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# Is it curtains?

# Star 2

The once vibrant Malaysian arts scene has hit a wall. Is there a future for local theatre? >12

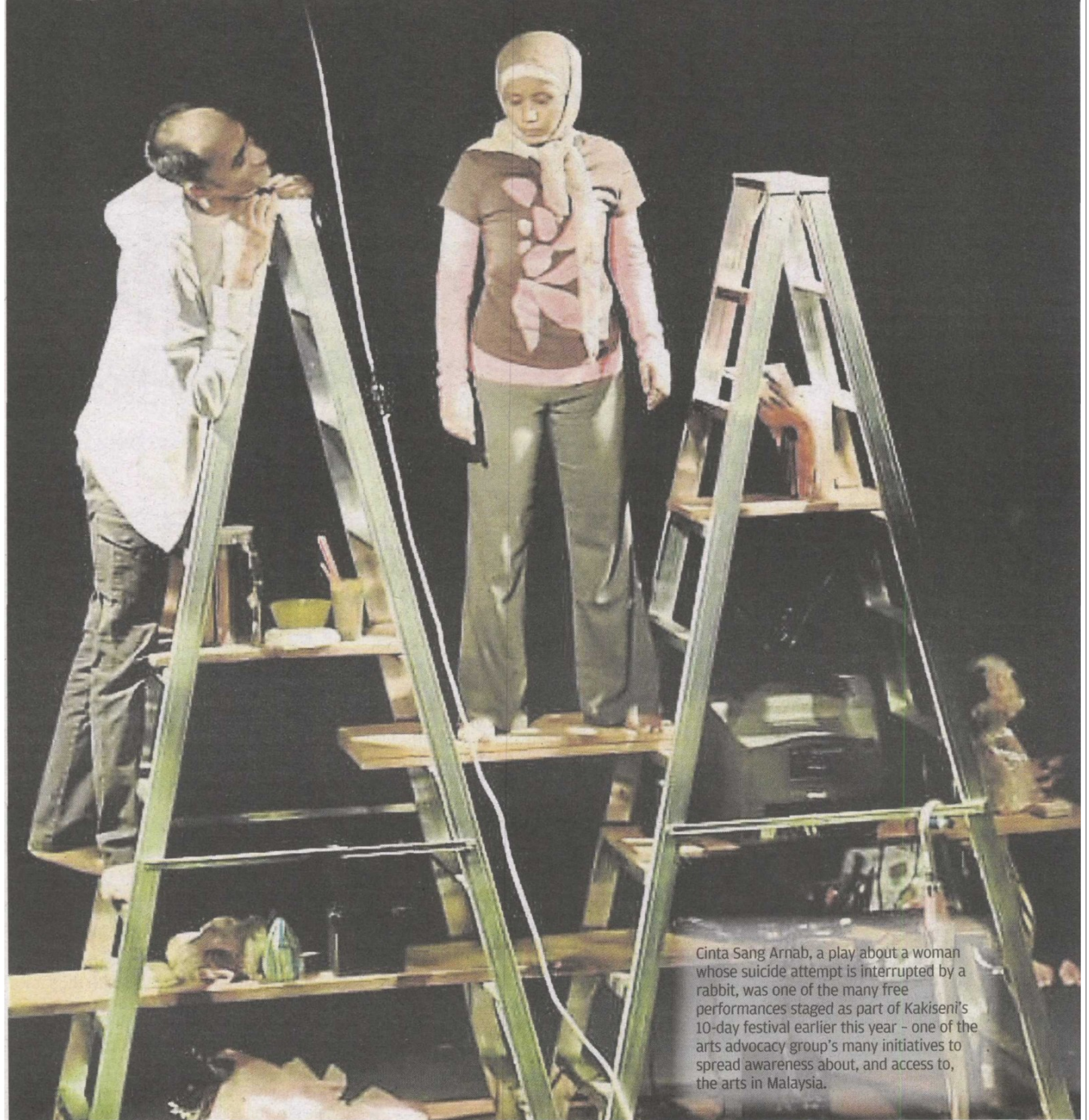


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# What's eating the arts?

In the first of a three-part series on the state, role and future of the performing arts in Malaysia, we examine some of the fundamental issues that make it a niche and struggling field.



Cinta Sang Arnab, a play about a woman whose suicide attempt is interrupted by a rabbit, was one of the many free performances staged as part of Kakiseni's 10-day festival earlier this year - one of the arts advocacy group's many initiatives to spread awareness about, and access to, the arts in Malaysia.

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## Stories by NATALIE HENG

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**F**OR the longest time, there has been something missing in Malaysia's performing arts scene: an advocacy movement.

As aptly summed up by actor and director Jo Kukathas: "Artists aren't always the best people to negotiate with government or corporations. What we need is an intermediary."

In many countries, arts advocacy groups are common.

Malaysia could do with more individuals or independent organisations working to source funding for artists, says Kukathas.

And so enters Low Ngai Yuen, and the current incarnation of Kakiseni.

Kakiseni was founded by Kathy Rowland and Jenny Daneels as an online platform to facilitate dialogue between artists. Low volunteered to carry on after they left in 2011.

Kakiseni, now headed by Low, has its own office, manned by a small army of bright and passionate individuals.

A set of government-funded grant schemes, mentor-mentee programmes and even a 10-day festival packed with free shows, art installations, forums and workshops, are the result of over two years of hard work.

Lobbying takes persistence, of which Low – a tenacious workaholic and irrepressible theatre activist – has shown an admirable amount.

"It took me about a year before I was invited to the right meetings," she laughs.

Getting to know people and sitting in on round table sessions gave her the chance to raise issues about the performing arts industry.

The formula is such: find out from practitioners what their problems are, and then be the bridge that champions those issues.

So what are the issues? They are indeed numerous and interconnected, and it begins with a lack of awareness.

The fact that few are aware of theatre means a limited audience attends performances; there is a perception that theatre is only for "certain types" of people.

Perhaps this explains why many Malaysians tend not to have a thriving and prolific performing arts scene in their list of top priorities, and why we compare so poorly with other countries when it comes to patronage and government funding for the arts.

Ticket sales, even when a show plays to full-houses, generally only cover about 40% of production costs.

"It's about scalability," explains Low. "The work you put up will only run for a certain amount of time, so if your ticket sales cover that particular show, it doesn't help you cover your next show."

The remaining half needs to come from external funds – your philanthropists, your

government grants, your corporate sponsors etc, she adds.

Not having those alternative sources of funding means that anyone who decides to put on a show faces the risk of struggling to recoup their investment.

Sometimes, actors and crew offer their services for free; often, they get paid a minimal amount.

This, in turn, has obvious implications for the sustainability of theatre companies.

For many years, these financial risks and sacrifices have meant that Malaysian theatre today largely survives on an ad hoc basis.

Each new project brings on a whole new set of financial challenges and worries. This tough

environment does nothing for the incubation and development of new talents – the uncertainty and lack of room for professional commitment inhibits the natural progression from amateur to professional.

Asked what constitutes a healthy performing arts industry, Low replies: "A healthy arts scene is one that grows every single year – from the number of performances to audience numbers, to the number of new artists coming in.

"It also entails a good mix of quality shows, re-staging of old as well as new works, traditional and experimental as well as serious and light-hearted performances."

As such, Malaysia's performing arts scene has been in stagnation.

Few original productions see the light of day, many performances feature the same old talents, serious drama or experimental works are few and far between, and productions are mostly frequented by niche audiences.

Does anyone make a profit?

Low laughs again. In most cases, the situation is very far from even "struggling to break even", she says. This is the reality of Malaysian theatre.

**A healthy arts scene ... grows every single year – from the number of performances to audience numbers, to the number of new artists coming in. It also entails a good mix of quality shows ... old as well as new works, traditional and experimental as well as serious and light-hearted performances.**

– LOW NGAI YUEN, KAKISENI HEAD



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## Thrive or fly - a systemic issue

SOMETHING being hard is no reason for people to stop trying. Actor and director Jo Kukathas is a household name, and she's been putting her soul into theatre for years.

She recalls that there was a time when Malaysia's arts scene was actually slightly ahead of Singapore's.

In fact, outsiders were coming to see what they could learn from us.

That was 25 years ago, and it does no good to dwell on the past.

Singapore seems to have gone the right route: it now boasts well funded and staffed theatre companies, arts housing (permanent spaces for theatre companies to rehearse and develop activities) and venues in which to perform. In comparison, Malaysia's arts scene now seems to be adrift and neglected.

Without a clear, institutionalised framework for funding, even the discretionary grants from the then Culture, Arts and Tourism Ministry, which held the portfolio for the arts for a time, eventually began to diminish.

Corporate sponsorship, along with the valuable exposure afforded to theatre via free airtime given by Astro - which itself was sponsoring two theatre companies, Five Arts Centre and Dramalab - also began to wane.

The result is that Malaysia, despite a recent mushrooming of commercially-housed theatre spaces, has lagged drastically behind its neighbour, which is a shame considering its potential.

Kukathas, who recently directed acclaimed productions *Parah* and *Nadirah*, both featuring a cast of fresh faces, feels that the raw talent in Malaysia is incredible.

"Give people here a bit of opportunity, and they fly," she says.

Unfortunately, most of them fly away.

It has happened so often in the past - the likes of actress-director Claire Wong, playwright Huzir Sulaiman and writer Charlene Rajendran, for example, have migrated to greener pastures across the Causeway.

Even Kukathas now spends half her time in Singapore, working on projects at the invitation of theatre companies there.

"Malaysians have gone to work abroad, because Malaysia doesn't really support their creative endeavours," she says of the brain drain.

In the 1990s, just after the Instant Cafe Theatre (ICT) group was formed, Malaysia's theatre scene looked promising.

The targeted nature of corporate sponsorships meant that theatre companies had a stable administrative and infrastructural framework.

Astro, for example, covered the initial

### Theatre needs to be more in people's faces.

- JO KUKATHAS, THEATER VETERAN

outlay for office equipment and furniture, plus monthly rental and utilities for Five Arts Centre and Dramalab, as well as a rehearsal studio that the two could share.

This allowed them to function more efficiently, not just in terms of the quality of their productions but also in the scope of projects aimed at developing the arts.

The writing workshops run by Dramalab, founded by ICT, and the Youth Theatre programme which came under Five Arts Centre, for example, are considered partially responsible for an increase in creative output during the 1990s.

At the time Kukathas, one of the groups' founders, was one of 12 paid members who worked full time for ICT. Twenty-five years on, she's the only one left.

"What I find is that some people come in, and then become discouraged, disillusioned or just burn out. They go elsewhere, or they stop making theatre," she offers.

### In decline

Today, the ICT, which has garnered a wide and faithful following over the years, runs on a shoestring budget. It can barely afford to do one show a year, two if it is lucky.

"People often say you must be doing this because you really love it," muses Kukathas. "And yes, I do. But that doesn't mean (I) shouldn't be getting paid for it."

People can only sacrifice so much; for things to grow, those involved in theatre need to be paid for the hours and work they put in, she adds.

As for nurturing new generations of talent, the struggle for survival leaves veterans with little time and resources to engage in mentoring.

"We've had to turn people away because we simply couldn't afford to bring them in," she says.

The main problems, she believes, are a lack of public, corporate and government awareness about theatre and the performing arts and a lack of arts housing.

Practitioners tell of a similar scenario within the Malay and Chinese theatre scenes.

There are hundreds of small amateur



Jo Kukathas (centre, pictured here with other Instant Cafe Theatre's founding members in 1999) recalls there was a time when Malaysia's arts scene was slightly ahead of Singapore's.

groups in Malaysia, mostly doing Malay-language theatre. Perhaps 50 to 60 are known to exist within the Klang Valley alone.

The number of active groups, however, seems to have declined.

Kumpulan Teater Angkatan Karyawan Aktif Kuala Lumpur (Angka) has earned a reputation for performances of a high standard. But Azman Hassan, an actor, voiceover artist and core member of the group, says it rarely performs these days.

"Props, costumes, venue rental - production costs are just too expensive," he explains.

The group used to put on shows for free at the Malaysian Tourism Centre (MaTic) auditorium, but after a change of policy there, it could not afford the new rental charges.

Amateur theatre groups across the board

are experiencing similar challenges, says Azman.

Actor and lighting designer Koe Mun Yoon says that in Penang's Chinese-language theatre scene, only four out of the eight amateur theatre groups active 15 years ago remain so today.

"Theatre needs to be more in people's faces," Kukathas concludes.

"The recent initiatives by Kakiseni so far have been great, and the radio station BFM has a strong programme inviting theatre people to go on the air to talk about their work.

"But I think theatre needs to be on television more, like when Astro used to give it airtime back in the 1990s. It needs more sex appeal, because until people encounter it personally, they don't realise what a powerful medium it can be."

**TOMORROW**

Arts, in terms of its value to the individual, culture and nation

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HARIRY Jalil is a theatre man. A writer, director and actor, his interests lie in creating political and contemporary works in the Malaysian context.

Of course, none of his productions have ever made money. Most often, money is lost.

He graduated from Malaysia's foremost performing arts school – Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (ASK), now known as Aswara, in 2003.

It is the only institute of higher learning geared towards developing the talents of Malaysian performing artists that is fully funded by the Government.

Out of a batch of nine creative writing students, Hariry thinks he may be the only one still heavily involved in the independent theatre scene.

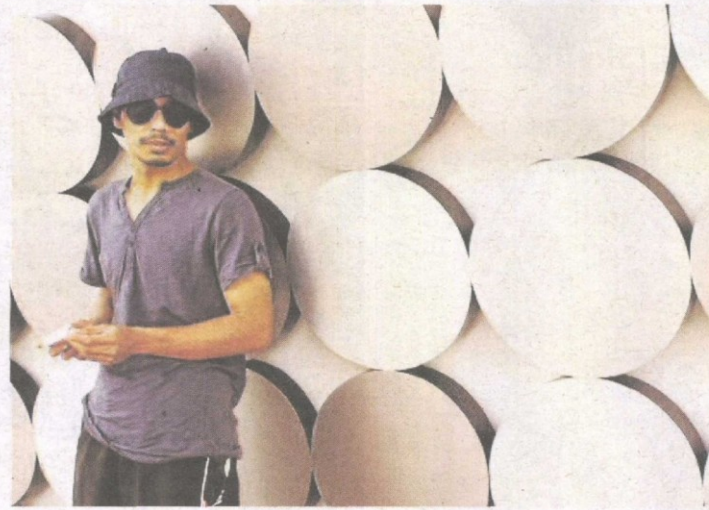
Most who graduate in this field try for a while, and then give up, he says; in fact there was a time he almost did that, too.

It was his very first independent project. He had spent three months writing *Saksi*, a Malay-language play which is an alternative take on the story of Hang Tuah.

His team put their own money into it, and even managed to get the venue – a hall within Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka – rent-free. But still, it was staged at a loss.

After all that hard work, losing money proved more than a little demotivating for

## The life of an artist is about scraping by



Hariy Jalil's interests lie in creating political and contemporary works in the Malaysian context.

Hariy: "I just thought, what's the point?"

He didn't give up, however. After an eight-year hiatus from writing and directing plays, a period he filled with acting, prop design and copywriting jobs, Hariy has had a recent burst of creativity. He staged and directed four of his own scripts within the last year or so.

With his wife Siti Nurbaya, who is also a thespian, he co-founded a theatre production company called Negeri Samudra Theatre Co, which they use to produce shows – not that doing so has made things any easier.

At least having a steady income helps provide some security for the family. Siti Nurbaya juggles motherhood and a full-time job as publicist at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, alongside all their theatrical extracurricular work.

"Sometimes people ask me: if theatre is so tough, why don't you just quit?" she says.

After all, with a Masters in engineering, she could easily go back to having a lucrative career in the corporate sector. Her need to find a creative outlet was, however, partly why she opted out of such a career in the first place.

Her answer to any question about quitting the theatre is simply: "If people like me didn't do theatre, then we wouldn't have any theatre!"



**Attention-grabbing:** The Kakiseni Arts Festival is a 10-day festival packed with free shows, art installations, forums and workshops, the result of over two years of hard work. Here, the En La Lona troupe from Argentina wheels its way along Jalan Bukit Bintang as part of the 2013 festival's street parade.