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## Analysis on Performing Theatrical Performance Matinya Seorang Pahlawan (1992) For Non - Malay Speakers in London

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### Abstract

Matinya Seorang Pahlawan (1992) was one of Malay language theatrical performances that has been performed overseas for non-Malay speakers in SOAS, London. Therefore, surtitles has been introduced in theatre world to overcome the language barrier issue. However, the production has not using surtitles on stage due to some reasons and budgeted constraint was one of them. This may be difficult for the viewers since foreign performances are alien for the audience members who do not speak the language and do not understand the culture. The research analyses factors and effects on avoiding surtitles on the production. A number of people that involved in the production – theatre makers and viewers were interviewed and documentations and writings about the production are also reviewed in order to get a deeper result on the research. This qualitative research used triangular method to identify and conclude either the production has achieved its main goal to promote Malay language and culture to the world or otherwise.

**Keywords:** language, Theatre Language, Malay World, Surtitles, Usman Awang

### Introduction

Primarily, a theatre performance has its own specific audience member that share a common language since dramatist is an “ideal speaker-listener” which is a “completely homogeneous speech-community, who knows its language perfectly” (Carlson, 2006). It is not only limited to the text’s language literally since they share a similar stage language. “Stage language” is a “scientific language” (Carlson, 2006). Gestures have their own meanings based on the dramatist’s intentions; communications among audience and performers are semiotics that covers a codified communication system – a language of gesture and spectacles. Codes in stage languages will be different for different culture viewers.

This has made a theatre performance is culturally and linguistically specific due to the theatre quality that only made possible for a live event. An audience member might struggle to understand the show if they are not speaking the performance’s language. However, the language misunderstanding will

be a minor issue occasionally because of a strong theatre language that performed to the audience members. Carlson (2006) proposes most people will visualise language in shows as spoken language and ignoring non-spoken language such as gesture, scenery and lighting. Thus, possibilities in theatre languages are wider and it is not only consisting text, dramatic dialogues and spoken words. This make arts in general and theatre in specific as a unique form of communication since they offer alternatives for communication.

Surtitles or sometimes recognised as super titles is projections of written translations that usually projected on a rectangular screen above the stage. It will be read by audience members when they watch the theatre simultaneously (Snell-Hornby, 1997). Surtitles were mostly applied in operas (Minors, 2013) before it has been widely practical for theatre. Occasionally, the technology has been developed and today simultaneous translation has been widely popular in international theatre festivals. Even though surtitles provide alternative for international audiences, the shifting of focus may affect the pleasure of viewing and enjoying the performance. Other technical issues such as malfunction also has to be considered by a theatre production. This has made surtitles as an issue and some productions prefer not having it on stage due to this reason. Another reason for productions reluctant to use the technology because it was expensive to operate a surtitle in the nineties. This has to be taken into account since some productions or viewers enjoy the mysteries of not understanding the performance literally and focusing on body, movements, and scenography - hence, make surtitles not practical for them. This has been articulate by Laura Barnett, a theatre critic when she watched performances. Laura (2011) states the shifted focus on other production's elements such as designs and movements brought a "more intense" experience for audience members. This has been discussed by Carlson (2006) by suggesting the struggle in theatre between verisimilitude is deeper in understanding different language in theatre and it qualifies reality in the interests of consensual strategies of reception. Viewing a non-subtitled show has a "sacred" experience. This make most the performance has a metaphysical element.

This research will focus on Matinya Seorang Pahlawan (1964) strategies to overcome the different spoken language barrier. It was performed without surtitles at School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London in 1992 and the main aim for the show was to promote Malay culture and language. Interviews, analysis of productions and analysis of reception will be done to find the result to the research in this qualitative research. The touring show limitations will also be discussed thoroughly in this research.

Language is essential for a "text based" performance because "[l]anguage or words exist to provide the conscious filtering of experience in communication." (Banes, 2007). More text may produce less movements and this will be affecting audience receptions to at least making meanings on performance when they watching a show. This research hopefully may enhance directors' thoughts in importance of using surtitles or otherwise for a touring performance.

## **Methodology**

Matinya Seorang Pahlawan, presented by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in London has been chosen as a research subject. The analysis will also draw on ideas from scholars and practitioners from similar case studies when comparisons are relevant. Various literature reviews based on reports such as a

report by Salleh Joned and any articles related to the production has been taken account as important references. Besides that, interviews have been for the production. Bank of questions which include the production experience and their perception on various topics related to languages in performance. Triangulation are based on informants' different types of works, ideologies and receptions. Their experience, perceptions of surtitles and their strategies to overcome issues related to their choice are asked in the interview - Zakaria Ariffin as a director, Ulrich Kratz as a SOAS scholar, and Anwar Ridhwan as a local theatre scholar have been informed of the research project via email. Those wishing to participate in the research had received interview questions by email. They were given several months to answer all the questions. The artists are assured that they have a long period of time in order to give a better-quality answer and plenty of time to answer it.

### **The Non-Surtitled Matinya Seorang Pahlawan (1992)**

Matinya Seorang Pahlawan was based on a renowned Malaysia epic story about the legendary Tuah and Jebat. The innocent Tuah was sentenced to death by the Malaccan King Jebat did not agree with the decision. He protested by making amok in Malacca. The King ask for Tuah's assistance who had been saved by Tun Perak to fight with Jebat. Jebat upset with Tuah because he is supporting the king. Tuah and Jebat confronted in the palace and Jebat lose in the fight.

The play was written by the Malaysian National laureate author, Usman Awang and was performed by Badan Budaya Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP) in the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) as one of the projects in Malaysia Literature Week in 1992. Jumaat Noor was the director of DBP in 1992, posits in Telaah Sastera Melayu. The aims of the project are:

1. To introduce Malay literature to the world in a place which has prestige in world languages and literature. The place must be a place which attract s Malay language and Malay literature observers in Europe.
2. To gather Malay studies, graduate s from all over the world, in order to strengthen bonds between researchers and scholars in the area, sharing ideas and opinions from discussions about Malay literature.
3. To introduce latest Malay publishing published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka in languages, literature and culture to the society and observers of Malay studies in Europe.
4. To introduce Malay laureate authors from their works and also from discussions sessions, readings and theatre performance to audience members in London.'

(Abu Bakar, 1993)

Director of the performance, Zakaria Ariffin and SOAS Malay language scholar Kratz state, the performance aimed to introduce Malay drama and Malay culture by using theatre performance. SOAS which has been a centre for Oriental and Asian studies in London had been chosen to be a venue for a performance because it was suitable for the aim since people around the world are potentially to be there to watch the performance (Kratz, 2016). Viewers can experience the Malay world by watching the performance in the original language.

Below is the translation of Jebat's words in by Rahmah Bujang in Asian Theatre Journal. The translation was not on stage during the show due to no surtitles:

"Fight with you, my brother? Never, never would I do that. How shameful that a friend should knife or be knifed by a friend. Why, Kasturi, should we take out crises in combat? I am not your foe, and you are not my enemy."

(Awang and Bujang, 1988)

Surtitling was not a practical move since the technology was rarely used in the nineties and the production also has limitations in budget and time (Ridhwan, personal communication, 20 July 2016). They were interesting argument when the performance done in London since promoting Malay language and culture in the programme were insatiable for Anwar and Usman Awang. Salleh Joned has argued the production as a lavish project. Salleh Joned in his column in New Straits Times entitled "Literary makan angin (makan angin means holiday)" argues Usman Awang was not satisfied with the event and claims the event as a holiday event rather than the main aim to promote Malay to the world since Usman unable to meet another major writers from another countries. It was highly recommended for Usman Awang to meet and share ideas with international writer around the world compared to performing a costly touring show *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan*. In addition, Joned also added a drawing of the performance which has a less audience and they were not enjoying the performance as a satire for the event (Joned, 1992).

*Matinya Seorang Pahlawan* then has different elements to discuss other than promoting Malay language. The elements are the "language" in the non-surtitled performance which we can consider as theatre language. The language was 'codified' similarly to most traditional performances in Asia such as *bangsawan*, *koodiyattam*, or *Noh*. The codified acting is used in various types of performances such as *Noh*, *Jingju*, and *Kathakali* (Schechner, 2006). Traditional performances in Asian always using codified acting that bring possibilities and coded meanings for every complex gesture, facial expression and movement. Thus, we can assume it as an anti-realism acting because we will find codes for every movement; most of the time more expressive.

In *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan* (1992), Zakaria Ariffin has to enhance Usman's words as important as the movements. Therefore, Zakaria has used the codified acting to make people know some messages in the text. 'Nonverbal signs' function to assist 'linguistic signs'. The 'over-acting' was acceptable as because it replaced the spoken language (Aston & Savona, 1991). In order to perform the poetic text of Usman Awang, every movement and gestures then assist audience members to get in to the world of performance and learn the narrative. This was helpful for non-Malay speakers to enjoy the mystery of the play. Imberti (2007) claims symbols can also be a communication tool that will be an understandable language for other speakers. Zakaria Ariffin's idea in theatre "language" agrees to Imberti's thought on language. In order to make the performance accessible for non-Malay speakers Ariffin claims:

The script has to be universal; thus, the theme and actions are easily understood. There is no barrier to being creative in the performing arts. The most important thing is the script which becomes the backbone for the performance and also the quality of the performance itself.

(Ariffin, 2016)



The absent of surtitles make the main objective of the performance was more to bringing the Malay world to the audience member. Additionally, Malay cultures such as Silat and the pantun in the theatre are something new for different tongues and cultures. Matinya Seorang Pahlawan brought the language and the mysteries of not understanding the words literally. It may be similar to looking at another codified acting and Asian traditional performance such as Wayang Kulit, Noh and Kabuki. Therefore, the surtitles will not be a priority because the main intention was to promote Malay language and culture. We may consider it as an introduction to the Malay world rather than learning Malay from a show.

Matinya Seorang Pahlawan's choice was also similar to Hirata Oriza's performances. Oriza never uses surtitles in his works even though he is a modern theatre enthusiast. Hirata Oriza prioritise theatrical elements in the performance. They have made various ways of communicating using theatre languages. It involved written and spoken language. Hirata notes that theatre is a cultural operation and telling a story is not the priority. The reception of the audience members is more important (Varney et al., 2013). If we consider Oriza's idea, Ariffin also used body language or codified acting because it can provide feelings and story for the members of the audience. Ariffin who has his own experience watching non-surtitled foreign show point out his experience in Tampere International Theatre Festival in Finland where synopsis was a primary tool to invite him to go to the world of the performances (Ariffin, 2016). Similar to the experience, Matinya Seorang Pahlawan's production has provided a programme and dual language script book. Therefore, audience members will learn basic information about the show. They can do more research by reading the programme and the book after the performance has ended because the inviting element which is the dual language script has been introduced to the audience members. Thus, they can watch the performance while they are still a non-Malay speaker.

Piaget's Schema theory is one interesting idea to discuss while viewers watch the non-surtitled Matinya Seorang Pahlawan since Piaget suggests schemas are people's mental template of knowledge and experience. Audience members have their own schemas which are their current knowledge of the Malay world (language, culture, literature) before enjoying Matinya Seorang Pahlawan. In order to justify their prior knowledge about the Malay world, the performance has been a subject study for them. New information of Malay worlds on the stage may update their schemas which will lead to assimilation and accommodation process. Taking toddlers learning language as an example, the idea of watching the performance was corresponding a toddler learn language by updating their schemas daily. Even though the process for the Matinya Seorang Pahlawan theatre viewers to learn the Malay language and culture was not a longer process compared to living in Malay community, the show will be an introduction for the Malay schemas. It has made the production may have some credits in promoting Malay world albeit the viewers may only experienced glimpse of the world.

## Conclusion

Matinya Seorang Pahlawan has classical, simple narrative and uses Malay cultures as their core setting. This made the plot easier to follow. Budget and technology limitations made surtitles also not practical for Matinya Seorang Pahlawan in 1992. Production has enhance the Malay world such as pantun, silat, Usman Awang's poetic words with assistance of codified acting that people can find

in most Asian traditional theatres. Simpler narrative and popular subject matter were invitational elements for Matinya Seorang Pahlawan's audience member.

Some Asian performers such as Toshiki Okada and Hirata Oriza do not agree to use surtitles in the performance because they want people to enjoy the performance rather than knowing the text literally. Toshiki Okada and Hirata Oriza claim that theatre is a cultural operation and telling story is not a priority. Okada's performances focus on movements and sign languages because of its universal quality (Varney, 2013). Even though Zakaria Ariffin has made a simple plot to tell stories, Ariffin still focused on movements using codified acting. This make Matinya Seorang Pahlawan suitable without surtitles and the production has covered some of their aim despite some people such as Salleh Joned and Usman Awang suggest that it has not achieve the target to promote Malay world. They prefer more discussions done among writers around the world.

Based on the research, the production was not successful to promote Malay world and culture effectively and people that involved in the production has suggested better alternative. However, there is the need for more case studies for similar types of performances in order to get a better result in the future. As a consequence of the comparison study, the study encounters limitations such as data and comparison to other local performances. Production's choice on surtitling are depend on many aspects such as budget, time and also aim of the performance. Surtitles offer information and have a bigger role today to express feelings and may be a part of a scenography. However, the most important thing in theatre is the performance itself. The surtitles role may be less important if the performance is not enjoyable.

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