

Performing a Negotiation of the Borders between the Academia, Industry and Community

Johan Awang Othman*, A. S. Hardy Shafii and Pravina Manoharan

School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia, MALAYSIA

*Corresponding author: johan_othman@yahoo.com

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ABSTRACT

A roundtable session on the topic of "Negotiating the Borders of the Academia, Industry and Community in Terms of Musical Arts" that was held in the School of The Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia on the 24th of November 2015 was supplemented by a performance event that was meant to illustrate and reflect on the same theme. Three sets of performances were The Sound of Silence a devised play, Wayang Chulia shadow puppet performance, and Samuel J. Dass' and Michael Veerapen's solo and duo performance. By way of alluding to issues and arguments raised during the roundtable discussions, this critical review examines the varying ways that these performances demonstrate the outcome of a traversing between the academia, industry and community. It can be seen that it is possible for the practitioners of the performing arts to simultaneously represent their respective disciplines and negotiate adapting approaches and raising awareness of one another's discourses while compliant with the normalcy of the difference between the sectors of the academia, industry and community.

Keywords: *community performing arts, music industry, academic performing arts*

The performance event that supplements the Roundtable on the topic of "Negotiating the Borders of the Academia, Industry and Community in Terms of Musical Arts" held in Universiti Sains Malaysia on the 24 November 2015, consists of three sections of performance – Wayang Chulia, The Sound of Silence, and Samuel J. Dass' and Michael Veerapen's solo and duo pieces. These performances explore various creative approaches of the three sectors – the academia, community and industry. These works also reflect varying implications of the act of traversing between the academia, community and industry. As such, this review presents a reading that responds critically to how these performances illustrate the negotiations between these three differing sites.

Wayang Chulia is an original shadow puppet performance based on original texts by school children that illustrates stories derived from the community, in particular, the multi-ethnic residents of Chulia Street and Armenian Street in Penang. This project is directed by Tan Sooi Beng in collaboration with Dalang Juffry and Murshid; all three collaborators are from Universiti Sains Malaysia. Although this shadow puppet performance was initiated for the Armenian Street community, nevertheless, the context of the performance within the theme of the roundtable – transgressing the spaces between the academia, industry and community – will be discussed.

To date, Wayang Chulia has had three performances. Its first inception was in the form of a street performance at Armenian Street, Penang, on the month of June 2015; six months before its second performance in Universiti Sains Malaysia. Subsequently, in December 2015, this shadow puppet play was performed for the third time for the community in Balik Pulau, Penang. All three performances took place within varying contexts. Firstly, a performance for the community – situated within the site of Armenian Street – constituting mainly of the public and relatives of the children performers of the shadow puppet play. This performance was further developed and performed for an academic audience at the Universiti Sains Malaysia roundtable event. The result of the developed form of the performance was then taken to Balik Pulau for its community in December 2015. At this point, it can be seen that,

although the text of the play that constitutes the stories of the local community of the Chulia Street and Armenian Street was initially intended to be received by the respective community, however, the "imaginative creativity", easily and attractive "communicability" (Freeden 2003) of the narrative, demonstrate the performance's adaptability to varying performance contexts; the possibility of being performed in the community setting as well as in the academia.¹ In this regard, in the context of the performance's reception within the Academia, even though the shadow puppet play portrays simple and localised attributes of the play – the appropriation of the language of the street and the construction of the puppets illustrating fictionalised examples of characters from local Penang – also allows for the possibility of a more complex reading by the academics who attended the performance.

How do we locate Tan Sooi Beng as an academic in relation to her position between the academia and the community of Penang within the basis of her shadow puppet performance project? It can be inferred in this instance, the position of Tan as an academic in relation to the community, in particular the young community, takes advantage of soliciting knowledge and mobilising culture – exposition of the origins and contemporisation of the Malay shadow puppet theatre reified as shadow puppets as subjects of local Penangites, and a genealogical tracing and placement of its subjects' culture in the narrative – by way of advocating the empowerment of the young. Tan's objective of "giving back" to the community, comprising sharing with the public the products of research by the children through the shadow puppet theatre, illustrates her enforcement of an academic method of formatting and strategising an approach towards the community; inadvertently also stressing on the importance of research, which is already a pertinent action of an academic.²

The second performance – *The Sound of Silence* – is a devised play, directed by A. S. Hardy Shafii along with Johan Awang Othman as music director, presents another example of how academics fuse their creative approaches by way of utilising a contemporary and controversial story/topic known by the public, exploring the usage of few languages and dialects, movement, sounds and music while combining professional actor with drama

students for a public performance. This performance was premiered at La Salle College of The Arts, Singapore in June 2015 in conjunction with the 6th UNESCO Asia-Pacific Bureau Theatre Directors' Conference and Theatre Festival and subsequently restaged at the School of The Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia in November 2015 for the roundtable event.

The narrative explores the power relations between the state and civilians, hence, the latter can be inscribed as the community; a nomination that also alludes to the marking and situating of the community as a regulated site in relation to the state. Inspired by true events³ and other similar cases from other nation states, the director, by way of a devised play, explores the expressing and exposing of a challenging journey in order to address the possibility of either a closed or an open reading of the play, which is represented through the different voices; a wife, son and the community.

As a devised and experimental play, the director, actors and creative team employed a research approach, similar to Tan's objective of her work with the children of the community, to derive materials through investigating specific and similar cases globally in relation to its respective socio-political scenarios. In turn, these materials informed the devising of the dialogues and movements for the characters. The conceptual design of the play is based on the director's specific choice of minimal props which consists of three stools representing the three main Malaysian ethnics of Malay, Chinese and Indian; and a square acting space to signify borders and laws within the Malaysian social and cultural context. The costume appropriates white tops to represent the truth, whereas the blue trousers as a metaphor for power or authoritative officers of the State. To narrate and dramatise this story, Shafii and Othman utilise body movements and vocals rather than relying on electronic, pre-recorded sounds or music. Moreover, Shafii who is always fond of using local folk songs and lullabies from the community, has carefully selected related local folk songs – *Bangau oh! Bangau* (Stork oh! Stork) and a Hokkien lullaby. These songs were cautiously inserted during a child's play not only to dramatise the scenes but most importantly to "poke" and provoke the audience, in particular the adults, to critically respond and in turn relate the satirical parts of

each of the scenes to the meaning of the lyrics. Below is an example of a text which the actors perform as children, singing children's folk song while playing with their respective props.

*Bangau oh! Bangau, kenapa engkau jatuh?
 Macam mana aku tak jatuh, orang tolak aku (2x)
 Orang oh! Orang, kenapa tolak bangau?
 Macam mana aku tak tolak, dia tak nak jawab!
 Bangau oh! Bangau, kenapa tak nak jawab?
 Macam mana aku nak jawab?...*

Stork, oh stork! Why did you fall?
 I fell because people disturbed me (2x)
 People, oh people! Why do you disturb the stork?
 How can I not? The stork does not answer!
 Stork, oh stork! Why do you not answer?
 How can I answer?...

Essentially, this scene challenges the audience to critically make allusions to the interrogation, which is central to the narrative of the play.

Following the performance above is a segment allocated for the roundtable panellists representing the music industry sector. These musicians are Samuel J Dass, one of Malaysia's renowned sitar exponents, with over 40 years of experience performing on the sitar both locally and internationally, and Michael Veerapen, a name often synonymous with Malaysian music, and is widely acknowledged as a leading jazz musician and as the driving force behind the Jazz Scene in Malaysia. Dass and Veerapen performed compositions on their respective instruments and later rendered a duet on Dass' original composition, *Dancing Latinas*. As representatives of the industry, both Dass' and Veerapen's performances

were important inclusions to the roundtable's program as they highlighted a palpable need to expose music students who belong within the environs of the academia to a wider world of music represented by the industry. Within the performance setting itself, the introduction of the sitar to the audience, many of whom may have only seen this instrument for the first time is a fitting example of how members of the academic community along with members of the industry have a vital role to play in bridging the gap between the industry, the academic community and also the wider public.

For his solo performance, Dass chose to perform a composition on raag Darbari Kanada. This is one of the more popular raags in the Hindustani classical system, as it allows an experienced performer to stretch the borders of Hindustani music grammar. Given the theme of the roundtable discussion, this raag was a suitable choice. This is because, one of the main characteristics of Darbari Kanada is evident in the rendition of its flatten 3rd and flatten 6th. When performing this raag, the flatten 3rd and flatten 6th are rendered slightly flatter than usual, thus presenting the performer with an opportunity to negotiate the limits of these two notes (swaras) and explore the various nuances permitted within the structure of this raag. Incidentally, a skill of this nature, which allows the musician to negotiate musical borders acquired through years of training, presents musicians with an inadvertent yet essential ability to understand and eventually negotiate the discernible borders present within the academia, industry and community, and reveals how musicians can play an active role in bridging the gap between these different discourses.

Veerapen's solo performance, a jazzed rendition of P. Ramlee's *Jeritan Batinku*, revealed how his academic qualifications in music continues to play an important role in his career as a jazz musician, thus blurring the borders that delineate the academia and industry. In his sharing after the performance, Veerapen explains that the knowledge gained throughout his academic journey has today made him a better musician and composer. "I understand music better", he said, when explaining how his diploma in music has helped him improve his voicing techniques and score arrangement. He stressed on the importance of developing

an ability to play by ear, but at the same time not neglecting the "bookish knowledge" that is expected and also required within the Malaysian education system and music industry. In highlighting this, Veerapen draws a clear connection between the need for the academia and industry to foster stronger ties as both these institutions ultimately rely on each other to survive as they strive to remain relevant to the community. Samuel's and Michael's performances are testaments to why there needs to be greater interaction between the academia, industry and community and how the various boundaries underpinning the three themes should and can be negotiated.

On the whole, Tan's metonymic position to the academia within the community, Shafii's consistent situation as an academic throughout the working process of the device play, and Dass' and Veerapen's concomitant discourse indissociable to the music industry, imply to a certain extent an immutable approach complicit to their respective sectors when it comes to crossing "borders". However, it can be concluded that the products of these individuals – the performances that exemplify children performers who are willing to adapt an academic research approach, a device play that challenges the community to critically read cases derived from the community, and Dass' and Veerapen's enforcement of the relevance of the music industry to the academia, do betray varying instantiations of a traversing amongst the academia, community and industry, which in turn suggest the possibility of demarcating the tenacity and malleability of the respective "borders" of these sectors.



Figure 1 Musicians and puppeteer from behind the screen.
Photograph courtesy of Tan Sooi Beng.



Figure 2 Examples of localising and contemporising Malay shadow puppets.
Photograph courtesy of Tan Sooi Beng.

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Figure 3 Samuel J. Dass and Michael Veerapen crossing borders on the sitar and piano respectively.
Photograph courtesy of Tan Sooi Beng.



Figure 4 This performance was performed in La Salle College of The Arts, Singapore in June 2015.
The actors: Taufiq Sallehudin, Rowena Selvarasan and Mohd. Ednizam Fuarddy, scenography by Wong Lay Chin, music by Johan Awang Othman and A.S. Hardy Shafii as the director.
Photo source: https://www.facebook.com/lasalleapb2015/photos_stream

NOTES

1. I borrow the terms "imaginative creativity" and "communicable" from Michael Freeden's discussion on the features of Ideology to demonstrate that, similar to the concept of ideologies, an artistic product can also influence the viewpoint of the public. Freeden, Michael. 2003. *Ideology: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
2. This argument alludes to Tan Sooi Beng's positing of the idea of formatting and strategies in terms of approaching the community in her talk at the roundtable session.
3. This play was inspired by a controversial case which involved a Malaysian journalist, Teoh Beng Hock who was found dead during the interrogation pertaining to allegations of corruption. All the characters are not intended to be directly linked to persons situated within the research materials gathered by the creative team. These personas are mere generalisations.

REFERENCE

- Freeden, M. 2003. *Ideology: A very short introduction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
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