

[Transcript] Parallel Universes in Wayang Peranakan: Adapting, Updating and Renovating *Mari Kita Main Wayang*

By
[Centre 42](#)

INTRODUCTION (00:01)

Charlene Rajendran 00:06

Hello everyone. Welcome to this podcast. My name is Charlene Rajendran. We are talking with two of the most important people involved in an upcoming production, *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, which will play at the SingTel Waterfront Theatre at the Esplanade from the 17th to the 19th of November 2023. So, with me here are Alvin Tan and Zulfadli Rashid, better known as Big.

Zulfadli Rashid 00:30

Hi, my name is Zulfadli Rashid. I am also known as Big. I am a playwright. Recently I've been known for transcreating, adapting works into the Malay language and *Mari Kita Main Wayang* is my first play, transcreating it into Peranakan patois with the help of a lot of collaborators.

Alvin Tan 00:57

Hi, I'm Alvin Tan, I'm the director for *Mari Kita Main Wayang*. This work is meaningful to me because I directed it 24 years ago, and now to revisit it and to have the resources and the connections at the moment to actually fulfil the objectives of the work in contemporary terms is something I look forward to because I have aspirations of how to make some changes and some updating of the work for current and contemporary audience.

ABOUT THE PLAY (01:42)

Charlene Rajendran 01:42

Mari Kita Main Wayang, sometimes translated as 'Let's Stage a Play', is a play within a play that follows a group of eight Peranakans who come together to stage a play called *Empat Bini*, 'Four Wives', an ambitious script that is set within the illustrious walls of a royal court. However, all is not as it seems. As the play unfolds, a gripping narrative of power gone array among the players comes to light. This play is presented in Baba Melayu, and peppered with familiar expressions. *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, originally by Felix Chia, is a love letter to the rich Peranakan cultural heritage deeply rooted in Singapore. It pays homage to the underappreciated art form of Peranakan theatre, while highlighting the significance of having this heritage represented on stage. Come witness the revival of this tradition and be transported to a bygone era where the past meets the present. So, let's begin, Alvin and Big, with how did this

production come about? What led to it and what are some of the key motivations that made it happen? Who are the main supporters of this project?

Alvin Tan 02:49

Esplanade approached me to ask me if I would be interested to look into doing a Peranakan play, because I think Esplanade has not done a full Peranakan production. And they offered *Pileh Menantu* by Felix Chia, because that's also a very known work, a kind of watershed, because it was in the Singapore Arts Fest a long time ago and brought back the Wayang Peranakan audience to the theatre. I have worked with Felix and I did one of his last plays called *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, and I felt that structurally, it was more sophisticated a piece of work. And I counter-proposed to Esplanade to look into *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, although it was a lesser known work, and they read the script, and they felt, okay, yeah, they would like us to explore. And I was thinking that too - how to update it, and how to make it relevant to today's audience. And I had in mind as well not to just have the play made, or remade, for the Peranakan community, but for people outside the Peranakan community, because in the past, it was a Peranakan play written, directed by Peranakans, acted by Peranakans, for a Peranakan audience, and I felt we kind of needed to open that up, you know, ventilate that, and to kind of share the culture with other people to look at more the universal elements of a very specific culture. And in my mind, I was very much thinking of Big, because Big has been involved in a lot of these kinds of transcreation projects. He has translated Haresh's play *Hope* as well, and I've seen him do a lot of this work in a very skillful way, and also very ethical way that he goes about it. And so I approached him - and also because Malay and Peranakan language - I mean, they're not the same, but, you know, enough for a playwright like Big to access - access the original script and see how to renovate it.

Charlene Rajendran 5:17

So transcreation sounds like a kind of world-making that uses these multiple languages, these multiple modalities, these multiple understandings of how to tell a story on stage, and the politics, the purpose, the intentions of the group involved.

Zulfadli Rashid 5:36

Okay, imagine a Venn diagram, right, because I have a Venn diagram here. Okay. So transcreation is in the middle, so it's localization and translation and adaptation, right. So first, of course, when you go on to create this whole new parallel universe, right? So you have to first respect the original world, understand the target audience, and then you, of course, you have to adopt an innovative spirit. So imagine - I mean, I'm a layman. So in layman's terms, transcreation is really the different Spider-verses. You have your Spider-Man in this universe, the Spider Man is this person - then in another universe, the Spider-Man is actually a Spider-Pig. And then another universe, the Spider-Man is actually a girl, you know? But all their narratives are actually about a person or being which has the extraordinary powers of a spider, and how he, she, they, then navigate their lives? And so that's what the transcreation means to me.

Charlene Rajendran 6:43

And when you say parallel universes, you're talking about a kind of an original, and then the parallel that sits in relation to it?

Zulfadli Rashid 6:54

Yes, yes, somewhat, yeah. But in this, I mean, of course, you have to respect the original work, right? Let's say *Mari Kita Main Wayang* - I cannot just transcreate it into something that has nothing to do with

the Peranakans, you know, I have to pay respect, where it came from, pay respect to the writers, so much so that sometimes when I transcreate works, and people say, "wah, that script that you did was quite engaging", I couldn't take ownership of it, because it's not mine. And on one hand, at times, I pour my heart and soul into this work; on the other hand, I also feel I am really playing a role to allow this script or this play to reach a wider audience. So that's what transcreation means lah.

Charlene Rajendran 07:51

So, Alvin, when you first did *Mari Kita Main Wayang* in 1994, you would have been considered a young director at the time. And I wonder what it was like for you to take on the responsibility of this kind of work. And therefore, speaking with Felix Chia, as you've talked about, but also then TNS, The Necessary Stage, agreeing to make this production, primarily for a Peranakan community - what were some things that you felt worked, didn't work, you would do differently, that you really are proud of right now, when you think about it? What was it like for you?

Alvin Tan 08:30

I was 31 years old. Now, I'm 60. I heard about Felix Chia, and I kind of wanted to explore my roots at that time, with theatre-making, and so I approached him. And he, at that time, also had not been doing any work for some time, so he was quite excited, and responded positively to my invitation. And so we, you know, met and started discussing, you know, what kind of play would it be like, and I was telling him at that time already, you know, how do we update the play, and how do we get audience of that day, in '94, to be interested in, and what would a new Peranakan look like, you know, for that era. I think at that time, I was just excited to work with Felix Chia, because he's, you know, like a veteran in that sense. And I was very carried away by his personality, because he had something that TNS had, which is the bravado to not dress up the Peranakan culture. So he would - if the Peranakan people like to *mencharut*, which is, be vulgar on stage in life, he will put that on stage. And the Peranakan audience will laugh from beginning to end, and then after that, go backstage and scold and reprimand him and say, you know, you are so bad, you, you wash dirty laundry, you know, then he said, but you laugh, right? From beginning to end. And then they say, yes, but you know, it's not good, you know, we're not represented properly, so I really left it out, because he said, I want to put Peranakan culture onstage, you know, warts and all? Why are we ashamed of this? That's why in the play within the play, the wives who are slaves, who are *gundek*, he wrote in his novel, in his book, you know, that the Peranakans were trying to avoid the fact that they were slave owners.

Charlene Rajendran 10:56

So this is the book he wrote about the Peranakans? A separate book.

Alvin Tan 10:59

Yeah. So he has actually translated that into his play, you know - he is able to migrate all his ideology, his thinking, into the play format. So I was very carried away by that. I wasn't really, at that time, also not steeped in feminist thinking, so I didn't - at that time, I was concerned about the narrative, where it was going, and so it was just left to him marrying - at that time, it was six wives, because it was a bit of an echo of Henry the Eighth. And there wasn't diversity, and Si Swatow was still speaking in that *pe/lat* way. So there were a lot of those revisions which I didn't see then, because too inexperienced or too young, because just putting it on stage, with a play within the play - those were changes that were already radical at that time for me, and that was enough on my plate, so I didn't see further than that. So now looking back, I saw more things to revise.

Charlene Rajendran 12:11

And what about the style that you are playing with?

Alvin Tan 12:14

Ah - so I also wasn't steeped in the whole Bangsawan thing, yeah. So I was able to take away the extra turn, you know, and now looking back and saying, "no, no, no, no, it's a device - even though we don't need it, because we don't need the time to change set, we can still use it for other theatrical purposes - why not?" So there's a lot of "why not? Why did I do this the last time? Can I bring it back?"

Charlene Rajendran 12:43

So I'm going to jump in there. 'Extra turn' is a term often used in Bangsawan right, Big? Do you want to explain what extra turn is?

Zulfadli Rashid 12:51

Back when we had to change sets, right, where it will take probably 10 minutes to change sets, you will have a performer come out on stage and entertain the audience.

Charlene Rajendran 13:01

In front of the curtain.

Zulfadli Rashid 13:04

In front of the curtain, as fillers. So the extra turns can be performances of magic, stand up comedy, singing...

Alvin Tan 13:10

Nothing to do with - don't have to have any relevance to the play.

Zulfadli Rashid 13:14

So that's an extra turn lah. I think Alvin wanted GT Lye to do the extra turn.

Alvin Tan 13:20

We brought it back for this version. Actually, in terms of contemporary theatre tradition, we don't need it, but I wanted to bring back the device, since we have the actors appearing intermittently - so the backstage is on stage, then we have the extra turn. I thought those devices can resonate structurally for this kind of work.

Charlene Rajendran 13:43

So I'm assuming you didn't have the extra turns the last time?

Alvin Tan 13:46

No, because the radical thing was to take it away, because why do we need it? Because we can do scene changes fast, so throw away the traditional device. And I think today - less reactive, looking more deeply into what are the sensibilities that need dismantling and how to do it more organically - and I think, now, also having the leeway to adapt or to transcreate the work, and having to ask what Felix's spirit and artistic objective was, and how to see and imagine what he would have liked to do today. And also given the resources we have now which we didn't have in '94, and it was done at Jubilee Hall at Raffles Hotel.

Charlene Rajendran 14:41

And you've got an assistant director for this production as well.

Alvin Tan 14:44

I have, yeah - Alin is the Assistant Director for this, and it's very important that I have her. One is that I've worked with her for many years, and her creativity, her imagination, her artistic contribution, her knowledge in Bangsawan as well, because she has done a few works on that, and being a theatre-maker as well, and how she reaches out to the cast is different from me. Sometimes we need to divide our work, because it's quite a major project, and the welfare of the cast needs to be looked into, because they have specific needs as well, so I couldn't do it alone.

THE LANGUAGE OF THE PLAY (15:39)

Charlene Rajendran 15:39

So Big, there is Bahasa Melayu, there's Baba Melayu, there's Baba patois. Talk a bit about that, please, and explain to us how these differences work.

Zulfadli Rashid 15:53

So in Singapore, the Bahasa Melayu that we use, the one that we learn in school, is called Bahasa Melayu Baku, which is the standard Malay. Then there is also the spoken Malay which is Bahasa Melayu Pasar. Bahasa Melayu Pasar is more akin to the Baba Malay. However, the Baba Malay is very much different from the Bahasa Melayu Pasar that everybody in Singapore is used to. How do I say this - there are also different kinds of idioms that the Bahasa Melayu standard has, and then there are also different kinds of idioms that the Baba Malay hold on to, and the way it is spoken also is different. When the Baba Malay wants to put across a point, the language used is pretty much euphemism, and then we have a slight curt, and then there is some sharpness to it, you know, *sindiran* - how curt they want to be, versus the standard Malay, which is straight to the point. If you don't want to be straight to the point, then there are also *Bahasa Kiasan*, or we can also use *pantun* for that matter. The *pantun* also exists in both Baba Malay and our standard Malay, which is also kind of different. The *pantun* is also evident in the *dondang sayang* songs, and the *dondang sayangs* by the Babas are different from the *dondang sayang* sung in Malay.

Charlene Rajendran 17:43

For those who don't know what a *pantun* is, what's a *pantun*?

Zulfadli Rashid 17:47

A *pantun* is a quatrain - *dua tiga kucing berlari, mana nak sama si kucing belang, dua tiga boleh ku cari, mana nak sama cik adik seorang*. So the first two lines are actually what we call the clues, and then the third and fourth line, what we call the intention of it, the message of the *pantun*. *Pantun* comes in different forms. There are quatrains, there are also two liners, there's a *pantun* that is as long as a few pages. But it is written or it is constructed in such a way that there is a beautiful way of delivering a message without being too upfront about it.

Charlene Rajendran 18:33

And explain to us why it's called Baba Melayu.

Zulfadli Rashid 18:37

The word 'Baba', if you're Malay in Singapore - a 'Baba' means that it's a Chinese Peranakan person, a male; the nyonya is the female counterpart, and they are very familiar with the Malay culture. You see the nyonya wearing the kebaya, which is also in our Malay culture, and then you see the babas speaking fluent Malay. It's evident in the *pasar* (market) - they would make it known that they know how to speak Malay, even if their Malay can be very different, versus a normal Chinese person, maybe above 60 years old - if they speak Malay, they come with a slight slang, twang to it. The *pe/at* will be a bit different. But the babas, they speak fluently.

Charlene Rajendran 19:42

So we could call Alvin 'Baba Alvin'.

Zulfadli Rashid 19:44

Yeah, in fact, we do! We call him Baba Alvin. Right, Alvin - Baba, we call you?

Charlene Rajendran 19:49

And how does it feel to be called Baba, Alvin?

Alvin Tan 19:52

I don't feel qualified, because my patois is not - it's fading. It used to be stronger when my grandparents were alive, because it was daily usage. I can feel it's going off, because I speak to my mom in English and she speaks to me in patois.

Zulfadli Rashid 20:17

Same with the second languages of everyone, for that matter. So your second language is Baba Malay, and then my second language is Malay - actually my first language is Malay - for this generation, the erosion of the know-how to the second language has eroded. We hope it doesn't also erode the cultural and traditional aspects to being whatever you are.

Charlene Rajendran 20:44

So we have Baba Melayu and we have Bahasa Melayu, and you're saying that there are distinct differences in how things are spoken and what is actually said. So can you please give us some examples?

Alvin Tan 20:56

So for me, the pronunciation - okay, like, '*besar*' is the *Bahasa Baku*, but in Peranakan it's '*besair*', so it's not '*pasar*', it's '*pasair*'. Yeah, so *tolong naik atas amek gua punya kotak* - it will be *tolong naik atair amek mama punya kotak* (please go upstairs and get Mama's box). So the lingo, the melody, is different. And then you also have Chinese words sometimes, right, and then you have things, like - okay, people say I'm Peranakan, so I should do we in Malay, and my Malay oral - I think it was saving water. So I said, "*rumah saya menjimatkan air hujan untuk cuci batu*" (at my house we collect rainwater to wash the stone floor). So my *cikgu* said, "*cuci batu buat apa?*" (why would you wash the stone?) So '*batu*' is stone, so in the Peranakan house, when I say "*cuci batu*", it's to wash the floor. And my *cikgu* said, "*itu bukan batu, itu lantai*" (that is not stone, floor is called 'lantai' in Malay). And then my Malay friends said, yeah, of course lah, because Peranakan house is built of bricks. So I don't know about this, but there's cultural context, right? Although the Peranakans have their own way of speaking, that's

what they claim is *halus* (refined). **[Big laughs]** I know you will laugh. But GT Lye, in his best moments, has lines that are quite poetic, so there are possibilities. I think maybe in the past when people were more competent in the patois and when the vocabulary, the competency was very high level, I think there was a time where the language had its refined manifestation.

Zulfadli Rashid 23:09

A simple example would also be the pronouns. *Saya, lu - saya* is 'gua', right, 'lu' is you. *Kalau Melayu* it's 'saya', 'awak', if you are more familiar with a person, 'kau, aku'. So that's the difference, simple difference lah.

Charlene Rajendran 23:31

But why did you laugh when he said that Baba Melayu can be refined - what is underlying that?

Zulfadli Rashid 23:38

I don't know lah. Maybe I come with my own biases, and I don't apologise for that lah. But the Peranakan speech, at least the one that I encountered in script, in written form, as well as on TV. They can be very curt, you know? They are unapologetic about it.

Alvin Tan 23:59

So, for example, this line, when my aunt comes to the house, I'm on the phone, right? And my friend says, "eh, your family quarrelling". I say, no, my aunt just came, they're talking. My grandma will say, "*laujiet lah*" - *laujiet* is Hokkien for festive noise, it's so noisy. *Baru datang sudah laujiet, sepuluh petat rumah boleh dengair* (just arrive and your voice is so loud that people can hear you from 10 blocks away). So 10 blocks away they can hear when you arrive. That's what he means by curt. And they're not angry, you know, just commenting.

Zulfadli Rashid 24:35

I think the more familiar you are with the person also, the more colourful your language.

Alvin Tan 24:41

It's very teasing - they want to deliberately provoke, the way they speak.

Charlene Rajendran 24:46

So would it be fair to say that it has permission to be much more direct, whereas culturally in Malay, you don't?

Alvin Tan 24:59

They will feel triggered when the Peranakans talk.

Charlene Rajendran 25:03

Or they will see it as rough rather than *halus* because you are not doing that.

Alvin Tan 25:08

I'm wondering whether it's because we come from a trading culture - the South Chinese that came to Southeast Asia - and things were very pragmatic and very direct and to the point, and "let's make the trade". So that pragmatism has influenced the use of language - but this is me speculating.

THE PERANAKAN PATOIS (25:36)

Charlene Rajendran 25:36

So the play that's coming up is *Mari Kita Maya Wayang*, and "let's stage a play" would be one translation. Interesting about language, and interesting about identity, what you have raised. So Alvin, you are Peranakan; Big, for the purposes of this project, you are non-Peranakan. I'm non-Peranakan as well. I guess this question of Esplanade wanting to explore this dimension of work is really heartening, and you're being asked to think of what might be a useful way to, in your words, update, kinda bring a new energy to the idea of creating a play about Peranakan culture that's not just for the Peranakan community. So let's think about this term Peranakan which has come up a few times - Big I'm going to ask you to explain the word.

Zulfadli Rashid 26:33

Well, the root word of Peranakan, without the suffix and prefixes - anak means child, or in this context a child of. So 'Peranakan' means people who are of mixed marriages, the children of mixed marriages - there can be Chinese Peranakans, Arab Peranakans, Indian Peranakans. As long as your parents are not from the same race, you therefore are Peranakan.

Charlene Rajendran 27:03

Why do you think they coined this word?

Zulfadli Rashid 27:06

Because back then it was CMIO, right, so if you don't fall into CMIO, then you are per-anak-kan.

Charlene Rajendran 27:14

And I guess it was different from Eurasian, because Eurasian was a different kind of mix.

Zulfadli Rashid 27:18

Oh, Eurasian is East-West, and they subscribe to different things, different traditions. Peranakan is pretty much East-East. So Peranakans themselves have certain traditions that are very different from Eurasians.

Charlene Rajendran 27:36

So Big, what does it feel like to be involved as a non-Peranakan?

Zulfadli Rashid 27:41

I guess the language gave me some access. I was happy, of course, to be asked to be involved in this project - I've always wanted to work with Alvin. The task that was given to me was to update this play, because it's not so much of translations, but more of - it's not localising as well; it's updating as well as adapting it to my own interpretation of it, of how it should be presented later on in Esplanade, so it was exciting. It's still exciting.

Charlene Rajendran 28:28

So when you say that it was the language that was of interest, the term that is used is sometimes Baba Malay, sometimes it's Peranakan language, or Peranakan patois. How do you play with this notion of language in relation to this?

Zulfadli Rashid 28:47

You know, the Peranakan patois - let's just call it Peranakan patois for this podcast - I thought it was very close to the Malay language. My background is as a Malay-language educator, so I feel that the Peranakan patois would be easy for me to access. And then easy became interesting, interesting became complicated. But all in all, I believe it's enlightening, because I thought the Peranakans would use a mishmash of Chinese, Malay, perhaps other languages, to communicate - but I'm not wrong, but I'm also not entirely correct, you know; they use different phrases for different things. They are very curt in how they use the language. And if they want to make sure you get a point, you get it sharp, as well as with flowers. You get what I mean?

Charlene Rajendran 30:04

Alvin, Big's transcreating, updating; renovating is another word that I've heard you use in relation to this project. What's your role in this project?

Alvin Tan 30:18

Facilitating, encouraging the renovation? I think at first Big was being very responsible about Felix Chia's voice, and the process began in a very conservative - in the changes that he made. And then I think, with readings and feedback, he gained momentum of confidence because, if I'm not wrong - correct me if I'm wrong - the Peranakans that turned up as well were asking for some changes, more changes than he was expecting, because - it's a play within a play, it's a group of Peranakans, *Mari Kita Main Wayang* is about a group of Peranakans who come together to discuss what play to put up. And then the rest of the play is the play within the play. And the Peranakans that turned up said they saw the group of Peranakans at the beginning part, and then after that, they don't appear anymore till the end, so the Peranakans that turned up for the reading said they missed the group of people, because after that they had to deal with the characters, and the group of Peranakans just turn up at the end, like, three minutes. So that kind of inspired all of us to say, maybe we should have the group of Peranakans intermittently pepper the work, and that gives a bit more meta to the work, which is then very relevant to today's kind of theatre-making. So I think I'm there just also to catch this kind of inspiration, and that opportunities that are suggested by the community, and which will fit into the updating scheme of things.

THE CREATION PROCESS (32:28)

Charlene Rajendran 32:28

The story involves a group of contemporary people coming together to stage a play that is not so contemporary, in a way, because the elements and the style of this Peranakan play incorporate somewhat older elements, such as Bangsawan elements. The kind of story is about an aristocracy, a king, and he wants to actually look for a wife who will give him a male heir, basically, so good old patriarchal gender-based kind of stuff, right? And then there are contemporary people staging it and a new playwright, for example, who comes into it. Before we get into the story a little bit more, tell us - when you say people came from the Peranakan community, and they give feedback - so there have been few readings, so tell us about that.

Alvin Tan 33:29

Three table reads, and I think one staged - you know, with blocking and all that - reading.

Charlene Rajendran 33:35

So tell us about that. What has been the intention of having those readings? Who has come and what's happened?

Zulfadli Rashid 33:44

I think the intention was to ensure that we didn't do work in an echo chamber. We didn't *shioh sendiri* lah, you know, and also to see whether what we are trying to do, whether the boundaries that we are pushing or not pushing, rubs the community the right way. And I believe it's quite intimidating, you know - I've never had a read with so many guests.

Charlene Rajendran 34:10

How many, when you say so many?

Zulfadli Rashid 34:14

A lot - there were more guests than actors.

Charlene Rajendran 34:16

Okay, so, what - 50 people?

Zulfadli Rashid 34:19

20... Alvin?

Alvin Tan 34:20

No, it's not that big. But their voices, their opinions, their presence was large, so I think Big felt overwhelmed, felt that the numbers turnout was big, bigger than Big.

Zulfadli Rashid 34:33

Yeah, but I appreciate it, you know - it's good that along the way, there are - what do you call that? Checks, checks and balances, to see whether - have we gone too far? But it seems that the general feedback is push more, push more. That's what I feel. But there are also certain parts that they feel very precious about. They are very, very respectful, and probably *jaga*, take care of my feelings. So they would gladly feedback to Alvin.

Alvin Tan 35:17

There was one trait that I want to address that was very interesting for me from the start - they pulled me aside and, very gently and out of genuine concern, said that, "you know, if the work is not familiar to the Peranakan community, then they will be disenchanted". Because we have not had a Peranakan play for a long time, and the thing is, because I have a Malay wife and Chetti Melaka, because quite a lot of times the Wayang Peranakan is dominated by Chinese Peranakan characters - so I wanted to kind of break that mould a little. And for them already, you know, they got shaken. And then I think - okay, this is my assumption, they didn't say it out loud - but because there was a Malay playwright, not a Peranakan playwright, then they asked me, "is this a Peranakan play or Malay play?" So there was that, and then followed with, "if it's not firmly familiar, they might get thrown off, derailed, and then disenchanted that they are not seeing what they are used to". So I said, "so familiarity is your criteria for success, but familiarity is my criteria for failure". Because I want to do something new. It has to be something out of the comfort zone. So then from the first reading, it kind of strengthened my vision of

how not to be afraid to depart - just know how to depart responsibly, and what we want to depart and why, not just anyhow.

Charlene Rajendran 37:08

So did the same people keep coming back for the readings, or different?

Alvin Tan 37:12

A few - so when I call them, the demographics is that there will be two or three that have seen all. I need to keep a small unit of consistency, and then the rest are new lah.

Charlene Rajendran 37:25

Yeah. And different generations?

Alvin Tan 37:28

Yes. We had the young ones as well, who then are not steeped in the Peranakan tradition, and so they don't know what we are breaking or what we are renovating. But from them I wanted to find out whether they could relate to the changes we were making. We know why, what changes we were making, but whether we were engaging them.

Charlene Rajendran 37:56

So Big, when you're hearing this notion of familiarity, and this idea of people could be disenchanted, and this word responsibility comes into it as well, right, because there's a desire to make things happen that will excite the aesthetic dimension of it, but there's no notion of boundaries and limits as well. So how is that negotiation happening?

Zulfadli Rashid 38:27

This is not my first adaptation, transcreation, whatever you call it. So whenever I approach a work that's been written before in another language or written in another period of time, responsibility is the first thing, one of the few things that I hold dearly in the process. So I read the play, and then I spoke to Alvin and then I found out who Felix Chia was. I believe this play, especially this play, he had a spirit of innovation. So from there, I drew on that spirit of innovation that he has begun to inspire me. I understand that the Peranakans are very precious of what we might create, but I also have a responsibility to make sure that this transcreation, this script, will also be enticing to all, will also be updated, will also have, more importantly, a spirit of innovation. So that's how I approach it - respectful, with responsibility, and as well as let the imagination flow, man. it will be a very different script, if I were to like, "Alvin, this one can or not", you know. Yes, yes, we understand tradition, I respect and I believe that tradition should be the number one priority in this transcreation, but we have to see how we can update the play, innovate the play.

Charlene Rajendran 40:34

For *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, give us an example of how that is working for you.

Zulfadli Rashid 40:40

So *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, the process of transcreation will also include updating the play to the current audiences. So there are certain parts of the play that is misogynistic, you know, and then, for me as a translator, I come in and then I decide to - okay, let's break down the misogyny and explain why the misogyny exists in this play in a meta form. Therefore, I will ask Alvin, you know, will this work?

You propose for this play. Alvin came back to me and said yeah, it works. Then we need to actually convince the actors, because the actors couldn't just be left with something that they don't know head or tail, where we are going and where we are from. So that's where the director comes in to convince.

Alvin Tan 41:36

Yeah, I guess then also talking to them and seeing their points of view, the actors, and their thoughts as well. And sometimes it doesn't need to be resolved in the lines - if we need to, then I'll go back to Big; if we don't need to, then it can be how it's delivered, or how we block it. For example, when in the bridal suite, and the raja was too lusty, too forthcoming at times, we could negotiate for her to fall out of character because she's so uncomfortable. And then she gains back into the role, and then finally, in the script, actually, she breaks out of role.

Zulfadli Rashid 42:27

The original script had no actors breaking of the fourth wall, the breaking of character.

Alvin Tan 42:35

Yeah, but because we already are having this intermittent interference, or digression, of offstage being onstage, that has the licence already. We have the vocabulary for them to kind of break out of character as well. Anyway, that scene - there's many other disruptions, because the queen keeps knocking on the door out of jealousy to interrupt the first night, so there's a whole theme of disruption in that scene. And I like the digression, disruption, meandering, not keeping to the point kind of necessary strategy to not let the patriarchal or misogynistic narrative continue. So that itself for me is resistance in a very accessible mainstream work.

CASTING (43:42)

Charlene Rajendran 43:42

In relation to that - Alvin, you've cast a mix of performers, people who have been involved in Peranakan theatre, community practitioners, and people who are not so involved, but nonetheless willing to be involved in this, whether they are Peranakan or not. And I guess there's intent in that kind of casting across different generations. Tell us about that.

Alvin Tan 44:10

Okay, first, I think it's in three categories. One is the non-Peranakans in the cast, I wanted them to immerse themselves in the Peranakan language and culture. And then the other one is your community actors, which is GT Lye, Fred Soh and Cynthia - Fred Soh and Cynthia Lee are both from Gunong Sayang - and then GT Lye is the veteran doyen in Wayang Peranakan. And then I have the other category of people who are non-Peranakan - Masturah, who's Indian Muslim, and Munah, who's Arabic Muslim. I wanted different cultural sensibilities and looks to be on stage. And the other one is Seng Onn, who's Malaysian, grew up in Malaysia, but then grew up quite a number of years in Singapore but has the Bahasa Melayu, so he could do the transition in terms of the language to the Baba Malay lingo. And then, of course, there was Karen Tan - she's Peranakan herself, and Seng Onn, Karen, Masturah and Munah and Kimberly - Si Swatow - they are from the English language theatre. And in my first iteration of *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, when Felix Chia was alive, there was Peranakan actors actually, and me just being from the English language, but now I wanted to increase the people coming from English language professional theatre, and mixing that with the community theatre. And it coincides

with currently NAC's policy of giving more support to traditional arts, and to see how traditional arts can have a dialogue with contemporary arts. So this project kind of fit into that national policy framework for me, so I thought, this is an opportunity, the window that I can use. And older people who for the Peranakan community were the gatekeepers have all passed on, and so in that sense, the purists is lesser, the resistance is lesser, and although we still hear the voices of people being still protective, I think it's totally natural, because it's already vanishing, you know, and then the insecurity is there. So I think it's just to let that be expressed and to see how we can address it, but not just go against it deliberately.

Charlene Rajendran 46:59

So just to clarify, this is Loong Seng Onn, Munah Bagharib and Kimberly Chan that you refer to? GT Lye is special, in a way. Tell us about that, and the role that you have cast GT Lye in, in this play, where there is, in a sense, a tension about that very disappearing process that is happening because as the role Kechoot, your heart shrinks, kind of thing. He's a stagehand or she's a stagehand or they're a stagehand - there's this whole questioning about identity, age.

Alvin Tan 47:45

The stagehand idea comes from Big's brilliant mind. And I've wanted, actually, GT Lye just to do the extra turn. The original iteration, we did not have the extra turn because extra turn is for changing sets and contemporary theatre you don't need that because the change is quite fast.

Charlene Rajendran 47:56

So why did you want GT Lye to...?

Alvin Tan 47:59

So Big also said, can he please come out and just give, share some lectures about your quintessential Peranakan practices? So we were on the same page with that, and so unbeknownst to me, he has written him into the main play as well, and take over the role of Kechoot.

Charlene Rajendran 48:24

The character of Kechoot who prepares the costumes and looks after the needs of the cast, and the ensemble is played by the person on stage, who is the encyclopaedia of Peranakan theatre, and that's an interesting choice to make in terms of what the body is saying on stage without having to speak all the lines, right?

Alvin Tan 48:52

And I feel this is - okay, I don't know whether I'm biased, but it's a contemporary theatre sensibility, which I think for GT Lye... at first, he was utterly uncomfortable with the role. I think we needed to actually have a chat with him about it, and we kept telling him about the extra turn. When he comes out, it will be the prime, glory days, and how today he still can perform those things, actually. So it's all about putting up a play, taking on the role of Kechoot. So it took some time for him to kind of settle into that, because when the reading was done, everybody was moved by the part where he articulates this, because he was struggling to take care of the stage welfare, playing a has-been, and he is known to be an iconic Peranakan performer, how dare you make him play a has-been? So your heart - it's really a great theatrical device, because it's not the words, right? It's just performed out there, so you kind of feel for him. And then the younger ones, they play the wives in the play within the play. So as younger interns, they were curious, and they asked him about what was doing a play in the past like, and he

then elaborated about not having a script, having to improvise and stuff like that. So for Big, that is a huge tribute given to practitioners who are doing Wayang Peranakan, and building that repertoire of body of work. But GT Lye couldn't see that point when he was playing it, because he was inside the work. So after a while, we had to describe to him what is actually happening. And I think in the past where you were doing Wayang Peranakan, everything was more literal, and suddenly there was this kind of semiotics, the reading of things that he might have missed out, and we have to kind of tell him, the juxtaposition of him performing the extra turn and him playing Kechoot; there's something there to interpret. So that was interesting, how to - when you want to work with the professional contemporary theatre and then with the traditional art form. These are one or two of the struggles that you have to bridge because the gaps are there.

WAYANG PERANAKAN & BANGSAWAN (52:15)

Charlene Rajendran 52:15

And you've used the term Wayang Peranakan. Now, is that a genre all its own? How did that term come into being - because we've been using loosely Peranakan theatre, but, you know, even then, what does it mean?

Alvin Tan 52:31

From what I understood is that when I saw in the past programmes and all that, *Pileh Menantu* and all that - Wayang Peranakan doesn't appear in the programme as a term to describe, like, "we are presenting now a Wayang Peranakan play". So I think it's after the fact, you know, analysts or academic scholars, and maybe even journalists, it caught on, just to kind of name the genre when it became more regular, more consistent, more popular, then perhaps the terms for the genre came about.

Charlene Rajendran 53:06

Big, how did you first respond to this term Wayang Peranakan?

Zulfadli Rashid 53:10

I'm familiar with the Peranakan performance, you know? So when I was growing up, we always had GT Lye on TV, to the point that I think I was in my 20s that I realised GT Lye was playing a woman on stage, on TV, then the whole world came like, oh, okay, then it became like, a realisation. Wayang Peranakan has all these traditions - because it's not, like, the crossdresser role was played to incite laughs. It's something that is traditional. It's like, if you have Bangsawan, you will have your archetypes, so Wayang Peranakan will also have your archetypes. Therefore my take to it is, okay, this is another art form, just like Bangsawan, and I've done Bangsawan before. So when doing Wayang Peranakan, theatre Peranakan or *persembahan* Peranakan, it was an easy access to me lah, I could enter it quite easily.

Charlene Rajendran 54:30

And this link with Bangsawan, which has all the elements of the characters being aristocratic, the king and the *menteri besair*, the Prime Minister, or the *memisan*, then the wives, and then, you know, the hierarchy in the court. Even the fanfare, the beginning and the kind of style of people talking to each other, which is very a la Bangsawan. When Peranakan theatre incorporates it, what's that doing, saying, how is that, in a sense, saying something about the region, something about where Peranakan theatre has emerged from - and Bangsawan also emerges in this same region. How do you read that?

Zulfadli Rashid 55:21

I think the Bangsawan element for this play per se is introduced by Felix himself. So before this, I think he wrote Peranakan plays about Peranakans without inserting the Bangsawan element to it. So I think this was a first for him, and probably for the Peranakan audience to actually see and experience the what-ifs, so, yeah, but probably he was - not probably lah, he was definitely inspired by the Bangsawan plays that were put up back then, perhaps things that he experienced while growing up, I imagine, because the original script that I read already had Bangsawan elements in it - it was set in a royal court, you know, we've never had that.

Alvin Tan 56:19

At least for Peranakan cultural history, we've never had royalty, so that was already a kind of fantasy. That's why I say that his later work *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, there's a maturity, because there's a confidence that he would go into a, I don't know, magic realism, you know what I mean - it's not about kitchen sink drama that Wayang Peranakan was very used to in the past; very domestic, very realism-based, very kitchen sink, very linear. Suddenly, with *Mari Kita Main Wayang*, it's playing with structure, a play within a play in '94. English language theatre will say that's nothing new, but for the Peranakans, it was new.

Charlene Rajendran 57:06

And it's things like these - Bangsawan fanfare pipes loudly, you know, and then use of *dondang sayang*, and then the court scenes and the kinds of antics that go on in a court scene, such that that story becomes very pertinent, which is not the regular domestic story in the 90s, in a way, becomes quite symbolic. So interesting that it was an experiment that Felix Chia, in a sense, was developing.

TRANSLATION (57:40)

Alvin Tan 57:40

The experiment here is quite interesting, because language - so we had to get a translator, and they've come as a husband and wife team. And they're not only the translator of the script, but also the voice coach, the vocal coach for actors who are not Peranakan patois speakers.

Charlene Rajendran 58:04

So what are they translating?

Alvin Tan 58:05

Okay, so for the script, because I wanted Big to feel free and just write it in Malay and English, so he could just write and just focus on the theatre craft, and then what he writes, then we'll go through this husband and wife team, who then will then translate it into Baba patois. And in translating - Big will tell you a little bit more - they had to recommend additions, because they say that the Peranakan culture wouldn't allow speakers to just say it like that - there will be a bit of digression, the flowers, so that part he had to, you know, do some adjustment, some dancing with it, because it does impinge on playwriting rules as well. That's why Big told me "wah, Alvin this one is really collaboration", so that one he will elaborate on.

Charlene Rajendran 59:04

Tell us the name of the husband and wife team.

Alvin Tan 59:08

Rapheal and Melanie - so they were recommended by GT Lye, and they are very pleasant people. So they will translate to that, and then there's a to-and-froing between them - and now all of them are sharing the same Google document so that they can track each other's changes. The two of them are doing a speech coach with Masturah, Munah and Kimberly, Seng Onn and Karen as well, but they're not doing detailed sessions with GT Lye, Fred and Cynthia because they know the lingo. But they met once already just to kind of have their language consistent. The next thing is that they are meeting Karen and Seng Onn, who are playing the king and the queen, because they have a lot of dialogue. So they have to even out, because Karen can manage the lingo very well. Seng Onn has to translate his Bahasa Melayu to Baba Malay, so he needs time for that. And they need the dynamics, the repartee. For Munah, she's the Malay wife, but gradually as the play goes on, she will take on a bit more patois, because she becomes the wife and she's in the household. They are the *gundek*. They actually are the servants of the house. Puteh, played by Masturah - Masturah is a Chetti Melaka, so Masturah is meeting an expert Chetti Melaka woman who was recommended by the Chetti Melaka Association in Singapore. She will then advise Masturah as Masturah goes through her lines, which part is which, then she will go to Rapheal and Melanie for the lingo for the Baba Malay rhythm. So she has to make the relevant changes first. Kimberly is another process because Kimberly is Si Swatow. Si Swatow is the last wife. Conventionally In Peranakan plays, they will get this Chinese character who cannot speak the Bahasa Melayu or Baba Malay well, they call it *pelat*, so they will speak with that kind of Chinese-accented Malay. It's like, *ini bulan hali hali hujan itu air longkang susa nak jalan* (every day this month, it has been raining, the rainwater in the drain is not flowing very well). But what happened in the past - like, Singlish went through it - it was used to call in the laughter, so the actors would overplay it. So my discussion with Kimberly is that, your character is a big character, and the Chinese-accented Malay - we do not want to erase just because we want to get rid of stereotype, we want to keep that, but how do we humanise it? So at the beginning, you are light, you know, but at the end, when you realise you have a child and you have no more property for the king, then you can be more centred. So when you play it, you are a big character, but you don't have to play it over the top that calls in the laughter. That then hopefully fleshes out the dimensions of what used to be a caricature, what can be played as a caricature. So those are subtle revisions which I am interested in.

Charlene Rajendran 1:02:40

And it's really interesting because it brings in the geographical, regional diversity, and opens up the term 'Peranakan', which, as you said earlier, has been largely used to reference one group of Peranakan culture and somewhat neglect other forms of Peranakan culture. So you've been using the term Chetti Melaka quite a lot, and for the knowledge of those who don't know what that means, it refers to Peranakan Indians who have stemmed largely from Malacca. And this word Chetti stems from '*chettiar*', if I'm not mistaken, where, again, the language as well as cultural, food, and dress elements are very much similar to the Chinese Peranakans, but there are differences, obviously, like you said, instead of maybe using Hokkien as one of the resources of language and words, Tamil becomes the reference point.

Alvin Tan 1:03:40

Which we don't, I think, often hear in Wayang Peranakan.

TRANSCREATION (1:03:49)

Charlene Rajendran 1:03:49

So Big, when you're working on how this language is being constantly transformed and co-created by different people who bring in to it, how then do you work out what stays and what goes, because eventually, that editorial process is also yours, and in a way, it's developing your ears, as well as how you read to figure it out, I imagine - what are you doing to deal with that?

Zulfadli Rashid 1:04:24

Well, first, you've got to put your pride aside. So working with Rapheal and Melanie is really enlightening, because I've always liked less is more, you know, and certain ways that I structure my sentences for certain characters. I do it because I want to, I want the character to speak as such.

Charlene Rajendran 1:04:53

When you are writing a play in your capacity, and the playwright?

Zulfadli Rashid 1:04:57

Yeah. But for this - so we have that Google Doc, then Rapheal and Melanie come and do the revisions, but they are very respectful - they would suggest simple things, like how a sentence is structured, or simple revisions, like how certain words should be spelled, if it is pronounced in a Peranakan patois. I would like, "huh, this one also must ask suggestion?". So I was like, okay, okay. Then I realised that, yes, they are being respectful. But at the same time, I also have to understand why these suggestions are being made, because they want it to be as authentic as possible. And then from what I heard, and what I've learned from them, the Peranakans speak differently depending on where they're from. So if you are from Malacca, you speak a certain way. If you are Peranakan from Katong from Singapore, you speak a certain way. I do actually reject certain - only a bit of - suggestions, when I feel that - when the character is telling more than they should, you know, you show, you don't tell, those kind of rules. So I would reject it, but I would explain why those suggestions were rejected lah. But like Alvin said lah - this is true collaboration. It's not me sitting down and writing in silo, it's really me speaking to Alvin, and then I speak to the translators. I also speak to the actors. Because, yeah, it's how it's going to be delivered.

Alvin Tan 1:06:51

I think this also prepares us for the rehearsal phase. I think it'll be even more.

Zulfadli Rashid 1:06:56

Yeah, there'll be even more. So what I told everyone is that the script is not cast in stone, you know, we could always - as we go on, whatever way you want to say a certain line, please suggest and then we could look into it.

Alvin Tan 1:07:13

So Masturah is meeting Jaya and myself - Jaya is the expert, the Chetti. And then Kimberly and I are meeting Jesse, who's from GSA.

Charlene Rajendran 1:07:27

Tell us about Gunong Sayang Association.

Alvin Tan 1:07:31

Gunong Sayang is a prime traditional Peranakan Association in Singapore that actually does quite a lot of the traditional performing Arts.

Charlene Rajendran 1:07:44

So Kimberly's meeting with them.

Alvin Tan 1:07:47

With one actress that does the Chinese-accented Malay roles. So I told Kimberly, just take what she says first, even if it's caricature first. Then once you get the lingo and rhythm, then we will shape it during rehearsals.

Charlene Rajendran 1:08:07

I mean, just one example for the benefit of readers who may not see the play and may not see the script. The word *Raja* is usually spelled R-A-J-A. But when Swatow - is that how you pronounce it? - when she speaks the word, it is spelled L-A-J-I-A-H. So it is not the actor simply deciding how to accent '*raja*', it is scripted, almost like it is its own language phonetically so that you are meant to say *Lajiah*.

Alvin Tan 1:08:42

So the actress Kimberly asked me, that in the serious moment, do I change it to *Raja* or *Lajiah*? I said, stay with *lajiah* - it's your emotional truth, and it's the tone that should change.

Charlene Rajendran 1:08:54

Right. So that's just one example. And again, you know, for me, reading the script is really interesting, because the spellings that you talk about.

Zulfadli Rashid 1:09:03

Yeah. And the fact that Kimberly plays an intern - they are a group of young interns lah, and they are woke, you know, they are woke, so they know what is acceptable.

Alvin Tan 1:09:20

There's one part where Puteh, who's played by one of the interns, is the second wife, and there's a scene in the bridal room on the night of the wedding. And of course, the Raja is very *cheeko*, very lusty. So the actor is Masturah, who then breaks out of character to say "I can't do this", or "is this it", and the rest of the cast members come on stage and say, "but he's that character", and they break into a small discussion, because the interns are disturbed by it.

Zulfadli Rashid 1:09:56

It's like a debate of generations. So you've got your newer generation of theatre-makers, and then you got your traditional generation of theatre-makers, and then you have their way of approaching a certain character or script, and then, you know, you've got your younger generation, woke, and then they encounter L-A-J-I-A-H, and then how would this character actually feel, you know, the meta-ness of all of it?

Alvin Tan 1:10:31

So we try to include that as well, you know, into the work - where tradition is having conversation with the contemporary, and what does it look like. But I don't think we are stressing ourselves with solutions,

it's more that there are these clashes, and and what's interesting is Felix Chia has already set those things in, you know - this is a spoiler, but I think Felix had a point where the first wife allows him to remarry, allows the King to remarry, so that he can actually get a wife that gives him a male heir. And his reason is that each wife is "your machine *dah rosak*" (your womb is not functioning). Yeah, so that is clearly - we want that there, the patriarchal line, the misogynistic line, because that line should be there to be challenged. But the first queen allows him to do that with the condition that each wife he takes, he gives her a property. I think in the original, the property she gathers, in the end, she owns it. Maybe what we can do is to say that the wife, the queen, the first wife, actually, along the way, had animosity from the new wives, right, because of jealousy and all that. But in the end, each of them face that misogynist attitude from the king, "you can't bear me a son, so your machine is spoiled". And eventually, the Queen says, "don't worry, I have all the property, and this property will take care of us who are rejected by the king, and our daughters". So that is our contribution. Because I think Felix would go that way, if he had lived long enough to kind of know - where he initially put in the feminist thing, but it's not fulfilled because he didn't live in this era. So that's the renovation we have made for the queen, to say that, at the end, the property is not just for her, but actually it's for all the women that were rejected based on misogynistic - yeah, so there is still the moral of the story.

Charlene Rajendran 1:12:58

Yes, yes. I mean, I think the moral-fable aspect of it is very strong, and remains within that *Bangsawan* as well as classical tradition. I'm curious now about how doing this project and thinking through these diverse elements of contemporary community, culture, language, identity, etcetera, what it is you hope audiences will derive and experience and engage with when they come to the theatre.

Alvin Tan 1:13:38

All I ask is curiosity about the culture - about its thinking, about its sensibility. There are, I think, certain traits that I was thinking: if they can see that, and they can see, oh, I see, you know, that's my takeaway, or the learning points. And how we all have it, it's universal - for me, even the language, whether it's curt or whether it's kind of vandalised, or whatever, there is - why did the language become like that? Why did the language - was appropriated, adjusted, and spoken in this way? And not in the Malay way - the lingo is different?

Charlene Rajendran 1:14:18

What about people who aren't able to get to those layers, and are going to rely on surtitles, which I'm assuming I'm going to be available? What is in it for them? And what's the curiosity that you're hoping they will have?

Alvin Tan 1:14:37

That even if it's minority and dying, what aspects of it are surviving, and how community participation is keeping it alive, the different ways we are trying to keep it alive. How to contest the young participants versus the purists, traditionalists, and whether there is a way to bridge that gap. And that would not just answer the Peranakan question of vanishing culture - it addresses all sorts of ethnic cultures that are going through erosions, and all the insecurities we are having, and the constant contestation between purists, traditionalists, and contemporary practitioners, and people like GT Lye that falls between now - he used to be more purist, and now he's appreciating the contemporarising of it, and yet there's some points he contradicts himself. And to say that's all right, that's all all right, because we cannot be so uncomfortable until we get rid of the necessary processes. At a conference I told them, when I translate to English, the Peranakan people - before they saw the show, they already said it's not a Peranakan

play. I worked *Mari Kita Main Wayang* with Theatre Studies at NUS and they can't manage the patois, so I translated all into English, peppering it with patois. Before it opened, the Peranakan community called my stage manager and said, this is not a Peranakan play, because it's in English. There was also a dialogue between - Robert Yeo brought a veteran practitioner with Felix Chia together, and they fought. The practitioner criticised Felix for bringing in English into the work. And it's like, what's the problem? Because English - we were very British influenced, and English is part of our everyday language. But the veteran purists just wanted the patois on stage. If a single English word comes in, it's already not a Peranakan play. But when I put up this English translated play at Theatre Studies, a lecturer came to me and said "thank you so much for this. I am a Peranakan, but I don't speak the language at all. I bring my mother to the Peranakan play every year as filial daughter, and I sit through three hours and not know what the hell is going on on stage. But because of this translation, I'm able to actually glimpse into the world of a Peranakan play". So I told this to a Peranakan conference. And I'm saying that this includes people like Desmond Sim, and Stella Kon, who doesn't speak the patois. And there was another - I forgot her name - she writes, she's Peranakan, but she writes in English, and at another conference, she apologises for that. She said, "my world and what's in my novel is Peranakan, but I'm sorry, I'm writing in English", and I wanted to tell her, "don't be sorry". So that whole thing of lacking that tolerance and threshold and resisting the diversity within the Peranakan, because of the existing of purity, purists, and how they want to gatekeep what defines Peranakan, because that then is the definitive of the culture that is eroding. So you're insecure, you're holding on to something - but relax! The more you hold, the more it will disappear. So I want us to enter into a conversation, not just for the Peranakan, but through this project to actually open this up to all ethnic groups that are eroding. And what can we do about it? How can we meet halfway?

Charlene Rajendran 1:18:40

And maybe to those who are eroders.

CLOSING (1:18:44)

Charlene Rajendran 1:18:44

Big - who are you hoping will come, as someone who is very involved in Malay theatre, and theatre that crosses boundaries a lot of the time, and as a Malay language teacher?

Zulfadli Rashid 1:19:01

Um, anybody, yeah - if they're interested enough to know, or if they see the poster then they like it, come. Come and watch, because it's a fun play.

Charlene Rajendran 1:19:14

It's entertaining, isn't it? It's definitely entertaining.

Zulfadli Rashid 1:19:16

Very entertaining. Because Karen - and then you have your OrkeStar trio. And it's fun, it's a fun play. It's a play that will probably make you wonder, why haven't I watched more of such plays before; plays that involves collaboration between the people of Singapore?

Charlene Rajendran 1:19:42

Mari Kita Main Wayang and the process of making theatre enables us to have these reimagined spaces where these other opportunities can actually be enacted and embodied, not just imagined and talked about, but experienced. And that's something that I would say to audiences who are thinking about it - if you are thinking, oh, no, I don't understand the language, I don't understand the culture. Experience that option, which isn't common, and think about it for that reason. Final thoughts, Big?

Zulfadli Rashid 1:20:19

Final thoughts. Come watch the play, because it's something that has never been done before, at least not for me, I think, in modern Singaporean theatre, so this is unprecedented. Yeah, enjoy yourselves.

Alvin Tan 1:20:37

Yeah. I think the same thing - it's one of my first time working in a piece that is unashamedly entertaining whilst engaging, and I think it's something that can appeal to everyone. And I'd be interested to hear their angles of entry into the work, because I think everyone from a different ethnic culture would have a different take to this piece.

Charlene Rajendran 1:21:16

Thank you very much Alvin, Big. All the best for the process ahead and the lead up to the production. Thank you.

Glossary of Terms

Wayang Peranakan - Wayang peranakan is a theatre form that was derived from bangsawan, a type of Malay theatre, in the early 20th century. It is performed by the Chinese Peranakan in the Baba Malay language. Wayang peranakan was originally staged to raise funds for charitable causes. World War II halted performances. The art form experienced a revival in the 1950s before disappearing altogether till the 1980s. It made a comeback in 1984 with a staging by the Gunong Sayang Association (GSA), a cultural organisation established in 1910 to promote social interaction among the Peranakan community. GSA has been staging wayang peranakan almost every year since then. (Source: [Roots](#))

Extra Turn - Extra turns were when singers came out and sang while the crew frantically changed the props, tables, and chairs, and all that. After the curtains opened, it would be the next scene. When the curtains closed again after the scene, the singers would sing again." These musical interludes are redundant now since props are on rollers, which makes scene-changing "quite seamless". (Source: [Roots](#))

Bangsawan - Bangsawan is a form of Malay operatic theatre. Derived from the Malay term for "nobility", bangsawan focuses its stories predominantly on Malay nobles and royalty. But, it is also multicultural in nature, with plots that are sometimes based on Indian and English stories, and involving performers from diverse ethnicities. (Source: [Roots](#))

Meta-theatre - Meta-theatre is defined as the aspects of a play that draw attention to its nature as drama or theatre, such as an actor directly addressing the audience, expressing awareness of an audience, or acknowledging that the people performing the show are actors. In modern theatre, metatheatre has led to a performance convention known as "breaking the fourth wall." This phrase comes from the relationship to the mise-en-scène behind a proscenium arch of a stage. When a scene is set indoors and three of the walls of its room are presented onstage, the "fourth" wall is the invisible, imagined wall that separates the actors from the audience. So if characters on stage "see" the audience and interact with them, they are "breaking the fourth wall." (Source: [First Folio Theatre](#))

Patois - 'Patois' is any speech or language that is considered non-standard, and covers pidgins, creole, dialects and vernaculars. ([Wikipedia definition](#))

Peranakan patois - The language of the Peranakans, Baba Malay (Bahasa Melayu Baba), is a creole dialect of the Malay Language (Bahasa Melayu), which contains many of the words from the Chinese Hokkien dialect. It is a dying language, and its contemporary use is mainly limited to members of the older generation. (Source: [Peranakan life](#))

Baba Malay - Another term for the Peranakan patois that came into existence in the 1970s, commonly used by outsiders and modern researchers. (Source: [C3A](#))

Bahasa Melayu - Standard Malay is the official language of Malaysia and one of the four official languages of Singapore (along with English, Mandarin, and Tamil). In Singapore, Malay was historically the lingua franca among people who spoke different languages, but it has been replaced by English.

Today, it retains the status of a national language. 15% of Singapore's population speak Malay. (Source: [Mustgo](#))

Pantun - Pantun is a form of Malay verse used to express intricate ideas and emotions. It is the most widespread oral form in maritime Southeast Asia and has been used in many parts of the region for at least 500 years. Pantun has a clear a-b-a-b rhyme scheme. The four-line variety is the most common. Pantuns may be transmitted in music, song and writing. Seventy per cent of verses are devoted to expressing love of a romantic partner, family, the community, and the natural world. Verses can be recited at weddings, customary rituals and official ceremonies. Pantun offers a socially acceptable way to express oneself indirectly in a polite way. It is also an instrument of moral guidance as verses often contain religious and cultural values such as restraint, respect, kindness and humility. Pantun has also been used as a diplomatic form of conflict resolution as it offers a way to gently evoke important issues. Harmony with nature and flexibility in human relationships are also lauded ideals. Pantun is formally taught in schools, artistic workshops, and through informal means. (Source: [UNESCO](#))

Dondang sayang - Dondang sayang is a musical and poetic art form, involving the singing of pantun, or four-line verses. In a performance, two singers would typically try to outwit each other in an amicable and teasing manner on topics such as love or good deeds. The singers are accompanied by a small band of musicians playing the violin, two Malay rebana drums, and a gong. Other instruments may include guitars, tambourines, and flutes. The history of dondang sayang traces back to Malacca in the 14th and 15th centuries. It was a popular form of entertainment among the Malay royal families and nobles, before eventually spreading to the public and being performed at festivals and celebrations. The art form found its way to Singapore in the 19th century when Malacca came under British rule as part of the Straits Settlements. (Source: [Roots](#))

Chetti Melaka - The Chetti Melaka (or Chitty Melaka) are descendants of Tamil traders who settled in Melaka during the reign of the Melaka Sultanate (15th- 16th century) and married local women of Malay and Chinese descent. Predominantly Hindu of the Saivite (followers of Shiva) denomination, the community speaks a unique combination of Malay, Tamil and Chinese, that has been called Chetti Creole by scholars. They trace their roots to Kampung Chitty in Gajah Berang, Melaka, and it is estimated that there are 5000 Chettis in Singapore. (Source: [IHC](#)) The Chetti Melaka community first originated when the South Indian traders arrived in Malacca (then Melaka) during the 15th century and intermarried with the local Chinese and Malay women. Later in the early 20th century, many of them migrated and found employment at other cities, including Singapore, under the British civil service. For the community, also known as Peranakan Indians, celebrating a diversity of religious and cultural beliefs is at the heart of what it means to be Chetti Melaka. (Source: [MCCY](#))

Gunong Sayang Association - The Gunong Sayang Association (GSA) was founded by Baba Koh Hoon Teck in 1910 as a cultural organisation to promote social interaction and the singing of dondang sayang among its Peranakan members. GSA started with just over twenty members, each contributing a weekly subscription of a dollar or two. With this modest income, the Association organised bonding activities in the form of weekly dinners and singing sessions. This practice continued until 1942, when the Association, for fear of being labelled subversive and pro-British, disbanded during the Japanese Occupation.

After the war ended in 1945, Baba Gwee Peng Kwee took the initiative to revive the club. By the time Baba Gwee retired in 1976, things were beginning to look up for the GSA. Membership had increased

to fifty members and the Association was beginning to be more financially stable. A lifelong GSA member, Baba Gwee passed away in 1986 with the Association on the cusp of a new era.

With the staging of “Buang Keroh Pungot Jernih” in 1985 marked a new chapter in the history of the GSA. The Association was starting to explore avenues other than dondang sayang singing to promote the continuance of Peranakan culture. Although the impetus for staging the Wayang Peranakan emanated from former GSA President, Baba Kwek Choon Chuan, nobody was able to elaborate on Baba Kwek’s motivations.

In the absence of direct evidence, Baba Lee Liang Hye’s opinion is that the GSA diversified into theatre because it was increasingly difficult to find dondang sayang-loving Peranakans. What is undeniable, is that unlike earlier charity-driven performances, the GSA wayangs of the 1980s were geared towards preserving Peranakan culture by making it appealing for the younger generation of Peranakan audiences. This was a particularly pressing concern as the membership base was aging. In the late 1970s, 90% of the GSA’s membership comprised of members above fifty-years old.

The revival of the Wayang Peranakan in the 1980s was spearheaded by Baba Kwek and his committee. Their motivation was to preserve the culture through the medium of theatre, rather than rely solely on dondang sayang as the main activity of the Association.

The plays staged by GSA since 1985 is a proof that ethnic identity can be re-invented and embellished in response to particular socio-political exigencies.

Unlike other theatre groups, the GSA does not receive ample government funding to create elaborate sets, props, and a huge cast and crew.

The GSA is not given a yearly Arts grant (enjoyed by other established theatre companies) to finance 70% of the cost of each production. GSA funding has come from generous donors and sponsors when staging Wayang Peranakan.

Today, GSA stages annual Wayang Peranakans to Gunong Sayang Association gears towards showcasing the best of the Peranakans culture through art performances, social and educational events, particularly the younger generation, on the colourful tapestry of the Peranakan culture. (Source: [GSA](#))

Texts Mentioned

Mari Kita Main Wayang - 'MARI KITA MAIN WAYANG' (LET'S STAGE A PLAY) is a play within a play. Performed in Peranakan patois, it pokes fun, in good taste at a group of Babas who try to put up a play; entitled, "ENAM BINI" (SIX WIVES), this story is about an imaginary Baba King who keeps one concubine after another as he longs to get a son. Although the sixth concubine finally delivers a male child, surprises are in store for the king, the queen, as well as the concubine. (Source and more info on first staging: [C42 Archive](#))

Pileh Menantu - The scene is Singapore in the 1930s. The rather insipid young son of a Singapore Baba family has taken a fancy to his neighbour’s daughter, and he wants to marry her. While his father

(like many fathers at that time who had been influenced by 'modern' English education) is not too concerned with lineage, his mother holds a different view.

Differences of opinion arise at a family discussion. Ba Besar, the son, is at first happy when his father overrules his mother's objections, but is then disappointed when a comparison of his horoscope with that of his neighbour's daughter proves unfavourable.

Ong Hoe Kiah, Ba Besar's father, is still at heart a Baba, and he accepts his own mother's declaration that the proposed marriage is taboo. Then a friend of the family offers to help match Ba Besar with her own niece. So all ends well. (Source and more info on first staging: [C42 Archive](#))

[The Babas](#) by Felix Chia - This fourth edition of the social history of the Babas and Nonya makes the seminal work by Felix Chia available again after being long out of print. Now illustrated throughout by full-colour pictures of a rich array of Baba artefacts sourced from private and public collections, this beautifully designed full-colour book will captivate and entrance both readers who are familiar with and new to Baba culture. Baba Felix Chia gives a witty, frank and lively exposition of the way of life he grew up in. His reminiscences and personal anecdotes are given additional weight by oral history and research. The result is an exceptional book where text and pictures combine to encapsulate the fascinating origin, language, practices, festivities and character of the Baba. *The Babas*, first published in 1980, won the Highly Commended Award for English nonfiction by the National Book Development Council of Singapore in 1982. (Source: [Landmark Books](#))

People Mentioned

Felix Chia - Felix Chia was brought up in a traditional Baba household. After a career in journalism, he turned to books, producing social history (*The Babas, Ala Sayang!*), memoirs (*Reminiscences*) and short stories (*The Lady in Red and Her Companions*). He was commissioned by the Singapore Festival of Arts to write *Pileh Menantu*, a play in Baba patois, in 1984. He followed this with another popular play, *Laki Tua Bini Muda*. (Source: [Landmark Books](#))

Alin Mosbit - AIDLI MOSBIT graduated from Queensland University of Technology and has worked extensively with local companies like The Necessary Stage, Teater Kami, Wild Rice, Cake Theatre, Toy Factory, The Theatre Practice, Teater Ekamatra and Drama Box. With Noor Effendy Ibrahim and Alfian Sa'at, Aidli published an anthology of Malay plays in the book, *BISIK*. She toured to Scotland, Australia, Malaysia, Indonesia, Romania, Hong Kong and Hungary, performing Singapore-brand theatre. Recipient of the Young Artist Award for Theatre in 2008, she played the leading role of Murni alongside Malaysia's legendary actor, Datuk Haji Rahim Razali, in the film *Sayang Disayang* (2013) by Sanif Olek which was Singapore's Official 2015 Oscar® Entry for Best Foreign Language Film. In 2016, she published her collection of Malay plays entitled *CHANTEK*. *CHANTEK* was awarded the Hadiah Persuratan (Literary Award) 2017 by the Malay Language Council, Singapore. Aidli is currently working in Temasek Polytechnic as the Deputy Manager of the Arts Division, in the Student Development & Alumni Affairs department and has a Master of Education from the University of Adelaide. (Source: [C42 Archive](#))

GT Lye - G. T. Lye is a Singaporean actor and playwright actively involved in wayang Peranakan or Peranakan theatre. He was a member of the Gunong Sayang Association, a Peranakan social club that

promotes the preservation of *dondang sayang*, the singing of Malay poetry. Lye wrote, directed and acted in many Gunong Sayang stage productions when he was a member of the club from 1984 to 2006. He is a veteran female impersonator who has played the role of the Peranakan matriarch numerous times on stage and on television. Outside of performing arts, Lye is a consultant on Peranakan arts and culture. (Source and more info: [Offstage](#))

Fred Soh - Mr Frederick Soh is the vice-president of the Gunong Sayang Association, the only organisation in Singapore that still stages wayang peranakan performances. (Source: [Roots](#))

Cynthia Lee - A veteran actress of the Wayang Peranakan, Cynthia has been in numerous Peranakan plays since *Pileh Menantu* in the 1980s. (Source: [Peranakan Association](#))

Loong Seng Onn - Having recently retired, Loong Seng Onn anxiously spends his days waiting by his phone, hoping for acting gigs to come his way. He has been dabbling in theatre since the eighties when he first discovered that it was possible to trade-in his boring existence for that of some infinitely more colourful character on stage. Ever since then, he has been persuading his assorted bosses that his involvement in theatre was important/relevant/useful to his day job. His favourite productions include *A Language of Their Own*, *Three Children*, *Lao Jiu* and *Beauty World*. (Source: [T.>Works](#))

Munah Bagharib - Munah Bagharib is a Singaporean host and actress. She came to be known as one half of Munah Hirzi, a Singaporean duo who rose to fame on YouTube. In early 2018, the duo announced their retirement from the YouTube scene. Since then, Munah has pursued an acting career on Singapore television as well as in theatre productions. (Source: [Wikisg](#))

Masturah Oli - Masturah Oli is an actor, host and theatre-maker. She graduated with BA (Hons) in Theatre Arts from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts, validated by the University of Essex (East 15 AcJng School). She was awarded Best Graduate and represented her cohort as Valedictorian. Masturah was also a recipient of the MENDAKI Special Achievement Award for Excellence (SAAE), Anugerah MENDAKI Award (2017) and the SINDA Excellence Award (2017). Some of her roles in Theatre include: *Opposition* (The Necessary Stage & Drama Box, 2022), *Blank Can Change* (The Necessary Stage, 2021) *Unsolicited Advice From my Ex* (Bored Whale Theatre, 2021), *Acting Mad* (The Necessary Stage, 2019 & 2022), *Anak Melayu* (Teater Kami, 2019), *Rubber Girl on the Loose* (Cake Theatre, 2019). As of 2023, Masturah was appointed as Co-Artistic Director of Buds Theatre and looks forward to bringing her creative and artistic vision to life. (Source: [C42 Archive](#))

Karen Tan - Karen has had the joy and privilege to work with practically every theatre company in Singapore. she has lived and performed in the UK, KL, Cairo, New Zealand and Vienna, but is happiest here in Singapore, where she is a working mum, with possibly the best job in the world. (Source: [Savour](#))

Kimberly Chan - Kimberly is a triple-threat Musical Theatre performer who hails from sunny Singapore. She has spent the last decade performing in professional productions locally. Kimberly is proud to be headlining Sing'Theatre's production of *Cabaret* as Sally Bowles this coming October. Her recent theatre credits include: *Trouble Came* (Brango Productions); *Coraline* (The Players Theatre); *The Nightingale* (SRT); *Monkey Goes West* (W!ld Rice); *Urinetown* (Pangdemonium); *Forever Young* (Sing'Theatre). (Source: [Kimberly's website](#))

Haresh Sharma - Haresh Sharma (b. 1965, Singapore–) is the resident playwright of The Necessary Stage, Singapore. A critically-acclaimed playwright known for his socially-conscious plays, he has written more than 100 plays that have been staged in Singapore and abroad, such as Berlin, Busan, Germany, Melbourne as well as Birmingham and London in the UK. He won the 1993 Singapore Literature Prize for his play Still Building. In 1997, he was conferred the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council for his literary contributions. In 2014, he won the regional S.E.A. Write award for Singapore. In recognition of his contributions to the arts in Singapore, the National Arts Council presented him with the Cultural Medallion Award in 2015. (Source: [NORA](#))

Robert Yeo - Robert Yeo was born in Singapore in 1940, and is one of the country's most representative writers. He has been described as having captured the changing Singaporean psyche through his poetry and plays, documenting the country from its nascent years to its coming-of-age. Yeo is also a founding executive director of OperaViva and has recently focused his writing endeavours on opera as a librettist. In 1991, he received the Pingat Bakti Masyarakat (Public Service Medal) for his contributions to drama in Singapore and in 2011, the SEA Write Award for a lifetime of writing. (Source: [Offstage](#))

Desmond Sim - Desmond Sim Kim Jin (b. 1961, Singapore–) is a playwright, poet, short-story writer and painter. He is best known for his short stories and plays that he has penned and staged. He has won the Singapore Literature Prize for Poetry (Merit) for his collection of poems Places Where I've Been (1993); the NUS/Shell Short Play Competition for both Story Teller and Red Man, Green Man in 1990; the first Hewlett Packard/Action Theatre 10-minute Play Contest with Drunken Prawns in 1993; and the Best Original Script award at the 2002 DBS Life! Theatre Awards with Autumn Tomyam. Sim's wide-ranging portfolio includes his work for the Singapore Airport Terminal Services, his role as playwright for TheatreWorks, and teaching duties at Temasek Polytechnic's School of Design as well as LASALLE College of the Arts. He was also the executive creative director and founding partner of The Green House Group. He held the position of associate artistic director at ACTION Theatre and ran its Singapore Theatre Oasis, an incubator programme for new and existing Singaporean playwrights. (Source: [Infopedia](#))

Stella Kon - Stella Kon (b. 1944, Edinburgh, Scotland–), a playwright, novelist, short-story writer and poet, is best known for her monodrama Emily of Emerald Hill, which has been performed locally as well as internationally. The winner of several playwrighting competitions in the early 1980s, Kon currently resides in Singapore. (Source: [Infopedia](#))

Riduan Zalani (Band Leader) - Riduan Zalani is a versatile percussionist with a keen interest in developing Southeast Asian ethnic drumming in contemporary settings and spotlighting Asian musical traditions on a global stage. An idealist at heart, he takes his dreams to the spotlight through his creative vision while serving his community of musicians, hoping to bring up their level of virtuosity to the world stage. This multi award-winning performer has performed in numerous local and international programmes, which culminated in him earning the prestigious National Arts Council's Young Artist Award in 2015. His skills, discipline, and dedication made him a force to be reckoned with among international artists, which brought him to various international festivals and performances in more than 60 states throughout Europe, Asia, America, and Oceania, touching more than 100,000 audience members. (Source: [Riduan's website](#))

Ismahairie Putra Ishak - Ismahairie's music journey is all about discovering, experimenting, and making music fun. As part of his heritage, his musical inspiration stems largely from traditional Malay music, a place extremely close to his heart. Ismahairie was first introduced to the world of music at the tender age of nine when he picked up Classical violin. Graduating from Lasalle College of the Arts with a Diploma in Music (Classical Violin Performance), Ismahairie is well versed in both Classical Music and Traditional Malay Music. It was also in Lasalle where Ismahairie's fascination for World Music grew further, after being exposed to traditional Malay drums and the Gambus (Oud). He also attended Oud Masterclasses conducted by the Turkish Oud virtuoso, Yurdal Tokcan. Besides performing, Ismahairie is also an active songwriter and arranger. He has been composing Traditional Malay Music for schools participating in the Singapore Youth Festival (SYF) Central Judging Competition for Dance since 2009. Ismahairie also enjoys sharing his love for music with eager young musicians through his teaching of the violin and the Oud. (Source: [Linkedin](#))

Julian Wong - Julian is an accompanist, arranger, and music director. He graduated from Berklee College of Music on an NAC Arts Scholarship. Julian is the music director of Spotlight Singapore in Mexico City 2015, ChildAid 2014, and Returning (Singapore International Festival of Arts 2015). As a pianist, he has been honoured to accompany Datuk Ramli Sarip and Art Fazil for Suria's Akustika Bersama, and Kit Chan for Spellbound. (Source: [Msworks](#))

Azrin Abdullah - Azrin Abdullah started learning the acoustic guitar at the age of six. He gave his first musical performance when he was nine and never looked back since. Azrin began his love affair with the oud, an Arabic lute-type stringed instrument, in 1999 when he was tasked to learn the exotic instrument as part of an endeavour to master traditional Malay music. Although he has faced considerable challenges and difficulties in learning to play the oud, Azrin continues to believe in sharing his valuable knowledge so the oud can be made accessible to all. In 2014, Azrin was sponsored by the National Arts Council to pursue an advanced course at the National Conservatory of Arts in Kuala Lumpur to further his knowledge of the oud. After completing the course, he went on to produce the first Singapore Gambus Conference, which was held at the Malay Heritage Centre from 25-30 October 2016 in conjunction with the Malay Culture Festival. The well-attended event saw speakers and gambus enthusiasts from Singapore and around the world gather to share their knowledge of the instrument. Azrin was also instrumental in forming SGOudists, an online oud community that provides local oud players from all walks of life with a platform to get together and share techniques and playing styles. (Source: [Honeycombers](#))

Ahmad Shahrudin Bin Safari (Din Safari) - Din Safari started his music career with the Singapore Police Force Military Band in 1977. He then went on to join Anita Sarawak Band and toured extensively across Europe, USA, Asia, and East Asia in the early 1980s. In 1986, Din formed Eurasia, a local Singapore band. He has recorded and performed for various local and international artists. Din has also performed in various musicals such as *Godspell*, *Little House of Horrors*, *Beauty World* (Japan Tour), *Liao Zhai*, *Puteri Gunung Ledang* (Malaysia) among many others. In 2006, he attended the Victor Wooten Bass Nature Camp in Nashville, Tennessee (USA) and studied at Players School of Music Florida Clearwater (USA). Currently, Din is the Founder of Rhythm & Groove Music Camp based in Singapore. (Source: Esplanade)

Alhafiz Jamat - Alhafiz has more than ten years experience in composing, arranging, recording and performing. He is a renowned multi-instrumentalist with a specialisation in the bamboo flute/seruling. A highlight of his career was the release of his debut instrumental album, *Dharma* in 2007. All the songs

were composed and arranged by Alhafiz under the guidance of the late Zag Fahmoa, a local music producer. Alhafiz is one third of Singapore's leading instrumental band, OrkeStar Trio. They have performed in international music festivals in Turkey, India, Japan, Slovenia, Hawaii, Brazil and Indonesia among others. He also performs with the Sri Gemilang ensemble. He currently directs music for dance and theatre productions and composes Malay dance music for schools in the Singapore Youth Festival. (Source: Esplanade)

OrkeStar Trio - OrkeStar Trio embodies the spirit of adventure in exploring the versatility and context of music in the Malay Archipelago in the modern world. Made up of three young artistes with unique dispositions, the Trio believes in honouring their traditional influences while pushing towards forming a new spectrum of sound. Their composition features a mash-up of various musical styles, reflecting the diversity of identities and interests among them. As soloists or a group, these musicians have represented Singapore on numerous local and international platforms. These include performances in countries such as Malaysia, Indonesia, Thailand, Cambodia, India, Japan, Turkey, Israel and United States. This musical outfit possesses a strong desire to break the barriers between musical genres and share their voice to inspire. (Source: [Facebook](#))