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Designs and Contents of '*Projek Bilik Sempit*' As the Identity of Indie Theatre in Malaysia.

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Abstract

This research is conducted to explore the designs and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatre in Malaysia. *Projek Bilik Sempit* is an alternative to run Indie theatretical productions. Indie theatres have been getting a generous amount of attention from theatre activists today involving all age layers. In fact, theatre activists are getting more active producing Indie in groups, collectively or individually without being bound under any orderly organisations. The after effect of the performances produced by *Projek Bilik Sempit* has successfully shaped an identity of Indie theatres of its own in the aspects of its design and content in all of its productions. Therefore, researchers had chosen three main objectives, which the first one is to analyse the performance design in *Juta-juta* theatre, *Asrama Ra All Star*, and *Aku Nak Jadi Bintang*. Second, to analyse the content in the performances of *Juta-juta* theatre and *Asrama Ra All Star* theatre compilation. Third, to justify the designs and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatres in Malaysia. In Malaysia, theatre activists who have been actively involved in performing Indie theatres are Fasyali Fadzli, Khairunazwan Rodzy, Namron, and others. Hence, researchers had selected three samples to be the main references to conduct this research which are *Juta-Juta* theatre by Fasyali Fadzli, and *Asrama Ra All Star* directed by Khairunazwan Rodzy. The researchers carry out this research using qualitative method, through observation and interview methods by interviewing three informants who are also Malaysia's prolific Indie performing theatre activists. The result of this study found out the identity of Indie theatres consist of small-scale performances, small budget, small management, only 2/3 actors and actresses involved, easily understood plot with the themes of humanity and current issues, simple organisation, and the format of the story performed is short-length. With that, Indie theatre performances have given new perspectives in shaping Indie theatres themselves.

Keywords: Theatre, Indie, Identity.

Introduction

Recently, Indie theatres have become popular choices to be staged by theatrical productions in Malaysia. For example around Kuala Lumpur in places such as *Panggung-panggung Eksperimen*, *Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, *Black Box* and other theatres. Indie theatres are one of the new theatre concepts that are accepted and celebrated lately. Theatre activists are starting to demonstrate their own uniqueness in performing Indie theatres. Indie theatres have their own distinctive features by staging small-scale theatres in small spaces or chambers. Theatre activists do not require grand or ornate spaces to produce a theatre. With these distinctions, Indie theatres capture the interest of their activists. Furthermore, Indie theatres have a decent number of followers who constantly watch the works produced by Indie theatre activists which are presented almost every week. Combined with its simple and relaxed environment, the audience are never bored to watch Indie theatres. The emergence of Indie theatres received good commentaries from Indie followers. According to Fasyali Fadzli (2013) in an interview when staging *Juta-Juta* theatre, he stated that Indie theatres are more aggressive in terms of themes, issues presented and their productions. In addition, Indie theatres receive endless support from young, artistic activists with dynamic and progressive ideas and minds. Thus, with the existence of Indie theatres, they become the best platforms to voice out and visualise opinions in their performances and ultimately can produce high quality works without constraints and restrictions especially in the aspects of venue and cost.

Theatres in Malaysia dating back to two decades in 1980s and 1990s was discussed by scholars and researchers as an era of the continuation of the development of experimental stream theatres in Malaysia. This scenario had been a triumph for experimental stream in Malay post-modernism theatres in the 70s era such as Hassan, Alwi, Dinsman, Jaafar and Khan. In 2000, a National Theatre called *Istana Budaya* (IB) was built with its prestigious features and advanced technologies, world-class facilities and a capacity of 1411 audience at a time in *Panggung Sari Istana Budaya*. At the time, according to Musa (2011) on Carmen Nge's statement in her writing entitled '*Theatre in Malaysia: The contemporary situation*' stated that, *Istana Budaya* during that time was dominated by senior, prominent directors such as Ahmad Yatim, Rahim Razali, and Syed Alwi. In relation to that, young and obscure directors did not stand a chance to present their ideas in the theatre. Because of that, a group movement consisting of theatre activists indirectly made their decisions and started to search for other initiatives to exhibit their own theatres. They did not only wait for opportunities to stage their theatres in *Sari, Budaya* (Nge, 2003; Darwish, 2016). Due to that, there is an abundance of new theatre genres created by theatre activists in producing a performance. For instance, Indie theatre is one of the new concepts in the performing arts world. With that, this concept has brought upon new space and perspectives for the theatre activists in performing arts to achieve their goals and commercial values in theatre performances. For that reason, this research is conducted to explore the designs and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatres in Malaysia.

Researchers will show the designs and contents through all three performances in *Juta-Juta* theatre and *Asrama Ra All Star*. Therefore, researchers had chosen the main location to conduct this research which is at Revolution Stage or commonly known as *Projek Bilik Sempit*. Revolution Stage is one of the Indie theatre activists' locations which are involved directly or indirectly with staging Indie theatres. Revolution Stage was established in 2006 by Khairunazwan Rodzy as the founder, and now it is re-registered with performing arts graduates from several higher education institutions (IPT) such as *Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan* (ASWARA), *Universiti Sains Malaysia* (USM), *Universiti Malaya* (UM), *Universiti Teknologi Mara* (UiTM), and Kuala Lumpur Metropolitan University

College (KLMUC) in December 2010. The results of the research can be obtained through the data collection process by conducting observation and interview methods with selected informants who are dynamic activists producing Indie theatres actively such as Fasyali Fadzli, Kahirunazwan Rodzy, and Namron. Next, researchers can further elaborate the exploration of designs and contents which shape the identity of Indie theatres in Malaysia. Indie theatres performances can also be made as the main platform for new theatre activists to produce high quality works especially with the purpose of building a quality and effective workforce in a production

Problem Statement

This research focuses in finding an identity of Indie theatres. Researchers aim to explore the form and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatre in Malaysia. This theatre is one of the performances which is receiving increasing demands especially within theatre activists. Theatre activists today have oftenly staged their play are Revolution Stage or more commonly known as *Projek Bilik Sempit*. Through this research, researchers' focus is directed to explore the form and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatre in Malaysia.

Every genre emerges in any performances definitely has its own unique designs and contents to be conveyed to the audience. The designs and contents presented in the performances shaped the identity of the performance itself. This can be seen from the Indie theatres as they gained their name from the distinction displayed in all of their performances through the aspects of designs and contents. Thus, this research is aimed to explore what and how the designs and contents of the theatre performances build the identity of Indie theatres in the development of theatre itself in Malaysia. Looking at the overview of the research, Indie theatre is a genre that is quickly becoming the favourite of theatre activists to date. This can be proven when fresh graduates with performing arts background finding more opportunities to develop their talents by staging Indie theatres. Active theatre activists in theatre performances are Khairunazwan Rodzy, Namron, Fasyali Fadzli, and others. According to Khairunazwan Rodzy, through the definition of Indie, Indie theatres or other names known as independent or alternative, is widely known as 'Projek Bilik Sempit' which is a gathering place for the activists to work and perform plays prior to their own abilities and capabilities. According to Namron, the definition of Indie is a branch of art field which is familiarly known as independent or something that guarantees different satisfaction for each and every one of its activists (*Utusan Online*, 2014). Besides that, according to Fasyali Fadzli, he explains that Indie theatres are one side of the many choices existed in arts with the emergence of mainstream spaces. As such, Indie theatre is a contrasting matter or idea wanted by majority or performances moved without luxurious materials, publicity or status in name. Based on the multiple definitions stated by these theatre activists, the research question will demonstrate whether the characteristics mentioned above will shape the identity of Indie theatres.

According to *Pustaka* (2007) fourth edition, identity is the properties attached to something to introduce or distinguish it from the others. Therefore, this research question will analyse how the designs and contents in a theatre performance shape the identity of Indie theatre. Referring to experimental theatre genre as absurd, surrealism and contemporary have had their own identities. According to Wilson and Goldfarb (1991) in a research conducted by Husin (2007), they have clarified experimental theatre as a new form of theatres, different from the current trends of theatrical productions, or the previous forms of theatre during their period, and also other forms in the past. The result is also something that exceeds the expectations of the community in the aspects of design,

dramatic structure, performance structure, and technology, technical and aesthetical concepts. Based on the statement, it is clear that experimental theatres have their identities from its features and performance structure. Hence, this research will then explore on how the designs and contents of Indie theatres shape the identity of theatres.

After *Istana Budaya* was built, activists did not manage to stage their theatres in *Istana Budaya* because not all theatres are suitable to be displayed in *Istana Budaya*. Staging a theatre there requires a huge amount of cost. Because of that, activists started to find other initiatives by staging small-scale theatres, and *Stor DBP* was established. Since 2003, *Stor Teater DBP* has been the best leeway for those theatre activists to stage their works (Hamzah, 2009). With that opportunity, theatres produced by *Projek Bilik Sempit* can open the eyes of theatre activists to make art wherever they are without having to depend solely on glorious spaces and places. This can change the theatre landscape in Malaysia compared to the previous theatres which focused mainly on big, extravagant theatres including *Istana Budaya*. This can be seen from the first theatre that was staged in *Stor Teater DBP* is *Projek Suitcase* on 10-14 December 2003. *Projek Suitcase* was a staging effort combining four dramatists: Namron and Rosdeen Suboh from Malaysia, and Aidil Alin Mosbin and Alfian Saar from Singapore.

Small-scale theatrical productions or more commonly known as Indie theatres is very important in Malaysia. This is because Indie theatres are the foundation of the development and advancement of theatre performing arts in Malaysia. With the emergence of Indie theatres, they provide platforms and opportunities for the activists to create art and will cause an abundance of high quality performances in theatres. Therefore, researchers aim to conduct a research on Indie theatres to investigate how far the designs and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* help in shaping the identity of Indie theatres in Malaysia.

Exploring the Identity of Indie Theatres

Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia (1989) defines 'exploration' as a field journey with the purpose of acquiring more knowledge by digging deeper on the reasons or earlier matters that influence something and also to find out more about what causes a problem to occur and the variables that manipulate the problem. 'Exploration' also means the path or activity to gain new experiences from new situations (Debdikbud, 1989). The concept of 'exploration' meant in this observation is the route towards the existence, functions, and meaning of the signs. According to *Kamus Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka*, 'exploration' means a journey to various fields to acquire something.

From *Kamus Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka Fourth Edition* (2007), 'identity' is defined as the nature or characteristics featured in someone or something in which as a whole, they introduce and also distinguish it from the others. Other than that, 'identity' means certain aspects that cover the behaviour, physical appearance, and how a person dresses which show the character and personality of an individual. For instance, every race and country has their own unique identities. This is because each race and country have their distinctive emblems that represent the identity of its country.

Design is an object derived from the analytical process conducted on the object itself. In this matter, it is related to the designs and contents in an artwork. In terms of daily basis, the environment is full with various objects existed in all forms available such as two-dimensional (2D) and three-dimensional (3D). According to *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia*, 'design' refers to appearance or existence, while in English, 'design' is also referred to as 'form'. A.A.M Djelantik explained the meaning of 'existence' as something that is concrete (that can be perceived clearly with the eyes and

ears), and even if it cannot be seen literally (abstract), it can be visualized by telling or reading a book (Djelantik, 2011: 17). The values in an artwork can be evaluated in two, which are design (sensory), and content (other than sensory). The value of design is the mainly accepted value or it is considered as entertainer in which it immediately awaken the satisfaction and pleasure within the audience.

'Indie', as stated in *Kamus Besar Bahasa Indonesia* (1989), is a short form of independent, which means free. 'Indie' can also be defined as free projects such as bands, films, and other genres related to creative arts.

One of the researches observed is the research conducted by Marshall (2014) from Indonesian Institute of the Arts, Yogyakarta. This research discussed on the topic Identitas Musik Dalam Indie Label Studi Kasus Band White Shoes and The Couples Company. Researchers found that this research is inclined to music as it focuses on the identity of the band White Shoes and The Couple Company which ventured into the Indie path through the retro concept and jazz/pop/funk music genres that they play. The White Shoes and The Couples Company band was able to contribute new and distinctive arts in the country's music industry. Researchers discovered that this research can assist them to gain information on the definition of Indie and the history of Indie development

Apart from that, in a research conducted by her, Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary has explained the definition of 'Indie' as 'not belonging to, working for or produced by a large organization; independent' which means free or liberated. She also stated 'Indie' as "Do it yourself" in developing an industry as follows:

...'Indie' has its own ideology, adhered by their followers that is "Do It Yourself" or more commonly known as D.I.Y. This ideology has deep and important meaning to the artists that ventured into the Indie genre because this ideology describes their identities in music. D.I.Y means do something yourself, starting from creating the art, recording process, to spreading the artwork... (p 23)

Based on the research conducted by Zakaria (2014) entitled 'The Culture and Language of The sban Takbai Malay Ethnic in South Thailand: A Phenomenology Analysis'. The research focuses on the search of the cultural identity of the Malay ethnic. This reseach has helped the researchers to vew the concept and meaning of identity. Therefore, according to Giddens (2008), 'identity' is characteristics or unique features which build the character or personality of an individual and a collection of identities comprises of an abundance of meanings and experiences which contain explanation on who is an individual or the perspective towards that individual from himself or others. Hence, the definition of 'identity' can be referred to as "Who?" and it can also be referred to as what an Indie theatre is in a performance.

Giddens argued 'identity' as something that is caused by the individual and the behavior and attitude brought upon by the individual as an attempt to search for his true self (Manuel, 1997). Based on Giddens's opinion, 'identity' is a subject and an activity conducted by the subject himself build upon the behavior of the subject in order to introduce himself to other people. Also, based on what Giddens stated, Manuel expands 'identity' to an institution caused by the dominant social person which shapes the meaning or characteristics combined in that group of people.

Stuart (1990) explained 'identity' as a term applicable in the context of creating and accepting ourselves as actively involved in the elaboration of every form of life events which is considered as history. One of the terms of the stated 'identity' is the culture that belongs to all in which the self-

equation can be shared with the same roots and background. The continuation of life in a community can be described through the basic experiences in life that are practiced and defined together in harmony.

According to Stuart Hall, 'identity' is a name given to something differently based on our levels in a community referring to our past experiences. 'Social' refers to skin colour, body shape, language, the role of the language, and place of birth. To understand an 'identity', psychological research, culture, politics, philosophy, and history are needed to be researched thoroughly to be comprehended. Linda (2003) explained that the development of history is vital to be understood in this research. Thus, every form of research which involves identity searching in a performance needs a thorough investigation on the development of the history of a performance.

Next, a research conducted by Ramli (2009) entitled '*An Exploration on Batik motifs in Pahang: A Case Study (Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris)*' focused on the aspects and elements that have influenced the exploration on the motifs produced in the state of Pahang only. The research conducted by him aimed towards the art of *batik* by carrying out an exploration by making observations on the *batik* motifs in Pahang. This research can help the researchers as a guide to facilitate them in running an exploration to study the designs and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatres in Malaysia. In his research, he also stated that 'exploration' according to Torrance (1990) in his writing *Thinking Creatively with Words Manual* described 'exploration' as a deep look over towards the beginning to end results in the creation of artworks using specific materials and equipment beside manipulating the nature and environment and also experience that can improve understanding and creativity.

Besides that, a research conducted by Ahmad (2016) in Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris entitled 'The Identity of Modern Visual Art of Catan In Malaysia Through Mixed Media in the Context of Culture' serves as a purpose to refine the role of materials in the context of mixed media influenced or shaped by culture. He will analyses the works and observe the effect and development of mixed media used by Malaysian painters as well as investigating the journey of modern arts in Malaysia in the context of culture and socio-culture relations. This research has helped in conducting the research in the aspect of understanding the meaning of identity to carry out the research on the designs and contents of *Projek Bilik Sempit* as the identity of Indie theatres in Malaysia. Included below are the definitions and terms used in defining an 'identity' stated in this research.

A statement released by Ali (1989) claims that 'identity' is a combination of situation values, equality, and likeness. These values are put together as a notion of an individual who has certain elements such as looks, skin colour, languages, religions, and other matters pertaining to the vital core of life. Based on the concept of 'identity', it is an art process in the context of culture and not separated from the influence of the history of the development of a race. It is also closely related to the existence of community diversity in the context of globalisation era of the community in Malaysia. 'Identity' is the question of influence, change, transformation, interracial interaction, shifting, contradiction and dynamic identity paradox, moving and changing caused by a life of strong dependence among each other, strong influence and great rivalry between the elements (Piliang, 2002).

According to Husain (2014), 'identity' is defined as a membership introduction based on individuals and thus represent a group to introduce the representative of specific groups. Humans create something not out of nothing; human create things from an existing substance. Every artist became more creative and intellectual from the ready-made materials created by the previous artists, making it better every time. This is what we often called it a 'tradition' (Sumardjo, 2000).

Sabatari (1987) had conducted a research in the field of Arts: Between Designs and Contents, Faculty of Technical UNY. Her research was conducted in the field of art which shows the designs in fashion that is a free form consisted of immeasurable designs such as plants, animals, clouds and geometrical shapes like rectangle, triangle, spiral, and cylinder. In the research, she stated that we found various things with diverse shapes whether they are two-dimensional (2D) or three-dimensional (3D) or both in our daily lives, all around us. According to Kamus Dewan Bahasa Indonesia, shapes mean appearance and existence. In English, it is called as form. To understand the designs and contents which are close to the idea of Louis Sullivan who was an architect from Chicago, famously known with the slogan "Form Follows Function" which means the design produced is suitable with what the design is supposed to do (Feldman, 1991).

The Significance of the Research

In conducting this research, it will give chances and knowledge to theatre activists by creating new innovations in the field of theatre. Theatre activists will be more open to involve themselves in Indie theatres. This is because they do not only get the chance to work freely but they also do not need to consider about the expensive cost and grand venues to stage their theatres. With the existence of Indie theatres, it can reveal new exposure and open the minds of theatre activists to continue making art and to never give up in involving themselves in theatre performances, not limited to their field of study.

Other than that, this research can also uplift the field of theatre arts in Malaysia, especially in the field of performing arts. In Malaysia, performing arts are very limited, especially theatre performances since they require lots of energy and long period of time to produce a successful theatre or performance. By having Indie theatres, the number of performances will be increased from the multiple sources of works from time to time. Theatres are a medium watched by an audience without age restrictions and with diverse interests based on the community. In addition, Indie theatre followers will always update on the development of Indie theatres by running performances without limits and thus are able to elevate the prestige of theatre arts in Malaysia with the increasing mediums for the audience.

Next, this research is able to achieve the value in its presentation to help in improving the intellect of a race and not relying on entertainment purposes only. This is due to the fact that theatre is a branch of significant art and received increasing demands in a country. This is supported with a statement from Mohammed Salleh Rahamad and Rozlan Mohamed Noor who agreed that theatres are huge cultural traditions and they are also one of the mediums exhibiting prominence in thinking, intellectual, and the aesthetic values of each race (Rohamad and Noor, 2014). Referring to the statement above, it is clear that theatres are one of the suitable mediums to practise critical thinking.

Hence, theatre performances can produce new and intellectual with critical thinking theatre activists and thus flourishing the theatre industry, making it an interesting branch of performing arts to watch because theatres are not only for entertainment purposes.

Besides that, this research is able to provide chances to theatre activists with the skill to create a short-duration script and to make art freely. Truly, an individual with critical thinking is produced from the experiences that made him for who he is. A group of new activists can try exploring their talents in creative writing. They will write by expressing their ideologies to create art on the themes and current issues they chose to highlight. Due to that, with the emergence of Indie theatres, this gives a chance to the activists to venture into creative writing and provide new ideas in terms of themes and current issues in short-length script production. This research also aims to produce open-minded activists and share ideas among each other through the staged work of art especially their own. As a result, it can direct the future of theatre as one branch of art in a competitive industry like the one in Malaysia.

Conclusion

The research has paved the way for Indie theatres to improve the culture and community among theatre activists which should be cultivated within themselves. The research shows that in managing a performance, the production needs a team with immense workforce. By working in a team and running the work together in a production, it can instill strong teamwork within the team while training young theatre activists before stepping into the working world. Apart from that, this research adds to the reference to the activists who wish to perform an Indie theatre since information regarding Indie theatres is very limited in Malaysia. Indie theatre activists have problems in finding reliable and documented materials and references related to Indie theatres. Therefore, this research can be a guide to theatre activists and scholars who are intrigued in knowing more about Indie theatres or interested in staging an Indie performance. This research will also help activists who want to learn more about the designs and contents of Indie theatres. Thus, this research relating to Indie theatres is fitting to be conducted as a guidance to activists who wish to stage a theatre.

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