

The Use of Theatre as a Collective Enterprise in Disseminating Literature To Children: Three Case Studies

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Abstract

This paper looks at theatrical collaborative works in Malaysia involving theatre groups and children from age 5 to 12 using English literary texts which have been translated to the national language, Bahasa Malaysia. This paper examines the involvement of children in three different theatrical productions: the '*Suara Rimba*' (The Sounds of the Jungle) a Bahasa Malaysia adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*; the second collaborative work which is done on a big scale is the production of the *Musical Ali Baba* adapted from the tale of the Arabian Nights, *Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves* with a big cast of 89 children aged 5 – 12 staged at the National Theatre; the third collaborative work is the production of a Bahasa Malaysia adaptation of the story of Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist* by a group of primary school students with a group of homeless street kids of the Chow Kit area of Kuala Lumpur.

Key Words: Translated works of English literature, Children's theatre, collaborations

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Historically, theatre that plays specifically to young audiences in Malaysia is a phenomenon which is traced back to the Colonial period 1910 to 1930, where Shakespearean plays and western plays were performed at the dramatic clubs in English-administered schools. The Malaysian Arts Theatre Group (MATG) formed by the expatriate community in Malaysia had until 1967 staged productions consisting mainly of Shakespeare, Bernard Shaw and Oscar Wilde. In 1969, MATG with the British Council brought over a touring London Shakespeare Group to perform extracts of Shakespeare's plays to school children in Penang and Kuala Lumpur. The costumes and props were simple, and several parts were played by one actor or actress. According to Tom Griddle in an interview with *Asahi Shimbun*, the purpose of the performances was to let them (the young audience) know as much as possible how Shakespeare's plays were performed.

English was used widely and taught in schools during the time Malaya, as it was known, was a British colony, and early post-independence years. The British Administration, in promoting the teaching and learning of the English language to colonial Malaya, had stressed the good effects of literature such as prose, poetry and drama on the practice of speaking and writing and as an incentive to the skill of reading as well. The British had included texts such as the *Pilgrim's Progress*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *Mowgli Stories* and a number of William Shakespeare's plays in the syllabus for Primary and Secondary schools.

However, because of socio-political developments in the 70's, Malaysia underwent a renewed fervour of nationalism: Malay language was enshrined as the National Language, and the English language suffered a set-back, with the majority of the children after the 70's more competent in the national language than in English. It was unfortunate that the literature component was discontinued in the 70's; only in 2000, was literature integrated back into the Curriculum for Secondary Schools. Thus before the 1970's, children's literature in English was widely read and known and appreciated by a large number of parents, and adults, particularly those who had been through the colonial education system, whereas a gap occurred for the young generation. It is not surprising that when literary texts are chosen for a particular theatrical work with children, they had to be translated into the national language to ensure a better understanding and discussion of the work among the young cast and crew.

In the early years of Malaysian modern theatre between the 1950's and the 1970's, there was no special theatre for young audiences. In the early years of children's theatre development, during the 70's, theatre for young audiences was still being performed by adults whereby teacher trainees at the Language Training Centre performed plays in schools and for young audiences. Adult theatre group from *Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka* (Institute of Language and Literature) performed plays for young audiences. Later, the Memorial Library in Kuala Lumpur established its own children's theatre group and performed plays with the objective of encouraging the children to read. In the 1980's, the Library Association Of Malaysia took a step to inculcate and nurture the reading habit of children by holding a hands-on puppetry workshop which culminated into a puppet theatre performance performed by the Children Theater Group led by Aminah Salam. Aminah had also dramatized popular children stories into puppet theatre. Around the same time too, the Arts Centre at the University Sains Malaysia took the bold initiative to train children between 9 to 17 in creative play, using local legend and folk tale to come out with a production of *Garuda* (a mythical bird), which went on tour around the country and to Singapore.

As Vygotsky states in his Theory of Social Constructivism, children especially build on knowledge that they already have within them and develop skills through social interaction and socio-cultural activities, particularly through play. These theatre practitioners have in the three cases had different ways and approaches in their working and playing out with children and the end product was public performances for children by children. Performances were constructed from improvisations and

workshop training using well-known stories from literature as active contexts through which children explore identity and human behaviour in social circumstances.

The last twenty years have seen changes in the scale and style of children's theatre. This paper looks at three different theatre groups and their productions of children's theatre, each a collaborative work between patient and enthusiastic theatre practitioners and children from as young as five years old. They took different approaches, with different objectives and goals using well-known stories from English literature, Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book* and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* and from the Arabian tale, the classic *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*. The *Jungle Book* had an all children cast ranging from 10 to 12 year olds, *Oliver Twist the Musical* featured a combination of children and adults, with children taking the characters of children and adults taking on adult roles whereas *Ali Baba the Musical* had children playing the roles of adults whilst the main role, Ali Baba was anchored by a popular television celebrity artist.

Case 1: Improvisational play on Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*

Local theatre group, the Five Arts Centre, was one of the pioneer groups in the country to start producing Theatre-in Education, a form of theatre with an educational focus, but with adult actors performing for young audiences. However in 1992, the Five Arts Centre started a Program called *Teater Muda* (Theatre for the Young) which was designed specifically for young people between the ages of 10 to 16.

Participants in the program were given a 6 months of basic training of the theatre arts where they were introduced to the basic elements of music, movement, drama and visual arts. Professional artists were roped in to facilitate the learning process. Children were totally involved in improvisation, role-play, games and problem-solving techniques and introduced to a variety of traditional and contemporary arts trained in the traditional music of the *gamelan* to puppeteering for the *Wayang Kulit*. The program was done in four phases and as many as 100 children have been trained in the phases. Young people from Phases 1 and 2, participated in the production of *Suara Rimba* (Voice of the Jungle, an adaptation of Rudyard Kipling's *Jungle Book*) and those from phases 3 and 4 participated in a devised play based on the Indian mythology, *Rama and Sita*.

Kipling is one of the most popular writers in English in the early 20th century and his fiction was introduced as a text for schools by the colonial British Administration. Kipling's novel, the *Jungle Book* is a collection of stories that tell the experiences of the human child, Mowgli who wanders off from his nearby village and gets adopted and raised by wolves. He grows up and learns the ways of the jungle and he learns also the ways of other animals with who he shares the jungle. He is accepted as one of them. However when he is exposed to human beings, he begins to question his own identity and is saddened by the greed and destruction of humans who invade the jungle. Although the story of Mowgli is set in colonial India, for the production of *Suara Rimba* research was not done on history or culture of India. At the workshop instead, children familiarized themselves with characters from Malaysian local folktales and legends. Children were given room to play imaginatively and creatively. They explored issues of the law of the jungle, safety of individuals, families and communities.

Instead of serving the text, the *Suara Rimba* performance treated the text as a source of inspiration for a staging an improvisational creative theatre event which took the Malaysian traditional theatre as its model under the guidance of a few facilitators. Participants in *Suara Rimba* were selected through an audition process. Consideration was given to a balanced participation in terms of age, gender and social background. The emphasis was on the participants and their abilities to analyze the text, the meaning, understand the characters using their imagination, and built them up. The process was as important as the product. The performance takes a bare outline of the classic novel but the theme is determined by the director at the initial stage. The director took the story and devised the idea into a theatrical event which engaged the participants at all levels. The play opened in the jungle,

the *gamelan* music reinforced the animal sounds made by actors with the jungle sounds. There was no true sense of place and time with regard to setting. Atmosphere and mood was given by the traditional music of gamelan. The movements of the animals incorporated local content and form making use of the cultural steps of the *silat*, the Malay martial art in the fighting scene. The staging techniques using the theatre in the round were adapted from the Malaysian traditional theatre. Traditional and contemporary design was also synthesized in the costumes and make-up.

Suara Rimba introduced the audience to wolves who discussed the violence that humans were capable of. The wolves were portrayed as civilized; they had a council that determined every aspect of their lives, from the rearing of their cubs to the interaction with each other. They showed great compassion as Mother Wolf loved and protected the Man Cub when the Tiger Shere Khan threatened the Man Cub. Mowgli's sibling wolves were given the space and time as they taught him the ways of wolves and played with him. The focus of the play and the message of this play was that man ought to respect all life and respect the forests. Audience was shown how Mowgli and various animals faced dangers and learned how to overcome them.

Mowgli raised by wolves, and abducted by monkeys had a great friendship with Bagheera the Panther and Baloo the Bear, who set out to rescue him when he was confronted by Shere Khan the tiger- these provided the children with opportunities for imaginative role-taking and problem-solving situations. They needed to think about the needs of others and value friendships. It allowed children to participate in modes of communication and expression in their games, in movements new to them.

Children as characters in the play made decisions and discovered what was right and wrong. In the process of making the play, they took on collaborative roles, they learned to care for each other, respect, listen carefully to each other, put forward their ideas, helped each other out. Theatre involved children in concrete (fictional) situations where they saw examples of how the world operates which in turn help them build their own moral and social code. This project helped children to cultural development as it provided them the opportunities to appreciate their own cultural traditions and the richness of other cultures. Elements of traditional Malaysian theatre that are employed in the devised theatre give the participants a sense of the community.

Case No. 2: Stage production of an Arabian tale *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves*

In contrast, the production of *Ali Baba the Musical*, which was taken from the classic Arabian tale, *Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves* was a mega production which was a combination of dance, songs and comedy acted by 83 children staged at the National Theatre from 19th December to 28th December 2006. These 83 children are chosen out of 400 children who auditioned for the play. The original story of Ali Baba was staged and tailored so as to be suitable for a family even. Children had no difficulties in relating to the story line as the tale was a block-buster comedy film of the 60's made popular by Malaysian own versatile and loved film –maker and actor P.Ramlee. The film, *Ali Baba* is shown on local television every so often.

Malaysia's celebrity artist, who was also a host for a popular children's television show, Aznil Nawawi took the role of the leader of the thieves. Children as young as 10 took the other lead roles of being the poor wood cutter, Ali Baba, the rich brother Cassim Baba, their wives and Marijina the wise slave girl. They sang solos, duets and in group and they danced and acted. The other 77 children took the supporting role of thieves, villagers, traders, servants, auctioneer, animals, rocks, and birds

Ali Baba the Musical was set in another land of fantasy with exotic Arabian costumes and flying sets. The line of conflict was clear, the good will defeat the bad. It told children not to tell lies, to be generous, to help those who are less fortunate, cooperate and do not steal. The story tells of Ali Baba, a poor woodcutter who happens to encounter a group of forty thieves and their treasure store in a cave in the woods. When the thieves are gone, Ali Baba enters the cave and takes some of the treasure home. His rich brother, Cassim heard of Ali's unexpected wealth, learns about the treasure in

the cave, and soon goes there. But in his greed and excitement he forgets the magic words that open the cave door and soon get caught red-handed by the thieves. They kill him. Ali looks for his brother, finds the body and gives him a burial. The thieves finding the body gone, realize that somebody else knows their secret. They set out to find the man. They found Ali Baba, and plan to kill him during the night, but the plan is foiled by the servant girl, Marjina. She pours hot boiling oil over the thieves who are hiding in empty jars. Finding them all dead, the leader of the thieves flees. The slave girl Marjina is given her freedom by Ali Baba.

The musical began with a charming overture set in the jungle, and little children as young as five danced as lizards, snake birds, rocks and trees. The opening dance was cute and heart-warming and set the tone for the production. Because of the size of the production, children were divided into age groups quickly and straightaway given specific tasks. Roles were given to the actors, dialogues memorized, actions and business are blocked. They were not grouped together to talk about the story or its literary values, rather they were taught the dance steps and routines and trained by a professional choreographer; the older children were given acting lessons by an acting teacher, and vocal lessons for singing by a vocal teacher. Every effort was made to polish the performance, to give technical support like costumes, scenery, props, lighting and make-up which contribute to the total theatre experience for children audiences. The children were convincing characters who worked in an ensemble in the situation that aroused laughter, joy and pride.

The lead child-actors admitted that being involved in drama developed their interactional skills- they learned to listen to each other, they compromised and they had to cooperate. What they enjoyed the most was being a character in a different social setting and having an adventure of a lifetime. This helped them to appreciate and made them read more stories from the Arabian Nights series.

Case No. 3: a collaboration with street children for a production of Charles Dicken's *Oliver Twist*

The production of *Oliver Twist* offered a different kind of experience as the young director with a Diploma of Performing Arts, Nawfal worked with a combination of street children and teens, elementary school children and adult students of the Academy of Performing Arts. It was performed as a musical for two nights to children and adult audiences at the Experimental Theatre with live band in 2009. The street children were from NurSalam, a Shelter for the Homeless, which is a non-profit organization, a centre for very young children and teenagers from the neighborhood Chow Kit. 400 children are currently enrolled and about 50 to 100 come to the Centre on a given day. Five currently live there full time in the dormitory space. Most of the children were from the Chow Kit area, but there were also children who had come to the area from other parts of the country who may have been victims of human trafficking, they may also be refugees or stateless- children without official identification papers. Most children came from one-parent homes, and many children were the children of sex workers or drug addicts. Chow Kit is a sub district in central Kuala Lumpur. It is also known as the red-light district of Kuala Lumpur. A reporter, Dina Zaman reports about the "Faceless Street Kids of Chow Kit" in the newspaper, The Star (July 31 2008)

Rooms are let for RM19 a day and renewed daily. Families are known to sacrifice their meager earnings for a room instead of buying a tin of baby formula for their month-old baby because the room is home. Children play in the streets, toddlers, babies are left unattended while parents who are drug addicts, immigrants or migrants from the rural area go looking for their dreams....There is a 10 year-old excellent student who pimps for his mother; mothers who entertains clients in the daily-rented room with their young children in the corner watching silently; a father drug user accompanied by his so because he has no home.

Nur Salam provides children two meals a day and a safe place to come in from the streets. They have educational programs like tutoring in basic reading and mathematics. Nawfal volunteered to read to the children once a week, and started to read to them the novel, *Oliver Twist* in the English language. During the reading, they explored the characters, the values and relationships. Later, the director held several acting workshops with the children, playing theatre games and doing improvisations, they played roles, and simulations based on ideas, and scenes from the novel. The director then evaluated what their collective abilities and talents were as this would affect his choice of production. If singers were available, a musical maybe the choice, if not it would have to be a realistic play. He found *Oliver Twist* to be the perfect choice as it had a clear, interesting plot development, interesting action, easily recognizable by the children: of pick-pocketing, the act of getting caught, and being in front of the magistrates. He turned the fiction into a play script in Malay.

Oliver Twist is written by Charles Dickens in 1837. It is his best-known work and has been made into a film, adapted to television series. It is a social novel and calls public attention to the various evils of the time, the astounding number of orphans in London, and the sad conditions of child labor, and their easy exposure to criminal life.

It sounded foreign, but according to Nawfal, there was a good story to tell. And when a story is told, it must capture the imagination, and the story must be used to give meaning and to make sense of the world. A story pays attention to problem-solving situations through dramatic enquiry and in *Oliver Twist* there were many such situations. Children actors would empathize with the fictional characters and their situations, and they should begin to think critically, identify different views, consider the possibilities and find alternative ways to overcome them. The story of *Oliver Twist* is clearly about good versus evil, evil trying to exploit the good, but good wins in the end. This makes the play a good choice for the kids of the streets of Chow Kit. *Oliver Twist* is one of hundreds of innocent children trapped in an adult world where they are doomed to either toil in the workhouse or to a lifetime of criminal activities with the criminal Fagin. However, from the sordid setting emerges a fairy tale. Oliver, although a passive character in the novel, meets with a happy ending. He finds kindness, family and love. He is fortunate. Do all the orphan children of the world dare to hope for that kind of happy ending, for happiness, for family love and kindness?

What the director did in this project is commendable as he had given these children access to real theatre, provided them a safe environment to play and explore the experience through theatre so one day it will help them make certain important decisions in certain situations. The children took the challenge and together they worked towards the production. They were trained in dancing, singing and acting and have benefitted from their involvement. Elementary school children were given the opportunity to work together with their less fortunate peers. The production served as a means of communication with a group of youngsters with different backgrounds and some from different cultures. Material that is drawn from reading books and a classic has its own interest, a context, and a quality of thought. The lines which were memorized are likely to remain with the children for a long time, and when delivered by the actors, would have come alive for the cast and crew and audience who may not have an interest in literature as a study. Young children in the audience for the two performances were challenged, enlightened and entertained.

Conclusion

The objectives of the collaborative theatre enterprises of *Suara Rimba* and *Oliver Twist* were achieved in that during the processes and in play, children were engaged in the reading of the literary texts, in the discussions of the issues, the thoughts of the writer—they had opened up a new world to them, gave them opportunities to look at life in new ways. The Ali Baba production was too big and a commercial endeavor which had not given time for deep insights into the thought and characters. However, children interviewed expressed appreciation of the story-line and expressed their desire to read more of the Arabian Night Tales. The children in all three productions agreed that by acting out the characters from the fiction in the drama, they had met with different challenges of working with each other in the creation of these characters and their situations on stage where they had to make choices and decisions all the time. It was a learning process where the child's commitment was matched by the director's commitment and the whole production at the end connected them with the audience. The three collaborations by three different theatre groups with children in producing theater for children through literature, particularly in the classics, as in the three cases above, have been successful, as not only the participants have greatly benefitted from the values of reading and experience it themselves by living in that world of fiction, children in the audience have also been enlightened and entertained by the theatre.

Appendix:



London Shakespeare Group performed a scene from a Shakespearean play for school children in 1969. (Straits Times pictures)



Ahmad Zaidyansiah Rudd Yansiah as Ali Baba and Nabila Muhd Mohsin as Ali Baba's wife



Aznil with 80 of the cast of children in Ali Baba the Musical

Pictures

by

Star



Children of Nur Salam, Primary School children and adults in Oliver the Musical



Children of Nur Salam and Primary School children in a scene from Oliver the Musical

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