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### **The Contemporary Musical Theatre in Malaysia**

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## The Contemporary Musical Theatre in Malaysia

### Abstract

Musical theatre production in Malaysia in recent years has been growing. Some productions are low-budget small scale concerns, while some are larger-scale musicals, involving professionals from different areas of expertise, a huge budget and a longer period of planning. The larger-scale musicals have proven their success, such as *Puteri Gunung Ledang*, *Siddharta*, *Butterfly Lovers* and *Jewel of Tibet*. Among the many musical productions, four main organizations that are actively involved in musical productions have been examined for their identity and characteristics of the musicals they produce. The article highlights how local musicals have been performed in a Westernized concept. Some issues will be discussed regarding the approach, opinions and methods stated by music directors and composers from different local musical theatres. It is shown that the influence of the Western Musicals is strongly reflected in local modern musical theatre.

**Keywords:** Malaysia, Musical, Identity, Modernity

### Introduction

Performing arts in Malaysia are growing rapidly, in parallel with development in various subjects including music, theatre and dance. As well as the growth of Malaysia as a developing country, one of the reasons is the increasing number of public concert halls and theatres, such as Istana Budaya, Dewan Philharmonic, and Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, in the last decade. This has indirectly provided more opportunities and platforms for various art groups, whether professional or amateur. The accessibility of these public halls and theatres also assists in increasing audience numbers, which is important as the support of various

performances. Another reason that has contributed to the development of various art forms is the increase in arts subjects in the Malaysian education system, as is evident in many tertiary institutions, whether publicly or privately funded.

Malaysian theatre appears to have a vast history that covers forms categorized as traditional and contemporary. Scholars have looked into the various theatres, drama and plays in Malaysia such as the *Wayang kulit*, *Bangsawan*, *Sandiwara*, *Boria* and others (Osnes 2010; Diamond 2002; Tan 1993; Bujang 1987); nevertheless, there seems to have been limited discussion and analysis of contemporary musical theatre. In recent

decades, local production of musical theatre has increased quite significantly to the extent that the success of some of these productions resulted in invitation and sponsorship to perform abroad. Musical theatre as discussed in this article refers to the contemporary musicals which have been much influenced by Broadway and West End musicals. Even in the historically based *sandiwara*, which places more importance on song and dance than the script, Diamond (2002:26) has stated that “some of the hastily contrived extravaganzas of the late 1990s followed a similar formula, although utilizing a Broadway model rather than a local one.”

Although Malaysia is a multicultural country with a population consisting of Malays, Chinese, Indians and others, it is interesting to analyse how these musicals are produced locally and the hybrid style embedded in these performances. The hybrid style in these productions can be found in various aspects, particularly the costumes, music, and the language used. Undoubtedly, art forms have gradually transformed due to the changes in society and the consistent influence of globalization and modernization. While much literature focuses on the development of the theatre in general, comprising theatre, plays, musicals, drama and so forth, this article will concentrate only on local modern musical theatre.

Although musicals in Malaysia certainly show a contrasting context in comparison with Musical in the West, Kenrick's (2008) statement that ‘history shows us that musicals thrive in cities that are the “happening place’ at

a given moment,” justifies the development and reflects why musical theatre has been increasingly produced in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia, in recent years.

### **The Local Contemporary Musical Theatre**

Comparable to Kay Li's article (Li 2007) discussing how Hong Kong's contemporary theatre reflects the globalized city in its performances, it is worth discussing the broad context of Malaysian musicals, which is due to Malaysia being a multiracial country whose populations includes the bumiputera (Malay) (67.4%), Chinese (24.6%), Indian (7.3%), others (0.7%) (*The Star* 29 July 2011). Looking solely at the titles of Malaysian Musical, the contents are rich, with subjects varying from epics, history, biography, original fiction and so forth. Undoubtedly, most of the contexts adapted from epics or historical accounts came from the two biggest sections of the population, which are Malay and Chinese. Taking into account that local contemporary musical theatre is growing in prominence as one of the important performing art forms, and considering the fact that its localization is blended with a Western Musical approach, some significances did emerge and will be discussed. While looking from the perspective of these productions, another important aspect is to find out how local audiences perceive this art form. Research (on 660 respondents) investigating audience response to selected Malaysian art concerts showed that Musical recorded the most preferred genre in comparison to a list of music genres such as Western classical, pop, jazz, and opera (Loo 2009). Although this survey cannot serve as a representative sample,

the preference gathered from the audience certainly contributes to a positive future for this art form.

In Malaysia, musicals are performed in both large- and small-scale productions, which can be reflected in the revenue, the venue and audience. Most of the small-scale musicals are part of activities in an organization regardless of schools or any associations, and raising revenue is not the main reason for these. In terms of the quality of the props and costumes, these productions are produced using an economical approach due to the lack of funding; casts are amateurish, as most of the performers and musicians are students, not professional artists. These small-scale musicals are performed mostly in schools, colleges, universities, and also by different associations, usually running for only one or a few performances.

In the public arena, some productions have more significant performances with a much more profound impact. In contrast to the small-scale Musical, these productions are usually managed by professional organizations in the performing arts and each production is planned with a given budget, with sponsors, publicity in various media. Audience reception and turnover are important in determining future productions. Productions that have the opportunity to perform abroad also have an important role in representing the current trend of musical theatre in Malaysia. The discussion below focuses on four organizations which are actively involved with musical production: *Enfiniti Production*; *Musical On Stage (MOSP)*; *Dama Orchestra*; and *Kuala Lumpur*

*Performing Arts Centre (KLPac)*. Their musicals are considered to be large-scale productions for the reasons mentioned above: the number of performances, consistency of publicity in various media, tickets sale, and performances abroad. All performances considered took place between 2006 and 2010 and their individual significance may to a certain extent contribute to the identity and present the hybrid style of local modern productions in Malaysia. The chosen musicals in this article were all stage musicals. As many art forms vary within themselves or amalgamate with other forms, the musical as discussed here reflects Kenrick's (2008:14) definition:

Musical (noun): a stage, television, or film production utilizing popular style songs to either tell a story or to showcase the talents of writers and/or performers, with dialogue optional.

The chosen musicals were analysed through observation and interview with selected music directors, performers, music composers, and performers. Interviews with production teams from various productions were held mainly to seek their opinions and experiences of the musicals. We also investigated one of the local productions, *Dama Orchestra*, from an insider perspective, due to long collaboration with this organization in music composing and arrangement and also our participation as musicians in many performances.

### **Selected Musical Theatre Organization**

#### **Enfiniti Production**

Perhaps Malaysia's most influential production, which analogues to the Western

“megamusical,” was Enfiniti’s *Puteri Gunung Ledang*. Enfiniti production was established by Tiara Jacquelina, a Malaysian-born actress and film producer of Burmese-Indonesian-Chinese lineage. This organization was founded in 2003 as an expansion of Kit Kat Club Entertainment and Ten and Ten Picture, with a reputation in the field of entertainment and production (<http://www.enfiniti.com.my/>).

Among the many productions, two significant musicals were produced by this company: *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (PGL) – *The Musical* was debuted in February 2006 and later followed by *P. Ramlee – The Musical* in 2007. PGL was based on a famous epic Malay legend, and the musical was derived from the movie with the same title produced in 2003. It was an award-winning film featuring the producer herself, Tiara, and it was considered in the Foreign Film Category of the Academy Awards. The story, set in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, tells of the romance of a *Majapahit* princess, *Gusti Putri* and *Hang Tuah*, a Malacca warrior. Due to the Indonesian origin, the Malay language with a mixture of Javanese-accented Malay was used in the performance, while English subtitles were provided. It was the longest running musical in Malaysia with three seasons (February 2006; August 2006; 2009) and there were also performances at the Esplanade in Singapore (November 2006). *P. Ramlee – The Musical*, the second major production by Enfiniti, was performed for two seasons (18 September – 3 October in 2007; and 28 May – 14 June 2008). It was a biographical musical that featured the life of one of Malaysia’s most popular figures in film-actor, songwriter, director, singer and

producer, Tan Sri P. Ramlee (1929–1973).

### **Musical on Stage Production**

The founder of Musical on Stage Production (MOSP) is Ho Lin Huey, a producer, director and writer, and its goal is to produce “top notch Malaysian musicals” (<http://www.musicalonstage.com/>). The first musical by this production was *Siddharta – The Musical* (1999), performed at the Bukit Jalil Stadium, Kuala Lumpur, and at that time considered the biggest Malaysian musical. Although the first musical, it was successfully taken to Singapore and South Africa. This was followed by other productions such as *Above the Full Moon* (2004), *The Perfect Circle* (2006) and *Jewel of Tibet* (2008). After a decade, *Siddharta - The Musical* was revised and performed again in 2009 at the Istana Budaya.

MOSP is known for its association with Buddhism and this is in evidence not only through *Siddharta* but also *Above the Full moon*, *The Perfect Circle* and *Jewel of Tibet*.<sup>1</sup> One of the main reasons for this may be that a few members in this production are highly devoted to Buddhism. Apart from working with MOSP as composer for almost all the productions, Imee Ooi has a reputation as a famous Malaysian composer of Buddhist music. Establishing her own studio IMM Musicworks, in 1997, she has released more than 20 albums which have also been successfully marketed in Taiwan. Another figure is Yang Wei Han, a devoted Buddhist, who is not only the lead singer for most of the productions but also the video image designer

for these musicals. Yang was also a famous pop singer in the 1990's and took the role of Siddharta in the Musical.

*Above the Full Moon* was premiered in July 2004 and later performed again at the Genting International Showroom<sup>2</sup> in October-November 2005. This musical described the life of Lee Shu Tong, a prominent artiste in early 20<sup>th</sup> century China who later converted to a monk, taking the name Master Hong Yi, and contributed greatly to the modernization of Buddhist chant and music. *A Perfect Circle* produced in 2006 tells about the story related to Buddhism in four segments, which are *Karma and Samsara*, *The Buddha and Rahula*, *The Great Sixth Patriarch of Zen Buddhism* and *The Great Compassion*. Different from other productions, each segment of this Musical was augmented by a question and answer session between an MC and the invited guest from Taiwan, Venerable Manyā, who has a mission to reach people of different cultures by travelling around countries (Ker 2006). *Jewel of Tibet* (2008) was based on a true story about Princess Wen Cheng from the Tang dynasty who married and brought Buddhism to Tibet.

In contrast to Enfiniti, MOSP represents the Malaysian Chinese community for this art form. These productions portray one of the local Chinese musical productions featuring the Mandarin language, with the content and the hallmark of MOSP having Buddhism as the focus. While centered on Buddhism, in 2010 the production came out with a very different musical *Singing Market*, featuring popular Chinese songs from the 1950's to 70's (Devan 2010). With Cody Fong as a music

director, the musical highlighted famous popular singers among the Chinese community, in particularly winners from the *Astro Classic Golden Melody Singing*.<sup>3</sup> Implementing the Prime Minister's slogan *1Malaysia* – referring to the unity of the various races in the country – both Ho and Ooi also engaged themselves in *Kita (We) – The Musical*, produced by Xiyue Art and Culture and organized by the Department of National Unity and Ministry of Information, Communication and Culture. This musical was about three ordinary boys living together in harmony to reflect the spirit of *1Malaysia* in the 1960's and 70's, in which the story continues until the Prime Minister launched the motto of *1Malaysia* in 2009.

#### **Dama Orchestra**

Another Chinese group that is actively involved in musical theatre production is Dama Orchestra. It was founded in 1993 by Khor Seng Chew as producer, music director and also pipa player and guitarist. Pun Kai Loon joined Dama as artistic director several years later and was the main reason why the organization involved in musical theatre. Dama was originally a Chinese orchestra comprising 20-30 instrumentalists with a repertoire of mainly traditional numbers. It was a not-for-profit organization at that time and the musicians were basically involved because of their interest in and enthusiasm for the music. During the 1990's the function of this orchestra was not much different from that of other Chinese orchestras in Malaysia. It acted more like a music club for leisure and most of the members had permanent day jobs (Tan 2000).

For a Chinese orchestra and for arts music in Malaysia, survival and maintenance is not easy especially in terms of financial aspects. The directors soon found many problems, particularly with sponsorship, commitment of musicians to be there at every rehearsal, and, more critically, a limited audience pool to appreciate the traditional or classic repertoire. In realization of all these matters, the directors immediately came up with an innovative approach to re-vamp this orchestra, in other words, innovation was necessary for Dama to survive and be marketed to the public.

The turning point of Dama came about in 1997. Three main actions were taken – downsizing the orchestra, changing the repertory, and adding a whole new presentation to performance. First of all, the orchestra was downsized to only six musicians. Their first performance was named *Spring Kisses Lovers Tears*, featuring Chinese “oldies” from famous Chinese songstresses and movie stars from Hong Kong and Shanghai in the 1930s to 1960’s. The use of staging revealed a brand new image, in which theatrical elements were brought in, singers acted along with the lyrics of the song, and a story line was added, together with the design of special costumes, lighting and stagecraft that successfully captured the audience’s attention. The success of this production was evident. The concert was performed in twenty-one venues throughout Malaysia and the success brought the whole troupe to Shanghai in 2003. By looking at the potential of such concerts, the directors instantly found assurance for continuing on the same path.

Dama’s first “theatrical” concert was *In the Imperial Garden* (2002), in which a mixture of songs by Theresa Teng and New Age Chinese music was used with poems from the Tang and Song dynasties. Based on the lyrics of the chosen songs, a legendary story was created which told a modern fable about how good triumphs over evil on Kingdom Earth. Although it cannot be fully considered as musical theatre, this story was presented with stagecraft, solo dancing, singing and acting. With these few elements, perhaps this was the first step in Dama orchestra changing the concept of its productions to a more theatrical approach. *Imperial Garden* was followed by productions with a similar concept, such as *Fragrance of the Night* (2002) featuring songs from the songstress Li Xiang Lan; *Love Without End* (2003), a combination of Chinese golden oldies; *Musical Sojourn* (2003) which featured popular music around the world; *Memories* (2003), a performance that showcased Chinese Golden Oldies from previous productions; *La Cabaret Shanghai* (2004) featuring Chinese Oldies and dance in a night club style; and *September Tale* (2005), the biography of the famous Taiwan songstress Teresa Teng. It is clear that the productions from 2003-2005 concentrated on Chinese Golden Oldies and this has become one of the significant features of Dama Orchestra in the Malaysian concert scene. All these performances were led by the classically-trained vocalist Tan Soo Suan who became the main “actress” in most of these productions. The classical singing of these songs, together with an ensemble which has a fusion of Chinese and Western instruments, became the trademark of Dama orchestra.

Dama's first musical theatre *Butterfly Lovers –The Musical* (2006) was based on the Shaw Brother's in 1963 story *The Lover Eterne*. It is also famously known as *Liang Shan Bo Zhu Ying Tai* or *Liang Zhu* among the Chinese community. The songs and the script were based on the film featuring *huangmei* folk songs, but although the melodies and lyrics were retained, the songs and music were completely rearranged in a new style. A narrator in English served as one of the cast and at the same time narrated the story alongside the performance. *The Butterfly Lovers* performed for three seasons, at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (October 2006) at the Genting Highland International Showroom (April 2007) and at The Majestic Theatre, Perth, Australia (June 2007). The second musical *I Have a Date with Spring* (2009) was based on a play performed by the Hong Kong Repertory Theatre in October 1992 and 1993, with a script written by Raymond To Kwok Wai and directed by Ko Tin Lung. It featured the life of four nightclub singers, each with a different character, and how they survived in the club and the changes in society throughout those years. The story begins with the lead singer, Butterfly, who returned from Canada in 1987 and the plot flashes back to 1967 and her life together with three good friends in the nightclub. The musical was performed for two seasons; it was debuted at the KLPac in October 2009 and again at Perth, Australia, altogether running for more than twenty performances.

The third musical from this production, *Glitz and Glamour* (2010), reflects its previous shows of Chinese Golden Oldies. This is a

singsong and dance musical spanning the era from Old Shanghai to the Silver Screen of the Shaw Brothers and Cathay cinemas; although without dialogue, narration in English leads the storyline. It was a book by Pun about a village girl who had the opportunity to become a star in the city, and illustrated her romance and challenges together with other subplots. This production ran for twenty performances at the KLPac in October 2010.

### **Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (Klpac)**

When KLPac is mentioned, the name usually refers to the venue and hall, although it can also refer to an organization established by Yayasan Budi Penyayang Malaysia, Yeoh Tiong Lai (YTL) Corporation Berhad (a developer) and The Actor Studio Malaysia (TAS). The establishment of KLPac initially came from two individuals, Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham. As reported in the article by Diamond (2002), both Merican and Hasham were also the founders of TAS and had contributed greatly to English theatre in Malaysia since the 1970's. TAS was founded in 1995 situated below Dataran Merdeka (the Independent Square in Kuala Lumpur) and was the first privately-owned theatre in Malaysia. In 2003 an unpredictable flash floods in Kuala Lumpur brought tragedy and destroyed all the shops and infrastructures below Dataran Merdeka, including TAS.<sup>4</sup> Due to the damage, TAS needed a new venue and so Hasham and Merican together with their partners found the old National Railway (KTM) warehouse in YTL Corporation's Sentul West. With the recommendation of the late Datin Paduka Seri Endon (then chairman of Yayasan



Budi Penyayang), the late wife of the previous Prime Minister, Tun Abdullah Badawi, the CEO of YTL Francis Yeoh agreed to the proposal of KLPac. It was launched on 21 May 2004 and the production team has utilized the venue since 9 May 2005 ([http://www.klpac.org/?page\\_id=1983](http://www.klpac.org/?page_id=1983)).

From the history of TAS, there is no doubt that countless theatrical productions have been performed. Being a producer, actress and director, Merican was known as the First Lady of Malaysian Theatre (Venugopal 2011); her early acting credits include such plays as *Lela Mayang, Tok Perak, Uda dan Dara* and *Alang Rentak Seribu*. Her husband, Hasham, a Lebanese, migrated to Malaysia from Australia in 1984 where they started up TAS. As the artistic director of KLPac, he was also a film director, recording artist, and producer of many theatre performances.

Along many productions of drama, plays, theatre and other performances, perhaps the first remarkable musical theatre that was staged by KLPac was *Broken Bridges* (2006). The musical produced by composer Lim Chuang Yik and lyricist Teng Ky-Gen, the lyricist and directed by Joe Hasham, was about the story of a father and a son from Ipoh in the olden days. Perhaps the setting was because both Lim and Teng hailed from Ipoh. An original story by Lim and Teng, this production reflects an issue common in current society, delineating the relationship between a father and his son who abandoned the family to move into the capital due to his materialistic character. This production was the first step of the team to produce “Broadway” musical, as

explained by Lim (2009).

With the same production team, another musical, *Tunku* (2008), was produced celebrating the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Malaysia’s independence. This musical gave the audience an “insight into how Merdeka had changed the people’s lives through the hopes, aspirations and sacrifices made by the nation’s Founding Father,” the late Tunku Abdul Rahman (Kaur 2007). It ran from 11 August until 2 September 2008 with more than twenty performances. Another biographical production followed, *Ismail – The Last Day* (running from 7–31 August 2008) about the later years of Tun Dr. Ismail Abdul Rahman, Malaysia’s third prime minister. It was produced in the same period of time for Malaysian’s Independence Day. Having been organized by KLPac, this musical introduced some new members into the production team, including Ng U-En as the script writer, Datuk Johari Saleh, who lead Radio Televisyen Malaysian (RTM) in the 1960’s and 70’s, as the composer, and music director Mervyn Peter. The production also incorporated poems of the late National Literature Laureate, Datuk Usman Awang (Sia 2008). In comparison with *Tunku* or *P. Ramlee*, this production was not as successful in the eyes of some critics: some felt that the biographical story of Tun Dr. Ismail would be better projected by a stage play rather than a musical, due to the fact that the politician’s personality, as stated, “unlike a personality such as Tan Sri P. Ramlee, Ismail seems an unlikely character to simply burst into song” (Vengadesan 2008). Other significant productions include the *Broadway Parodies Lah* (2007) and *Broadway*

*Parodies Lagi Lah* (2008) which were ‘a collection of songs about Malaysian life set to the tunes of Broadway hits and a couple of Disney movie tracks’ (Kanter 2008). For example, one of the songs describes the worry of a girl who is required to participate in National Service with the song “I am Sixteen Going to Seventeen” from *The sound of music*; or lyrics were changed, such as “I Could Have Danced All Night” from *My Fair Lady* becoming “We Must Play Golf All Night.” However, this is a production of a collection of songs set in various scenes, more like a singing concert with acting and drama instead of a musical.

### **Issues in the representation of language, costume and music**

#### **Language**

From the many productions, it is evident each organization produces musicals that bear significant approach and predilection in some aspects. The different backgrounds of the organizations probably explain the characteristics and contexts of the musicals performed. For example, Enfiniti, whose production team is mostly Malay, naturally chose the legend of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* and also the biography of Tan Sri P.Ramlee, one of Malaysia’s most popular artists in the 1960’s and 70’s. On the other hand, both Dama and MOSP featured Chinese legend, history, Buddhism, and Chinese popular music in various eras in their productions. KLPac, described as the “English language theatre” group (Diamond 2002) and associated with *The Actor Studio*, has performed the local issues, although mostly rendered in English in

both dialogues and lyrics.

In terms of language, all these musical productions reveal many aspects of localization, although it is equally important they embrace a western approach. Although performed for the multiracial community of Malaysia, non-English musicals are mostly supplemented with English subtitles rather than subtitles in the national Malay language. A possible reason is perhaps because the majority of theatre-goers are non-Malay. Different organizations have shown clearly the language used in their musicals productions, for example Enfiniti uses Malay and MOSP, Chinese, in all their productions. This has become part of the identity of the particular production company, but the choice of story also explains why the language chosen is more appropriate, along with the background of the synopsis. To a certain extent, authenticity might not be achieved if PGL were performed in English or Mandarin. However, production of musicals and Operas that use a foreign language to portray a different culture are not new in the globalized world. As Swain (2002: 265) gives a fine example:

Certainly a large number of opera have settings foreign to the composer’s home culture: The Abduction from the Seraglio (Mozart in Turkey), Aida (Verdi in Egypt), and Turandot (Puccini in China) come to mind immediately, and perhaps the entire Baroque tradition of *Opera Seria*, preoccupied with antiquity and myth, could be compared with these, although it does not use the foreign elements in the same way.

In the literature of musical, this could apply to productions such as Rogers and

Hammerstein's *Flower Drum Song*, *King and I*, *South Pacific* and many others. Although these works have become internationally famous, they were originally composed for an audience which was similarly foreign to the particular culture portrayed. Looking from the other point of view, authenticity may be challenged if a foreign language is used, particularly for legends or epics. Depending on the views of the audience and also taking into consideration the background of the audience, a musical using a Chinese set and legend sung or spoken in English may sound alien to a more traditional Chinese community or to those who are not exposed to foreign languages. Despite the setting and music, the essence of language and communication may be lost. For example, the aesthetics in Chinese poems and text, or a dialogical style such as that used in a palace, can hardly be replaced or even lost, although this depends on the concept of a production.

While both *Enfiniti* and *MOSP* show a strong attachment and localization in using Malay and Mandarin in their productions, the use of mixed languages can be found in *Dama's* productions. *Dama's* recognition of Chineseness in Malaysia is demonstrated not only in its music performance, but also in the overall presentation. This is no doubt explained by looking at its background as a Chinese orchestra and together with their fellow musicians. Their approach in promoting Chinese oldies and instrument has been apparent to the public, particularly the Chinese community in Malaysia. *Dama* debuted its first musical *The Butterfly Lovers* (2006), based on the Shaw Brother's musical film *The*

*Love Eterne*, which featured *huangmei* songs, as mentioned earlier. Using Mandarin, the musical follows the script in the film and also the melody of the *huangmei* folk songs exactly. Apart from the set design and the costume, the major change in this musical is the arrangement of all *huangmei* songs in a modern manner together with the singing style of the cast.

Nevertheless, this musical of Chinese legend together with the more formal Mandarin used in that era targeted an audience from the Chinese community. However, it is important to note that there is a considerable population of Chinese in Malaysia who are not Chinese-educated, meaning that this section of the community does not speak or write Chinese, nor understand Mandarin (although some understand dialects, this community is commonly termed as "banana" in Malaysia, meaning yellow skin with an English [white] background). Both producers Khor and Pun certainly predicted these problems, probably due to the fact that Pun himself came from a non-Chinese-educated background. Taking this matter into consideration, one of the added aspects in the musical is the inclusion of a character who narrates in English. To serve a new few function in the musical, the story was narrated alongside the performance, providing a third-party opinion and also the role of Ma Wen Chai – the rich man who was intended to marry Zhu. The role of Ma is only revealed at the end of the musical, surprising the audience with his identity. This is because those familiar with the film knows that Ma's role only exists in the dialogue of the film but not in person. The narration functions in story-telling and

criticizing the different roles, and was believed to strengthen the understanding of the non-Chinese educated audience and non-Chinese audience even though subtitles in both Chinese and English were provided.

In the midst of concern about the audience understanding the story, in particular for the performance in Perth, Pun stated "Language will not be a problem as there are English subtitles for non-Mandarin speakers, but would the culturally-dissimilar Perth audience get it?" (Yoong 2008). In that, the narration perhaps acted as an effective supplement in the three performances at the Majestic Theatre, Perth, Australia in 2007. While a large crowd of Chinese audience was expected at the city of Perth, the English narration assisted not only the non-Chinese but also those for whom unfamiliar with the legend and the cultural differences were unfamiliar.

The purely English language local musical theatre came from the KLPac organization. In comparison to other productions that feature epics or legends, KLPac's localization is shown in its historical aspects, such as the two biographical musical *Tunku* and *Ismail*, featuring the two prime ministers in conjunction with the Merdeka (Independence) celebration. The localization of their production also includes the *Broken Bridge*, *Adam* and so forth which narrate the lifestyle or issues of the current community in Malaysia. *Broken Bridges* tells about the phenomenon of young people who abandon their villages in order to survive in the modern city, and how this affects their relationship with family members and friends, while *Adam* highlights

the issue of a couple affected by Aids, emphasizing that the disease is a serious threat not only in Malaysia but also around the world. Regardless of the synopsis of these musicals, dialogues and songs were all presented completely in English. On one hand, the localizations thus strongly portrayed in these musicals reflect Malaysia's historical accounts and also the current society, but on the other hand, globalization is exhibited in the production approach. Not only is English used on a stage portraying a multi-racial cast, the use of Broadway or West End style of music is also evident, which will be explained in the following discussion.

### **Costume**

Whether or not to describe these local musical theatre productions as bearing more of the elements of traditional or Broadway/West End style is hardly justified since the individual aspects from these productions contribute to the entire outcome. But another issue of discussion is how the representation of these subjects appeals to different parties or is meant to simulate them. Most of the members in each production team are locals despite their professional backgrounds, but even so intrinsic artistry varies with each individual, or the creative team stamps its hallmark on each production. Both audio and visual subjects are equally important in the musical theatre and, analogues to a chemical reaction, the characteristics and style of each entity determines the identity of the end product. The delivery of the dialogue or lyrics in different language is discussed above, but the music, costumes, props and stage craft are also important components affecting the end

product of these performances. Looking across all productions, the fundamental style of the costume designs did not contradict the era of each synopsis although each production presented its own creativity in these subjects. “Contradict” in this context means that the creativity in these productions did not go beyond the expectation of the audience perception, as might be the case in *avant garde* productions. To a certain extent, while not rigidly analyzing these costumes according to a designated era, authenticity is somehow achieved together with the ethnicity of the cast in each production. The issue of conforming to the “local colour” in accommodating the authenticity of the legend of narrative does not apply in local productions, although these have raised much discussion in many contemporary productions around the world. For example, it was explained by Metzger (2003) how Zhang Yimou infused more Chinese elements in his staging of *Turandot* by training the actors in the subtleties of court rituals and manners, also infusing the opera with more “Chinese flavor” with the use of sets, costumes and direction. In the same article, the issue of compensating between the visual representation of Chinese people onstage with the ornate costumes serves as a vehicle, although the casting choices of vocal roles that “denied them any part of the opera’s music” was also discussed (Metzger 2003:212). The production did not include any Chinese in principal roles and it was stated that *Turandot* in China “is largely a Western creation for a Western audience” according to Chu’s review in L.A. Times (*ibid.*:213).

The intercultural issue within a production

may be totally irrelevant in local productions as not only does the ethnicity of the casting conform to the particular narrative, but the background of the production team is no different, although with a mixture of one or two who are non-Malaysian. For example, this could be applied to PGL, in which all the principle roles are Malays; *Siddharta* and *Jewel of Tibet* are Chinese; *Butterfly Lovers* and *I have a date with Spring* are also Chinese; while KLPac productions such as *Tunku* and *Ismail* came with a multiracial cast which corresponded with the narrative.

In addition, as mentioned, the creativity of costume design in these productions does not travel beyond the period itself and the effort to maintain authenticity is clearly shown. The processes of some of these productions are documented. For example, the research of Majapahit costumes portrayed in the PGL not only took Akma Suriati to forty shops in search for the correct material, but as a graduate from a local institution who had experienced working with the costume department of the Hafen Theatre in Germany, Suriati’s study on the style of the costume also took her to Johor to meet someone who had danced at the palace in Indonesia (Tan 2007). The authenticity and creativity in this musical was explained: “I wanted to create something different, use more earth tones instead of bright colours for the musical.” (*ibid.*:104). The designer also discloses that she used *kain sarong*, *batik*, and *songket* fabric from Terengganu and certain fabrics from Pakistan. Other more authentically-designed costumes were used in productions such as the *Siddharta* and *Jewel of Tibet* by MOSP. Both designed by

a local Malaysian, Caren Yee, the research for *Jewel of Tibet* took the production team from Xi An, China to Lhasa, Tibet, looking into the route taken by Princess Wen Cheng when she left her homeland to marry King Songsten Gampo. Reported as a 1.5 million ringgit production, it features 300 newly-designed costumes from the ethnic Tang dynasty and from the Tibet (Seto 2008). The authenticity of these costumes not only could be visually observed but also was revealed by the cast, as one of the main actors revealed “The costumes, which are made of authentic materials brought from China and Tibet, are so hard and heavy that if he were to jump out of them, they would still stand upright by themselves” (Chan 2008). Perhaps the more debatable costume came from the *Butterfly Lovers*, the *huangmei* musical. As a famous piece of Chinese folk literature, the story is set in the Eastern Jin Dynasty (265-420AD), which portrays a culture that rejects female education. As mentioned, while the majority of the production team were Malaysian, the costume in this musical was designed by a Frenchman from New Caledonia, Dominique Devorsine, although she had lived in Malaysia for more than twenty years. Devorsine was the famous designer in many musical productions in Malaysia, not only working with Dama but also KL Pac. Interviews and conversations with some members of the cast and production team revealed that the colours, which complement the stagecraft and lighting, are what makes her designs significant. Together with the stagecraft, there were also comments that both the costumes and the stage design resemble some flavor of Japanese rather than Chinese (Ho 2006). Although different views

were gathered, the stage design undoubtedly presented a magnificent outlook in this production. Whether or not simplicity was the concept of the stage design, the transformation of the platform that changed in each scene was somehow extraordinary. In this musical, the flamboyance and the ornamentation in the Chinese traditional decoration were not portrayed in terms of the set, such as the interior décor in the living room or the wedding ceremony. Also, the *shui xiu* (the traditional water sleeves) were not present in this production. Rather than the lightweight swaying of the water sleeves, the costume offers a much more static image, except for Zhu Ying Tai’s white robe when she ran to Liang’s grave at the end of the scene. It was also commented that the costume for the cast during the wedding ceremony resembled a funeral due to the use of black more than red. Perhaps it may be Devorsine’s creativity in the choice of colors, or this might be the director’s initiative, as the wedding in this scene signifies the tragedy in the coming scenes with Zhu’s refusal to marry. The director’s thoughts were reflected in the arrangement of the wedding music so that the procession music, although portraying the joyful ceremony, at the same time expressed or hinted that the dark side was approaching (Pun 2006). In that, the arrangement of the music employed a fragment of *huangmei* with major tonality signifying the joyfulness accompanied by the Chinese cymbal, but each phrase and the end of the possession music were filled with minor tonality (to represent the tragedy).

The non-traditional style of costumes by Devorsine were also featured in KLPac’s

productions due to the content of musicals that focus more on casual attire from the 1950s to the 1990s, including the three main ethnic groups in Malaysia, the Malays, Chinese and Indian. Through these musicals, which include *Broken Bridge*, *Tunku* and *Ismail, I Have a date with Spring*, Devorsine's design closely followed contemporary ethnic costumes such as the *Kebaya*, *Sarong*, *Cheong Sam*, and *Sari*, together with casual Western attire from the 1960s to 1990s such as coats, shirts, trousers, gown and so forth.

### **Music**

Music is one of the key elements in the form of musical theatre and a great number of songs deriving from this form are popularly used in concerts, adverts, competitions and so forth. Alongside the costume and stage design, the music is thus equally important in delivering the overall style of an entire production. Thus, the varied musical styles in local musical productions are worthy of discussion. For most of the local musicals, a production that comes from a particular organization commissions the same composers or arrangers, and this to a certain extent creates their own identity. Despite the style of the music, some issues are raised amongst the few productions discussed above.

From various references and interviews, it is gathered that most of the composers and directors aim at a Broadway and West End style for their musicals. It was explained that "striving to be true to the genre of traditional Western musical theatre like Broadway, Lee maintains that he was aiming for the overall score of the musical to be authentic without

being too academic" (Tan 2007:100). Rather than the more contemporary musicals, many had mentioned those of Rogers and Hammerstein, Irving Berlin and Leonard Bernstein, which produced significant melodies, remarkable choruses and tunes which they hoped audiences would be able to whistle them after the show.

While influenced by the Western Musical, the juxtaposition of the modern popular style with some traditional elements in these productions thus presents a much more global character in the local musical. This is clearly depicted in PGL in which the characteristic of the rhythmic drumming and *kompang* evidently becomes the foundation of the overall music; the ethnic sound of the *seruling* used in much of the background music. In this production, Dick Lee, a Singaporean, was approached by the director. Although being a Singaporean, it was stated that Lee was commissioned for this musicals due to his involvement in this industry, in which he advocated the infusion of Asian influences in pop music, including his involvement in stage musical such as Jacky Cheong's *Snow, Wolf, Lake* (*ibid.*: 99). This is certainly revealed in the music in PGL. In terms of the tune and songs, the motifs that portray strong folk tunes could be heard clearly in *Suatu Hari Nanti* (One Day) and *Melaka Terbilang* (Glorious Malacca), with the frequency of reprise, this chorus song has nevertheless marked one of the main theme songs in PGL. While traditional elements exists in the music, the traditional rhythmic section such as those of *Joget* style were mostly juxtaposed with more pop-like rhythmic ideas such as 8 beat, 16 beat and

R&B, which is undoubtedly familiar to the ear of the modern audience. The use of Western and non-acoustic instruments also dominated the accompaniment of this musical, in which synthesizers and a drumkit were used. Similar to most of the musicals in the literature, the romance theme *Katakan Hadirmu Kerana Cinta* (Say You are Here Because of Love) was written in a ballad style, closely resembling that of current popular ballads while recalling the style of songs such as *All I Ask of You*, *On the Street Where You Live*, *Tonight*, and so forth. Although some of the music numbers sounded quite “Western,” the ethnicity in this musical was also enhanced by the dance choreography by Pat Ibrahim, which he infused with the classic form of *Wayang wang* (shadow man) from Java in the Majapahit era, while in the second half of the musical that features Melaka, Ibrahim stated that he varied Malay traditional dance with a modern approach (*ibid.*:102).

The modernization of ethnic or folk music also applies to the *Butterfly Lovers* which adopted *huangmei* folk songs as the fundamental ingredient. The music as commissioned meant only the melody and the lyrics were maintained exactly as the originals while being given a full transformation with a new accompaniment. As Dama’s signature, the *erhu* became the lead solo instrument, while all the *huangmei* numbers were modernized with a mixture of Chinese and Western instruments. As an insider, composer and arranger for this musical, one of the aims from the directors was to present this Chinese folk music but at the same time employ a modern medium to deliver it to a current contemporary audience.

A multicultural sound was thus created; for example, the lingering *erhu* accompanied with the electronic piano as background music whenever the English narration occurred.

Some of Dama’s musical signatures seemed to be maintained regardless of the era in which a musical was set. Renowned as one of the Malaysian Chinese orchestras in the 1990’s, most of the concerts and productions have had a lead role for solo *erhu*. This indirectly applied to productions such as *I Have A Date With Spring*, although songs and music projected in the era of this musical were greatly influenced by the pop music in the West from the 1960’s to 80’s that involved electric guitar, saxophone, brass instruments and so forth. While the saxophone is used in the theme song, many excerpts were given to the *erhu* solo, which presented a change of taste from the original music. The *erhu* solo even applied in Western songs such as *As Time Goes By* and *Stupid Cupid* which were used in this musical. However, the audience seemed to accept the presentation packaged with the drumkit and keyboard, while many of the Dama’s “fans” came not only for the musical but also for the *erhu* performance. Here, what can be noticed is that the authenticity of instruments has not been given priority; while Dama’s approach of “Chineseness” has consistently been emphasized in their productions, the signature or hallmark of Dama was nevertheless sustained throughout where it formed its own identity.

The musical style of the ethnic musical of MOSP presents another unique style. For this organization, the focus of the musicals relates



strongly to Buddhism. The characteristics of Imee Ooi's works as the composer of Buddhist Music, mentioned in earlier paragraph, were strongly reflected in productions such as *Above the Full Moon*, *Siddharta* and the *Jewel of Tibet*. Dialogues were sung-through along with the music and this was one of the challenges stated by Ooi (2009). Although the musical styles of all these ethnic or legendary musicals were completely different, similarities did occur. In MOPS productions, while some ethnic rhythms were presented, such as in the *Jewel of Tibet* featuring the Tang Dynasty and the Tibetan Era, the overall music was again dominated by Western instruments. Ooi's musical style does not focus on projecting melodic ideas but is more geared towards generating the atmospheric mood of a scene. Most of her songs do not have a fixed melodic line or phrase but rather present a more spontaneous character.

Looking at all these ethnic or legendary musicals, while each has its own identity and style in presenting the different aspects, particularly regarding the music and costume, these productions opt to deliver authenticity to certain extent but at the same time inject both creativity and modernity in the hope of capturing an audience. Due to the varied history and cultural elements presented in these musicals, those who are familiar with the literature may question the authenticity of these performances. However, what makes the creativity and the individualism of these performances comes from the teams of the particular production, and therefore it is the creativity of each member in a team that is integrated to the end product of the musical.

On this issue, Swain (2007:267) also made a notable remark where he took Rodgers' words (Rodgers 1975:220) as an example.

History has shown that composers have consistently paid scant attention to any ethnomusicology that might bear upon the musical setting of their ethnic operas. In the American tradition, Rodgers himself is not in the least apologetic about his refusal to be accurate in the ethnomusicological sense:

'If my melodies [in Oklahoma!] were going to be authentic, they'd have to be authentic in my own terms. This is the way I have always worked, no matter what the setting of the story. It was true of my 'Chinese' music for *Chee-Chee*, of my 'French' music for *Love Me, Tonight*, and later of my 'Siamese' music for *The King and I*. Had I attempted to duplicate the real thing, it would never have sounded genuine, for the obvious reason that I am neither Chinese, French, Siamese, nor from the Southwest. All a composer – any composer – can do is to make an audience believe it is hearing an authentic sound without losing his own musical identity'

This issue did not apply to productions by KLPac as their musicals had a more secular context which was originally written by the locals. For these productions, the composer Lim Chuang Yik, a full-time pharmacist, stated that he has a great passion for Broadway musicals that influences many of his composition. Lim explained that he wanted people to whistle the tunes of his compositions like those of Broadway after they have watched his musical.

The composer also clarified that he came without a musical background and his melodies were transcribed and arranged by other members of the team. However, they managed to transform what he requested and in the end it worked well in the performance (Lim 2009). KLPac musicals have a less electronic sound and maintain more acoustic instruments, with drum kit and piano as the main accompaniment, together with a small ensemble of string and wind. While featuring much of the historical background and the modern society in a Malaysian context, perhaps the overall ‘sound’ of KL Pac productions resembles those of the Broadway tradition such as Rogers & Hammerstein and Lerner & Loewe, as emphasized by the composer.

One issue that generally occurs in many popular music live performances in the modern day, and thus applies to the arena of Malaysian musicals, is the approach of using “minus-one” (pre-recorded music). This occurs in MOSP productions and in one of Dama’s musicals – *The Butterfly Lovers*. Generally, the choice of using pre-recorded music for these productions was due to the budget being insufficient to hire the number of musicians required. Responses from interviews with selected cast members, musicians, arrangers and composers were rather predicted, as most opted for live music which serves the ethics of a live performance practice. For Geneviene Wong, the arranger and rehearsal director for most of the KLPac productions, the use of live musicians is necessary as this assures the spontaneity generated from both the musicians and the cast during the show (Wong 2009); more importantly, live performance thus indirectly creates more job opportunities for

musicians, particularly for orchestral instrumentalists, looking at the job limitation which has become a serious subject not only in the East but also in the West. On the other hand, Ooi, the composer for MOSP, revealed that the choice of using pre-recorded music with live singing was not only due to restricted funds, but on the contrary she personally felt that she had much more control over the particular sounds she intended to achieve through the use of computer software mixed with recorded live instruments. Furthermore, Ooi (2009) explained that it is not practical to employ an instrumentalist purposely to play for only a few bars in a production that runs for twenty shows. This also currently appears to be a controversial issue, especially in many pop concerts both in the West and East, but the common problem for local musical theatre undoubtedly appears to be the budgeting of a production. The same issue applied in Dama’s *Butterfly Lovers*; according to the directors, the musical style that was intended could only be realized with the use of pre-recorded accompaniment with live singing due to insufficient funds to employ the number of musicians of an orchestra. To complement a more “live” effect, four musicians were used to play for all incidentals/background music during dialogues and scene changes.

## **Conclusion**

While coming from different backgrounds, the four organizations described above are a role model for Malaysian musical theatre. Each of these organizations stamps its identity on the context of the musicals and the team members

in the production. The majority of Malaysians involved in all four organizations nevertheless represent a certain extent of localization portrayed in these productions, but at the same time the approach and the intention of these musicals seems to offer a more globalized representation to the audience. Productions such as *Enfiniti* and *KLPac* deliver more contexts of the local history, legend and current issues regarding Malaysia. Conversely, both *MOPS* and *Dama*, with a majority of Chinese members in the production, present mostly adaptations and legends from Chinese culture and Buddhism. However, according to various references and also interviews, all these productions seem to maintain some traditional or local aspects with the use of a more globalized approach. The success of *Broadway* and the *West End* in the literature and the acceptance of these Western Musicals in the East also greatly influenced the local musicals, as emphasized by the directors, musicians, and cast. Outside the musical arena, some famous songs from western musicals such as *Think of Me*, *Memory*, *I Dream of Dream*, *I Could Have Dance All Night* and so forth were consistently performed and requested by audience in functions and events. No doubt efforts are made by some organizations, and CD albums were produced, in order to record local musical performances and also in hope of publicity. Although all the musicals mentioned above were considered to be well-received by the Malaysians, this does not reflect the opinion of the general public but only those who are involved in this field. Many Malaysians were only attracted to musicals with titles which were familiar to them. A survey conducted in the period of

August 2009 to 2010 showed that 80% of the respondents did not know of the existence of the local musicals listed except for *PGL*, *P. Ramlee* and *Butterfly Lovers*; less than 9% of a total of 693 respondents watched these local musicals.<sup>5</sup>

While performing arts in Malaysia are still developing, and the challenge of local musicals has never been easy, some of the local musicals have aimed and been successfully performed abroad and were well received. Although this genre may more easily attract public attention than another genre of art music, still the popularity and support from the public, which is the main source of funding for many musical productions, was inevitable lacking. "Maybe those who believe that the theatre scene is slow is referring to the difficulties we have been facing for the last few years economically - that is preventing theatre companies from being able to be as active as we would like to be" said Faridah Merican (Venugopal 2011). In contrast to other art forms, the main problem for local musical theatre mainly comes from the funding that is required to covers the costs of many parties. This also becomes one of the factors meaning that some casts could hardly survive by being full-time in this industry (Chang 2010). To date, many organizations have been supportive in becoming sponsors for various performing arts in Malaysia, and to survive with the lack of revenue, some musical productions or concerts have been marketed to organizations for charity purposes, celebrating anniversaries or other related events. In short, the development in this genre from the local production has indeed increased tremendously

but the support of the general public is vital to sustain this art form.

#### Notes

1. Other non-religious musicals were produced in 2010 such as *Kita* to promote *IMalaysia* to encourage unity in the multinational country; another musical was *Singing Market* featuring Chinese oldies and popular songs. However, this musical was a collaboration with other organizations and therefore is not discussed here.
2. Genting Highland is one of the important tourist spots in Malaysia, famous for its casino and arena for various popular concerts since the 70's, was also known as the 'Las Vegas' of Malaysia.
3. Astro is the satellite television channel in Malaysia.
4. At that time, the office of Dama Orchestra was also situated at the same place and both suffered from the flash flood in 2003.
5. The research was funded by Universiti Putra Malaysia under the Research University Grant Scheme (2008-2010).

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