

Amateur Theatre In ASEAN: Challenges of the 21st Century

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Technology, commercialism, mass media, economic forces which change the processes of cultural production, and the political power shift in the world at the end of the twentieth century has asserted great impact on the cultural life of the peoples in Southeast Asia. The region's development since the 15th century was influenced by the sudden interest of the European powers and their subsequent colonization. Inevitably, cultural borrowings as well as varying degrees of cultural domination occurred in the region. In addition to the indigenous theatre forms, Southeast Asians took up some theatre forms from the colonizers, and neighbouring countries throughout the last few centuries. That period saw the growth of rigidly stratified, ethnically segmented population in the major cities, where borrowed theatre forms were more influential. In the rural areas, until the flood of television programmes in the recent decades, traditional theatre forms had been more important.

The massive capital expenditure and concentration of facilities in the major cities that had characterized the colonial period continued after post-war independence was achieved. Political independence was not accompanied immediately by economic and cultural independence. The poverty as a result of war and centuries of colonized exploitation compelled the newly independent countries to give concessions to the Western investors to make use of the cheap land and labour. Thus the major cities became the employment centres which increasingly attracted the population in the countries. Theatre, the traditional and the contemporary, naturally experienced major challenges in their social roles and functions. As in the movements to confront the colonizers to achieve independence, theatre was in many instances used as a tool by the proletariat and the left wing to propagate political ideology. At the time when the workers were badly paid, in the world where the communist countries confronted the capitalist countries with some degree of success, highlighted by the American defeat in Vietnam, it is understandable that for a long time such practices attracted many followers.

The picture in the 1990s has changed. With consistent economic growth since the previous decades, and the collapse of the Communist giant the defunct Soviet Union, political theatre is losing ground. Theatre is appealing to the public more by its

aesthetic value than ideological persuasion. New-found wealth and changes in lifestyle has allowed some theatre groups to make a living. The formation of these groups have been encouraged by the plentiful funding opportunities. It is in this context that I shall examine the challenges of the amateur theatre in ASEAN (The Association of South East Asia Nations).

Economic growth, changing life styles and theatre

In most parts of ASEAN (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), the 1980s was a period of impressive economic growth. The result is the swelling number of middle class consumers who experience a life style which is very different from their parents. The liberalisation of economics and politics is changing the cultural landscape of these countries rapidly. Although there might still be a few groups that retain a political agenda, most drama groups are more concerned with the fact that they must find the audience if they are to practice their arts meaningfully. No longer can they launch their performances based on the traditional support of the community or political sympathizers as in the old days in the cities. The cities in Southeast Asia, projected to have 30 percent of the total population of these countries by 2000, do not have volunteer audiences who would go to the show merely to show their support for their friends or clan members. Everybody

is busy with their endless stream of activities offered.

Believing that turning professional will give them better chance to polish their crafts and be more competitive economically, some of the amateur groups began exploring the new world of arts sponsorship and commercialism. For example, in Singapore, the government set up a National Arts Council in 1991 giving generous support to the arts with a budget of one million US dollars, from which specific grants helping the amateur groups which wish to become professional are available and at the same time there are various types of grants to assist amateur theatre groups launch productions. Together with the increasing support of the private sector, multinational companies based in Singapore, banks and local corporations, which receive tax incentives if they give money to the arts, theatre groups, professional and amateur, are increasingly devoting their energy to learning the craft of public relations and image making to win sponsorship. In Thailand, the highly popular young professional company, Dass Entertainment, in launching financially viable projects and packaging its products, shows the way to succeed in the consumer market. In Malaysia, the Ministry of Culture, Arts & Tourism, has also in the recent years rewarded the amateur theatre groups by presenting their plays in the theatre it manages. All these new possibilities and development will have impact on the direction amateur theatre takes.

Amateur Theatre in ASEAN Challenges of the 21st Century

Artistic strength is crucial to success

A few decades ago, theatre groups across the region were engaged in the process of gaining independence. Theatre was a place for social and political forum. Thus the participants, both the creators and the audience, were interested more in the events as an expression of support rather than to appreciate or evaluate the artistic values of the performances. In the present situation, when the staging of drama or dance is evaluated by technical merit and artistry, nobody is going to spend time and money in theatre to show support except at those that are related to school functions or charity shows where specific groups of people have the obligation to do so. Thus, for the amateur groups to survive and compete with the usually technically more superior professional groups, they must spend more energy to upgrade their skills and theatre craft.

Cultural and educational roles

While the commercial theatre often could not take control of the means of cultural production and have to respond to the

market demands, producing formula soap operas or imitations of western musicals, the amateur theatre groups, less subjected to the pressure to make money to pay salaries and other expenses, are in a better position to fulfill the cultural and educational needs of the society. Many school and community theatre groups in Southeast Asia have for decades, preserved, promoted and innovated their traditional theatre forms with tenacity and vigour. A case in point is the Er Woo Amateur Musical and Drama Association in Singapore, which has been practicing and promoting the Teochew opera, a regional Chinese opera form originating from the Southern part of the Canton province in China, for the last 80 years in the rapidly modernising and westernised urban environment. Their consistent efforts have kept the centuries old art form alive. Funded by the Tourist Promotion Board, the group also presented many shows for visitors showcasing part of the Singaporean cultural heritage. They also tour community centres and schools regularly thus reaching the masses and the young. While the classics of the world have been ignored by the professional theatre groups in the recent years, as many are busy translating the current musicals and successful new plays, or engaged in the process of promoting local plays and productions. The amateurs have continued to revive the works of great Western playwrights: Shakespeare, Ibsen, Chekhov, Shaw, Synge, Pirandello, Brecht as well as those important epics and classics of the East: Ramayana, Mahabharata, Dream of Red Chamber, Journey to the West, Thunderstorm, Manora, etc. The continuous staging of these works will help the public and the young people to appreciate the many universal issues being articulated so well in the

classics.

Exploring new artistic territories

While the newly formed professional theatre groups are sometimes constrained by financial consideration and have to put up safe productions that can make enough money, the amateur theatre groups are free to explore new artistic territories. For example, a young Malay drama group in Singapore, Kami Theatre, which was caught in several controversies for their unconformable productions, is to be commended for their courage to explore and sincerity to learn. Youth theatre groups formed by the alumni of the Hwa Chong Junior College in Singapore have been turning out innovative works which freely integrate witty comments and stylistic expressions.

Marketing strategy and fund raising

In the age of massive advertisement, every manufacturer spends much of its

energy catching potential buyers of its products. The professional theatre groups are no exception. Full-time public relations officers are engaged in selling their images. Marketing managers devise strategies to convince corporations to give away their money for theatre productions which in turn publicize for the companies. In order to receive substantial financial support from both the public and the private sectors in the future, amateur theatre groups have no choice but to learn better arts administration and marketing. In some cases, the disparity between the funding of professional companies and the amateur groups are unproportionally different, despite the fact that very often their artistic quality is not dissimilar.

Therefore, the amateur theatre groups apart from striving for higher artistic standard, will have no choice but to push harder in the ways they sell their cultural productions. They have to learn to articulate their potential contribution in the public forum and raise their profile, locally and internationally. Those groups which are better at this get better chances of upgrading their strength and status. Chinese Theatre Circle in Singapore is a good example. Formed in 1981 to promote Cantonese opera, the group has been administered with great skill which led them to faraway places in the world. Not only has it fascinated the spectators in the West, its lead actresses have also won acclaim in China. Suasana, a Malaysian group formed at around the same time, has been equally successful in its achievements at reviving traditional performing arts and interpreting old legends, at home and abroad. It has an educational

programme to teach the young as well as projects to help the traditional artistes who are not often heard or seen by the urban audience.

Exchange and networking in the region

Within ASEAN, cultural exchange, though not as intense as economic cooperation, has seen a fair amount of information flow and interactions between artists. The government-organised exchange programmes are coordinated by the ASEAN Committee of Culture and Information, the COCI. Since the beginning of the 1980s, it has organised performing arts festivals, music workshops, theatre festivals, travelling exhibitions and many other activities. However, if the artists can go beyond the chance encounters at the festive seasons and develop a more permanent network which can facilitate collaborations, they can perhaps achieve greater heights collectively as they have done in their economic performance in the last decade. While the theatre which developed in the established institutions such as government funded arts centres, theatre related to the tourist industry, and university theatre departments are likely to stay in the mainstream, amateur theatre will continue to reach out at the grass roots level and present their performances at unconventional venues.

Interacting with similar theatre groups in neighbouring countries can help amateur groups find their orientation better. They will be able to see how others solve their problems at crucial stages of their development.

To achieve this, they should compile a directory that makes effective communication possible. In the recent past, thanks to the booming economy, the new attitude and perception of the East, and the many official cultural exchange programmes within ASEAN, more Southeast Asians are travelling within the region. The theatre peoples in the region can learn much from the International Association of Amateur Theatre, IATA, which has vast experience in networking. IATA can certainly play an important role in helping the amateur theatre in the region interact more frequently and freely.

Promotion of Children's Theatre

In traditional societies of Southeast Asia, children mingle with adults at community events, whether a *mak yong* in a seaside *kampung* in the east coast Malaysia or a puppet show in a Javanese village. In the highly urbanised society of today where in most cases both parents are working there is a greater need to ensure that the children are looked after both physically and emotionally. The amateur theatre, not aiming to make a profit, will be able to continue to get volunteers to be

involved in children's theatre programmes as they clearly value the educational function of theatre. Take Singapore Amateur Players and the Hokkien Huay Kwan as examples. These two cultural organisations have been particularly active in running children's drama classes in the last few years. Judging from the children's productions they produced recently, one can be sure of the potential contributions made by these young people in the future.

Role of Drama School and University in Developing Theatre

Although compared to America, Southeast Asia has far fewer universities that offer courses in theatre studies, the few that do have these programmes are making significant contributions to the development of theatre in their countries. Take Thailand for example; two leading universities, Chulalongkorn University and Thammasat University, have since the late 60s trained a generation of actors, directors and designers.

Not many of those who took the drama courses became professional theatre artists; many went into film and television. Some remain actively involved in amateur theatre activities. Some ended up in totally different professions. All of them at some time will be good audience as they are able to enjoy and evaluate more than the uninitiated. Since then, Silpakorn University and Bangkok University have also started drama programmes and trained many talented young people who later became leading figures of amateur theatre. The students of these universities' drama departments put up interesting productions. Some are direct translations or adaptations of Western classics or important contemporary plays.

The National University of Singapore started its Theatre Studies only two years ago and set up the NUS Theatre, a unit to coordinate and to promote theatre activities in the campus. Its administrative abilities combined with substantial financial support from the university and the private sector, has made it a key player in the local drama scene, publishing local plays, organising competitions and printing a widely read performing arts magazine. The University of the Philippines, with a number of leading directors and scholars on the staff, has always turned out projects that become the talk of the town. In Malaysia, the Universiti Sains Malaysia, Malaysia University of Sciences, apart from teaching courses on traditional theatre and contemporary theatre, is also making important

contributions to the development of young people's theatre.

Lesson from the West and Japan:

In America and Europe, the large number of professional theatre companies have not led to the demise of the amateur theatre groups. This is because each has a role to play and the network of IATA has resulted in the organisation of many memorable encounters. In Japan, cultural life will be much poorer without the amateur theatre groups.

Community theatre provides an avenue for creative expression. The collective efforts often boost the morale of the participants, giving them a sense of achievement. Theatre is healing; much needed in the technologically advanced age where everything moves with great speed, where loners exist in great numbers in the cities. Social pressure in an intensely competitive urban environment is high and amateur theatre offers a good chance of relief and for participants to find a sense of purpose and direction in their search for artistic achievement. Free from commercial pressure to succeed, they can explore at the pace they are most comfortable with.

The American and the Japanese amateur theatre groups having organised many national and regional events are more experienced in networking and arts administration. The Southeast Asian amateur theatre groups can learn a great deal in these areas from them. They should also put their acts together and form some kind of association to lobby collectively for public recognition and financial support.

New Direction

If the definition of professional theatre is those who earn their living by engaging in theatre activities, then amateur theatre refers to those who devote their creative energy and available time to the theatre, with or without pay. People who are involved in the creative works of the theatre are all artists, full-time or part-time, they should be rewarded for their creativity; it would be unrealistic to expect them to go without any form of compensation. They should also be recognised by the society for their enormous contribution to the theatre world. To achieve these goals, the amateur theatre should make it a higher priority to offer training programmes for their participants.

With better skills and ability in producing high quality work and effective strategies to promote them, amateur theatre in Southeast Asia will escalate to a higher plane in the next century.