

## Coping, Adapting, Thriving: What role for the Theatre in Contemporary Southeast Asia?

*“Performance”, designating both the performing arts (theatre, music, and dance) and a performative or “dramatistic” approach to human action and interaction, has been more thoroughly documented and theorized about with regard to Southeast Asia than for most parts of the world. Geertz’s (in)famous theatre state and cockfight merely constitutes the top of the iceberg. The literature on performance and shamanism; philological, anthropological, linguistic, and historical accounts of ‘Wayang Kulit’ in Indonesia and Malaysia; intricately detailed studies of choreology and “oranology” for both mainland and insular Southeast Asia: the field is rich, historically deep, and constantly developing.*

*By Matthew Isaac Cohen*

Regrettably, the EUROSEAS conference only provides a mediocre index of Southeast Asian performance scholarship, represented by a solitary panel convened by Catherine Diamond of Soochow University (Taipei) and with individual papers scattered through other panels (another planned performance panel, organised by Felicia Hughes Free-land and focusing on the performer, was cancelled). The single panel devoted entirely to performance focused on the theme of theatre in contemporary Southeast Asia. Presenters were: Catherine Diamond (Soochow University). Solehah Ishak (UKM, Malaysia), Kittisak Kerdarunsuksri (University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce, Bangkok), and Matthew Isaac Cohen (University of Glasgow),



The contributors followed a liberal interpretation of “Contemporary” while some of the papers looked primarily at the most recent theatrical developments in Thailand and Malaysia, others

discussed theatres of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Much common ground was found, though, across all the papers. The relatively modest numbers in attendance at the panel and its tight focus contributed to lively dialogue.

Kittisak Kerdarunsuksri presented a new form of *Thai Khon* (masked dance-drama) created in



1997 by Phatravadi Mejudhon, and combining dance with shadow puppetry. Based on his description and a video, panellists and others found obvious similarities to contemporary Indonesian forms, such as *Wayang Ukur*; it came out in discussion that Phatravadi Mejudhon had participated in ASEAN theatre workshops and performances prior to her 1997 “invention”. Diamond’s paper on English language and Malay theatre since 1969, closely related in theme to Solehah Ishak’s contribution on “traditional” bases of contemporary Malay theatre, generated a charged discussion concerning invented Malay heritage and its stifling effects on theatrical production.

Cohen’s paper on the *Eurasian Auguste Mahieu* and the *Komedie Stamboel*, while grounded in century-old archival material from the Netherlands Indies, provoked thought about nationalist historiography and identity politics in today’s Indonesia and Malaysia.

The large number of participants at the international conference (held in Leiden in 2000) on audiences, patrons and performers in Asian performing arts had already then demonstrated that there is a definite European interest in East, South, and Southeast Asian performance. Other scholars also noted the conference’s strong orientation on the political and economic at the expense of anthropological and humanistic matters. It is to be hoped that future EUROSEAS conferences will feature more panels centred on performance and interpretation studies.

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