

Negotiating Visuals: Roles of Images in a Site-specific Performance

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ABSTRACT

Wilkie (2004) in her research "Out of Place" discussed that theatre has a long history of experimenting with a variety of spatial configurations and visual relationships. However, it is only in the last two decades that the label "site-specific" has been applied to theatrical performance, indicating a new mode of place-bound practice. This paper looks at the association between a performative engagement with place and space and the role of visuals and scenography; an enhancement of a site-specific spatial formatted performance. The study also looks at the function of images as one area of the theatrical's "visual systems" that affects the creation and reception of a play. "Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua" is a contemporary theatrical research project based upon the archaeological findings in Lembah Bujang. The performance combines three different fields of study: performance, archaeology, and history. This research combines the idea of theory and practice to decode literary and historical sources by triangulating the relationship between archaeological artefacts, architectural space and time.

Keywords: visual projection, scenography, site-specific, performance, archaeology

INTRODUCTION

The intersection between performative elements and theatrical exploration of space is a continuous process of negotiation. According to Wilkie (2004), the symbiotic relationship between performance, audience and place, is often explored within site specificity and "theatreness" of a production. "Bermulanya Di Sini...Kedah Tua" theatrical project based upon the archaeological findings in Lembah Bujang, is an example of the employment of performance and theatrical exploration of space. Set in the archaeology site of Lembah Bujang (a United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation [UNESCO] heritage site), the contemporary theatrical performances attempt to re-enact the "everydayness" of the place, allowing the audiences to re-imagine (and re-create) the historical re-enactment of activities in the space. It also allows the performance and commentators to help define and re-define the nature of fluid and provisional "site-specificities" delineating the concern of such work through questions of, for example, political efficacy, spatial identity, and urban rhetoric (Wilkie 2004).

Site-specific theatrical performances which uses the properties, qualities, and meanings found at/on a given site, (be it archaeological, landscape, within a city, a building or a room) emphasises particular images, stories, and events. It also helps reveal the complex relationship between the event, people, and the physical environment. The performances then engage the multi layered exploration of the site. Performers and spectators alike will strip away layers of the site-specific performance to reveal the interpretation of the space, place, culture, and history. Thus, the performance unlocks the historical significance of the place unearthing spatial frames that frequently characterise the site-specific theatre (Wilkie 2004).

The stimuluses and techniques to extend the expressive dance and theatrical performances at a make shift site-specific archaeological location is a quite a feat. Graphical visual projection as an excellent way to add visual appeal is one of the key elements in enhancing the contemporary stage performance by the infusion of images, music, and text. This enables the performance and performers to respond and connect to a believable atmosphere, aesthetically and expressively. In this context, the "digital scenery" role is that of an assistant choreographer, where it is able to reinforce a scene while the performer is creating the particular images, stories,

and events. Expressive text, as well as images, extend the expressive grammar of theatre by allowing the play to show more of the "character's" inner conflicts, contrasting action/thought moments, memories, worries, and desires, in a way analogous to cinema (Sparacino et al. 1999). It also provides visual cues that stimulate the imagination and connect with the audience in a personal way. Visual image in the theatrical backdrop is relevant to the expectation of experiences by deconstructing images of a space and place and allowing the interpretation of the audience perceptions of these images and the experiences associated with them.

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATIONAL FACTOR

Earlier findings in Lembah Bujang (1840–2005) indicate that the civilisation in Lembah Bujang began no earlier than 4th CE (Nik Hassan Suhaimi 2008). However, recent discoveries by the Centre for Global Archaeological Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia (CGAR USM), Pulau Pinang in 2007 reveal a ritual monument dated 1st AD, a riverside jetty that was built in the 2nd AD, and iron smelting facilities that could have been used from the 1st AD (Nadarajan 2012). The discoveries of Lembah Bujang, also historically known as Kedah Tua, through archaeological artefacts and literary sources served as vital source in curating the performance for Kedah Tua research project. The research project purposely allows Malaysians to connect with their rich ancestral heritage and tourists the ability to understand the significant historical finding of the country. This is hoped to also help increase the interest on archaeology and theatrical performances study in Malaysia. The combination of the two-research field (of archaeology and the arts) has enabled the research to re-look at the historical context visually and increase the imaginative visualisation of the site and its valuable artefacts. The short-term grant granted by Universiti Sains Malaysia has also enable the story behind these artefacts be told via site-specific performances. Apart from this, the research project allows for (Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer and Manoharan 2016):

1. The translation of historical narratives based on archaeological evidence into tangible (seen, felt, experienced) memories at Sungai Batu.
2. To visually re-trace the activities of the early civilisation (2nd–6th AD) through a site-specific performance.
3. To re-imagine and re-create the scene of an industrialised community that revolved around the precious raw material, "iron" via artistic impression (performance).

Taking the cue from the research perimeter, researchers from different areas of the arts, i.e. theatre, dance, scenography, music, product design, and visual communication, have contributed towards the site-specific narrative story-telling project working alongside the data from the archaeology department, unlocking the historical significance of the place.

VISUAL NEGOTIATION ON A SITE-SPECIFIC PERFORMANCE

Apart from the various contributors to the research on site-specific at the Lembah Bujang-Sungai Batu site, visual and scenography component has become an important part for this project. The use of visual as the background setting and backdrop of the theatrical play has help increase the depth believability, whilst intensifying the quality of the performance. This significantly helped highlight the importance of the place in the context of the historical artefacts and archaeological site into the right setting. Some playwright incredibly detailed in what they want in the stage setting, where the usage of visual background, lighting, sound, and musical scores help support the symbolic elements of the play. The use of specific visuals in describing the historical context of the site and its artefact help put the perspective architecturally and geographically for the performers and spectators alike (Gleeve 2011).

The selection of visual and scenography for this project was selected based upon the framework of the script derived from the examination of research finding and scholarly papers from the study and site visit of the Lembah Bujang, especially the Sungai Batu archaeology sites. The mapping of visuals was set against the demand of the storyline was challenging. There were no visual reference other than the interpretation of the site activities and reference from the historical account of the research findings and description of the Lembah Bujang-Sungai Batu trade activity from the excerpt from Tamil literary works, the *Pattinapalai* poem (200 BCE – 200 CE) and the Tamil Epic *Parunkhatai* (10th CE) mention iron from Bujangga Valley and Kedah as *Kataha* and *Kadaram*, Sanskrit words for iron or black seeds (Nilakanta Sastri 1938; Thani Nayagam 1968). The infamous Chinese traveller, I- Ching has recorded Kedah or *Chieh-cha* as it was known among the Chinese travellers and traders during the 2nd CE, as the centre for trade and commerce (Wheatley 1961).

The visual selection for the site-specific theatrical play of "*Bermulanya di Sini...Kedah Tua*" research project negotiated the narratives demand of the performance which combines acting, dance, choreographic movements, and exchange of dialogues. The acting style was loosely based on stylisation, whereas, the dance and choreographic movements portrayed a fusion of Indian, Malay, and contemporary dance styles (Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer and Manoharan 2016). Although the site-specific performance based upon a fictional storyline was created to help tell the story the relationship between the site, its activities and the concept of theatreness, the nuance of its content is supported by the actual research findings.

Hence, the images chosen for each scene and storyline was plotted against the documented annals of trade and economic records based upon discoveries of the early civilisations in Malaysia. The unearthed skeletal frame of temples and iron foundry provided an important evidence of a Southeast Asian civilisation based on trade and iron industry, in which Sungai Batu played a major role from 1st AD (Mokhtar Saidin et al. 2011). The finding at Sungai Batu site became the foundation of the theatrical storyline and the anchor to the performance. The usage of visual and scenography were also employed to help bind and interweave the relationship between the site, its archaeology artefacts, theatrical performances, and dance. The premise for images used for this site-specific performance enables convincingly the amplification of the historical narratives in order to re-create a new understanding of the past through contemporary interpretation. This help combines theory and practice to develop new understandings on the challenges in developing archaeological interpretations via history within a performance context (Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer and Manoharan 2016).

In the opening scene, the image setting of a busy port was projected onto the backdrop screen to illustrate the liveliness of the ancient trade and economic activities. This enables spectators to be invited into the visualisation and perspective of Kedah Tua and its highly advanced civilisation at that time. The image also helps to illustrate that as a trade port, Sungai Batu is buzzing with numerous traders from today's India, China and Middle Eastern nations, mingling and discussing potential trade agreement and business opportunity.

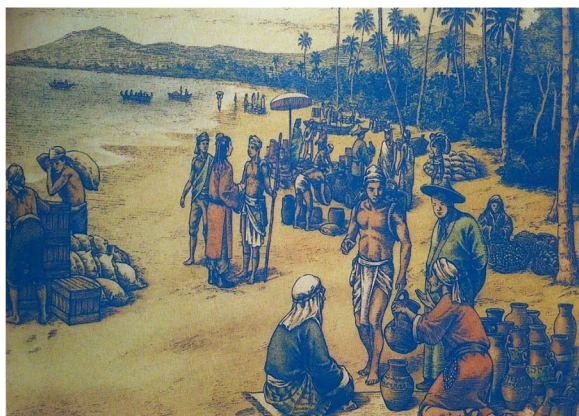


Figure 1 Scene 1: A bustling port city with commerce and trade activities as the introductory of the Sungai Batu storyline. Source: Nadarajan (2012).

The three visuals in Figure 1 were sequentially projected in sync with the opening act which was represented by a welcoming royal court dance. The type of images used in this scene was specifically chosen

from an illustrated one, whereas the selections for the other scene were photograph based visuals. It is done in such a way to help frame a different timeline in the story telling, creating a tempo of various cycle of time-based activity. This is then further enhanced by scenography augmentation of the stage which adopts rhythm conceptual technique as its working scenography framework allows the visuals, the lighting and audio to be negotiated seamlessly. Rhythm, a concept, in general means "any frequent and symmetrical repetitive motion" (Liddell and Scott 1996) or "movement marked with strong and weak elements in a controlled, or opposite or different state" (Anon 1971: 2537). This rhythm technique was used alongside the projected visuals to help indicate and highlight the repetition in normal tempo or pattern in time to produce various natural cycle phenomena that has time or frequency from microseconds to millions of years. This combination of the visual projection and rhythm concept scenography helped to frame the site-specific ecosphere, which balanced the choreograph performances in the form of a larger micro and range movement.

The relationship between the visual, scenography, and performance implicitly draw the level of the connectivity of the site-specific performance as an effective story telling or the artefacts (see Figure 2 and Photo 1). This enable plausibility of the showcased performance even though it may have been re-imagined or re-created, but the activities of the people, their spiritual practices, their economic trade based on iron smelting and technology was not an imagination, but truths excavated through archaeology, affirmed by history and re-staged through artistic impression (Mumtaz Begum Aboo Backer and Manoharan 2016).

The combination of visuals and scenography have also allowed for the juxtaposing of emotion via emotive performances by conveying different mood and energy of the performance. As the fictional characters immersed the spectator with their dance movement and operate across the "stage", the pulsating musical beat and actions take place simultaneously, allowing the combination of images, sound, and lighting to provide a scenography aesthetic to the entire performance and negotiated to fit the characters, events, and intended messages of the play. This fictional storyline is then seamlessly intertwined with the research facts. Its purpose is to highlight the history of Kedah Tua as one of the earliest "modern" civilisation of its time, based upon the evidence of the iron smelting plant and their knowledge in iron ore.

As breath-taking as the unbroken negotiation between the different performance elements in the play, the selection and usage of the visuals and scenography comes with their sets of challenges. As the stage of the performance is placed at an important archaeology site and the script "indulges" the recorded documentation of the annals of Tamil and Hindu religious texts, (spiritual practices of animistic worshipping), selection of images for this particular performances have to observe and to take into consideration the sensitivities of the present local people (and spectators, which majority are Muslims) with regards to their spiritual and religious beliefs. Images of deities or extreme connotation towards animism had to be toned down or omitted. This negotiation between visual selection, the site, performance, local cultural, and religious practices is deemed necessary although seen by many theatrical practitioners and historian as compromising the creative property (Pearson 2010). However, for this particular site-specific performance project, the selection of the visual were chosen based upon "site-determined", "site-referenced", and "site-responsive" context rather than content-based context.



Figure 2 Setting of scene: Portraying the ancient kingdom and its civilisation.
Source: Nadarajan (2012).



Photo 1 The ritualistic dance portraying the Sun God. The scenography seamlessly negotiated the background image, sound, performance, and dance.

Source: School of the Arts, Universiti Sains Malaysia.

The images alongside clever scenography aesthetic and techniques have managed to find a respectable compromise. By using pictures and illustrations that bear close similarity to the architectural artefacts and the site natural faunas, the usage of idol imageries was reduced to a minimal. Such negotiation allows the performance to respect the content of the performance whilst at the same time give close to factual visualisation of the historical civilisation it is trying to portray. In this instance, the images manifest, celebrate, confound or criticise location, history function, architecture, micro climate, as the interpenetration of the found and the fabricated (Kaye 1996: 211).

CONCLUSION

The use of visuals, lights, and sound is negotiated to fit the characters, events and intended messages of the play. The lighting arrangement used in the performance (of LED Parcan, City Colour and Moving Head Projection) enables to bring the Kedah Tua civilisation alive in this site-specific performance bringing the illusion of its existence at present time. The usage of visuals and lights are deliberating, focusing on holistic communication of the storyline whilst imbuing historical facts and findings. As it aimed to present and explore some of the historical connotations of the site as a local historian have from their research, the Kedah Tua site-specific performance at Sungai Batu has given opportunities to showcase the critical role of visuals and scenography experimenting with a variety of spatial configurations and visual relationships.

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