

**BOOK REVIEW**

**Rowland, Kathy (Ed.) (2015). *Staging History: Selected Plays from Five Arts Centre 1984 – 2014*. Kuala Lumpur: Five Arts Centre. 384 pp. ISBN: 978-967-13594-0-2. (Paper)**

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Art is not a mirror with which to reflect reality  
but a hammer with which to shape it.

-Bertolt Brecht

Among the most recent works in Malaysian theatre and performance is Five Arts Centre's *Staging History: Selected Plays from Five Arts Centre 1984 – 2014* edited by Singapore-based independent editor, writer, researcher, art-critic and producer Kathy Rowland.

*Staging History* is a 384-page book containing 15 plays by both veteran and new Malaysian playwrights such as Beth Yahp, Chin San Sooi, Jo Kukathas, Leow Puay Tin, Kee Thuan Chye, David Wong, Faridah Merican, Foo May Lyn, Marion D'Cruz, Huzir Sulaiman, Charlene Rajendran, Nam Ron and Mark Teh. With a preface by theatre producer June Tan and introduction by Kathy Rowland, *Staging History* also includes an essay by Ken Takiguchi, a post-doctoral fellow at the National University of Singapore, and two roundtable discussions on theatre-making. It also contains images of activities carried out by Five Arts Centre over a span of 30 years.

On the importance of *Staging History*, June Tan notes that “these artistic contributions and the critical need for contribution of art projects, eventually led us to this book” (p.1). Following that, Rowland explains the purpose of this book in her Introduction:

The arts in Malaysia are generally underfunded, and overly politicized. We suffer in equal measure from neglect and scrutiny. There is not a single effort to systematically document and archive contemporary performing arts in Malaysia...Published scripts are rare in Malaysia. An anthology which is multi-lingual, spans three decades and encompasses works that range from agitprop to lyrical monologues to devised text is a first (p.2).

Indeed, the publication of *Staging History* is timely, as a tribute to Krishen Jit's (one of the founders of Five Arts Centre) 10-year passing, and to mark the Centre's 30-year

anniversary. Earlier in the year, the Centre held a conference at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPac) titled “Unfinished Business: Conference on Krishen Jit’s Performance Practice and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre” from 9 to 11 January 2016. Parts of the outcome of that conference are documented in *Staging History*.

For newcomers of modern Malaysian theatre in English, it is crucial to at least go through Rowland’s 12-page Introduction which gives a brief historical outline of Five Arts Centre. She then gives a chronological overview of the book’s content to explain the contexts of productions and plays in the 1980s such as Chin San Sooi’s *Refugee Images*, Kee Thuan Chye’s *1984 Here and Now* and Leow Puay Tin’s *Three Children*. Then, the 1990s saw the rise of the Centre and its contributions to the local and international theatre scene. This was a fertile era for experimental theatre and playwrights, experimenting with space, visuals, bodies and movements, thus opening up new channels for performance interpretations. The Centre’s contributions to the avant-garde theatre include Leow Puay Tin’s *Three Children* and *Family*, and K.S. Maniam’s *Skin Trilogy: A Visual Performance Event*. This is followed by a new generation of playwrights in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The plays mentioned in this section include Huzir Sulaiman’s 1998 monologue *The Smell of Language*, Mark Teh’s *Daulat* and Jo Kukathas’ *Operating Theatre*.

The two sections on *Roundtable on Theatre-making* give intimate insights into what it is like to be working with the Centre. The designers (Wong Tay Sy, William Harald-Wong, Carolyn Lau and Mac Chan) spoke warmly about their beginnings, struggles in dealing with minimal resources, how they never allowed themselves to be limited by such shortcomings, and how freedom, trust and respect are nurtured. The playwrights (Imri Nasution, Leow Puay Tin, Mark Teh, Marion D’Cruz and Janet Pillai) talk about the process of giving birth to their works, collaborative efforts with each other, how each one has evolved in their own way, ideologies and philosophies that have influenced them and aspirations towards influencing the audience towards social change.

The plays in *Staging History* are “selected to reflect the breadth of themes, styles, languages and collaborators the company has worked with”<sup>1</sup> which seemed to be geared towards the objective of social change. *1984 Here and Now* by Kee Thuan Chye is based on George Orwell’s political satire *1984*. It paints a dystopian picture of Malaysia in the form of agitprop/epic theatre, addressing concerns such as racial inequality, social injustice, censorship and betrayal. The change that is envisioned in this play is for this somnambulistic country to awaken to a more socially just, well informed and enlightened society.

Chin San Sooi’s *Refugee Images* draws upon the issue of Vietnamese refugees in Pulau Bidong, Terengganu who fled their country’s new communist rule between 1975 and 1991. He paints a bleak picture of the Vietnamese boat people who had to survive the hostile conditions of the refugee camps, being exploited and even killed by the locals. This play was denied public performance permit by local authorities in 1980.

*Three Children* by Leow Puay Tin is a psychologically compelling metaphorical journey of three siblings to their childhood days in Kappan Road, Malacca that tells of their memories, hauntings, encounters with other people and, at a more profound level, with their own consciousness that serve as catalysts of their own metamorphoses. Meanwhile, *(A Modern Woman Called) Ang Tau Mui* addresses gender and identity construction, confronts patriarchal structures in a fusion of non-linear, stream of consciousness and other experimental techniques that probe deep into the psyche of a lonely disoriented girl.

The third quarter of the book features works of later playwrights—Nam Ron, Huzir Sulaiman, Mark Teh, Jo Kukathas, Marion D’Cruz and David Wong—that are mostly experimental and mixed-mode pieces, thought-provoking, political, open-ended, and honest. Huzir Sulaiman’s *The Smell of Language* is based on the injustice of the Malaysian judiciary system in handling a statutory rape case which resulted in an opposition member of parliament being jailed for defending the victim against a former chief minister. *Daulat* by Mark Teh is a humorous piece satirizing Malaysian and Singaporean politics addressing current issues of race, national service and patriotism delivered in witty yet piercing proclamations.

The section on “Visual Essay” contains coloured and black-and-white photographs of past performances, programme books, posters, a rehearsal script, a storyboard and a news clip. Most interesting is the book’s five-page timeline of the Centre’s events, performances and projects from 1984 to 2015 which are mentioned alongside controversial high-profile national events such as the murder of Mongolian model Altantuya Shaariibuu, Bersih rallies, the use of the word ‘Allah’ by the Catholic church, and the 1MDB controversy. It is also remarkable that the more controversial Malaysian politics become, the more confrontational the Centre’s works are. The book concludes with a four-page selected bibliography on Malaysian theatre with focus on contemporary Malay and English theatre.

Not all plays in *Staging History* are entirely in English. Kee Thuan Chye’s *1984 Here and Now* mixes English with Manglish. *Suara Rimba* by Leow Puay Tin, *Lina dan Lijah* by Nam Ron and *That Was The Year – A Tale of Unrequited Love* based on Beth Yahp’s *In 1969* are written in both English and Malay. *A Chance Encounter* devised by Krishen Jit, Foo May Lyn and Faridah Merican mixes English with northern-Malay dialect whereas Mark Teh’s devised play *Baling (membaling)* uses English and Romanised Cantonese dialect.

*Staging History* is a landmark effort by Five Arts Centre in painstakingly compiling the works of local playwrights and artists for over 30 years. Most plays do not get published after being staged because individual efforts in publishing plays is both time consuming and expensive. When published collectively as what the Centre has done with *Staging History*, it makes such works more accessible to the public, as Kathy Rowland justifies that “unlike many other countries around the world, Malaysian

scripts and plays are rarely printed, making it difficult for theatre-makers to restage the shows, especially significant plays from the past.”<sup>2</sup>

The plays featured in this book are an interesting mix of old and new plays, devised plays, full-length plays and shorts written by both veteran and new Malaysian playwrights. They are arranged chronologically, so it is interesting to see how the genre and writing styles of plays have evolved over a period of 30 years – from full-length plays that could go up to 36 pages to 10-minute shorts of only five pages while David Wong’s *Toilet* is without a script.

*Staging History* makes an appropriate supplementary textbook for students of theatre and performing arts, as well as a valuable reference text for scholars and researchers of Malaysian theatre. The voices in *Staging History* are bold, new, visionary, honest and authentic. There is a good mix of old and new voices of accomplished and younger playwrights.

However, there is not much information on the Centre’s Rhythm in Bronze, a Malay gamelan ensemble formed in 1997 directed by Jillian Ooi. There is also a lack of academic papers whereby the two keynote addresses from the “Unfinished Business” conference “Krishen Jit and the Contemporary in South East Asia” by T. Kanaga Sabapathy, and “Krishen Jit and Networks in Asia” by Makoto Sato can fill the gap.

Drawing on Astrid Oesmann’s *Staging History: Brecht’s Social Concepts of Ideology* (2005) that examines how Brecht advocates social and political change via his aesthetic use of the stage as an experimental space to communicate his political thoughts, *Staging History*, although not wholly Brechtian, has itself captured the essence of compiling works that call for and experiment on social change. In fact, this book is a product of their commitment to social and political change. Its content addresses the crucial need for transformation in our social structure and system and directs our attention to existing conflicts, particularly how readers like us can initiate change.

This is not only an informative book; it is also a significant historical text in modern Malaysian theatre, containing important details of the history of Five Arts Centre, beginning from its establishment in 1984 to 2014. The plays and visual essays featured in this book are themselves individual accounts of Malaysian history. The selection of plays and visual essays encapsulate Malaysian flavours as aptly as possible, narrating Malaysian issues, culture and challenges over a period of 30 years. It is as though the book has freeze-framed sections of important Malaysian events and brought them to life in dialogues and images. This book is a celebration of diverse Malaysian voices, dedicated “to the next generation of artists”.

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**Endnotes**

<sup>1</sup>Dinesh Kumar Maganathan. (January 27, 2016). *Preserving original scripts in 'Staging History'*. <http://www.star2.com/culture/books/book-news/2016/01/27/staging-history-gostan-forward/>.

<sup>2</sup>Dinesh Kumar Maganathan. (January 27, 2016). *Preserving original scripts in 'Staging History'*. <http://www.star2.com/culture/books/book-news/2016/01/27/staging-history-gostan-forward/>.