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Experimentation the Anak Alam way

LEGACY: Theatre on the move has ceased to exist yet it is part of the glorious history of arts in the country

THIS month, 35 years ago, Kumpulan Anak Alam performed two plays for the road. It was literally theatre on the move (*teater bergerak*). *Stesen* was written and directed by Hatta Azad Khan. W. Mankowitz's play, brilliantly adapted by Renda as *Pemburu Perkara* was directed by Omar Abdullah. The plays were brought to Seremban, Kuala Lumpur, Taiping, Alor Star and ending in Penang on Nov 5, 1978. It was the first *teater bergerak* for Anak Alam, a concept borrowed from Rudolph Puspita of Indonesia's Teater Keliling that came to Kuala Lumpur in 1975 and 1976.

Anak Alam (literally child of nature) was housed at 905, off Jalan Merbuk, where Aswara (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan) is now. It was fertile ground for the arts. The first generation Anak Alam were painter-poets — A. Latiff Mohidin, Mustapa Ibrahim, Siti Zainon Ismail, Maryam Abdullah, Mohd Yusof Osman, among others. Then came the dramatists — myself,

Omar Abdullah, Muhammad Abdullah, Khalid Salleh, Musa Masran and Zakaria Ariffin, to name a few. It was Omar and Muhammad who started to perform *teater kecil* (little plays) for the group. They brought the plays to the public, performing them at whatever place available. It was a strange idea for the people of Kuala Lumpur who looked at them as weird people doing extraordinary things.

They performed *Pemburu Perkasa* at Pertama Complex and improvisations at Benteng or on the streets of Kuala Lumpur. When I joined them, I staged my own *Pasrah* and *Dia*, two of my short plays. It was fun and challenging.

Experimental theatre as it was

known was a craze. Together with Nordin Hassan, Dinsman, Hatta and Mana Sikana, we were regarded as the proponents of absurd theatre in the country.

Absurd or otherwise, the campuses in the 1970s were alive with plays — mostly protest ones — in line with the spirit of political activism of the era. Universiti Malaya's Experimental Theatre, true to its name, was the centre of the theatre universe.

It was about that time when Krishen Jit discovered a medicine seller at Jalan Chow Kit. He is currently one of the finest actors on stage and film — Khaled Salleh. We were "buskers" in a different form — staging short plays instead of playing music and singing.

It was a tough life for the members — many were unemployed, living on paintings, writing and busking. Anak Alam was the mecca for arts at the time. When Anak Alam initiated its theatre on the move, Zakaria and Hatta were there to help. Hatta not only directed his play *Stesen* but acted in it as Busu. I was the station master. Muhammad played in both *Stesen* and *Pemburu Perkasa* as Mamat and Datuk respectively. K. Thangarajoo, a budding artist, played Raju while Ariffin Ismail was Akil.

One interesting feature about the group is that Anak Alam had enough talents to put up an exhibition or play *musik alam* (literally nature's music). Many could play the *bungkah* (a flute-like musical instrument from Sabah) and the percussions. In such programmes, there will be *bungkah* jam sessions in between plays.

The late Ismail Zain, an artist himself and formerly the director of the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports (better known by its Malay acronym KKBS at the time) was the patron. With the late Usman Awang, he was the protector and motivator of the group. In his preface for the pamphlet for *teater bergerak*, Ismail mentioned the fact that Anak Alam was leaderless and without a manifesto.

It was an artists' colony that was self-contained, independent yet

surviving on the principle of enriching the arts. Moving from one

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place to another was a tedious process. But we travelled light. There were dialogue sessions with local theatre groups as we moved along. At the time, financial support was the biggest nightmare. Funds for innovation and creativity were eons away. Theatre groups depended on KKBS or raised their own money to stage a play. When I

staged *Angin Kering* at Universiti Malaya, a friendly head of publicity of a company (corporate communications was unheard of at the time) gave RM2,000.

Anak Alam has ceased to exist. Yet it is part of the glorious history of arts in the country. It has in fact achieved a cult status among its followers. Many of its members have moved on with their lives.

Many remained as painters and actors. But the experience of *teater bergerak* in 1978 will be etched forever in our consciousness.

It was a defining moment in the history of theatre. Young theatre enthusiasts have a lot to learn from our experience.

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