

Symbolic Solidarity in Cultural Expressions : ASEAN Dance Festival and ASEAN Theatre Festival, 1990

by Lim Mei Hong



Thai dancers performing with their lotus flowers at the ASEAN Dance Festival, 1990.

Asean, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand), was formed on 8 August 1967. Through its Committee of Culture and Information (COCI), it organizes numerous activities and projects in Literature, Performing Arts and Visual Arts. Funded by the ASEAN Cultural Fund, it aims to promote

intra-ASEAN cooperation in the fields of culture and information.

This exploratory study intends to review the performance and reception of the audience in the ASEAN Dance Festival and the ASEAN Theatre Festival of 1990. This study reveals that the consumption and production of culture in the symbolic sphere is dialectically related to the discursive

formation in the public sphere. These costly festivals have, to a large extent, achieved their primary aim of displaying symbolic solidarity through cultural expressions. The small-sized audience, having the opportunity to see these performances and artistes, also had the privilege of interacting with their counterparts from other countries.

ASEAN DANCE FESTIVAL

Restructured and renamed from the former ASEAN Festival of Performing Arts, the first ASEAN Dance Festival (6th-13th March, 1990) raised its curtain on the seventh of March, in Jakarta. The festival featured an interesting spectrum of dances, created by the leading choreographers of the six member countries.

Compared to the First ASEAN Performing Arts Festival, which was held in 1981, this festival seemed to be a low-profile event. It had lesser publicity despite the fact that it had a high budget of US\$230, 835.

A twenty member delegation was sent by each member country to Jakarta. The host country, Indonesia, had a large group of 46 delegates consisting of officials, lecturers, musicians, and dancers.

The ASEAN Dance Festival has three stated objectives:

1. To create awareness among the ASEAN peoples of the traditional dance heritage of each member country.
2. To discover common modes of dance expression among ASEAN cultures as well as ASEAN dance aesthetics.
3. To inspire the creation of original choreography, based on traditional modes and expressions of contemporary realities, tempers and people's aspirations.

The festival was held at Taman Ismail Marzuki, Arts Centre of the Jakarta Institute of Arts. With a lavish opening ceremony on the seventh of March, all the countries contributed a variety of dances for the invited guests. The Chairman of the Organizing Committee, Mr. F. X. Sutopo Cokrohamijoyo, announced at the opening ceremony, "Asian traditional dance in the reflection of



Seen at the lecture session of the festival were Dr. Sri Hastanto of Indonesia (left) and Mr. Sumadi Bin Sukaimi of Brunei Darussalam (centre).

modern expressions is the theme set for this event."

ASEAN NIGHT: DIVERSITY IN UNITY

An elegant and vigorous Balinese fan dance was chosen as the curtain raiser. With dynamic gamelan music, the piece performed by 11 young ladies won thunderous applause from the audience. This was followed by a dance from Brunei Darussalam called "*Ngalai Brunei*". The dance portrayed the welcoming ceremony of serving betel leaves and areca nuts to guests. Malaysia's "*Tari Rebana*", which had strong Middle East influence came next. This dance is usually performed at festivals and celebrations in the east coast of Peninsular Malaysia. The male musicians beat the tar (small drum) cheerfully while they sang alternatively with the dancers. The lyrics of the songs praised the greatness of Prophet Mohammad. A ballet called "*Igorot*", inspired by the ritual dance of the Igorot tribe of the Mountain Provinces was then presented by the dancers from the Philippines.

Singapore was next and pre-

sented a piece called "*Transformation: Time, Style and Mood*". It attempted to inform the audience how the Chinese, Malay, and Indian came to the island and progressed together in the last decades. The moralistic approach was just too peculiar in the performing context, although the dancers were joyous in their dancing. The Thais presented an abstract dance for the festival, the "*Contemporary Visuality of Thai Philosophy of Life*". It was rich in choreographic ideas and theatrical intentions but seemed repetitive.

The final item was a medley of short dances, presented by the well trained dancers of the host country. "*Gambyong*" was danced by nine pretty girls, with thrilling vitality. Subsequently "*Klono Topeng*" (The Mask Dance), "*Jaranan*" (The Horse Dance), and "*Prawiro Watang*" (The Warrior Dance) were introduced.

On the eighth of March, Brunei Darussalam presented five items: "*The Bridal Dance*", "*The Jong Sarat*", "*Aduk Aduk*", "*The Tudung Dulang Dance*" and "*Jipin Laila Sembah*". These short dances, although varied in themes, were rather

similar in mood, style and tempo. They provided the audience an opportunity to assess the present development of dance in present Brunei Darussalam.

THE SNAIL PRINCE

"*Anak Raja Gondang*" (The Snail Prince) is a new work choreographed by the doyen of traditional Malaysian dance, Ahmad Omar Hj. Ibrahim. Using *Mak Yong* (traditional Malay theatre of Kelantan and Trengganu states of the east coast of peninsular Malaysia), his usual source of choreography, he narrated folk tales accompanied by Suhaimi Mohd Zain's music. Music was played by the ensemble sitting at the back of the stage. It was a persuasive blend of raw

harmonies and tender melodies. Its sophisticated variations pushed out the boundaries of its original rhythmic framework. Thus, the choreographer was more able to effectively develop the dramatic content of the legend.

Singapore shared its variety show with the Philippines on the ninth of March. Singapore was represented by its National Dance Company, with Madhavi Krishnan as the star. As before, the company presented Chinese, Malay and Indian dances. Lee Shu Fen's "*Court Dance of the Tang Dynasty*" was the opening item. Dancing with long silk streamers, the graceful performers were full of pulsating passion for this centuries-old dance. There were also two Malay dances, "*Paduan Kaseh*" and "*Buruh*", another Chinese dance

entitled, "*Maidens and Bird*", The highlight of the evening was, however, an Indian dance adapted from an episode in Mahabharata, "*Savitri*". For the benefit of the audience, the narrative was done in English. It proved to be a clever device as the audience was able to follow the complicated plot in full. They were also able to appreciate the captivating dance of Madhavi Krishnan. She was also the choreographer of this short dance drama.

To the surprise of the audience, the Philippines, instead of presenting a full length dance drama, showcased six dances: "*Dugso, For the Gods, Kappa Malong-Malong, Bai Soraya, Uyaoy and Igorot*". The audience in Jakarta were familiar with these dances. They have been seen on television and in theatres on many occasions before. Nevertheless the technically tidy dancers did impress the audience. They were impressive with their precise steps and endless energy, particularly in "*Kappa Malong-Malong*", a classic created by Lucrecia R. Urtula, a National Artist of the Philippines.

LOTUS FROM THAILAND

"*Contemporary Visuality of the Thai Philosophy of Life*" is the long title of the Thai group. This was choreographed by the most adventurous contemporary dancer of Thailand, Naraphong Charassri. Naraphong used his nickname, Tam, for the dance group he formed, the Tam Dance Theatre.

The plotless dance was supported by an atmosphere which suited the four different sections of the dance. They were: the rural setting, which represented the harmony, the urban, which represented the conflict, the utopian arena, where the previous sections assimilated and finally,



Delegates from Singapore at the closing ceremony of the ASEAN Festival for 1990.

the "middle path" which leads to peace and tranquility, "The Nirwana".

The only prop, lotus, was the symbol for wisdom, truth and serenity. Towards the end of the dance the performers formed a circle, with lotuses to depict their desired universe. Most of the dancers were trained in the Thai classical dance, with the exception of the male ballet dancer, Vadana Visit Sastivatana. The dancing ensemble was uniformly impressive. The leader of the Thai delegation, Madame Sathaporn Sonthong, explained, "All of us were involved in the process of creating this dance, as we all wanted to make this experiment a success".

Indeed, this inventive choreography could have been a greater success had Naraphong made the four sections more different. This could have enabled audience to contrast and compare the various moods of the dance. The dancers did not wear glittering classical Thai dance costumes. Instead, they wore brown working shirts and a pair of trousers that looked very much like the ordinary Thai wrapping loin cloth or Panung. Together with the occasional use of Thai dance gestures and the recitation of a Thai poem, the dance gave the right amount of national flavour that was pleasing.

CLASSICAL DANCE REINTERPRETED

The Indonesians concluded the performance on the tenth of March with two pieces: "*Bedhaya Lala*", a new version of a classical Javanese dance and a dance drama, "*The Fall of Ronggalawe*". The former was originally created by the late H.E. Susuhunan Paku Buwiana Vth (1784-1823). It was, however, rearranged by S.D. Humardani, the former director of the Sekolah Tinggi Seni (Institute



Solidarity expressed in a joyous dance by artistes and officials.

of Arts) in Surakarta. Much shorter and quicker than the original version, this new version had an additional modern resonance. The dance was still as attractive as ever before.

Even for those who were not familiar with the epic of Menak Jingga of the Majapahit Kingdom, "*The Fall of Ronggalawe*" was still a fine piece of art work that deserved praise. Backed by a large group of musicians and vocalists, the dance drama offered several performing highlights. Most of these highlights were brought to fruition by the dancers who played Ronggalawe, the hero, and Banowati, his wife.

The closing ceremony on the 11th of March was concluded with a dance presented by dancers from all the participating countries. Choreographed by an Indonesian artiste, the dance used gestures that suggested Southeast Asian flavours. The 15-minute piece was completely learned by the dancers within two two-hour

rehearsal sessions. The choreographer's inventive flair was evident, whether it was for solo, duet or group. There were fascinating variants on the dance structure and the dancers apparently enjoyed dancing. Thus the ASEAN spirit of harmony was convincingly displayed.

It was a great pity the auditorium was half-filled that evening. It was peculiar too, to note that many leading scholars, choreographers, and dancers of Indonesia were absent during the lecture and workshop sessions.

ASEAN THEATRE FESTIVAL

The format of the Second ASEAN Theatre Festival, held in Singapore (2-9 October 1990) was similar to the one previously held in Manila, in 1988. The biannual event was supported by the ASEAN COCI. Each participating group sent 20 delegates for the occasion.

The two main objectives of the Theatre Festival were:

1. To create an awareness of the progress and development of theatre in ASEAN countries and,
2. To discover the origins, similarities and differences among the theatre works of ASEAN countries.

The festival brought together the dramatists, stage directors and technical theatre personnel of ASEAN countries for a mutual exchange of ideas and expertise on stagecraft. It offered a comparative study of the current trends and developments of theatre in ASEAN countries. Through activities such as performances, workshops and discussions, it hoped the ASEAN people could have a deeper understanding and appreciation of the rich diversity of the theatre in the ASEAN region.

Held at a variety of venues in Singapore, the six productions were performed between the third and the eighth of October. Each presentation was followed by a workshop, con-

ducted by the presenter for the next day.

SINGAPORE'S BABA PLAY

The opening ceremony was duly conducted on the third of October, followed by the performance of a Singapore drama group, the Gunong Sayang Association. Singapore chose to present a Baba play, a unique genre in the multiethnic city state.

Baba, is the term used to describe those Chinese who were acculturated by the Malays. They eat Malay food, dress as Malays and speak the Malay language. Baba plays are drama staged by these Chinese people, using Malay as the language of their performance. It is said that this type of play, had at least, a history of several decades, dating back from pre-war days. Baba plays have been predominantly light-hearted comedies. They have mostly domestic themes, with a female impersonator playing the lead role of the heartless step-mother or domineering grandmother.

This once popular genre of theatre almost disappeared in the '70s, together with the shrinking size of the Baba population, due to the forceful education policy. Few young Singaporeans were then able to speak enough Malay to perform in Baba plays. However, in the '80s, as a result of the government's 1984 Festival of Arts, which included a Baba play, it miraculously revived. The play was Felix Chia's *"Pileh Menantu"* (Choosing a Daughter-in-law). The overwhelming reception of *"Pileh Menantu"* encouraged the Baba theatre enthusiasts tremendously. In the next six months, three more Baba plays were staged!

The choice of the Baba play, *"Sudah di Janji"* (Fated), by the Singapore host is therefore a decision much appreciated by the members of the participating countries. It was a popular theatre genre seldom seen outside Singapore. *"Sudah di Janji"* (Fated), written by Henry Tan, was about traditional customary marriage and the generation gap. It had a predictably satisfactory plot: conflict between the old and the young generations. The story ended on a happy note, with family and friends reconciling. It was the feisty, tightly strung central performance of G. T. Lye, the female impersonator, that ultimately sustained the audience's interest in the narrative. William Tan's clever direction kept the central characters well in focus. He monitored each scene so carefully. He built towards its crux and attack until the end with maintained pace. The audience at the huge Kallang Theatre apparently enjoyed it as they burst into laughter throughout the play.

THE MOON FROM THAILAND

The following day, on the fourth of October, the Thais presented



"The Trial of Mr. Serapio" by the students from Cebu was received enthusiastically by the Singaporean audience.

Pornrat Damhung's "*Jun Euye Jun Jao*" ('Dearest Moon'), at the small auditorium of the Drama Centre. The theme of the play was changing values in the modern world of shopping centres, traffic jams and money chasing. It was a world where parents had no time to spend with their children. The central character was a girl called Nu Lek. She was neglected by her materialistic parents and she missed lullabies such as "Dearest Moon" at bed time.

Mr. Moon, puzzled by the happenings in the changing world, descended to earth, disguised as a human being. He then experienced the mad rush in the metropolitan. And he was greatly disappointed by the indifferent parents. Fortunately, at the end, Mr. Moon and Nu Lek found reason to sing the meaningful lullaby "*Dearest Moon*" again.

Performed by the Arts Theatre Company, an affiliate of the Dramatic Arts Department of Chulalongkorn University, the play brought together an interesting diversity of forms, sources and talents. It was held together by the music specially composed by Napisi Nimmanahaeminda. It was the tuneful music and dances choreographed by Bancha Suvannanonda which lifted the dramatic material out of the thin story line.

Suffering from the frequent changes of props and light, the play was too fragmented. The clear-cut line between goodies and baddies did not encourage the possibility of developing a play with greater depth. The director had her cast bouncing well during the comic moments. But the serious message did not get through.

Nevertheless, the Thai group must be praised for undertaking such a fascinating voyage to an unfamiliar territory. Many of the Singaporeans

in the audience were pleased with "Dearest Moon". This modern play gave them that new perspective on non-traditional theatre in contemporary Thailand.

LEGEND ON STAGE

On the fifth of October, Brunei Darussalam presented "*Pancir Kesateria Tongkat Negara*" (The Fatherland's Pillar). Many forms of theatre in Brunei Darussalam were

Negara" and "*Putra Seni*". Most of them had tremendous experience on stage as well as radio and television.

The play chosen by Brunei Darussalam was a story of patriotism and romance. It was set against the warring backdrop of Spanish insurrection and the occupation of Brunei in 1578 A.D. With stylized movement and elaborate costumes, the production was fair on the whole. Although the pace was a bit slow, the cast did give a polished and truthful performance. It was a pity that the group



Musicians from Brunei Darussalam practicing their songs before the performance.

initially introduced and presented through dance. They were heavily influenced by "*Bangsawan*" troupes from neighbouring countries. Theatre was once used as an instrument by which the spirit of struggle was emphasized, especially during the Japanese occupation era.

With the emergence of various theatre groups, at present, theatre is experiencing a revival in Brunei Darussalam. The Brunei Darussalam delegates to Singapore were selected from two leading groups: "*Rusila*

had chosen a wrong venue, Kallang Theatre, which was too large. If it had been performed in a small theatre the effect would have certainly been better.

A HILARIOUS REVENGE

Next came the Indonesians. They presented a satirical play called "*Dhemits*" (Spirits of the Trees), by a young Javanese playwright called Heru Kesawa Murti. Performed by the Gandrik Theatre Group, *Dhemits*

questioned the environment posed by modernization. Trees were being cut down at an accelerating speed so the spirit of trees, the *Dhemits*, came out to take revenge.

Dhemits was both poignant and funny. The young cast gave an impeccable performance, under Jujuk Prabowo's inventive direction. It was a most memorable production. Indeed, it touched the hearts of the audience.

DRAMATIZED HISTORY

However, for the 1990 Festival, Malaysia decided to send a larger group of actors. Taking advantage of geographical proximity, the extra number of delegates came to Singapore by train.

The offering from Malaysia, *Anak Tanjung* ("The Son of the Soil"), was written and directed by award winning playwright, Nordin Hassan. It was an admirable production, with solid performances from the large cast. The story depicted "the struggle of the Malay people to free themselves from the shackles of socio-economic educational and political injustice brought about by colonisation, during the period before the Second World War up to the abolishment of the Malayan Union. It portray the efforts at cooperation of the major ethnic groups in attaining independence, though not without difficulties due to different political philosophies", according to the programme note.

The concept of the playwright and director, Nordin Hassan, was admirably clever. He used flags to symbolize the different periods when Malayan was ruled by the British and Japanese before. This was before it became an independent country. The Japanese invasion scene was flooded with flags and red light, with intimi-



"The Fall of Ronggalawe", a classical dance by the late S.D. Humardami, the highly respected Javanese choreographer.

dating sound effect. The use of two comedians (Dr. Ghouse Nasaruddin and Lokman Ghani), as a thread to link up the long story was an intelligent device. Because they were such experienced performers.

However, the performance was weakened by the structure of the play. The 29 short scenes, could have lent themselves better to a television series. The clog dance and the use of masks did not integrate well with the flow of the drama either. But worst of all, was the insertion of an unmistakable balletic pas de deux. The dance sequence was well choreographed and executed by the dancers with ease. But it did not seem to be in harmony with the main theme of the play. It was so ironic to see a drama with strong anti-colonialism feeling using ballet as a means to depict a love scene.

Fortunately, other song and dance scenes as well as acting were well presented. There were also some marvellously funny or serious moments. And they successfully involved the emotion of the audience in the large auditorium of the Kallang Theatre.

A FARCICAL TRIAL

The last performance of the Festival was presented by the Cebu Central College from the Philippines. Presented at the World Trade Centre Auditorium, "*Ang Paglilitis Ni Mang Serapio*" (The Trial of Mr. Serapio) was written by Paul Dumol in 1968. It was adjudged the Best Play in the Dulaang Sibol Play Production Contest. Some months later the play also won the Best Script Award in

another contest sponsored by the Philippines Educational Theatre Association. The young Paul Dumol, then a student at the Ateneo High School, was indeed very happy with such honour. The play has since been published in anthologies of Philippine Literature, the *East-West Journal of Hawaii*. It was selected as the play for all the group participating in the First National Drama Competition organized by the Cultural Centre of the Philippines last year.

Directed by Orlando Magno, the Barangay Kalubihan Theatre Workshop Company of the Cebu Central College presented the play in a tongue in cheek farce, in Tagalog with futuristic trappings. This satirical approach brought out the original intention of Paul Dumol: displaying the painful sufferings of Serapio. The production also benefited from the dramatic lighting design of Gerard Fernandez which heightened the visual effect of the play. Despite the language barrier and the monotonous shouting of some of the actors, the Singaporean audience was moved by the tragedy of Serapio.

EVALUATION

Similar to the ASEAN Dance Festival in Jakarta, the ASEAN Theatre Festival had provided opportunities for participating groups to see the developments of theatre in their neighbouring countries. They were also given the opportunity to assess their own strengths as well as their own weaknesses. The advantage was that the events were organized in the traditional spirit of ASEAN solidarity and cordiality. Some were able to exchange views with startling frankness with their counterparts. Others preferred polite conversations.

However, there were also drawbacks because of the lack of strong

support from the mass media. Television coverage was limited. The critics and the press were too polite to honestly air their criticisms. The physical limitation of theatre venues had inevitably restricted the large number of people who could have otherwise enjoyed the presentation. Performances should have been aired simultaneously. And the presentations could have been followed by discussions on television. This way more people could have been involved in the process of understanding and promoting the arts in ASEAN.

It would have been more successful, if the Ministry of Education of all the member countries were brought in to consistently support these projects. Just imagine, if some of the plays were published and used in the schools as textbooks and the dances taught as extracurriculum activities. How different it would be in a decade! We will have a new generation who could grow up with ASEAN drama and dance! Would these not be a more interesting way of promoting symbolic solidarity in cultural expressions? ■

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