

2015-09-11

Jebat: Exploring Cultural Hybridization in Theatre Performance

bin Saipul Bahri, Fasyali Fadzly

bin Saipul Bahri, F. F. (2015). Jebat: Exploring Cultural Hybridization in Theatre Performance (Master's thesis, University of Calgary, Calgary, Canada). Retrieved from <https://prism.ucalgary.ca>. doi:10.11575/PRISM/26691

<http://hdl.handle.net/11023/2452>

Downloaded from PRISM Repository, University of Calgary

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Jebat: Exploring Cultural Hybridization in Theatre Performance

by

Fasyali Fadzly bin Saipul Bahri

A THESIS

SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY OF GRADUATE STUDIES
IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DEGREE OF MASTER OF FINE ARTS

GRADUATE PROGRAM IN DRAMA
CALGARY, ALBERTA

JUNE, 2015

© Fasyali Fadzly bin Saipul Bahri 2015

Abstract

Jebat by Hatta Azad Khan, and its English translation by Nadia Khan, was produced by the Department of Drama at the University of Calgary, in the University Theatre from October 21 – November 1, 2014. This Artist Statement details the research and creative process involved in the production of Hatta's *Jebat*. The first chapter contains my background as an artist and my research interest. The second chapter discusses textual analysis with emphasis on Jebat-Tuah as central research. The third chapter focuses on the creative process with the designer and actors. The final chapter is an overview of the production and things that I learned throughout the entire production period as a director.

Preface

This artist statement was professionally copy edited by Muhammad Fahmi bin Abdul Rahim who helps me on checking grammar and spelling, polishing language usage and jargon, Malay translation and word punctuation into English while maintaining author's idea, voice, and intention.

Acknowledgements

First of all, I would like to express my utmost gratitude to the entire production cast and crew who made *Jebat* possible. Your dedication and spirit were an inspiration for me to strive for nothing but the best in my future endeavors. Also, I'd like to thank my designer, Jennifer Arsenault and Anton de Groot, who kept challenging my small ideas and made them grander as a result. Special shout out to all my actors who never tired of going on this exploration with me. I would also like to thank my academic advisor, Dawn McCaugherty for all the guidance, and immeasurable moral and academic support in my completing this thesis.

I further extend my thanks to my fellow MFA students; Tim Sutherland, Jackie Dymont, Rebecca Flynn and Anton de Groot for always being there whenever I needed support and encouragement. I will miss our fruitful discussions and our journey we went through together. To all my Malaysian friends in Calgary who had to bear with me when I ranted about and struggled to finish this journey – thank you for being there when I needed you. To my Canadian best friend, Steven Rimke, who knew all the right words in supporting me. I express my endless thanks to you.

I would also like to thank my family back in Malaysia for their continuous love and support. To all my Malaysian friends back at home, my gratitude toward you is like millions of stars shining at night.

Last but not least, to my sponsor, ASWARA, for believing in my quest to expand my directing skills in a foreign country. I cannot wait to go back and contribute to our beloved country.

Dedication

For

Latifah Omar

Saipul Bahri

Farizad Faisyal

Fadrila Shila

Fadzrul Fasya

Faten Fateha

Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Preface.....	iii
Acknowledgement.....	iv
Dedication.....	v
Table of Contents.....	vi
List of Figures	vii
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION.....	
From Nowhere to Somewhere.....	1
Early Thoughts.....	3
CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT.....	6
Hatta and Malaysian Modern Theatre.....	6
The Tuah and Jebat Conflict in Malaysian Literature.....	13
Malaysia Nowadays: Cultural, Social and Political Landscape.....	16
CHAPTER THREE: PROCESS.....	22
How the Text Was Made Relevant to the Canadian Audiences.....	24
Discussion with Designer.....	25
Creating the World of Jebat: Scenic Design.....	26
Costume Design.....	30
Puppetry Design.....	31
Lighting Design.....	34
Casting Process.....	35
Rehearsal Process.....	37
Physical Exploration.....	39
Puppetry Work.....	42
Bringing Eastern Discipline of Performing to the West.....	46
Wearing the Audience's Hat.....	50
CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTION.....	53
The Importance of Good Communication.....	50
The Need for Enlightenment	55
The Difficulties of Cultural Hybridization.....	56
The Result of Hybridity.....	58
WORKS CITED.....	60
FIGURES	62

List of Figures

Fig 1 Variation of level in stage design.....	62
Fig. 2 Jebat in Malay clothing and his wife, Dang Wangi in modern dress.....	62
Fig. 3 Sultan and Royal Viceroy.....	63
Fig. 4 Aristocrats.....	63
Fig. 5 <i>In the Mood for Love</i> , one of the references for lighting design.....	64
Fig. 6 Silat choreography during fighting scene between Tuah and Jebat.....	64
Fig. 7 Various <i>silat</i> -esque physical movements.....	65
Fig. 8 Fighting scene between Palace Official and Jebat's puppet.....	65

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

From Nowhere to Somewhere

There's a Malay proverb: 'Like a frog under the coconut shell'. It refers to the frog that spends its entire life thinking that the world is no bigger than the coconut shell it lives under.

There's more to my world than the proverbial coconut shell, and I have no desire to be like that frog. My world has endless things to offer, while at the same time challenging me in many different aspects. I want to go further and explore the 'other' world, and I have chosen the theatre as my door to that 'other' world. I want to blend the worlds together and see them from another perspective, or try something that's completely foreign to my culture. I want to learn about other cultures and at the same time I want them to acknowledge my culture as well. In other words, I want to understand people and the world in which we live.

It's a question I've been asking myself my whole life. I've always been curious about how people view my world. Born into a small family in an outback village in the south of Malaysia, I had very little exposure to the outside world. My village had no such facilities as phone lines, internet, or cable television. In short, my world was very much confined. I had no way of knowing what happened beyond my horizon aside from print media such as books and magazines, and these were considered luxury items hard to come by. It was only after I grew up that infrastructures were built, making it easier to communicate with the outside world - and it was exhilarating. Every day in my childhood, I wanted to go out into the world. I couldn't wait for the day when I'd be free to observe the world from a different perspective.

Due to the factors mentioned above, my involvement in the theatre world began pretty late. I only had the opportunity to watch my first show in my early twenties, after I had moved out of my village and furthered my studies at the tertiary level. Watching a play at the time was simply something my classmates and I did for our free time. I didn't see very many plays prior to studying theatre formally. *Jebat* was among the earliest ones I saw, and it gave me a brand new outlook towards the performing arts. But, at the time, I didn't delve any deeper than simply being in the audience.

After a few years, I became more seriously involved in the performing arts scene in Kuala Lumpur – the fast-developing capital city of Malaysia. Unlike my village, Kuala Lumpur was home to millions of people of different backgrounds, races, religions, customs, and traditions. As my outlook towards the world broadened, I even had the opportunity to learn about cultures other than those found in Malaysia. With easier access to the internet, films, books as well as other mediums, I learned a thing or two about societies living outside Malaysia though they were little more than observations filtered by the mediums' own limitations.

For my plays, I was mostly inspired by my observations of foreign cultures. Whatever I deemed 'cool' would go into my plays. These would all be attempts at the extraordinary. For example, incorporating Japanese Kabuki masks in traditional Malay theatre, or using a projector as the source of light in shadow puppetry. In this way, I was trying to do what Jebat did back in his day – he fought the norm, customs and traditions. He was a radical beyond his time. In short, I wanted to be Jebat.

Early Thought

When I was informed that I'd be directing *Jebat* for my final thesis project, I was elated. The first image that came to mind was two non-Malays performing *silat*, one of the martial arts practiced in Malaysia. It was something interesting yet strange for Malaysians to imagine non-Malaysians performing *silat*. As Malay, I would be duly proud to see people of other cultures performing some of our traditional customs and traditions. In some ways, it would feel like introducing Malaysian culture to others. For weeks, more images flooded my mind and plenty of questions popped up. Among them: how would this play, prominent with Malay elements, translate over here in Canada; what approach to use so it wouldn't be jarring for Canadian audiences; as well as other concerns that include the visual aspect (in terms of choreography and production design).

Prior to this, I had directed plays written by myself. As I wrote them, I'd already imagined how everything would work on stage. In contrast, with *Jebat* I did not put on my playwright's hat. Instead, I opted to wear the director's hat the whole time. It was a new challenge for me when it comes to directing plays. Luckily I had already had some exposure to this when I directed *Art* by Yasmina Reza as my pre-thesis production. That gave me some ideas on how to handle the text solely from the perspective of the director and proved to be invaluable when I set out to direct *Jebat*.

My main intention and interest while directing this play was to explore hybridity of cultures. I have some experience in traditional Malay theatre productions and I intended to bring some aspects from them into staging *Jebat*. This included things like the flair and form of performance, traditional theatre acting discipline, approach in rehearsals and the philosophy. However, I didn't intend to bring that alone into the staging of *Jebat*. I also wanted to bring elements of modern theatre as

brought to us by the West – the philosophy, approach in directing, and performance - all of which I think differs greatly from ours in Malaysia. The combination of the two would surely be nothing short of marvellous.

The genesis of my interest in exploring hybrid theatre performances can be traced back to my experiences seeing the way people live in the big city, Kuala Lumpur, where there are many ethnicities and races living in harmony. Even though they practice their own customs, culture, and way of living, there is something in common that they all share. The three biggest ethnic groups that live in Kuala Lumpur are Malays, Chinese and Indians. They still practice their traditions and are very much proud of them. Some traditions remain authentic while others have changed over time to suit the modern way of living. I wondered, if they can live in harmony, then there must be a possible way to combine all of these cultures to create something beautiful, and something that would belong to all of them. And through *Jebat*, I would love to answer this question. Furthermore, Calgary is comparable to Kuala Lumpur in terms of its diversity so it would be a good opportunity for me to explore that further.

But when I first heard I would be directing *Jebat*, these were all simply thoughts I was toying around with. I'm not just referring to how I imagined scenes playing out on stage, but also possible challenges that may arise in bringing this text to life. It was no child's play. It was as if I carried with me the pride of Malaysia and the responsibility of introducing her cultures to an audience living in Calgary, a city known for its diversity and progressive ways.

When people asked about the play, after they knew I would be directing *Jebat* for my thesis production, I had a lot of things to say. Almost no one had any idea of *Jebat*, who he was and what the story was all about. They wondered about many things. So I gave a brief introduction to them. My answers varied; I went from

describing it as the Malaysian version of Robin Hood, to the Malaysian Hamlet or Macbeth – all of which I think were not the best answers I could have given. To me, *Jebat* could not be aptly compared to any of them. It carried such a strong idea of what Malaysia is nowadays. In order to understand some of the critical aspects of *Jebat*, it is important to know more about Malaysian history, theatre background, and political realities in the country.

CHAPTER TWO: CONTEXT

Hatta and Malaysian Modern Theatre

(Note: Hatta Azad Khan is a Malay name; the name Khan is a patronymic, not a family name, and the person should be referred to by the given name, Hatta.)

The development of theatre in Malaysia differs greatly from the West. The first scripted theatre production was archived in the 1940s whereas previously performances relied heavily upon the performers' imaginations and improvisational skills. It is still a matter of debate among historians when modern Malay theatre was first staged. Shahrom Husain was the first to pen a stage play, entitled *Lawyer Dahlan*, in 1942, making him in the eyes of some the pioneer of modern Malaysian theatre (Krishen 50). In contrast, there are records of stage plays from the West having been written all the way back in 500 B.C., i.e. the theatre of ancient Greece.

This is not without dispute, however, as Ghulam-Sarwar has a different view on how modern Malaysian theatre came to be. He strongly believes that *Bangsawan* introduced the modern element in Malay theatre.

Bangsawan pioneered the introduction of certain modern elements into Malay theatre. These included the proscenium arch, the actor-audience division and the darkened auditorium in addition to those features already noted[...] The first urban theatre form to develop in the Malay Peninsula, it brought in its wake the commercial element: salaried performers and paying audiences. Consequently *Bangsawan* may also be appropriately termed as “intermediary” theatre – a link between

older folk styles and contemporary Western-inspired drama and theatre which followed rapidly on its heels (Ghulam-Sarwar 187).

In Malaysia, the history of theatre can be traced back to traditional performances like *Mak Yong*, *Main Teri*, *Wayang Kulit* and so forth. These types of theatrical performances involved ritual elements. After many years, Malaysian theatre developed a new kind of performance called *Bangsawan* that did not include any ritualistic ceremony. *Bangsawan* was derived from a theatre troupe called Wayang Parsi, originally from Bombay, India. They performed in the Urdu language in front of Indian workers that lived in Penang, one of the northern states in Malaysia. *Bangsawan* spread from there to other states in Malaysia and used Malay language (Ghulam-Sarwar 13-14).

Bangsawan did not require a written script and relied on the actors' capability to improvise whole acts based on plot structures inspired from many sources such as folklore and adaptations from Chinese, Indian and Arab merchants that came to Malaysia at the time. Using stereotypes and larger-than-life acting, *Bangsawan* used only certain characters such as the King (or Sultan), ministers or courtiers, the prince (the hero), the princess (the heroine), the warriors, villains, comedians (or sometime villagers) and handmaidens. It was set in several selected locations such as the palace, forest, village and palace garden, utilizing painted backdrops to indicate location. There were unrelated performances such as a song-and-dance number in front of the curtain and 'in between scenes', to allow for the set to be changed behind the curtain. These were called 'extra-turns', the only English term used in *Bangsawan*. These elements shaped traditional *Bangsawan*, reaching its golden era in the 1940s.

Even though *Bangsawan* performances did not employ the use of scripts, certain elements within the genre broke new grounds in the local theatre scene. Tan supports this view:

While retaining many elements of traditional Malay theatre, the earlier *Bangsawan* seemed to be more commercial and heterogenous. It incorporated non-Malay stories and Western and other non-Malay elements in its stage setting, music, and dances (Tan 7).

Though Western influences were initially slow to seep into Malaysian-made plays, modern theatre in Malaysia began to develop due to exposure to the British secular education in the 1940s. As a result, in the 1950s, development of modern Malaysian theatre gave birth to the *Purbawara* (or *Sandiwara*) genre. Stage plays written by those educated in universities and teacher-training colleges were staged. According to Krishen, this new wave of playwrights incorporated nationalism into their works. He goes on to add:

The episodic *purbawara* presented processual living and speaking dioramas exalting the Malay warrior spirit. Off-stage, however, Malay power had been progressively dissipated by the political and social intrusions of British colonial rule. By highlighting the contrast between ideal and reality, *purbawara* contributed to the post-Second World War Malay nationalism, part of the aims of which were achieved by Independence in 1957. (Krishen 50)

Purbawara plays were built on some formulas found in *Bangsawan*, though they were more straightforward in their storytelling. Extra-turns were absent, which means there was no set changing and performance in front of the curtain anymore. Song and dance too were absent, giving more emphasis on story and performance.

What remained was the use of the classic Malay language. Other than that, the numbers of principal characters were also reduced and they tended to feature non-*Bangsawan* characters (i.e. not kings and nobilities). By eliminating kings and nobilities as central characters, playwrights of the post-Independence era reassessed the feudal society from a different perspective.

The earliest work that discussed the feudal system differently was *Si Bongkok Tanjung Puteri* (*The Hunchback of Tanjung Puteri*, 1961) by Shahrom Husain; this play featured the anti-hero Si Bongkok, who was physically deformed, fierce and promiscuous, as the protagonist (Krishen 50). This was against the norm at a time when protagonists were perfect, innocent and virtuous. It was during this time that playwrights went beyond the feudalistic ideals to explore characters who were not of the nobility.

Even the time-honoured story of *Tuah and Jebat* was not exempted from *Bangsawan*. Stage adaptations of the story were by no means new; it was also part of the *Bangsawan* repertoire but the emphasis was more on *Tuah* as the ideal hero for the Malay society. Post-Independence, however, there was a paradigm shift and people started to look at the story from a different angle. *Jebat* was the protagonist of Usman Awang's *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan* (*The Death of a Warrior*), staged in 1961. Usman employed the *Purbawara* approach and maintained the use of the classic Malay language. The piece was considered provocative and controversial as it challenged the traditional way of thinking. Krishen stated that Usman's *Jebat* was a true modern day hero who stood up against tradition in the name of justice (Krishen 64-66).

The paradigm shift continued over the next decade due to the initiative of a scholar by the name of Mustapha Kamil Yassin.

In 1963, Mustapha Kamil Yassin, a lecturer in the Malay Teacher's Training College, and later a University professor, proclaimed at a drama seminar, that thematically and aesthetically, poetic drama clung too much and too stuffily to the past. In the next decade, he launched a vigorous campaign promoting the dynamic Western-influenced realistic drama eventually called *Drama Moden* (Modern Drama). (Krishen 51)

Mustapha led a new movement in shaping modern Malaysian theatre. Among the writers who contributed to this movement were Bidin Subari and A. Samad Said. They continued to explore themes such as the post-Independence Malaysian society. Among their subjects of choice were conflicts between urban and rural, traditional values and new ones, the young and the old, Malays and Chinese, and many more. Generally speaking, their concern was the social divide that existed at the time.

In the late 1960s, there was another writer to come out of the Malay Teachers' Training College, Noordin Hassan, who was apathetic to the sentiment shared by his colleagues. He leaned towards *Bangsawan* and *Boria* (which was a form of sing-song performance incorporating praises of dignitaries) (Ghulam-Sarwar 236). He had been exposed to the two arts from a young age, as his father was a *Boria* performer in Pulau Pinang. Also, he came back from a short trip to Europe, having witnessed Western surrealist, absurd and avant-garde theatre, all of which influenced his works.

Krishen declared assimilation between the traditionally Malay and Western avant-garde performance which was pioneered by Noordin:

In the midst of the excitement over the emergence of *drama moden*, he wrote and directed *Hujan Panas di Bumi Melaka* (Foreboding in the Land of Melaka, 1964), his main contribution to the growing dramatic

literature on the Hang Tuah-Hang Jebat debate. The performance features a revamped version of the traditional chorus, sung verse, and the Malay martial art, *silat*, the staple of *purbawara*. But unlike his forebears, Noordin froze *silat* in various positions in mid-flight, calling attention to its elaborately decorative gestures and poses. In short, he objectified the medium of *silat* (Krishen 52)

His explorations did not end there. He kept writing and some of his works ended up affecting the landscape of modern drama. Among them was *Bukan Lalang Ditiup Angin* (The Grass Not Blown by the Wind) penned in 1970. Krishen stated that the play had strong Malay and Western elements in it (Krishen 53-54). The use of existing characters from folklore in surrealistic imaginings, combined with allegories and responses to the May 1969 race riot, made this piece stand out from the naturalistic plays of the 1960s written by proponents such as Mustapha (Krishen 53-54). Plays by Noordin also provided commentaries on directions Malay society could take after the riot, and the focal points extended beyond identifying the types of divide between the races within the society; they also commented on how progress can be made after the bloodshed.

Contemporaries of Noordin included Syed Alwi, Dinsman and Johan Jaaffar. Most of them wrote and staged their own plays. Krishen described these as contemporary theatre (54). They experimented with a lot of Western theatrical elements, which were more progressive and provocative in the effort to challenge the norm and converse about a more dynamic national identity. Contemporary theatre did not view tradition as a barrier. If anything, it was considered as something important in shaping the ideals of Malaysian modernity. For example, works by Noordin retained a lot of traditional elements in addition to bringing modern thinking. This

hybrid between the old and the new was the result of the new way of thinking, of wanting to see Malaysia develop into a new country that could stand on its own two feet in a modern world.

Noordin continued to involve himself in producing works of a similar nature at that time, in addition to branching out to explore Islamic theatre in his subsequent works. The nationalist agenda torch was then passed on to new writers such as Dinsman, Hatta and Johan. The types of theatre that sprang up during this era also took on a different shape. Krishen opined that Dinsman pioneered absurdist ideas through his works (Krishen 56). In his first piece, *Jebat*, Dinsman featured the character Jebat as a hippie with a substance abuse problem. Krishen added, "... he [Dinsman] attempted a dazzling marriage between the traditional rebel, namely Jebat, and the pop symbol of contemporary revolt" (Krishen 143). Dinsman's approach towards staging absurdist plays differed from the West, such as those penned by Beckett, Ionesco and other well-known absurdist. They were adapted to local nuances; anchored by local customs and traditions, Dinsman attempted to converse about social ills and how the old values could still co-exist with the new. By ending his plays on an optimistic note, he went against the Western absurdist fundamentals. In addition Dinsman, Hatta was among those who produced absurdist works during the era (Krishen 144).

Contemporary Malaysian directors and playwrights had already explored the cultural hybridity in theatre performances in an attempt to modernize the tradition. Most of them westernized traditional Malay theatres as seen in *Bangsawan*, contemporary theatre and absurdist plays. The hybridization of western philosophy with traditional Malay culture was the most popular form of exploration within that period of time. This exploration did not end there, and continues to grow as cultures

evolved and the world expands. This gives rise to different challenges for new directors (myself included) and how Malaysian theatre artists perceive modern day Malaysia and the world.

The Tuah and Jebat Conflict in Malaysian Literature

The legend of Tuah and Jebat is renowned throughout Malaysia, owing to texts like *Sejarah Melayu* (Malayan History) and *Hikayat Hang Tuah* (Chronicles of Hang Tuah). These two accounts are not without contradictions, but both portray Tuah as the protagonist. *Hikayat Hang Tuah* goes into great details about the characteristics of Tuah: his physical prowess, intellect, courteous nature, and unwavering loyalty to the king. In other words, he is perfect to a fault, which makes him the ideal hero for the Malay community.

Jebat is a minor character in *Hikayat Hang Tuah* which is where the accounts differ from *Sejarah Melayu*. In the latter, Tuah kills Kasturi instead of Jebat – but the cause of conflict and outcome remains the same. This version however is not as widely known since many intertextual works use *Hikayat Hang Tuah* as their main reference, including Abdul Rahman's book *Tuah-Jebat Dalam Drama Melayu: Satu Kajian Intertekstualiti*, which uses the text when analysing the Tuah-Jebat conflict in modern dramas.

The conflict in both classic texts is important in the Malay community and in shaping its identity. History has seen it being interpreted for good use in rousing the spirit of nationalism. Khoo (2006) has also observed that the conflict is still relevant in circumstances of modern-day Malaysia. Among these: (1) The Islamic debate about whether or not there is a need for reassessing the *hadith* (sayings and traditions of the Prophet), or should we stick to blind adherence (*Taqlid*), or use independent

reasoning (*ijtihad*); (2) Political conflict with regards to the fourth Malaysian Prime Minister, Mahathir and his then-Deputy, Anwar, in the '90s; and (3) The power struggle between UMNO, Malaysia's ruling party since Independence, and the Opposition (Khoo 24-27). It is said that the core of all these conflicts is not unlike the Tuah-Jebat conflict whereby all of them revolve around the themes of loyalty and treason, traditional and modern, and of rulers and the people. This analogy can still be applied in contemporary issues. Khoo went on to add:

Such contemporary re-inscriptions of the Tuah-Jebat dilemma in 1980s and 1990s discourse show that the dynamics of nationalism and betrayal between men have seeped into the popular unconsciousness, even though the actual plays about Tuah and Jebat were being staged less and less frequently. (Khoo 24-25).

The nationalism agenda in Malaysian stage plays began in the '50s, the decade when Malaysia achieved independence from the British. As a new nation, the people desired nothing more than to have an identity of their own, free of colonial interference without falling behind the times. Interestingly, the story of Tuah-Jebat has always been part of the discourse – with many writers having interpretations of their own with regards to who is the actual protagonist.

For the purpose of this research, we shall put aside other mediums (films, poems, short stories etc) that offer their own interpretations. Instead, we shall look into stage plays alone, among them: *Hang Jebat Menderhaka* (1959) by Ali Aziz; *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan, Jebat* (1960) by Usman Awang; *Hang Tuah, Atau, Pahlawan Melayu* (1963) by Syed Alwi al-Hady; *Jebat* (1973) by Dinsman; *Kotaku, Oh Kotaku* (1975) by Johan Jaaffar; *Jebat* (1982) by Hatta Azad Khan; and *Wangi Jadi Saksi* (2006) by U-Wei Haji Shaari. All of these writers brought forth different

agendas and ideologies and among them, only two have different takes on the lore. Syed Alwi in *Hang Tuah, Atau, Pahlawan Melayu* chose Tuah as a hero. He is protector of the nation, and a great dissenter of Japan (Japan had once occupied Malaysia prior to the bombing of Hiroshima in World War II). On the other hand, U-Wei's *Wangi Jadi Saksi* chose neither Tuah nor Jebat as a hero. Both are represented as victims in feudal Melaka and in this version Pateh Karma Wijaya, one of the palace officials, kills Jebat.

Meanwhile, the rest of the plays portrayed Jebat as the hero. A year after Ali Aziz staged *Hang Jebat Menderhaka*, Kassim Ahmad set to work on a thesis called *Hikayat Hang Tuah* in which he suggested that Jebat was a Malay socialist hero (Khoo 207). This study shed new light on the character, making him a more progressive hero, and it led to a renewed interest in discussions through a contemporary lens. Sure enough, after its publication in 1964, there was a surge of stage plays in the 1970s and 1980s with their own reiterations of the Tuah-Jebat conflict. Those were the times when Malaysia was still in search of its own identity. However, in the 1990s and 2000s such plays promptly died out. It can be argued that this stemmed from the leadership of Mahathir Mohamad, the fourth Malaysia Prime Minister. Khoo compared his leadership with his then-Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim:

These men differ in personality and political vision. Mahathir is a shrewd, authoritarian leader known for his anti-imperialist rhetoric and ambitious nationalist project. Anwar, a charismatic former student radical and leader of the Islamic Youth Movement (ABIM), which was popular in the 1970s and 1980s, was imprisoned in 1974 for his involvement during the farmers' revolt. (Khoo 23-24)

In 2003, Mahathir stepped down after 22 years in power. It wasn't until three years after when another story of Tuah-Jebat was staged: *Wangi Jadi Saksi* by U-Wei Shaari. During Mahathir's period of leadership, no Tuah-Jebat related plays were staged since this topic was considered too provocative and the idea of Jebat as a modern-day hero was too radical. The Tuah-Jebat conflict might have also challenged the Malaysian society to think critically and many believed it could have slowed down Mahathir's nationalist mega-projects. As discussed before, many playwrights used this historical conflict to voice out their opinions on nation building. But as Mahathir appeared to believe, building a nation starts with emphasizing and strengthening other aspects such as the economy and infrastructure, not the society.

Malaysia Nowadays: Cultural, Social and Political Landscape

Malaysia was founded as a constitutional monarchy, similar in nature to the Westminster parliamentary system (Abuza 2002:17). Nine out of the thirteen Malaysian states have kings, and there is a rotation system that elects a king from amongst them as The Supreme Head of Malaysia once every five years. However, their power is limited to a finite number of items, including, upholding the rights and privileges of Malays, acting as the head of Islam, and approving new laws proposed by the parliament. Malaysian Monarchy as we know it today was something introduced and established by the British.

At the same time, the nation is administrated by the Prime Minister, elected by the people once every five years. To date, Malaysia has had six Prime Ministers since its independence on August 31, 1957, and they have all been from the coalition of political parties known as *Barisan Nasional* (National Front). It includes parties that represent the three major races in Malaysia: United Malays National Organisation

(UMNO), Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC), and Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA), as well as other smaller parties. These parties were formed to safeguard the interests of each race in the country, and the British were in full support of them even before granting Malaysia independence. For example, UMNO was formed by elites of Malay descent, and was backed by the Royalty to preserve their rights and privileges.

After 58 years of independence, *Barisan Nasional* is still in power due to the prevalent belief by the majority that it champions the rights of Malays. Malaysia has a population of 30 million, 50% of which are Malays, 23% Chinese, 12% Indigenous, 6% Indian, and the remaining 9% of other races. Not only that, Malaysian citizenship is divided into two groups – Bumiputra and non-Bumiputra. Siddique and Suryadinata clarify the term Bumiputra in their article *Bumiputra and Pribumi: Economic Nationalism (Indiginism) in Malaysia and Indonesia*.

"Bumi" has the meaning of "earth" in Malaysia and Indonesia or "soil" in Malay and Indonesian, while "putra" can be translated as "prince," or more commonly can be used as a polite reference term for "son" 9(662-663). They then define bumiputra in Malaysia as Malay people from Peninsular Malaysia and indigenous ethnic people from East Malaysia. (Siddique and Suryadinata 663).

Certain events in contemporary Malaysian history have shaped the political and social climate in the country. On May 13, 1969, a race riot took place, and so the second Prime Minister of Malaysia came up with an initiative to enable Malays to compete better economically. According to Walsh, "[New Economic Policy (NEP)] aimed to bring social stability by reducing overall poverty and strengthening the economic and social positions of *bumiputeras* [sons of the soil] over the other two groups (319-320)."

There was also a thorough socio-economic restructuring among races, and the NEP is still being put to use today. But it hasn't been without criticism. It has been said that the NEP has failed to meet its goals despite having achieved two: poverty reduction and economic empowerment of Malays.

Tengku Razaleigh Hamzah, a UMNO veteran, was one of those who argued against it in an interview with Md Izwan. According to him, the NEP has worked against the Malays because it encouraged: 1) over-reporting of cost and pocketing the difference; 2) cronyism; 3) corruption. He went on to add that the first item, in particular, has caused Malays to become lazy and developed the propensity to take the easy way out (Md Izwan 2014). Government contracts allocated for *Bumiputras* are often sold to a third party, after either taking kickbacks or skimming money off the top. Not only that, contracts were given out to those who government officials favoured (instead of basing it on the contractors' merit), encouraging cronyism. The phrase 'Malays helping Malays' has since become the keyword for those wanting an opportunity to do business. While indeed it has encouraged more Malay involvement in the economy, it has also seen rampant abuse throughout the years. What is available to one person is not available to the other, and bribes are used to bridge the gap between the two – leading to widespread corruption.

Aside from strengthening the economy, the Government, through the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sports, introduced the National Culture Policy in 1971 to uplift the nationalist spirit, two years after the 1969 Race Riot. Three items in this policy include:

1. All works of art must be based on the cultures of these regions:
Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore, Brunei, Thailand, Kampuchea, and the south pacific islands.

2. Elements from other cultures that are appropriate are acceptable as something dynamic, evolving through a process of continuous absorption and adaptation.
3. Islam plays an important role in shaping the national culture. Religion or faith in God is paramount if Malaysians are to be of good character. (National Development of Culture and Arts 2013)

Both policies, the New Economic Policy and the National Culture Policy, have had a direct effect on the Malaysian art industry. Works that came out after the Malaysian government introduced those policies heavily propagate the idea of a multiracial Malaysia. Playwrights who responded to these policies through their works include Noordin Hassan, Syed Alwi, Hatta Azad Khan, Dinsman, Bidin Subari and A. Samad Said. Also, as a result of the policy, theatre practitioners were promised a national stage for their works.

But according to Cheng, the National Cultural Policy affected more than the arts, it also affected the Malays' position in matters of the socio-politic (32). To contrast, he adds:

Furthermore, a National Cultural Policy (1971) that defines the regional culture as the official one to the region's culture guarantees the preservation and hegemony of the Malay language, the Malay region, Islam, and the monarchy as head of *adat* (customs and cultures) in modern-day Malaysia. (Cheng 32)

Other than the 1969 Race Riot, there was another incident in 1998 involving the fourth Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad and his then-Deputy, Anwar Ibrahim. The latter was accused of corruption and sexual impropriety. Even before being convicted, Anwar was simultaneously sacked from his position and dropped from

UMNO. This move took the country by surprise and forever changed the political climate in Malaysia. Anwar then launched a move that called for thorough reformation in the administration, which he accused of being dysfunctional and not transparent. He also called for Mahathir to step down as Prime Minister.

Once again, comparisons were made between Mahathir-Anwar and Tuah-Jebat, with Anwar deemed as Jebat. With the advent of the Internet, supporters of Anwar used cyber media to express their opinions, since the mainstream media such as TV, radio and newspaper were controlled by the pro-Mahathir government. In 1999, Anwar was convicted of corruption and sentenced to six years in prison. His wife, Wan Azizah took over his mantle, formed *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (People's Justice Party; PKR) and ran in the general election.

PKR was clearly against the NEP, which they deemed to no longer be relevant in today's more competitive society. PKR's Director of Strategy, Rafizi Ramli stated that the NEP should be replaced with a new economic policy that would seek to eradicate poverty based on needs instead of race (Izatun and Mohd Hilmi 2013). This, he suggested, would empower the Malays by making them more competitive in addition to eradicating the rampant cronyism and corruption happening under *Barisan Nasional*.

All of the above reflect the type of conflict that exists between BN and the Opposition (*Pakatan Rakyat*) – with BN as Tuah and PR as Jebat. In the last general election, PR gave BN the toughest fight they have ever had in history. In 2013, most of the PR candidates that ran in urban areas won, which gave rise to headlines like 'Chinese Tsunami' and 'What more do the Chinese want?' in UMNO-owned newspapers. Such sentiments shocked the nation for their racial and seditious overtones, though there were no repercussions to those involved in inciting it.

These two incidents, the 1969 Race Riot and 1998 Reformation movement, were turning points for Malaysians, and in particular for Malays, in deciding the path they should take as citizens of a free country in the modern world. This would, no doubt, be reflected in the arts as well. People looked back to the fabled *Hikayat Hang Tuah* and re-examined it based on modern day sensibilities. The revival of these characters and conflict will continue to change and redefine the true meaning of nationalism.

CHAPTER THREE: PROCESS

Way back when, before I delved into the world of theatre, I had read and seen Hatta's play *Jebat*. To my then-untrained senses, the play was something I considered extraordinary and hilarious, completely unlike anything I had seen before then. It was put together by an amateur troupe for a competition in Kuala Lumpur and it was then that I was first exposed to the idea of Jebat as protagonist and it made me rethink everything I thought I knew about the ideals of a Malay hero. It was an enjoyable experience for me, and I couldn't have seen it at a better time – I was a growing man learning to look at the ever-changing times through different perspectives, and *Jebat* proved to be still relevant years after it was first written.

However, it did not prepare me for what I was to learn some time later. I was formally studying theatre at a tertiary level and discovered that *Jebat* had made a huge splash in its day. Upon closer inspection, I had a strong feeling that it was not just a critique of societal issues of yesteryears, for it continued to reflect local society as we know it today. I pondered upon it; did reading it through fresher eyes mean the reader projected new meanings into it, or was the text truly something that crossed boundaries and eras like classical Greek and Shakespearean works? We have previously looked into how the two Malay heroes – Tuah and Jebat – continue to be relevant in current life and times in Malaysia, and how as observers of politics, playwrights and critics continually use the two as an analogy for socio-political issues.

I was beyond elated when I was entrusted to stage *Jebat* in Canada, where the story of Tuah and Jebat is completely foreign. Of course, it begged the question of whether Canadian audiences could relate and share our perspective with regards to the

Tuah-Jebat conflict. How could I deliver it in a way that they would relate? Should I present the text in its original form or adapt it to better suit the background of Canadian audiences? And what about the political climate of Canada? Clearly it is different from that in Malaysia, so can the same analogies be drawn and understood by the audience?

These questions led me to investigate the idea of hybridity in theatrical performance, which involves a combination of two or more different styles, genres, literary works, cultural entities, etc. to create something new. In this globalized world, theatrical hybridity is widely practiced due to ready access to a myriad of approaches in performance from traditional to modern, East and West, intercultural performance and so forth. It was this process of cultural exchange in the rehearsal process that would allow me to experiment with directing a Malaysian story with Canadian performers for Canadian audiences. Discovering different approaches, including disciplines of acting, and experiences in theatre would be central to the process of cultural hybridization, which involved adaptation, amalgamation, innovation and adoption. Furthermore, the difference of cultural experiences and backgrounds with regard to the designers would be crucial for me in exploring how hybridity in performance can extend to design and visual representation. My designers would interpret Malaysian text and my vision as a director to portray the world of the play (such as the look of Malaccan palace) through Canadian eyes.

This opportunity to direct *Jebat* in Canada would allow me to deepen my understanding of the idea of hybridity. And I took some advice from Kahn:

Those who would celebrate by cultural hybridity suggest that classical notion of cosmopolitan practice need to be revised to take account of the fact that cultural identities are now de-territorialised... (Kahn, 162).

This statement inspired me to investigate the problems, solutions, other complications and potential that could arise from investigating the differences in cultures through the theatrical medium. The reason I was interested in doing this was to see how differences between cultures could amalgamate and adapt with each other to create something new. The important part of fusing two cultures is the actual process whereby the director gets to work with designers and actors who each bring their individual cultural experiences and points of view. To come back to Kahn's statement above, through theatrical hybridization, I hoped to de-territorialize cultural identities and come up with something new.

In this part, I will examine the creative process, problems that arose, and solutions that were arrived at, starting with discussions with the designers, rehearsals, the technical week, and the performance itself.

How the Text Was Made Relevant to the Canadian Audiences

Upon learning that I was to direct *Jebat*, I reread the script, this time bringing into it my own playful imagination and thinking about all the potential it has. However, I found that upon repeated readings, the text was able to speak for both Malaysian and Canadian culture. The political propaganda remains relevant. The script, penned in the 1970s, speaks of a societal problem that still plagues present-day Malaysia, that of the uprising of people oppressed by authority - even though no such radical 'of the people, for the people' movement exists in Malaysia today. Even if given the opportunity to stage *Jebat* there, it is my belief that it would not affect the socio-politic situation in Malaysia. In fact, there have been other plays that have criticised in much harsher terms in addition to bringing forth new propaganda, but

none ever had any influence beyond the stage. Therefore, I believe that plays like this can no longer be an agent for instigation or revolution in Malaysia.

I wondered if the outcome would be the same if I were to stage it in Canada and emphasize it as a propaganda play? With the differences in culture, society, and political climate, what sort of approach might I implement in staging *Jebat* here? Would a Canadian audience respond in the same fashion as I did when I first saw it?

Upon reflection, I figured that the approach to take was not that of the propagandist, or instigator, or revolutionist but something entirely different. Other than the political and ideological nuances, *Jebat* also showcased many aspects of Malaysian culture, which I feel are very much different from that of Calgary. No doubt, the political undertones are part of the content and therefore cannot be set aside but what I wanted to stress more was the concept of marrying the old and the new. Hatta's *Jebat* incorporated ideas from Malaysian contemporary theatre – where playwrights faced modernity while still preserving traditional culture and belief – and this idea was very much apparent in the text. I felt that it was this aspect of the script that deserved to be in the forefront. It may be challenging to make Malaysian political issues relevant to Canadian audiences but I was confident that with a cultural hybridity approach, the audience in Calgary – a melting pot of race and culture – would be able to find meaning in it.

Discussion with Designers

In Spring 2014, I was informed that Jennifer Arsenault had been assigned as my designer, responsible for design of the set, costumes, props and puppets. I could not have found a better designer responsible for the visual interpretation of the text. As a Canadian herself, I was curious to see how elements of Western theatre would

seep into the staging of *Jebat* through her designs. When asked if she was familiar with the text or the story of Tuah-Jebat, her answer was no. I found the process to be very interesting due to this collaboration between a director and designer from two different parts of the world. I was adamant to inject elements and values from Malaysia while giving Jennifer room to inject Western elements into it.

Anton de Groot came on board as well as lighting and projection designer. He is a very talented artist and has a lot of experience in designing set, light and props for Calgarian theatre. I looked forward to working with such an experienced lighting designer, as I did not have much experience in this area. Unfortunately, I found it tough to have artistic conversations with Anton. I consider lighting is very different from other technical aspects in theatre production. Set, costume, props and puppet design are all visible during the pre-production period. I can see the items being designed, follow construction from time to time and suggest adjustments to the final products before they will be used on stage. In my understanding and experience, I was not able to do any of this with light. It was only during the production week that I could see how the lights worked and would look for the show. For this reason, I found the lighting design to be the most challenging aspect of design while doing this production.

Creating the World of *Jebat*: Scenic Design

Discussions with Jennifer and myself began in the middle of May 2014. We had a series of meetings where we tossed ideas around, beginning with the background of this epic and how Jebat ended up hailed as a hero by modern Malaysian society. I also provided information about feudal Malacca and Malaysia, the political system and the socio-economic background, so she would be able to get a

clearer picture of where Malacca is on the world map. Online sources were very much limited for Jennifer due to their availability mostly being in the Malaysian language; anything in English was limited and only scratched the surface in terms of the content. Therefore, I took it upon myself to talk at length about the ongoing debate regarding the Tuah-Jebat conflict in modern-day situations and how it reflected the political climate in Malaysia. I also shared a number of parody videos, classic films and images found on the internet, input as to how the debate remains relevant as time goes on.

This was followed by my own views about the script. The first time we talked about it, we did not go beyond some general ideas and immediate response after going through the script. This was intentional as I wanted to focus on the theme. We also searched for images that strongly represented the story. I was adamant about keeping the playfulness of the story intact. In this respect, I noted similarities between Malaysian and English when it comes to the language. “*Main teater*” is a vernacular term in Malay that means, “acting out a play.” “*Main*” also means “(to) play”, a word in English that could also refer to stage plays. This cross-language wordplay had quite an impact on me, and gave me the idea that the set should have a sense of playfulness about it. I told Jennifer that the stage should be designed as such, giving room for actors to do more than just deliver the story; they should have room to play around and to explore their physicality. I wanted to bring forth the idea that the stage is a space where ideas are explored, where actors challenge themselves beyond the realm of acting and where one would be vulnerable and open to risks, yet retain a sense of joy throughout the journey.

With this idea in mind, we agreed upon drawing from the image of a playground. My intention was for the actors to actively interact with the set and to

challenge themselves physically rather than just illustrating the geographical aspect of the setting. We even incorporated a slide, a monkey bar and a climbing wall.

I illustrated to Jennifer that the set should possess characteristics of both the East and West, as it was my intent to explore the idea of hybrid theatre. Jennifer returned to me with an image of a Malaccan palace, along with images of other Middle Eastern-inspired Malay palaces obtained from the internet. Among them all, I was drawn to an old Malaccan palace. It was not built in the era of Tuah-Jebat and, to my knowledge, no such building exists anymore nor are there any photos of it.

A distinctive feature of the palace was its one-of-a-kind roof. It was Jennifer who expressed interest in retaining and incorporating it into her design, even including it into the design of the screens. Since the bulk of scenes took place indoors, I figured it was the best route to take in exhibiting the geography and landscape of the text.

Other than shapes that represented the kingdom of Malacca, I stressed letting actors have room to explore dynamic movements. I wanted some characteristics to differentiate the types of social classes that existed in feudal Malacca, as clearly portrayed in the text. To achieve this, Jennifer brought to my attention some photos of traditional Malay shadow play, specifically the hut used for its performance - a small hut raised approximately three feet off the ground. I was taken by the idea of incorporating it into the set, considering that it would merge both traditional Malay shadow play with modern-day cinema; the former was intended to be played in big open fields while the latter is intended for a more enclosed space. The roof of this hut was built to resemble the Malaccan palace as we had agreed. Having this hut on set would also add to the opportunity for dynamic movement mentioned earlier. Actors would have a platform on which to move around, and it might just give them the

motivation they needed to showcase their prowess in bringing characters to life, which in turn would add to nuances in character arcs (see Fig 1).

With this set, I decided to have only two platforms, located at the up-centre stage and the up-left stage. The right backstage was left without a platform also for the purpose of letting character arcs develop. For example, the Sultan character was never placed upon the highest platform to represent for the fact that he had power in name only. Therefore, he only made appearances on the lowest platform and also on the floor. Other than that, the characters of Tuah and Jebat started out on the floor and gradually made their way to the highest platform, symbolic of the paradigm shift within the hierarchy of feudal Malacca. Meanwhile, the Royal Viceroy was free to move around on the set because, to my understanding, this text portrayed him as someone with real power who manipulated others into serving his own needs.

In the text, the playwright had already suggested a design for the play, including specific stage directions for certain characters to be in certain spaces at a given time. This caused quite a disruption in our creative process, especially with regards to the screen where we intended to only show silhouettes of our actors. Jennifer and I then decided to put aside these stage directions to allow us to think outside the box. I stressed to Jennifer that the screen had to be more than just a screen for shadow play. It could also be used as screen for a projector, or any other possibilities.

Jennifer came up with the idea for the screen to serve as vertical blinds made out of stretchable fabric that would double as an entrance or an exit for actors. I agreed and felt that it would also allow actors to interact with the screen – effectively making it more than just a screen.

Costume Design

This idea of hybridity also went into costume design. The Malay community in Malaysia have certain attires that are considered traditional, all of which are still worn to this day, and even hailed as one of the official Malaysian attires. However, there is a difference between the modern variation of *Baju Melayu* (Malay traditional clothing) and the one worn in feudal Malacca. I explained this to Jennifer and showed her the traditional Malay attire for men and women. What interested us most was the use of *tanjak*, a type of headgear worn by men based on their place in society and occasion.

When I returned to Malaysia in the summer of 2014, I took the opportunity to meet with a *tanjak* maker and conducted an interview about the process of making them. He explained that the *tanjak* for commonfolk was not as elaborate as for those with authority, where type of fabric was different to produce a more solid shape that stayed more firmly upon the wearer's head. These shapes are called *karangan*. I relayed this information to Jennifer and expressed that every *tanjak* should differ in their *karangan* based on the wearer's place in society. I also purchased two different *tanjaks* and brought them back with me to Canada as examples for Jennifer and the costume cutter.

For this staging, some of the actors would have action scenes. I stressed to Jennifer that the costume must allow them to leap, fight, slide, and hang from the monkey bars and so on without having their mobility constricted. When she asked if there were any specific clothing for the Malayan warriors, I showed her some examples and how to wear them, as well as some images and videos of the traditional and the modern versions. We drew inspiration from these sources.

Throughout the process of costume design, the overarching idea of hybridity was held constantly in mind in order to give the play nuances of modernity. Modern clothing was mixed and matched in our effort to show that the old and the new can go together; this harkens back to ideas heavily propagated by the Malaysian theatre community in the 1970s and 1980s. Other than that, I wanted the designs to evoke the feeling that they belonged to both cultures – Malaysian and Canadian. Of course, this distorted the origin of said designs, but more importantly I wanted the designs to portray the harmony that exists between both cultures (see Fig. 2).

Puppetry Design

The script never mentioned any usage of puppets. Instead, the idea of incorporating them into the performance came from the screen required by the script. To maximise the use of the text, I thought of bringing into the performance the age-old Malaysian shadow puppetry, which would be limited within the two-dimensional realm, i.e. strictly behind the screen. In order to maximize the usage of these puppets, I went back to the script, looking for a solid reason to even use them to begin with.

In my opinion, there was one character that pretty much controlled the story, and even manipulated other characters so he would remain in power; and that character was the Royal Viceroy who served as the Sultan's advisor. He was the one responsible for swaying the Sultan to make decisions, in addition to advising him with regards to the matters of the State. The Sultan might sit in the highest position of power in Malacca, but that also meant he had to rely on the Royal Viceroy for advice. I took this to mean that the Royal Viceroy possessed the necessary skills to manipulate the Malaccan administration.

In addition, he chose to disobey the Sultan when the latter decreed that Hang Tuah was to be killed – instead he chose to save and hide the celebrated admiral. It was the Royal Viceroy who orchestrated all that happened in the Tuah-Jebat conflict. It was upon this realization that I finally decided to fully incorporate puppetry into the play, since the Viceroy served as the ‘puppet master’ in so many situations. The characters that had a puppet form of themselves were the Sultan, Hang Tuah, Hang Jebat and Aristocrats. These were the characters that frequently interacted with the Royal Viceroy.

I explained to Jennifer that the Sultan was a metaphor for people in power being overly dependent on others to decide their moves. I suggested that the character appear lacking in aforethought, insecure, not smart and funny in appearance, but still able to carry the idea of a human being in the highest position of power in feudal Malacca (see Fig. 3).

In the script, Aristocrats was written as Aristocrate I, II and III and was to be played by three different actors. However, they struck me as three characters all standing for the same idea. Therefore I decided to have them all played by one actor. Jennifer came up with the idea of placing fake heads on the shoulders of this actor, to give the appearance of three people standing abreast (see Fig. 4). I was taken by this idea and promptly agreed. In this instance, the design came to define the kind of acting required of the actor, drawing inspiration from the concept of puppetry itself. I was also intrigued by ventriloquists in the West. Ventriloquism is a type of vocal performance where the performer speaks without their lips moving, speaking instead in a different voice for the puppet. But I had no intention of incorporating ventriloquism entirely, as I was only inspired by it. It was decided then that the actor

who was going to play Aristocrates must have the ability to speak in different voices for each of the three characters he represented.

Tuah and Jebat were also to make appearances as puppets, but only in selected scenes, such as the fight scenes. This would also add to their dynamic as pawns played by those in power.

Other characters that didn't have a puppet version of themselves were only the Royal Viceroy and the Villagers - the former for reasons already stated, while the Villagers were characters free from manipulation and could stand on their own feet, except for one scene where protestors were portrayed in puppet form, holding hands. In arriving at this decision, I explained to Jennifer that for the said scene, I wanted to portray a mob made of villagers in silent protest. An issue with that was the fact that I only had a limited number of actors with which to work. This scene was also meant to show that they were united in going against a cruel and unjust leader. After a few weeks, Jennifer returned with a cutout of paper-people holding hands. I was taken by this idea and agreed since it carried the idea of unity perfectly.

All discussions with Jennifer about designs went swimmingly well, at the same time they were thrilling and full of excitement. However, in keeping with the idea of hybridity, I never disclosed fully the backstory about the Tuah-Jebat conflict. I considered it crucial to give her room to explore, understand and come up with her own interpretation. The idea was to see if our interpretations could meet halfway, if ever. At this stage, my focus was solely on the harmony in the amalgamation between cultures and ideas. Therefore, I did not want one to overshadow the other. It was a tough process as it would never be free from bias, whether it be based on the experience, background or ideologies that I subscribe to as director, i.e. the one with

final say in all artistic decisions of this production. Nevertheless, I considered this process invaluable when it came to exploring hybrid theatre.

Lighting Design

Traditional Malay theatre did not use special lights as part of the performance, however, in contemporary western performance lighting plays a significant role, from illuminating the actors to creating mood and atmosphere. In addition, lighting assists the director in establishing focus, intensity, tempo, and pacing. Until now my experience with lighting design had been very limited; I would leave everything to the designer with only one expectation – to be able to see the actors. But for this production I was challenged to engage in conversations and discussions with a lighting designer.

The *Jebat* script mentions the technical aspect of lighting with silhouette and spotlights suggested to delineate and focus space on the stage. One of my first directives to Anton de Groot, the lighting designer, was to ignore the specific in-script directions because they were too conventional. Anton agreed with that. As discussions continued, we found ourselves being brought back to the playwright's original suggestions because there are several scenes where the silhouette is compulsory to create shadows for puppets and spot lights are mandatory for certain scenes involving the Narrator to create the two different worlds.

We also discussed some important scenes that I wanted to highlight, one of which was the journey sequence where characters walk in a circle accompanied by gamelan music to indicate travel. After making the sequence, characters would have arrived at different locations in the story. Because it was inspired by traditional

Malay theatre, Anton suggested that the journey sequence needed a different mood of light and talked about colours of light he thought would work in the production.

We also discussed the overall aspects of mood in the play. I showed him several pictures from the Wong Kar-Wai film, *In the Mood for Love* as a reference (see Fig. 5). The colour in that film affects the overall aspect of the film, by enhancing the ideas of bravery and strength. We communicated primarily using pictures, as I found that to be an effective way to generate more ideas about lighting. In addition to that, we also took into consideration the colours of the set in an effort to ensure that all design elements worked in harmony. As we went through the discussions, I found that there was something lacking; I needed to see the light but could only see what it looked like during production week. At that time, I couldn't put my finger on the problem so I still wanted to have further discussions with Anton. Pictures and videos were not enough and I needed more. As a result, we discussed light cues and it was then I understood that lights have a musical quality about them. Scene changes, fade-in and out, cross fade and black out, all influenced the pacing and mood of the play. This understanding was helpful but, in terms of being able to envision the visual effects, I would have to wait for the technical week.

Casting Process

I believe that all directorial work begins way before the director ever sets foot in the rehearsal space and works with the actors. One task in particular that I found most challenging was casting. I had to be careful and wise in my choices since I would have to work with the cast for six weeks. Having staged a number of plays back in Malaysia, I find this process to be the toughest. Sometimes during casting an actor may come in looking like the complete package (from their physicalities and

acting capabilities, and so on) but upon entering the studio for rehearsals, it is not too uncommon for them to fail to live up to my expectations. Therefore, directors must know exactly what they need in advance of the short audition process.

During the auditions for *Jebat*, I found the process to be nerve wrecking. In choosing actors, I narrowed it down to a number of criteria. First of all was, of course, acting prowess and the ability to move naturally on stage. All of these I zeroed-in on during the auditions. I looked at how they projected their voices and how they moved about. At this stage I could not see how they would emote or enunciate the lines.

Secondly, I looked at their physicalities. Because the play was going to explore how *silat* and traditional Malay dance could look on stage, it was compulsory for actors to be able to use their bodies as a medium of expression. During the audition, I only instructed them to move without telling them anything specific.

Next were the callback auditions. In this process, I was able to see the potential of every actor in greater detail. This time around I had more time to challenge my actors with other activities. This was when the script came into play and I saw how potential actors brought the text to life. Next, I looked at the roles each actor could play. I made a shortlist of the actors I deemed suitable. I called them in to run their lines with potential co-stars to see how they would gel with one another, in addition to looking at what they could bring into the overall performance. Their appearances were also a cause for concern. For example, I interpreted *Tuah* and *Jebat* to look completely different from each other. I was lucky since most actors who showed up for audition were of different races, which made it so much easier to choose the two main actors. My intention was not meant to add anything into their characters – may it be nationality, background, etc. – I simply wanted them to look in

complete contrast to each other. I had no interest in the idea of a particular race having a particular ideology, and had no desire to explore this interpretation.

Other than that, I also looked for their ability to take directions from me, and how they would respond. Simple directions were given during the callback audition to gauge how well they could process them and how they would use them to affect their performance and surroundings. I only wanted to work with those who could take instructions well as it would make the rehearsal process much smoother. I made variations to my instructions just to see how these small changes could affect the dynamic between characters.

Of 23 shortlisted actors, only 12 were chosen, with some of them playing more than one role. I was more than satisfied with the cast. Each of them had something different to offer, and I anticipated the rehearsals would have a good energy because of that. The varying background and experience of actors had also prompted me into researching the idea of hybridity with a renewed vigour. Now it was no longer simply research about variety and amalgamation of cultures for the stage, it had also become a melting pot for the various disciplines and acting experiences brought by every actor of different ability and background. Their uniqueness would surely pose more challenges for me in exploring the idea of hybridity in theatre.

The Rehearsal Process

As the director, this was my favourite part as I had the opportunity to work with a lot of ideas from actors. We began our rehearsal session by watching a classic film called *Jebat* (1962) by Hussein Haniff. Of all films that dealt with the Tuah-Jebat conflict, I chose this one because it told the story from the perspective of Jebat as the

protagonist. However, English subtitles weren't available for the benefit of my actors. All they had available to them was the audiovisual, which included the intonation/delivery of actors, songs and the sound effects – but I made sure to provide the synopsis for them beforehand so they would understand the plot.

Even disregarding the dialogue, they were still able to follow the narrative based on what they saw, even though there was some confusion. The intention of the screening was just to give them the idea of customs, culture, and the idea of moral conduct and common decency in feudal Malay society. There were things that caught their attention: the art of *silat*, which is different from any other type of martial art; the way people bowed in reverence to those in power; the *Bangsawan* school of acting – very much external and stylised; and also the traditional dance. I took into account their input on what images or movements we could use in our staging. This way, they would be able to adapt some of the more inspired images into their characterisations.

They were, however, not in favour of a few things, such as the *Bangsawan* school of acting which was too foreign to them. But I did not want to set aside entirely the essence of *Bangsawan* in this staging, so I considered how this old school of acting could appear on the modern stage with actors unaccustomed to it. The screening gave impressions of the visuals and of the quality of *Bangsawan* acting to them. I was interested in further exploring the combination of *Bangsawan* acting with their contemporary North American style of acting, to arrive at a hybrid of the two styles. I figured that most of their acting veered towards the Stanislavsky school of acting, which gave more emphasis on exploring the internal work of the actor and Freudian psychological theory.

Physical Exploration

Because the text tells the tale of two Malay warriors, I wanted to incorporate movements of *silat*. Based on my observation, *silat* stresses the importance of lower body strength. The prowess of a *silat* practitioner depends on how strong is their *kuda-kuda* stance (truss/easel stance), which meant the actors would not be standing straight. The physical exploration was further enriched with choreographer Krysten Blair on board, experienced in the art of dance, who received training in Bali, Indonesia. Even though the arts and cultures of Indonesia are different from Malaysia, the two nations have much in common – which includes giving emphasis to the movements of hands and legs in their dances.

Before Krysten joined us in the rehearsal space, I had already looked into the physicalities of our actors. With my limited knowledge about *silat* and Malay dances, I relied mostly on what I've observed throughout my years in this field. I began this exploration by asking each actor to choose a job (in accordance to their characters). These jobs must involve body movements required in occupations such as farming, picking fruits, fishing, and so on. Starting from realistic movement, I asked them to find the main physical qualities for each job and then explore these. For example, if one were to pick fruits, which part(s) of the body would be utilized and what would be the significant movements of this activity? These movements then were shaped into something less realistic but still inspired by the actual activities performed by the characters.

To incorporate the element of *silat*, I then asked them to find a stable position, a more grounded one. Big, sweeping arm movements were made regardless of whether or not they made sense for the characters. At this stage, I no longer focused on how each routine could add into the characterisations, since I only wanted their

respective movements to become like a motif. This motif would be repeated by each actor regardless of their character to inject the essence of *silat* into the performance. It would then become an acting discipline of its own (see Fig 6).

Most of *Bangsawan* actors in Malaysia have a certain degree of expertise in the art of *silat*, hence *silat*-esque movements tend to show up in their acting. By continually training my actors in the art of *silat*, I wanted them to be well-versed in it to the point where it would seep into their acting, as if they had been practicing it all their lives; therefore it would show up all by its own when they performed action scenes on stage. Despite the quite limited time for rehearsals, by injecting ideas about the kind of acting and physical explorations that I envisioned for *Jebat*, the rehearsal process benefitted. These movements became a motif which manifested in the form of physical movements that were repeated by the characters, effectively giving the performance its Malay essence.

In my initial email correspondence with Kristen, I expressed my inspirations about the type of physical movements that I wanted. I also included links to a video clip that inspired me for the ultimate fight scene between *Tuah* and *Jebat* in the palace. That way, she would already have an idea about the action and physical movements before she even entered the rehearsal space.

It took Krysten a couple of rehearsal sessions to explore it. Some movements were taught and exhibited to actors to inspire them. These movements were the basic ones, such as walking, how to bow to the Sultan, how to properly sit, and so on. With traditional Malay dance as main inspiration, she came up with the idea of clapping; not even I had realized that clapping has always been a prominent feature in traditional Malay dances – and it can also be seen in *silat*. I was taken by this motif and wanted my actors to continue exploring. Other than affecting their physical

movements, the sound it produced had a favourable impact on pacing and the momentum of the performance.

With a few more ideas and motifs inspired by *silat* and traditional Malay dance, I allowed my actors to find a movement vocabulary that suited their characters. These physical movements might be manifestations of internal states of action. For example, the movements of Jebat were mainly motivated by his inner conflicts. These conflicts were then interpreted in the form of *silat* to externalise his emotions and developed as motifs that would express his inner life. This contrasted with how a Villager character might do it, by selecting some *silat* and dance motifs and using them in specific moments to express the reality of his character. In short, Jebat portrayed his character by connecting with his inner feelings and drives and then revealing that through movement (‘inside out’ – a western approach to acting), while the Villager started from physical movements that indicated his intentions (‘outside in’ - the model of acting practice in traditional Malay theatre). Here was where modern acting and traditional *Bangsawan* acting collided, allowing for hybridity to take place. This process only occurred after the actors adapted new techniques – introduced during rehearsals – and added them to what they already knew. They injected the essence of *silat* into their acting, giving *Bangsawan* attributes to it. It was a continual process. If I observed that their acting did not possess any sort of clash between the East and the West, I would bring them back to the basics of *silat*, just like the early stages of rehearsal.

The physical exploration emphasized in the rehearsals was meant to find motifs that could become symbolic for every action or character. This motif was repeated to emphasise the Malay essence of this theatre. This was inspired by Malay arts that place emphasis on repetitive design, motif, and patterns. Based on my

observation, even movements in *silat* and those in traditional dances appear to have been built on this same principle. Therefore repeated movements in this play could give it that distinctive Malay feel. At first I wanted to bring *silat* into the play in the most literal sense, but in my exploration involving *silat* and Malay dances, I discovered something invaluable. The traditional Malay school of acting and its elements can be injected not only through *Bangsawan* acting, but also by understanding other Malay forms of art and adapting their essence. In bringing this idea to an actor in the West, it also gave them room to explore, capture and portray what they understood about the Malay art form. Through this process, hybridity was able to take place.

Puppetry Work

Through *Jebat*, I tried to recreate my first experience with theatre and see how puppetry could lift the audience's imagination and suspend their disbelief. However, this technique was different in many aspects from the conventional as I intended to use several types of puppets. As stated in the previous section, there would only be a handful characters made into puppet form - Aristocrates, the Sultan, Tuah and Jebat. Each of them would be a different type of puppet and would require different techniques to be brought to life.

For Aristocrates, since all three characters were to be played by one actor, I stressed the need for different voices and movement for Aristocrates I, II and III. I figured that in every puppet theatre, a puppeteer should have the ability to find different voices for each character that they play. The same is true of the puppeteers in shadow puppetry plays. The *Tok Dalang* (or puppeteer) will find different voices and intonations so the audience will be able to differentiate the characters. Other than

that, the *Tok Dalang* will also bob or wave the puppets currently speaking to make it clear. Going back to Aristocrates in *Jebat*, I used this technique to differentiate between Aristocrates I, II and III.

However, Aristocrates in this play would not be acting from behind a screen. But rather, the character would appear on stage – yet still employ the same techniques as shadow puppetry. The audience would be able to differentiate the three characters based on the voices and movements. The actor would not only play one character, but also act as a master of two other puppets. This required him to find different mannerisms for each character.

These characterisations began with some practice by Krysten as described in the early stages of rehearsals. The actor stated that he was drawn to the hand movements in the *silat* and traditional Malay dances, and he wanted to explore further the qualities of hand movements. He then came up with the idea that for Aristocrate I, the moves would be framed by slower (and graceful) dance numbers, while for Aristocrate III they were sharper and firmer like *silat* drills. For Aristocrate II, the movements were more neutral. These movements also affected the vocal qualities for each character. Naturally Aristocrate I would be more soft-spoken while the voice of Aristocrate III would be more gravelly and harsh.

The Sultan character was drastically different. The character was realized fully as a puppet about one metre in height and propped atop a wheeled plank that resembled a skateboard. This Sultan puppet had a few moveable parts, such as the head and arms. Initially, I wanted it to be controlled by two puppeteers, but I decided to settle for one. This decision was made so there wouldn't be any confusion about the Sultan character, who was dominate in a few scenes. Other than that, I was also

worried about the complications the traffic of one more puppet operator could cause on stage.

Even though the Sultan puppet had no moveable mouth, its limbs could be moved to show when he was speaking. However, finding the right moves for the puppet proved to be challenging. The actor didn't have ample opportunity to play around with it as it took a while for it to be completed and we received it late in the rehearsal period. When it arrived, we utilised the few days we had to explore the possibilities and potential of the puppet.

The rehearsals focused more on finding its voice and moves. But I was not as drawn to the former as I was with the latter. It challenged the actor to find the physical limitations of this character. It was unlike the orthodox form of acting, where the actor possesses full control of his body. With puppets or other inanimate objects, the puppeteer or actor not only has to get to know their personal conduit, but also the anatomy of the puppet, finding all possibilities and adding characteristics through these. In this exploration, I discovered that the concept of acting is the same as playing with puppets, the difference being that on stage actors lend their bodies to play the role from within, while for puppets, their bodies are created for the exact purpose of the role, and the controls are done externally. Hence it is necessary for the actor to understand the anatomy of the puppet's body they are about to play, and realize its potential.

Through the process of design and construction, the character of the Sultan was realized in puppet form, and it waited for the actor to play the role by lending characteristics to it. The search for the Sultan's character began from the information from the script, then the process moved on to shaping the voice (intonation and vocal quality) and physical movements of the puppet. The process was nothing short of

thrilling. The quality that we lent to the character depended on the physicality of the puppet as well. The delivery had a staccato quality - with clarity, concise and 'sharp' at the end of every word. The actor operating the puppet stated that he built it from factors such as its small stature, the internal conflict and also the journey of the character based on the text.

For the staging of the play, there were several scenes where the narrative was aided by images of *wayang kulit* (shadow puppetry), played by people behind the screens. Among the images portrayed was the scene where food aid was distributed; there were puppets in the shape of moving food trucks. These 'trucks' were moved by a few actors who weren't on stage. This technique came straight from the traditional Malay shadow puppetry with modern nuances added, since traditionally there had never been such a thing as food trucks in Malay theatre.

There were also scenes where characters like Tuah and Jebat were realized in puppet form. These puppets too were played by actors who did not show up on stage. The puppets were utilised only during the fight scenes, created to give the impression that the fight began from outside and got dragged on into the palace. Performing these puppets proved to be less challenging than the previous two. This was due to the puppeteers never making an appearance on stage while manipulating the puppets and also because the puppets were more static in terms of action. All the puppeteers had to do to 'breathe life' into them was move them in front of a source of light. The same goes with other scenes that utilized shadow puppetry, such as the fight scene where Jebat attacked the Royal Viceroy, Aristocrates and Palace Official (see Fig 8).

However, for scenes involving the shadow puppets, music played a massive role in giving the play an Eastern flavour. Choosing *gamelan* music not only gave distinction between actors in the three-dimensional realm (on stage) and puppets in

the two-dimensional one (behind the screen), but it also added an essence of wanting to amalgamate the East and West. The music used in the scene was the Malay music often played in *silat* exhibitions. Other than that, the music contributed to the character development of Tuah and Jebat as Malay warriors, and made reference to the geographical origin of the story.

Bringing Eastern Discipline of Performing to the West

Ravi Shankar, a well-known classical Indian composer, once stated his opinion about the differences in stage discipline between Eastern and Western performers:

Presentation is important. Showmanship plays a great part in the West, whether on the part of an opera singer, a jazz musician or a pop star, but in our country musicians used to be overtly informal. Too often they were crude or sloppy, displaying all their mannerisms in front of the public, coughing and mumbling, chatting to members of the audience or with each other (Shankar 298).

The statement gave rise to a debate within myself. Is this really true? His statement is actually in line with what I have witnessed myself, when I participated as a musician in a traditional stage performance in Kuala Lumpur some time ago. Being someone who was trained formally at university level, it was apparent that I had a different stage discipline than those who learned their craft verbally and through years of experience. Most of them were more casual and spontaneous in their performance. Among the musicians, there were those who talked amongst themselves, tuned their instruments mid-performance, laughed along with the audience, and displayed many other behaviours that we would never get to see in Malaysian contemporary theatre

which tends to be more disciplined, organised and rigid. Even so, their focus never strayed from the performance as they had to give certain responses, spontaneously, to move the story forward.

I noted that these distracting behaviours are among the characteristics of a traditional performance in Malaysia. Traditional theatre performers may not be involved emotionally during the staging, but they were always aware of their surroundings and were responsive to it in relation to themselves. I tried to adapt these distracting behaviours and attempt to challenge the statement by Shankar. Other than that, I was also drawn to a statement by Brecht about the relationship between an actor and his role.

The actor does not allow himself to become completely transformed on the stage into the character he is portraying. He is not Lear, Harpagon, Schweik; he shows them. He reproduces their remarks as authentically as he can; he puts forward their way of behaving to the best of his abilities and knowledge of men; but he never tries to persuade himself (and thereby others) that this amounts to complete transformation (Brecht 137).

The relationship between actors and their roles can be severed by making the aforementioned distracting behaviours the medium to emotionally distance themselves from the performance. Even though the traditional Malay theatre did not carry any strong propaganda, the element of pedagogy that existed in the traditional texts made it belong in the same league as plays by Brecht. How was this achieved?

Going back to *Jebat* and the concept for it that I had chosen, Brecht's ideals about acting and Shankar's stage discipline were my inspiration in exploring the idea of 'dirt', 'noise' or 'glitch' in the kind of acting I was trying to develop. What is

‘dirt’, ‘noise’ and ‘glitch’ in acting? I considered it as the distracting behaviours that can be seen or heard, that exist during performance, which are not part of the character’s or actor’s intention or choice. These can be the behaviours in Shankar’s statement or could be something that naturally happens on stage. I found that while performing actors try hard to control everything even a little cough, sneeze or scratching an itchy skin. Putting so much effort into controlling all this ‘dirt’ and ‘noise’ in acting makes them focus too much on the play and play less while performing. This ‘dirt’ or ‘noise’ is also something that is totally unplanned during rehearsal.

In the rehearsal process, I was interested to look into and explore those ideas found in traditional Malay plays and bringing them into this play where most of the production company were Canadians, who had received formal training. I attempted to celebrate the spirit of traditional theatre that, in my opinion, was more playful. The idea was for the performance to be more responsive and allow for communication between performers and audience. By communicating, I do not mean direct verbal communication, but more towards understanding that both entities exist in the same dimension of the spirit of the play.

During the rehearsal process, I reminded my actors that they were still themselves, and there was no need to entirely be someone else. That was why I placed emphasis on the character’s appearance physically, rather than psychologically. Their biggest role was to be conscious of their acting, i.e. to always be conscious of and be responsive to their surroundings. No doubt, these responses would be different for every rehearsal and performance, but I liked it because it felt more human – like how we, as humans, don’t do everything in the same way as robots might. Every moment on stage had a different feel and it was a joy to explore. Ravi Shankar (2012) also

added that through every song, even though it is always the same and played on the same note scale, will always be different with each performance. It was the same thing with traditional Malay theatre. Even with the same text, performances would always be different depending on the response of actors to their surroundings and the 'noise' or 'dirt' that was accidentally created.

For example, in the beginning when the Narrator introduced the actors on stage, they made an appearance in a very casual manner even though the performance had already begun and they were in full costume. They would smile and respond to the audience, saunter over to their spot and just stand. Sometimes, they would change the way they stood, tinker with their costume, or greet other actors. They appeared natural even though there was no showmanship about it, and no rigid acting discipline. However, there were scenes where this did not happen as the actors were so into their role, nothing distracted them, making their acting clean of 'noise' or 'dirt'. An example can be seen during rehearsal of the opening act where all actors danced and lined up prior to the performance. During rehearsals, all actors were cautious in their every move, all the way to their final position. As far as movements were concerned, they had a rigid stage discipline. They were all looking for uniformity in their movements. After a couple of rehearsals, it got to the point where they all moved in sync with each other until there was no longer a sense of individuality. That was when I asked them to incorporate any distracting behaviours that would showcase a sense of individuality in each actor. However, this 'dirt' and 'noise' then became synthetic and faked – the complete opposite of what I wanted. How to achieve non-synthetic 'dirt' and 'noise'?

The actors suggested the idea of adopting a basic move, from which each would be free to expand into something related but unique to each other. For example,

if they have a basic movement such as a simple walk, they can make adjustments to their gait by adding, improving or eliminating something via physical exploration. These additional characteristics were indeed the ‘dirt’ and ‘noise’ I was looking for. The movement was less synthetic and, as a result, the actors in the opening scene moved at varying speeds (which is different from a Malay dance whereby dancers move in unison to create togetherness), in varying styles (some actors made the basic movement bigger while some made it smaller, some concentrated on the upper body, and so on), as well as with a variation of internal life that came from their characters. The idea of breaking the sense of togetherness resulted in non-synthetic noise in acting, even when they utilized the same basic movement (see Fig. 7).

The idea of emphasizing individuality in the midst of group activity was also reflected in the character of Jebat himself. Jebat, as written in the play, was not a follower of the people in power. He celebrated individuality while Tuah adhered to those who were influential. In the spirit of Jebat, I tried to create a sense of individuality even when part of a group.

Wearing the Audience’s Hat

The final step in this process is to wear the ‘audience’s hat’. At this point, I needed to see the performance from every possible angle: from the aspects of storytelling, technical, and exploration that I stressed throughout rehearsal sessions. I could also no longer make significant changes at this point, but I needed to focus on the musical aspects such as tempo, pacing and overall mood. My notes to the actors were also more compact and more general in nature, except for some small scenes, which I decided needed to be fixed by some of the actors. Moreover, many notes on technical aspect were given at this stage, to ensure that every scene change would run

smoothly. The aforementioned musical aspects include how overall acting performance complemented the technical aspect to create the sense of togetherness. In short, I was concerned with the flow of the show and the consistency of performance from the beginning to the end. I had only a week to wear the audience's hat before the show would be open to the public.

The day of the opening was nerve-wracking. Questions and uncertainties flooded my mind the moment the audience started to trickle into the auditorium; mainly I wondered how they would respond to this legendary Malay tale. Would they be able to grasp the idea of Malay customs and traditions? I left it all upon them to watch and what to make of it. At this point I needed to prepare myself for any criticism from the audience, all of which I considered valid and should be kept in mind for my future plays.

On the opening night, some of the audience came from the Malaysian community. Before the show, they mentioned that they had never heard of Hatta's *Jebat*, thinking that they were about to watch a purely *Bangsawan* performance. I let them watch and braced myself for any interpretation made by them. Later after the show, they remarked that the show was different from what they had expected. When I asked what was different, they said that I had 'westernized' *Jebat*. Some of them said the play reminded them about political situations that were happening back in Malaysia. They went on to comment that I probably could not stage it this way in Malaysia due to our strict censorship law. Because of freedom of expression in Canada, my artistic and creative vision was allowed to comment on the political situation in Malaysia.

Besides that, there were also remarks from non-Malaysian audiences. It was interesting that their opinion differed greatly from their fellow Malaysian audience.

They were more interested in the cultural aspects such as the costumes, music and movements in *Jebat*. One of the audience members that I met after the show asked me about the movements in *silat*, which seemed so foreign to his eyes. He was aware of other eastern martial arts such as *kung fu*, *taekwando* and *muay-thai* but not *silat*. Some of them were really into the music, the customs portrayed in the performance and so on.

After that night, I let *Jebat* conquer the stage. I wanted the show to meet with new peoples in a foreign land and be ready to be 'judged'. Some other nights, I'd go and see *Jebat*. It was important for me to see how much my actors had grown from the opening night, and how their confidence fared from time to time. Through the run it became clear they were more comfortable with the scene changes, sound and light cues, and with their engagement with audience members.

CHAPTER FOUR: REFLECTION

The Importance of Good Communication

I believe that all forms of art convey emotions and thoughts – may it be in the form of narrative or in abstract models. But producing a work of art not only requires interpretation of emotion or information, but something more important which is observation. Not everything one witnesses could inspire art or perhaps contribute to it. This happened to me while I was directing *Jebat*. My one-year observation and experience of living in the Calgary community proved to be insufficient. I still have a shallow understanding of the work ethic, cultural activities, the locals' favourite sport, and so on. These things may appear minute, but they all affect the process of amalgamation between two cultures. Among the things I feel that I should learn more is the work ethic of the people in Calgary, which I feel is totally different from that in Malaysia.

The system and process of staging a theatre production I observed here was totally different from my experiences in Malaysia. Back in Malaysia, I was involved in small productions where everybody held down multiple roles to maximize the use of few human resources. Due to this, creative workers like the director, actor, writer and designer had to do other things that might involve, for instance, publicity and carpentry, thus rendering them unable to give the creative process its due attention. This inefficient system more or less affected the quality of the staging even though I, as director, possessed full control of the production. In contrast, the theatre culture in Calgary is more focused and efficient. Duties were well-distributed, and this made a lot of things easier. However, it requires constant communication throughout the production to avoid confusion between departments. This is something I learned when

I staged *Jebat*. Directing requires not only creativity but also communication – may it be with actors, designer, production manager, publicist, stage manager, and many more. My artistic desire needed to be expressed in several different ways to make it easier for every production member.

For the *Bangsawan* plays staged in the 1940s, a systematic model had been established. Every production member stuck to their own roles for economic reasons – the very reason, in fact, for a production to be taken seriously by its members. Unlike the artists who worked in that system, I never thought of staging a play as part of show business; this made it difficult for me to understand the work system, and it was something I needed to learn. The production work for *Jebat* was all about the real thing – actual theatre – that not only placed emphasis on directing as an art, but also taught me that it was all part of show business. With the understanding of the system and work culture, I realized that good communication is vital if I am serious about succeeding in this field – artistically and economically.

I found that production meetings and continuous discussions were vital in making sure that I could realize everything that I envisioned. Unfortunately, there was one thing that I think did not fully represent my original idea - the poster of the play. I strongly agree that the poster is at the forefront of communicating to the audience what the play is all about. The discussion with the poster designer was the first meeting I ever had during this production process. At that time, I was still learning how to have a creative discussion. With my limited experience, our discussion always ended with me saying yes to the designer's every idea. The final poster, though it still carried the idea of the play, did not really bring forth the concepts I wanted to emphasise or explore in this production. In our discussions, I did not demand or stress on ideas. I only hoped that he could understand my vision after our first meeting. The

final poster did not portray my artistic vision. It simply fed information to the audience about the play, whereas I think posters should serve like a window to the play.

The Need for Enlightenment.

I didn't have any problem communicating with actors because much time was spent with them during rehearsals in the studio. I was able to share my artistic vision with them actively. Furthermore, I had good experience working with actors back in Malaysia, which I think was really useful when I directed *Jebat*. But, the hardest person to communicate with was the lighting designer. It was not a personal problem, as I had a good relationship with Anton. The difficulties originated because I do not understand how lights work on a show. I do not fully understand how to use lights technically and artistically. My previous understanding of lights was that they are used simply to illuminate the stage. Therefore, it was hard to communicate with the lighting designer since I did not have a basic understanding of the potential of theatrical lighting. Though the designer suggested several ideas about how to convey mood, scene transitions and so forth, I was unable to offer artistic responses.

I am still figuring out what is the 'thing' that directors and lighting designers discuss. What is the best way to communicate with lighting designers in my future projects? At this moment, I strongly think that I should undergo a basic lighting workshop to understand how lights work - technically and artistically. This could maybe improve my communication skills and I will know what to bring to a discussion, so it would prove to be fruitful for me and the designer. I also think that it would be helpful for me to work very closely with the designer and have as many discussions as we can, sharing photo references and sometimes before production

week visit the actual space to see the light condition and the architecture of designing light. This process could be done back and forth until I understand and can imagine how light would work for the show.

The Difficulties of Cultural Hybridization

Exchange between nations and cultures is much easier and more common than in past eras. One can easily observe the life and times of a community through mediums like the internet, television, films, literature and so on. But in doing this, one will only have the kind of understanding that observation can provide. To fully understand and experience the culture of a community, one will have to live in the environment of that community. Only then can the process of assimilation and adaptation take place.

In staging *Jebat*, a lot of focus was given to the hybridity between the East and the West (Canada in particular), and this posed many challenges for me. On my part, there are still nuances to the Calgary community that I have not fully understood. My one year of living and studying here proved to be insufficient. When I speak of culture, I refer to the lifestyle – how the society here lives, what their pastime activities are, their daily routine, favourite sport, favourite food, the way they dress, and so much more. I daresay I failed in doing an in-depth observation about the routine and the everyday particulars that define the local culture.

Such things impacted the pre-production work of costume and set design. When I look back upon my choice of costume and set, it portrayed and presented much about Malaysia but not so much about Calgary and local people here. When I first stepped foot in Calgary, I saw a signboard with an interesting cowboy hat design to it, welcoming me. Also, security personnel at the airport sported cowboy hats.

Never had I thought that such hats represented Calgary. Only after I met and talked to locals, after the show was over, did I learn that the cowboy image represents them. This iconic aspect of Calgary escaped my attention initially. If I had included it, I feel it would have given the play a sense of belongingness to the Calgarian audience.

This production of *Jebat* showcased many aspects of Malay culture, which also posed a number of challenges. The first was in introducing this foreign culture to the production members. With their limited understanding, they relied a lot on me to fill them in about it. As we have already discussed, for different cultures to amalgamate naturally into the play cannot happen with the help of observation alone; one would have to live among them. With their limited observation of Malay culture and customs, production members (designers and actors) could only obtain such information from the internet as well as printed materials, in addition to myself acting as an ambassador of culture, customs and traditions. Limited knowledge about the Malay culture threatened to hinder the production. It took much rehearsal time to talk about aspects or scenarios that are commonplace for me, but totally foreign for them. For example, the aspect of hierarchy in the feudal system and the ways in which every member from every class interacts with reverence to customs and culture was completely foreign to the actors. In Malaysia, some of these customs are still alive and very much part of Malaysian life. Therefore, to inform them about it to the point of comprehension took time and longer rehearsal sessions in the studio. Inevitably, there were aspects of the Malay culture that could not be portrayed clearly, given the rehearsal schedule.

This challenge also extended to the perception of the audience, who witnessed a cultural show quite foreign to them. With the relatively short and simple script, they had a limited amount of time to grasp the idea of the culture portrayed on stage. An

audience member on opening night remarked that it reminded him of his visit to Indonesia a number of years ago. I was completely fine with this, as the audience should be free to come up with their own interpretations. Still, it was an input, a reminder for me to be more careful in making decisions so the audience would not be confused about the cultures. Indonesia and Malaysia are neighbouring countries that share similar cultures and traditions, yet they are each distinct.

The Result of Hybridity

Every combination of two different things will create an entirely new entity. Black and white will create grey. The same goes for cultures. It's that grey area that comes from such marriages that I find fascinating. As a Malaysian looking at Malay culture presented in Canada, my senses felt overwhelmed. It was the same feeling I had when I observed and tried to learn Canadian culture. We, the whole production team and I, made many interpretations of each other's cultures and tried to understand them. The result of these interpretations was what I considered the grey area. It was something blurry; less contrasted from one to another but had the essence of two different things.

The staging of *Jebat* is a grey area that exists in my exploration of hybrid theatre. I feel that this exploration is a continuation towards the idea of theatre as recommended by Malaysian theatre activists back in the 1970s, who were progenitors of the concept. But for my part, this concept must be further explored to add to the dynamics of the Malaysian theatre scene, in keeping with the ever-fading lines between cultures and nations. However, this grey area I'm exploring must be properly balanced so that not one culture will be more dominant than the other. This hybridity can happen through the process of adaptation, adoption, assimilation, integration,

incorporation, and so on. In *Jebat*, all of these approaches were taken into account in seeking the ‘right’ type of grey I am looking for.

My exploration as a director will not end here. Malaysia, like Canada, is a multiracial and multicultural country. There are many races that still practice certain customs and traditions that will be useful for my future exploration. I believe understanding other cultures, traditions and customs is a great approach in strengthening society. As an artist, this is one of the contributions that I can offer to make the world a better place.

WORKS CITED

- Abdul Rahman, Abdul Faiz Bin. "Rethinking Jebat." *Rethinking Jebat*. BICNews, 29 Oct. 1998. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.
<<http://www.iol.ie/~afifi/BICNews/Afaiz/afaiz34.htm>>.
- Abuza, Zachary. "Malaysia—Political System." *Encyclopedia of Modern Asia*. Ed. Karen Christensen and David Levinson. Vol. 4. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 2002. 17-19. *Gale Virtual Reference Library*. Web. 3 Feb. 2015.
- Ahmad, Kassim, ed. *Hikayat Hang Tuah*. Kuala Lumpur: Terbitan Bersama Yayasan Karyawan Dan Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1997. Print.
- Brecht, Bertolt, and John Willett. *Brecht on Theatre; the Development of an Aesthetic*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1964. Print.
- Hanafiah, A. Rahman. *Tuah-Jebat Dalam Drama Melayu: Satu Kajian Intertekstualiti*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, Kementerian Pendidikan, Malaysia, 1994. Print.
- Human Rights Watch. *Malaysia's Internal Security Act and Suppression of Political Dissent*. Human Rights Watch, May 13, 2002. Web. May 10, 2015.
<<http://www.hrw.org/legacy/backgrounders/asia/malaysia-bck-0513.htm>>.
- Izwan, MD. "DEB Punca Sistem Makan Atas Angin, Kronisme Berleluasa, Kata Ku Li - The Malaysian Insider." *DEB Punca Sistem Makan Atas Angin, Kronisme Berleluasa, Kata Ku Li - The Malaysian Insider*. The Malaysian Insider, 4 Apr. 2014. Web. 30 Mar. 2015.
<<http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/bahasa/article/deb-punca-sistem-makan-atas-angin-kronisme-berleluasa-kata-ku-li>>.
- Jit, Krishen. *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position: Selected Writings*. Ed. Kathy Rowland. Singapore: Contemporary Asian Arts Centre, 2003. Print.

- Kahn, Joel S. *Other Malays: Nationalism and Cosmopolitanism in the Modern Malay World*. Honolulu: Asian Studies Association of Australia in Association with U Of Hawaii, 2006. Print.
- Khan, Hatta Azad. *Patung-Patung*. Kuala Lumpur: Dewan Bahasa Dan Pustaka, 1980. Print.
- Khan, Hatta Azad. *Puppets*. Ed. Solehah Ishak. Trans. Nadia Khan and Rohani Mohd. Yusof. Kuala Lumpur: Institut Terjemahan Negara Malaysia, 2010. Print.
- Khoo, Gaik Cheng. *Reclaiming Adat: Contemporary Malaysian Film and Literature*. Vancouver: UBC, 2006. Print.
- National Department for Culture and Arts. "National Culture Policy." *National Culture Policy*. National Department for Culture and Arts, 2015. Web. 2 Mar. 2015.
- Shankar, Ravi. "Raga: A Personal Introduction by Ravi Shankar." *YouTube*. YouTube, 2 Sept. 2012. Web. 12 Feb. 2015.
- Shankar, Ravi. *Raga Mala: The Autobiography of Ravi Shankar*. Ed. George Harrison. New York, NY: Welcome Rain, 1999. Print.
- Siddique, Sharon, and Leo Suryadinata. "Bumiputra and Pribumi: Economic Nationalism (Indiginism) in Malaysia and Indonesia." *Pacific Affairs* 54.4 (1981): 662-87. *JSTOR*. Web. 4 Feb. 2015.
<<http://www.jstor.org/stable/2757890>>.
- Tan, Sooi Beng. *Bangsawan: A Social and Stylistic History of Popular Malay Opera*. Singapore: Oxford UP, 1993. Print.
- Yusof, Ghulam Sarwar. *Dictionary of Traditional South-East Asian Theatre*. Kuala Lumpur: Oxford UP, 1994. Print.

FIGURES



Fig. 1 Variation of level in stage design

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014



Fig. 2 Jebat in Malay clothing and his wife, Dang Wangi in modern dress.

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014



Fig. 3 Sultan and Royal Viceroy

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014



Fig. 4 Aristocrates

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014

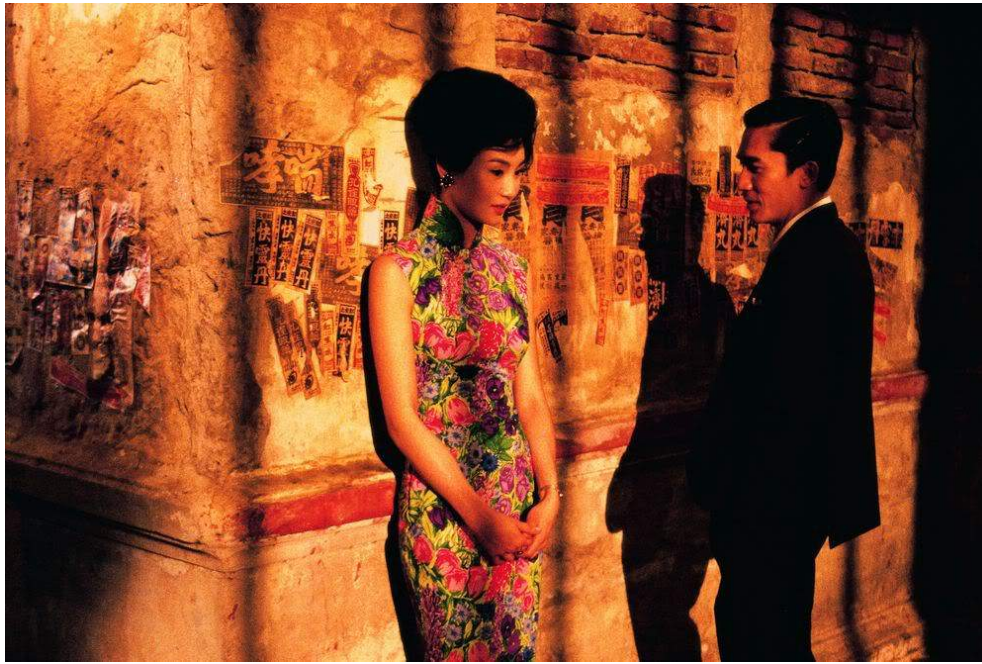


Fig. 5 *In the Mood for Love*, one of the references for lighting design.

Courtesy: berlinfilmjournal.com



Fig. 6 *Silat* choreography during fighting scene between Tuah and Jebat.

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014



Fig. 7 Various *silat*-esque physical movements.

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014



Fig. 8 Fighting scene between Palace Official and Jebat's puppet.

Photo by Citrus Photography, Oct 2014