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Comparing Performing Theatres for Small and Big Scale Productions in Malaysia

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Abstract

Theatre productions in Malaysia have been enacted in many performance spaces. A mega show will be performed on a cutting-edge technology stage, such as Istana Budaya. Some may also prefer an intimate room such as Stor Teater Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). These two productions are different when we discuss their visions in producing theatre. Their audience members also come from other types of people based on demographic, economy, and education. The paper aims to discuss the issues and viewership differences between both productions. This paper also aimed to compare the operational and production of both theatres - types of shows, technological possibilities and how productions solve limitations of space scale using creative performance concepts to perform a play. The researchers are focusing on contemporary theatre production from 2010 until today; the research may open a new spectrum of studies in making theatres in Malaysia. Using library research and qualitative in-depth interviews with theatre producers, managers, and performers will assist the research in finding relevant information about the studies. Alternative audience members mostly view small scale theatres. The audience members have more critical ideas and the desire to get more intimate experiences. In comparison, the show in Istana Budaya offers mainstream performances suitable for the masses since Istana Budaya is a national theatre in Malaysia. Therefore, the business model is also different in marketing and production.

Keywords: Contemporary Theatre, Malaysian Theatre, Istana Budaya, Stor Teater DBP

Introduction

Theatre productions in Malaysia have continuously developed since the traditional performing arts are done in the country. Similarly to most countries, theatre in Malaysia was a ritual, and a public gathering place before the emergence of Bangsawan - a form of transitional theatre before the modern theatres, which are mostly scripted, was introduced to locals. Traditional theatres, done mainly by a community, have different team management approaches. Due to community-based projects, the said theatre always deals with a long time managing the show. It may start from early dusk until dawn. The audience members also may come anytime during the production team is performing the show.

Production costs primarily cover the performers' needs; they may get food, cigarettes or money. It is gathered from people willing to pay the money—mutually agreed by the community members to be part of the show. They may interact or choose not to interact with

the performers during the show. Rituals are related to the interaction with people around the area and also spirits. The spiritual elements are parts of early traditional theatre before the Islamic world was part of life, and the performative aspects of the shows are maintained - meanwhile, the ceremonial role, which may be different to Islamic beliefs, is slowly fading among communities. The management process is becoming more Islamic-oriented. Foods and offerings are served to people and not to the spirits anymore. The factor makes the shows now distance themselves from religious rituals and become more of a performance only.

Some traditional theatres are exclusively for authorities or palaces. Highly skilled performers performed them. Most of them are excellent in music, acting, and dancing. As an aristocratic show, it offers engagement between the palaces and the performers. Compared to traditional folk theatres, the production values are higher. However, folks' theatres have a stronger bonding between performers and audience members. In some situations, the performers are amateurs. They have daily jobs such as a farmer or fisherman and will perform in a show when they are needed. Therefore, the management ideas and outcome are less professional since the need for the show is to perform in front of a community, and everybody can join the show. Compared to palaces shows which are performed before the authorities. A higher standard is needed, and the palace shows are done mainly through professionals.

Bangsawan marks the beginning of commercialisation in theatre. Performing arts for authorities and folks are now consumable, and people pay them if they want to watch the show. The scenographic elements of the performance also made the enactment costly. Tasmat is spectacular scenographic features, such as bombing, flying, and many others, have gotten the show's audience's attention during its era. The main cast, who are always beautiful, can enhance the commercial values of a Bangsawan production. More people come to the show if the production brings more value to the show.

The modern theatre has emerged since then. More people from Malaysia studied abroad to get theatrical knowledge in addition to more local education institutions offers theatre as part of a program study. Different styles of theatres are available after that. Variations assist in developing the theatre scene in Malaysia. More theatre spaces are built, and more people will watch shows.

Literature Review

There are many theatre systems worldwide with different approaches to making shows. Research centres, higher education, writings and meetings have been done to understand better the theatre world (Bonet & Schargorodsky, 2018). They cover a variety of aspects of theatre, such as management, education, and styles of performing arts. Since the 20th century, theatre management and policy have been taken seriously in the academic world. *L'entreprise théâtre* by Raymond Temkine, and Jack Lang's *L'État et le théâtre* are two early writings from France discussing said topics. Jack Lang, who is also the Minister of Culture, is a person who is responsible for making policies in theatre in France (Bonet & Schargorodsky, 2018).

Management in Theatre

As a place of contemplation, people are always keen to watch theatre performances. Technology and ideas have evolved yearly beyond ideological, aesthetic, social, political and

religious perspectives (Hamui, 2018). Over time, representation has been more complex than today. For instance, managing folks' traditional theatres in the past demanded higher mutual understanding and, most of the time, working as a non-profit community-based project. Venues are primarily in public spaces; there has been ample open space to get more people to join the show. It may be a multi-purpose venue or place specially designed for the theatre performance.

Shows can be presented in streets, houses, religious spaces, social meeting areas, farms or even at the seashore. Technical requirements are based on the space's quality and its characters. Open spaces such as the seashore may only need the space itself without decoration because the society will make the space lively during the show with their showing such as decorative artworks, weavings, crafts and many more. Participatory elements shaped by political and site-based theatre that reach the idea of making the fourth wall between performers and audience is not available anymore (Burnett et al., 2019). The making performance idea has been part of traditional Malaysian theatre. Since it has been rooted in the culture, people see it as a thing that should not be abandoned, and teamwork between performers and audience members is needed the most during the show.

Puja Pantai in Peninsular Malaysia and Kaul Serahang Kakan in Sarawak have this quality. Both performances are made lively because of the participation of the audience members. Masquerades during the event also made the shows even more lively. Society is the props master, performer, scenographer, and also writer. They have a guideline or script which is understandable by the audience members. Restrictions are followed by society. Kaul Serahang Kakal is led by Ulo Kaul. He will bring a 9 feet circular offering to spirits with restrictions that must be followed by the audience members or society, such as not bringing animals and the leading boat that has the offering has to be in front - leading the theatrical performance (Ali et al., 2019).

Shifting management styles from multi-task to more professional started during modernity in theatre and when the theatre was commercialised. The Malaysian model was marked by Bangsawan troops and then continuous by Sandiwara. More modern performance styles have been developed since then. Business-oriented mindedness was the main aim for production. In order to get more income to produce for them to sustain the theatre performer and spectator ecosystem - more income means more shows. Therefore, a more systematic approach to theatre production is needed. Some Bangsawan has sponsors from elite or wealthy people. The said groups will be less dependent on ticket sales than other troops.

The manager for the Bangsawan will be the one who is looking for income, sponsors, cast and many more job scopes related to managing the production. Some Bangsawan is touring production groups. Therefore, managing many performance spaces will be part of the job for the Bangsawan manager. Directors may be the production members with vision and talent in theatre directing. They have a guideline for a story. However, a written script is not provided. In order to know cues for the next scene, they have their mutual understanding and ways during a performance to signal the production team. The painter's role was significant in a classic Bangsawan show. He or she is an important figure that will paint scenery for each background. Most stories are about fantasies and kingdoms. Therefore, setting and

scenographic elements in Bangasawan must be crucial to address. Tasmat has been part of Bangasawan and will always be the thing that audience members will await.

In the west, theatre production and job descriptions have been developed from the Greek theatre. For example, introducing *deus ex machina* has made the role of set designer and technical director crucial. Elizabethan then made the ticket sales system work as part of theatre production management. In the past was called the box office. People would sit in a private box to watch a theatre, and the boxes' tickets were available at the office. The box office term today is used to address the earnings after a film release. Dramaturge was then introduced to assist production in getting a better understanding of the text and performance - its structure, language, themes, and many more.

Today's world of theatre management is different from the past. More job scopes will be available because theatre performance styles have developed since the Greek era. Technology also plays a vital role in a managerial style. Thus, the primary goal of production is different.

Mainstream Theatre

Mainstream theatres are conventional and shared by most people. Most people will see them as usual and easy to follow because of their conventional qualities. For instance, making musicals in Istana Budaya is a mainstream theatre for Malaysian audience members. Performing renowned experimental theatre dramas by Hatta Azad Khan or Dinsman is mainstream. Watching an enactment at a theatre hall is mainstream. They are consumable and will not be seen as different from standard theatre practices.

A theatre suitable for mainstream audiences is usually performed in specific ways. It is also done in a specific building, has extensive hierarchy management, and is usually subsidised (Evans, 2019). If we look at its definition from Evans, we can learn that mainstream theatre is similar to other art forms. They offer products that are identical and normal for society. People may not watch shows from the theatre makers as different, and because of this reason, this type of theatre always has more audience members.

The emergence of Istana Budaya, Malaysia's national theatre (Mohd & Burrige, 2021), has made the mainstream theatre definition clearer. Most people will associate theatre with Istana Budaya, and local media has made the mindset popular. The media promote Istana Budaya as the most critical place for theatre practitioners to perform a show. Technologies in the space are also critical factors for people to watch shows at Istana Budaya.

Usually, mainstream theatre will need a bigger space to perform because more audience members can be accommodated during the show. Nevertheless, on the other hand, performances are usually not challenging norms in making theatres because they need to minimise the risk of losing the interest of their regular audience.

Alternative Theatre

Alternative offers revolutions and depart from conventional theatres, and usually, this form of theatre is not popular and gets less attention from the public (Epner, 2020). Typically, people will go to Istana Budaya or any renowned theatre hall, such as Panggung Bandaraya,

to watch a theatre show. However, alternative theatres can be performed at any place. Offering non-linear text and usually performed to challenge ideas or issues revolving around Malaysian context.

They may include political thoughts about current issues or challenging theatre forms - which sometimes get unfairly preferential treatment by conventional theatre makers because the traditionalist will see it as ruining the meaning of showing the styles and forms. The viewers are primarily theatregoers and people who love revolutions in theatre. Usually, this type of theatre is done by newcomers or revolutionary practitioners. Fringe is another word referring to alternatives. Due to its nature of making shows revolutions, performances for alternative shows are usually done in a non-conventional theatre space. For example, some shows are performed on a street, garden, or in a parking area. The plays are also different from conventional theatres.

Performance Space and Its Politics

Performance space that involves theatre location, audience arrangements, and physical appearance plays a vital role in exploring audience receptions (Hills, 2018). Technology is one of them in order to satisfy both audiences and performers. Intensifying theatrical performances are made possible by the latest digital technologies. Candlelight was ideal for washing the stage and shows changed to industrial lighting during industrial revolution 3.0. Today, they are digitised (Burnett et al., 2019). Most works are done using digital technology; lighting gels seem less relevant today due to the emergence of led and digital lighting consoles. Performance spaces also have changed. Even though digital technology is coming and offers more possibilities, it is still unstable.

Performance stages still use technologies from the previous era because of aesthetic and creative choices made by directors. The biggest problem with digital technology is that more damage can be done if technical issues come up. For instance, if a lighting board has a technical issue, it may wipe all data and recordings done beforehand. In this case, a digital understanding of design and its technology is necessary.

However, it is different from the conventional practices in theatre-making. Thus, the digital expertise and the technology's stability bring possibilities for theatre makers if done correctly because the demand for digital technology reduces the production cost (Khalykov & Koyessov, 2022). Istana Budaya, for instance, has issues with sound quality because the space is more prominent than other spaces, and the sound reflections are not well presented in some areas of the stage (Rizky & Prayogi, 2021). Therefore, the factor will make more expertise and technology needed.

Digital technologies enhance theatrical performance and designs. Even though the analogue world in the past assisted production, the emergence of digital technology brought a great deal in making performance. In the past, analogue technology, mainly related to the industrial world, enabled more possibilities for making new designs. Moving stages and higher-quality audio are made possible because of the technology. The digital world offers more copies and more efficient ways of working.

Some spaces are not offering the technology because of their business nature and target audience. For example, Istana Budaya, the national theatre, has the best technology in the

theatre compared to spaces built on abandoned buildings. We can only assume the management can only offer the space basic stage technology; even worse, some spaces only have a blank space just to perform. Therefore, there are discussions about space and its politics. Who are the users for a specific space? How is the space itself constructed as a style of performance? How do they communicate with the audience members?

Methodology

This qualitative research will focus on library analysis. Case studies from two types of productions - small scale and big production are made. Researchers will find similarities and differences in production management to gather information for these two case studies of theatre productions. Additional information from previous research done by theatre and management scholars is analysed. Library research has been done to determine the best possible outcome for the research. Philosophical analysis methods of cognitive analysis are used to explain the structure of a group. Structural analysis is used to analyse the reasons or aims of each group in performing a show. The relationship between production budget and funds may bring more precise ideas on the product produced by both small and large-scale productions. Some studies are compiled and analysed in a group of subtopics such as management overviews, mainstream and alternative shows, and space politics. This research method will assist researchers in describing individual experiences and beliefs about theatre management. Both productions' benefits and limitations in performing the show and managerial styles will be analysed. In this research, observation is essential to producing a guideline for small and large-scale theatre productions.

Production Aims

Theatre and its audience cannot be separated because the audience may need pleasure in enjoying artistic activities performed on stage (Huang et al., 2022). Thus, results from the research may be related to audience members' views and performers' perspectives. First and foremost, looking at the aims and objectives, the outcome may differ for each production. However, there are similarities that we may observe. For example, small and large-scale theatre productions should be performed before audience members and done in space. Therefore, they are reasons for each production to produce their show.

The managerial style was introduced in the late 19th and early 20th century. It has evolved every year because more productions in the late 20th have different business models, making it a more significant business. They are serious about making performances that make shows more profitable. In addition, some are more prominent companies for global audience members (Balme, 2019). Therefore, managerial styles are more similar to corporate business models.

If we look at the similarities of both big and small productions, both productions also may choose to produce a commissioned project or a non-commissioned profit-based theatre. Grants from the Malaysian government, such as MyPerforming Arts Agency and Geran Sokongan Pelancongan, Seni & Budaya (GSPSB), assist both productions. In addition, there are grants from non-government organisations such as INXO Arts Fund. Some companies are beneficial to inject funds into theatre productions. Both productions have opportunities to apply and get the fund. The proposal has to be strong and align with the grant providers. Usually, when it comes to government grants, they seek theatre productions that promote

each government ministerial mission. Most funds from the government are not intended for economic development, even though Malaysia has included heritage and creative arts development as a priority area of its Economic Transformation Programme (Haigh, 2020). Therefore, more productions, including emerging artistes with small-scale productions, may apply for the fund since the main aim of the fund is not for economic development; the fund is a one-off budget allocation for each production.

The social and aesthetic value is more important for a cultural institution because the non-profit arts are constantly making innovations (Šimić et al., 2018). Therefore, if the production is small, they must align with the aim, and profit is less prominent for the commissioned projects. Productions that do not have sponsors or do not have grant providers may have more liberation in performing their ideas on stage. They do not have to focus on limiting their ideas to follow guidelines by the grant provider. Thus, performances by non-sponsored shows usually discuss issues bolder because the main aim of the production is to promote their ideas to audience members.

More extensive production will need to entertain more audience members, and the limitation of seating capacity affects the audience's composition (Roselli, 2021). The shows are usually more straightforward, and issues are mainstream. Amusement elements are more critical for bigger production. They always neglected social critiques in their shows in order to get more audience to come to the show. Musicals have more attractions because they maximise the quality of technology, and more creative people are involved. For example, Datuk Rahim Razali performed a big production with his *Keris Sang Puteri* in the newly opened Panggung Negara with a cast of over 60 people (Diamond, 2002). The size of the production members shows that a larger production may involve more people. 60 cast means more creative people are needed. If a small-scale production needs one stage manager, Rahim's production may prefer more than three people in the stage management department. The same goes for other creative departments.

People from different demographics and interests will come to watch a musical performance. Some may love to watch scenographic elements; some may prefer looking at the leading actor, and some enjoy musical arrangements. Compared to smaller productions, they are aiming for a smaller group of people. Most people are followers of their ideology. In other words, the aim for a smaller production is usually to convey ideas to their followers.

The alternative is usually related to small-scale theatre since the audience members are not mainstream consumers. Therefore, an amateur and students do some smaller productions. The budget is smaller than a bigger production which will need professionals or experts to do the designs, acting, musical arrangements and many more. Therefore, the aim for small productions is to express their thoughts than to get the revenue back from the investment.

Production Values, Spectacles and Management

Audience members have a more prominent role in determining the success of a production (Velli, 2018). The frequency of attendance is a measurement of a show, and it has to be taken into account (Radbourne, 2009). However, measuring based on the most numbers of attendance will be problematic since, for apparent reasons, big-scale productions will get more attention. Measuring based on margin will be more significant. For instance, if the

maximum number of seats for a space is 100 people, 90 attendees will be a success because it covers 90% of the maximum audience.

On the other hand, ninety attendees for a total of 1000 seats will be a failure for the big-scale theatre production. On that account, both productions' success when opening a discussion about attendance is a must. However, the measurement of audience attendance is based on margin.

Bigger productions focus more on an exaggeration of ideas because the limitations are less for them since more money is put on their table to produce a show. Higher quality production in terms of design is available on stage. During the Semarak Bangsawan season in 2007 - 2016, each group will get RM50,000 from the government to produce a show (Deneerwan & Kahn, 2018). Therefore, more money is needed on the table for bigger-scale productions. However, some productions usually focus less on acting. Some may focus on every aspect of production. Productions that do that are usually productions that get more money to get a better actor. The visual aspect of exaggeration is essential because if they do not do that, people will assume the production is not using capital.

Smaller production will aim for ideas. Smaller theatre productions will be based on renowned particular group members and always bring new plays on stage (Eltham & Verhoeven, 2018). Some may produce shows without proper sets and stage lighting. The main focus is usually acting and script. A strong script is vital for small productions since they will need to use an excellent actor to express the ideology on stage. They performed in non-conventional theatre spaces such as roads, markets, and bars. In some situations, the movements are agitprop and aim to express thoughts about issues in a community (Itzin, 2021). They know they have a limited budget to produce higher quality products in design. Consequently, producing an ideology-based production will make the design style different, and the limitations in performing theatres bring new audience members and ways to read a show (Birgit, 2019). They may choose a minimalist design compared to bigger productions that will exaggerate more things on stage.

Both have quality on their own. Both have their style in performing shows and different management styles. Managing more extensive production will need a bigger group and more departments to supervise their subordinates. For instance, the lighting design department may have more people in it. Some will do technicals, some will design, and some will be their helper or crew. On the other hand, if we look at a small production, the lighting designer may be the set designer. Some small theatres do not need lighting on stage, which relates to their concept, which does not need the lighting design.

Organisational charts for bigger productions have more hierarchies than small productions, which may have a non-direct hierarchical chart. Sometimes, designers will need to do management things if the production is smaller and get less than ten people in it, which is very unprofessional. However, to reduce the cost, they need to do more jobs in production. Most of the time, small productions are dependent on the popularity of the text, director, or actor. They are their marketing for shows. Compared to more prominent companies, the marketing department will assist them in marketing the theatre.

Conclusion

Quality is crucial for both productions. However, the managerial styles are different. Bigger productions can gather a professional team because they have more budget to pay a better practitioner. Smaller productions have limited budgets. Therefore, some small productions regularly work unprofessionally and have more jobs to do for a show. The limitations are not an excuse for the small productions because they can produce a better quality show with different performance styles. They know that performing ideas is their strength and focus more on that performance aspect. Bigger productions are produced for mainstream audiences. Hence, more aspects of production have to be focused on, and the text is usually more straightforward because a simple sequence text will enhance the entertainment values of the show. In conclusion, the management styles differ because of many aspects, but the primary intention of producing shows is similar; to produce a high-quality performance for each follower.

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