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Output, audiences and affordability

HOW accessible are theatre works to the masses?

With a sigh, Joseph Gonzales, a prominent figure in the dance scene, replies: "They're not."

Dean of the dance faculty at the National Academy of Arts Culture and Heritage (Aswara), Gonzales is a well-known dancer and choreographer in his own right.

He uses the example of a contemporary dance show: "Thirty people in the audience might say the performance was a brilliant piece of art. But altogether, only 30 people will have actually seen it.

"Most would usually rather watch something like *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (the musical), than something really *avant garde*."

The question of accessibility is related to more than just content, however. You may never realise, for example, how much you would enjoy contemporary dance until you actually sit down and watch it.

Social conditioning of what to expect from a live performance, coupled with a lack of exposure, no doubt influences how receptive people are to the less "mainstream" forms of art.

The question is a combination of multiple factors: audience receptivity, affordability and physical accessibility.

And it fuels a two-way relationship, with audiences influencing artists and vice versa. The type and quality of a show influences the type and volume of the audience that will patronise it. In turn the artists, along with the works they produce, may be motivated or demotivated by whether or not anyone actually comes to watch.

As Prof Mohamad Nazri Ahmad, an arts and culture lecturer at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, puts it: "If there is no reception for a show, would you (the practitioner) still want to do it?"

The specialist in theatre and Malay literature says audiences can be divided into intellectuals, activists and leisure seekers.

"Intellectuals are people who come for the message, to absorb whatever the performance is trying to convey.

"Activists, on the other hand, are people who feel it is their responsibility to support the industry – they will often support specific groups and attend their shows.

"And leisure seekers are those looking for entertainment: these are casual theatregoers, who might as easily spend their evening at a cinema."

Leisure seekers, of course, make up the largest category – as evidenced by the celebrity crowd-pulling shows that are a staple of stagings at the Istana Budaya – Malaysia's

largest, most lavishly-equipped government-sponsored venue.

The goal is to cast a wider net, introducing and cultivating a greater sense of curiosity and love for the arts in its more varied forms across the general population.

A professor at the Universiti Malaya Cultural Centre, Dr Mohd Anis Mohd Nor, feels the Malaysian media has an important role to play in this.

The problem, he says, is that it is not proactive enough; there are simply too few interest groups that want to seek out and cover these events.

"Singapore is a small country, but there are always people hunting for new activities to say something about. They come up with critical pieces about the subject matter.

"Here, it's the reverse. You either send out a press pack, or call a press conference, or you aren't going to get heard at all," Dr Anis says.

Gonzales' own group, the Aswara Dance Company, is well established. Groups like his tend not to have any problems pulling in the crowds. "The problem is getting a *different* crowd, in reaching new audiences," Gonzales says.

But Malaysian receptivity to the arts comes with baggage.

Government policies at the macro level, and Malaysian parents at the micro level, have always reinforced that economics trumps the arts.

"In most Malaysian families, the arts have always taken a back seat, because they are never seen as lucrative or valuable.

"We have not nurtured an arts-loving population. There are many people who have never seen a *Mak Yong* performance before, so these are huge challenges which we are facing," Gonzales adds.

Affordability of course is also a factor, and dictates what type of theatre is accessible to whom.

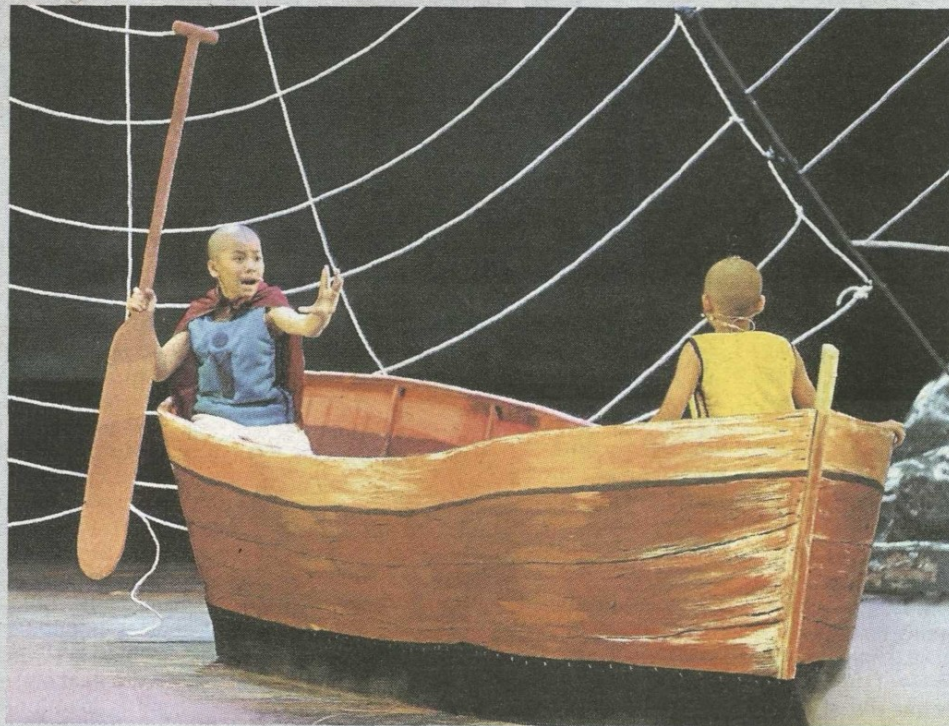
A lot of theatre is not priced for the masses, Prof Nazri points out.

To be viable, many independent production houses price their tickets at around RM50 or more. Prof Nazri says that for locals, however, RM15-RM25 is considered a more affordable price, especially if you plan to make it a family affair. Hence, most independent Malay-language theatre groups stick to this price range.

In addition to that, physical accessibility or access to public transportation also poses some restrictions. A lot of the action is only restricted to Kuala Lumpur and its surroundings, where most of the more established venues are.

And although new venues have mush-

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Crowd-pullers like *Upin & Ipin The Musical* (staged in 2012), are what draw the masses to Istana Budaya.

roomed in recent years, there are often complaints about inaccessibility.

Some, like the newly minted Gardens Theatre in Gardens Mall which has the advantage of being next to Mid Valley Megamall's adjoining KTM station, are in the safe zone. Others, including the more established Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre in Sentul Park, and the new and promising Damansara Performing Arts Centre in Damansara Perdana, are an inconvenient walk away from the nearest Light Rail Transit (LRT) or planned Mass Rapid Transit (MRT) stations.

Sometimes, sociopolitical factors also come into play, limiting the type of works that are made accessible to audiences.

Prof Nazri cites the post-May 13 era as one that gave rise to increasing polemics about what does and doesn't constitute Islamic works, which created a confusion about how to distinguish Malay literature from Islamic Malay literature.

This impacted the Malay theatre scene in a variety of ways.

"For one thing, there were more conservative views on the mixing of men and women. The absurdist theatre also fell victim to the Islamic revivalist movement of the 1970s," he notes.

This subject was also raised in a 2007 article written by arts commentator Kathy Rowland and published on the Asian Art Archive, an online resource on contemporary art in Asia.

According to Rowland, the co-founder of Kakiseni, what was then a thriving absurdist movement became recast as incompatible with Islam, whilst various other indigenous Malay art forms, such as *main patri*, *wayang*

kulit and *menora* bearing pre-Islamic influences of Hinduism and animism, were subject to rehabilitation attempts, into more Islamic-friendly forms.

It looks like there is a long way to go in creating the right conditions for an ecosystem – one reliant on so many different factors – wherein the performing arts can flourish.

Some organisations are trying to kickstart this, for example Kakiseni's government-partnered initiative offering grants to projects which reach out to new audiences that have little exposure to the performing arts.

In the meantime, it looks like the performing arts largely remains accessible only to a relatively small portion of the population.

So blog about it, tweet about it or patronise it – perhaps the best way we can speed up the growth of Malaysia's arts scene is by showing our support for it, and making it known to as many others as possible.

TOMORROW

How education and outreach play a big part in ensuring a bright future for the arts.