

PAPER FOR UNESCO SYMPOSIUM ON ARTS EDUCATION IN ASIA  
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**Growing Up Into Theatre : A Look at Teater Muda, Malaysia.**

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**SLIDE ONE**

Thankyou for inviting me to be part of this discussion on arts education. It has been a most useful opportunity to think about and try to understand my own experience in arts education and some of the reasons for my own value for it. I have been asked to present a case study that will offer some useful reflections on arts education and have chosen to talk about Teater Muda, a project that Janet Pillai began in the 70s and continues to run till today. As she is present at this meeting it seems rather odd to for me to be presenting on it, but I shall employ my lens as participant to offer a view that includes the ‘child’s evaluation’ in the process.

**Introduction:**

As a teenager in the 70s I was involved as a participant in a Teater Muda type project. Although it was not called Teater Muda then, it was really the initial stages of what became Teater Muda. As a working adult in the 90s I became involved as a facilitator in what came to be called Teater Muda, an integrative multi-arts education project, produced and hosted by Five Arts Centre, a visual and performing arts collective in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. Such that when I sat down to write about Teater Muda for the purposes of this meeting, I could not help but ask myself a range of questions about what I had experienced as a participant and then a facilitator.

**SLIDE TWO**

What made it work and how did I come to be so involved in it? What led to the programme happening in the first place and then being able to find a life for itself beyond its initial beginnings? What sorts of people were charged and changed by it? How did it affect my education? Should it become part of formal education? Is there a space for TM in all contexts and locations? Is the process peculiar to its time and space and thus inapplicable to a wider audience? Would it make sense to do TM in both rural and urban contexts as well?

Significant issues if I was to consider aspects of effectiveness and impact, implementation and continuity for an arts education programme in the space we call Asia. But too many questions to ponder. I need to focus on what is most relevant. Yet in the process of my reflections, a persistent voice drumming in my head. That the programme's value lies in its position outside the formal education system. Despite problems that arise from being in this location, such as not having consistent funding and training for facilitators, reliable infrastructure and facilities for organization and administration. Still, the voice reminding me of the fact that it was never compulsory nor was it held in school time, with school teachers or school rules. A significant factor in my own memory of the work whilst I was a participant.

So how to situate its relevance in our meeting here, which seeks to find ways of encouraging arts education in a “ mainstream context and within the existing school curricula, in furtherance of the Education for All goals” ? (Quote from the Background Description on the Symposium website). I am not sure I know the answer but believe it is useful to consider 3 aspects of the programme that are pertinent to the issues we are raising in this meeting. Its Process, its Location and the passage of Performance.

### **SLIDE THREE**

I must begin by stating that this is not a quantitative analysis nor is it a thoroughly researched description with details of the programme, its methodologies and its implementation. I offer a brief sketch of the program and some principles of working,

linked to my thoughts on why this has meaning for us. I will consider how it remains a crucial space for a deep experience of the arts for young people and a crucial learning centre for skills that go a long way toward building a wholistic education. I apologise in advance for using myself as an example.

### **Teater Muda Description:**

Teater Muda officially began in May 1992, produced by Five Arts Centre, a performing and visual arts collective in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. A team of facilitators selected and led by Janet Pillai, came together to conduct a 6 month series of workshops using an integrated multi-arts approach. Malaysian traditional arts and contemporary arts were brought together for a group of 16 young people aged 10-16 years. The aim was to give them a vocabulary of skills and a range of opportunities to create their own versions of theatre that would articulate a Malaysian sensibility and a semiotic of their location. Meeting for 3-4 hours every Saturday and Sunday, the participants went through a process oriented training in drama, movement, music, visual arts and the traditional arts ( in this first phase it was Wayang Kulit (Shadow Puppetry). The process also incorporated an exploration of issues relevant to their worlds, and material culled from their experience, emphasizing a participant centred activity.

Towards the latter part of the process the participants were led to devise and structure their own short pieces of theatre drawing from the vocabularies they had learnt and experiences they had gone through. Facilitators helped to structure and rehearse the participants towards a performance workshop, which was then shared with family and friends as a kind of 'graduation' event for all.

There was no grading or assessment. Nor was there payment involved. Participants entered into a voluntary contract of attendance with the facilitators, with permission from their parents or guardians. They were required to make a commitment to be punctual and participatory in all the activity. An audition was held to select participants as there were only limited places. Participants were selected for their willingness, initiative, spontaneity

and spunk. There was also a consideration of age, gender and background in order to create as mixed and as balanced a group as possible.

Facilitators were made up of artists in the various fields who were interested and willing to work with young people in a teaching and collaborative manner. Traditional artists worked in a more rote teaching capacity, whilst contemporary artists seemed to use more improvisatory and experimental modes of skills transmission. But all were interested to extend their ideas and aesthetics to young people willing to imbibe and perform.

Since 1992 TM has been conducted in KL and Penang with at least 8 groups of young people.

### **The Process :**

In each case, a language or vocabulary was being taught and shared as a working discourse of ideas and conventions. Sometimes its rules were very strict and there was little room to include one's own signs and symbols until the later stages when one gained ownership of the words and grammar, and resemanticised them in one's own story building and text making.

But each language offered a lens through which to view the world and a means through which to express one's perception of the world. Separately and together in an integrated fashion. This increased literacy is significant empowerment in extending possibilities of cultural interpretation and intervention, whether one uses dance or drawing. How to view and re-view the world becomes more engaging when one is not always dominated by the verbal and linguistic, logical and mathematical. Observing human posture and gesture, apprehending visual sign through shape and colour. Recognising the range of language we read but rarely heed and thus becoming more literate in the reading of texts that surround.

**SLIDE FOUR**

When Janet began working with young people in Children's Theatre under the Ministry of Culture in 1978, I got involved. She employed a similar philosophy but it had not yet been named. Thus although TM began officially in 1992, the practice had started much earlier.

I recall learning silat, a martial art form from a contemporary dancer and choreographer. I remember learning the gong from a traditional Wayang Kulit master. I have vivid memories of learning to 'melatah' which is a form of spontaneous trance evoked by a sudden fright, leading to a continuous stream of language and rebuke, uncontrolled in the person who is provoked until she calms down. These are all Malay forms of being and cultural expression that were quite remote to me, coming from an urban middle class Indian family, despite my education being in Malay and my having grown up in Malaysia all my life. These were not foreign elements but they were certainly Other-ed by a process of socialization that was largely Westernised, my having learnt to play Bach and Mozart, sing Ella and the Beatles, watch Camelot and Oklahoma. An ethnicised socialization meant I would have known the nadaswaram and thavil from family weddings and had notions of kalari payat when my mother and her sisters talked of a dance with sticks. But none of these were in my working vocabulary.

This becomes relevant when I consider the impact and implication of Teater Muda for young people growing up in a multi-cultural society that in fact has very few spaces for an integration of multi-cultural experience beyond the superficial labeling of Malay dance, Chinese opera and Indian music. In learning the languages that I did through a process of immersion and experience, I not only learnt to understand and appreciate Wayang Kulit and Silat, but I also grew to have deeper respect for all those who represented its existence. Learning the skills involved also meant I had access to owning and reimagining the spaces in which they were articulated. No longer being as much an outsider as I previously was. I am convinced that this made a significant difference in my learning process at school.

My first language is English. This is what I grew up speaking and thinking in at home. Malay is the language that I learnt to speak on the street and had to read and write in at school. But I struggled with written Malay language for many years as I did not read as much in Malay nor was I thinking in it. Until I had to perform theatre in Malay and thus reorient my imagination towards a language that now inhabited a terrain that mattered to me. This improved my motivation towards the language and my inclination to master it as well.

#### **SLIDE FIVE**

Although the situation varies from person to person, I offer that as an example of how the TM programme engages the participants in activity that seriously changes the landscape of their cultural literacy, creativity and curiosity. I began to watch more movies in Malay and listen more closely to the language and its nuance. I also began to be interested in traditional Malaysian performance. I began to perceive Malay artists who were hanging around the KBN as people who were not to be feared or avoided, as within my family they were the near current equivalent of the Muslim terrorist or vagrant immoral artist! This often led to struggles at home when I needed to go to rehearsals in 'that place' but the process of individuation was probably a very good one too!

#### **The Location :**

Janet operated as a kind of itinerant teacher in a range of schools, traveling from one school hall to another school field. We often also met at the Kompleks Budaya Negara, or National Cultural Complex for intensive workshops and large group rehearsals.

So the question of Teater Muda being located outside the school system. The fact that it is not part of the establishment, which gives it a freedom, flexibility and fluidity of existence that is crucial for the opening up of the participants and their introduction to the

world of art making – perhaps on a more organic and complex level though much less organized and thus less quantifiable.

Spaces and locations are filled with association. For a programme to be linked to school means certain connotations and expectations. Some of these may be beneficial whilst others disadvantageous. The ideal would be to have links but not be tied down. Enjoying some of the benefits but not be weighed down by them. Idyllic perhaps, but not entirely impossible.

### **SLIDE SIX**

Teater Kanak-Kanak, as it was known in the 70s was initiated by the late Ismail Zain, then director of the KBN. He created a full-time portfolio for theatre graduates, first filled by Elizabeth Cardoso in 1977 then Janet Pillai in 1978. It was funded and made possible by the then Ministry of Culture and thus enjoyed a certain validation and sanction when it came to getting access to school children.

In the 90s TM has been produced by Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur and then Young Theatre in Penang. These are theatre companies, acknowledged by government institutions, and are known to be involved in young people's theatre and community theatre. It has been held in a range of venues from the National Art Gallery to the Malaysian Tourism Centre to schools which offer their space on weekends. Again government institutions supportive of the activity but not as part of official school work and thus not regimented by a national agenda. In an urban context where several middle class kids in particular have a gamut of other classes as it is, I think it makes sense for TM to remain outside school as an alternative form of training and exposure. I am not so sure about rural contexts. The question is how to get it seen as serious education and not just an entertaining extra.

By remaining on the outside, within a certain kind of margin perhaps, it operated in a space more conducive to pushing young people towards understanding art making as part

of the social fabric. Not as a subject in school but as part of how people operate in society. Then, not only is the process non-orthodox, the location and association prod a question for the participant and parent as well. Is art just for some people or do we all take part in it? Art and artists become tangible experiences, not just references on tv or in a book. A soccer team that trains with a soccer club and plays on a city stadium pitch, feels a different energy even if the dimensions of the space are exactly the same. Negotiating different people in different spaces yields different results. And in this case I think the shift and change from one locale to another would actually prod the participant to activate a new nerve or a fresh impulse.

### **SLIDE SEVEN**

In this way the forum for education (Bruner) is enriched by the way in which it interacts between spheres and domains because it does not have to be focused on a prevailing centre of school alone. As a participant it was tremendously liberating for me to have an activity outside of school that in some ways could consume me and provide for me what school would never have been able to do. Spend many hours simply doing one thing – doing theatre. My opportunity for real deep play.

### **The Performance :**

One of the working aims of Teater Muda is that the participants should have an opportunity to then be involved in a full production of a young people's performance that is performed for young audiences in a public theatre space. They then go through rehearsals and the process of devising theatre, based on a story or issue chosen by the adult creative team led by a director. In the first few years of Teater Muda in KL, the participants were involved in two productions. The first was Suara Rimba or Voice of the Jungle, an adaptation of Kipling's Jungle Book in 1994 and the second was Rama & Sita : Generasi Baru (new generation) an adaptation of the Ramayana story in 1996. Since then there have been other productions such as Ne Zha and Red and Gold Shoe in both Kuala Lumpur and Penang.

The purpose of this aspect of the Teater Muda programme is so that young people have an opportunity to become active participants in the larger space of theatre and thus make links between their experience of the arts education programme and the theatre that is being made around them. The performance is aimed at a young audience, but the participants are made to take their work seriously. No patronizing of peers is allowed!

Tickets are sold and publicity is rampant. Newspaper stories and magazine articles emphasise that this is not just something for family and friends, but for the public at large. Thus the responsibility of artistic activity and the accountability to their creative selves and audience demand levels of commitment and energy that far exceed what was required in the earlier performance workshop.

Participants volunteer to be involved and again the cooperation and support of the parents and guardians is critical. Intensive rehearsals during the school holidays and over weekends often mean having to negotiate compromise 'deals' with families and make sacrifices as well. But the desire to perform is strong enough and manages to sustain the group through the pain and exertion of tough times.

The young people work with professional artists – musicians, choreographers, designers, directors – whose own artistic temperament and temper can come into play. No longer is this the simple safe terrain of the workshop process. Egos can explode, adults and young people together. The devised process means negotiation, contemplation and commitment. A collaboration that engages the whole team on several level of artistic input and theatre knowhow.

#### **SLIDE EIGHT**

Young people become culturally active participants in the artistic sphere. They intervene in processes of artistic expression by defining their space and becoming part a group of artists who make their mark. They articulate their ideas in collaboration, learning from

their elders, but teaching them a thing or two as well. This makes the theatre a valid forum of ideas and opportunities for negotiation and participation. Active culture being activated and performed as well.

I recall as a teenager rehearsing for the production that we did, called Si Geroda, based on the legend of the mythical bird Garuda and his abduction of the Princess of China. The production was first held in the second half of 1979 and then went on to do two national tours – one at the end of 1979 and the other at the end of 1981.

There were several things happening in school those years. Primarily the big public examination that was taken very seriously by all and sundry. But the opportunity to perform and negotiate a process of story telling that drew on my response to the story, my imagination of character and employing the range of vocabulary that had been acquired over the process of training and workshop were very exciting and well worth the tug of war with parents and teachers and time and energy.

#### **SLIDE NINE**

Not only was this a huge challenge compared to the staid practice of drama in school, this was inventive and creative in ways that pushed us to be imaginative, purposeful, original and have value. We had to develop a vocabulary that was unique to the performance through the processes we had gone through. We had to take on responsibility as script writer, musician, costume designer, mask maker, depending on our talent and ability. I remember writing a song for a crow, the tune of which still echoes in my head. [It seems insignificant now that the young boy who was to sing it, could barely hold a tune, but he got the impulse and the rhythm right!]

The value of working with professional artists whose respect for the young person define a working relationship that is not merely instructional but truly collaborative and thus interactional, enables young people to grow to appreciate the rigours of making theatre professionally and respecting the profession. I am not suggesting that theatre in school

curricula do not do this. But I do think that when artists engage with a professional theatre company to produce a work, it is not the same as when they do it for a school.

By inhabiting the professional stage (and by this I do not simply mean the venue but the psychological space), the young person grows to understand the dynamics of working in a 'real' theatre space and an appreciation for its difficulties as a future audience member and possible artist in the future. A sort of vocational training one could say.

The opportunity for other young people to watch young people perform in the public space with professional standards is also a factor to consider. No amount of teaching or encouraging can have the impact of watching a peer group in action.

### **Conclusions :**

In conclusion I will point to some of the problems I see in the TM programme as I know it. Apologies to Janet if this is a reflection of the past and not the present as I have not been involved for some time and I did not have the time resource to do the necessary investigation and research before writing this paper.

One of the problems for TM has been development – its continuity and accessibility. This has been due to availability of facilitators and funding. This is a serious disadvantage to being outside the system, where there is no engine to keep the wheels moving. Thus it depends on the strength and dedication of a few to keep the work progressing.

It also runs the danger of being exclusive and elitist. Not many opportunities arise for programmes like this to run. So it is only a few young people who will have the access and opportunity to get to the spaces where it is being held. Also only a few artists see working with young people as rewarding to their own profession and this is something that needs to be considered in the larger discussion of arts education.

Another aspect of the work is how to improve the methods employed when there is poor continuity and so few facilitators have access to training. Understanding the psychology and pedagogy of how to deal with the material and with the young people is sometimes seriously lacking.

**SLIDE TEN**

As a final word I go back to the idea of process, location and performance as three aspects of the TM programme that I think are important in our consideration of Arts Education. When we engage young people in a process that encourages them to review the semiotics of their location, we encourage them to become active participants in the performance of cultural activity and art making that empowers them towards better self-fulfilment and stronger sense of self-esteem. In order to do this we need to consider education as a process that engages young people in their social fabric and on several levels. School is the fabric that tends to dominate. Do we not need to offer other garbs for survival?

The process of TM is defined by its location. The performance that comes out of the process employs the semiotics of that location in order to reflect and refract an experience that is deeply educational and educationally deep. When this happens, one not only grows up into theatre, one grows up as well.

As I have to say, I was fortunate to do!

Thankyou.

**Possible Programme for Teater Muda:**

Month/Week		Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	
Month 1	1 hr	Wushu Drumming	Wushu Drumming	Wushu Drumming	Wushu Drumming	Whole Group
	1 hr	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	
	1 hr	Drama Improvisation	Drama Improvisation	Drama Improvisation	Drama Improvisation	
Month 2	1 hr	Wushu Drumming	Wushu Drumming	Wayang Kulit	Wayang Kulit	Whole Group
	1 hr	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	
	1 hr	Drama Improvisation	Drama Improvisation	Drama Improvisation	Drama Improvisation	
Month 3	1 hr	Wayang Kulit	Wayang Kulit	Wayang Kulit	Wayang Kulit	Whole Group
	2 hr	Visual Art / Design	Visual Art / Design	Visual Art / Design	Visual Art / Design	
	3 hr	Field Trips & Research	Field Trips & Research	Field Trips & Research	Field Trips & Research	Small Group
		Participants	Begin To	Make Group	Performances	
Month 4	1 hr	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Contemporary Movement	Small Group
	1 hr	Rhythm & Sound	Rhythm & Sound	Rhythm & Sound	Rhythm & Sound	
	1 hr	Drama / Story Building	Drama / Story Building	Drama / Story Building	Drama / Story Building	Whole Group
Month 5	3 hr	Rehearsing a Performance	Rehearsing a Performance	Rehearsing a Performance	Workshop Performance	
		Rehearsing Vocabulary	Rehearsing Skills	Rehearsing Ideas		

**Teater Muda : An Educational Experience Written by Simran Latif**  
**[http://www.familyplace.com.my/articles/theater\\_muda.htm](http://www.familyplace.com.my/articles/theater_muda.htm)**

As I sat down somnolently for a few moments of repose, my body placid with stiff joints and aching muscles, beads of sweat pouring down my face, my attention turned to the ramblings and instructions of the obdurate facilitators - their frantic gestures still an enigma to most of us. I looked upon the sea of bobbing heads with sweaty faces and saw the anticipation in their eyes. Yes?our lunch break draws nearer?

I have been involved in a theatre programme for the past six months which is pegged as 'Teater Muda' or 'Young People's Theatre.' To shed some light for the benefit of the clueless, *Teater Muda* is a project conceived by a group of theatre people in FIVE ARTS CENTRE, Kuala Lumpur to promote the 'revolution' of theatre for the younger generation. To date, Teater Muda is the pioneer young people's theatre establishment in Malaysia. To the best of my knowledge, *Teater Muda* aims at allowing young people to deal with 'process theatre'. It also provides a firm platform for an integrated arts approach for creative expression. *Teater Muda* allows modes of drama dance and music.

In the early stages of *Teater Muda*, we the participants (Teater Mudarians ?) were involved in three disciplines, namely drama, dance and music. After a certain period of time, certain individuals whose interest and talents lay in one of the disciplines were streamed accordingly. Those who could portray characters well and had a good imagination went to drama, hyperactive individuals who couldn't sit down quietly were suitable for the dance section (Just kidding ! Actually anyone with visibly clear body movements could dance) and those who love music (and had a good sense of rhythm) inevitably became musicians.

For drama, the budding actors/actresses were directed by the ever voluble Janet Pillai (one of the committee members of the FIVE ARTS CENTRE). Through serious reenactments of typical daily life scenes, the individuals were taught how to apply the concepts of status, emotions and character observation into their self-portrayed 'alter-egos'. For a hands-on experience, the gang of actors were taken out into the real world of busy wet markets, dirty jettys and smoky temples. Through this, they were able to fine-tune their inept skills of observing a person and noticing his/her particular habits and gestures.

In the meantime, the group of dancers were sweating their guts out during the rigowons and repetitive dance training of Aida Ridza, a well known dancer in her own right. Through earlier exercises concocted by Aida, the individuals were able to isolate their body parts and sensitized their physical movements towards internal and external surroundings. Emotions play a big part in a dance as it shows through the dancers movement, so the dancers learn how to control disruptive emotions that would affect their dance in a maladroit manner. The dancers were also bestowed the lucre of the 'dance vocabulary'?the lexicon of a thousand meanings.

(The faint beat of drums can be heard in the distance) Yes, our musicians are practicing away under the guidance of Dr. Tan Sooi Beng. Come and compose at all times, she orchestrates a symphony of big *Shu'Ku* drums (traditional chinese drums) and an ensemble of traditional malay instruments like the gong, the *kompangs* and the *gendangs*. I was fortunate enough to be part of the symphony, I played the big chinese drums. Earlier on, the musicians were taught the basics of music like beats and rhythm, and this laid a foundation for them to play new instruments. At first, we didn't make much music as a group but we slowly moulded and played music in harmony.

Towards the end of Teater Muda, we had an intensive training programme for a whole week during the school holidays. Intensive was as the training was between 10.00 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. For the first five days we were greeted by the presence of the ever humble Chris Mellor from Liverpool, a fellow theatrist. He came to give us some vocal training exercises and together, we played games and sang songs?everyone was in a halycon mood. And even though throughout the whole week, I remain in the sullen funk of the sleep deprived. I had a good time.

Before I lay my pen to rest, I would like to take this opportunity in extending my most heartfelt gratitude and love to the company of Teater Muda. To Janet, Aida, Dr. Tan and Christine - your wisdom have been a beacon of light for the past six months, my thanks and love to you, to my beloved friends Sherene, Alex, Edward, Carmei, Ngah Keng, Yin Yin, Ifwat and Izzat, Ivan, Jenita, Johan, Hoon Hoon, Mike, Rajan, David, Tracy, Shiu Shiu and Sarah ?what can I say, words can't describe the love I feel for you all and I hope that the bond that we share lasts forever? To Chris Mellor - may our paths cross once again !

And of course to all the parents including mine who gave their unrelating support and encouragement (not to mention their acerbic comments at our workshop) thank you very much !