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**Theatre Ethnography and a Prism of Difference:**  
**A Dialogical Approach to Practitioner-Oriented Research.**

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Introduction:

Researching theatre practice entails engaging critically with a sensuous medium that is complex and multi-layered, replete with intersections and integrations of thinking, feeling and doing. The experiential, transient and non-replicable nature of theatre for both performer and audience, raises questions for the researcher about what is knowable about theatre practice, how this can be known and how what is known needs to be presented. As a theatre practitioner and researcher I have been prodded to rethink how written analysis and interpretation of theatre practice can be extended to include styles of representation and reflection that incorporate the dynamics of theatre as a medium which draws on a dialogical experience of theatre as well.

The embodied symbolic representations that produce situated and contextually-based meanings in theatre require insights about culture and society, politics and history that are participatory and subjective to enable an apprehension of ideas and images, sounds and sensations that constitute the practice. To enjoy theatre it is important to engage with the politics of everyday living amidst the fluidity and dynamics of situatedness. In addition, theatre is an ephemeral art, which is ultimately non-quantifiable and thus many things to many people. So should theatre research conform to conventional notions of documentation and monologic analysis or should it be 'performed' in ways that engage the 'audience' theatrically with imagination, reflexivity and a sense of drama? Can theatre research be written dialogically to emphasize the diversity of perspective and encourage an awareness of interaction and context as a crucial basis of developing meaning in performance?

Theatre practices that excavate the complexities of socio-cultural histories and express the plural imaginings of diverse realities are rich sites for examination and analyses about the politics of society and the workings of identity. Whilst recorded performances and published writings about theatre are common sources of data in the discourse, the theatre practitioner's practice - which is articulated and expressed in theatre processes (rehearsals, workshops) and theatre dialogues (reviews, forums, interviews) - is also important to examine as a source of knowledge and understanding about theatre. This is so even if the individual theatre practitioner, whose life is continually undergoing processes of change, is never fully knowable nor explicable, and thus susceptible to the contradictions and paradoxes of embracing oppositional ideas due to being plural and thus expressing multiple belongings.

The theatre practice of Krishen Jit (1939-2005), Malaysian theatre director, educator and critic, is one such site which offers deep insights into the socio-cultural politics and critical imaginings of theatre-making in Malaysia, with particular focus on issues of identity and culture. In my research on his work as a theatre practitioner I engage as an insider-practitioner and researcher, having worked with Krishen<sup>1</sup> as an actor and collaborator, and having been involved in Malaysian theatre. In the process I am developing an approach to theatre research writing that reflects the diversity of ideas that Krishen's theatre embodied, and which entails deliberating dialogically on issues of performativity and identity. I examine his work by looking at recorded performances that

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<sup>1</sup> Although it is common academic practice to refer to persons by their surname, I choose to refer to Krishen Jit by his own name, Krishen, as this is how Krishen was known and referred to in the theatre community and at large. By referring to him as Krishen, I foreground my positioning as an insider and ongoing participant of the community. To privilege the surname is also a patriarchal and depersonalized way of referring to individuals. So whilst I will adhere to the practice in relation to academics cited, I will make an exception where Krishen is concerned. In addition, there is traditionally no surname in many Malay and Indian names, unlike Western and Chinese names.

Krishen directed, articles he wrote on theatre and performance and published reviews of his productions. In addition I have conducted interviews with other practitioners who worked with Krishen and reflected on my own position as a participant in the theatre. I analyse the work drawing on critical theories of postcolonialism, cosmopolitanism, feminism and modernity, seeking to understand the interaction of ideas that stem from varied voices and trying to forge a meaningful coherence from the differences that emerge.

In the process of considering how best to write the research document I embark on what I term ‘theatre ethnography’, an approach to practitioner-oriented theatre research that works “more like a prism than a lens” (Richardson and St. Pierre cited in Denzin and Lincoln 6) to encourage a diversity of perspective and a plurality of form. In this process theatre is researched by a practitioner who is an acknowledged part of the theatre practice being studied and this informs the processes of analysis and reporting that result from her thinking and experience. This is done with a view to creating research documentation that consciously sets out to incorporate aspects of theatre in the production of the ‘document’ as well. This may involve writing about theatre the way a theatre maker engages the ‘audience’, prodding the reader to move from one ‘text’ to another and process diverse material simultaneously. It may also entail staging the work using multiple-media and performance strategies that go beyond the written text as a final report.

This article will discuss theatre ethnography as a frame for research, its value for practitioners and some suggestions about how this might be done. It will then consider

some of the challenges that emerge in practitioner-oriented research that seeks to create a performative and dialogical approach to theatre documentation.

### Performance, Theatre and the Process of Re-Viewing

Whilst performance is widely prevalent across culture and thus seen as an everyday part of being human, theatre is viewed as particular, located in specific sites and performed for particular situations. *Homo performans*, a notion introduced by anthropologist Victor Turner (81) to explain the preponderance of performance in culture, suggests that human beings are performance-making creatures and performance is no mere appendage but a necessary part of human existence and the everyday practice of culture. Theatre on the other hand is an integral part of performance but very specialised, carefully stylised and intricately structured as interpretive reflections of socio-political and cultural imaginings. It is less widespread due to its technical and aesthetic demands, but no less informative in its capacity to reveal the human condition. In fact I would argue that theatre is a distillation of performance practices and philosophies, because in theatre there is an intense process of selecting and refining, interpreting and symbolizing.

Performing theatre refers to a much narrower field of activity than performing texts or performing culture. Whilst theatre remains a contested concept, one of the main aspects of theatre is the relationship between performer and audience that is made possible with the presence of a 'stage'. This negotiation of the 'stage' is what marks theatre as a specific medium with attendant characteristics such as spatio-temporal dynamics and live interaction. Counsell discusses the importance of the stage as an "interlocutor, a partner in the exchange of meaning" because "in the theatre, the audience

customarily assumes that everything on the stage is a meaningful sign” (13). In his analysis of theatre as a ‘sign-system’, Counsell analyses the ‘codes’ and ‘languages’ of theatre as more than just contextually based and located in culture, but dependant also on form as a signifier. In his view, “Theatre proffers meaning not solely in its overt utterances – the character’s words and actions, the ‘author’s message’ – but also in the very form in which those utterances are conveyed” (6-7).

In view of this a performer must wield an understanding of this medium by engaging with the energy, artistry and history of the stage. As a result the task of ‘acting’ demands close attention to negotiation of the space, as Peter Brook’s seminal book *The Empty Space* discusses with profound insight. Brook acknowledges how the actor must deal with the reality that “theatre can be a very special place” (98) and yet begins his discussion by citing how theatre can “take any empty space and call it a bare stage” (9). This flexibility in theatre demands a deep awareness of how the medium creates meaning – through signifying systems that are both “concrete” and “abstract” (Counsell 16-20). Performing culture on the other hand is more inclusive of a range of performance activities and less preoccupied with the ‘stage’ as a ‘special’ and sometimes ‘sacred’ space. As a result a ‘performance text’ and a ‘theatre text’ demand different things in order to operate effectively. My focus on theatre requires a more attentive approach to the dynamics of *staging* and the discussion of how the *staged* performance produces meaning.

Derived from the Greek word ‘theatron’ which means ‘a place for viewing’, theatre, which also refers to the building or site where theatre is performed, engages the audience with a particular experience of ‘viewing’ that is generated by the actions on a stage. In the process of staging, theatre makers go through a process of ‘re-viewing’

culture and society in order to create a theatre performance that is resonant and relevant. The staging entails a process of signifying meaning through style, design and concept that will convey and constitute the meaning of the work, whilst working towards a profound interaction between performer and audience that is generated by the skills and artistry of the theatre makers.

In comparison, performance pertains to the act of doing and is linked to the word ‘operation’, which stems from the Latin word ‘operari’ which means ‘to work’. Hence performance places greater emphasis on doing and participating whereas theatre suggests a more reflective process of viewing and ‘re-viewing’. Based on this distinction I refer to theatre ethnography as that which places more importance on ‘seeing’, which includes observing, apprehending, perceiving, watching, viewing and evaluating. In comparison performance ethnography stresses ‘doing’, which entails acting, working, operating and executing. In the former a reflexively interpretive mode is given prominence because the ‘seeing’ is an active and collaborative process of meaning making through ‘in-sight’ and ‘re-view’. However in the latter an engaged participation is underlined and the enactment of the task is given focus. Whilst I am aware that both these aspects are crucial to each other and would stress their interdependence in the ethnographic project, the difference positions theatre as an “essentially interpretive act” (Counsell 5) and thus requires a research methodology that ‘re-interprets’ the symbols and signifiers that constitute theatre whilst providing the reader with an experience that is an interpretive art as well – an interpretive ‘doubling’ perhaps.



Theatre is a medium that simultaneously represents plural realities. It draws on the doubling effect<sup>2</sup> to generate coexistent diversities which are not necessarily streamlined into a unified similarity. Thus in order to examine spaces of inquiry that deal with contextualized stagings of plural culture, such as Krishen's theatre, and engage difference as enriching and empowering within the medium of theatre, research writing needs to open up discussion and work like a prism so that it can reflect and refract ideas, offering multiple points of view within a coherent whole. This means moving away from a primarily monologic approach that unifies ideas in order to present a singular viewpoint, towards a more dialogic one, which stresses the variety of positions and locates the voice of the researcher as one among others, albeit a primary and steering one. It also entails being conscious of the reader as a maker of meaning as well as an interpreter of 'utterances' in the Bakhtinian sense, able to adopt and assimilate ideas from 'preceding utterances', forging interpretations that draw on a dialogic understanding of reality (Todorov 41-59).

### Performing Ethnographies and the Dialogue of Research

Building on the critical frameworks of performance ethnography and the theorized deliberations of performance ethnographers such as Dwight Conquergood, D. S. Madison and Norman Denzin who rework research as an interactive and performative process, theatre ethnography develops shared perspectives on the performing body, political agency and critical reflexivity that raise questions about ethical representation,

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<sup>2</sup> The 'doubling' effect of theatre is its capacity to produce layered meanings and multiple references simultaneously by pointing to and drawing from the quotidian and transforming it into a theatrical expression that symbolizes more than the ordinary. As Madison and Hamera explain, "It is in cultural performances where performativities are doubled with a difference: they are re-presented, re-located and re-materialised for the possibility of a substantial re-consideration and re-examination" (xix)

critical respect and impartial reflection. Instead of simply writing up the research conventionally, performance ethnographers seek to perform their interpretations of culture by generating performance texts that are based on ethnographic field notes and producing performances that stem from the data collected. These performances are then recognized as valid products of the research. (See Denzin, *Performance Ethnography*; Madison, *Critical Ethnography*). Bearing in mind that performance ethnography is an innovative and radical process of reporting research data, theatre ethnography seeks to adopt a similar philosophy of producing research.

The work of Dwight Conquergood (1985, 1988, 1989, 2006) has been critical in developing performance ethnography as legitimate research practice that emphasizes ethnography as “embodied practice” that is “an intensely sensuous way of knowing” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 352)<sup>3</sup>. Stressing the importance of experiential knowledge that is characterized by being “corporeal” (Erving Goffman, qtd. in Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography” 352) and “coeval” (Johannes Fabian, qtd. in Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography” 354), he shifts the focus of ethnographic research to that which “privileges the body as a site of knowing” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 352). He refers to this as “radical empiricism” which “represents a shift from monologue to dialogue, from information to communication” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 354). This signals an

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<sup>3</sup> Conquergood’s essay “Rethinking Ethnography: Towards a Critical Cultural Politics”, first published in 1991, is cited as the “foundational essay that charts a critical performance ethnography and the performative politics of embodied enquiry” (Madison, 2006, p.347). Although Denzin also credits performance theorist Richard Schechner with leading “the movement” (*Performance Ethnography* 30), it is Conquergood’s deliberations that are returned to time and again as the basis for discussing performance ethnography.

important reworking of the research process towards a more conversational approach in which “vulnerability and self-closure are enabled” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 355)<sup>4</sup>.

Research practices that incorporate elements of performance and analytical notions of performativity are rare and yet marked for their capacity to move across knowledge boundaries and perform praxis. This offers productive thinking spaces for deliberations on difference and divergence that encourage a more active engagement with the material. Oriented towards engaging difference and consequently developing ideas about the ‘Other’ as not only between but also within selves, this is done through enacting alternatives and generating dialogical expressions of identity. As Madison and Hamera elucidate,

The politics and praxis of performance open up the multivocality of expressions that are formed under necessity and duress, as well as pleasure and inspiration toward envisioning new and other realities in the everyday acts of both foreign and familiar locations. In performance as praxis, the form of knowledge itself is questioned. Performance asks us to identify and affirm knowledges that are contested, obscure, and often demeaned in the embodied acts and oral traditions of such locations.

(xxi)

By emphasizing “change, contingency, locality, motion, improvisation, struggle, situationally specific practices and articulations” (Denzin, *Performance Ethnography* 16) the research then needs to consciously embody a politics of resistance that locates performance as a site where “context, agency, praxis, history and subjectivity intersect” (Denzin, *Performance Ethnography* 16). As a result, difference and divergence are

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<sup>4</sup> Conquergood emphasizes that “(t)he communicative praxis of speaking and listening, conversation, demands co-presence even as it decenters the categories of knower and known” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 355). Since performance ethnography engages with performance as liminal, contingent, partial and plural, this approach acknowledges and foregrounds the ways in which difference can be negotiated within an ‘experiential and participatory epistemology’ (Conquergood, qtd. in Denzin, *Performance Ethnography* 16). It also provides for ways of interpreting knowledges that are plural and divergent, more able to resist the hegemonic norm.

engaged with as non-disruptive, due to the growing awareness that “encounters with ‘difference’ now pervade modern everyday life in urban settings” (Rosaldo 28) and it is the task of the ethnographer to bear this in mind when she interprets and inscribes, embodies and enacts knowledge. In addition the theatre ethnographer seeks to develop a way of representing these ideas that connects with the medium of theatre and the experience of theatre – possibly performing the research as a form of theatre.

Like performance ethnography, theatre ethnography takes on the challenge of articulating differences without trying to prescribe and define how they should be regularized or structured. Within poststructuralist and postcolonial frames that “no longer subscribe to discrete, singular, integral and stable concepts of identity” (Conquergood, “Rethinking Ethnography” 355) it is significant that “difference is resituated within, instead of beyond the self” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 356). This rethinking of identity and culture as “constructed and relational instead of ontologically given and essential” (“Rethinking Ethnography” 356) is crucial to negotiations of difference, in which the overlaps and criss-crossings are no longer regarded as problems to be solved but opportunities to be experienced and enjoyed. However a theatre ethnographer seeks to do so from the point of view of an insider-practitioner whose participation in the community informs the dialogue and attempts to integrate the form and culture of theatre into the research document. Whereas the performance ethnographer is often the ‘outsider’ who immerses herself in the community during the research process, the theatre ethnographer is part of the community and involved in the politics of the community as a practitioner – thus able to reflect as a participant on the inner workings of the subject.

Theatre ethnography and performance ethnography also differ in that whereas performance ethnography focuses on performance as ethnographic ‘reporting’, theatre ethnography acknowledges the manner in which theatre already performs this function through the utterances that occur. Whilst performance ethnography engages with the “staged re-enactment of ethnographically derived notes” (Alexander 411), theatre ethnography considers how theatre in itself is a performed cultural text that is derived from the lives, imaginations and cultures of theatre practitioners and audiences. So the ethnographic study does not simply explain culture through analyzing theatre but aims to also incorporate theatre strategies and dynamics as part of the research process and document. If theatre is regarded as already ethnographic – performed and embodied versions of Clifford Geertz’s notion of “thick descriptions of culture”, and aesthetic articulations of Erving Goffman’s concept of the “presentation of self in everyday lives” - the question is how to develop “poetic ethnography” (Clifford 5) that is informed by theatre as both content and form.

### Theatre Ethnography and Negotiations of Difference

The theatre as an open and constantly evolving site of expression is suited to articulating the myriad imaginings that emerge from a decentred and polyphonic sensibility, not constrained by the burdens of unitary positions or singular identities. In view of these frames of world and self, theatre research needs to acknowledge culture as “composed of seriously contested codes and representations” which require “writing of cultural descriptions (that) is properly experimental and ethical” (Clifford 2). Clifford argues for a “poetic ethnography” that is “figurative and polysemous” (5), able to develop

“ways of rendering negotiated realities as multisubjective, power-laden and incongruent” (15). This entails the challenge of producing dialogical documents that articulate and analyse difference as enriching, generative and overlapping, not divisive, disruptive or separate. Clifford refers to this as “hybrid textual activity” (26), producing texts that are fresh, emergent and not always known in advance. This is particularly relevant to writing about theatre.

Drawing on a postpositivist qualitative research process, where a more personally involved researcher-participant is required because “the once dominant ideal of a detached observer using neutral language to explain ‘raw’ data” (Rosaldo 37) can no longer be suitable for the work and needs to be duly “displaced by an alternative project that attempts to understand human conduct as it unfolds through time and in relation to its meanings for the actors” (Rosaldo 37), theatre ethnography positions the researcher in this role as researcher-artist whose participation in the form extends into research as potentially ‘theatre-oriented’. It cultivates a way of ‘doing research’ that is linked to ‘doing theatre’ and not just watching, analysing and writing about theatre.

As a practitioner who belongs to the theatre culture that she examines, the theatre ethnographer has experiential and insider knowledge about her material and investigates it further by engaging dialogically with fellow practitioners. This produces plural perspectives that then require the researcher to sometimes operate more as an outsider in order to analyse and articulate knowledges within multiple “positioning” and “positionalities” (Sanchez 42)<sup>5</sup> that emerge in the process of interpreting and

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<sup>5</sup> See Rosaura Sanchez for epistemic discussion on position and positionality in relation to identity politics. In this article Sanchez stresses the “intersectedness of positionings” (36) such as gender, class and ethnicity, and the need to analyse “equivalencies and non-equivalent positionings” (38). She also points to the structures of society that determine positionality, which she defines as “one’s imagined relation or

documenting a specific theatre practice. However drawing on critical theories that question and elucidate the structures of power and hegemonic norms, this researcher analyses theatre practice beyond the purely literary, aesthetic or philosophical frames – thus engaged with the process of creating theatrical “hybrid textual activity” (Clifford 26). This raises questions about how the documentation or reporting can be done in a manner that draws from the specific qualities of the work being examined such as the elements and forms of theatre being analysed.

In theatre ethnography the subjectivity of the researcher and her prior experience in the ‘field’ is a crucial part of the analytical frame and is best served by a “mindful enquiry” (Bentz & Shapiro 4) that locates the researcher as a reflexive participant at the centre of the process of enquiry rather than a detached observer who purports objectivity. This allows the researcher the capacity to operate as a “bricoleur” (Denzin, “The Art and Politics of Interpretation” 501; Denzin & Lincoln, “Introduction” 4) or “montage maker” (Denzin & Lincoln, “Introduction” 5) whose interpretive skills provide a means of unravelling the ‘truths’ that can be ascertained from close readings and insightful perceptions about theatre-making and theatre-doing, with its range of texts, sign-systems, languages and utterances. As montage maker the researcher produces “dialogical texts” which “presume an active audience” and thus consciously draws on difference – “different voices, different perspectives, points of view, angles of vision” (Denzin & Lincoln, “Introduction” 5) - as enriching rather than disturbing. Much like a playwright or director develops the voices of multiple characters in a theatre performance the researcher sets out to produce ways of giving voice to the diverse views that emerge in

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standpoint relative to that positioning” (38), making identity a “relational and discursive process” (40). The importance of this approach for theatre ethnography is its conscious engagement with identity as “discursive processes that cannot be examined outside of experience” (42)

the research. This may appear fragmented and incoherent at first but on closer inspection it may be a way to reflect the overlapping views which cannot be presented in a comfortably linear fashion. It may also engender a way of reading that is more reflexive and sensuous, not just logical and cerebral, involving the subjectivity of the self more than the self as objective and distanced.

The links between self and research are closely intertwined in theatre ethnography as it becomes necessary for the researcher to engage as an “applied philosopher” (Bentz & Shapiro 31), an approach which requires a high level of self-awareness and is thus ‘conducive to an integration of personal and philosophical self-reflection’ (Bentz & Shapiro 34). No prescribed method can then be simply applied as this requires an ‘invention’ of research that emerges from the ground – what Rae qualifies as a “blanket term that covers both research and artistic practice, and makes no hard and fast distinction between them” (6). As Rae aptly observes in his investigation of “the limits of reflexive practice” (1) as a theatre practitioner and researcher, “the inventive practitioner-researcher takes reflexivity as a given, to the extent that it is germane to the matter in hand, while sensing that such reflexivity will take different forms in different contexts” (8). The ‘inventive’ process is then improvised to suit the research and the material rather than imposed from without.

As Denzin stresses,

One learns about method by thinking about how one makes sense of one’s own life. The researcher, as a writer, is a *bricoleur*. He or she fashions meaning and interpretation out of ongoing experience.

(“The Art and Politics of Interpretation” 501).

As theatre ethnographer I embark on a process of discovery – of theatre, culture and community - by consciously reflecting on what it means to look at and be a part of



the theatre process, interrogating my experience and that of fellow practitioners as a crucial part of the discussion. In so doing I set out to ‘enact’ my research by allowing the theatre process to inform my interpretation and theorizing. In Krishen’s theatre an excavation of cultural vocabularies was crucial to staging texts and devising performances. Often he created parallel texts – both verbal and non-verbal – which commented on one another, inviting audiences to reflect on the conscious refraction of ideas and materials. Thus it was that the intersections of difference and overlaps between and within these performed texts became the sites of revelation and insight. Documenting and analyzing these crucial processes as significant cultural interventions has become the focus of my research. Describing, analysing and reflecting on them critically and imaginatively poses the ongoing challenge.

### Researching Krishen Jit with a Performative Difference

My research on the theatre practice of Krishen Jit developed out of a desire to understand more fully a contextually-based local approach to theatre-making and to articulate and reflect on some of the issues that arise in theatre practice and philosophy in Malaysia. One of the main questions that propelled my research is: what made Krishen’s work potent and why was there continued interest in his theatre making, even if his productions were not always liked.

Apart from being a well-known director his impact on Malaysian theatre was significant as critic and educator, largely due to his constant experimentation and insatiable curiosity about theatre and culture. Krishen was also one of very few

Malaysian theatre practitioners whose careers spanned nearly four decades of work and included a wide variety of experimentation, style and aesthetic.

My investigation of Krishen's work focuses specifically on the politics of identity and negotiations of difference that he performed and produced in theatre. By looking at Krishen's processes of rehearsing, staging and reviewing theatre, as well as the opinions of his collaborators, I focus on how he produced contextualized stagings of plural culture that engaged difference as enriching and empowering within the medium of theatre. Having been directed by Krishen I was well aware of the complex processes that Krishen employed in his work with actors. Krishen's methods were not always deemed savoury to actors but most will acknowledge that they produced profound executions of performer and character, self and other, as a result of deep explorations of text and culture, politics and physicality.

Krishen's theatre practice was avowedly diverse, experimental and critically engaged with the politics of identity within both indigenous and globalised frames. His interpretation and presentation of material was then geared towards reflecting and refracting ideas, offering multiple points of view within a coherent whole. By approaching theatre as a medium that simultaneously represents plural realities and generates coexistent diversities which are not streamlined into a unified similarity the research 'stage' needs to be similarly open to divergent ideologies and contrary views – mirroring the way a theatre stage can become a prism of ideas.

His approaches to theatre making were informed by his perceived need to develop locally based performance vocabularies that fused the traditional and the modern, the factual and the fictional, to produce diverse imaginings of culture that embraced

difference between and within selves. In a recorded interview with the author about his theatre practice, Krishen explained the following:

I actually believe that in the case of plural societies such as Malaysia and Singapore, and even certain parts of India, multiculturalism is in one body. We tend to think of it as a negotiation between one body and another, but I actually think it is in one body and in many ways I have been trying to excavate that in one way or another.

His interest in forging expressions of self and other that resisted essentialist notions of identity thus produced complex stagings of culture and society, and in so doing provoked audiences to participate dialogically in viewing and responding to his theatre. His interrogation of self and other was crucial in a plural society such as Malaysia where conflicts of socio-cultural identity continue to plague the coherence and confidence of its citizenry<sup>6</sup>.

As a younger Malaysian theatre practitioner I observed and participated in Krishen's theatre practice in a range of ways. Initially I was based in Kuala Lumpur, the site of Krishen's theatre making, and involved as an actor, youth theatre facilitator, director and producer with Five Arts Centre, a visual and performing arts collective which he co-founded in 1984, and with which I worked extensively from the early 1990s. From 2001 till present I have been engaged as a theatre researcher and educator based in Singapore, where I began to interrogate local theatre practices and working methods in order to inform my processes of teaching theatre in a contextually grounded and theoretically relevant manner. Moving into full-time tertiary education as a theatre lecturer, from being a freelance theatre practitioner, writer and educator, I was also under pressure to conduct formal research and publish academically in order to meet the

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<sup>6</sup> See Rajendran and Wee for further discussion on Krishen Jit's stagings of identity and the politics of culture in Malaysian theatre.

requirements of continued employment. This led to my embarking on PhD research that examines Malaysian theatre with a specific focus on the practice of Krishen Jit, acknowledged doyen of theatre in Malaysia.

In the following section I offer some brief examples of my experiments with theatre ethnography in examining Krishen's practice and attempt to represent its diversity by reporting ideas dialogically<sup>7</sup>. This includes working as a 'bricoleur' to 'script' in a collage a plurality of voices that give diverse perspectives on Krishen's work and incorporate my own reflections as a 'mindful' practitioner and researcher. I then raise questions about the way this style of documenting works and its efficacy as research practice.

### Dialogical Reflections on Krishen's Theatre Practice

The attempt to rethink how theatre research can be reported to reflect a more dialogical interpretation and presentation of ideas is a complex one. In order to offer a reworking of academic discourse, to suggest a prism-like presentation of material I suggest one simple consideration, namely to rework the layout and formatting. Whilst most academic writing, even in theatre, occurs in conventional formal prose it may be useful to develop a more collage type approach that allows for texts to be arranged in a manner that is more likely to elicit cross-connections of meaning by pointing to parallels and comparisons that would otherwise be less obvious. Just as Krishen's theatre often created parallel texts in order to prod the imagination of the audience and thus explore

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<sup>7</sup> For earlier examples of my explorations in writing about theatre with the aim to reflect dialogically on the reflexivity and performativity of theatre see Rajendran, "The Talk of So Few" and Rajendran, "Performing Among Shadows and Screens".

pluralities of meaning, the research can also do this by revising how it gets written. This could elicit a process of reading that produces more imbricated meanings.

The examples that follow are limited to using material from the interviews with Krishen's collaborators. It does not include aspects of the performances Krishen directed nor Krishen's writing as a theatre critic and academic<sup>8</sup>. However it sets out to suggest how a collage can open up a discussion about the work and encourage a more interactive engagement with the ideas as the reader may choose to read vertically and/or horizontally, thus generating a range of meanings that stem from this choice. It therefore questions the idea that knowledge develops in a singular and unitary fashion, but actually recasts the way we think as being much more overlapping and plural.

In the first example I consider how two of Krishen's collaborators viewed his impact on theatre and their own interactions with him. They reflect on the value of Krishen's work quite differently and thus provide different perspectives on how to think about the way Krishen negotiated his space in Malaysian theatre. Between the two reflections culled from interviews are my own comments on Krishen's efficacy and importance. I include my own experience of his work and analyse his efficacy in relation to his reputation for having a highly experimental approach.

Kee Thuan Chye: playwright,  
performer, director.

*I think he was the most intelligent (theatre practitioner). He gave it that intellectual depth. He thought about it. He knew what it should be like. And he followed it up with experiments to try and open up new ways of doing things....*

Krishen's productions were thought provoking and insightful about how theatre works sensuously. They forged an experience of theatre that was stimulating for its multiple levels of text and meaning. Even when I did not enjoy the choice of aesthetic that he would sometimes employ I was compelled to think about the

Huzir Sulaiman: playwright,  
performer, director

*He asked me to be in Skin Trilogy...It was at lunch that I told him I wasn't going to do it. I also kind of, true to form, lectured him about how 'you shouldn't be doing all this avant garde theatre stuff, when the community didn't have the capacity to do a straight play in*

<sup>8</sup> See Rajendran, "A Choice to Review", for discussion on Krishen's writing as a theatre critic, reflected in his highly regarded theatre column, *Talking Drama With Utih*.

*And in order to achieve that purpose he had to work with the available talents. As many as possible. He opened up spaces. He worked with a whole range of people. Throwing out ideas and inspiring people to come up with new ways of seeing things and new ways of expressing....*

*And it was not just focused on English language. There was also Malay theatre as you know, and he was also into some aspects of Chinese theatre. Non-verbal theatre as well. Music. Finding ways of creating theatre without language....*

*But this I know about Krishen la. He would try and do things that were unconventional to try and break through to try and see what can come out of it....*

*It's something that needs to be done. Regardless of what people might feel. Sometimes it takes doing something that is wrong in order for people to see that it's right.*

work and wonder what tugged at me from deep within.

I think it was Krishen's commitment to developing diverse local vocabularies of performance. It was perhaps this capacity to generate expressions of community and identity that stemmed from something deeply resonant, yet not always familiar or known.

Even though Krishen's experiments with theatre as a plastic and fluid form were not often met with enthusiasm and yet there was sustained interest in the nature of his work. As a result he managed to communicate something crucial about the human condition and the dynamism of performance that may not always have been fully worked through, but the very thinking it embodied was important in the process of forging local theatre and creating indigenous forms.

*a very traditional manner'. So my thesis, which I've never really abandoned, was that experimental theatre has to be earned in a sense....*

*He was of course very gracious about it and he said 'well, yeah but you don't know where I've come from and you don't know my own personal journeys, so let's leave it at that'. But I suppose that was the thing that sort of bedevilled our relationship for the next two or three years...*

*Then later I think there had been a couple of things that I had done that he had liked and vice versa. And it was me that said to him, 'can I work with you now or can you work with me on something?'...I am not sure if we had started seeing each other socially by that stage, but it was definitely the lunches when we got to know each other and I got to know a little bit more about life.*

In the following example I 'script' some ideas from interviews with his actor-collaborators that relate to how Krishen negotiated working with them as actors and juxtapose these extracts with my own analysis. This offers a brief glimpse at some differences between and within Krishen's working processes that indicate something of the way Krishen adjusted to each circumstance as he saw fit.

Anne James: actor, dancer  
*Rehearsing The Sandpit. That was tough... One of the things was Krishen asking me to look for the Indian woman in me. As opposed to the Westernised woman...and also to find the body of that Indian woman. The gestures. Because it was about stillness and instant transformations... And Krishen was working on this whole instant*

Krishen's theatre was marked by experimentation with the actor – the actor's physicality and imaginative capacity to encounter and embody the character truthfully. In order to do this, Krishen would prod an actor to examine intricate details of the text and engage with its meaning and interpretation diversely. Through a process of exploration and invention, the actor would

Zahim Albakri: actor, director  
*It was that kind of provocation and prodding where directing is really setting you on a path. So most people would say Krishen's questioning was what it was about. And sometimes he would really stump you with the questions and you would just sit there and think, 'what'? What does he want or what's he asking?... And there were times*

*transformation thing. You just become. (she claps) You immediately become. You don't see the stitches... It was really hard to do because you were ripping your body to move from one shape to another shape... And he wanted it to happen instantly...*

Krishen continuously sought to offer audiences a sensuous experience of the texts being performed by developing vocabularies of movement, image and gesture that were contextually grounded in the cultural realities of the performer. Krishen resisted simple essentialised interpretations of Self and Other, but he did draw on the realities of an actor's sense of identity to build ideas and sensations that were resonant and rooted in a known and felt reality.

come to an understanding of the character physically and psychically.

Ivan Heng: actor, director  
*In the early years it (Krishen's process) was very much about the presentation exercise. Very directorial, very authoritative, very auteur. But by the time I was doing Emily (of Emerald Hill), it was about sitting down and telling me stories of his childhood. Sitting down telling me stories of his aunty. Or the women he had known and loved. Of the women that he saw on tv. His mother... And we would share stories... Linking and spurring an imagination. The stories spurred something deeper that was about history and culture. That was present and remembered.*

*he did kind of want me to take the lead...I didn't know what he meant at the time... But there was obviously another level that he wanted me to go into... Sometimes it was very difficult as an actor and how you took that on was what mattered...*

The centrality of the actor's presence on stage was characteristic of Krishen's style. He believed in the actor as the primary repository of the theatrical imagination and trusted this immensely, even when he felt frustrated by the fact that some processes worked less effectively than he had hoped. He strove towards a profound energy and intensity in the actor's performance as this sense of presence was often the focus of his experimentation and attention.

In both these examples I have consciously avoided providing contextual references and background details as this would entail much more space than accorded here. My main aim is to consider the possible development of a research document that provides spaces where the thinking is 'performed' in a manner that provides a refraction of the material. The presentation of ideas as a collage that weaves the analysis with the actual comments made by informants is intended to draw the reader into a dialogical relationship with the material. It is meant to provide dynamic interactions between the texts that are less likely if presented in a linear fashion – much like parallel texts in Krishen's theatre performances.

One difficulty lies in deciding how much analysis is needed and how to present it without too much contrast between the voices of the informants who speak in a conversational mode and the voice of the researcher, who is tasked with being more

formal and academic. There is also the challenge of providing sufficient socio-cultural context and political history for the utterances to make sense to readers who are not acquainted with the dynamics of the community. Whilst trying to be more comprehensive in the representation of diverse views, there is no doubt that a particular selection has already been made, and that is steered by the intentions of the researcher. However it remains a difficult line to draw between too little and too much interpretation when there is a conscious attempt to also allow the voices of the informants to speak for themselves.

Reflecting on the attempts to present ideas in a less conventional and more dialogical manner, I am aware that the writing is susceptible to a quality of informality that may be deemed unsuitable for academia. However I believe that there is value in some aspects of the research being left conversational and open-ended in order to communicate more consciously in the language of practitioners, which is less inclined towards conclusive and definitive discourses.

The two examples above are initial suggestions as to how theatre ethnography can experiment with theatre documentation. Other possibilities include interweaving texts from the theatre texts performed, written texts published and interview texts to create a more complex collage of ideas that convey a sense of how Krishen's work negotiated difference and performed it in his practice. In addition theatre ethnography should incorporate multi-media documentation that seeks to perform the research in ways that engage readers as active audiences, thus including non-linguistic texts and allowing for non-verbal representations as well. Whilst this is not something new to research processes, it remains largely marginalised and needs to be explored with greater tenacity



and given support in order to develop and thus be regarded as ‘normal’ rather than ‘special’.

Conclusion:

My process of engaging with research on theatre as a theatre practitioner, has led to a series of questions and concerns that pertain to how research is produced, legitimated and viewed. Among them has been the need to develop ethical approaches and reflective methods that interrogate and incorporate not only the epistemology of the researcher but also the forms of theatre that render meaning in particular ways. This necessitates producing and deliberating on an alternative that builds on what is already developed in the field of qualitative research methodologies, namely critical, interpretive and performance ethnography.

The approach emphasises the role of the theatre practitioner-researcher whose engagement in research practice relates to her own histories and stems from her context and community thus problematising ‘outsider’ theorization of theatre practice and the ‘colonising’ gap that often ensues. In addition contextual literacies are acknowledged as embedded in community belonging and embodied practice – aspects which are never fully qualifiable or quantifiable. The approach stresses that these knowledges are critical to theatre research in the journey of articulating performance, process and practice.

My desire to create a ‘new’ form of research is in line with the postpositivist philosophy of each research process being designed to meet the needs of the people involved and their contextual situation. It also pushes the thinking on how to develop

research on Krishen's theatre practice which is characterized by a diversity of material and a range of collaborative practitioners. It is my hope that the research will work like a prism and have resonance and relevance not only to the Malaysian theatre community, but also to the community of thinkers interested in theatre and ethnography, issues of difference and issues of identity.

In many ways theatre ethnography sets out to engage difference and divergence as valuable concepts in dialogical discourse, mirroring the way theatre operates on stage to draw disparate elements together in an interrogation of socio-political conflict, cultural and economic disparity and personal tension between and within persons and communities. This makes it a valuable frame in my own research on the theatre practice of Krishen Jit – a theatre practitioner whose work was to 'excavate' plurality and embody criticality and whose influence in my own theatre practice has led to my interest in negotiations of difference and the importance of theatre in understanding contextual literacy. It is hoped that my theatre ethnography on Krishen's work will offer a prism of difference in the journey towards *embodied* 'mindful inquiry' and *artistic* 'thick description'.

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