

Ulasan / *Reviews*

Hang Li Po —A Musical

*Istana Budaya, Kuala Lumpur,
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The Chinese Princess Hang Li Po has been featured as one of the important characters in the history of Melaka. According to history and legend, the Chinese Emperor sent his Princess as a gift in respect and admiration of the Sultan of Malacca. In addition, the Emperor hoped that this gift would establish cordial and friendly relations between China and Melaka and in recognition of Melaka as the administrative and commercial centre of the Old Malay World. In all probability, this gesture of the Chinese Emperor was not merely to honour the Sultan of Malacca but to secure Melaka as a trading outpost for the Chinese Empire. Thus, it would seem that the Emperor was willing to sacrifice his daughter for this purpose.

However, there are several other assumptions regarding the authenticity of Hang Li Po as the daughter of the Chinese Emperor. Some question the willingness of the Emperor to send his daughter to be married to a foreign potentate from a far away land. Others believe that Hang Li Po was not the Princess of the Chinese Emperor but rather was the offspring of one of his many concubines.

Usually, myths and legends glorify the mundane and sometimes the pedestrian to enhance the importance of incidents or the characters involved. They may also present a larger than life perspective to create awe and sublimity. These elements are somehow absorbed as historical

facts. Sometimes historical facts present us with a problem in the determination of what is gospel and what is apocrypha.

Notwithstanding that, these historical legendary episodes have on numerous occasions served as material for dramatic and artistic expressions. For example, Syed Alwi used Hang Li Po as one of the characters in his play, *Rakan Teman Para Bangsawan*. Rahmah Bujang availed herself of similar materials in her bangsawan play entitled *Hang Li Po*. The latest dramatic effort to use the historical legend of Hang Li Po is the musical *Hang Li Po* staged by Istana Budaya from 21 to 28 April 2004.

According to the program notes, it was Dato' Paduka Abdul Kadir Sheikh Fadzir, the former Minister of Arts and Tourism, who mooted the creative idea and the story line of the *Hang Li Po* musical. It was left to the creative team of the Istana Budaya to develop this idea into a dramatic and musical expression of international stature. Rosminah Tahir and Rahimidin Zahari were charged with this responsibility. Rosminah, as the director of this musical, is no stranger to theatrical activities for she has directed national level big budget plays, especially at Istana Budaya. She has to her credit such productions as *Lantai T. Pinkie* (1998, 2000) and *Anugerah* (1996, 2002). Rahimidin Zahari, as the script writer, has proven his mettle in writing poems, novels and short stories in addition to being a *Wayang Kulit* (shadow play) *Dalang* (puppeteer).

Although both of them have such eminent credentials in the creative arts, they managed only to come up with a basic story line about the Emperor of China giving his Princess, Hang Li Po, as gift to be married to The Sultan of Malacca. And the Princess has to sacrifice his love for Admiral Ming to submit to her father's wishes. This script only presents a basic conflict of the sacrifice of Admiral Ming for the love of Hang Li Po. It is the case of loyalty to the Emperor that overrides personal consideration. Not that Admiral Ming has a choice for his clandestine love. If found out, he would have been put to death.

This love affair is created to inject some sense of dramatic conflict in an otherwise simplistic script. In actual fact, such a love affair between a royal Chinese Princess and a commoner Admiral is forbidden on the pain of death. There is no avenue for such a thing to happen because no one is allowed to see, much less to approach the person of the Princess. But the writer has the theatrical license to spin such an incident. It is unfortunate that he has not made use of this element of loyalty and love to create an intriguing and credible dramatic plot.

The play consists of a prologue and five acts. The prologue is in the form of an overture that waxes lyrical about Hang Li Po's beauty. This is followed by a voice over narrating the opening scenario of Hang Li Po being the jewel of the Emperor and that she is in love with Admiral Min You. In Act 1, scene 1, the Chinese Emperor, perhaps out of curiosity but more aptly out of the blue, wants to know which country is the most powerful. After being told that Melaka is that country and that it is also a very important trading centre, the Emperor decrees that Admiral Ming You leads a delegation bearing a letter and gifts from the Emperor of China to the Sultan of Melaka.

Act 2, Scene 1 takes place at the Melaka Court where the Sultan receives the gifts of large urns of needles from the Chinese Emperor, each needle signifying a household. The Sultan then commands Tun Perpatih to lead Melaka's delegation to China to reciprocate the visit of the Chinese delegation and to exchange gifts. Act 2, scene 2 takes us to the Court of the Chinese Emperor where the Malacca delegation is presented to His Highness. Tun Perpatih Putih hands over the gifts from the Sultan of Malacca, including a container of sago grains, each grain representing a household in Melaka. The next scene, Act 2, scene 3, shows the delegation from Melaka eating *kangkong* (a type of vegetable) which the delegation has requested for. The act of lifting the face to eat the long *kangkong* leaves and stems gives the Melaka delegation the excuse to catch a glimpse of the Chinese Emperor whom no one is allowed to set eyes on, on pain of death.



In Act 3, Hang Li Po is devastated after learning from her mother, the Empress, that the Emperor has chosen her to be married to the Sultan of Malacca to further cement the relationship between these two great countries. Hang Li Po entreats her lover to take her away but Admiral Ming You remains steadfast to follow the orders of the Emperor who has commanded him to escort the Princess to Malacca.

The busy market place at the port of Melaka is the location for Act 4. As Hang Li Po and her entourage land, a man runs amok stabbing passersby. The Sultan who is incognito immediately challenges the amok person and is wounded while trying to subdue him. Princess Hang Li Po who is already at the scene, helps with the wounded. Before she can attend to the Sultan, he disappears with his bodyguards. Hang Li Po admonishes Admiral Ming You, who is on board during the whole episode, for not protecting her.

Act 4 scene 1 opens with Mak Inang teaching the Chinese maids-in-waiting how to wear the *sarung*. Hang Li Po enters and expresses her doubts about marrying the Sultan, but Mak Inang and Tun Perpatih Putih convince her to reconsider and judge for herself when the Sultan makes his appearance shortly. After they leave, Admiral Min You enters and becomes the butt of Hang Li Po's frustrations as she has to forsake her lover for a stranger.



In Act 5, the Sultan meets Hang Li Po and each recognizes the other as the one he/she met at the market place. Hang Li Po is taken in by the Sultan's prowess and humbleness and gladly submits herself to be the Sultan's bride. This is followed by a scene of celebration and the marriage ceremony.

The play contains many non-material dialog fragments inserted in the incidents that are loosely linked without much consideration for cause and effect. Scenes like the eating of *kangkong* and the wearing of *sarung* could be dispensed with without affecting the flow of the story. Likewise, the market scene at the harbour was only to establish the prowess of the Sultan of Malacca. In fact, the play is structured more like a *wayang kulit* episode and this is not surprising as the writer, Rahimidin Zahari, is a practicing *Dalang*.

The loose and simplistic nature of the script does not reflect the expressed policy of Istana Budaya of only entertaining good scripts of international standard. The Director General of Istana Budaya, Dr. Hatta Azad Khan, through various theatre seminars and newspaper interviews, has constantly reminded local practitioners of this policy and even reprimanded them to be receptive of comments that would help them write good scripts. The *Hang Li Po* musical seems to be totally out of context of Istana Budaya's high aspirations.

Why is the story written in such a simplistic non-thought provoking manner? Is it because it is staged as a musical with the erroneous assumption of mainly emphasizing dance and music? Thus, a story line with conflicts leading towards a climax and denouement and one that is thought provoking is considered secondary and only serves as an excuse to feature dance and music.

But world class musicals such as *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* by Dato' Noordin Hassan, *Uda dan Dara* by Dato' Usman Awang, *The Sound of Music*, *My Fair Lady*, *Fiddler on the Roof*, *Mame*, *Rama Hari (Philippines)*, *Les Miserables*, *Tommy*, *Phantom of the Opera* and others, all have solid, credible and dramatically viable story lines and plot structures.

Perhaps there are other reasons that have prevented the creative team of Istana Budaya from coming up with a story that is credible and challenging. Maybe this is the criteria for an in-house production that abides by a separate system of rules and principles favoured by the administration.

The musical *Hang Li Po* uses two languages, Malay and Mandarin. Almost two thirds of the performance is in Mandarin. As a result, the audience was at times confused about whether a Chinese Opera was being staged. For the non-speaking Mandarin audience, of which there was a sizeable number, subtitles were projected on a screen above the proscenium opening to help the audience follow the dialogue. For a segment of the audience, it became difficult to follow the story as one had to constantly shift one's gaze up and down the stage to read the subtitles. In the end, the audience simply abandoned this effort and concentrated on the actions unfolding on stage.

What is the rationale of using two languages in a single performance? Is it to make the performance authentic as the subject matter deals with a Chinese Princess and the actions

occur in China and among the Chinese community in Malacca. If that is the case, the whole production should have been in Mandarin and the production billed as a Chinese Opera performance. At least, this would have been more sincere and less confusing.

Would it have tarnished the production if the whole performance had been in Malay? In fact, it would have been more appropriate as the Malay language was the lingua franca of the Old Malay World which provides the background to the story. The story is also viewed from the perspective of the history of Malacca and not China. More importantly, local artists should give priority to promoting their cultural heritage.

Music and dance, which are integral elements in a musical, should be used to support the dramatic action and should be compatible with the style, thematic material and cultural identity of the production. However, in the musical *Hang Li Po*, contemporary western music and dance movements are used. Except for one or two Chinese dances and the sounds of the flute and *erhu*, the music and dance do not conform to the cultural ambience of the story.

Traditional Malay music such as *gamelan*, *mak yong* and drumming would have been appropriate for scenes in Malacca while in the court of the Chinese Emperor, traditional Chinese music could have been used. However, Pak Ngah, the musical director and composer attempted to incorporate several traditional musical elements such as *dondang sayang* in his composition. But the musical basis is the contemporary western style fusion music that bears a striking resemblance to the Citrawarna (annual spectacle combining music and dance of various states and communities performed for tourists) type of music.

Contemporary fusion movements form the core of the dances in *Hang Li Po*. From the opening overture right through the play, the audience was presented with a choreography that featured western aesthetics which incorporated the use of horizontal and vertical extensions, symmetrical and asymmetrical balancing, large gestures and fast pacing.

The visual and aural aspects are based on the Citrawarna performance concept of emphasizing spectacle over cerebral elements. The performance of *Hang Li Po* did not show unity in terms of production or proper design in the use of theatrical elements. Rather, the stage was splashed with colours and filled with props, sets and performers.

A combination of Malay and Chinese actors is featured in this production, with each group representing its respective ethnic character. As the focus of this production is on music, singing and dancing, acting is relegated to a subsidiary role. Further more, the script does not present the actors with the opportunity of playing substantive roles, except to be subservient to the narrative nature of the play to suit their stock characters.

Hang Li Po, the lead character, is played by Soong Ai Ling a familiar face in television advertisement endorsing brand name products. She has also acted for stage and film. She is supported by her chief hand maiden (Inang Cina) acted by Louisa Chong also a popular film and television personality. Aman Yap takes the role of Admiral Ming You who has a secret love affair with Hang Li Po, Zaerful Nadzarine plays Sultan of Malacca, Aris A. Kadir, Tun Perpatih Putih, Lim Kean Hui as the Chinese Emperor and Hamzah Tahir as the narrator. They are supported by dignitaries from the Melaka and the Chinese Courts, villagers/chorus/dancers.

None of the characters were outstanding and could only manage a superficial level of acting. For most, acting was limited to reciting the dialogue without much conviction. However, one character stood out, not for outstanding acting prowess but more of an anomaly. This was the narrator who seemed to be everywhere in time and space, doubling as a messenger in the courts of Malacca and China, a jester and even at times a singer and a dancer. In fact, the role of the narrator was redundant as he related the actions happening on stage. A narrator should furnish

additional information that could either give the background or supplement the action on stage. The clownish actions of the narrator were sometimes at odds with the emotions on stage.

To a certain extent, the technical visual aspects of the production salvaged an otherwise lacklustre production. Symbolic and constructive setting represented by scenery pieces on wagons or hangings indicated the various locales, such as the courts of Malacca, China and street or market place. These panels and hangings were designed using Malay and Chinese cultural elements.

Lighting served the functions of visibility and mood. Two types of lighting designs were used, one for dramatic scenes and the other for dance and music. High intensity general lighting lit dramatic scenes in which lines of dialogue were exchanged among the various characters. For the song and dance scenes, a system of wash, follow spots and silhouettes created the necessary mood and sculpturing of the dancers.

The colourful costumes identified the various characters mainly according to their ethnic identity and not so much their psychological perspectives. However, Admiral Min You's costume easily identified him as a soldier. Chinese Opera and Malay *drama purwa* elements were employed in the costume designs. It is clear that the colourful costumes were designed for visual effects rather than for characterisation.

As Istana Budaya has always claimed that it has world-class facilities and produces world-class productions, it is proper that it substantiates its claims through actual professional

productions and not merely engage in rhetoric. Like it or not, its productions serve as yardsticks to measure other local productions. Let it not be said that local productions with their meagre budget and basic facilities have more dramatic credibility and integrity than the multi-million ringgit productions of Istana Budaya. It is hoped that the musical *Hang Li Po* stands to serve as a learning experience towards Istana Budaya's objective of not only creating world-class productions but also to serve as an entity to promote and champion traditional cultural heritage.

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