Negotiating Difference in Krishen Jit's Theatre: Staging Identities and Contesting Boundaries in Multicultural Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The politics of difference in a multicultural society such as Malaysia is an area of increasing interest in an environment of global anxieties about the "clash of civilisations" (Huntington) and the "flows of culture" (Appadurai). As the lines of race, religion, language and gender become more prescribed by the "authorities" of state and media, they are also diversely contested by those who do not fit or who choose to resist these narrow defines and limiting dictates. Krishen Jit, doyen of Malaysian theatre, dealt with issues of difference and sameness in his multiple staging of Malaysian identities. His theatre process and practice were in several ways critical interventions into the Malaysian cultural landscape. This article will examine some of the strategies used in Krishen Jit's theatre that dealt with cultural difference and emerged as a valuable response to the tensions of identity in Malaysia. It interrogates his choices for theatre and how they indicate a conscious engagement with issues of plural identities within a multicultural mosaic. It seeks to offer a perspective on how the theatre

provides an apt site for questions of agency and belonging that arise in negotiating issues of exclusion and inclusion within a plural socio-cultural space.

Keywords: *difference, identity, theatre, plurality, multiculturalism*

INTRODUCTION

Whether or not a nation, society or self is officially plural, multiple diversities – imagined and experienced – exist within and between communities and selves and these spaces warrant attention in a global environment increasingly anxious about difference as divisive. In multicultural Malaysia, identity, based primarily on race but combining aspects of language, religion and gender, is a much discussed issue, especially as official politics still operates along racial, religious and gender lines.[1] Although "race," with its implication of essentialised identity is an increasingly contested term, it is still used officially in Malaysia to refer to the main ethnic groups that consist of Malays (50%), Chinese (25%), Indians (7%), and other groups that are either indigenous (Kadazan, Dusun, Iban) or Eurasian. Having inherited British colonial policies of "divide and rule," the Malaysian government has perpetuated these lines of separation in a post-independence attempt to forge national coherence amidst acknowledged multiplicity.

Difference is accordingly prescribed and perpetuated through official requirements that all citizens be categorised according to race, gender and religion. Ironically, on one level it has been effective in ensuring visible levels of representation among majority and minority groups. However, it has not resulted in equity among the different groups but led to a society that is fragmented along racial and religious lines even after more than 50 years of "liberation" from colonial rule.[2]

When secure identity is perceived as stable and unitary (whether national, communal or individual), change and difference are framed as potentially destructive and thus threats to the self and community. An increasing emphasis in the global arena on difference as oppositional and thus a danger to internal security has been fueled by a preoccupation with the supposed "clash of civilisations" that analyses difference as a source of animosity.[3] This stimulates anxiety about preserving the boundaries of identity and sets up frameworks that valorize uniqueness. This in turn privileges essentialised identities in the name of "purity" and "authenticity." It also discourages the blurring of boundaries that stem from fusions of culture which recast and refashion the tropes of identity.

Several Malaysian theatre practitioners have dealt with issues of identity, seeking to express and deal with ruptures in society, too often whitewashed by state-oriented rhetoric that projects flawless unity and blissful co-existence. Admittedly it is no simple task to effectively challenge notions of identity in an audience grown comfortable with its own perceptions of self and other. To engage in this task is to take on the resistance that may ensue. While theatre is an acknowledged site for the critical analysis of culture and identity, not many performances are deeply revealing about the politics of Malaysian culture – staged or sensed. Theatre may simply deal with "diversity" without engaging with "difference" – the latter examining the encounters between divergent ideas and beliefs, the former presenting without interrogation a range of co-existent practices. [4]

The theatre of Krishen Jit (1939–2005), acknowledged doyen of Malaysian theatre, was critically analytical about cultural difference and its relation to the state of being Malaysian. It was often replete with multiple styles of performance that reflected the diverse material he engaged with (modern and traditional, local and global, personal and public) and incorporated an integrated arts approach which wove together strands conventionally kept apart and deemed incompatible. The theatre productions that Jit helmed as director and producer – from

monologues to musicals, devised plays to interdisciplinary performances – were invaluable executions of his insights into the positive and problematic aspects of plurality in Malaysian society.

Due to his capacity to collaborate widely, Jit worked variously with state agencies as well as a range of local and regional arts companies such as The Actor's Studio, DramaLab and Straits Theatre in Malaysia, as well as TheatreWorks, W!ld Rice and Action Theatre in Singapore. He also collaborated with diverse and interdisciplinary artists, among them dancer-choreographer Marion D'Cruz, musician-composer Sunetra Fernando, visual artist-curator Wong Hoy Cheong, writer-performer Leow Puay Tin, director Ong Keng Sen and director-performer Ivan Heng. These were artists markedly interested in developing dialogical approaches to theatre-making across multiple media and plural cultures. Jit's engagement with them signaled his interest in negotiating diverse approaches to theatre-making and demonstrated a commitment to inventing performance frames within which the collision of difference and the cohesion of sameness could be expressed in relation to each other.

Jit embraced the potential that stemmed from difference and sameness as a resource for theatre thinking and making. His own passage in theatre was of constant reinvention and relocation, negotiating between and within English language theatre (ELT), Malay language theatre (MLT) and multilingual theatre as he responded to shifts in national policy, cultural trends and social developments.[5] As a theatre critic, writing for international publications, regional journals and sustaining a theatre column for 22 years in Malaysia's main broadsheet,[6] Jit cultivated a discerning voice that came to be highly respected and pivotal in shaping contextual aesthetics that consciously sought to decolonise and indigenise Malaysian theatre and the surrounding discourses. He wrote about several art forms including dance, music and the visual arts and reviewed performances that ranged from the traditional and classical, to the

modern and experimental – generating ways to consider how these diverse forms and styles were all integral to the depiction and extension of Malaysian culture.

In his role as theatre educator, teaching in performing arts faculties of national universities and being instrumental in setting up the Akademi Seni Kebangsaan (National Arts Academy – now known as Akademi Seni Budaya Dan Warisan Kebangsaan, ASWARA) in Malaysia, Jit developed among his students a critical consciousness of the need to ground Malaysian theatre in local traditional and contemporary practice, whilst engaging with international perspectives and regional frames of reference. As founding member of Five Arts Centre (FAC), the performing and visual arts collective in Kuala Lumpur that Jit's work was inextricably linked with, he also engendered programmes for practitioner training and opportunities for indigenous pedagogy and contextual experimentation that nurtured an open and critical space for discourse and development.

In this article I will discuss how Krishen Jit, dealt with issues of difference and sameness in his multiple staging of Malaysian identities and how these performances indicate a conscious engagement with issues of plural identities within a multicultural mosaic. The article seeks to offer a perspective on how Jit's theatre provided a potent site for questions of agency and belonging that arise in negotiating issues of exclusion and inclusion within a plural socio-cultural space.

STAGING A POLITICS OF DIFFERENCE: CONFRONTING THE PRESENCE OF PLURALITY

Krishen Jit confronted issues and conflicts that stem from cultural plurality in the Malaysian context such as racial prejudice, political discrimination and socio-economic

disenfranchisement. Throughout his more than 40 years career as theatre director, critic, educator and producer he created several works that challenged essentialised notions of identity with regard to race, gender and class. He also generated spaces that encouraged a dialogical approach to the notion of being Malaysian to contest reductive state-sanctioned norms which perpetuated unitary notions of identity. His articulations of Malaysian culture, informed by a strong sense of historical perspective,[7] produced concrete enactments of alternative multiculturalism in which it was possible to reconfigure notions of identity by casting against race and reworking the boundaries of self and other. Jit drew on everyday experiences and lived cultures that embodied the tensions of inherited and porous identities, generating situated yet fluid cultures, to articulate contemporary revisionings of Malaysian identity. This challenged hegemonic frames of plurality that were static and rigid.

Jit's theatre offered symbolic representations of the tensions and confrontations that occur within and among communities that co-exist in a national framework. By choosing to develop work that consciously provoked alternative imaginings of culture, such as the reworking of prevalent constituent myths (e.g., in 1971 Jit directed *Matinya Seorang Pahlawan* (The Death of a Warrior) written by Malaysian National Literature Laureate, Usman Awang that recast the Malay legend of Hang Tuah), excavating indigenous personal histories (e.g., in 1993 Jit devised text from actors' biographies in *US: Actions and Images*) and developing multi-modal texts (e.g., in 1994 Jit collaborated with visual artists, musicians and dancers in the installation cum performance of *Skin Trilogy* written by K. S. Maniam), Jit forged performances that combined these diverse facets of art making in Malaysia to question the premise of authenticity and identity as determined and predictable.

Jit refuted the idea that a person was singular in his/her cultural identity. In dialogue about the complexities of Malaysian culture he said,

> 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 (Krishen Jit, pers. comm.)[8]

He thus made choices that reflected a politics of difference committed to the articulation of Malaysian culture as an ongoing river of change rather than separate parallel streams – the latter being more in line with state policies of divisive multiculturalism. But this did not mean Jit opted for the "melting pot" of culture either. Dealing with the plurality of Malaysian society, Jit developed collages of intra-cultural and inter-cultural theatre, which examined cultural difference and sameness within national boundaries (between Malaysians) as well as at the intersections where cultures that have distinct primordial histories (Chinese, Malays, Indians, etc) collude.[9]

Jit's innovation as a deviser-director yielded integrated performances in which visual, spoken and corporeal texts depicted the inventive nature of communication capable of transcending essentialist boundaries. In the process of telling stories and shaping characters on stage, different performers used varieties of Malay, English and Chinese languages, apart from local and foreign performance styles, to create a collage of "actions and images" that depicted Malaysian culture more thoroughly than is usual.

Jit developed what performance theorist Bonnie Marranca calls a "discourse of interculturalism" that negotiates a cultural space "to reflect these crosscurrents as a strategic mode of enquiry" rather than as a mere "mirror of reality" (Marranca 1991: 11). By connecting forms and ideas that stemmed from local culture and indigeneous cultural resources, the work embodied commonalities between the dimensions of race, religion and language, thus

empowering enactments of Malaysian-ness with the richness of particularity and plurality. Working with like-minded Malaysian performers, writers, designers and producers, Jit's staging elicited potent expressions of the plural landscapes of being Malaysian whilst challenging restrictive politics of difference. The performances provoked audiences to rethink normative modes of identity in Malaysia and recast themselves in the process.

Jit felt that Malaysians "don't ask enough questions about our normative behaviour" and "are not investing enough into what we are as Malaysians" and thus he described some of his work as "trying to penetrate the whole issue of how we imagine our community" whilst questioning the strength of inter-cultural relations when "all of this can be toppled and made irrelevant and purposeless when something is at stake" (Ambikaipaker 1999). He thus sought to ground artistic practice in stories and symbols that were resonant with contemporary concerns and cultural cross-currents. In this manner he engaged the potential richness of difference whilst interrogating the apparent security of sameness.

Jit's theatre was mostly experimental and non-naturalistic, bringing together diverse physical and spoken vocabularies to forge a Malaysian sensibility on stage. In several performances that Jit directed (e.g., *Scorpion Orchid* by Lloyd Fernando, co-directed with Joe Hasham in 1995; and *Family-A Visual Performance Event* co-directed with Wong Hoy Cheong in 1998), the actors were from diverse racial and class backgrounds to reflect the multiplicity in Malaysian society. To emphasise the presence of difference within and between cultures, Jit also drew on multiple physical and vocabularies (such as tai chi and *silat*, *gamelan* and the Broadway musical) to dramatise the interactions of culture on stage.

In making choices for theatre, Jit developed a "language" for each production that depicted an "imagined world" that stemmed from the combined texts of the playscript, the design, choreography, musical score and the actors themselves. Within the plural vocabularies encoded

in the mise en scene, these performances were dialectical in their approach to meaning and interpretation. They often articulated a conscious negotiation between "Abstract and Concrete registers" (Counsell 1996: 19–20), working simultaneously to develop illusions about a world beyond the stage whilst drawing attention to the real material presence of bodies and objects on stage. In so doing the staging highlighted the power relationships that prevail in the spaces between the imagined world and the material presence.

Interpreting these experimental systems of signs involved participation from the audience as "active" meaning-makers. Jit shared Bertoldt Brecht's critique of the passivity that resulted from naturalistic theatre and often developed strategies that would "denaturalise and defamiliarise" the viewing process much like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt* (alienation effect). This made Jit's theatre a dialogical site which sought to rework and challenge conventional notions of reality. It encouraged a negotiation of identity as flexible and reviewable, offering agency in a context where choice is often seen as depleted. In this manner his theatre extended a space for what Dolan (2005) calls "performative utopia" where the intersubjectivity of performer and audience leads to reimaginings of what is possible in generating alternatives that engender hope.

In this article I will discuss two particular strategies Jit deployed to examine difference and sameness in theatre namely to cast against race and mix languages on stage. These strategies were not unanimously well-received but nonetheless provoked strong responses and provided insightful enactments of Malaysian culture that contested the boundaries of race and language. Neither were these experiments repeated in every performance Jit directed, but they were vivid socio-political expressions of culture that dismantled "race" and "language" – crucial aspects of identity – as "stable substances" and posited alternative embodiments of identity that embraced fluidity and plurality instead.

RECASTING *THE CORD*: RESISTING THE MOULDS OF RACE

In casting actors for a performance, directors often seek a certain verisimilitude that reduces the difference between the Abstract and Concrete registers. This is meant to create a more "believable" performance and persuade audiences to "accept" the actor as the character. However in politically engaged theatre it is the "spaces between" that become the focus for interrogation – to question the normative and present the alternative. To cast against race is then to resist a metaphysical interpretation of identity and stage a reworking of a prescribed construct. This may not work for audiences unprepared to "read" the signifiers as metaphors for identity rather than inadequate equivalences. But it offers an insight into how theatre can recast the notion of race despite the stern dictates of the state.

In 1994, the Five Arts Centre (FAC) production of *The Cord*,[10] a play by K. S. Maniam, Indian-Malaysian writer of international repute and inaugural recipient of the Raja Rao Award (September 2000, New Delhi) for his outstanding contribution to the Literature of the South Asian Diaspora, did not meet with enthusiastic response. Perhaps in part, this was due to choices made by Jit in his casting of actors for the play. Maniam's play about a community of disenfranchised estate-worker Indian-Malaysians who resent feeling like outcasts in a country they had chosen to make their home, raises issues about citizenship for Malaysians who still imagine their "homeland" to be elsewhere. It also examines how class and education become pivotal in the bid to belong – particularly for those on the lower rungs of the hierarchy of racial identity. (Indian-Malaysians are seen as "lower" than Malays and Chinese, not merely because they are a small minority, but because large numbers of Indians migrated to Malaysia as indentured labour during the British colonial period. Many still remain in the lower socio-economic classes). Jit's deliberate questioning of racialised norms through his cross-racial casting may have unsettled audiences who expected to see a play simply about Indian-Malaysians.

K. S. Maniam's seminal play had been directed by Jit on two previous occasions, most significantly as the inaugural FAC production in 1984, and was being re-staged as part of its 10th anniversary celebrations.[11] Granted the cast and the production were no longer identical with the well-received 1984 production (only one actor, S. Subramony reprised his role as Muniandy) and the socio-cultural climate in Malaysia was also altered,[12] yet the script and the story remained the same. However this particular staging disappointed audiences and whilst several aspects of the production (e.g., poor pacing, lack of aural clarity, incongruity of style) were discussed in two newspaper reviews, only one of the actors, Hamzah Tahir, was singled out as being "miscast" in his role as Ratnam, an angry young man frustrated with unfulfilled dreams. In the play Ratnam is exceedingly taunted by a perfectionist father, Muniandy who humiliates him for his failure to live up to expectations – a pivotal relationship in unraveling the agonies of other characters in the play.

Reviewer Eddin Khoo described Tahir as "evidently miscast" (Khoo 1994). This was echoed by reviewer Tamara M. Karim who wrote that Tahir was "unfortunately totally miscast" (Karim 1994). However neither elaborated on why except to suggest that Tahir did not deliver a "believable" performance. Tahir, a Malay-Malaysian was the only actor in the play who was cast against race whilst all other "Indian" roles were played by actors of varied "Indian" descent. Tahir was also the only actor who had worked primarily in MLT and was performing his first role in ELT. Seeing as theatre reviewers rarely comment on casting, this may have been a determining factor in the judgement – perhaps their response cast more doubt on the choice of the director than the skill of the actor.

Tahir, a "young talented actor" (Karim 1994) was from a working-class rural background and typically less fluent in English. His being cast in this role was a stark contrast to the previous Ratnam, played by Ravi Navaratnam, an Indian-Malaysian actor from urban, upper-middle class and English-speaking background. Whilst socio-economically Tahir had more in

common with Ratnam than Navaratnam, perhaps visually and aurally Ratnam was imagined by ELT audiences as more commensurate with Navaratnam than Tahir.

When Malaysian actors of Malay, Indian and Chinese descent perform in plays from the Western canon that require them to play "foreign" roles that range from the dark-skinned Moor Othello (in William Shakespeare's *Othello*) to the fair-skinned American Blanche DuBois (in Tennesse Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire*) their "believability" as "Moors" or "Americans" is rarely questioned. However the politics of difference in being Malay-Malaysian and Indian-Malaysian are so fraught within the national tensions of power that characterise notions of "self" and "other," a Malay actor playing a local Indian character seems to require a more discomfiting leap of "disbelief" than usual. In casting Tahir as Ratnam, Jit questioned the construct of race as a metaphysical and stable substance through an enactment and embodiment of difference that resists essentialism, providing space to rethink the dynamics of "race" in a multicultural mosaic that is often regarded as immutable. This was not the first instance of Jit casting against "race," as in the 1984 production Kee Thuan Chye was cast as Muthiah. This is the role of an arrogant English-educated Indian clerk who rises in status among the other estate workers and is revealed as having fathered Ratnam by raping Lakshmy, Muniandy's deceased wife. Kee is Chinese-Malaysian (thus also non-Indian!), but perhaps because Kee was a known actor in ELT he did not disrupt too significantly the "expectations" of the audience. It was regarded with apprehension but managed to be acceptable. Caroline Ngui noted that Kee's presence gave her "a few disturbing moments" because of "a Chinese guy playing someone called Muthiah in a play so richly Indian" but she moved on to say "after these first few moments, it did not matter" (Ngui 1984). Ngui commended Kee for having "played a very believable bad guy" but said nothing about Kee playing a believable "Indian." Due to his status, Muthiah is undeniably an "outsider" in the community of Indian estate workers and thus Kee's being "different" (and Chinese!) fits with the function

of the character who lauds it over the rest. The "other" as bad guy is easier to process than when the "hero" is cast from the "other."

Ratnam is situated at the heart of the Indian community in *The Cord* and thus Tahir's presence as a Malay actor, who was not disguised to look or sound otherwise, may have appeared incongruous in rendering the perceived issues and ideas of "the play" successfully. Or it could have been that Tahir's corporeal presence (the Concrete register in Counsell's terms) triggered uneasy nerves of consciousness in considering relations not only between Malays and Indians, but more significantly English-speaking (read urbanised and upper-class) and Malay-speaking (read rural and lower-class) Malaysians. When Ratnam says to Muthiah in a bitter confrontation about his worth,

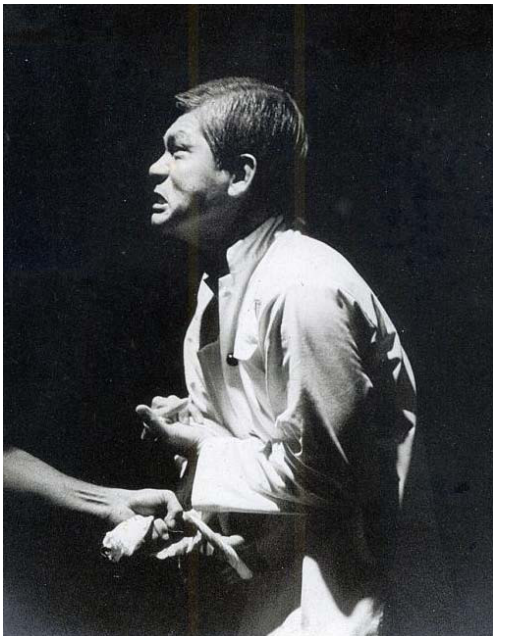

Photo 1 Kee Thuan Chye as Muniandy in *The Cord* (1984). Copyright Five Arts Centre.

> You nothing but stick. You nothing but stink. Look all clean, inside all thing dirty. Outside everything. Inside nothing. Taking-making. Walking-talking. Why you insulting all time? Why you no like me? Why you sit on me like monkey with wet back-side? (Maniam 1994: 64).

This may have highlighted the politics of class difference and discrimination that would unsettle a largely affluent audience unwilling to negotiate the prejudice that they may embody – whatever their race. Although Malay-Malaysians are seen as the politically dominant race, those who are not fluent in English are still "inferior" in status by virtue of class, and thus it is possible that ELT audiences (largely non-Malay) secure their notion of "superiority" – between and within races – by classifying language as a significant determinant of acceptance even within the apparently neutral space of ELT.

Although ELT deals often enough with multicultural experiences, it is not often that actors are cast against their "race" (except when doing foreign plays!) and even less frequent is the opportunity for actors who work primarily with non-English languages to play a significant role in ELT. Thus to cast Tahir in the role of Ratnam, a distinctly non-Malay role, was clearly a conscious option to challenge the construct of identity based singularly on race. Jit was clearly questioning the notion that the "Indian-ness" of Ratnam was of utmost importance and could only be played by a Malaysian of Indian origin. It underscores gender, class and age as equally important elements in the construct of Ratnam and links the disenfranchised Indian with his Malay contemporary as well. It also extended ELT beyond the notion of linguistic proficiency to become more inclusive of a wider range of English speakers.

Regrettably Malaysian theatre is a divided space that separates theatre practice according to language use. Due to English being seen as a "neutral" language – it not being tied to any racial group – ELT is regarded as more "integrated" and its practitioners are not dominated by any particular identity, unlike MLT, which still consists primarily of Malays. The same holds for Chinese and Indian language theatre, which tend to be racially linked making it uncommon to find an Indian speaking Hokkien or a Malay speaking Tamil on stage.[13] Jit's efforts to blur the boundaries of culture and identity by having Tahir play Ratnam, was an attempt to revise the limits of racial identity and thereby stage an alternative multiculturalism

that exists between and within bodies – prodding audiences to see Ratnam as a mix of several cultural constructs that clash and converge.

However this does not seem to have been "read" adequately – at least not in the two reviews mentioned. Perhaps the staging did not make the strategy accessible to audiences who sought cultural cohesiveness that was defined along racial categories – seeing the play primarily as an "Indian" play and not a "Malaysian" play. It may have required more overt "defamiliarisation" devices to foreground how race can be destabilised in a performance perceived to be about a particular "race." Such that when Ratnam tries to persuade his father to buy him his dream motorcycle,

> These are useless these days (referring to religious rituals). Nothing like a Yamaha. The wheel spokes shine like the sun. And the sound of the engine! And when you sit on it, you're riding heaven! (Maniam: 1994: 33).

The staging could have strategically linked this not only to the dreams of a young Indian-Malaysian male but many young Malaysian males who are seen as drop-outs in the system and traitors to tradition. For an audience less politicised or engaged in issues of race this may have aided an appreciation of why Tahir was cast.[14] But when audiences are not able or prepared to deconstruct the staging in the manner suited does such an intervention "fail?" Or does it indicate how challenging it is to recast identities when they have been so prescribed by the state? Does the "fault" lie with the context in which both audience and performance are framed by socialised norms, which block any attempt to deal with difference more holistically?

Jit's boldness of vision for Malaysian theatre was to experiment and offer sites where alternative imaginings of self and other could occur, despite the risks of being inaccessible or unreadable. In dealing with the potential for theatre to recast identity and reinvent the self, Jit explored "re-imaginings" of race that required a willingness to shed stultified categorisations and challenge fossilised norms. Whilst the actual performance may not have cut through the sediment of socialisation, the cultural politics of the intervention merit consideration as an attempt to extend how identity can be played and behaviours deciphered. It also offers a space to consider how the moulds of racial identity can be recast.

CREATING *A CHANCE ENCOUNTER*: INVENTING A LANGUAGE BETWEEN

Jit's capacity to stage the spoken and unspoken communicative systems that evolve in situations of "difference" was enhanced by his commitment to exploring theatre in multiple forms, vocabularies and languages. The propensity to hear and attend to the plural articulations of identity that are manifest in Malaysian society thus stemmed from Jit's interest in developing theatre that was grounded in lived contexts and historicised cultures – simultaneously contemporary, modern and traditional. This led to an engagement with theatre that saw and heard beyond the official dictates whilst being fully conscious of their presence. In this way Jit negotiated the spaces between, or liminalities, that critically inform alternative imaginings of Malaysian identity.

One area of experimentation that Jit developed in the later years of his directing career was the devised multilingual play. Jit was one of only a few theatre practitioners who culled multilingual texts [e.g., *US: Actions and Images* (1993); *Work: The Malaysian Way* (1996)] that engaged the complexities of difference without resorting to simplified depictions. These became valuable enactments of the dynamics of culture across boundaries that are constantly in shift. That the works were performed without translation or surtitles – the assumption being

that Malaysian audiences would be able to decipher the texts performed – marked Jit's intent to move Malaysian theatre beyond linguistic confines.

In *A Chance Encounter* (1999), a play devised by Jit with actors Faridah Merican and Foo May Lyn, Jit explores how individuals concoct their own languages to adapt to particular circumstances. The story revolves around an intriguing relationship that develops between two women who have to bridge cultural gaps – language, race, religion and age – in order to connect. Anita, a young Chinese cosmetics salesgirl played by Foo, meets Fatima, an elderly Indian-Muslim housewife played by Merican, in an urban shopping mall. As Anita promotes her beauty products across a cosmetics counter, the two women begin to converse, and talk about looking beautiful, being healthy and enjoying movies. Gradually their conversation deepens and they reflect on issues of being women and dealing with the challenges of loneliness. To transcend their differences they use a range of languages, accents and physical gestures, and find that they are in fact more connected than they envisaged.

Their capacity to establish diverse connections with each other, such as a shared love of telling ghost stories, eventually leads to them sharing more private episodes about their families and relationships. In so doing, they unravel their stories, values and cultural frames and come to realise that they are in fact no strangers, but were once neighbours in a different city. Although Anita resists the loss of her anonymity by denying the histories that Fatima tries to excavate, their "chance encounter" has exposed how interlinked they really are, for all their seeming cultural difference and social distance. It is these affinities that enable them to exceed the gaps and thus encounter themselves through each other.

As a devised play, this dialogue was created in rehearsal when the actors (with the additional help of playwright, Leow Puay Tin) improvised then scripted a language that would cope with the demands of the context. They devised a manner of speaking that was inflected by

Photo 2 Rehearsal for *A Chance Encounter* (Faridah Merican, Krishen Jit and Foo May Lyn from left to right), 1999. Copyright Five Arts Centre.

large demonstrative actions that become significant gestures in building meaning between two people with different linguistic skills. This is in fact a way of speaking "Malaysian" that is identifiable to most urban Malaysians. This mix of language and gesture is peculiar not only to the persons involved but to each context that requires a particular adaptation of words and actions that communicate effectively.

Theatre provides an apt site for staging this reality and challenging the notion of "pure" languages that need to be used according to a "standard." Fatima being more provincial only speaks Malay (specifically Penang-Malay which is marked by a distinct accent and vocabulary) but understands some English as well. Anita is more multilingual and speaks English, Malay and Cantonese, indicating her more cosmopolitan identity. In their process of communication they "invent" a language which includes varieties of Malay, English and Cantonese.

In an interview about *A Chance Encounter*, Jit explained that:

> The language used was not broken Malay but an invented language that is not-not Malay… It is a language for the stage that is not real but can convey the ideas necessary with a Malaysian accent, tone and colour (Krishen Jit, pers. comm.)[15]

By rejecting the category of "broken Malay" for this "invented" language, Jit was advocating a politics of language that incorporated non-standard varieties as their own creolised mixtures which needed to be fluid and able to sustain ongoing change. The freedom to "mix and blend" gives agency to the performers to choose their mode of expression according to their experience and preference.

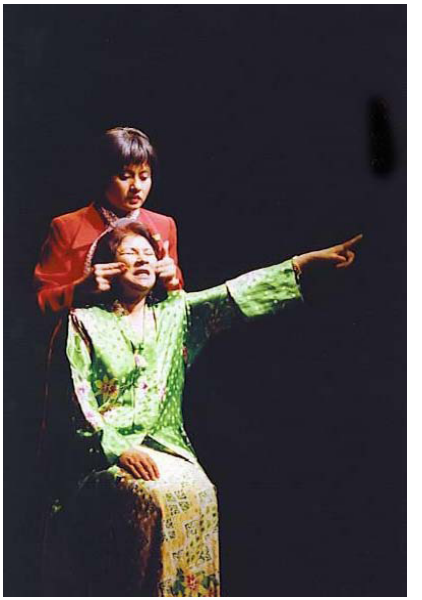

Photo 3 *A Chance Encounter* performance in 1999. Copyright Five Arts Centre.

When Anita explains the benefits of her beauty products, she uses Malay (e.g., *makan itu lemak* – devour that fat, *kasi kilat* – gives a glow, *bagi kuat* – makes strong) to describe how they work, but English to name these processes (e.g., anti-cellulite, light-reflecting, nourishing) as there are no effective translations for these terms. However into the mix is added the persuasive language of gesture such as when she demonstrates "toning and firming" by physically outlining her svelte figure and pointing to how it "*jadi satu S la!*" (becomes an S you see – to indicate the curves in the right places).

Fatima's language is more consistent throughout and this coheres with her being more culturally confined to the boundaries within which she operates – she wears a *baju kurung* (Malay traditional dress for women) and she abides by Indian-Muslim traditional values that reinforce her religious and cultural practice (e.g., she will not wear nail polish as she believes the devil inhabits long nails, and she is superstitious about an open umbrella indoors as this is meant to attract snakes). Her cultural references draw from this frame and when Anita introduces the concept of six degrees of separation, based on a television-documentary, Fatima relates this to a Malay saying *pelanduk dua serupa* (two identical deer) which refers to the physical resemblance of two different people – unconnected and separate. Whilst the two concepts vary in meaning, they are relevant to the conversation at hand about whether or not Anita is in fact a former neighbour of Fatima and the possibility of mistaken identity.

Anita's language is more varied and draws on English, Malay and Cantonese words, inflections, accents and syntaxes. When speaking to Fatima she transitions between accents and weaves English, Malay and Cantonese seamlessly. However she speaks in standardised English when she confides in the audience about her painful memories, indicating a conscious shift to a higher register of language, in line with the content. When recalling her childhood trauma of discovering her mother naked in bed with the *mee pok* (flat noodle) man, she says

> But no matter how afraid I was I still had to go forward, wishing I could go backward. No matter how scared I was I still had to go forward. I still had to reach that door. I still had to open it.

This highlights her capacity to change according to context and make suitable choices as required.

Anita switches from English when talking to the audience, to the "invented" Malaysian language (punctuated severally with gestures and demonstrative actions) when talking with Fatima about skin care and personal issues. But when she wishes to shun Fatima she sings Hokkien folk songs that are reminiscent of her childhood – a poignant metaphor of how we often shun the present that is laden with the past by retreating into a symbolic nostalgic past that seems distanced from the present. This switching also accommodates both the actor, for whom English is most natural, and the character, who switches according to her task and intent. Just as the characters have fluid identities, which they choose to "stage" according to their purpose, the languages are also composites in flux.

However the attempt to describe the language of the play led to interesting insights about how language is perceived in relation to a "standard." Reviewer Eddin Khoo wrote that:

> The play was conducted almost entirely in Malay (there were bits of Cantonese uttered in the most convincing of ways). Once again, not the calculated Malay of officialdom, but the natural inflections of the language that govern our everyday interaction (Khoo 1999).

Similarly reviewer Francis Dass included a *Nota Bene* in his review,

> as if to "warn" an audience that the play "starts off in English" and then veers toward the sunny side of Bahasa Malaysia for most of its duration, with Faridah's Fatima spouting the warm dialect of Penang while Foo's salesgirl rattles on in her broken Bahasa (Melayu – Malay Language) (Dass 1999).

In both instances English was not "marked" as the play is categorised as ELT and thus assumed to be in English.[16] However the notion that this was a "variety" of Malay that ranged from "broken" to "warm," "natural" to "convincing" suggests that something powerful was being spoken to invoke strong responses, but there was as yet an inadequacy with which to describe this – the "sunny side of Bahasa" (Melayu) hardly suffices!

In creating links across the "differences" without having to homogenise or standardise language, the two characters perform what was difficult but not impossible – even if as yet unquantifiable. In this instance Jit challenges the notions of Malaysian identity as being plural "within languages" (as well as bodies) and not simply "between languages." He does this in collaboration with the performers, through staging an encounter that has to develop a language which bridges the gaps that remain between official categories of "difference."

However the reluctance from official agencies to engage with these "mixed languages" intensifies the struggle to value and depict them adequately and points to the ongoing dilemma about the validity and quality of languages that are not "pure" – reflecting a similar concern with the "purity" of race as well.[17] Mixes and blends may be welcome in the "fusions" of Malaysian culture apparent in food and clothing, but less so in language, indicating that because language co-relates with race in the construct of identity, it too has to be preserved and protected against corruption and being "broken."[18]

Nonetheless the play was a veritable success and reviewed as being "one of the most powerful works of Malaysian theatre in recent times" (Khoo 1999) and a "penetrating reflection of Malaysian life" (Dass 1999). In this instance the bridging of the "gap" between the two characters who could be read as "too different to be friends" (culturally, generationally, linguistically, etc) had been codified with success and the pleasure of watching the "well-cast" actors in performance stemmed from identifying with the many devices and strategies

employed to make meaning and forge ties of identification as Malaysians – made possible through the layered politics of difference and sameness. It is also pertinent that the work was rich with humour that stemmed from the contextual awkwardness of the "encounter" and the identifiable struggles to overcome communication barriers at all costs.

By opting for a multilingual text that was performed in a physically exacting and elaborate storytelling style, Jit extended the boundaries of language as a playground for identity by facilitating the "invention" of a language peculiar to the situated differences of the two characters. It was not about writing a new language but about realising the potential languages within Malaysians when confronted with unexpected encounters that provide "communicative democracies" through "greetings, rhetoric and storytelling" (Young 1996). It engaged dialogue about life as Malaysians that involved a participatory citizenship and developed ownership of cultural experience from the ordinary and mundane, to the esoteric and intellectual.

CONCLUSION

Malaysia's multicultural image is widely advertised through its tourism slogan that uses the essentialist notion of Malaysia being *Truly* Asia (italics mine). The depiction of quantified stable identities that offer authenticity as well as diversity, thus able to represent "all" of Asia with validity to add, is commodified further with glitzy images of designer shopping in urban malls. To resist these popularised reductive notions and contest the prescribed policies of having to be identified according to race and religion is to challenge the constructs of nationhood and official categories of identity that are limiting and fixed. This entails advocating a mix and collage of cultures as constitutive of individual identities, which are also in flux. The process of questioning these tropes, such as in Jit's theatre, then develops ways of making available alternatives that allow for differences to co-exist without being homogenised or flattened.

"Disjunctures between economy, culture and politics" occupy a central place in Arjun Appadurai's discussion of "global cultural flows" (Appadurai 1997). His argument that cultures are severally informed by "imagined worlds" that are "constituted by the historically situated imaginations of persons and groups spread around the globe" (Appadurai 1997: 33) also suggests that these disparate sites enable contestations and subversions of the "official mind" that tends to be seen as dominant. Within this frame of increasingly decentralised identities, nation-states tend to defend their policy by exercising "taxonomic control over difference" (Appadurai 1997: 39) and exploiting national and international mediascapes to do this. Cultural imaginings which then contest dominant constructs provide agency for participants who execute a plurality of "cultural flows" by creating potent sites for the questioning and reworking of identities that do not fit the prescribed models defined by the state.

Jit's exploration of "cultural disjunctures" through the medium of theatre provided metaphors and narratives that countered the "official flows" of culture by enacting alternatives and performing plural representations of the "supposedly singular" norm. His staging of difference were crafted to provide opportunity for expressions of solidarity attained through an identification of sameness, whilst asserting particularity through difference. Working with the experiences and vocabularies of fellow artists, Jit collaborated to forge systems of signs that depicted sensibilities about being Malaysian that were not curtailed by boundaries of language or race – a space more "truly Malaysian" in the fissures and ruptures than in the exotic cultural dances or rare historical sights advertised as local attractions. These were opportunities to rethink prescriptive identities and experience enacted alternatives that question the normative perspective.[19]

However the space allocated to cultural expression does not guarantee efficacy or potency unless perceived as relevant or experienced as resonant. When theatre strategies work to alter a cultural paradigm, their capacity to make a mark on the cultural landscape depends on the

context in which these processes occur. The more political will invested in plural discourses that are not exclusive but reflect with honesty and insight on the politics of difference, the more productive the operations to build stronger ties will be.

Jit's theatre was rarely viewed as easy entertainment but it gained recognition for examining the politics of difference in Malaysia. It was cultural intervention that expressed the dynamics of staging identity in a plural society, in which the broken moulds of race and the invented languages of Jit's theatre offered potent performances of Malaysian culture that dramatised what needed to be examined and experienced by all those in the fragile "play" of being Malaysian and being human.

NOTES

1. Malaysia's main political coalition, the Barisan Nasional (Malay: National Front) is made up of communally defined parties that are meant to represent the interests of each group accordingly. Each of the main party components, namely the United Malay National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) also has a sub-party for women that is allocated a quota of representatives within the main party. Within this context, Malays are additionally defined by not only their racial category but also religion – constitutionally being Malay in Malaysia includes being Muslim as well. Whilst Indians are associated with being Hindu and Chinese with being Taoist-Buddhist, these aspects of their identity are not constitutionally defined. Being Christian does not imply any particular race, but it does suggest being non-Malay, and is associated with being Anglophone, although several churches operate in Chinese, Tamil and Malay.

2. See Kahn and Loh (1992) and Loh and Saravanamuttu (2003) for a range of discussions on the politics of "fragmentation" in Malaysia and the complex network of factors involved in dealing difference and pluralism.

3. Samuel Huntington's (2003) "clash of civilisations" is based on religion as a focal point for identity and posits the inevitable encounters of "difference" that ensue between societies that uphold these religions, namely Muslim and Christian (read Western). This reductive dyadic relation sets up a convenient opposition that is then seen as justification for animosity and tension between cultures who profess "different" beliefs and thus are "bound" by "different" codes of ethics.

4. This echoes Homi Bhabha's (1990) distinction between "difference" and "diversity" in which cultural difference "must not be understood as the free play of polarities and pluralities in the homogenous empty time of the national community" but instead "addresses the jarring of meanings and values generated in-between the variety and diversity associated with cultural plenitude" (Bhabha 1990: 312). As McLaren (1994) points out, Bhabha argues that "with diversity comes a 'transparent norm' constructed and administered by the 'host' society that creates a false consensus" (McLaren 1994: 203). Difference on the other hand deals with the "incommensurability" without having to "normalise" it.

5. Language was a particularly potent issue in Jit's theatre practice. After the 1969 riots Jit chose to move from ELT to MLT in order to re-imagine the cultural implications of being Malaysian from within the main language of the nation. In the mid-1980s he relocated back to ELT due to nativist practices in MLT that excluded non-Malays and questioned his validity as a practitioner. But Jit continued to be involved in MLT as a critique (in his New Sunday Times column *Talking Drama by Utih*) and educator (teaching theatre at the University of Malaya and the National Arts Academy). Jit also observed Chinese and Indian language theatre – contemporary and traditional – and included his perspectives on these practices in his deliberations. His capacity to work with performers from diverse backgrounds was deeply informed by these experiences and interrogations of culture in Malaysia. Jit's deliberations as *Utih* on issues of language and theatre, particularly

in relation to ELT, were insightful in highlighting the complexities of language in the changing cultural landscape of Malaysia. In the 1980s Jit challenged ELT playwrights to create work that reflected greater diversity as "the battle for the national language has been fought and won and English no longer threatens the paramouncy of Bahasa Malaysia" (Jit 1985). In the 1990s Jit read the scene as more in need of strong directors as "the massive influx of new actors into the arena of theatre is quite unprecedented" (Jit 1991) and had generated more writers as well. Also, in this climate the need to produce Malaysian plays was less urgent than the need to produce professional and skilled theatre (Jit 1993).

6. *Talking Drama by Utih*, a weekly arts column that Jit wrote using the pseudonym Utih, was published in the Sunday edition of the New Straits Times, Malaysia. It ran from 1972–1994. For further analyses on Jit's work as a critic see Rajendran (2007)

7. Jit's formal education was as a historian and he taught history in the University of Malaya for several years.

8. Krishen Jit, May 2004, in a recorded interview with Charlene Rajendran.

9. Jit's executions of cross-cultural theatre do not fit neatly into any of the usual categories of theatrical interculturalism (Pavis 1996). Unlike the interculturalism of, say, Peter Brook or Robert Wilson, who engage international artists and draw on cultural traditions from different countries, Jit worked mainly with local artists from diverse cultural traditions that ranged Indian, Chinese, Malay, and Anglo-European. Unlike Tadashi Suzuki or Ninagawa Yukio, he also did not direct foreign canonical texts using local traditional forms. Jit's theatre thus spans the intra- and intercultural while remaining intra-national. He had reservations about the politics of interculturalism (Jit 2003) that accepted neat identities that could become representative "pure" existences interacting with other such pure identities that may be defined ethnically, linguistically or nationally. Such reservations are close to Rustom Bharucha's notion which describes the interculturalist as "more of an infiltrator

in specific domains of cultural capital" and who works to "negotiate different systems of power in order to sustain the exchange of cultures at democratic and equitable levels" (Bharucha: 2001: 33).

10. *The Cord* is published in *Sensuous Horizons: Stories and Plays* by K. S. Maniam (1994).

11. In 1984, Jit's production of *The Cord* met with much positive response and was subsequently invited to perform in The Shell Theatre in Singapore in 1986.

12. Malaysian theatre in the 1980s had few locally written English scripts that sought to forge a version of English which incorporated local inflections and cultural metaphors. *The Cord* was one of the first plays that had this quality and K. S. Maniam was one of a few Malaysian writers whose work bore this quality, and who continues to write in a style that is distinct and respected. By the 1990s, more writers had taken on this challenge and thus the excitement of the language and the politics of the play being performed were quite changed. For a more detailed examination of the politics of language in *The Cord*, see Jacqueline Lo (2003: 51–80).

13. See Philip (2005), and Rowland (2005) for discussions on how ELT provides a "neutral" space within which issues of race are examined with greater openness and critique. Their arguments assert that English is both an international language as well as a Malaysian language – rarely seen in contemporary Malaysian contexts as a "colonial" language that needs to be resisted. As a result, theatre in English has been the most integrative and pluralist as practitioners are not dominated by any particular racial group. This is unlike Malay, Chinese and Indian language theatres.

14. See Loh (2002) for an argument about how "developmentalism" in the 1990s had effectively reduced "ethnicism" and the awareness of racial issues due to overt emphasis on affluence and commercialism in Dr. Mahathir's policies.

15. Krishen Jit, March 1999, in a video-recorded interview with Ray Langenbach.

16. A small number of audience members, mostly foreign to Malaysia, expected to see a play in English and left soon after they encountered problems with the language being used. Some demanded a refund of their ticket and their contention was that the title was in English and thus gave the wrong impression. This raises questions about whether a multilingual performance should also have multilingual titles. It also reiterates the need for Malaysian theatre to rework its division along linguistic lines and become more inclusive of cultural experience beyond the boundaries of "official" languages.

17. June 2006 marked the 50th anniversary of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP – National Language Institute) and all the major DBP monthly publications (*Dewan Bahasa, Dewan Sastera* and *Dewan Budaya*) for June 2006 featured articles on the importance of the Malay language as the national language and the need to prevent the bastardisation of the language by mixing words from other languages in spoken and written form. It pointed to the emphasis on recent policy passed to empower the DBP to act as "language police" for the national language in the aim to prevent Malay from being "corrupted" – "Anyone refusing to follow an order by the DBP director-general can be fined up to RM1,000" (see Cheah 2006).

18. "Broken English" is the term used to refer to ungrammatical English. English that incorporates words and syntactical structures from other languages such as Malay, Cantonese and Tamil, is sometimes called Malaysian-English or Manglish – seen as an "impure" version of the standard.

19. For further discussion on Jit's theatre and politics of staging cultural difference see Rajendran and Wee (2007).

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