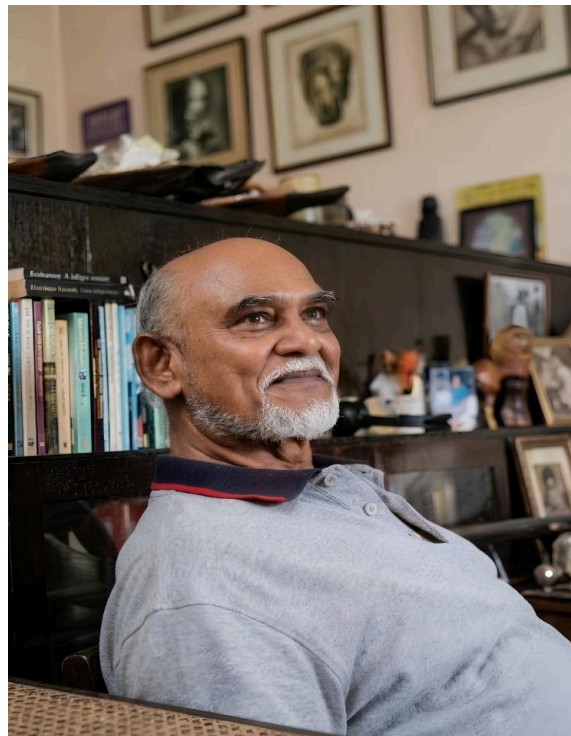


In Memoriam: A Conversation with Mano Maniam (1945-2025), The Malaysian Shakespearean

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“We are slaves to no man, / nor do we fear Death. ... The wide world is our home; /
generous householders in every town / give us food.” (Appar, VI.132, stanza 1)

“... there is [a] special providence in the fall of a sparrow. If it be now, ‘tis not to come; if it be
not to come, it will be now; if it be not now, yet it will come – the readiness is all. Since no man
knows aught of what he leaves, what is’t to leave betimes? Let be.” (*Hamlet* 5.2.214-19)

May 19th, 2025. I stand in KL Sentral, the intercity railway station that connects the whole of the Klang Valley. Workers and wayfarers of diverse kinds are drawn to its centre. The lines of humanity converge and diverge, each seeking a meeting beyond this transitory space. My own meeting is right here in Brickfields. I type the address into my e-hailing app: “Crescent Court”.

Crescent Court is the residence of Mano Maniam, the legendary actor and veteran of Malaysian theatre. From his role as Big Brother in Kee Thuan Chye’s *1984: Here and Now* to his performance in *Anna and the King*, Mano has been an enduring presence on stage and screen.¹ Though one could fill a whole book discussing Mano’s contributions as an actor, director, and activist, I am concerned with something more specific: Mano’s lifelong connection to Shakespeare. My ride arrives and I head toward Mano’s home, passing ornate multicoloured arches of orange, yellow, and purple that stand freely in front of shop lots. Various names stand out: Chat Masala, Nachiyar, Dhanaz Boutique. An ornamental flower pot declares where we are in red letters: “Little India Brickfields”.²

Mano and I had already spoken over the phone a few days before, when I reached out to him. After he told me that he had spent fifty years playing Shakespeare, I asked him if he was open to being interviewed. Not an interview at first, he told me, but perhaps we could meet and chat more casually. I was more than happy to oblige. The meeting itself was an honour, and interviews were a secondary priority.

My driver drops me off at Crescent Court, and I head up to Mano’s apartment, where he welcomes me. At almost 80 years old, the actor still casts an impressive figure, being a man of considerable height with strong features. But his kindness and courtesy, conveyed through a mellifluous baritone voice, supersede all else.

Mano invites me to take a seat in the living room while he conducts his morning rituals. Picking up a pair of incense sticks, Mano explains that he is paying respect to his parents, mentioning his father in particular. As we settle in, I take note of my surroundings. Statuettes and trinkets from various places bear witness to a life well-travelled. Books of varying sizes reveal an intellect continually cultivated. On the table I see a particularly striking publication: *The Tamils: A Portrait of a Community*.³

To my surprise, my host now decides that we should have an interview after all. I express delight, but privately I am worried. Having expected an informal chat, I have not come prepared with the necessary questions, and my research into Mano's Shakespearean work has been cursory. Mano's career spans several decades. How could I do justice to such a career? I begin with what seems to me like an embarrassingly standard question: does he remember his first Shakespearean play?

"Strange you should ask me that," Mano says. He shows me a leaflet on the table before us: *Shakespeare Demystified: Twelfth Night*.⁴ "Strange I should have this," he says, "because it's the last play I went to see. It was two days ago".

Twelfth Night was also his first introduction to Shakespeare. My questions may be roughly hewn, but there's a divinity shaping our ends.

Substantial Pageants: The Student from Stratford-on-Kinta

"I was just in Form 4," he tells me, a fact that places us in 1961. "I played a captain of the boat, which brought the main character, the hero in the story, and I had just about two lines ... My introduction to theatre."

The main character would have been Viola, arriving on the shores of Illyria and uncertain of her twin brother's fate. Viola's opening lines - "What country, friends, is this?" - had a far broader resonance for the Malayan audience (*Twelfth Night* 1.2.1). Born in 1945, Mano grew up in Ipoh, the state capital of Perak, during the transition between colonial rule and Malaya's independence. "At that time it was just post-war," Mano says, so there "[was] not much entertainment except the odd cinema." This lack of quantity was compensated for by an abundance of diversity. English films played alongside Malay, Tamil, and Chinese movies, the last being "more subscribed to in Ipoh than any [other] movies." That plurality was also reflected in daily interactions, with the young Mano using multiple languages on a regular basis. "So invariably you become very multilingual," Mano says, "and in school you are multilingual, and you were led to believe that this is a country for all."

But it was also a country that had inherited a colonial education system. Academic scholarship often highlights the linguistic divisions between these schools, presenting English-medium schools - often the purview of Christian missionaries and the surest path to the civil service - as entirely distinct from Malay, Chinese, and Tamil vernacular education (Lim; Smith; Ng and Cavallaro). The picture Mano paints is far more complex. Mano tells me that he attended the Anglo-Chinese School (ACS) in Ipoh, whose hyphenated name alludes to both "the Chinese towkays who created the school" and the institution's missionary status. Despite subjects being taught in English, the ethnically diverse student body led to Chinese, Malay, and Tamil being spoken amongst the students. "That one Chinese boy speaks to the other fella in Chinese," Mano says. "The Malay boys will speak to the others in *bahasa* first ... so we Tamil boys also did the same thing."⁵ Ipoh's English-medium schools were also varied in their

confessional identities. ACS was Methodist, the nearby St. Michael's was Catholic, and the Anderson School was non-denominational. Yet there was no denying that ACS outranked its rivals when it came to English language and literature. "I come from a school which traditionally was immaculate with its English," Mano tells me, "and all teachers were handpicked to teach [English] in the best available form." Enunciation was stressed to a high degree. "The teachers were very, very particular about how you crossed your T's," Mano says, "and how your constants [should] come at the end". He says the last "d" with an extra emphasis, as he recalls the imperatives of the ACS schoolmasters: "Stand up! Chin up! Speak!"

The school's emphasis on elocution led to a disposition for drama, and the Bard in particular. For arts students, ACS offered English Literature as part of the Senior Cambridge examinations, a subject that involved the study of Shakespearean texts.⁶ Teachers did their best to instruct their students in the mechanics of Shakespeare's language. "They made it," Mano says, "you may have heard the expression, 'Shakespeare without tears'". But some advocated a more practical approach, and the school eventually began putting on Shakespearean plays that mirrored the Cambridge syllabus. While Broadway musicals were sometimes staged in the first half of the year, the Bard was staged closer to exams, with ACS sometimes staging two Shakespearean plays a year. Was this just a student audience, I ask? "Noooooo," Mano replies, delivering an elongated emphasis with sober gravity. "School students come in the daytime for matinee shows. But the entire society comes because this is the only theatre in town for the whole year". Shakespeare became a meeting place, a locus that brought together a diverse school and an even more diverse community. "We were called Stratford-on-Kinta," Mano tells me, a name that alludes to both Shakespeare's birthplace and the Kinta Valley that encases Ipoh.

It was in this valley of Malaysian Shakespeares that the young Mano Maniam first rose to prominence. His brief hour upon the stage in *Twelfth Night* was not limited to the captain, with Mano adding life to the scenes as a host of miscellaneous characters. At this point in his journey, the thrill of theatre was enough. “Just the idea of having grease paint on your face,” he explains, “and it was a good observation point, you know?” But the student’s talent clearly caught the attention of his teachers, who began to cast the young actor in named roles. His first “big role” in *The Merchant of Venice* had a very literal racial tinge, with Mano playing the foppish Prince of Morocco. “Discount me not for my complexion,” Mano says, paraphrasing the Prince’s reference to his darker hue.⁷ “Simply because I was Indian lah, the rest [of the cast] were Chinese or European.”⁸ But Mano’s big break came with *Macbeth*, with the teenage actor being cast in his first lead role as the murderous Scottish king. The casting took Mano by surprise. “The lead roles are always teachers,” he explains to me. Moreover, the teenage boy was expected to play opposite a professional actress, the 33-year-old Norwegian wife of a local resident. “And I’ve often wondered why they didn’t choose a teacher or an adult with experience ... to play the role. I still don’t have an answer to that question, I did ask.”

But the teachers did have an answer. “We don’t think there’s anyone who can do [this] better than you,” they said, in response to the teenage boy’s queries. It was a statement of confidence, certainly, but also a demand. “Bloody hell, you better shape up to it,” Mano recalls. “We’ll help you, but you know, don’t let the entire lot of us go down with you.”

The Scottish king from Kinta would not disappoint. Mano would return to the role of Macbeth five times over the course of his career, as he ventured onto the national stage.



Fig. 1. Photograph of Mano Maniam as Macbeth in the Anglo-Chinese School’s production of *Macbeth*. 1970. Chin San Sooi’s personal collection. Courtesy of Chin San Sooi.

The Great Globe itself: Mano, Malaysia, and the World

The impetus to perform well in English didn’t come from ACS alone. “I’m the son of an English school teacher,” Mano explains, referring to his father, M.S. Maniam. “My English had to be perfect. If not, his image will be affected. ‘You don’t shame me in front of people ah?’ he would say.” But his father was also a proud Tamil, and was insistent on rooting his children in their identity. “My father made sure I had a complete, parallel Tamil education as tuition at home, as well as Tamil classes in the afternoon at school, so I wouldn’t end up being an

Englishman trying to speak Tamil.” The father’s exhortation, “Don’t ever forget you’re a Tamil,” clearly made an impression on the son. Mano proceeds to give me a lesson in proper Tamil pronunciation. “You don’t get to call it ‘Tamil-an’,” Mano says. “[The word ‘Tamil’] does not end in an ‘l’, it is a ‘zh’”. I also learn about the richness of the Tamil language, with Mano telling me that its grammar, poise, and poetry are unmatched. “It is one of the oldest languages in the world,” he says, “and [it is] still surviving intact.”

For all the emphasis ACS had placed upon English, it was the Tamil tradition that Mano was determined to embrace at Universiti Malaya, with the young man pursuing a minor in Tamil while majoring in Geography. I comment that his father must have been very proud. “I did as best as the facilities would allow me to,” Mano says, “and he was proud of me, and I was proud of myself.” Mano’s deep connection to the Tamil language is clearly something he wishes to emphasise. “But very few people who associated with me in my latter life know that of me. They just think, ‘Oh, the actor!’ ... And when I speak in Tamil, they are surprised.”

The surprise may be partly due to his pioneering status in Malaysian theatre, with Mano being at the forefront of English language drama. “I was in my first year,” Mano recalls, “there were the seniors who were already there in the English department, doing ... unfamiliar things from beyond Shakespeare, all the other British heavyweights, the Romantics and so forth.” Despite not being an English major, Mano soon began to conquer this unfamiliar territory, participating in everything from absurdist plays to modern Malaysian works. Though he occasionally performed Shakespeare, there were other playwrights of greater interest. “I was very happy not to do Shakespeare,” Mano notes, “and to do modern playwrights and the stuff that the English department was doing.” That “stuff” included works translated from French (“Moliere or something like that”), Norwegian (“Ibsen was there”), Dutch, German, and other

European works. “So you have European literature available in English texts,” he says, “done by a Tamil from Malaysia who knows *bahasa*, so multiculturalism took place.” The translated status of these works did not take away from their cultural complexities. “You still delve into the culture,” Mano says.

He would delve even deeper into culture beyond Universiti Malaya, as he went on to pursue his Master’s degree in comparative culture in the United States. “It is not surprising that when I was asked ... ‘What field would you like to study as a Masters?’, I said ‘multiculturalism’ ... that is the only salvation we actually have, to understand the Other.” I can see this is not an abstract concern for Mano, who vigorously asserts the need for cultural diversity and understanding. “If you don’t understand the Other,” Mano cautions, “your only option is to oppose, and your only resort is to fight.” There is an urgency in his tone of voice. “Think about the unborn, who are innocent [of] all these leftover habits of fears, like used slippers left behind. Give them a chance, give them a break.” A beautifully theatrical image of Malaysia emerges from these ruminations. “It’s a multi-stick tent, each one holding its own weight. But inside the tent, it’s a multicultural society.”

Mano was always comfortable finding his way around a multicultural tent, both in Malaysia and abroad. In addition to minoring in Tamil, Mano tells me he decided to learn another language: Spanish. “I studied Spanish at the university,” he says, “and when I went to the US it was useful.” He relates how Spanish helped him form cultural connections during his postgraduate study; “a smile [would emerge] on the other guy’s face, because I’m acknowledging his language.” It occurs to me to list the number of languages Mano speaks. English, Malay, Cantonese, Tamil, Spanish - “I studied Latin in school” - and Latin. So does Mano speak five different languages? “Well, you don’t speak Latin,” Mano tells me.

We talk about many other things: Mano's Fulbright fellowship, his time as director of the Malaysian-American Commission on Educational Exchange (MACEE), and his travels abroad. Mano's explorations have not only been physical, but theatrical and cultural. In India, he took the opportunity to see "good classical Indian stuff," and though he does not understand Mandarin, he could appreciate China's dramatic forms when he travelled to the country. He made similar cultural and theatrical excursions when he was in Japan, the Philippines, Thailand, Burma, Indonesia, and Australia. But Mano reminds me that national borders are themselves fabrications, being man-made barriers that limit the true breadth of human culture. "So drama breaks these historical demarcations," he tells me, "or the political demarcations, or the geographical demarcations. And drama is about the human condition, which is borderless and timeless."

These ideas remind me of the argument that Shakespeare conveys universal truths, as well as the opposing argument that Shakespeare is rooted in his time and place. Where does Mano stand in the debate? "It is both," he asserts. "The fact that we have been talking about it today proves that it is both." For Mano, the "marvel" is that Shakespeare continues to "communicate with the rest of the world" despite his limited cultural influences. That ability to speak to human experiences is central to all drama. "The origin is the human being," Mano argues. "And when you write about the human being, you are just today's mirror, like there were other mirrors before, and there will be more before [us], after this." But those mirrors also reflect the societies that surround them, with drama and storytelling educating each culture and drawing out its moral compass. "All stories, all morals, all values, even royal proclamations had to be translated into an understandable form in terms of human drama," Mano observes. "So there was

a role for theatre ... Malleable, changeable, portable.” He pauses for a moment. “I feel as if I’m in drama class,” he says.

Indeed, it is apparent to me that ‘Mano the actor’ is intertwined with ‘Mano the teacher’, that performance and pedagogy are dance partners in the arena of Mano’s being. He has taught in two countries - Malaysia and America - across four different universities, including developing an acting course for a multimedia university. But his time as a teacher at ACS clearly holds a special place in his heart. The teenage pupil eventually returned home to Ipoh as an erudite teacher, bringing his love of literature, language, and culture with him. Mano was not the only one to return. “You know Chin San Sooi?” he asks me.⁹ “He was my director, he was my friend, he was my neighbour, and we worked, [and] collaborated on a lot of things together.” That included exploring the Bard together, with Mano the schoolteacher assuming prominent roles in ACS’s annual Shakespearean productions. Mano could not only spend his time gracing the stage, however. “I still had to be a teacher in school, you know?”, he reminds me. “I still had to be a football master, you know?” I am given a breakdown of his grueling teacher’s schedule: rising at seven o’clock in the morning, teaching school subjects, coaching sports, returning at night for a quick change of clothes, then heading back out for rehearsals.

It is astounding to me that Mano mustered the energy to perform a range of Shakespearean roles, both at ACS and beyond. Do any particular characters stand out for him? “Some more than others,” Mano says. “But I cannot choose one to say, ‘This singular one transformed me.’ Only inexperienced people do that.” Nonetheless, Mano’s comments do make it clear that there are certain highlights in his Shakespearean repertoire. He has explored Macbeth multiple times, including in-the-round at Universiti Malaya’s experimental theatre. And of course he had to deal with multiple Lady Macbeths, including his friend and fellow actor, Sabera

Shaik. My mention of *Othello* and racial issues also gives rise to some reflection. “I’m glad you brought up *Othello*,” he says. “I played Othello, and we were showing that bit, the Indian being Othello, and Desdemona being a very fair Chinese.” Though Desdemona was played by a family friend, the role’s psychological and emotional intensity clearly had a profound effect on Mano. “That was difficult,” he says somberly, “but it was also medicine.” Perhaps the medicine lies in Shakespeare’s willingness to explore the full extent of human nature, including human evil, in his tragedies. “I think Shakespeare meant it to be,” Mano says, “that at some point in any human existence, each human being is capable of losing his senses, and when he does that, he can do the most inviolate things.” Such tales, Mano tells me, show the degree to which reason may be sacrificed in the face of human suffering. “May 13th,” he says, referring to the Malaysian racial riots of 1969, “an exact example of when reasonable behaviour was forsaken, and the fabric of the country was shredded.”

At one point, Mano jokingly tells me, “I’m sounding like a philosopher.” Yet his observations reveal this to be more than a mere jest. I am conscious of being in the presence of an intellectual in the true sense of the word: a man possessed of *intellectus* (discernment), whose analysis and performance remove the superfluous and reveal the essential. I am treated to both analysis and performance as Mano discusses Hamlet’s famous soliloquy. “It is not simply, ‘To be or not to be’”, Mano says, with a deliberate lack of intonation. Then he shapes the verse: “To be” – he takes a pause – “or” – another pregnant pause – “not to be.” Then comes a sigh: “Ah... that is the question.” He explores the line’s existential implications. “It is like, is it night, or is it day? Is it right, or not right? Is it life, or is it death? It’s as black and white as that. And that’s what we are faced with every day.”

In the months after the interview, I will learn of many more Shakespearean parts that Mano played. He took on the role of King Lear to remarkable effect at ACS, howling with Cordelia in his arms in 1969 (fig. 1). Chin San Sooi directed Mano as Macbeth in 1970, with the lead actor donning a modern white costume against a backdrop of zinc sheets (fig. 2). Mano eventually came full circle as *Twelfth Night*'s Malvolio in 1982, playing opposite Chin San Sooi as Sir Andrew Aguecheek at the British Council Hall ("Twelfth"). He would reprise his role as the Prince of Morocco in 2000 under the direction of Jo Kukathas and Rey Buono, doubling as the Duke of Venice in Instant Cafe Theatre's *The Merchant of Venice* ("Merchant").

But at this point, here in Crescent Court, I think of only one role: Prospero, the character he played alongside the late Samantha Schubert in 2007 (Devan). "I'm glad you brought it up," Mano says. "Prospero stands out, because it is the last Shakespearean role I played."



Fig. 2. Photograph of Mano Maniam as King Lear in the Anglo-Chinese School's production of *King Lear*. 1969. Chin San Sooi's personal collection. Courtesy of Chin San Sooi.

Our revels now are ended: A Malaysian Shakespearean reflects

So what does Mano recall, as he looks back on his own legacy as a Malaysian Shakespearean actor? Did he ever attempt to perform Shakespeare in another language? “No,” he tells me, “I did it only in English. I’ve tried it in Tamil, but it’s lost in translation.” For Mano, the issue is not simply one of language, but of a crucial relationship in theatre. “Because I believe [that] in acting, the actor and audience relationship is inviolate, that’s supreme. If the actor doesn’t reach the audience, then the whole effort at the writing stage is lost.” The need to maintain a connection with the audience goes well beyond Shakespeare. “Many actors think about [being] *syok sendiri* (self-absorbed),” Mano says with a note of caution. “You are just the lesser half, the sender. It is meant for the receiver.” He continues to reflect on this process of transmission. “You’re just the medium.”

So how does one become a medium for Shakespeare? Does Mano have any advice for the next generation of Malaysian Shakespearean actors? “Oh, [one] can fill up a whole page actually,” he tells me. But Mano’s basic advice comes down to the archaic nature of Shakespeare’s language; “words which were used at that time will have to be transcribed and understood in modern English ... and [be]fitting Malaysia.” In Mano’s view, seeking help from those “more acquainted” with the language is paramount. “If not,” Mano reflects, “sooner or later, as I have found in my experience, many people give up Shakespeare, just with a big huff by saying, ‘I don’t understand lah!’”. This complements the advice he gave earlier in our conversation, as he reflected on his own early attempts to master the Bard: “the more you learn, the more you understand. The more you understand, the easier to do. The easier to do, then people will tell you they enjoyed it.”

I have indeed enjoyed our conversation, and thank Mano for sitting down with me. I am acutely conscious of having taken up much of his day, and am grateful for his time. “No problem,” he tells me gently. “Time is something which we can always get, and replace.”

We head out of his apartment together, and begin to walk toward a restaurant further down the road. Mano invites me for lunch - he has told me that Brickfields’ best Indian restaurants open after one o’clock - but though I am tempted, I unfortunately have to decline this time. But I assure him that I’m happy to eat together in future. After all, I plan to review the upcoming article with him, so hopefully we will meet again soon.

We continue to chat and walk down toward the restaurant, with Mano greeting people along the way. At one point he stops, and tells me about a Hindu temple close by. With contented gladness, he lists out a series of objective truths. He is in Brickfields. He is near a temple. People speak Tamil.

He tells me he has everything he needs.

Postscript: Rounded with a sleep

Mano Maniam passed away peacefully in his sleep on the 31st of May, 2025. His obituary reads: “He will be deeply missed and fondly remembered - Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow” (“Obituary”).

The author would like to thank Mano Maniam’s family for reviewing this article, as well as Chin San Sooi, Jo Kukathas, Adriana Nordin Manan, and Susan Philip for their broader assistance.

Notes

1. Throughout his life, Mano Maniam was known to the Malaysian theatre community by his first name, “Mano”. Out of respect for this convention, the present article has retained the use of the first name throughout.
2. Though it is a multicultural area, Brickfields has been historically identified with Malaysia’s Indian communities, who comprise the largest demographic (Baxstrom).
3. Nirmala Lakhsman’s *The Tamils: A Community* (2025) explores the heritage and civilisation of the Tamil community, which has persisted over millenia. Lakhsman reflects on Tamil identity and culture in all its complex manifestations, including contributions to literature, philosophy, and the arts (“The Tamils”).
4. *Shakespeare: Demystified* is an ongoing series of productions by the KL Shakespeare Players (KLSP), currently “the only theatrical group committed to bringing Shakespeare to the stage” (Kok 37). The company’s *Demystified* series presents abridged versions of the plays geared toward school students, with scene fragments being held together by an expository narration (Kok 38).
5. The term *Bahasa Melayu* (Malay language) or *Bahasa Malaysia* (Malaysian language) is often shortened to *bahasa* (language) in everyday speech.
6. The Cambridge Certification examinations were adopted as a common syllabus for Malaya’s English-medium schools in 1891. The phenomenon of staging Shakespeare in schools soon followed, with the productions often being celebrated for their pedagogical potential (Kok 38).
7. The Prince of Morocco’s comment regarding his skin tone is made to Portia, the heiress whom he hopes to marry: “Mislike me not for my complexion, / The shadowed livery of the burnished

sun / To whom I am a neighbour and near bred” (*Merchant* 2.1.1-3). Mano is thus implying that he was assigned to the role on the basis of his colour.

8. The word “lah” is a common particle used in Malaysian English, as a way of affirming a statement. The word “ah”, used elsewhere in the present work, is similarly meant to provide emphasis, particularly in relation to a question (Hashim 389).

9. Chin San Sooi is one of the leading actors and directors in Malaysia’s English-language theatre scene. He is particularly associated with the Five Arts Centre, which was established in 1983 to facilitate arts training and develop Malaysian drama, theatre, and culture (Zuhra 181-2).

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