup>60</sup> Krishen, ‘Director’s Notes’ in *Monkey Business* Programme Booklet, 2005.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *The Art of Life*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2008) 13.

Krishen initiated, 'located in the intersection between music, dance and drama', went further in provoking ideas about difference because it revised ways of playing contemporary gamelan music, as well as being a contemporary gamelan musician. What mattered was a willingness to embark on an 'adventure into untraveled frontiers' and play with intersections, connections and dis-connections.

Krishen's theatre had always conveyed a sense of being in transition, moving from one phase to another, shifting between varied approaches to staging and interpreting scripts. His willingness to revise ideas about cultural production and his openness to changing ideas about socio-political frames enabled him to engage with flux as an integral facet of the contemporary. Thus his ideas about contemporary culture in Malaysia continually entailed trying out new approaches and experimenting with alternative ways of enlarging the discourses on identity. However in the final phase of his directing, he went a step further and staged the transitions within performances, to articulate how the flux expresses cultural reconfiguration and revises lines of demarcation and constructedness. In the spaces of suturing between one play and another in *7-Ten*, and in the playful executions of interwoven Selves and Others in *Monkey Business*, Krishen articulated his politics of performing cultures as closely related yet distinct; permeable and overlapping while historically situated; and mixed, intersecting and multi-layered, even as they were producing new possibilities for imagining and perceiving identity. These were political, aesthetic and imaginative interventions about being Malaysian in a modern and multicultural society, asserting inclusivity and mutuality that advanced deeper commonality. They also empowered agency and equity as valuable aspirations for a hopeful future that would embrace the power and potential of difference.

## Conclusion

To make a claim for multi-culturalism is not, therefore, to suggest the juxtaposition of several cultures whose frontiers remain intact, nor is it to subscribe to a bland “melting-pot” type of attitude that would level all differences. It lies instead in the intercultural acceptance of risks, unexpected detours, and complexities of relation between break and closure. Every artistic excursion and theoretical venture requires that boundaries be ceaselessly called to question, undermined, modified, and reinscribed.<sup>1</sup>

Issues of cultural difference have gained increasing importance in a globalising world where multiculturalism has become more prevalent, and growing numbers of individuals and communities of diverse backgrounds co-exist. In a climate of intensified inter-cultural and international conflicts, intra-cultural and intra-national disparities also create deep divides in the fabric of society. It has thus become urgent to understand and attend to multiplicity between and within cultures as integral to contemporary life. When fractures and ruptures are caused by a diminished capacity to negotiate divergent systems of belief, culture and identity, and there is a perpetuation of unjust socio-political and economic systems that sustain hierarchies of oppositional Selves and Others, the challenge is to create alternative frameworks for engaging with plurality that do not simplify the task of dealing with difference. There needs to be critical yet empathetic questionings of how delineations of identity operate, and attentiveness to the intersections and overlaps that encourage mutuality through a consciousness of inter-relatedness and similarity. As cultural theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-Ha points out, a sustainable and relevant multiculturalism calls for ‘the intercultural acceptance of risks, unexpected detours, and complexities of relations between break and closure’ in which the spaces to interrogate the ‘boundaries’ of culture are enlarged. Here the processes of ‘artistic excursion and theoretical venture’ are alert to how difference operates, and thus the lines of division, the politics of segregation, and prejudicial practices, are ‘ceaselessly called to question, undermined, modified and reinscribed’. They are not assumed to be rigid and fixed, nor devoid of power relations.

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<sup>1</sup> Trinh T. Minh-Ha, *When The Moon Waxes Red: Representation, Gender and Cultural Politics*, (New York: Routledge, 1991), 232.

Instead the politics of difference is reinvented in the interstitial and transitional spaces that emerge therein.

As shown in this dissertation, Krishen's politics of theatre was never to create a melting pot identity that smoothed out difference, or to generate juxtapositions that reinforced lines of difference. Instead his intent was to forge an experimental artistic space in which the lines of difference were relevant, but could be interrogated and seen as permeable, overlapping, intersecting and in transition. His achievement was to deliberately put together aspects of culture that were often deemed separate, and to rework how the links between and across them could engender in-between spaces of cultural embodiment, in which porous, fluid and layered expressions of identity could be explored and performed. This elucidated the complexities of being modern and multicultural 'within', as it resisted the flattening of cultures and contested the singularity and essentialism of officially sanctioned identities. While racial, religious and linguistic differences were acknowledged as historically entrenched and deeply rooted aspects of identity, these were also recognised as constructs that could be reinvented to produce inclusive imaginings of Malaysian community and commonality. Hence Krishen's theatre contributed to an inclusive politics of multiplicity by highlighting the inter-connectedness and mutual imbrications of Selves and Others – evident in the incorporation of the traditional and modern, folk and contemporary, the local and foreign, mainstream and marginal, centre and periphery – without denying the historicity or particularity of these categories.

Krishen asserted an alternative multiculturalism that was not based on separate or parallel strands of culture but founded on principles of difference within cultures, which allowed for varied influences and sources to inform the constructs of identity. Identity as self, community and nation was envisioned as constituent of several strands woven into a whole, remaining in flux, sometimes in contradiction, but always inter-related despite the disjunctures. Hence his work also focused on the tensions of difference, and acknowledged how divisiveness remains an ongoing problem which obstructs the processes of building mutuality, commonality and solidarity. In societies such as Malaysia, where the government acknowledges the need to officially deal with questions of multiculturalism, provision is made for specific cultural groups, mainly the Malays, Chinese and Indians, to be represented and recognised as legitimate spheres of differentiation within the modern nation-state. As a result, the boundaries of race have become embedded in the politics of identity, as Malay, Chinese and Indian cultures are linked to political

parties that constitute the ruling Barisan Nasional (National Front) alliance in government. Furthermore, hierarchies of political entitlement such as policies of affirmative action for *Bumiputera*-Malaysians, produce further delineations of power relations and curtail efforts to aspire towards social justice and equity. Hence the inclusive politics of Krishen's theatre, which sought to develop inter-ethnic parity and show how aspects of the Other were imbricated in the Self, contested the state hegemony. Even as the work acknowledged the racialisation of politics as a historical dimension of state-formation, it was not confined to these frames as totalising and absolute. Instead it asserted revised notions of race, culture, language and identity, which were open to reinvention, able to accommodate multiple influences and thus reflect the porosity of Malaysian cultures in ways that were recognisable, familiar, and derived from everyday realities where mix and interaction are an ordinary part of life.

My purpose in highlighting these aspects of Krishen's theatre has been to show that his stagings of cultural difference provided embodied examples of how settled assumptions and prejudicial frames can be dismantled through creative reworkings of Selves and Others. In view of the growing disenchantment and escalating pessimism about social cohesion in Malaysia, that has been evident in recent years, there is a growing need to recognise the multiplicity in Malaysia as an integral aspect of national identity.<sup>2</sup> This is crucial in efforts to curtail the impact of divisive and simplistic rhetoric that is advanced by communitarian politics, especially after more than fifty years of independence. As political scientist Sheila Nair notes, there is a growing prioritisation of 'exclusionary' rather than 'inclusionary' discourse, which emphasises ethnic politics and thus impoverishes the 'national imaginary'.<sup>3</sup> In this context ethnicity has become a 'rigid marker used to divide people instead of being applied in more expansive and encompassing terms'.<sup>4</sup> Thus Krishen's attempts to enrich the 'national imaginary' with more pluralistic and integrative discourses can be seen as a relevant resource for reconfiguring the politics of identity. This could also help generate frameworks that allow for a 'combination' of

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<sup>2</sup> See Lim Teck Ghee, 'Malaysia's Prospects: Rising to or in Denial of Challenges?' in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 483-500, for discussion on the growing dissatisfaction among the Malaysian populace about issues of ethno-religious dividedness in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

<sup>3</sup> Sheila Nair, 'Colonialism, Nationalism, Ethnicity: Constructing Identity and Difference,' in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 77.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 93.

‘positions and processes’ as suggested by political analyst Ooi Kee Beng, in order to avoid ethnocentrism in ‘an extreme form’ and instead ‘swing towards an acceptance of change’ that encourages more ‘spontaneous cosmopolitanism and ethnic integration’.<sup>5</sup> Rather than stipulate unitary alternatives, Krishen’s work advanced how multiple options exist and can be deployed in relation to each other.

As I have demonstrated in this dissertation, Krishen generated multiple ways of being and becoming Malaysian on stage. From strategies of inter-racial casting that he began to explore in the 1970s, in which an actor from one race played a character from another race; to monologue performances that marked his work in the 1990s, in which a solo actor performed several different characters from a range of cultural backgrounds; Krishen’s theatre performed the permeability of the body as a text that can be reworked according to the role being played. Here the fixity of assigned categories of identity was rendered fluid, and the doubleness of performance created possibilities for reviewing culture as ambivalent and discursive. From the 1980s onwards Krishen also engaged with what happens when different cultural elements are juxtaposed to create intersections and overlaps that enlarge the interstitial spaces where new mixes of culture emerge. While these collages and fusions of culture articulated a clear politic and aesthetic of multiplicity, by emphasising their inter-connectedness and mutual imbrication Krishen also contested the dominant frames of multiculturalism that posit separate and parallel streams of culture. This was a form of ‘Open Culture’ which Singaporean playwright-director Kuo Pao Kun defined as ‘an earnest desire to enter into other cultures and take them as part of one’s own or extending oneself beyond one’s own culture to evolve a larger, diverse one’.<sup>6</sup> This approach towards rethinking boundaries of Selves and Others allowed for cultural particularities and histories to be acknowledged and endorsed within a larger frame of inter-relatedness. It also made it conducive to adopt and adapt to other cultures, making them part of one’s own without losing a sense of rootedness. The ongoing flux of identities and cultures, evident in the ongoing transitions from one phase to another in the cultural evolution of a contemporary Malaysia, made

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<sup>5</sup> Ooi Kee Beng, ‘Beyond Ethnocentrism: Malaysia and the Affirmation of Hybridisation’ in *Multiethnic Malaysia: Past, Present and Future*, eds. Lim Teck Ghee, Alberto Gomes and Azly Rahman, (Petaling Jaya: Strategic Information and Research Development Centre, 2009), 461.

<sup>6</sup> Kuo Pao Kun, ‘Contemplating an Open Culture: Transcending Multiracialism,’ in *The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun: Volume Seven – Papers and Speeches* by Kuo Pao Kun, (Singapore: Shi Jian Biao Yan Yi Shu Zhong Xin, 2005), 252.

it crucial to negotiate uncertainty and ambiguity. Krishen's work, particularly in the early 2000s, explored the potential for dramatising the space of transition as a further dimension of engaging with difference. Here the performance of suturing and severing different segments of performance produced deeper layers of connection across, between, and within diverse cultural spheres. This palpable sense of transformation in the midst of a jostling coming and going, multiple to and fro, articulated the dynamics of change as constantly present, even in the apparently insignificant transitions that are often overlooked as simply to be gotten through, rather than attended to.

These approaches to staging Malaysian identity were Krishen's contribution to realising a contemporary and indigenous culture that drew from differences in society, and forged alternative imaginings that were counter-hegemonic to state-sanctioned frames of national and multicultural identity. The use of everyday vocabularies, physical and spoken, apart from traditional forms and codified artistic practices, further legitimised the experience of ordinary Malaysians as crucial to a democratised and open process of reclaiming the right to recognition, and asserting the need for acceptance and belonging. The urgency of engaging with what historian and political scientist Farish Noor has called 'a multiplicity of "Malaysias"', in which the nation is acknowledged as 'an expansive and unlimited terrain that is fundamentally unsutured, open and multifarious in nature' is a 'pressing reality'.<sup>7</sup> This demands an imaginative and politically informed will to 'reclaim the histories, biographies, symbols, tropes and markers that dot the narrative and discursive landscape of Malaysia', from 'simplified and essentialised totems' that reduce the diversities of culture between and within boundaries of difference.<sup>8</sup> In effect it is to restore Malaysia as a 'land that bears the imprint of many overlapping civilisations: indigenous, Malay, Indian, Chinese, Arab, European and now global.'<sup>9</sup> To do this is to re-imagine the community of Malaysians as inter-connected in a range of ways that go beyond inter- and intra-cultural crossings. The complex inter-weavings of multiple strands of culture in history, as well as the contemporary, reveal a diverse tapestry of how individuals and

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<sup>7</sup> Farish Noor, 'Many Other Malaysias,' in *The Other Malaysia: Writings on Malaysia's Subaltern History* by Farish Noor, (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2002), 4-7.

<sup>8</sup> Farish Noor, 'Introduction: History, and the Toys that Fascists Play With,' in *What the Teacher Didn't Tell You: The Annexe Lectures (Vol. 1)* by Farish Noor, (Petaling Jaya: Matahari Books: 2009), 12-13.

<sup>9</sup> Farish Noor, 'The Loneliness of the Long Distance Writer,' in *From Majapahit to Putrajaya: Searching for Another Malaysia*, by Farish Noor, (Kuala Lumpur: Silverfishbooks, 2005), 16.



communities have interacted over time, and more recently, to generate alternative experiences of what it means to be modern, multicultural and Malaysian.

While Krishen's theatre moved from one phase of critical interrogation and aesthetic innovation to another, from the 1970s till his passing in 2005, his focus on what it meant to be Malaysian in a contemporary context was sustained. Even when he looked beyond national boundaries, his primary motivation was still to express how these enlargements related to the challenges of being modern and multicultural in Malaysia. His intent to 'excavate' what he saw as 'multiculturalism in one body'<sup>10</sup> was based on the conviction that multiplicity in Malaysia was not just a recent phenomenon, but one that had historical roots and thus needed to be recognised as fundamental to an inclusive apprehension of society. In this respect he articulated the value of 'difference as a root',<sup>11</sup> and committed to validating mixed identity that was rarely sanctioned officially or in mainstream society. This capacity to see beyond the normative, and thus grapple with the 'obscurity of the present', the 'unlived' and 'untimely',<sup>12</sup> remains valuable to ongoing experimentations of how theatre can alter perceptions of racial bias and cultural prejudice. The bold, ludic and adventurous approaches that Krishen cultivated were thus aimed at trying out options rather than defining solutions. This commitment to experimentation enabled Krishen to adapt to ongoing shifts in the Malaysian context, as well as in the wider artistic terrain. He reinvented and relocated his theatre practice several times, as part of his politic of being open to change and embracing the challenges of doing different things and taking decisions that contradicted earlier positions. This made his work a critical showcase of how culture is moderated, inflected and refashioned by differences across time, space and politics, to become adaptable and expansive. When encouraged to reconfigure itself in interaction with these evolutions, culture embraces difference as a positive and enriching possibility, rather than a disruptive and divisive boundary. Krishen's theatre performed this imaginative capacity, and thus offered deep insights into the questions and challenges that arise in confronting what it means to be contemporary.

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<sup>10</sup> Krishen Jit, in recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran, 2004 – as quoted at the start of the Introduction.

<sup>11</sup> T. K. Sabapathy, 'On Vision and Idea: Afterthoughts,' in *Vision and Idea: ReLooking Modern Malaysian Art* ed. T.K. Sabapathy, (Kuala Lumpur: National Art Gallery, 1994) 108.

<sup>12</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'What is the Contemporary?' in *What Is An Apparatus and Other Essays*, trans. David Kishik and Stefan Pedatella, (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2009), 40-47. These terms are used by Agamben in his discussion of the 'contemporary', as discussed in Chapter One.

Krishen's influence on theatre practitioners in Malaysia has been evident in the choices and approaches taken by some of his former collaborators in framing and initiating contemporary Malaysian theatre. Directors and performers who worked closely with Krishen, as well as students who were influenced by his thinking, attest to a deep sense of engagement they had with Krishen – even when they disagreed with him or found his demands exacting.<sup>13</sup> The questions of how and whether his work will continue to provide inspiration and insight about staging issues of Malaysian culture and identity needs to be examined in a separate study. The documentation and analyses of processes of rehearsal and training that Krishen developed are also areas for further research. However it is important to note that already, in the setting up of the Krishen Jit ASTRO Fund that gives annual grants for experimental arts work, artists continue to have an opportunity to reflect on an important aspect of Krishen's work - namely an apprehension and articulation of difference as an integral dimension of Malaysian culture. This symbolises an important part of his legacy, which is that artists invent and innovate their own politic, practice and aesthetic, in relation to Malaysian contemporaneity, rather than follow an already existing method or form. Eventually what is most valuable is that Krishen's politics of theatre negotiated cultural difference through a range of strategies and approaches to performance, in order to create greater inclusivity and deeper respect for multiplicity in everyday life. Even if his theatre did not reach the wider populace, for those who were provoked to rethink notions of identity and prodded to revise their own prejudices and biases, this was an important achievement – particularly in a society beset by problems of polarisation and resentment against the perceived Other, and a world riddled with conflicts of animosity. It was about enhancing a sense of Malaysian community by revising the power and possibilities of boundaries, as in Krishen's terms,

[T]heatre is a collective communication art. Unlike writing or painting, theatre has that sense of always working with others. A sense of trusting each other, of having confidence in each other, of loving each other. It is a whole way of life.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> These include Anne James, Claire Wong, Faridah Merican, Hamzah Tahir, Huzir Sulaiman, Ivan Heng, Janet Pillai, Jo Kukathas, Joe Hasham, Leow Puay Tin, Lim How Ngean, Mark Teh, Namron, Ong Keng Sen and Zahim Albakri, who in recorded interviews with Charlene Rajendran, in 2006 and 2007, commented on how working with Krishen had impacted on their theatre practice.

<sup>14</sup> Jhybe, 'The art of being Krishen,' *New Straits Times*, August 22, 2001.

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