

WE NEED A PAST TO CREATE THE PRESENT : THE SIGNIFICANCE OF TRADITION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THEATRE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN MALAYSIA

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Many seminal directors of young people's theatre in Malaysia have drawn upon the theatrical models of the West as well as consciously or unconsciously 'borrowed' from their own traditional cultures. The borrowings from traditional theatre often began with the recovery of traditional content, the unearthing of form, and finally the marrying of the two. These fragments of borrowings were subject to constant redefinition, that is, they were placed alongside modern ideas, juxtaposed against the western, synthesized, or reinvented to create new theatre.

I would like to view the development of these hybrid works not just as the creative products of some individual directors or collaborators but more as cultural objects that are shaped by the ideas and ideologies circulating in the society where they originate.

Traditional Malaysian theatre generally never discriminated between adult and child audiences and was performed in the ambiance of a social gathering in the open air. It functioned as part of religious or cultural ritual. By comparison, theatre that plays specifically to a young audience is a new phenomenon. Its beginnings can be traced to the colonial period in Malaysian history when Shakespeare and other western fare were strutted across the proscenium stage of English-medium schools by dramatic associations and clubs between 1910 and 1930.

Although this article makes references to the time when Malaysia was already a multi-ethnic society consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians and other races, it traces mainly the development of Malay language children's theatre. As far as I know, there was no known children's theatre tradition in Chinese and Indian vernacular schools prior to independence.

THE DEVELOPMENT OF MODERN MALAY THEATRE FOR THE YOUNG

The base for the development of a Malay written literary tradition was laid down when J.R. Wilkinson, the British inspector of schools from 1903-1906, introduced the study of Malay literature to Malay vernacular schools. This

base was strengthened in 1924 when the Malay Translation Bureau which published textbooks for Malay schools was transferred to the Malay-medium Sultan Idris Training College (SITC) in Perak. SITC trained all Malay teachers in the Federated Malay States. The Bureau staff produced a newspaper and a teacher's magazine which printed discussions of 'Malay' issues. As Andaya (1982:238) writes, "virtually from its inception to the outbreak of the Second World War, the SITC stood as the centre of literary activity and provided a platform for Malay spokesmen".

The rise of Malay nationalism in the 1940s, inspired the more literate Malays especially those in Malay teacher training colleges to write and produce plays in the Malay language which were based on local content. The first written plays for young people/ students can be traced to this period (Jit, 1982):

One of the results was the first Malay children's play 'Bagaimana Kassim diUbatkan' [How Kassim was Cured]...advocating the efficacy of modern medicine...accompanied by an essay promoting the cause of drama in schools (and displaying) ...a concern for the socialization of children to modern situations.

In the 1950s and 1960s, writers highlighted social issues and the development of writing techniques that emphasized the development of plot and character. The Generation of 1950 writers (ASAS '50) wrote on events related to patriotic issues and the struggle for independence. In 1961 the National Writer's Association (PENA) was founded and their works were more of a cynical protest or criticism of the ills of their society, particularly in the area of politics and governance.

By the mid-1960s, local scripted Malay drama had become the vogue among some of the Malay-educated intelligentsia. Besides adult drama, two volumes of plays for secondary schools *Mari Berlakun* [Come, Let Us Act] and *Lakunan Ria* [Happy Acting] by Malay writers of modern drama were published by *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka* [Language and Literacy Agency] which was entrusted with the task of promoting a national language and literature at the time.

These '*drama moden*' plays were probably performed in *sandiwara* style, with the acting transiting from a presentational (*Bangsawan*) to representational (Realism) style, the dramatic plot moving towards a well-made play structure (climatic plot), and the language moving from literary (poetry and song) to everyday speech. As the trend towards social realism set in, historical conflicts

and characters were replaced by realistic characters and realistic themes set against a backdrop of modernism (A.Rahman 1967: 485):

Fatimah: *I don't know. He said Noraini is possessed by the spirit of the Sena tree*

Doctor: *(laughing) That's what it may seem like. But in truth Mr. Murad your child is suffering from an illness termed 'neurosis'.*

Many of these plays were strongly didactic and the purpose of drama seemed to be focused on socializing Malay students into the modern era. In these plays young actors were more often than not cast as adult characters who projected the new social and cultural ideals of the post independence Malay. Younger writers revived heroic characters and situations from Malay history to promote Malay nationalism. In one of Siti Zahara's children's plays, a 19th century scholar bemoaned the loss of a valuable collection of Malay literature carried away by Stamford Raffles in 1824. The books were destroyed by a fire on board the ship (Siti Zahara 1967: 236):

Munshi Abdullah: *But why is it the foreign races like Muttu and Baba Ah Loy seem more concerned over the fire. On the other hand Pa' Hitam of my own race is still not aware (of the loss). Why is my race still enveloped in darkness?*

In the post independence years, Malay writers continued to question the loyalty of Malaysia's mixed citizenry. Malay writers, the majority of whom were teachers and UMNO members, wrote passionately about Malay concerns regarding income disparity between Malays and Chinese, the lack of access of Malays to higher education and Malay rural poverty. Despite the use of local language, themes, characters and conflicts, *drama moden* plays in the 1960's imitated Western modern drama in form and structure.

The May 1969 racial riots were a watershed in Malaysia. The government was forced to focus on economic and social restructuring and to formulate a national ideology following the riots. In 1971 a National Cultural Congress (NCC) officially discussed the construction of a national culture with the hope that a national identity would emerge that would eventually override ethnic loyalties. The congress reiterated PENA's stand that Malay culture would form the

backbone of national culture, while non-Malay culture would feature as subplots interwoven into the new narrative.

In the 1970s, sixty-nine artists reacted in the affirmative to the idea of a national culture by decolonizing the form and structure of local theatre and grounding it in stages in indigenous forms. As Krishen (1982) states, "bringing to the stage the hitherto-neglected traditional styles of (traditional) performance such as poetry, music, chorus, *boria*...*bangsawan*-type comedy and mime... nudged the door to the discovery of an identifiably Malaysian theatre".

EXPERIMENTING CHILDREN'S THEATRE IN THE 1970S AND EARLY 1980s

In the 1970s, Malay theatre practitioners explored form through experimental theatre. The experiments with tradition could be viewed as a manifestation of the political and cultural discourse and ideology of the time. Discourses on form were tried out through new styles, genres, techniques, conventions, characters, and designs in theatre. By the mid-1970's, children's theatre began to display an affinity with the new aesthetics which was inevitably molded by, and expressive of, the socio-historical situation of the times.

Vijaya Samarawikrama (a lecturer who taught children's drama script writing at Universiti Sains Malaysia in 1973) initiated the search for indigenous material in children's theatre. He sent his students to collect legends and myths from their hometowns, and to rewrite them using modern dramatic structures. He allowed the inclusion of fantasy characters, magical happenings, and local nursery rhymes, releasing these new writers from the bonds of rational thinking.

In contrast to the scripts of the 1960s which targeted teenagers, children's plays of the 1970s such as *Dewi Bunga* [Flower Goddess] *Denda Manis* [Sweet Punishment], *Azad dan Gergasi* [Azad and the Giant], *Rama-Rama* [Butterflies] specifically targeted younger audiences in the primary age group. They were clearly less diadactic and not intent on raising political or social awareness.

Drawing on motifs from folktales, characters based on animals/plants were commonly featured in these new scripts. Sometimes animal/plant characters were pitted against child characters in a game of wit. At other times, children outwitted other children in a conflict of values, resulting in the mischievous child mending his/her 'cruel' ways. Children were depicted in all their playfulness and in a spirit of naive exploration and adventure. Such content projected the

growing sensitivity of the new artists to the developmental needs of younger children.

In a review of a children's festival produced by Vijaya and performed by students of the ITM Art Teacher's Diploma course in Shah Alam in 1979, the headmaster of a school commented that unlike children's plays of the 1950s and 1960s the plays *The Modern Pak Pandir* and *Visitor from Planet Mars* were 'special and highly suited to the level of thinking and psychological development of children' [*Berita Harian*, April 1979].

Naturally the performance style of these plays moved away from staid realism towards one which incorporated more physically animated movement and dance, song and chant, the expression of local aesthetics in colourful and decorative costumes, and sets depicting the outdoors as contrasted to the indoor setting common to realistic *drama moden*.

The *Modern Pak Pandir* was an experiment in traditional shadow puppet theatre while the *Visitor from Planet Mars* incorporated traditional children's games and masks into a science fiction story. These new styles of performance were evidence of a purposeful re-discovery and incorporation of classical and folk traditions into contemporary theatre.

By 1976 we can trace a theatre for young audiences developing independently of 'adult-theatre playwrights and directors', and the manufacture of a specific genre called 'children's theatre' demanding a form and content more relevant and accessible to the child. This development is closely associated with the emergence of a new breed of 'children's theatre directors.'

Children's theatre directors who emerged in the latter part of the 1970s were products of both western cultural colonization through the British-style school system and local cultural revivalism through national-type schools or universities. This meant that they had a strong background in Western literature and theatre; at the same time they had been subject to heavy propaganda on national identity and decolonization in national-type schools after the 1969 riots. Their interest in the rediscovery of indigenous form and content was honed through a consistent scrutiny throughout the 1970's of the traditional cultural environment. These emerging artists began to re-articulate their complex identity in new models, which were a blend of western modern and indigenous traditions.

Local institutions such as the Mara Technological Institute's (ITM) Art and Design Department and Universiti Sains Malaysia's (USM) Performing Arts

Section employed foreign instructors in the 1970s who brought revolutionary ideas from the alternative theatre scene in Europe. American concepts of children's theatre were imported by local instructors like Vijaya Samaravikrama and Zainal Latiff who had pursued their postgraduate studies in Hawaii. Simultaneously, local theatre forms were being emphasized via policies to conserve the traditional performing arts in academic and practical courses in institutions such as cultural centers or university departments.

This combination of legacy and agency explains why the earliest semblance of a model for local children's theatre was framed by the western models of Godowsky's Poor Theatre and Schechner's Environmental Theatre and conscious borrowings from traditional Malaysian theatre.

Performances during this period captured a staging concept that was common to both the western contemporary theatre and traditional local theatre: the productions did away with sets and the formal stage, played on the ground, in the round in community centers and invited audience participation. Performances also clearly incorporated some form of classical or folk performance style. While many works for young audiences still adhered to plot and development and had a narrative in the accepted sense, plays relied heavily on improvisation rather than script in its execution. Communicative resources such as gestures, movement, and expressivity of the voice were expanded.

The best examples of this early model are witnessed in productions spanning 1975-1980: Vijaya Samarawikrama adapted *wayang kulit* (Malay Shadow Puppet theatre) in an open air production of *The Modern Pak Pandir* in 1976, Zainal Latiff returned *silat* (Malay martial arts) to the stage (a black-box) in his *Sang Kancil Tales* in 1977, Elizabeth Cardosa resurrected Nenek Kebayan (a Malay folk character) in *Beg Sakti* ("Magic Bag") in 1978 and traces of Malay traditional dance and music were incorporated into *Garuda* directed by Janet Pillai in 1979 which toured community halls:

Most of the music punctuating the drama (Garuda), for example, is sounded by the enthusiastic hands of the children playing a hybrid ensemble of caklempong, wayang kulit and angklung instruments. Some of the movements also reveal the influence of the National Dance Company...the manner of the joget gamelan dance, if not its substance, is discernable (New Straits Times, June 1976).

It was a combination of individuals and institutions affected by a specific historical circumstance that became the catalyst for the development of this

homegrown model. The National Cultural Complex played a vital role in providing a fertile ground for experimentation with tradition when the Director of Culture, Ismail Zain, set-up a Children's Theatre Project in the Complex in 1978 (Jit, 1982):

Quite simply, he wished to provide an environment where children of all ages could freely exercise their creative instincts in an atmosphere of egalitarian play. He hoped that the multifarious activities of KBN-traditional dance and music, silat, modern theatre and art, by osmosis if not by example, would influence the shape and direction of children's creativity.

This experiment was a benchmark in children's theatre because it paved the way for children to access traditional theatre in a variety of ways which included not just osmosis, but formal traditional transmission methods besides being directed/choreographed by modern instructors trained in traditional theatre. Borrowed traditions were reconstructed and synthesized into the contemporary to make performances more accessible to children.

This experiment also set a precedent in theater training for children. The training incorporated transmission of traditional forms through master artists but had a strong component of modern actor training ranging from method acting to the more child-friendly techniques adapted from creative dramatics, play, improvisation, and theatre games. This training led later to the evolution of several pedagogical theatre forms such as forum theatre, process theatre and theatre-in-education in the late 1990s. However the discussion of these forms is beyond the scope of this article.

By the early 1980s, both public and government acknowledgement of children's theatre as an independent genre had gained ground. In 1981, keynote speakers at a theatre seminar organized by The Department of Culture together with a theater company Komputer praised the government's move to include drama in the Malay literature syllabus for secondary schools.

The movement to introduce local content and form and staging practices adapted from indigenous theatre into children's theatre began as a conscious elitist institutional effort. However, the experiments began to filter down to grassroots theatre practitioners. At the Children's Theatre Workshop in 1981 organized by the Department of Culture in Port Dickson, long-time theatre practitioner Yusuf Akib (a secondary school teacher by profession) revealed the growing awareness for locally identifiable material for children's theatre.

We have to plant the seed of eastern identity in their hearts - familiarize them with characters from our legends and tales...They must know their own culture; steps from silat, the flexible movements of Malay dance. All this can be accessed through the theatre...we can perform it in arena style or even in an empty classroom...modern (children's) theatre has an open concept. It is a participatory theatre... (Berita Harian, 12 Aug 1981).

In 1984, the Department of Youth and Sports together with the Writers Association in Tumpat, Kelantan, initiated a six-month children's theatre course which culminated in a performance of *Si Luncai* by the child participants. 1985 also saw Malaysia hosting the International Workshop of Children's Theatre in Asia where local groups like Aries Nine performed contemporary *wayang kulit* (shadow play).

By the mid-1980s an identifiable local form of children's theatre with clear characteristics had emerged. Young people's theatre performed by adults/children adopted many of the performance conventions of traditional theatre. Mime, dance and stylized movement, games, song and chant derived from traditional sources carried the action. Improvised dialogue replaced written literary pieces. The formal stage was abandoned and young people's theatre moved to public spaces and playgrounds, very often empty stages with minimal props were employed. Sets and costumes were handcrafted from materials found in the environment.

In exploring modes of expressions that ranged from the kinesthetic to the musical and the visual, children's theatre practitioners had finally discovered those which escaped the rigid and formal linguistic and mathematical-logical modes of expressions advocated in schools but gave room to children's need for play, imagination and creativity. In addition, the fragments adapted from traditional theatre comprised accessible aesthetics based on local cultural codes. By the mid-1980s, theatrical and pedagogical models in children's theatre had adopted the politics and ideology of the times.

The overlapping of secular and transpersonal realities (undeniably still part of the local psyche) was manifested in the pluralistic orientation of the model. Various schools of western psychology were explored via creative, play oriented, egalitarian, and democratic methods. Local philosophical heritage which included values and meaning, spiritual and moral experiences, and extended concepts of time and space from traditional theatre, were manifested in the replay of myths,

synthesizing modern and traditional instruments accompanied the dances as well as the dramatic scenes. The plot was carried by scripted dialogue delivered in either realistic or presentational acting style.

Similar to the early children's theatre written by young Malay playwrights of the 1970s, these plays highlighted fantasy and folk elements but also included futuristic references so that the episodic structure remained intact. Performances were supported by colourful and decorative sets and costumes displaying a strong Malay aesthetic. However, contrary to the early plays, the Malay children's theatre of the 1990s was performed on large elaborate proscenium stages with spectacular sets so that they took on an air of Broadway-type entertainment incorporating the glamour of *bangsawan* with the excitement of hi-tech computer screens. This trend reflected the economics of the city and the commercial demands of its inhabitants at a time when the Malaysian economy was doing very well.

In the year 2000, Malay children's theatre was said to have 'reclaimed' traditional theatre in the production of *Cermin Sapura* (April, 2000) directed by Lokman Ghani which was publicized as Children's Bangsawan Theatre and in *Raja Pensil* (October, 2000) written and directed by Azhar Othman which was promoted as a children's Makyong.

The genre chosen to articulate the Malay discourse in children's theatre was musical theatre or the musical dance-drama displaying an array of classical or popular folk dance and music, held together by a theme or story. The cultural perspectives that informed performances were based clearly along lines of ethnicity as could be gleaned from the choice of language, origin of text, design elements, music, dance, venues, and audiences. The development of a Malay children's theatre was very much tied to government agency and annual performances continue to be commissioned and funded by the Department of Arts and Culture or by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka.

The early pioneers of children's theatre in Malaysia have since moved on to a more semi-professional or academic level. Semi-professional children's theatre companies such as 'Teater Muda-Five Arts Centre' and 'Young Theatre Penang' source for funds on their own and play in independent theatre spaces. Their target audiences are neither bound by ethnicity nor by class.

Having stepped out beyond their own ethnic boundaries to further embrace other cultural forms through academic trips overseas or through traditional immersion, these artists find themselves affected by a variety of discourses. Their identities

consist of overlapping placements in language, thinking, and experience. These artists have studied several related forms in their field and are interested in inter-culturalism and collaboration, incorporating techniques, images, and texts drawn from theatre/media in Asia and the West.

Young People's productions by Five Arts Center such as *Suara Rimba* [Voice of the Jungle], *Rama and Sita*, *Ne Zha*, and *Red and Gold Shoe* are examples which re-articulate meanings drawn from a pluralistic pool. The adult artists and the child performers are multi-ethnic. Stories/legends, music, and dance are adapted from different parts of Asia.

The composer's and dancer's statements in *Red and Gold Shoe* reflect deeper ethnographic interest in tradition, and exploration of aesthetics through compositional 'reinvention' which goes beyond reconstruction or synthesis.

The music....combines Malay wayang kulit instruments... the Malay komping, the Chinese shigu drums; the Indian Harmonium and Western violin, saxophone guitar and recorder. Dialogues are sung using melodies in Javanese and Middle Eastern modes. Songs following African and Chinese 'call and answer' singing style and Hindustani tunes....The potpourri of sounds and styles are framed and linked by polyphonic textures found in most Southeast Asian traditional music. The power of the music lies in the multiple layering of rhythms.... different melodies...are then superimposed above these interlocking rhythms (Tan, 2001).

My most recent study of Legong and Topeng Pajegan from Bali as well as the Thai Classical dance and Khon Theatre has inspired most of my work in the Red and Gold Shoe. My intention is not to take these particular forms and represent them in their actual structures or borrow them for the sake of creating a multicultural extravaganza...but to study the core principles and philosophy of the traditional techniques of the body, the art of storytelling ...and invent a clear identity and character for the choreographer's vocabulary in this music (Aida Redza, 2001).

Perceiving the earlier 'realistic' model as insufficient to represent the multi-dimensionality of a child's world, young people's theatre directors and collaborators experimented with traditional and contemporary media to create a more relevant and accessible form. They searched for a new aesthetic language

that could express the many planes of experience that comprise a child's reality — the social, the political, the fantastic, the spiritual.

One of the prominent elements from traditional theatre that have been absorbed into the newly developed children's theatre model is 'participation' of the audience in the drama returning to the theatre a sense of community. Second, is the orientation towards 'process' where the child performer may as before, have access to experiential learning and socialization through the theatre. Third, the theatre has recovered its 'performance base' as opposed to 'script based theater' allowing children to relate to modes of communication and expression natural to them. Ritual has also been adopted, this time sensitively formulated from children's games, chants, movement and transformation. These elements play a therapeutic role in the overall development of the child.

Theatre for young audiences is already showing signs of moving towards more visual/sound based performance. Contemporary media such as television, video projection, and computers have made their appearance in a big way in young people's theatre in the 1990s, but always as part of the concept of the traditional 'total theatre' model. We could say that the most significant contribution of traditional theatre to young people's theatre was the multi-dimensional, multi-arts model of 'total theatre'.

Up and coming younger directors of the twenty-first century comprise a generation brought up on visual/sound media. It is left to be seen if theatre for young audiences will be repackaged or reinvented using the new media. One thing is clear, in the twenty-first century form is more prominent than content.

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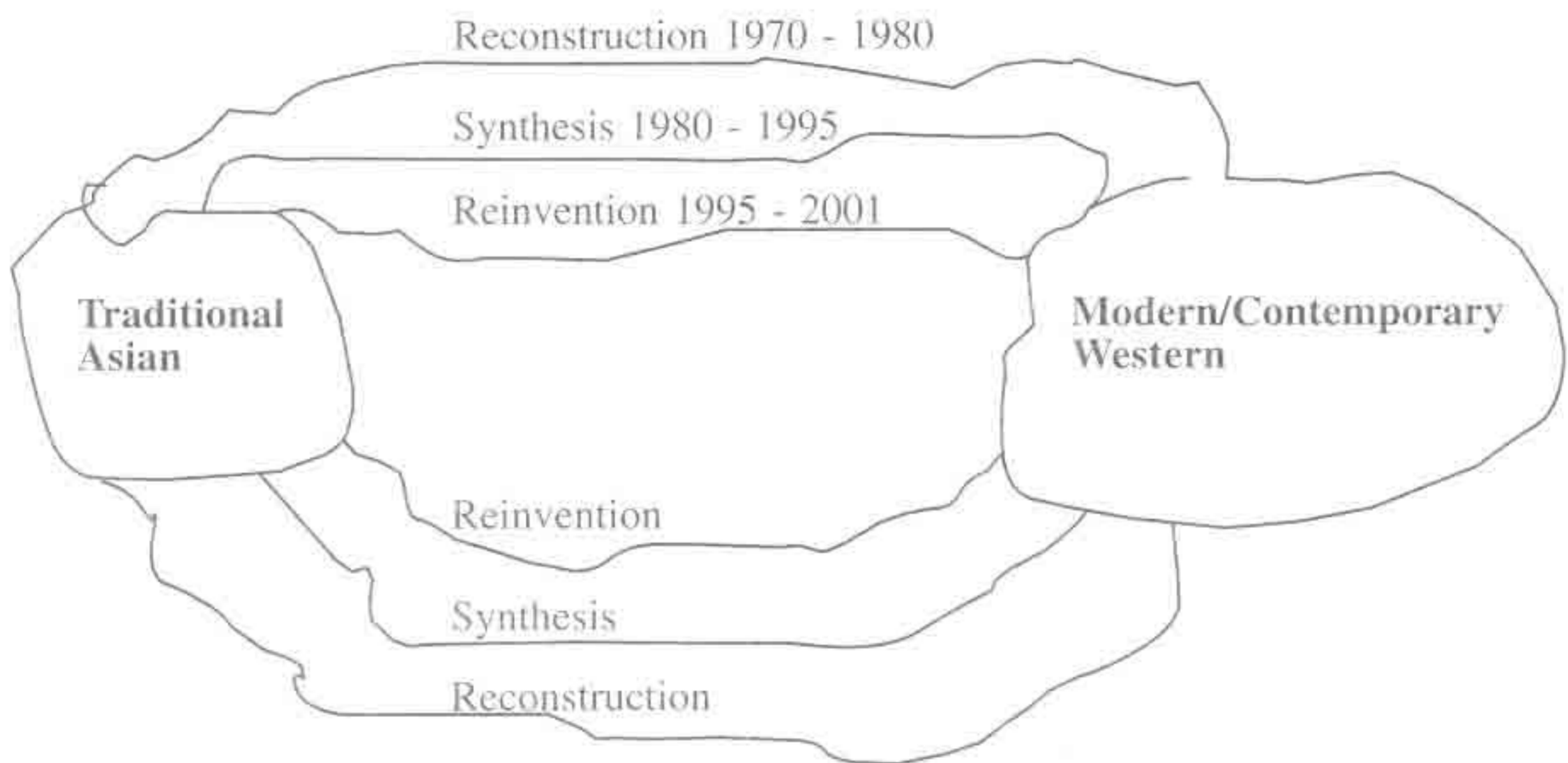
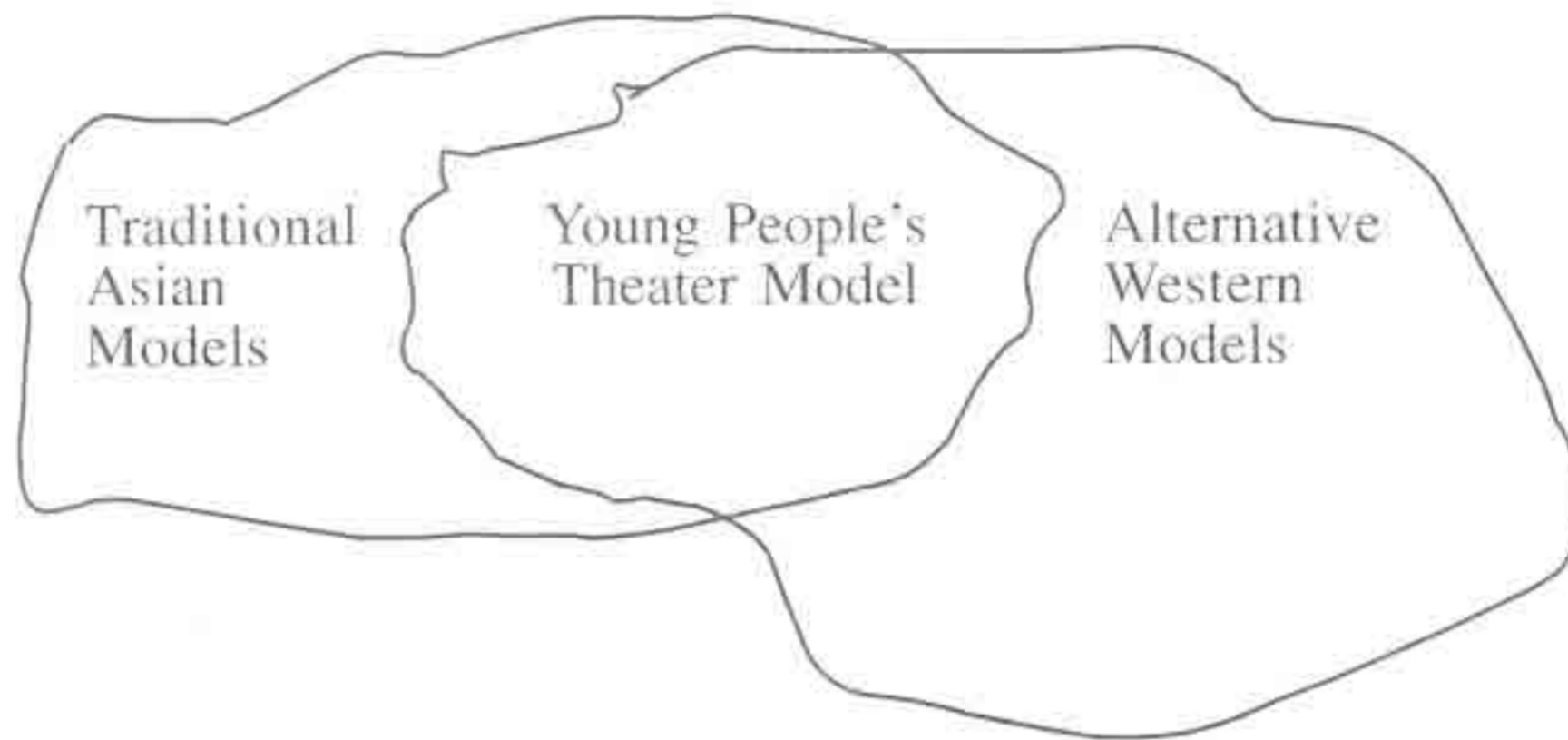
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Development of Young People's Theater in Malaysia

TIME PERIOD	FORM	FUNCTION	FOCUS	TRANSMITTER
Before 1940	Oral Literature + Music + Dance + Drama	Ritual	Community	Traditional Master
1930 – 1940	Oral Literature + Music + Dance + Drama	Ritual and Commercial	Child as Adult	Traditional Master (specialization)
1940 – 1969	Written Literature + Drama	Educational (Literary & Moral)	Child as Adult	Colonial Style Teacher
<i>1969 → Racial Riots → National Culture → National Language → Decolonization</i>				
1970 – 1980	Written Literature + Improvised Drama + Music + Movement	Anthropology (Political & Cultural)	Child as Child	Trad. & Mod artists artists Amer/ Europ/Local directors
1980 – 2000	Written or Devised Texts + Dance + Movement + Music + Drama + Visual	Pedagogy + Ritual (Social & Psychological)	Family & Community (Child, YouthParent)	Trad & Contemp. Local artists and YPT directors
Beyond 2000	Written Literature + Dance + Movement + Music + Drama + Visual	Entertainment Forms	Child as Artist Artist as Child	Contemp. artists & Artistic directors



Diagrams Showing Intergration of Asian and Western Models



Traditional and contemporary design synthesized in *Suara Rimba*, a Malaysian adaptation of *Jungle Book*, directed by Janet Pillai



Malaysian children at a workshop run by Indonesian traditional dancer on kecak dance, 1985

legends, metaphorical characters, episodic structures, and ritualistic songs and dances.

MUSICAL THEATRE AND INTER-CULTURALISM IN THE LATE 1980s AND 1990s

When the city of Kuala Lumpur launched the performance complex MATIC in the 1990s, it played such an important role in the revival of both traditional and modern Malay theatre and was so active that it was dubbed the predecessor of the National Theatre. Government agencies came forward to fund a series of Malay arts-related programs and productions which were showcased at this popular venue.

MATIC saw the growth of a more commercial form of Malay children's theatre funded by the Pejabat Kebudayaan dan Kesenian Wilayah Persekutuan (PKKWP) [Department of Culture and Arts], Kuala Lumpur, together with corporate sponsorship. PKKWP sponsored huge children's productions as part of the city's annual celebrations. These shows were directed by performing arts graduates from local institutions who worked together with choreographers and composers from dance and music academies or troupes. These productions cast talented children from the city as well as incorporated children from the PKKWP sponsored children's training programme called 'Tunas Budaya'. Through this programme, children were instructed in traditional Malay dance and music on a weekly basis. These performances were written, directed, performed, and produced solely by the Malay community.

In July 1996 as part of the Flower Festival, the 1970's script *Dewi Bunga* by Shamsiah Mohamed was restaged by PKKWP together with Bayu Bumi Dance Theatre as a musical theatre extravaganza with a large cast of children. It was touted as the first Malay children's musical and successfully toured nine states in Malaysia. This was followed by a string of popular musicals, such as *Lagenda* directed by Siti Hajar Ismail as part of the 1996 Malaysia Festival, *Taman Baginda* written and directed by Adlin Ramlie as part of the 1997 Flower Festival, *Bawang Putih Bawang Merah* written and directed by Zaifri Husin in conjunction with the 1997 Malaysia Festival, and *Siti di Alam Fantasi* written and directed by Aminah Rhapsor in 1998.

These musical theatre showpieces employed choreographic patterns and musical compositions influenced by the modern Malay dance-drama tradition developed in the 1970s by the National Dance Company. Popular Malay folk and classical dance numbers were performed by a children's ensemble. Heightened live music,