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Reimagination of William Shakespeare's A Midsummer Night's Dream: Performance Text Analysis

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Abstract

Reimagination works of Shakespeare have become a popular form of theatre in Malaysia. This study ascertains that the productions of Shakespeare have shifted to the newest method of adaptation namely reimagination as theoretical discourse moves from the notion of fidelity to original texts. This study argues that *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (AMND) (2012) retains Shakespeare's imagination; however, the director of the adaptation has his own imaginations, interpretations and cultural agenda in maintaining the essence of Shakespeare. The main objective of this study is to provide a holistic analysis of the adaptation of AMND in Malaysia. Subsequently, its sub-objectives are to explore the imaginations and cultural agenda of the director of AMND (2012) as well as interpret the extent to which the Malaysian director offers a new interpretation to AMND's original text. This research answers the question of how the director of AMND (2012) adapted the Bard in the context of imagination. Qualitative methods including interpretivist, interviews and textual analysis through Coleridge's theory of imagination and Aristotle's theory of drama were used in this study. Findings demonstrated that AMND (2012) maintains Shakespeare's words; nevertheless, the Bard introduced the local traditional art forms and ethos through the director's imaginations. The theoretical structure of this paper offers an empirical basis for formulating and inventing adaptations from Shakespeare's imagination to the Malaysian director's imagination. This research also provides a workable study paradigm to be applied to Shakespeare's adaptation practice in Malaysia.

Keywords: Shakespeare's Adaptation, Imagination, Cultural Agenda, Textual Analysis

Introduction

This study examines one of the areas in performance arts, which is Shakespeare adaptation studies. According to Schechner (2005), as a field of study, performance study is sympathetic to the avant-garde, marginal, offbeat, minoritarianism, subversive, twisted, queer, people of colour and the formerly colonised. The statement rationally reflects this study since Malaysia is a colonised country, therefore, this study is significant to identify Shakespeare's imaginations in the context of adaptation in Malaysia. The research subject is one of the

prominent plays by Shakespeare entitled *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (AMND) that was adapted in Malaysia by Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) in 2012.

This study discovered that there are various concepts of Shakespeare's adaptation in Malaysia. Some adaptors chose to perform the Bard in local language (Malay) (Mimpi, 2012 by Jim O' Connor); in English (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1994 by Swami Shantanand Sarawati); and in both Malay and English, as well as presented the narrative structure of Malay traditional theatre of Makyong (Titis Sakti, 2018; Norzizi Zulkifli). In AMND (1991), Jo Kukathas incorporated local cultures and values in the play to promote national identity. According to Jo (personal interview, 2014), the new generation in Malaysia is forgetting their roots as there is a lack of critical steps in lifting the notion of national identity by incorporating Shakespeare's adaptations with the local folk arts such as *Wayang Kulit* and *Makyong*. The statement has triggered this study to explore the research subject by examining the adaptor's imaginations to re-create the Bard. The objectives of this study are: to explore the imagination and cultural agenda of the director of Amnd (2012), as well as interpret the extent to which the Malaysian director offers a new interpretation to AMND original text. This study examines the adaptation of AMND through Aristotle's six elements of drama to analyse its performance text. Butcher (1895) stated that Aristotle introduced the ideal mechanism through the 'imitation' concept in drama by studying the famous Greek plays by Sophocles, Aeschylus, and Euripides through their plots, theme, characters, language, music, and spectacles. Subsequently, this study examines the adaptation through the two principles in Coleridge's theory of imagination known as primary and secondary imaginations. According to Kheralatika (2014), Coleridge states that 'primary imagination' is "...the living power and prime agent of human perception", while 'secondary imagination' is "...the poetic vision, the faculty that a poet has to idealise and unify". Thus, this study highlighted the adaptor's imaginations by marrying the Bard with local knowledge and heritages, and at the same time retains the essence of Shakespeare's imaginations. Hence, the main purpose of this study is to contribute a holistic review of AMND (2012) by analysing its performance texts in the context of imagination.

Performance Text Analysis of *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (2012)

The research subject (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 2012) was directed by Aris Ahmad and performed at Stage 1, Penang Performing Arts Centre (PenangPAC) from 10th to 12th of July 2012 during the event of "Georgetown Festival 2012" in Penang, Malaysia. The production was a collaboration between several faculties in USM including the School of the Arts, School of Humanities and School of Physics. It was a manifestation of four fields of research including "Intercultural Performativity in Shakespeare"; "Deconstruction in *Wayang Kulit* Kelantan"; "Quantum Arts"; and "Choreography-GIS". The production's tagline was "Globalising Transdisciplinary Local Knowledge through Shakespeare" inspired by the director's vision, Aris Ahmad.

According to Koay (2012), this joint venture production of USM and corporate bodies was aimed at achieving the following objectives: (i) to translate scholarly research into a tangible form of staged performance; (ii) to share expertise through transferred knowledge/skills to members of the community; and (iii) to directly involve these institutions and corporate bodies in the form of training workshops, community engagement and ultimately performance albeit not for its own sake. She explained that the production was also inspired by the USM's 'Regional Conference on Local Knowledge' (RCLK) at Langkawi in 2011 as USM's efforts to document and preserve local treasures through the Bard.

It was ascertained that AMND (2012) has marked the milestone in local English theatre history by infusing the Bard with elements of Malaysian heritage through the director's imagination, interpretation, and cultural agenda. While Asian performers have embraced Shakespeare and localised their plays for international audiences, most of them have

performed the Bard in their traditional theatre form and structure, as well as in their native language while Shakespeare's words were sacrificed. On the contrary, AMND (2012) had retained Shakespeare's original words (the verse), whereas other extra-textual elements were recognised as local tradition and reflected Malaysian and the neighbouring country's heritage. "...The co-existence of humans and unseen spirits is a concept very familiar to the Malay psyche and world-views; as such, this play has proven to be an excellent medium for the foregrounding of local belief and practice" (AMND, 2012).



Figure 1: '*Buka Panggung*': Prologue of AMND (2012) (Ahmad, 2012)

Amnd (2012) begins with '*Buka Panggung*' (Figure 1), then continues with a performance of shadow puppets presented by a female '*Dalang*' (puppets' master). According to Mumtaz Begum et al (2014), '*Buka Panggung*' is a ceremony to indicate the wish to start a performance, which is normally performed by a shaman (*bomoh*) to seek guardian's permission to allow the performance to take place without unwanted mystical forces. The performers recite the word '*tobro*' (salutation) in the Batak's language; they did not only offer their salutation to the gods, but also those present in the theatre. In Malaysia, '*Buka Panggung*' can be experienced through many local traditional theatre performances such as in *Wayang Kulit*, *Makyong*, *Mek Mulung*, *Menora* and *Jikey*. Aris Ahmad (personal interview, 2014) emphasised that he interpreted Oberon, the fairy king as *Pakyong* (the stock character in the Malay traditional theatre of *Makyong*), while in the Prologue, Oberon acted as the shaman for the opening ceremony (*Buka panggung*). According to Jukka (1992), the most sophisticated albeit rarely performed in Malaysia is the *Makyong*, which used to be an ancient form of court theatre from the state of Kelantan. He explained that *Makyong* is believed to have descended from an ancient shamanistic healing ritual and even today, its performance is regarded as having a magical significance and a special healing effect. Aris Ahmad created the whole new world by relating the plot of AMND directly with the local heritage including the music elements identified as local sound. Interestingly, he also adopted the sound of music from Indonesia (Batak's Opera). Furthermore, the adaptation reflects the local culture through the presentation of many elements of local culture; for instance, the introduction of *Wayang Kulit*, *Makyong* and Malay traditional dances. Rationally, the presentation of these local cultures in AMND will preserve and promote local heritage, as well as encourage the spectators to appreciate the authenticity of local folk arts. This study articulates the interpretations of the director to speak his cultural agendas through the adaptation of AMND and examine elements of drama in the context of Malaysia's heritage.

Imagination plays a crucial role in AMND, as Shakespeare used it to create fascinating scenes and show that when people dream, their imagination works to construct the images thoroughly. The scenes in the forest in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* represents imagination. A fairy (Puck) and the king of fairies (Oberon), watches 'the mechanics' (six Athenian) practice a play to be performed for Theseus' wedding in the forest. Puck turns Bottom's head into an 'ass' (a donkey). In the last Act, the fairies arrive to bless the three Athenian couples (Theseus-Hippolyta, Lysander-Hermia and Demetrius-Helena). In the Epilogue, Puck tells us, "Now it is the time of night that the graves, all gaping wide, everyone lets forth his spirit in the church way paths to glide and we fairies, that do not run by the triple Hecate's team from the presence of the sun, following darkness like a dream, now are frolic" (AMND, Act V, Scene i). This shows that a dream is another form of imagination and that the conscious mind is not in control. The theme created by Shakespeare in the AMND is dominated by imagination. Shakespeare used the examples of no time passing to show that the brain can creatively think about many things and think ahead of time. This creative invention by Shakespeare can be categorised as 'primary imagination' as discussed by Coleridge. Surman (2017) stated that, Samuel Taylor Coleridge proposed that the human imagination is broken up into two distinct parts: the primary and the secondary. Literary essayist Shawn Rider describes the primary imagination as a spontaneous act of creation when inspiration overtakes the poet and guides him in his writings. The secondary imagination, on the other hand, is tapped when the poet consciously and wilfully tries to dream up his work (para. 2)

In AMND (2012), the theme of dreams is significant to the play as it allows the audience to see the supernatural world created by the director. As an audience, we have a conscious mind where our dreams do not affect the outcome of our real life. In the play, at times, the situation is strange and out of control, and the characters in the play use the word dream to describe the strange things happening to them. The word dream allows them to let the events be what they are. Imagination and time are all displayed throughout the play to help further the importance of dreams and the meaning behind dreams.

Aris Ahmad has a spectacular idea of the three puppets known as '*Saka*' that bring the play into a whole new perspective dedicated to the Malay worldview; the local ancient animistic belief system. This study identified that the costumes, sets and lighting designs in Amnd (2012) combined Shakespeare's classic text with local traditional styles and contemporary touch. Meanwhile, the National Cultural Policy 1971 provides an important question regarding the need for schools of drama to transform the Bard to other languages or to preserve Shakespeare's language. How far should we adapt and stage Shakespeare's plays in Malaysia as they were initially performed in different styles and concepts? This issue is especially vital at present because the adaptation of Shakespeare's plays is bound to the theoretical notion of what Shakespeare's AMND performance was like? however, by the notions of creativity and imagination, there was nothing to prove whether or not they are right. Moreover, the performance text analysis of Amnd (2012) revealed unexpected knowledge through the adaptation process that encouraged this study to explore more to widen the range of inquiry. Thus, for the advancement of understanding Shakespeare's plays or for an opportunity to discover methods to stage appropriately for the present time, the approach applied in the adaptation of Amnd (2012) might be useful to be explored. This study suggests Shakespeare's imagination as 'primary imagination', and Aris Ahmad's imagination as 'secondary imagination. In Coleridge's *Biographia Literaria*,

On the imagination, or esemplastic power...The Imagination then I consider either as primary, or secondary. The primary Imagination I hold to be the living Power and prime Agent of all human Perception, and as a repetition in the finite mind of the eternal act of creation in the infinite I Am. The secondary I consider as an echo of the former, co-existing with the conscious will, yet still as identical with the primary in the kind of its agency, and differing only in degree, and in the mode of its operation. It dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to re-create; or where this process is rendered impossible, yet still at all events it struggles to idealise and unify. It is essentially vital, even as all objects (as objects) are essentially fixed and dead. (XIII)

Based on *Biographia Literaria* (1817), the primary imagination is the power behind what Coleridge elsewhere calls “the mystery of perception”. It is “the living Power and prime agent of all human perception”. Its synthetic power operates through the most direct contact of the mind and nature. From a series of sense images not necessarily visual, the ‘primary imagination’ forms an intelligible view of the world. Thus, the ‘primary imagination’ creates AMND, which is associated with Shakespeare’s imagination to produce the play. He merged all the elements of drama to produce a complete piece by unifying sensory data into a large unit of understanding. Meanwhile, Coleridge refers to ‘secondary imagination’ as the human ability to transcend the primary organisation, to reassemble perceptual elements or fragments and create new meaning. This study suggests that Aris Ahmad’s interpretation of AMND is a ‘secondary imagination’ that is the creative imagination of an adaptor. Coleridge emphasised that “...in common language, and especially on the subject of poetry, we appropriate the name imagination to a superior degree of faculty joined to a superior voluntary control over it”, which is another way of saying that the secondary imagination co-exists with “the conscious will”. He added that ‘secondary imagination’ differs “only in degree” from the primary and becomes the fullest exercise of the self. This statement can be related to Amnd (2012) as we can still sense the essence of Shakespeare in the adaptation, but at the same time, it introduced us to the oriental theatre’s characteristics. Asian theatres probably offer a better situation to improve or recreate Shakespeare’s play as they prosper in their freedom to adapt foreign texts. For instance, the adaptation of Shakespeare in Malaysia genesis with the traditional theatre of Bangsawan is followed by experimental and educational agendas. A vast range of Shakespeare’s adaptations is available to be enjoyed in Malaysia, which is represented differently and able to raise issues about how one’s response and action to Shakespeare might change. Amnd (2012) staged through a process of adaptation does not guide a better way of staging the play today or towards the kind of adaptation that should be built to accommodate the productions. Moreover, it was discovered that Amnd (2012) is inspired by the visions and imaginations of two important individuals from different backgrounds; Aris Ahmad (director) is from a drama school while Nurul Farhana (dramaturg) is from the school of English Literature. Both of them formed a company (Shakespeare Indigenous Company) and marked a tremendous footprint through (Amnd, 2012). They have created an experimental performance of Shakespeare’s adaptation considered as fidelity to Bard’s words, which however applies ‘extensive transposition’ to the gesture, acting, music as well as the spectacles of the original text.

Through the findings and analysis of AMND (2012), the importance of imagination in the development of Shakespeare's adaptation was identified, and this study measured the quality

of the performances that can be referred to in the future. However, in Malaysia, there are distinct policies outlined by the government to create any art forms, such as the National Cultural Policy 1971 (*Dasar Kebudayaan Kebangsaan - DKK1971*) and the recent policy DAKEN 2021 (*Dasar Kebudayaan Negara*). Therefore, this study suggests that the future study of Shakespeare's adaptation in Malaysia should be referred to DAKEN 2021 to explore its seven principles that have more relevance in this new era.

Discussion

This study ascertains that through Aris Ahmad's 'secondary imagination', Amnd (2012) retains the original classic text; however, it was transformed to an oriental style, gestures and looks in maintaining Shakespeare's essence. This study identified that the text of AMND (2012) has combined local knowledge with Shakespeare's 'primary imagination' through original language (classic English) and applied the 'blank verse' technique for the script deliverance (diction). The concept of AMND (2012) was identified through its performance's style, which combined the Bard with local heritages, sciences, and technologies. The local cultures include *Wayang Kulit*, Makyong, Batak's opera, *Magunatib* (bamboo dance), 'Buka Panggung', Orang Asli's statue and 'Saka'. A broader knowledge is essential on imagination to create a proposed model on how to create a new innovative way to adapt Shakespeare in Malaysia. The knowledge of Coleridge's imagination and Shakespeare's play will not bring absolute certainty and no research to determine comprehensive settlement since neither result would accord with the nature of theatre as an artwork. Therefore, this research suggests that the access to the text should be exploratory and experiential involving imagination and sensation, as well as observation, analysis, and critical judgement. The result of this study is open to challenge the students, readers, professionals, or audience members, as the text invites us to take and consider them as Malaysian plays. While this study has examined the life of the play as it becomes part of theatrical asset in Malaysia, the need for this study as research and criticism has become increasingly apparent. This study featured the characteristics of the performance texts and offered a wide range of knowledge to the readers in the context of imagination through adaptation and local heritage.

Through the analysis of Amnd (2012), it is hoped that this study can fill the research gap to describe the text of the performance and the background as well as the concept of the productions. Additionally, through the findings of this study, a new gap was identified, which is a proposal to carry out a textual performance analysis vis a vis the concept of imagination of other productions in identifying the best way to produce Shakespeare's adaptations in the future. Further studies to continue the study in the future are crucial as contributions to the academic and industry of performing arts in theatre. Since no specific models or design on the accurate way to stage Shakespeare's adaptation, this study suggests that it is up to the new generations to decide on what and how to stage the Bard based on their 'secondary imagination'; creativity, worldview, interpretation and cultural agenda, as well as based on the local national policies improved by a strong justification in 2021.

Moreover, a consideration of several questions should be made before adopting the text of Shakespeare to a play. Is it for educational (learning institution), commercial (professional's production) or a combination of the two? As for educational purposes, the adaptation of Shakespeare should imitate the original text according to the actual performance of Shakespeare. In the meantime, for commercial purposes, the text of Shakespeare can be altered without limitations. However, this study revealed that AMND (2012) has combined both purposes to fulfil the production's objectives. Furthermore, both

purposes will return to the primary purpose of Shakespeare theatre performance, which is to entertain the audience with the imagination of Shakespeare's play. AMND (2012) presented an effort for exposing students to the knowledge of Shakespeare's 'primary imagination' with Aris Ahmad's 'secondary imagination'; new approaches, interpretations, worldviews, and cultural agendas. It has preserved the original text of AMND but was performed in local styles. In the context of education, the theatres of Shakespeare in the public universities should restage the Bard in-campus within the original language, gesture, fashion and recognise the professional production to utilise any styles, concepts or forms of performing art to fabricate Shakespeare's magnum opus (work of art). This study reflected the notion of reimagining the Bard through AMND (2012) that can be marked through the six Aristotle's elements of drama. This research can be extended by analysing more adaptations of Shakespeare in Malaysia to provide a wide range of knowledge on 'reimagination'. Finally, this study has validated the importance of imagination in creative work particularly in the theatre adaptation of Shakespeare.

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