

Contemporary Theatre in Southeast Asia

Finding new roles in larger arenas

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There are in Southeast Asia thousands of theatre practitioners involved in modern drama, as opposed to indigenous traditional theatre forms. Yet there is no institution that provides a theatre programme that is devoted to the study of the creative energy and artistic achievements of the dramatists in the region. There has also been too few opportunities for theatre practitioners and scholars of the region to articulate their views and exchange experiences. Therefore it was with great pleasure that SPAFA organized a Regional Seminar on Contemporary Theatre in Southeast Asia, in March 1992 in Bangkok, Thailand, the first of its kind.

Due to budgetary constraints, SPAFA was unable to invite as many practitioners and scholars as it would have liked to. It is hoped that the small number of participants of this seminar will serve as contacts for a more permanent theatre studies network on the regional level. SPAFA wishes to test the possibility of developing, on the regional level, practical frameworks and processes within which Southeast Asian dramatists can assume an active role in shaping the cultural destiny of the region.

Southeast Asia is a convenient geographical term used to embrace Indochina and the thousands of islands between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific. However, the countries in this tropical area are not entirely similar in their cultural and

political histories. Their different experiences of western domination and different acculturation processes have to a great extent influenced the paths they have chosen in political and economic independence. Despite the symbolic solidarity expressed in the political economic alliance formed on 8 August 1967, ASEAN, the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Brunei Darussalam, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore and Thailand) these countries in the 1990s are not identical in their levels of industrialization, technological development and modernization. These societies inevitably face different types of problems.

Theatre is representation. It is a vehicle for conceptualization. It reflects aspirations and anxieties of the peoples, hence, the different types of problems manifested in the theatres of Southeast Asia. From protest theatre, street theatre, educational theatre, professional theatre companies based on western models, government subsidized

theatre groups or productions, devoted amateur theatre to the dinner theatre, cafe theatre, or cocktail theatre in luxurious hotels, each of these groups represents a certain voice of society. It is because of the complexity of cultural diversity and the reality of differences that we are compelled to examine these issues with caution. In the discussion of contemporary theatre in a region where indigenous traditional theatre is rich in forms and functions, one must examine with great care how the systems of organization of traditional theatre, and the market economy of the modern time have affected the creative process of contemporary theatre. In this presentation, I intend to define the scope of research of contemporary theatre in Southeast Asia and offer ideas related to the creative artists and the audience, training institution, commercialization of theatre, amateur theatre, theatre research, children's theatre, popular theatre and political theatre. My aim is to stimulate the raising of a wide range of issues rather than providing answers. Indigenous traditional theatres in Southeast Asia have clearly defined religious, social, or political functions. They do not merely entertain. Imported from the west or via an Asian country which imported spoken western drama

earlier, early Southeast Asian modern theatre practitioners were essentially the western educated or the literati who had access to western theatre.

The influence of western theatre was thus inevitable in the early stage of modern theatre in Southeast Asia, although the extent, depth and time span of such influence differ from country to country. In Thailand, it was at the court that western drama was first introduced, in the reign of King Rama VI, Monkut Klau Chau Yu Hua (1910–1925).

At about the same time, Filipino playwrights were rewriting the *sarswela* of Spanish origin and the drama *sinakulo* or revolutionary dramas which were often labelled as seditious by the American colonialists. Similarly, in Indonesia, the early practitioners of modern theatre saw the new form of expression as a viable tool for political campaigns. The development of modern theatre in Singapore is different as there are marked differences between the language streams in the journeys theatre practitioners took. English drama, not surprisingly was introduced to the English educated by the expatriate community. Inspired by the China social reformists' approach, Chinese drama in Singapore, right

from the start served as an educational tool of moral edification. Playwrights, directors and organizers of theatre activities of the Chinese community saw themselves shouldering their social responsibility of educating the masses.

During the Second World War and the subsequent years of political struggles for independence, theatre activities in Southeast Asia assumed a significant role. The Japanese rulers suppressed cultural activities that were not in line with the philosophy of the Great Eastern Asian Co-Prosperity Sphere. But the majority of dramatists were not cooperative, and the primary concern of the dramatists then was the new responsibility of the intellectual in the struggles for independence.

In Singapore the announcement of an Emergency Act in June 1948 by the British Government brought difficulties to cultural organizations. Emergency regulations put restrictions on meetings and strikes and

permitted the detention of individuals without trial.

Nevertheless, student organizations of the Chinese schools and a Malay nationalistic literary group Angkatan Sasterawan 50 assumed important roles and became the vital force of literary and theatre activities. Variety shows, which included short plays staged by the Chinese school drama groups, served the need of student movements to mobilize the young involved in the Anti-Yellow Culture Campaign and to support what was then called "immigrant education" (i.e. Chinese education) which was apparently discriminated against by the colonial government.

These short plays, simplistic in their plots and naturalistic in their staging, were obviously moralistic in their approach. Their fervent call for social commitment and political actions and their success in capturing mass support often gave the colonial government headaches.

However, side by side with these activities, was the English drama, organized by the expatriate community as well as the English educated. The western classics (Shakespeare, Goldoni, Moliere, Ibsen, Shaw, Wilde and Brecht) were introduced to the English educated Singaporean. The three-dimensional characters of these plays of realism and the skillful performers of the amateur companies attracted a small group of English educated audience and in a way nurtured future local playwrights, directors and actors.

Although Southeast Asian countries in the 1990s have different levels of economic development, they face the same dilemma of western cultural domination. Advanced information and communication technology, its design and their messages carry great influence. There are often conflicts, sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit, between those who control advanced technology and those who consume it. Artists in

Southeast Asia, surely have an obligation to activate and to help people towards a consciousness of their national identity. They should continue to redefine theatre and dramatic aesthetics in the framework of wider decolonization processes. They should be more assertive in their search for cultural roots. Contemporary dramatists must find effective ways of engaging performers, supportive creative crews and their audiences in the quest to find purpose in the complex social environment in which we live. We must decide for ourselves who and what constitutes aesthetic authority and legitimacy.

Despite community development programmes initiated and the varying amounts of effort made by governments, the disparity in quality of life between rural and urban in Southeast Asian countries is still alarming. If contemporary theatre practitioners are serious about their roles in national development and social responsibility, they should not

limit their performances to the high-tech, posh showcases in the cities for the middle class audience and tourists or in government funded national or international theatre festivals in the capitals. They should look for a larger arena and relate their artistic experiences to the masses in the rural areas.

In order to animate intercultural dialogue at grassroots level, contemporary theatre practitioners must find forms and themes of drama which the rural audience can relate to. It is doubtful that those fashionable experimentations under the guise of expressionism or surrealism or any other names created by the urban-based theatre groups can capture the imagination of the

masses. If the rural areas' audience cannot appreciate, understand or relate to these productions, then their efforts at experimental theatre performances will be totally meaningless. It is here that contemporary theatre practitioners often have to look for resources from traditional and folk theatre and find a common language with the masses. They have to probably abandon the proscenium, forget about fanciful lighting design, and find new resources and strategies in the countryside.

Few would disagree that if we are to develop a vibrant theatre scene, we will have to invest heavily in children's theatre and youth theatre. For the time being, at least,

no Southeast Asian country includes drama in the curriculum of formal primary education. Unlike music, dance or visual art, drama is left as an optional extracurriculum activity. Although few theatre groups in Southeast Asian countries are totally devoted to children's theatre and youth theatre, they have made enormous contributions in nurturing a young generation of potential audience and practitioners. In their numerous projects, they have activated the emotions of the children who possess artistic capabilities but have yet to find opportunities to exercise them. These groups, often with inadequate funding from the government have to struggle with their limited energy to solicit funding from the private sector.

Fund raising from the private sector or seeking funds from the state, has become a necessary chore for the contemporary theatre group, professional or amateur. Unlike traditional theatre performances in

the old days which were sponsored by kings, village chiefs, religious or community leaders, contemporary theatre groups must find financial resources for themselves. To succeed, the groups must use aggressive marketing strategies. In the highly competitive commercialized cities of Southeast Asia, artistic achievement alone is insufficient to appeal to funding agencies. Some theatre groups have chosen to have senior politicians as board members or advisors, thus securing state support. Others have decided that multinational corporations would possibly have less artistic interference and more generous financial support. The crucial issue here is that relative artistic autonomy might be eroded by this new commercialized relationship. Contemporary theatre practitioners must be cautious about how the control of cultural production and cultural consumption will affect the processes of distribution of ideas.

In the era of rapid social and economic changes, contemporary theatre practitioners have to act with a high level of symbolic sophistication. We need to quickly react to and adapt to repeated changes in work methods and organizational skills. It is necessary to be alert to social and political changes, cultural shifts, competitive pressures and image making processes. Where scholarly research on theatre and mature

theatre criticisms are lacking, those drama groups and individuals which are skillful in image making are able to market their products regardless of their uneven quality. In an age of information explosion where conflicting commercial, cultural and political messages bombard people intensively in their daily life, contemporary theatre practitioners, in order to counter the waves of propaganda launched by the publicity-crazed drama groups and individuals who might not be serious about their arts, have no choice but to channel some of their energy to publicizing their ideals and works.

In some instances, theatre practitioners saw the value of projecting themselves as pioneers of innovation and proclaimed that the dramatic tradition of realism is dead. Some have even asserted that in modern societies only modern forms are capable of expressing the feelings of modern man. Such ideas might be able to attract some temporary followers, but realism is far from dead. It still is one of the effective means of expression in contemporary society. Indeed, the overt attempt to localize drama form and themes in some cases were carried to the extreme of discarding everything foreign.

Some even feel that there is a need

to totally dissociate themselves from everything western, the classics, realism and the proscenium stage.

Traditional theatres in Southeast Asia in presenting dramatic narrative in music, dance dialogue and martial art, offer implicit and explicit moral guidance, and enhance group identity as well as ethical behaviour. Contemporary theatre practitioners may not like to issue moral instructions and dislike to be seen as educators, but they must surely take on board all the contradictions and chaos of social reality and find logic in them for themselves as well as the spectators. Their success or failure depends not on the frozen categories of realism, total theatre or surrealism but on whether or not they make sense of the complex world for the audience. Contemporary theatre practitioners could perhaps learn a lesson from their counterparts in the Caribbeans and Africa where theatre is used for development wherein their initiatives have involved extensive collaboration with local communities and agencies

of various kinds. Contemporary dramatists must find new roles in a larger arena and not confine themselves to the small circle of urban middle class intellectuals who can afford to pay tickets and make small talk over the tea or coffee during the intervals. They should integrate themselves into the forefront of social action and establish themselves as vital elements within the national culture, acting as mediator between traditional and modern values, between rural and urban communities, finding the suitable forms and modes of representation to express the anxiety and aspiration of the people.

This is a speech delivered at the SPAFA Semiar on Contemporary Theatre in Southeast Asia held on the 15th–21st March, 1992.