Intercultural theatre praxis: traditional Malay theatre meets Shakespeare's The Tempest

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INTERCULTURAL THEATRE PRAXIS: TRADITIONAL MALAY THEATRE MEETS SHAKESPEARE’S *THE TEMPEST*

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DECLARATION

This is to certify that work reported in this thesis was done by the author, unless specified otherwise, and that no part of it has been submitted in a thesis to any other university or similar institution.

Norzizi Zulkafli
25 Oct 2017
ABSTRACT

In facing globalisation, which might be said to promote and sustain homogeneity, it is important to create contemporary performances that connect to cultural entities while also maintaining cultural integrity. Is it possible, however, for contemporary performance to incorporate traditional materials and practices? Can this be done respectfully? The objective of this research has been to analyse how a Malay-focused intercultural performance practice might fuse traditional Malay performance techniques (specifically taken from *Mak Yong*) with selected, adapted and reworked sections of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in order to create an intercultural theatre production that reveals a contemporary performance aesthetic and can communicate to a twenty-first century Malaysian and Australian audience. This thesis is comprised of two parts, an exegesis and a creative project. The exegesis charts Eastern and Western approaches to intercultural theatre, the evolution of the traditional Malay dance theatre form *Mak Yong*, and explores the works of other Malaysian contemporary theatre directors. It also examines the developmental phases in the making of the creative doctoral project, *Throne of Thorns*, a project that fuses traditional Malay performance techniques with a text from the Western canon. This creative project utilises Eastern and Western styles of direction and performance to develop a unique intercultural Malay-centred performance. This practice-led research involves diverse approaches: theoretical explications of intercultural productions and practitioners, field trips that include interviews with *Mak Yong* scholars, practitioners and Malaysian arts administrators, and historical research. The theoretical approach draws upon the study of traditional theatre scholars of Malaysian traditional theatre forms, especially Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof’s research on *Mak Yong* (1976) and on sustaining traditions (2014) and Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin’s (2009) scholarly insight into the characteristics of each traditional Malay theatre form. The works of many intercultural theatre theorists inform this thesis, including Joseph Gonzales (2012), Rustom Bharucha (1990), Richard Schechner (1991), and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014). This research reveals that for *Throne of Thorns* there were five significant intercultural practice approaches and conceptual criteria that when combined were useful in the creation of an engaging rehearsal process and production. The five intercultural performance practice approaches are as follows: 1) cultural sensitivity; 2) cultural belonging; 3) aesthetic integrity; 4) collaboration; and 5) openness. This thesis argues that if a rehearsal process and production is developed with such cultural criteria in mind, and given that the researcher is Malaysian, working with Australian student performers, then it is possible to fuse elements taken from a Shakespearean text with *Mak*
Young performance techniques, to create a new theatrical performance piece that reflects a strong Malay cultural connection; a performance that is respectful and relevant not only to a contemporary Malaysian audience, but to an Australian one as well. These combined approaches may be useful for other intercultural projects, although it is important to remember that each individual cross-cultural process will have specific needs.
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Sadly, two months before my submission deadline, my dad suffered a stroke, leaving him partially paralysed and in ICU. I flew home immediately and when I was preparing emotionally to fly back to Australia his advice to me was, “Don’t give up” and my greatest thanks to my parents for all their precious prayers.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

The rapid progression of globalisation has resulted in homogeneity in society. Through contemporary performance it is possible to initiate connections to cultural entities. Is it possible, however, for contemporary performance to incorporate traditional materials and practices respectfully? Patrice Pavis, a theorist in intercultural theatre, suggests that in our contemporary world where cultures are ‘intertwined’ (2010, p. 7) there is no power to control cultural changes (p. 6). He argues that consequently there is no power to effect resultant changes to national identities (p. 14). Yet, do we want to become a monoculture? Malaysian scholar Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof regards homogeneity as an intimidating development that would lead Malaysians to become ‘some brave new race’ (2014, p. 215). Yousof emphasises that ‘traditions that have lasted thousands of years in some instances and have served their purpose well must surely have something in them to recommend them to present times and the future’ (p. 217). Globalisation ‘dissolves boundaries’ as Richard Schechner states (2002, p. 267), yet a homogenous monoculture may not be the most advantageous outcome. How important is tradition to the making of contemporary performance in an independent and yet previously colonised country such as Malaysia?

As a Malay citizen, working in an international sphere as a female theatre director, I am interested in being a global citizen, yet holding on to my traditions. I am interested in examining my tradition and cultural identity through the creation of a contemporary intercultural performance project. How might a Malay intercultural contemporary theatre practitioner, such as myself, maintain a connection to cultural traditions? Is it possible to use traditional theatre forms to create a contemporary performance for a globalised audience?

This thesis is comprised of two parts, an exegesis and a creative project. The exegetical research will analyse a traditional Malay dance theatre form, Mak Yong, tracing the history of the form through to its contemporary use. This thesis will then briefly review other contemporary practitioners who use traditional forms, before providing an exegetical account of the creative project. The creative project is an intercultural production, titled Throne of Thorns. This production was staged at the University of Wollongong in February 2015. It was performed in English, with Australian actors and was directed by a Malaysian practitioner, the researcher. In exploring the political and cultural complexity surrounding intercultural theatre practice this
thesis will examine *Mak Yong*, one of the Malay traditional dance forms, drawing on the historical research of Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1976) and Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin (2009). This thesis also employs the work of intercultural theatre theorists such as Joseph Gonzales (2012), Rustom Bharucha (1990), Richard Schechner (1991), and Erika Fischer-Lichte (2014). These theorists were important in shaping both the theoretical research and the creative project. The definition of intercultural theatre used to frame this research, based on the works of Jacqueline Lo and Helen Gilbert (2002), John Martin (2004) and Ric Knowles’s (2010), regards intercultural theatre as intentional performative encounters between disparate cultures producing new forms of work while constantly challenging and renegotiating cultural values.

I begin with my research question – how might a Malay focused intercultural performance practice fuse traditional Malay performance techniques (specifically taken from *Mak Yong*) with selected, adapted and reworked sections of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, in order to create an intercultural theatre production that reveals a contemporary performance aesthetic, and can communicate to a twenty-first-century Malaysian and Australian audience? Can elements of the traditional form of *Mak Yong* be used in a contemporary and non-traditional performance? How might this be done (if it can be done) respectfully? Might it be achieved in such a way as to create a new intercultural theatrical piece that has a unique identity, yet also remains connected to Malay cultural traditions despite being performed on Australian soil? This research project requires me to analyse my own creative process in an attempt to tease out which theoretical, historical, and traditional research methods are and are not useful in the creation of a contemporary intercultural production in Australia.

This research argues that political and economic changes within Malaysia have altered the *Mak Yong* form significantly. It will aim to reveal that the *Mak Yong* form has continually been evolving, from its very inception. This does not mean, however, that cultural traditions can be appropriated at will. What becomes apparent through the creative research is that when creating intercultural contemporary work it is important, not only to approach the creative process with sensitivity, always maintaining Bharucha’s notion of ‘cultural respect’ (1996, p. 20) for the traditions employed – partly by ensuring that there is a historical link to the cultural traditions employed by the practitioners – but also to be aware that ethics and integrity need to be taken into account. This thesis argues that in dealing with intercultural theatre praxis, there are several intercultural practice approaches that need to be dealt with carefully: 1) cultural sensitivity; 2) cultural belonging; 3) aesthetic integrity; 4) collaboration; and 5) openness. In making *Throne of Thorns*, the combinations of these five specific intercultural practice approaches were integral to
the process. These approaches may be useful for other intercultural projects, although it is important to remember that each individual cross-cultural process will have specific needs.

**Mak Yong**

*Mak Yong* is the earliest existing dance theatre of the Malay (Yousof, 2004, p. 38), and was established in the fourteenth century (Yousof, 2011, p. 11). It comprises ‘ritual, stylized dance, vocal and instrumental music, song, story, and improvised and formal spoken text as well as stylized acting’ (Yousof, 1976, p. 2). The myriad elements found in *Mak Yong* shape a cultural form that is not only entertainment but also has a spiritual connection for Malaysian people. *Mak Yong* is derived from the word ‘Yong or Yang [and] is a variation of Hiang, an old Malay word meaning divinity. Ma-Hiang was the Mother Spirit of pre-Muslim Malaya, who was believed to watch over rice crops’ (Sheppard, 1983, p. 33). The Malay words ‘Moyang’ and ‘Poyang’, which mean ‘ancestor or patriarch’ (p. 34) might have been the roots from which the term *Mak Yong* was derived. There is inconsistency in the spelling of *Mak Yong*. *Mak Yong* appears in many different spellings as Ma’ yong or Ma’ Yong, Mak Yong, Makyong, Mak Yong or Makyung. In this research, I use *Mak Yong*, following the earliest Malaysian scholar in *Mak Yong*, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof.

*Mak Yong* originated in Kelantan, a state on the east coast of Malaysia and from there became essential to the Kelantanese. As Malaysian scholar Solehak Ishak explains in *Text, Theatre and Malay Aesthetics* (2012), ‘*Mak Yong* is the collective, artistic, cultural product of the Kelantanese Malays, an art form which was created by and for them’ (p. 15). In 1990, the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS) won the Malaysian 8th General Election and took over the administration of Kelantan (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 71). Meanwhile the National Front governed the rest of the country. The National Front (*Barisan National*) is a major coalition party in Malaysia. It consists of three other parties: the United National Malay Organization (UMNO), the Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and the Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) (Singh, 2010, p. 173). Malaysia has thirteen states and Kelantan is the only state that is ruled by the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS). This party was established in 1951 and is ‘the only and the oldest Malaysian opposition Islamic Party’ (Salleh, 1999, p. 237). PAS banned traditional Malay theatre practices such as *Mak Yong* because it believed that these performances with their historical connection to spirits and deities undermined the Islamic belief in one God (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 71). The banning of *Mak Yong* restrained its growth in Kelantan and resulted in *Mak Yong* practitioners moving to the city of Kuala Lumpur for work (Mohamad, 2012b, p. 454). As a consequence of the banning in
Kelantan, the federal government tried to preserve Mak Yong by staging performances in Kuala Lumpur. These performances were staged at the Palace of Culture (Istana Budaya) and the National Arts, Culture and Heritage Academy (Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan - ASWARA). After the banning, several practitioners from Kelantan were invited to teach this art form in Kuala Lumpur. These practitioners were important for the survival of this traditional form. Mak Yong productions are now produced regularly by Istana Budaya and ASWARA. These venues have become the main bodies dedicated to maintaining the survival of Mak Yong as a theatre form, however, many of the Mak Yong performances in these venues are on proscenium stages with elaborate set decorations, which deviate from the traditional convention. A current debate between Malaysian scholars and existing Mak Yong practitioners questions whether these contemporary performances of Mak Yong can still be considered authentic or not (Zahari, 2006; Umar, 2006; Abdul Manaf, 2010; Zainuddin, 2012).

In 2005, UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization) proclaimed Mak Yong as a ‘cultural masterpiece’ under the Oral and Intangible Heritage of Humanity Award. UNESCO defines ‘intangible cultural heritage’ as maintaining a cultural impression of a society that has been handed down from the ancestors to the descendants, thereby developing the community and shaping its identity (2013, p. 4). Although Mak Yong received recognition from UNESCO in 2005, and despite productions at Istana Budaya and ASWARA, Zulkifli Mohamad a Malaysian scholar suggests that ‘in Malaysia the form is still poorly preserved, managed and promoted’ (2012a, p.165). The contrasting values surrounding traditional theatre, as revealed by the Kelantan state government’s banning of Mak Yong and later followed by UNESCO’s international recognition of Mak Yong, provided the inspiration for me to embark on this research. This is an area of research that is controversial for Malays. Numerous Malaysians consider traditional Kelantanese Mak Yong as sacrilegious, yet others imbue it with healing and spiritual value; some think of Mak Yong as purely entertaining, while many think it obsolete.

**Significance of the Research**

This research increases the global scholarly body of knowledge of the traditional Malay theatre of Mak Yong in Malaysia. In addition, it also aims to develop the researcher’s intercultural performance practice. The practice approach discovered through the doctoral project can be further explored in future productions within a Malaysian context. The creative work involves exchanges of diverse theatrical cultures, but most especially from Malaysia and Australia. The
exchanges that occurred in the rehearsal room enriched the cultural interaction between the two main cultures. Throne of Thorns allowed the researcher to investigate the traditional materials of her own culture, reflect upon their historical uses, and to explore how traditional materials may inspire a contemporary performance work. Throne of Thorns was created as a work that might still connect the researcher with her traditions yet not be traditional. As Bharucha has said, it is important to develop intercultural theatre from the historical perspective of the practitioner (1990, p. 1). This thesis research is especially significant in a Malaysian context because it adds to national scholarly and artistic debates about the appropriateness of modern staging of Mak Yong, in Kuala Lumpur and elsewhere, and to those international discourses that revolve around the use of traditional forms for contemporary aesthetic work.

**Methodology for Practice-led Research**

This practice-led research involves multi-methodological approaches: historical research; field trips including semi-structured interviews with Mak Yong scholars, practitioners and Malaysian arts administrators; theoretical research and a creative project. There are several terms used in identifying research that explores the arts or uses the arts as the method for discovery. For example, practice-led research, practice-based research and practice as research are all closely related but differ in terms of focus and intent. As Hazel Smith and Roger T. Dean explain, this ‘overlapping’ (2009, p. 5) acknowledges that creative work is a component of research (p. 5). According to Smith and Dean in addition to the creative work, the process employed in the actual making of artwork must be written as research documentation, because it too can produce new research insights (p. 3).

Practice-led research is about enhancement of knowledge concerning the practice (Candy, 2006, p. 1). This approach is vital in allowing the artist or, in Haseman’s terms, the ‘practitioner researcher’ to solve the problem not only by the process of thinking but also through the practice (2014, p. 147). It is also crucial that practice-led research is a ‘process of inquiry driven by the opportunities, challenges and needs’ of the practice (Haseman & Mafe, 2010, p. 217). Carole Gray defines practice-led research as:

research which is initiated in practice where questions, problems, challenges are identified and formed by the needs of practice and practitioners; and secondly, that the research strategy is carried out through practice, using predominantly
methodologies and specific methods familiar to us as practitioners. (Gray qtd in Mercer, 2012, p. 117)

Linda Candy (quoted in Smith and Dean, 2009) says that practice-based research is the ‘creative work act[ing] as a form of research, whereas practice-led research is about practice leading to research insight’ (p. 5). For Candy, practice as research is a ‘broader view of creative practice which includes not only the artwork but also the surrounding theorisation and documentation’ (p. 5). Robin Nelson suggests the term practice as research emphasizes the necessity of academic and practice research to produce ‘new knowledge’ (2013, p. 25). The practitioner-researcher should, therefore, reflect critically on her own practice (p. 24) as it is a fundamental process of a research (p. 29). Nelson stresses that ‘theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time as practice is informed by theory’ (p. 29). Practice as research highlights the academic writing, the creative process and the research product (p. 27) and underlines the idea that ‘theory imbricated the practice’ and ‘practice is informed by theory and vice-versa’ (p. 33).

For this thesis, I embrace Gray’s notion of practice-led research, defining my research question in relation to the production and using performance practices, drawn from East and West, to formulate the creative work.

The theoretical approach draws upon the work of Malaysian scholars, in particular Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof on the history of Mak Yong in his thesis ‘The Kelantan Mak Yong Dance Theatre: A Study of Performance Structure’ (1976) and the sustaining of traditions in traditional Malaysian culture in Issues in Traditional Malaysian Culture (2014). The thesis also employs Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin’s research in The Traditional Malay Theatre (2009), on the characteristics of numerous traditional Malay theatre forms and the value of reawakening such forms. In addition, the thesis engages with the work of several intercultural theorists, including Rustom Bharucha’s notion that intercultural theatre is often subject to being utilised for the continuation of colonisation, as discussed in Theatre and the World Performance and the Politics of Culture (1990). This thesis also examines Richard Schechner’s notion of ‘pure culture’ as discussed in ‘Intercultural Themes’ (1991), in particular his contention that culture is always evolving and expanding. In addition, this thesis reviews the concept of ‘internalizing’ as formed by Joseph Gonzales in Intercultural Contemporary Dance in Malaysia. These various methodological tools allow me to theorise about intercultural theatre from a Malaysian perspective, as well as enabling reflection on the Throne of Thorns project for the exegetical component of the thesis.
The historical research on *Mak Yong* was initially library-based, involving the examination of historical records, newspapers, photographs and recorded materials (video and DVD). I then conducted twenty-four semi-structured interviews with *Mak Yong* practitioners, Malaysian scholars, and ministry officers (as the traditional theatre in Malaysia is under the administration of the government bodies). This required a field trip to three states in Malaysia: Kelantan, Penang and Kuala Lumpur, where the interviews were conducted, recorded, and later transcribed and translated. I interviewed the following Malaysian theatre scholars: Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, Mohamed Ghouse Nasruddin, A.S Hardy Shafii, Farouk Zakaria, Mohd Najib Nor, and Jumilah Tahir. I interviewed the following masters and practitioners: Fatimah Abdullah, Che Nasir Yusoff, Che Mat Jusoh, Husin Yusoff, Mad Gel Mad Dali, Awang Omar, Wan Midin Wan Majid, Nisah Mamat, Abdul Rahman Jusoh, Rosnan Rahman, Ruhani Md Zain, and Norhayati Zakaria. I also interviewed the three directors of three main government bodies that nurture *Mak Yong* in Malaysia: The Director General of the Palace of Culture (*Istana Budaya*) Dato’ Juhari Sharaani; The Director General of the National Department for Culture and Arts (JKKN) Datuk Norliza Rofli; and the Rector of the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage (ASWARA) Professor Mohammad Hatta Azad Khan. This primary research was crucial as *Mak Yong* is an art form with only limited research documentation. In addition, I reviewed the works of Shakespeare and of Shakespearean scholars, although extended exploration was beyond the scope of the current project with its Malaysian focus, and is intended for future research. In addition, research into the works of three Malaysian contemporary directors – Zulkifli Mohamad, Aris Kadir and Joseph Gonzales – shaped my research.

The theoretical research into intercultural theatre and intercultural theatre practitioners informed my own creative process in the rehearsal studio as well as the exegetical work. This creative project will be analysed through the lenses of a case study methodology. Julian Meyrick suggests that case study methodology demands a ‘case’, which is ‘representative of a certain kind of problem’ (2014, p. 1). Case studies emphasise the object of study. According to Rolf Johansson, the case should be an intricate component, which needs to be examined through the combination of multiple methods and it should be current (2003, p. 2). Johansson suggests that the principle of case study methodology is ‘triangulation, the combination on different levels of techniques, methods, strategies, or theories’ (p. 11). In this case study, the problem I undertook to resolve was how a Malay focused intercultural performance practice might fuse traditional Malay performance techniques (specifically taken from *Mak Yong*) and elements of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in order to create an intercultural theatre production that reveals a contemporary performance aesthetic, and can communicate to a twenty-first-century Malaysian and Australian
audience. Therefore, it was important in the rehearsal room context to continually acknowledge not only the creative process of the researcher, but also that of the ensemble members and other creative members, in an attempt to recognise our different cultures. In addition, it was necessary to explore if elements of Mak Yong and selected, adapted and reshaped sections of the Shakespearean text could be fused together, and if so, how might that best occur. The creative project included the following: traditional rehearsal preparation; auditions; conceptual work with a Malaysian designer, as well as an American/Australian composer, and a Maori lighting designer; dancing, singing and physical body training in Malay performance techniques.

Five Intercultural Practice Approaches

The thesis research revealed five combined and interconnected cultural approaches that became important to the rehearsal process of Throne of Thorns. They are derived from researching the work of others and also from practical experience in the Throne of Thorns rehearsal room. Each step of the research revealed the importance of a particular approach but they are collated here in order to articulate my interpretation of each. The five cultural approaches are 1) cultural sensitivity; 2) cultural belonging; 3) aesthetic integrity; 4) collaboration; and 5) openness.

Cultural sensitivity is the awareness and allowance of difference that needs to be encouraged when working across cultures in an intercultural production. Sensitivity needs to be initiated as an ensemble practice, as it may not come naturally. Being sensitive includes having a positive attitude to the various beliefs and practices that exist among members of the production team while also accommodating these differences in the intercultural undertaking. Cultural sensitivity includes respect. It is crucial that respect is central to all interactions.

Cultural belonging is a term referring to growing up in a specific culture which becomes an integral part of what Bharucha discusses when he uses the term ‘internalized culture’ (1990, p. 70). With cultural belonging there is a strong, lifetime, cultural knowledge (conscious or unconscious) that is rooted in the individual person; they understand their own cultural heritage, including spiritual concepts and values. Culture belonging results in a strong sense of ownership of the culture. It conditions how you perceive the world around you, your aesthetics, mores, and basic behavior. It generates a sense of belonging, for as Watson mentions, ‘culture engenders a sense of belonging, of identity and inclusion’ (2002, p. 3). This research suggests it is preferable if the intercultural theatre director, creative team and performers utilize, in the production, their
own cultural materials. This research stresses the importance of this, because, as Watson states, ‘most of us see other cultures through the frame of our own and view what we see as expressive of the “foreign” other’ (p. 3). A lack of understanding of a particular 'foreign' culture is often the main factor leading to the misappropriation of cultural materials in intercultural performances.

Aesthetic integrity is the creator’s subjective or personal vision that is shaped from cultural background, education, experience and beliefs. It is a constant rationale based on a personal and considered viewpoint. Aesthetic integrity is fundamental as it influences the form of art that directs the processes of the director/creator. Aesthetic integrity is about the director/creator’s creative sensibility that shapes all decision-making. It may be shaped partially through cultural conditioning, where tastes and artistic choices are partly culturally based. It might also be said that aesthetic integrity is a space where the director and members of the creative team question their own integrity and aesthetic decisions. Gonzales suggests that each artist is shaped by an ‘internal space’ and this research proposes that this 'space' might be interpreted as the artist having aesthetic integrity. This ‘internal space’ includes ‘cultural background, education and art training, experience and family upbringings’ (2010, p. 263) but goes beyond that. Cultural belonging is about immersion within culture you grow up in and gradually it envelops you and becomes a part of who you are. Within the culture in the familiarity with it and a complete understanding the culture. Essentially gets grafted into the person and becomes one with the person. Aesthetic integrity, on the other hand, is tied to the director’s decision making and is related to how his/her personal life experiences have shaped the choice. And the personal life experiences are channelled through the director’s cultural background, education and belief system. Bharucha calls his sense of “aesthetics” as the ‘sense that is jarred, revealing my own “taste” and cultural conditioning’ (p. 196).

Collaboration is the ability to share power in an intercultural production and creative environment where everyone is of equal status. It also means sharing the decision-making processes between the director, actors and the creative team. This approach ensures that there is a balance of power and a shared ownership. Collaboration is about the willingness to share. It is a collective, rather than individual effort. Anne Bogart argues that collaboration is her ultimate process. She compares collaboration to the notion of different artistic personnel looking through different windows (2014, p. 109-112). Each collaborator might exchange their window view. ‘In true collaboration, all of these lenses or windows are necessary in the realization of a play’ (p. 111).
Openness is the willingness to adapt and adjust to others from different cultures. In intercultural productions, there is a constant process of adaptation and negotiation. Openness is an attitude that is important to adaption and negotiation processes. It goes beyond sensitivity because it allows processes of change to occur. Knowles suggests that in an intercultural production there is a constant and ongoing ‘renegotiation of cultural values’ (2010, p. 4). Openness is an attitude that includes a willingness to incorporate the ideas, advice and suggestions of others. Without openness, collaboration and negotiation are impossible. These five interconnected cultural processes shaped the creative research. While they may be useful to other artists embarking on their first intercultural production, it is also true that each cross-cultural production will produce different circumstances and have very particular requirements. They were, however, the foundation of the Throne of Thorns rehearsal process and will also form an integrated approach that will shape my own future performance practice.

**Exegesis Chapter Outline**

The research for this thesis took me in several directions: analysing intercultural theatre; examining the historical context of the traditional Malay theatre, Mak Yong; exploring methods of other artists who, in their creative practice, crossed cultures and fused traditional forms with their contemporary practice; reflecting on my own creative practice. This thesis is practice-led with an intercultural emphasis gained from a Malay perspective. My own practice and my reflection on that practice form the basis of this study, and this reflection resulted in new insights into the process of creating a journey in intercultural theatre praxis. These different areas of investigation often occurred simultaneously but have been separated out into various chapters for ease of narrative progression.

In Chapter Two, Literature Review: Intercultural Theatre, I examine the pertinent literature with regards to intercultural theatre theories and practices. These theories provide the contextual, theoretical and conceptual frameworks for understanding the creative practice. Attempts are made to trace the development of intercultural theatre: Western directors borrowing Eastern materials and Eastern directors borrowing from Western styles and texts. This chapter briefly outlines the main conflicts that have arisen among theorists and practitioners of intercultural theatre. ‘Intercultural Wars’ is the term coined by Ric Knowles (2010) in considering these debates. Whilst cross-cultural connections have enabled many artists to produce new significant works on a global stage, the problem of the continuation of imperialism of the First World in
relation to the Third World has been an ongoing issue. This literature informs my own intercultural practice. This research questions which techniques and methods might be respectfully drawn from Malay traditional theatre in order to make a contemporary intercultural production favouring a Malay perspective. The literature review informed the identification of the five intercultural practice approaches - cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging, aesthetic integrity, collaboration, and openness - that became important when developing Throne of Thorns. This chapter, in particular, identifies cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging and aesthetic integrity as vital elements in the construction of such intercultural theatre works, the other two elements explored further in the next chapters.

Chapter Three, Traditional Malay Theatre: Mak Yong and Its Evolution, examines the characteristics of the Malay culture, and of traditional Malay theatre, most especially Mak Yong. It firstly introduces numerous traditional Malay theatre forms and then narrows the focus to Mak Yong, the dance drama of the Malay. This chapter explains aspects of the origin of Mak Yong, the purposes of performance, staging, stories, performance structure, acting and characters. It also discusses the modern attributes that are evident in recent Mak Yong performances in Kuala Lumpur. In addition, this chapter draws on interviews I undertook with Mak Yong scholars, practitioners, and ministry officers responsible for nurturing the traditional heritage. The results of this analysis can be divided into two groups, which I have named ‘the purists’ and ‘the innovators’. The purists stand against innovation in traditional forms of Malay theatre, while the innovators demand modernity. This chapter deploys Richard Schechner’s (1991) notion that there is no pure culture, yet the aspect of his argument that claims intercultural theatre is a celebration of cultures, and that this celebration occurs through ‘borrowing, stealing and exchanging culture’ (1982, p. 19) remains problematic. This chapter confirms, through the research, that cultural sensitivity is fundamental in dealing with traditional materials and in dialoguing with the practitioners of traditional theatre. It also affirms that when using traditional materials cultural belonging (one’s historical connection to the culture) is important for a deep understanding of the specific culture. This chapter argues that Mak Yong is continuously transforming and has been since its inception. While this is a separate question to that of whether a contemporary practitioner can draw on elements of traditional work to create a modern aesthetic piece, it was important to discover that change is unremitting and is due to many significant factors. It was also important for the researcher to speak with many of the traditional practitioners to gain an understanding of their perspectives about what has occurred culturally, and to comprehend their thinking about the changes that have happened to Mak Yong.
This chapter reveals that the interviews and the ensuing discussions assisted me in making decisions about the creative project and my performance practice.

Chapter Four, Contextualising Malaysian Contemporary Theatre Directors, explores how other theatre directors create their contemporary works using traditional materials. This chapter begins by overviewsing the Malaysian contemporary theatre culture from the decline of traditional Malay theatre to the advance of musical theatre in contemporary Malay theatres. Next, it analyses the works of three Malaysian director/choreographers, Zulkifli Mohamad, Aris Kadir and Joseph Gonzales, who have each utilised traditional theatre forms to create their contemporary work. The context of these works helped me situate my own creative project, Throne of Thorns. This chapter posits aesthetic integrity as the main factor that influences the director’s choices and it is inextricably tied to who he/she is which is determined by the cultural milieu that shaped him/her.

Chapter Five, Throne of Thorns, a Case Study: Studio Based Intercultural Theatre Research, is a reflective discussion on the processes involved in making the creative project, Throne of Thorns. This chapter begins with a brief explanation of my previous directing works and experience with Mak Yong and is followed by a selected analysis of the process undertaken in creating Throne of Thorns. It articulates the interweaving cultural journey and collaboration between the creative team, the Australian ensemble and myself. I reflect on the exploration of ritual forms, the use of cross-gender casting, the development of a costume and spatial design and how these elements, based on the traditional form of Mak Yong, were transposed into a contemporary aesthetic. This chapter argues that collaboration is a valuable process in situations where different cultural practices affect the working styles and methods used in the rehearsal studio. Entering an alien culture, as a director, can be a confronting experience in the rehearsal studio. I discovered that working collaboratively on the rehearsal room floor (the director leading rather than dictating the process) was the most productive method in the rehearsals in embracing the cast and creative crew. This chapter further argues that openness is a vital attitude for all parties – director, actors and creative team – in this kind of intercultural collaboration. It is necessary for all involved to be open and willing to negotiate approaches to any studio work that might introduce different cultural traditions. Important also is the ability to employ an open and caring attitude when negotiating with each other, especially when confronted by global and national events (such as the Lindt Café event) that have the potential to impact on the rehearsal room process.

Chapter Six, Conclusion, summarises how the theoretical and historical research intertwined with my own performance practice in the intercultural theatre production, Throne of Thorns. This
research reveals five intercultural practice approaches that are significant for this particular research: cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging, aesthetic integrity, collaboration and openness. In this chapter, I conclude that firstly it is important when using traditional materials that sensitivity, awareness and respect are considered as the leading processes in this cultural exchange. Secondly, cultural belonging enables an intercultural theatre practitioner to have an authentic connection to the specific culture from which the traditional materials are being drawn. In the case of the Throne of Thorns production, through my birth and childhood and adolescence I have gained a particular understanding of, and respect for, the Malay culture, that would be difficult to be attain in any other way. Likewise, each member of the cast and creative team respected each other without caveat. Intercultural theatre collaborations would be well advised to involve one or more practitioners in the creative team from each culture from which the traditional materials are being drawn in order to be able to produce the work collectively, yet respectfully. Thirdly, this research reveals that practitioner aesthetic integrity is crucial to the process and for creative decision-making. Fourthly, collaboration, the sharing of power equally between the director, the actors and the creative team, creates a productive working environment in the rehearsal studio. Finally, openness, which involves the process of being flexible and allowing constant negotiation in the creative development, is necessary for a successful intercultural collaboration. This research proffers these five intercultural practice approaches as significant in making an intercultural collaboration between Malaysia and Australia. These five approaches have formed the specific basis in the creation of Throne of Thorns.

**Early Exposure to Performing Arts**

I was born and bred in Malaysia. My parents brought me up with a very strong sense of Malayness. Through them I learnt about the Malay culture: the language, the customs and behaviour. As a Malay child, I was trained in Malay cultural protocols. For example, I learnt to salam – shake hands when meeting adults, to bow and walk politely when walking in front of a guest or older person, to eat with my right hand; and duduk bersila – to sit down on the floor. These Malay cultural traditions were embedded in me, as were traditional Malay dances.

My parents are performers and at times have worked with the National Complex of Culture (Kompleks Budaya Negara – KBN), the government organisation that is dedicated to nurturing Malaysian culture and arts. Both of my parents were traditional Malay dancers, choreographers
and actors. As a child, over the weekend, my parents used to bring my siblings and me to rehearsals where I watched the dancers perform Malay traditional dances, such as Asyik, Terinai, Inang, Joget, Zapin and Gamelan dances. My ears, my sight, and my heart were filled with an abundance of beauty. I could hear the sound of the classic gamelan music, the gendang, gong, serunai, rebana – the traditional Malay musical instruments. Rehearsals were held in an old double-story wooden building, which had four studios on each floor. I remember how my sisters and I used to run, play, and laugh in the long corridor outside of the rehearsal studio. We could see most of the rooms where rehearsals were taking place, hear the traditional music continuously playing. When we were tired of playing, we would quietly enter the studio where my parents were working and sit at the back observing either directly in front of us or through the reflection of the mirror. My father led the rehearsal. He is an expert in traditional Malay dance and Malay martial arts. He would demonstrate the traditional movements. He danced, he stopped, then the dancers followed and repeated his movements. This process of repetition was, and still is, the Malay convention in teaching and learning traditional arts and classic dances. I spent my childhood following both of my parents into their creative ‘worlds’.

When I started university, my passion for Western theatre increased tremendously. In 2004, I went to England to further my post-graduate studies in theatre directing. Before I went abroad I had already directed three professional theatre productions and two were Mak Yong traditional theatre productions. My last production before leaving was Mak Yong Raja Tangkat Hati (2003) presented in Istana Budaya, the National Theatre. The opportunity to direct traditional theatre at the age of twenty-five was unusual, as Mak Yong is usually handled and directed by the masters of this art. I worried that the shadow of traditional theatre would keep following me as, at that time, I wanted to establish myself as a contemporary director with my works strongly reflecting Western elements.

In London, one morning, a visiting theatre lecturer came to the class and asked the students a simple question: ‘Why are you taking this module?’ When my turn came to answer, I responded by saying that recently in Malaysia there was a musical production Puteri Gunung Ledang (The Princess of the Ledang Mountain)(2006) that was highly successful and had become a phenomenon. It had a strong sense of being a Western musical compared to the previous musical productions that were claimed to be ‘very Malaysian’. ‘ Malaysian audiences’, I said, ‘want musicals to be influenced by Western styles in order for them to be considered great productions. I want to learn how the West creates musicals so that I can produce a musical like Western ones’. The lecturer was silent for a while. ‘What do you have? What kind of theatre do
you have? We want to see that,’ she said, ‘not something from Broadway or the West End’. Her response forced me to delve into my past. ‘What do I have?’ I asked myself. In my mind, as if a film reel was running, I saw myself running and giggling in the corridor of the rehearsal studios. I saw people dancing, I saw people acting. I heard traditional music; I imagined I was again touching the colourful traditional costumes. Up until that moment, I had not appreciated that my past exposure to the arts had moulded who I was. Traditional Malay theatre had been an integral part of me since I attended my parents’ rehearsals. However, my enthusiasm for modernity and Western practices had made me blind to what I actually had – something that was, in fact, mine. I was eager to return home, regretting that before my departure to England I had not grasped the traditional arts more fully. I had learned *Mak Yong* but I had not mastered it, I had lived with it but I had not fully appreciated what that meant. Only when I was not in my own land, did I realise that my traditions gave meaning to my existence as a Malay. On my return to Malaysia, I revisited all the traditional theatres, renewed all my knowledge and skills, and found a new appreciation of my heritage. I deepened my *Mak Yong* learning with my new master, Fatimah Abdullah. When my PhD research project started, however, the questions I had to answer for myself were: Did those traditional forms have to remain exactly as they were when I was a child? Or, could I employ those cultural materials in new ways for contemporary aesthetic purposes in an intercultural theatre production? To answer these questions, I needed first to review the literature surrounding intercultural theatre.
Figure 2: “Prologue: Raja (Prospero)” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
CHAPTER TWO
LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

When I began the research for this thesis I was aware of the term intercultural theatre, but I had little understanding of the conflicts connected with it. It became important to me to understand the historical positioning of the term, and to comprehend the issues in the field that arose between Eastern and Western countries, theatre practitioners and intercultural theatre theorists. The existing literature on intercultural theatre provides the groundwork to this research and to the creative project. Intercultural theatre continues as a nexus for ongoing debates, since the form itself is open to misappropriations of cultural understandings, as well as being permanently tainted by the problems of imperialism: ‘There is always a West in the East and vice versa’ (Minh-ha qtd in Lei, 2011, p. 572). This chapter investigates the polemic between differing cultures forming approaches to intercultural theatre. It begins by defining what is meant by the terms interculturalism and ‘intercultural theatre’. It explores the emergence of Western directors using Eastern traditional artistic practices and the conflict surrounding the appropriation of Eastern materials. It examines Eastern explorations of Western texts, in particular Shakespearean texts, as articulated by scholars and by Asian contemporary intercultural theatre practitioners. In addition, the chapter briefly surveys some of the literature on Shakespeare’s The Tempest. This literature review provides research on the challenges, and the theory and practice of intercultural theatre. The chapter reveals that cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging and aesthetic integrity are vital in the intercultural theatre encounter between the East and West. Cultural sensitivity is required when practitioners face cultural differences in the form of ethics, norms and taboos. Respect is a keyword in intercultural practice and part of a culturally sensitive approach to different cultures. Cultural belonging is the internalising and often unconscious commitment to the cultural values held when born and raised in a specific culture. The awareness of cultural belonging in any intercultural theatre project enables a deep understanding of the value of the traditions encompassed in the project. This research indicates that both cultural belonging, cultural sensitivity and aesthetic integrity are important in the creation of intercultural theatre. This research also revealed gaps in knowledge that enabled exploration into other areas of approach that might be useful to intercultural theatre. These explorations evolved into what the
Defining Interculturalism and Intercultural Theatre

In today’s interconnected globalized world interculturalism is an important issue that requires much discussion. Interculturalism as defined by Holledge and Tompkins (2000) is ‘the meeting in the moment of performance of two or more cultural traditions’ (p. 7). Schechner (1996) stresses that interculturalism involves a national exchange and bartering among cultures (p. 42). Similarly, Martin (2004) refers to it as a new hybrid representing ‘a meeting point of cultures [with] some sort of exchange’ (p. 1). Consistent with each of these definitions is the understanding that interculturalism is a convergence of swapping other cultures’ traditions and practices. This process of exchanging is vital in discussions about intercultural theatre.

What constitutes intercultural theatre is still being debated and a definitive definition is incomplete. Ayshe Jenkinson defines the prefix inter as ‘between and/or among’ (2011, p. 10). Jenkinson discusses Brian Fay’s definition of culture as a ‘complex set of shared beliefs, values, and concepts which enable a group to make sense of its life’ (p. 10). Jenkinson views cultures as sharing experiences and infers that the term intercultural indicates a sharing and negotiation between cultures. Intercultural theatre, Schechner suggests, is a matter of ‘hybrid performances that incorporate elements from two or more different cultures or cultural sources’ (2002, p. 251). Crossing cultural boundaries through interculturalism occurs in the theatre scene, perhaps more so now that the world is so connected. Intercultural theatre is interpreted by Martin as a theatrical form created from the convergence of differing forms (2004, p. 4) and writes that intercultural performance ‘is an on-going process of meeting, cross-pollinating and producing new and relevant work for its surroundings’ (p. 4). Expanding on this idea, Knowles (2010) sees intercultural theatre as, ‘a site for the continuing renegotiation of cultural values and the reconstitution of individual and community identities and subject positions’ (p. 4), Lo and Gilbert (2002) consider intercultural theatre to be ‘a hybrid derived from an intentional encounter between cultures and performing traditions’ (p. 36). In this study, I will be drawing primarily on the definitions given by Lo, Gilbert, Martin and Knowles which see intercultural theatre as an intentional performative encounter between disparate cultures producing new forms of work while constantly challenging and renegotiating cultural values. Martin’s discussions of the relation between people and cultures which espouses that ‘as long as peoples
and cultures meet there will be new ideas, new ways of communicating and creating’ (2004, p. 4), also contributes to the understanding of intercultural theatre as used in my creative project.

**Western Fascinations with the East**

In the early part of the twentieth century, interculturalism became a trend in cultural exchange between the East and the West and vice versa. European directors began creating hybrid styles combining the cultures of others with their own. Knowles suggests that avant-garde directors Antonin Artaud and Bertold Brecht were ‘progenitors’ (2010, p. 13) in the intercultural field as their theory and practice influenced the Western intercultural theatre movement in the twentieth century (p. 13). Their theory and practice was influenced by exposure to eastern art forms. Artaud, for example, was inspired by Balinese dancers he saw at the Paris Exhibition in 1889 after which he wrote an essay titled ‘On the Balinese Theatre’ (p. 12). Brecht identified Verfremdungseffekt (‘The Alienation Effect’) after he saw the performance by Mei Langfang, a Chinese Peking opera female-role actor in 1935 (p. 12), and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* was based on a Chinese story. These examples reflect the tangled relationship between the European avant-garde directors (their theories and practices) and eastern art forms in the early twentieth century.

Post World War Two, and in order to break the hegemony of 1950’s post war nationalism, western theatre artists again explored cultures other than their own to produce theatre works that could be considered avant-garde (Watson, 2002, p. 1). French director Ariane Mnouchkine employed Japanese and Indian elements in her Shakespearean productions; Robert Wilson used Japanese *Noh* and *Bunraku*; and Peter Brook explored the tradition of Indian *Kathakali* in his work (p. 27). Eugenio Barba writes (1990) about his discoveries of Eurasian Theatre, which is a combination of European and Asian theatre (p. 31). His exposures to Balinese, Chinese, Indian and Japanese theatre led him to combine these traditions in producing his works and to finding training methods for the actors. They were Eurasian theatre attempts to create ‘anti-traditional forms of theatre in the West’ (Barba, 1990, p. 32). The increasing numbers of Western directors appropriating the traditions of the East created a conflict as their fascination exposed the stagnancy of contemporary Western performance. The Western arts scene was searching for expansion and innovation as evidenced by Mnouchkine’s statement that ‘The theatre is Oriental’ (1996, p. 93). These European avant-garde directors’ discoveries led to a distinctive theatre where these artists started to exchange cultures (or as Barba calls it ‘barter’) in performances (Knowles, 2010, p. 20). These artists had different ‘degrees of respect for their chosen other cultures’ (p.
12). Most of the European avant-garde practitioners incorporate the culture of the non-European performance techniques in ways that are distant from ‘their social contexts, histories, and belief systems’ (p. 12).

‘Intercultural Wars’

The term ‘Intercultural Wars’ as proposed by Knowles describes the argument between two groups of academics who have had different perspectives on intercultural theatre, a war concerned with the Western manipulation of Eastern culture (2010, p. 23). An exemplar of this war is a well-known production by British director, Peter Brook, titled *Mahabharata*, which was part of the 1985 Avignon Festival. This prominent international theatre production was widely reviewed (Carlson, 1996, p. 81) and polarised reviewers, artists and scholars into two distinct groups. These ‘intercultural wars’ came to a head in the 1990s with passionate polemics from both sides. The main critics of Brook were Rustom Bharucha, Gautam Dasgupta, Una Chaudhuri, Jacqueline Lo, Helen Gilbert and Biodun Jefiyun. Meanwhile, Brook’s supporters were Patrice Pavis, Erika Fisher-Lichte and David Williams (Knowles, 2010, p. 23). According to Holledge and Tompkins, ‘Brook’s production and Bharucha’s critique have been the most public and visible discussions in intercultural theatre, raising a completely new ethical debate for theatre artists working in an increasing global arts market’ (2000, p. 11). Bharucha explains that intercultural theatre discourses have begun and have been dominated by Western academics and practitioners (1990, p. i). Therefore, Bharucha’s writings are vital to give balance and another perspective on this ‘burning reality’ (p. i). Critical terms used in this debate, such as appropriate and misappropriate, misrepresentation and authenticity are applied by academics and practitioners in intercultural theatre discourses. Debate primarily revolved around the ethical appropriation of Eastern traditions and the possibility that the *Mahabharata* perpetuated cultural imperialism. It is worth noting that this debate continues today.

In an article titled ‘Brook and Mnouchkine’s Passage to India’ (1996) Carlson discusses the history of *Mahabharata* and *La Indiade*, directed by Peter Brook and Arianne Mnouchkine, respectively. Carlson explains that ‘the East was not permitted to speak for itself’, that ‘the West provided the Eastern voice or voices it desired to hear’ (p. 82). After premiering at the Avignon Festival in 1985, *Mahabharata* went on to Bouffes du Nord in Paris where it was well received. *Mahabharata* involved performers from nineteen different countries, reflecting Brook’s belief that ‘the truth is global and the stage is the place where the jigsaw should be played’ (p. 89).
Concurrently, in October 1985, Mnouchkine’s *La Indiade* opened in Paris at the Cartoucherie. Following on the success of Brook’s *Mahabharata* in Bouffess du Nord, Parisian audiences rushed to see *La Indiade*, which sold out and was one of the most popular performance pieces of the theatre company Theatre du Soleil, which was founded by Mnouchkine. Consequently, there was anticipation for their future work.

Despite critical and audience popularity in France, *Mahabharata* experienced negative critical responses in America. According to Carlson, many New York critics found that *Mahabharata* was a continuation of Western appropriation, manipulating Eastern materials without giving an authentic voice to that material (p. 88). *Mahabharata* was criticised by eastern and western audiences because cultural sensitivities and cultural belonging were not taken into account. Carlson understood the problems arising in these highly-celebrated productions and wondered if intercultural theatre was able to bridge the universality gap. What was stolen glamour in one culture was traditional form in another. This provided an important key for my own project and raised vital questions about authenticity and Western colonisation. Since my intention was to work with my own traditions, the question of what would be appropriate to use in a contemporary Australian production in relation to my own Malaysian heritage became paramount. If there was a bridge between East and West that needed to be negotiated, was there a similar bridge between traditional and contemporary practices? And if so, how might I cross it respectfully? It was necessary for me to research the historical reactions of Eastern practitioners and scholars to the controversial productions in the ‘intercultural wars’.

*Mahabharata* received abundant Eastern as well as Western criticism. Among the critics was Gautam Dasgupta, the co-founder and publisher of *Performing Arts Journal*, who challenged Brook’s production in his article titled, ‘The ‘*Mahabharata*: Peter Brook’s Orientalism’ (1991). He considers the production of *Mahabharata* to be an ‘empty shell’ (p. 78), which contributed nothing of positive value to Indian culture or global audiences. He questions the purpose of Western artists who borrow Oriental themes and myths and present these to the world. Dasgupta expresses his concerns about the misinterpretation of the classic text by a person of non-Indian descent. The Indian epic *Mahabharata*, a compilation of over 90,000 stanzas of Brahmanic lore, was written between 400 B.C. and 200 A.D. (p. 76). This text was adapted for Brook’s production by Jean-Claude Carriere. Dasgupta criticises the version of *Mahabharata* by Brook and Carriere, which, he contends, ignores and misunderstands fundamental aspects of *Mahabharata*. He writes of the “Orientalist” bias of their readings (p. 78) and explains that
myriad religious, spiritual and cultural aspects are misrepresented. Dasgupta argues that
Mahabharata is a primary example of the West’s misappropriation of Eastern tradition.

Besides Dasgupta, the main critic of Mahabharata is Rustom Bharucha. In Theatre and the World
Performance and the Politics of Culture (1990) Bharucha defines interculturalism as:

a ‘two-way street’, based on a mutual reciprocity of need. But in
actuality, where it is the West that extends its domination to cultural
matters, this ‘two-way street’ could be more accurately described as a
‘dead-end’. (p. 2)

Bharucha questions the intent of Western theatre practitioners’ ‘ethics of representation
underlying any cross-cultural exchange’ but especially concerning Indian theatre (1990, p. 4). Like
Dasgupta, he is concerned about the West’s misinterpretation of traditional Indian culture,
especially when it interferes with sacred Indian texts. He posits that it requires one to grow up in
a particular culture in order to understand, on a deep and internal level, the essence of a cultural
text. Bharucha believes that one can only look at interculturalism through the lens of one’s own
culture; therefore, he has a unique and profound perspective on Indian theatre that differs
significantly and meaningfully from a Western director’s perspective. Bharucha observes that
Western theorists have ignored the cultural and social situations of the people intimately
associated with sacred Indian texts like the Mahabharata.

Bharucha emphasises that intercultural theatre is not only concerned with the celebration of
exchanging culture, as stated by Schechner in The End of Humanism (1982). Schechner urges that
‘there was something simply celebratory about discovering how diverse the world was, how
many performance genres there were, and how we could enrich our own experience by
borrowing, stealing, exchanging’ (p. 19). Bharucha disagrees on the matter of ‘borrowing,
stealing, exchanging’ considering these processes are not necessarily ‘enriching’ (1990, p. 14)
cultural practice. He contends that it could lead to a perpetuation of imperialism (p. 14).
Bharucha’s article ‘Somebody’s Other Disorientation in the Cultural Politics of Our Times’
(1996), raises issues regarding the ownership of culture. He questions the rights of an artist to
decontextualise other cultures, especially in the case of Western directors who manipulate and
manufacture Indian cultural forms and export them to the international market. He views this
borrowing of techniques and conventions as an appropriation likely to lead to distorted
meanings.
What I am advocating, therefore, is not a closed-doors policy, but an attitude of critical openness, a greater sensitivity to the ethics involved on translating and transporting other cultures, and a renewed respect for cultural self-sufficiencies in an age of globalisation, where there is a tendency to homogenise the particularities of cultures, if not obliterate them altogether. (p. 208)

Bharucha in his article ‘Peter Brook’s “Mahabharata”: A View from India’ critiques Brook’s production Mahabharata as an ‘appropriations of Indian culture’ (1988, p. 1642). He explains his disagreement with the Western practice of manipulating the non-western cultural materials and misusing it, and he questions what Indians could do to prevent others from coming and taking their own cultural icons and ideas. He questions whether outsiders should have ‘direct access to the artefacts of the Orient – rituals, ceremonies, masks, folk dances, poems, epics. Instead of viewing these artefacts within their own contexts, the maestro is more concerned with using them for his own purposes’ (1988, p. 1642). Bharucha cautions the people of India to ‘guard our territory’ (p. 1647). He sees Brook as having been initially concerned about his own vision for intercultural collaboration, then losing respect and not appreciating where the materials came from. The version of the Mahabharata that Brook developed, according to Bharucha, was very far away from the meaning and context of the Indian epic. He reiterates that, ‘If there is a need to exchange our culture for insights into another, then the door can be left open for negotiation based on the mutual needs and respect’ (p. 1647). Bharucha’s point is important. Manipulating cultural elements or materials that are not part of the artist’s heritage can result in cultural appropriation. This has ramifications in working with artists’ own cultural materials. Bharucha emphasizes that the respect for traditional materials must include a deep understanding of the cultural context the material is sourced from. This is true not only for those artists from other cultures, but for those from the source culture itself. When setting up the rehearsal process for Throne of Thorns, Bharucha criticisms were like a warning, and I took great care to ensure that I and the artists involved had an understanding of the cultural context of the materials we were using. However, I was also interested in the viewpoints of theorists who suggested that all cultures borrow from other cultures.

Patrice Pavis defends Brook’s production of Mahabharata in ‘Introduction: Towards a Theory of Interculturalism in Theatre?’ (1996a, p. 2). Pavis argues that the intercultural exchange between Brook (Mahabharata) and Mnouchkine (La Indiade) on one side, and Barba (Faust for Japanese or
Indian dancers) on the other, was, in fact, “a two-way street”, countering Bharucha’s criticism. Pavis claims that all cultures borrow from other cultures. He uses the example of the modern Japanese Shingeki drama, which imitates and borrows elements from the Western theatrical tradition (p. 2). Pavis maintains that Western directors do not intend to destroy Eastern forms, instead they glean inspiration from these forms as they attempt to merge cultures and theatrical paradigms together. In this article, Pavis reiterates Schechner’s statement that ‘there is no “pure” culture that has not been influenced by others’ (p. 4). Pavis (1992) highlights his notion of ‘source’ and ‘target’ cultures using an hourglass model. In any intercultural production there will be some degree of cultural confrontation between the two cultures which needs to be evaluated, compared and treated with caution when transforming from ‘source’ culture to the ‘target’ culture. It is Pavis’ intention to treat both cultures equally, the hourglass becomes a model which contains the same volume and can be turned over to eventually give precedence to both the source and the target. In other words, the hourglass attempts to create a power equality in the shifting between the two cultures (1992, p. 18). It still involves an intricate and intertwined relationship between the two entities, indicating that this model has ramifications for intercultural theatre. In ‘Intercultural theatre today’ (2010) Pavis suggests that intercultural theatre today needs to be re-visited. He argues that since the phenomenon of globalisation fuels the crisis of national identities in a world dependent on the global economy, then the ‘intercultural becomes the general rule, [and] it is no longer controllable or manageable by nation-states’ (p. 6). Since today’s cultures are already overlapping and mixed, Pavis questions the purpose of having intercultural theory. He goes on to explain that the prefixes ‘inter’ and ‘trans’ mean universal similarity whereas ‘cross’ means ‘hybridity, mixture’ (p. 7), and he maintains that intercultural theatre is about universal connections.

From researching the perspectives of these theorists regarding the West’s use of Eastern traditional texts, such as Mahabharata, it became clear to me that there were ethical approaches needed in the use of traditional materials. In order to avoid the misappropriation of traditional materials, the research suggests that sensitivity and continuous negotiations between those involved in the project from differing cultures might result in more equitable productions.

**Current Intercultural Debates**

Exploration in intercultural theatre is still a current issue. Iris Hsin-Chun Tuan states intercultural theatre is still an intricate subject and it is important to thoroughly examine this matter and discover other facets of intercultural theatre. (2010, p. 213). In her book, *Intercultural*
Theatre Adaptation and Representation (2010) she analyses seven intercultural productions directed by Eastern and Western directors and finds the issue of misappropriation still exists (p. 51). Knowles (2010) insists that intercultural theatre should be re-examined (p. 3). He argues that intercultural theatre should consider intercultural performance ecologies through a dynamic understanding of ‘performance studies, multiculturalism, race theory, whiteness studies, diaspora studies and new cosmopolitan studies’ (p. 5). He believes that the acrimonious ‘intercultural wars’ should cease as they do not allow for progress. Instead, finding different methods and models for understanding, enabling and developing meaningful exchange in the theoretical and performative world of intercultural theatre is what scholars should seek (p. 4). It is crucial then to consider new forms and hybrids of intercultural theatre.

Daphne P Lei in her article ‘Interruption, Intervention, Interculturalism: Robert Wilson’s HIT productions in Taiwan’ (2011) claims ‘hegemonic intercultural theatre’ (HIT) is a major form of intercultural theatre. Lei explains that HIT ‘is a specific artistic genre and state of mind that combines First World capital and brainpower with Third raw material and labour, and Western classical texts with Eastern performance tradition’ (p. 571). She classifies Peter Brook, Richard Schechner, Ariane Mnouchkline, Suzuki Tadashi, Contemporary Legend Theatre and Ong Ken Sen as ‘practitioners of HIT’ (p. 571). Lei states HIT started ‘as a form of Western experimentation with Eastern raw material, produced and consumed mainly by the West. However, as the genre became a recognisable path for ascending the world stage, it was imitated by many Eastern theatre groups’ (p. 573). Through the ‘notion of interrupted cultural flow’ (p. 574) Lei criticises two of Robert Wilson’s productions, Orlando (2009) and 1433: The Grand Voyage (2010) in Taiwan, which she claims as failures due to the cultural interruption that happened. Wilson was invited to Taiwan to create works for the International Theatre Festival, in 2009 and 2010. The cast of the two productions were Taiwan’s most outstanding traditional actors who perform jingju, the Peking/Beijing Opera. However, the productions became problematic and ‘the Taiwan jingju circle gradually reduced their support for the production, because of the feelings of disrespect and injustice that surfaced during the collaboration process’ (p. 577). Wilson did not allow the jingju actors to rehearse or perform traditionally, despite that being their existing body-training. In working with Taiwan jingju diva Wei Hai-Ming, Wilson applied his ‘Wilsonian schema’ (p. 578) without incorporating Wei’s body-training in jingju. This led Lei to make the observation that Wilson’s ‘rigid formalism and the alien nature of the text greatly restricted the natural blood flow from the rich jingju source in that her lonely extra-daily body and her jingju trained body had to submit to a stiff and senseless Wilsonian schema’ (p. 578). According to Lei, Wei ended up becoming ‘Wilson’s marionette’ (p. 578). This, Lei claims,
resulted in interrupted cultural flow since these cultural trainings are physically embedded or embodied processes. Wilson in Lei’s terms stopped the flow of the production and the tradition. Lei demands that any Western maestro-led intercultural production should ‘equip itself culturally’ (p. 574) in order to make sure that collaborations work accordingly to the needs of both parties, the East and the West. In this sense, it can be seen that Wilson’s aesthetic shaped his visions, rather than a consideration of the culture he was dealing with. His aesthetic formed his creative sensibility and shaped all the decision-making, yet it was not one that led to a successful collaboration. The ‘Wilsonian schema’ is an example of a director who has a certain ‘taste’ which has shaped his choices and preferences. This style was derived from Wilson’s personal cultural background, education, experience and beliefs. It is clear that some directors want their vision, their own sense of artistic integrity - without having to consider their cast or the cultural belonging and cultural sensitivity of their cast. The aesthetics of any piece of art is about the sense of beauty of the art. Different cultures have differing senses of beauty. However if a director imposes his sense of beauty (and style) on a theatrical company without taking account of the company's cultural sensitivities and cultural belongings then the style can destroy the trust in the rehearsal processes.

Yvette Hutchison emphasises that respect and sensitivity (p. 72) are essential in intercultural collaborations. In her article ‘The “Dark Continent” Goes North: An Exploration of Intercultural Theatre Practice through Handspring and Sogolon Puppet Companies’ Production of Tall Horse’ (2010) she proposes two other factors that are important in this exchange: firstly, sufficient resources and secondly, cultural perspective. Time and money need to be sufficient in creating an intercultural theatre production. Such productions are often elaborate and the process is time consuming. Another challenge is the cultural perspectives that control the artist and the audience, both need to ‘pause to step back, learn, and consider difference, the possibilities of something new’ (p. 72). This becomes vital in giving breathing space for both parties (the artist and the audience) who have diverse cultural perspectives.

In The Politics of Interweaving Performance Cultures (2014), Fischer-Lichte introduces her notion of interweaving. In her view the term, intercultural theatre, is problematic and she urges a rethinking of it. She states it is a challenging term as it involves separation between ‘our’ and ‘other’ (p. 7). Fischer-Lichte pinpoints three problematic assumptions in intercultural theatre, the first of which regards the ownership of the script. The text emerges from a country and its people, enabling the citizens of the country of origin to better understand the plays and their meaning. However Fischer-Lichte asks, ‘are the only “owners” the people of the nation to which
the author belonged?’ (p. 7). The second assumption, which she pinpoints, is in regard to the notion of universalism that is often applied by Western directors, when Westerns plays are performed by non-Western cultures. They claim that certain plays have universal ‘truths and values’ rather than culturally specific values (p. 8). The third assumption that Fischer-Lichte identifies is the dependency of theatre productions that rely on the text as the ‘controlling authority’ in creating the performance (p. 9). According to her, Brecht was able to demonstrate that ‘each text could be used in the most diverse contexts and adapted to numerous purposes. The text is no longer regarded as the controlling authority but as one material among others’ (p. 9). If this is the case then as Fisher-Lichte understands it, the question of ownership is dissolved. This consequently means ‘equality between the theatrical traditions of all cultures’ (p. 9). In addition, she proposes the use of the term ‘interweaving’ instead of ‘intercultural’, where ‘many strands are plied into a thread, many such threads are then woven into a piece of cloth, which thus consists of diverse strands and threads … without necessarily remaining recognizable individually’ (p. 11). She writes that the ‘processes of interweaving performance cultures thus generate a new kind of transformative aesthetic’ (p. 12).

However, Bharucha criticises Fisher-Lichte’s term of interweaving in his article ‘Hauntings of Intercultural Enigma and Lessons on the Borders of Failure’ (2014). He argues that her interweaving ‘remains somewhat too locked within- and against’ (p. 179) and that ‘what is being interwoven are “cultures”’ (p. 180). Bharucha criticises the concept of interwoven cultures by questioning how ‘interweaving such cultures can free one from the burden of appropriation’ (p. 180). Bharucha’s emphasis is on the ethics of belonging and the ownership of cultural traditions which any interweaving needs to recognise in order to respect the rules and taboos of the ownership.

Helen Gilbert and Jacqueline Lo in Performance and Cosmopolitics: Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia (2007) discuss how Australian theatre deals with Asian cultures. Gilbert and Lo write that for the past thirty years Australian theatre has expanded its connection to Asia. They use the term, Asianisation, which ‘involves the incorporation and reinterpretation of Asian performance forms within a Western aesthetics paradigm and bodily praxis’ (p. 89). The development of Asianisation has ‘resulted in the potential for deeper processes of cross-cultural exchange and collaboration between Australian artists and their Asian counter-parts, as well as creating new main stage opportunities for Australians of Asian descent’ (p. 111). There are numerous Australian artists who have collaborated and connected with Asian body-training, such as Nigel Kellaway and his exploration of Japanese body-training, Tess de Quincey with her use of Tanaka
Min’s Japanese *butob* (p. 101), and other performers such as Yana Taylor and Meme Thorne (p. 103). According to Gilbert and Lo ‘Australian performers have enthusiastically adopted aspects of *tai chi, silat kathakali, randai* and *butob* to enhance their physical capabilities and performance vocabularies’ (p. 97). The eagerness of Australian artists to hybridise cultures arises out of Australian cosmopolitanism, ‘a cosmopolitics that is caught up in hybrid spaces, entangled histories and complex human corporeographies’ (p. 11).

**Eastern Explorations of the West**

If Western directors such as Reinhardt, Artaud, Brecht, Brook, Mnouchkine and Wilson are considered as directors who were fascinated by unique Eastern materials and techniques, there are also Eastern theatre directors, such as Tadashi Suzuki (Japan), Yukio Ninagawa (Japan), Oh Tae Suk (Korea) and Ong Ken Seng (Singapore) who incorporate Western texts into their work. The function of intercultural theatre in Asian countries and an understanding of how that function operates in a political context form the basis for the contextualisation of the creative project, *Throne of Thorns*. Whilst Western directors borrowing Eastern exotic materials have been viewed as enriching the Western performing arts, an Asian perspective on the reasons for intercultural theatre productions may be very different (Fischer-Lichte, 1996, p. 33; Shih, 2000, p. 10).

In Asian countries, intercultural theatre is often closely related to the national history and politics of specific eras, as each country has endeavoured to integrate Western technologies and economic imperatives. Intercultural exploration is closely linked to ideas of Westernisation as a sign of modernisation. Fischer-Lichte in her article, ‘Theatre, Own and Foreign. The Intercultural Trend in Contemporary Theatre’ in *The Dramatic Touch of Difference* (1990) elucidates Asian intercultural theatre in three Asian countries: Japan, China and India. In 1868, Japan opened its doors to Western influences. At that time, many Japanese artists were eager to introduce Western drama to their country. The first Henrik Ibsen play was staged in 1909 and with it began the emergence of Japanese spoken theatre, *Shingeki* (new drama) (p. 14). Western influences impacted on this form with the plays of Chekhov and Stanislavsky also being produced. Theatre artists increased their use of *Shingeki* often regarding *Noh* and *Kabuki*, the traditional theatre forms, as ‘obsolete and sterile and no longer able to deal with the problems of modern Japanese society’ (p. 14). Besides modern theatre, Shakespearean and Greek classics were also introduced through *Shingeki*. In 1911, *Hamlet*, directed by Osanai Kaoru, made its first appearance on the Japanese stage (p. 13). In Japan, *Shingeki* illustrates the tendency to bring
drama from the West, however often as a duplication of Western drama. According to John M. Brokering (2007), the imitation within Shingeki meant Japanese ‘actors donning strange wigs, dying their hair blond, puttying their noses, and making themselves up in ways incongruous with their Oriental physiognomy’ (p. 375). Thus, there developed an alien theatre in which the actors were not Western but imitated Western narratives, appearance and lifestyles. There was, however, a turning point, when directors such as Yukio Ninagawa adapted Shakespearean texts to the local stage.

Two Japanese directors, Yukio Ninagawa and Tadashi Suzuki, went on to produce Greek tragedies, as well as works by Shakespeare and Chekhov, whilst also using Japanese theatre styles such as those of Noh, Kabuki and Shinto rituals (p. 12). Fisher-Lichte also describes intercultural theatre in China when, after the Cultural Revolution, there were attempts to fuse Chinese and Western theatre traditions in Chinese conventional performing arts using Stanislavskian and Brechtian performance practices (p. 14). China Dream (1987) is one of the productions that reflect these meldings. In 1986, a fusion of classical Chinese opera with Shakespeare’s Macbeth was produced in Kunju Opera and Brecht’s Good Person of Szechuan as Sichuan Opera was produced in 1987 (p. 11). For differing socio-economic purposes intercultural theatre in India has been popular. According to Fisher-Lichte, in India this form of theatre is associated with European colonisation: ‘The Western theatre was introduced as a model of the colonizing society and was implemented on the consciousness of the native people as the instrument of colonization’ (p. 15). Fischer-Lichte argues that the issues resulting in intercultural theatre in the twentieth century in China and Japan were ‘determined by various historical and social situations [and] can be related on one hand to the aesthetics of theatre, and, on the other, to the social functions of theatre’ (p. 17). She contends that intercultural theatre should be associated with ‘aesthetic-historical and socio-cultural functions’ (p. 18). It is essential to understand that intercultural theatre is not always a celebration of various cultures but in many instances, has been a part of the struggle against colonialism. To understand this, Fischer-Lichte maintains that it is important to look at the differences between what happened in China and Japan on the one hand, and what happened in India on the other, because in India intercultural theatre was regarded ‘as an instrument in the battle for national independence and towards affirmation of, or even recovery of, their own cultural identity’ (p. 17).

Julie Holledge and Joanne Tompkins in Women’s Intercultural Performance (2000) suggest that the aim of intercultural theatre originally tended to focus on aesthetics, however it becomes ‘political when a critic complains about (mis)representations of otherness or appropriations of culture’ (p.
1). There are two cultural attitudes in intercultural theatre as stated by Wen-Shan Shih in her doctorate thesis, ‘Intercultural Theatre: Two Beijing Opera Adaptations of Shakespeare’ (2000), the first is celebration, and the second is misrepresentation of foreign cultures in intercultural exchanges (p. 10). Exchanging cultures can be a process of celebration, with joy in mutual enrichment. However, on the other hand, as Shih states, intercultural theatre may be closely related to the misappropriation of cultural indicators. In creating Western avant-garde performances, eclectic cultural expressions were freely used without concern for their ‘historical and social specificities’ (p. 11). Shih claims that Asian intercultural performances need to be viewed from three perspectives: the foreign, the modern Asian and the traditional Asian (p. 9–10). She states that Asian intercultural studies today deals with the ‘foreign (the Western), the self of the present (the modern Asia), and the self of the past (the traditional Asian)’ (p. 10). These are the struggles in identity that are faced by Asian theatre practitioners working in a global context and coming to terms with contemporary aesthetics, where postdramatic and avant-garde performance are also of interest to Asian audiences. Modern Asian theatre also has its own contemporary developments, some unique to each culture, others due to absorption of Western performance elements. In discussing intercultural theatre from an Asian perspective, Shih suggests that intercultural theatre ‘is a route to return to Self by way of Other’ (p. 13).

Whilst my initial impetus in the creation of Throne of Thorns was the delight in the concept of a fusion of two differing aesthetics, I became aware through the literature review, and also through the interviewing process (discussed in the next chapter) of the sensitivities needed to embark on such an exchange. As a theatre director, working with an intercultural agenda I was immersed in a more complex situation than I had previously encountered. My journey of understanding of oneself, by a route that takes us to what is other than ourselves, might, I discovered, be seen as one belonging to a new wave of Asian directors who use Western text and fuse it with Eastern traditional theatrical techniques. The research reveals that in order to question and unravel evolving personal and perhaps national identities, the director’s aesthetic integrity needs to be considered.

It might be said that through the amalgamation of Western text and traditional theatre, Asian audiences reflect on their own cultural identities. There are numerous Asian directors inspired by the use of Western texts, (particularly Shakespeare’s plays). These directors fuse these texts with local materials. Besides Yukio Ninagawa, Oh Tae Suk, Ong Ken Sen and Tadashi Suzuki (and other Asian directors already mentioned) leading the way in this new direction, several Malaysian directors/choreographers, such as Zulkifli Mohamad, Aris Kadir and Joseph Gonzales, also
create fusions of East and West. In Malaysia, however, many Western texts are performed in imitation of their original style.

From my own experience and observations, as Japan, Taiwan, Korea, and Malaysia are heading into modernisation, it is increasingly popular for Asian practitioners to adapt Western elements within intercultural productions and for these productions to be considered by Asian audiences and producers as modern. In an article by Jon M. Brokering, entitled ‘Ninagawa Yukio’s Intercultural Hamlet: Parsing Japanese Iconography’ (2007), he has investigated Ninagawa’s Japanese production of *Hamlet*, staged at the Barbican Centre, London in 1998 as a fusion of Shakespeare’s text with Japanese traditional materials and performance techniques, such as *Kabuki* and *Noh*. According to Brokering:

Ninagawa’s effort to make Shakespeare’s plays more immediate to a Japanese audience by fusing them with familiar images and cultural references was part of a reversal in Japan’s inferiority complex towards western culture, which had prevailed since the opening of Japan to the West in 1868. (p. 371)


Jae Kyoung Kim in her article ‘Suzuki Tadashi’s Intercultural Progress in South Korea’ (2013) examines Suzuki’s intercultural production of *Electra* produced in South Korea (2008) with Korean artists. Kim claims the success of this production was due to the use of the Suzuki method. Kim calls this the ‘East-West marriage’ (p. 208). Kim states further that it was also the collaboration between Korean and Japanese artists and creative personnel, using both languages, and translating the narrative to reflect a Korean family living in Japan that enabled the production to succeed (p. 211). This negotiation between these two cultural groups created an equal cultural interaction. Suzuki states that as an artist he was considering the culture of his nation:
…an outstanding artist is able to criticize their own country’s situation. Speaking for myself, my creations start from criticizing Japanese culture. Artists exist not to advertise their own country but to criticize their own country. (qtd in Kim, p. 220)

Alexander C. Y. Huang, writes about Korean director, Oh Tae Suk’s directing debut in an article entitled “‘What Country, Friends, Is This?: Touring Shakespeare, Agency, and Efficiency in Theatre Historiography’ (2013). Huang analyses Oh’s adaptation work in his staging of The Tempest (2011) produced by Mokhwa Repertory Company. Oh has directed more than sixty new plays and has made a name as a director who inserts Korean traditional aesthetics, language and expression into his works (p. 57). In The Tempest, Oh used the traditional Korean mask-dance drama and a rural percussion musical style. Huang refers to ‘Asian Shakespeare’ as a mutual process between utilising traditional Shakespearean text and Asian theatrical styles (p. 53).

Khay Foley in an article ‘Shakespeare-Asian Theatre Fusions: Globe—“alization” of Naked Masks (Bangkok), Shadowlight (San Francisco) and Setagaya Public Theatre (Tokyo)’ (2011) questions whether it is true that Shakespeare in Asia is a perpetuation of Western domination. She discusses the adaption of Hamlet entitled When I Slept over the Night of the Revolution (2007) in Bangkok, which was directed by Ninart Boonphothong and produced by the Ministry of Culture’s Office of Contemporary Art and Culture. Boonphothong directed When I Slept over the Night of the Revolution in order to criticise the political situation in Thailand. Boonphothong states that Shakespeare’s play is able to mirror the conflict happening at the current time in Thailand during the administration of Thaksin, the Thai Prime Minister in 2010. Shakespeare plays, Foley claims, ‘can directly and clearly reflect what’s happening in Thailand’ (Foley, 2011, p. 10).

A Vietnamese theatre director, Khai Thu Nguyen, and Cliff Moustache co-directed Another Midsummer Night’s Dream in the city of Ho Chi Minh (2011) using traditional theatre techniques from Hat Boi. Hat Boi is a Vietnamese traditional opera that has existed since the thirteenth century when it was a court entertainment. The production aimed to ‘see how Western theatre techniques and Vietnamese theatre forms such as Hat Boi could innovate one another’ (Nguyen, 2011, p. 205). Yeeyon Im discusses the work of Hamlet by Korean director Lee Yountaek. She writes in ‘The Location of Shakespeare in Korea: Lee Yountaek’s Hamlet and the Mirage of Interculturality’ (2008) highlighting the status of Shakespeare's plays in Korean culture and how Lee creates a theatrical work with ‘the aspiration to reach universality through Shakespeare’ (p. 263). Lee intended to create a contemporary production yet remain authentic to Shakespeare but
utilising Korean culture (p. 263). Lee claimed that his production should be ‘Korean, yet not too Korean’ (p. 264). He aimed not only to revive Korean traditions but also to inject modernity in the work. Im argues that Lee deconstructs the elements of two cultures and explains that Lee’s ‘metaphor’ (p. 265) in making the intercultural collaboration was to use a ‘Western structure and Asiatic flesh and blood’ (p. 265).

Dennis Kennedy and Yong Li Lan in ‘Why Shakespeare’ (2010), claim that different nations perceive Shakespeare differently. Kennedy and Yong propose three ways to understand the growth of Shakespeare in Asia. Firstly, Shakespeare in Asia serves the needs of nationalist aspirations. For example, Japan adapted Shakespeare in parallel with the national policy of Westernisation, whereas in China the anti-Western policy resulted in Shakespeare not appearing until after 1976: ‘All foreign literature and art which was banned as ‘feudal, bourgeois, or revisionist’ (p. 8). Looking at India, Asian Shakespeare has existed from colonial times (p. 8). Shakespeare in India was not the instrument of modernity; instead it was a sign of English colonialism. Therefore, it appears that the reasons for intercultural performance differ with the needs of each location. Kennedy and Yong further describe Asian Shakespeare as different from that of other parts of the world in that Asian Shakespeare uses forms such as ‘gestures, costume and make-up, singing, dancing and even acrobatics’ (p. 17), transforming the text with the use of embodied aspects that extend beyond original English performances (p. 17). According to both of the scholars, Asian theatre demands both the verbal and the corporeal to convey the meaning of the performance (p. 17). ‘The ‘authentic’ style as understood by the Asian theatre community, is where Asians imitate the Shakespearean production and performance style, complete with English costumes, set and stage properties (p. 20). In the contemporary Malaysian theatre scene, of which I am a part, this is known as ‘authentic Shakespeare’, our colloquial phrase for such performances. The alternative form, an Asian(ised) convention, is one where the performance fuses the original with something new, where a physical approach is embraced, and where language and the style of production allows for the creation of a ‘new script, a foreign tongue and a different socio-cultural context’ (p. 20). This Asian(ised) convention interests Ong Ken Seng, a contemporary Singaporean director who established the Flying Circus Project, a theatre laboratory involving artists from Korea, Singapore, Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and India (p. 8). Yong Li Lan in her article ‘Shakespeare here and elsewhere: Ong Keng Sen’s intercultural Shakespeare’ (2010) discusses Ong’s Shakespearean productions – Lear (1997, 1999), Desdemona (2000), and Search: Hamlet (2002) – and sees these as presenting a variety of approaches to Shakespearean performance altering or adding languages, multi-cultural casts and multi-media techniques (p.189). Ong’s performances toured to several Asian countries, as well as Australia
and Europe. Ong invited Asian performers from Japan, India, Thailand, China and Indonesia, to take part in his intercultural productions, with the performers retaining their traditional arts and languages. In Desdemona and Search: Hamlet, film, video and art installations by a Korean visual artist and installation artist were injected into the performance. Ong’s directorial mission aimed to counteract the structure of Shakespeare’s scripts. Ong reversed the gender-power relations. In Othello, he split the main role between two actors: a boy Kutiyattam actor and an actress skilled in Kathakali who were both from India. Yong concludes that Ong’s works were able to display intercultural plurality ‘with gendered East-West polarization, with old/new Asias, Asia/the West and masculine/feminine’ (p. 192). Ong attempts to present gender reversal from a different perspective to that of traditional Asian stories. Ong in his new vision of Asia tries to present leading female characters in contemporary Asian theatre as well as in Western theatre (p. 192). Ong, through his production Othello, was speaking, not just to a Singaporean audience, but to a global one.

This is an important perspective for contemporary Asian directors, such as myself, who consider themselves to be uniquely bonded to their country, yet feel as well the need to engage in a global theatrical community and express their interest in global politics. Ong’s efforts, however, in intercultural theatre were decried by Bharucha who criticised Ong’s intercultural endeavour, claiming it as Ong’s own agenda for his ‘return to Europe’ (2004, p. 9). According to Bharucha, Ong Ken Seng is another Peter Brook (p. 15), a director who uses intercultural theatre as a project purposely created for international attention. Shakespeare, Bharucha contends, has become merely a ‘pretext for dramatizing different cultural productions and differences across Asia’ (p. 1). Ong on the other hand, sees his works as representative of the New Asia, which involves adapting Shakespeare’s plays and fusing them with the work of international and multi-disciplinary artists from ‘India Myanmar, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore and Korea’ (p. 8).

At present in Malaysia there is a scattering of directors and choreographers who have been articulating new modes of fusing traditional performance practices with contemporary Western modes of performance. Zulkifli Mohamad is one of these; a scholar, dance-performer artist and choreographer. In his article ‘In Search of Identity Through “Tradition-Based” Contemporary Dance and Theatre Performance’ (2012), he terms his dance works as Tradition-Based Contemporary works, through which he means ‘searching for modernity in one’s indigenous knowledge’ (p. 164). In this paper, he discusses his choreography in Dan Dia Datang (And She Comes). This work is inspired by Main Peteri, a ritual performance from Kelantan. Mohamad
articulates that his childhood experiences in Kelantan and his exposure to the performing arts influence his creative works.

Joseph Gonzales is another scholar and choreographer in Malaysia researching the uses of traditional forms in contemporary performance. In *Dancing the Malaysian* (2011) he examines the performance work of Abdul Aris Abdul Kadir. Kadir, a dancer, choreographer, actor and director, is a graduate from ASWARA and has received numerous awards. His dance work examines ‘the Malay psyche more deeply’ and the meaning of the Malay spirit. One of his major works, *Berinai* (2006) won the BOH Cameronian Award with Kadir named as best choreographer. In *Berinai*, Kadir presents the secret of the wedding night in Malay culture (p. 182). In *Nasi Putih* (2009) he explores ‘black magic’ customs in Malay culture (p. 183). Kadir’s performance works emphasise the ‘traditional aesthetics and positive aspects of Malay culture’ (p. 183). Joseph Gonzales’ own newest contemporary dance piece, *Becoming King the Pakyung Revisited – Phase 2* (2015) presented at Damansara Performing Arts Centre explores the conflict surrounding *Mak Yong* traditional theatre. This work-in-progress is only at its first phase. It is performed as a reality TV competition where all the contestants have to dance and sing in *Mak Yong*. The production also utilises the symbol of Pak Yong, the main character in *Mak Yong* (Ect, 2015).

Gonzales also writes about his own creative works as a choreographer and in his paper entitled ‘*QADIM*: An Intercultural Contemporary Dance Collaboration in Malaysia’ (2009), he discusses the creation of *QADIM*, an intercultural dance performance in which he collaborated with eleven multiracial dancers. In this paper, Gonzales emphasises the process of inventing this production. He began rehearsals by asking the dancers in the team to share their individual stories, from the ages of 12–18 years old (p. 4) and from this he created a vocabulary of movement inspired by the stories being told (p. 5). The performers also exchanged their diverse dance techniques, such as the *Zapin* (Malay) and *Bharata Natyam* (India).

This literature review research emphasises the issue of respect. As a Malaysian director, working with an Australian student ensemble and an Australian/Malaysian creative team, I need to be aware of being respectful, firstly of my own culture and past traditions, as well as being sensitive to the cultural needs of all involved. I need to be mindful and wary that my ambition to be contemporary and modern will not lead me to be disrespectful to the performers from different cultural backgrounds. This research provides an important background to the shaping of my doctoral project and also to my future practice as a theatre director, academic and teacher.
Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*

This literature review focuses on intercultural theatre, primarily Asian and Malaysian productions, however, through researching the Shakespearean text more broadly than a restriction to intercultural productions might permit, it is possible to gain a broad perspective on *The Tempest*. I have read numerous scripts and watched several recordings of theatre productions. Other Shakespearean productions proved useful as visual explanations of previous adaptations and these included; *As You Like It* (1978) directed by Basil Coleman, *Measure for Measure*, (1979), directed by Desmond Davis, *The Tempest* (1980) directed by John Gorrie, *The Taming of the Shrew* (1980) directed by John Cleese, *Twelfth Night* (1980) directed by John Gorrie and *Comedy of Errors* (1983) directed by James Cellan Jones. There are also several adaptations of *The Tempest* by numerous directors such as: *The Tempest* (2011) directed by Declan Donnellan, *The Tempest* (2009) directed Tsui Hark and Wu Hsing Kuo, *La Tempesta* (1977) directed by Giorgio Strehler, *The Tempest* (2011) directed by Oh Tae Suk, and a film *The Tempest* (2010) directed by Julie Taymor. In understanding the interpretation of other directors from different cultural backgrounds I have been able to expand my own imaginative vision for the play. These viewings have provided an underpinning for the creative project *Throne of Thorns*. Through reviewing these archives, I have been able to comprehend the diversity of interpretations of Shakespeare’s text and how it has travelled across cultural boundaries. For Shakespearean scholars, the issue of textual authenticity is of concern when cultural boundaries are traversed. Textual authenticity is the concern for the original meaning and historical staging practices of Shakespeare’s works. In understanding the numerous works of directors in presenting Shakespeare’s texts, the production of *Throne of Thorns* necessitated newly configured stage practices due to its cultural connections with *Mak Yong*. The question of the use of Shakespeare’s text however became a directorial and aesthetic set of choices which far exceeded any cultural necessities. Shakespeare’s language was used sparingly throughout the production taking a more deconstructed, contemporary approach and highlighting a more physicalised Asian aesthetic. Cross-gender casting is an aspect that occurs in *Mak Yong*. Interestingly, it has occurred in Shakespearean productions in two different ways: firstly, in the very first Shakespearean productions where men played women, and secondly during the last two centuries, with women, on occasion, playing men. Elizabeth Klett, has written about cross-gender casting in Shakespeare in ‘Many Bodies, Many Voices: Performing Androgyny in Fiona Shaw and Deborah Warner’s “Richard II”’ (2006). The article discusses Fiona Shaw’s enactment of the lead role in Shakespeare’s *Richard II* (p. 175). In Klett’s article, Julie Burchill terms this exchanging gender as ‘Third Sexers’ (p. 175). Klett claims that Shaw’s performance is not believable. The production, Klett argues, presents Richard as androgynous
‘embodiing a wide spectrum of gender identities and unsettling the masculine/feminine binary’ (p. 178). Klett states that Shaw’s performance is unsuitable, as it exposes gender performativity and highlights the character of Richard as having uncertain masculinity (p. 178).

Brook directed an intercultural production of *The Tempest* in 1990, which he considers to be one of the most challenging of Shakespeare's plays because it deals with the unseen world (Neumeier, 2001, p. 103). In an article, ‘Towards an Intercultural Theatre? Variations on Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*’ (2001) by Beate Neumeier, one distinguishing aspect of this production is pinpointed as being Brook’s casting of African actors as Prospero, Antonio and Ariel, then an Indian actor as Miranda, a German actor as Caliban, with a Japanese actor as Gonzalo and a French actor as Sebastian. Brook created a utopian island of *The Tempest* that did not belong to any specific cultural entity but included a Zen garden, Korean masks, African bubus and Neapolitan gestures (p. 103), a type of transcultural utopia (p. 105).

Virginia Mason Vaughan in her text book *The Tempest* (2011) analyses productions of *The Tempest*, investigating several adaptations of the text from theatre to film. The first recorded version of *The Tempest* was performed four hundred years ago by the King's Company (2011, p. 5) on 1 November 1611. In 1660 when London’s theatres were resurrected there was a new wave of actors who wanted to alter Shakespeare’s scripts. John Dryden and William Davenant adapted *The Tempest* with the title, *The Enchanted Island*. The play was an appropriate adaptation for Restoration spectators: ‘The Dryden-Davenant adaptation retains only about 30 per cent of Shakespeare’s original language and alters the plot to accord with Restoration aesthetics’ (p. 20). Borrowing from *commedia dell’arte* farce, Dryden and Davenant transformed Shakespeare’s storyline (p. 21). Vaughan claims that Peter Brook’s *The Tempest*, performed in 1957 by the Royal Shakespeare Company with John Gielgud as Prospero, had a minimalist concept that was negatively received as it had a ‘combination of vestiges of the old, pictorial style with a contemporary, introspective interpretation of its characters’ (p. 81). In 1968, Brook redirected *The Tempest* articulating a dynamic physicality for the actors involved, which included ‘mime and action’ (p. 81) and also discusses *The Tempest* directed by Peter Hall in 1974. In addition, Vaughan examines two Japanese productions of *The Tempest* directed by Yukio Ninagawa (1992) and Minoru Fujita (1992) respectively. In the latter two cases Vaughan uses the frame of intercultural hybridity to question whether the productions could be considered as genuine or non-genuine. She argues that ‘Shakespeare’s plays can never be “pure” except perhaps in our minds’ (p. 166). It is interesting to note that the issue of genuineness or non-genuineness is questioned when *The
Tempest is presented as an intercultural production. Purity seems not to be an issue for Vaughan when Western directors adapt the text, alter the plot and even change the ending of the play.

In considering notions of ‘purity’ in Shakespearean productions, Dennis Kennedy states that, ‘in the end Shakespeare doesn’t belong to any nation or anybody: Shakespeare is foreign to all of us’ (p. 146). In his article ‘Shakespeare without His Language’ (1996) he questions how ‘foreign’ Shakespeare functions ‘outside English-speaking environments’ (p. 133). Kennedy observes that Shakespeare’s texts definitely belong to the history of Great Britain and Ireland, North America and Australia (p. 135) noting, however, that unavoidably foreign-language productions would:

...lose an essential element of Shakespeare in the process of linguistic and cultural transfer...but it is also true that some foreign performances may have a more direct access to the power of the plays. (p. 136)

Acting Shakespeare (1991) follows Gielgud’s extensive experience of acting in and directing Shakespeare throughout his years. Gielgud played Prospero three times (p. 5). He was Prospero in Peter Brook’s 1957 production, in Peter Hall’s 1974 production and in Peter Greenaway’s 1991 film. Brook and Hall had different interpretations for the ending in The Tempest (p. 94). According to Gielgud, Brook’s interpretation was for Prospero to return to his country ‘as a kind of God’ (p. 94), however Hall imagined that Prospero would be unwilling to take his throne back and would return to the country in gloom (p. 94). W.B. Worthen in Shakespeare and the Authority of Performance (1997) examines the actor’s body in Shakespearean performance: ‘The body becomes the vehicle for the transmission of Shakespeare’ (p. 99). Worthen argues that body-training in Western theatre differs from Asian theatre forms in which body-training has 'for centuries' (95) been considered as a 'discipline,' (p. 95). Worthen argues that Western training privileges the verbal, Asian the physical. But this is problematic. It is true that in Asia body-training is rigorously physical, with a range of differing physical forms of training arising from differing cultures, and it is also the case that Western body-training has only been taught in institutions (schools, studios, universities) in Europe since the late nineteenth century. Prior to this, however, novice actors were trained by more experienced ones similarly to the master or apprentice arrangements in Asian theatre. Actors in Shakespeare's time and in the late seventieth century had long apprenticeships from childhood through to being adult actors:

New actors being trained to perform established roles were taught
to mime precisely the manner in which the part had first been acted: rehearsal was only necessary to ensure that the actor had ‘correctly’ received a part, and young players were harshly judged against their ‘originals’ (Stern, 2007, p. 11).

So it can be seen that there have been (and still are) similarities in the disciplined nature of body-training in Eastern and Western traditional theatre. Modern training methods for actors are espoused not only by the theorists (Denis Diderot, John Hill) but also by practitioner-trainers (Augusto Boal, Lee Strasberg) as well as acting teachers (Cicely Berry, Sanford Meisner). Further examination of traditional Shakespearean texts and performance styles, while informally examined in the rehearsal room, was beyond the scope of the current research. This intriguing area of study does, however, offer opportunities for future research. What was important to the doctoral project was an understanding of Eastern explorations of the West.

**Conclusion**

The preceding literature review provides useful insights into the theory and practices underpinning my thesis by providing a deeper understanding of the fragile issue of intercultural theatre. Intercultural theatre is not merely a matter of borrowing and exchanging cultural notions from different countries; intercultural theatre interrelates with other factors such as the political, economic, sociocultural and national identity of cultures. The review of the literature clearly shows an East and West dichotomy in the world of intercultural theatre and holds that intercultural theatre is either enriching the arts or is unethical when seen as misappropriation. From the research, it can be seen that scholarly criticism comes from many directions. Scholarly research reveals that the East criticises the West, the West criticises the East, and the East criticises itself just as the West criticises itself. This research brought me to a crossroads in determining my position on the intercultural theatre route that I was taking. Why does this form of theatre attract so much criticism? The research revealed that intercultural theatre is closely aligned to specific cultures, and the specific belief systems inherent in those cultures. This specificity means that each intercultural production, or as Fischer-Lichte says, interweaving of performance cultures (2014, p. 15), is unique and has particular culturally specific requirements. Thus, any director involved in a production that mixes texts and traditional forms, needs to be cautious in handling the cultural issues that arise.

There are three terms that emerge from the literature review that I want to connect to my intercultural work: cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging and aesthetic integrity. A strong sense
of cultural sensitivity must be activated in creating fusions where differing cultural materials are involved. Being sensitive to cultural boundaries, respecting differences, and valuing ethics – these are key to intercultural collaboration. Intercultural theatre consistently involves a sense of ownership; the theatrical forms involved belong to the people from whom they spring. This cultural belonging is illustrated in numerous works by directors whose cultural background became the main factor in interpreting Shakespearean texts. Cultural sensitivity and cultural belonging are the two key cultural approaches that emerge in this chapter and were essential in developing the intercultural materials for the project and for working with the personnel involved in the creative project. The next cultural approach is aesthetic integrity which I define as an ‘internal space’; the director's own integrity and aesthetics choices. Importantly, aesthetic integrity is tied to a director's rehearsal processes and aesthetic staging choices. While any director's aesthetic integrity may be negotiated through further cultural understandings there are some cases, where a director's aesthetic integrity does not allow for a negotiation with otherness.

The research into Malaysian and Asian directors, who were creating either Asian adaptations of Shakespeare, or contemporary aesthetic productions that utilised traditional theatre materials from the East, provided a practice template for the doctoral creative project. Australia as my ‘hybrid space’ (Gilbert & Lo, 2007, p. 11) is the perfect place to initiate this intercultural collaboration, allowing this cross-cultural exchange between Malaysia and Australia to enrich the Australian arts scene. The research suggested that through working with Australian actors and creative personnel in the development of my project, Throne of Thorns, I could embrace differing cultural perspectives with a view that it would give me ‘a new result from a new meeting’ (Martin, 2004, p. 5). My intercultural theatre project could be based on a process of exchange from one culture to another, actively impacting and shaping the creative work. In synthesising these perspectives, I began to realise that the thesis might describe the intercultural theatre project as a point where different cultures meet, connect with and adapt to one another.

The research suggests that the intercultural theatre project, Throne of Thorns (2015), could perhaps also be about questioning ‘self’ and questioning and challenging cultural and national identity. I was brought up in the Malay performing arts tradition, and learnt the traditional forms from being in Mak Yong coteries. Therefore, showing respect for the traditional art form became an important consideration. The doctoral project was not about the survival of traditional Malay theatre; it was not an attempt to preserve and find ways to revive traditional theatre. The literature review research confirmed that my creative project, Throne of Thorns, would be a contemporary piece derived from Mak Yong and my work with the ensemble would use selected,
adapted and reworked sections of Shakespeare’s text *The Tempest*. The subject matter that *Throne of Thorns* deals with is revenge, the hatred and pain of betrayal, and healing. In this, the project had universal ambitions, yet ultimately for me personally, *Throne of Thorns* would become about questioning and understanding my own culture. In my case, the intercultural theatre project did not seem to be merely a fusion of a Western text with Eastern performance techniques, but it was perhaps more about understanding ‘self’ as expressed by Shih: ‘a route to return to Self by way of Other’ (2000, p. 13). After my literature review research, it became important for me to investigate the traditional form, *Mak Yong*. How could I be respectful to my own culture if I did not research the history of the form and speak with established practitioners and scholars? I further my research in examining traditional Malay theatre *Mak Yong* in the next chapter.
Figure 3: “Raja (Prospero) Losing his Throne” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara, Toni-Lea Potter, Natalie Wilson, Daniel Cottier, Lauren Bacon, Nicole Samson, Tasha O’Brien, Georgia Broderick, Adrian Tolhurst, Daniel Hills. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
CHAPTER THREE

TRADITIONAL MALAY THEATRE:

MAK YONG AND ITS EVOLUTION

Introduction

This chapter deals specifically with the Malay traditional form, Mak Yong, and explores how it can be fused with *The Tempest* to create theatre that can engage Malaysian and Australian audiences. How might these two cultures, Malaysian and Australian work respectfully together? Firstly, this chapter examines the characteristic of the Malays. Secondly, it investigates the traditional theatre of the Malay, and thirdly, it examines the historical background of *Mak Yong*. This chapter lays out the development of *Mak Yong* and the transformations that occurred from the 1920s to the present. In this research I categorise *Mak Yong* into five phases: 1) *Mak Yong* in its Rural Forms; 2) *Mak Yong* in the Royal Court; 3) *Mak Yong* and Commercialisation; 4) *Mak Yong* and Transformation; and 5) *Mak Yong* and Urbanisation. This chapter argues that *Mak Yong* is in a process of transformation. Thus the objective of this chapter is to examine *Mak Yong* in order to understand what has happened to the form over time. It also presents the perspective of Malaysian practitioners, scholars and ministry officials with regard to the question of what is an ‘authentic’ and ‘inauthentic’ performance of *Mak Yong*.

Solehah Ishak, argues that ‘[w]hen culture and the society change, the aesthetics too would evolve and change’ (2012, p. 10). After deliberating upon the characteristics of the Malays, I will then define traditional Malay theatre, giving brief examples of this tradition, such as the *Wayang Kulit*, *Menora*, *Mek Mulung*, *Bangsawan*, *Jikey*, *Boria*, *Awang Batil* and *Selampit*. As *Mak Yong* is the main focus, this chapter will discuss the historical trajectory of *Mak Yong* and draw attention to the characteristics of *Mak Yong* performance. As mentioned earlier, *Mak Yong* is banned in Kelantan, the homeland of most of the traditional theatre. This has resulted in *Mak Yong* having to struggle to survive through performances in Kuala Lumpur, the capital of Malaysia. As a result, Kuala Lumpur has become a platform for sustaining the existence of *Mak Yong*.

In Kuala Lumpur there are three government bodies that are responsible for expanding the future of the traditional theatre: The National Department for Culture and Arts (*Jabatan Kebudayaan, Kesenian Negara* JKKN); the Palace of Culture (*Istana Budaya*); and the National Arts Culture and Heritage Academy (*Akademi Seni Budaya dan Warisan Kebangsaan* – ASWARA). All
three come under the Ministry of Tourism and Culture, Malaysia. These three entities are seen as
the main anchors in sustaining the lifespan of Mak Yong. The main objective of JKKN is for
‘preserving and promoting Malaysian culture and arts’ (JKKN, 2014). This is the chief
government body engaged in nurturing all the cultures in Malaysia, so it is the equivalent of the
Australia Council for the Arts.

As with the Malaysian National Theatre, the Palace of Culture plays an important producing role
in regards to Mak Yong. In this research in reference to the Palace of Culture I will use the term
Istana Budaya, the Malay acronym for the Palace of Culture. ‘Istana Budaya is the first theatre of its
kind in Asia possessing advanced stage mechanism for stage plays’ (Istana Budaya, 2014). In
Istana Budaya there are performances such as concerts, local and international orchestral
performances, and dance performances, traditional theatre, and local and international musicals.
Istana Budaya produces professional Mak Yong performances employing actors, musicians,
directors and the full complement of a creative production team. The National Academy of Arts,
Culture and Heritage, (hereafter ASWARA), was founded in 1994 and is a higher education
institution which offers instruction in the arts, culture and heritage (ASWARA, 2014). ASWARA
has procured the services of masters in training traditional theatre forms. These skilled trainers
moved their practice from their home state to the capital city under the patronage of the federal
government. They include the late Hamzah Awang Amat, a master puppeteer or dalang, and
Khatijah Awang, a prima donna of Mak Yong, who were both National Laureates for the Arts in
1993 and 1999 respectively (Gonzales, 2011, p. 27).

The latter part of this chapter provides an analysis of the interviews I conducted with Mak Yong
practitioners, and also with scholars and ministry officers, during a field trip to Malaysia in 2014.
The interviews offer deeper insight into the current circumstances of Mak Yong. Many of those
interviewed criticised the modernity of Istana Budaya and other Mak Yong performances in Kuala
Lumpur and argue that the modern Mak Yong productions are ‘inauthentic’. Fatimah Abdullah, a
prima donna of Mak Yong and a director of all Mak Yong productions in Istana Budaya emphasises
that her modern Mak Yong productions do retain authenticity although even she is against
extreme changes made to the form.

This chapter argues that Mak Yong indeed has always been subject to change, alterations, and
modifications despite existing performers claiming that the past performances were pure or
‘authentic’ compared to the modern performances. There is no cultural purity in Mak Yong. As
Schechner points out, ‘No culture is “pure” – that is, no culture is “itself”’ (1991, p. 308). This
research suggests that Mak Yong should be reassessed based on its functions as Mak Yong for
ritual or for entertainment purposes. It proposes that it is possible for Mak Yong to retain both purposes through being presented in both rural and urban styles and settings.

In this refining process it is important to decide upon and maintain key elements of Mak Yong. Although my creative project Throne of Thorns was not a Mak Yong production, but rather a contemporary piece that was inspired by Mak Yong performance techniques, researching the history of the form, and comprehending the current debates, meant that I was able to approach my own production from an informed position that drew not only upon my own experience, but from those elder Malay practitioners and scholars. This thesis argues that when working with traditional materials, using a culturally sensitive approach and having members of the creative team connected to the culture from which the traditional materials are being derived, having a sense of ‘cultural belonging’, is essential. Cultural sensitivity is an attitude that needs to be present when working with other cultures. For example, Bharucha, in dealing with other cultures, stresses an awareness of the dissimilarities between the East and the West and he demands respect for the differences (1990, p. 20). As mentioned in Chapter Two, closely related to cultural sensitivity is the concept of cultural belonging. Bharucha has this to say about this cultural belonging:

I suppose that if one wants to understand another culture, there is no way out but to live there for long periods of time. Only then can one confront one’s own mediation of its realities, without which one can never truly understand how people represent themselves to one another (1990, p. 155).

Cultural belonging is most often understood by a person who feels a deep connection to a specific culture – usually the one to which he or she belongs, because living and breathing in a cultural environment allows a person to internalise the culture.

**Characterising the Malays**

The Malaysian Federal Constitution article 160 defines the term Malay as, ‘a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language [and] conforms to Malay custom’ (p. 131). Fundamentally, Malays who convert from Islam are no longer considered Malay under the law. In Malaysia non-Malays who convert to Islam are termed as ‘masuk Melayu’, which means becoming a Malay instead of becoming a Muslim (Osman, 1989, p. 10). These definitions
of Malays are for the Malays in Malaysia and not for Malays in other parts of the world. This research focuses on the meaning of being Malay as stated in the Malaysian Federal Constitution.

The Malays have a very strong belief in adat. Adat can be termed as ‘all aspects of Malay culture and social life, from styles of dress and housing to rules of etiquette and social interaction’ (Nagata, 1974, p. 335). Adat is closely related to ceremonies of birth, engagement, marriage and life. A Malaysian anthropologist Wazir Jahan Karim (1990) defines adat as ‘a generic term to include customary practices, social institutions, systems of behaviour, and processes of socialization into culture’ (p. 13). Adat in Malay culture is vital. There is an old Malay proverb which says, Biar mati anak jangan mati adat, meaning it is ‘better to let one’s child die, but not one’s custom’ (Hussain, 2014, p. 115). This proverb, an often-quoted statement for the Malays, indicates the high status of adat in Malay society. The Malays also have high respect for maruah, which is pride. Adat is closely connected to pride. The Malays have numerous adat, which apply for births, weddings, and funerals. An example of Malay etiquette and an important Malay social interaction is the practice of salam. Salam is when ‘Malays draw the palm of their hand “to the heart as a gesture of sincerity”’ (Milner, 2008, p. 7). This gesture portrays respect. A person can be considered as rude or as having no manners if they do not salam, especially when meeting elders or visiting a Malay home.

Malays practice Islam, as Islam is the official religion in the country. However, Malays separate their belief system into two parts: the religion (agama) and supernatural beliefs (kepercayaan). Although Islam is the main religious pillar, supernatural beliefs inherited from the ancestors (kepercayaan orang-orang tua) have not been entirely discarded (Osman, 1989, p. 57). Many Malays still retain a close relation with the supernatural world and a large proportion still believes in semangat, the human soul (Winstedt, 1947, p. 19). For Malays, Semangat exists in every part of the body. It can be defined as a ‘vital energy or soul’ (Yousof, 2011, p. 11), which exists both in humans as well as in particular ‘non-living objects’ (p. 11) such as the keris (the Malay dagger) and royal regalia (p. 11). Semangat has a ‘special status in Malay society to the extent of being regarded as sacred’ (p. 11). Ritual in Mak Yong for healing purposes relates to reinforcing or evoking this semangat, particularly if it has been lost from a human body (p. 11). During the animist period prior to the arrival of formalized religions, Malays’ beliefs were dominated by the pawang and the bomoh. It was only with the arrival of Islam that beliefs in animism changed (Osman, 1989, p. 47). The primitive belief in the pawang (medicine man) was essential in the Malay village, so much so that the trust in a powerful pawang became one of the main characteristics of Malay society. There was no village without a pawang (Skeat, 1900, p. 56).
Furthermore, Malays also believed in the powers of the bomoh (sorcerer or shaman). Both the pawang and the bomoh dealt with the spirits in order to heal people physically and spiritually. As Malaysia moves towards a modern country, the trust in the pawang and the bomoh has shifted and modern medicine has taken over as the main source for physical cures. Yet, as this thesis will reveal in Chapter Five, there are still elements of this belief system being practiced in small villages, and these beliefs are intricately connected to Mak Yong performances. For example, shamans there still begin Mak Yong performances, which are conducted purely for healing purposes. Shaman is the person who will communicate with the spirits and heal the spiritual sickness whereas Pawang is a medicine man that does not deal with the spirits.

Another early belief amongst Malays was that of divine kingship. Malays are respectful towards the king as the main leader of the nation. Malaysia was previously ruled by an inherited kingship, which was termed, Yang di-pertuan Agong (He is made lord) or Sultan; in Hindu terms this means the Raja (Roff, 1967, p. 2). The Sultan is the symbol of harmony of the state. ‘The theory of the king as the Divine Man is held perhaps as strongly in the Malay region as in any other part of the world’ (Skeat, 1900, p. 23). The king and his physical body are believed to be sacred. The Malays’ feudal belief is that the Sultan or king has Daulat or ‘Royal Sanctity’ (p. 24). This demands loyalty to the king as the king holds the power. Daulat can be understood as ‘the shadow of Allah on earth’ (Mohktar-Ritchie, 2011, p. 15). Daulat can also be explained as ‘the mystical reinforcement of personality conferred by kingship’ (Roff, 1967, p. 2). This bestows the right of the king to punish those who disobey Malay rituals.

In contemporary Malaysia, globalisation and the influence of Western education have reduced these beliefs. After the Malaysian independence in 1957, Malaysia established a constitutional monarch and parliament. This caused changes in the political administration and resulted in the multi-national coalition, Barisan Nasional ruling the country. As a result, the Sultan or the king faced a reduction in power to govern the country and is now considered only as the head of Malay customs and Islam in Malaysia. Today, the Sultan represents Malay traditions rather than a power of authority (Mohktar-Ritchie, 2011, p. 15).

While traditionally indigenous Malays believed in animism, with the arrival of Hinduism and Buddhism and then Islam, beliefs changed. Islam came to Malaysia in the early fifteenth century (Andaya & Andaya, 1982, p. 53). Yet, the beliefs of the old Malays, are strongly reflected in traditional theatre, especially in Mak Yong. Research into Malay beliefs such as the adat, as well as animistic beliefs in pawang and the bomoh, and attitudes to kingship, including the understanding that there was a ‘soul’ existing in the keris (the Malay dagger) and royal regalia, was important for
developing the conceptual approach to my creative project, but this research was also vital for assisting me in understanding the position of those elder performers of Mak Yong whom I wanted to interview. Yet, before I could interview these elders it was necessary to fully understand the history of the form.

**Traditional Malay Theatre**

Traditional Malay theatre is important, as it is the legacy of the cultural heritage of the Malays. Malay culture is expressed through music, songs, dances, martial arts and games (Arshad & Ariffin, 1997, p. 2). Anthony Milner suggests that Malays accept traditional theatre such as *joget* dancing, *Mak Yong* and shadow plays, rituals and the practice of Malay shamans, as the foundation of Malay culture (2008, p. 8). Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1993) divides traditional theatre into four categories: proto-theatre, puppet theatre, dance theatre and opera (p. 11). Proto-theatre forms, *Selampit* and *Awang Batil* are individual performances that are comprised of storytelling involving the changing of characters and voice, performed by one person. Proto-theatre also has elements of singing and playing musical instruments. *Selampit* and *Awang Batil* have both declined in Malaysia (p. 12). The genre of puppet theatre, *Wayang Kulit*, demands a highly skilled *Dalang* to play the role as the master puppeteer. In Malaysia there are three types of *Wayang Kulit*: *Wayang Kulit Kelantan*, *Wayang Kulit Jawa*, and *Wayang Kulit Melayu* (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 2). *Wayang Kulit* uses shadows and puppets as the main elements. Meanwhile, dance theatre forms include *Mak Yong*, *Menorah*, and *Mek Mulung*. Dance theatre forms consist of stories, music, acting and dance, whilst the genre of opera includes *Bangsawan* and *jikey*. These opera forms, influenced from Western style opera through the presentation of a narrative with the use of songs and spoken drama, are often very melodramatic and emphasise romantic elements (Yousof, 1993, p. 16). These various forms of traditional theatre have enriched and reflected the culture of the Malays.

Shanti Balraj Baboo argues that *Mak Yong* ‘has attracted great attention at the local and international levels, however, there is scarce documentation on this art form’ (2015, p. 89). Therefore, several key scholars are relied on for this section of my research. One of these is, Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof (1976; 1993; 1994; 2004; 2011; 2012; 2014), an expert in traditional theatre in Southeast Asia. Besides Yousof, other scholars who have written about traditional theatre include Mohamad Ghouse Nasuruddin (2006; 2009; 2014; 2015), Mubin Sheppard (1972; 1983), A.S Hardy Shafii (2004; 2009; 2012; 2015), Rahimidin Zahari and Sutung Umar RS (2011), Zulkifli Mohamad (2012a; 2012b; 2012c) and Solehah Ishak (2008; 2012; 2014).
Gillit Asmara, an American dramaturg, defines traditional theatre as a performance that was presented in a village without the usage of the script, using local languages and it is closely interrelated to villagers and their family rituals. Asmara further explains that traditional theatre is about ceremonies with the mixture of drama, music and dance (1995, p. 165). It is important to recognise the purpose of traditional theatre that is closely related to the needs of the community. Traditional theatre is created by them to fulfil their needs.

Nasuruddin and Solehah Ishak (2014) conclude that there are similarities between the traditional theatre forms of Wayang Kulit, Mak Yong, Jikey, Boria, and Mek Mulung. Firstly, the stories of these traditional theatre forms have been passed down through oral traditions and are not scripted. Secondly, these traditional theatre forms are closely related to ritual, and the performances do not need a specific stage. These forms include two important rituals: Buka Panggung, which opens each performance and Tutup Panggung, which closes each performance (p. 292). Buka Panggung is the ceremony that precedes the performance to ask for protection from the spirits. Tutup Panggung is the closing ceremony to thank the spirits for their protection. These rituals are integral to the forms of performance. Besides performing an entertainment function, traditional Malay theatre serves as a ‘vehicle for the transmission of norms and values and as an intermediary between the real and the nether worlds’ (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. ix). The embedded rituals have healing purposes. Traditional Malay theatre serves to reflect traditional Malay customs and beliefs and as such is vital to an understanding of Malay culture. By examining the art of traditional theatre, the psyche of the Malays is made visible.

**Trajectory of Mak Yong Transformation**

There are numerous political and cultural influences that have changed the form of Mak Yong. Some of the changes have been intentional and aesthetical and some of the changes have been unintentional as the outcome of other influences. In this research, I categorise Mak Yong into five phases: 1) Mak Yong in its Rural Forms; 2) Mak Yong in the Royal Court; 3) Mak Yong and Commercialisation; 4) Mak Yong and Transformation; and 5) Mak Yong and Urbanisation.

**Mak Yong and Its Rural Forms**

Mak Yong developed in the Malay Peninsular before the arrival of Islam in the fourteenth century and was performed in Patani, (a historical part of Malay now in southern Thailand) and in Kelantan (Yousof, 2011, p. 1). Mak Yong from this pre-Islamic period fuses performative
elements that combine dance, music, acting and ritual and embodies strong animistic and shamanistic beliefs (Yousof, 2004, p. 38). In Malaysia the traditional theatre forms, folk arts, music and dances are closely connected to the states. Malaysia has thirteen states and generally each state has its own folk arts, which can be viewed as the cultural identity of that state. For example, the state of Johor has the dance form of Zapin (Mohd Nor, 2002, p. 30), and Sabah has the Sumazau dance (Janaun, 2010, p. 106). Whereas Kelantan, which Yousof terms as ‘the heartland of traditional Malay culture’ (2011, p. 1), is viewed as the origin of numerous traditional theatre forms such as Wayang Kulit, Dikir Barat, Main Teri, Menora, and Bagih. However, Rosdeen Suboh states that scholars are still searching for the certainty of the origins of Mak Yong (2012, p. 78) as ‘no one can conclusively prove with clear and valid evidence of its birth’ (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 4).

Political changes in Kelantan in the 1990s impacted on its arts scene resulting in a decline in traditional performances. Mak Yong was banned in Kelantan by the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS). The Chief Minister of Kelantan, Haji Nik Abdul Aziz Nik Mat declared that Mak Yong could not be publicly performed because it violated Islamic rules, through ‘exposure of the “aurat” (parts of the body that should not be seen in public) of male and female’ (Shafii, 2015, p. 15). A second factor contributing to this banning was that the Council of Ulama, the Kelantan Islamic religious council, decided that Mak Yong performances allowed the mixing of male and female audience members and this too was against Islamic regulations (p. 16). A third factor was that the opening and closing ceremonies of Mak Yong performances were comprised of ancient rituals that were not acceptable to Islam.

Traditional Mak Yong is performed for entertainment and healing purposes (Yousof, 2011, p. 13). When Mak Yong is presented for entertainment purposes only, it is called Mak Yong, but when it is used for healing purposes, it is known as Main Puteri – Mak Yong, a combination of Main Puteri, a shamanic dance and Mak Yong (p. 13). Main Puteri is a pre-Islamic trance dance and shamanic ritual (Yousof, 1994, p. 15). It involves a healing ceremony where there are two male healers: Tok Puteri, the main shaman and Tok Minduk, the rebab (traditional flute) player. In enacting Main Puteri-Mak Yong, Tok Puteri permits the spirits to enter his body and he then moves into a trance. Tok Minduk, acting as the assistant, uses music and singing to facilitate Tok Puteri’s communication with the spirits. The musical communication between Tok Minduk and Tok Puteri reveals the cause of illness (p. 194). This healing performance is usually done in a private place, the compound of the home, and can be watched by other villagers. Schechner claims that all
performance originates through ‘the creative tensions of the binary efficacy-entertainment’ (2002, p. 71). Efficacy and entertainment, he says, are ‘dancing partners’ (p. 71). As with Mak Yong, Schechner’s efficacy-entertainment dyad is closely related to the purpose of the performance. According to Schechner if the performance aims to ‘effect change’ (p. 71), if it is in some way transformative to an individual or to the community, and if that individual or community believes in the transformative processes enacted by the performance, then it can be claimed as ‘a ritual’ (p. 71). However, if the objective of the performance is to amuse, to impress, or be simply aesthetically pleasing, Schechner suggests it ‘is entertainment’ (p. 71). However, Schechner believes ‘no performance is pure efficacy or pure entertainment’ (p. 7), it is instead something much more complex. This is true for Mak Yong.

Historically, Mak Yong for entertainment was performed after the harvesting season in Kelantan. During the celebration phase, the Kelantanese community gathered at night to be entertained and to listen to the penglipur lara (storyteller), who would narrate the story of the greatest king and his adventures. These stories would transform the people’s imaginations, offering an escape from the struggles of real life (Mohd Akib, 2009, p. 50). Besides the penglipur lara, performance forms such as wayang kulit, mak yong, menorah, and main teri were performed for several nights. The Kelantanese also inherited numerous traditional games such as wan (flying kites), gasing (top spinning), and lumba perahu (racing boats). The festivals, games and competitions (organised by the king), connected the king and his people. These various entertainments created a strong connection between the upper classes (the king and the country administrative) and lower classes (the villagers) (p. 53). Mak Yong was historically performed within this atmosphere of entertainment, fiesta or celebrations. Besides the harvesting celebrations, Mak Yong for entertainment was usually performed when celebrating the Kelantan Puja Umur (king’s birthday) and wedding celebrations (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 36). Farouk Zakaria, a Kelantanese scholar in Universiti Malaysia Kelantan, explains his childhood memory of seeing a Puja Umur celebration:

The Kelantanese culture is very rich in this state of Kelantan. When I was small, we always had the festival of Puja Umur, with all its traditional performances. In the 1960s and 70s Mak Yong was one of the items to be performed during Puja Umur. I still remember when I was small perhaps ten years old; in fact I remember that the group of Sri Temenggong was invited to perform at one of my relative’s wedding in our private compound. There was an amazing experience, enjoying a cultural performance with the family members in the
wedding ceremony. I was excited to watch the *Mak Yong* performance because of the beauty of the songs and the lavish and colourful costumes. The performance lasted for three nights.  
*(Zakaria F, 2014, pers. comm., 12 February)*

Traditionally, *Mak Yong* performances were presented in an open-sided space that was surrounded by the audience, which was usually the village community. In rural settings in earlier times, the *panggung* or *bangsal* (the performance space) was made by bamboo, built as a temporary construction and the roof was constructed using thatched palm leaves and facing the east (Yousof, 2004, p. 38). This appeared as a hut with the ground covered by floor mats (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 37). *Mak Yong* performances, even now can be considered as minimalistic as they have no curtains, scenery, wings, or backstage area (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p.11). The performance takes place in the centre of the stage, with the actors, visible and seated in off-stage areas, when not performing. The transparency of actors and characters is characteristic of *Mak Yong*. The spoken dialogues of *Mak Yong* always indicate information as to the location of the setting. *Mak Yong* is a performance enjoyed by the community, and was performed in ‘an open setting in the middle of the village’ (p. 11).

*Mak Yong* performances traditionally lasted from three to five or even seven consecutive nights (Ishak, 2012, p. 11). However, since the banning of *Mak Yong* by the PAS in 1990, there have not been open *Mak Yong* performances in Kelantan. ‘With the issuance of the religious edict it spelled the end of makyung [sic] public performance in Kelantan’ (Shafii, 2015, p. 17). It is, however, still performed secretly by villagers for healing purposes (Ishak, 2012, p. 16). In my interviews, practitioners and scholars confirmed that the Kelantanese still secretly perform *Main Puteri-Mak Yong* (Wan Majid WM 2014, pers. comm., 13 February, Mamat N 2014, pers. comm., 13 February, Nor N 2014, pers. comm., 12 February) and stressed that for the Kelantanese this therapeutic ritual is believed as the only healing process for certain sicknesses.

Historically the traditional form of *Mak Yong* has been able to ‘adjust and adapt’ (Drewal 1992, p. 73). Historian Eric Hobsbawn argues that tradition is always an invented process and defines it as:

> a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past. In fact, where
possible, they normally attempt to establish continuity with a suitable historic past. (1983, p. 1)

The point is that tradition itself comes about through cultural processes and practices that are set in place to acknowledge particular values and ideas relevant to the culture. The particular rituals embedded in traditional dance forms such as *Mak Yong* and *Main Puteri* – *Mak Yong* reflect the changing of political, economic and cultural circumstances. This is demonstrated through the opening sequence of *Mak Yong*. The roots of this opening sequence lie in animism, yet as Islamic belief grew more widespread in Kelantan it was altered, with portions of the Quran added. The tradition of *Mak Yong* is something that has been reinvented as change occurred.

**Mak Yong** in the Royal Court

In the early twentieth century a major transformation occurred to *Mak Yong* as the dance form came under the patronage of Long Abdul Ghafar, the Kelantan prince. He was the youngest son of Sultan Muhammad II the king of Kelantan. Long Abdul Ghafar, also known as Tengku Temenggung, promoted *Mak Yong* passionately, moving a troupe of *Mak Yong* performers into the compound of his palace, which he called *Kampung Temenggung* (literally meaning the Temenggung village) (Shafii, 2009, p. 3). *Kampung Temenggung* a ‘Kelantanese arts centre’ (Yousof, 2004, p. 94) was established in July 1923 and lasted for twelve years. Tengku Temenggung selected performers throughout Kelantan to be educated in his centre. The performance forms supported in this centre included *Mak Yong*, *Wayang Kulit*, *Rebana Ubi* (the big frame drum), *Pencak Silat* (the martial arts) and the dance of *Asyik* (p. 94). The objective of this centre was to nurture *Mak Yong* as a valuable source of entertainment in Kelantan and as a symbol of prestige of the sultanate (Shafii, 2015, p. 7). It also developed the village dancers and musicians into a more refined troupe, one that was suitable to perform for the court; a similar process had occurred in the royal courts of Indonesia, Thailand and Cambodia (Yousof, 2004, p. 94). In *Kampung Temenggung*, *Mak Yong* was performed for the royalty and the royal guests in the *balai* or audience hall of the palace (Yousof, 1976, p. 51). During this time, Tengku Temenggung initiated a Royal Tribunal, which had power over any *Mak Yong* activities that were against Islamic teachings (Shafii, 2009, p. 3). In addition, the performers of *Kampung Temenggung* were obliged to attend religious classes in the Masjid Muhammadi mosque or in traditional Islamic schools.
At the same time, village performances of *Mak Yong* still continued.

During the patronage of Tengku Temenggung, there were two major *Mak Yong* transformations: firstly the role of Pak Yong was changed from a male role to a female role. This startling development allowed a female actor to play Pak Yong, a male king character. Historically, before 1920 the role of Pak Yong was played by men (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p.12). This change of gender in the *Mak Yong* principal role came as a result of Islamic demands. *Mak Yong* evolved to be a principally female dance-theatre and non-principal roles were given to male performers (Yousof, 1976, p. 51).

Another important transformation is the development of a more refined style of music, dance and costumes, compared to the traditional folk performances (Yousof, 2004, p. 94). Refined in the sense that the dancer’s movements were recreated to have a deeper gracefulness and manner when presenting the dance in front of the king and the royal family. This patronage supported the enhancement of costumes with more elaborate beads, and the headdress of Pak Yong was changed to appear slightly more like the king’s headdress (Abdullah, F 2014, pers. comm., 7 January). In *Kampung Temenggung*, *Mak Yong* performances performed for royalty and the royal guests in the *balai* or audience hall of the palace (Yousof, 1976, p. 51). This is another change that occurred during this patronage. However, in 1935 the death of Tengku Temenggung ended the royal funding into the arts scene of Kelantan (Yousof, 2004, p. 94). His death resulted in *Mak Yong* performers returning to the villages. The village performances were then altered by the royal court performers sharing their style of *Mak Yong*. ‘Over time, the art of the common people blended with the refined elegance of the palace to produce a standardized form of art as we know today’ (Shafii, 2015, p. 7).

*Mak Yong* and Commercialisation

A.S Hardy Shafii (2004) argues, in the 1950s and 1960s *Mak Yong* in Kelantan became commercialised (p. 38). *Mak Yong* performances were created primarily for entertainment and profit. There were many *Mak Yong* groups which travelled from one village to another to perform. These groups actively performed and competed with one another. It was important for any group to gain popularity because this involved the group’s survival. The more popular the group, the more money the group made from performances. The ticket system was introduced and performances were no longer free, even for children. Changes were made to accommodate a
shorter performance time. The lengthy ritual opening and the closing ceremonies were reduced. According to Shafii, commercialisation also led to an increase in creativity of the performances, particularly through acting, costumes, props, stage and the make-up of the performers (2004, p. 38). Abdul Rahman Jusoh explains, his experience performing in commercial Mak Yong was full of enjoyment and pleasure because the crowd was huge. Male, female, children, old and young came to watch Mak Yong. The ticketing system, he explains, provided extra funds:

during that time, the tickets were only $0.10 for adult and $0.05 for children. At that time a Mak Yong group could earn from $70-$150 per night. That is a lot! You just count on your own how many people are in the audience at that time? The size of the audience will boost the energy of the performers and thus improve the performance as a whole. (Jusoh AR 2014, pers. comm., 14 February)

Shafii emphasises that there were two differing spatial performing styles for Mak Yong; firstly, using a stage and secondly, without a stage (2012, p. 51). If the performance was to stay less than three days in one location, then the group would work without a stage. If they were to stay more than three days, then they would build a stage. The Mak Yong stage usually took five to seven days to build and was not raised too high. The audience was seated on the ground. Chairs were not provided so the audience was welcome to bring ‘anything for their comfort. Usually the audience would bring their own floor mats and sometimes bring some snacks too’ (p. 51). Two of the practitioners whom I interviewed, Abdul Rahman Jusoh and Fatimah Abdullah, describe their past experiences travelling with Mak Yong groups. Abdullah narrates that at the backstage there was a kitchen and bedrooms for all the performers and it was separated with cloth like a back drop (2014 pers. comm., 7 January). Jusoh adds: ‘Yes, we had a kitchen at the back of the stage. We even slept on the stage. I once slept under the stage. I experienced using coconuts as my pillow’ (2014 pers. comm., 14 February).

Mak Yong performance spaces evolved in different phases. Traditionally, Mak Yong performances were conducted on the ground with the audience sitting in the arena or thrust setting. However, in this period, Nasruruddin suggests, the Mak Yong stage was altered:

The modern stage, which is about the size of the traditional stage is raised between four to five feet from the ground and constructed like a hut with an attap (roof), which varies between six to eight feet from
the stage floor. The rear of the stage is converted into a changing room. (2009, p. 36)

Yousof reveals that modern stages or *panggung* were built from wood and were raised from three to five feet above the ground to give focal points for audience viewing. Before 1950 there was no backstage, actors prepared and changed costumes in the nearest house to the *panggung*. The *Mak Yong* stage became a ‘replicate proscenium setting’ (2011, p. 8). The arena set up met the needs of the community, however commercial performances demanded a clear separation between the audience and the performers. The backstage area was built to hide the actors and created a further separation. *Mak Yong* performers no longer shared their space with the audience, but instead were separated from them.

Today, *Mak Yong* performances in Kuala Lumpur, at venues such as *Istana Budaya*, Petronas Philharmonic Hall, The Actors Studio, Malaysian Tourism Centre (MTC), Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, other local university and school halls (Rahman, 2015, p. 47) are presented on a proscenium stage, following Western conventions. Some modern *Mak Yong* productions even separate the musicians from the actors, unlike in the villages, where the musicians and actors are together in one space. Modern *Mak Yong* performances have changed venues from outdoors to indoors and have eschewed the traditional ceremonies of *Buka Panggung* and *Tutup Panggung*, signifying the loss of the ritual aspect in modern *Mak Yong*. Through these changes in spatial design the function and meaning of the performance have also changed.

**Mak Yong and Transformation**

In 1970, a *Mak Yong* group named *Seri Temenggung* was formed in Kelantan initiated by Khatijah Awang, the prima donna of *Mak Yong*. The group’s name was inspired by Tengku Temenggung, the former royal prince who had promoted *Mak Yong* (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 49). The *Seri Temenggung* group revived the gracefulness of the *Mak Yong* dancing style, the ‘elegant court tradition’ (Yousof, 2004, p. 95) from the Kampung Temenggung. The performers in the *Seri Temenggung* group were trained by people who were themselves performers in the era of Kampung Temenggung. This group altered staging conventions. *Mak Yong* was no longer performed in its convention (arena or thrust form), but presented in auditoriums in towns that had proscenium settings. The use of backdrops was also initiated (p. 94). Yousof argues that with the arrival of the *Seri Temenggung* group there was ‘the emergence of a glamorous and popular urban tradition of *Mak Yong’* (p. 94). Yousof, who during his doctorate research closely worked with this group
in Kelantan in the 1970s, suggests that Khatijah Awang not only adapted *Mak Yong* to the modern stage, especially the proscenium arch stage, but also shortened the performance time, and introduced set design and stage props (2014, p. 181). *The Seri Temenggung* troupe initiated transformations to *Mak Yong* performance structures.

Zulkifli Mohamad, a performer and a local scholar, argues that ‘What was re-established by Khatijah in 1970, however, was an altogether new kind of *Mak Yong*, perhaps a reconstructed form’ (2012b, p. 446). As a Kelantanese, Mohamad was brought up in the performing arts environment and he remembers the costumes created by the *Seri Temenggung* group as glamorous, shining and full of sequins. He concludes that Khatijah’s main attempt was to attract audiences to *Mak Yong*, which at that time had to compete vigorously with other forms of entertainment (p. 447). Marlenny Deenerwan, an academic from the University of Malaya, who was also a student of Khatijah Awang, agrees that the innovation was introduced by the *Seri Temenggung* group which had added beads to the costumes to enhance their beauty (2015, p. 263). The *Seri Temenggung* group not only managed to introduce *Mak Yong* outside of Kelantan, through productions in Kuala Lumpur, but also internationally. Khatijah was invited to travel the world performing *Mak Yong* for audiences in London, New Zealand, Kuwait, Germany, Paris, Amsterdam, Bangkok, Jakarta, Singapore and elsewhere (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 49). The style of *Mak Yong* performed by this group was considered a huge transformation (Yousof, 2004, p. 95, Mohammad, 2012, p. 447). Yet, this transformed *Mak Yong*, created by *Seri Temenggung* in the 1970s, is today what is considered as ‘authentic’.

*Mak Yong* and Urbanisation

As mentioned previously, as a result of the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS) banning *Mak Yong* in Kelantan, the traditional form is currently performed outside Kelantan, particularly in Kuala Lumpur. *Istana Budaya* plays a crucial role in producing traditional Malay work. It is considered to be ‘among the top ten most sophisticated theatres in the world, and is proud to be the first theatre in Asia equipped with cutting-edge stage equipment’ (Foley & Khan, 2012, p. 425). *Mak Yong* productions in *Istana Budaya* from 2003 to 2013 include: *Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2006), *Endeng Tejeli* (2008), *Raja Besar Senyanya* (2009), *Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010), *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011) and *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* (2013). The researcher directed *Raja Tangkai Hati* and Fatimah Abdullah the prima donna directed the rest of the performances.
In 2003, *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* (King of Heart) became the first *Mak Yong* production on the *Istana Budaya* stage. It was presented in the proscenium space and the scenic elements of *Raja Tangkai Hati* were transformed into a modern Western theatre setting (Foley & Khan, 2012, p. 419). While traditionally *Mak Yong* performances did not rely on any theatrical set, in this production each scene change used a different set and maximised the use of lifts, wagons, fly bars and other special effects. Foley and Khan are of the opinion that *Mak Yong* needs to be merged with new technology in order to make it relevant for today’s audiences. ‘For *Mak Yong* to continue into the twenty-first century, adaptation is necessary. Cultural heritage that remains too “true” to the past makes for an endangered form’ (p. 420). They propose that the latest technologies be considered as necessary solutions to connect the older form of *Mak Yong* to the present.

*Mak Yong* was transformed when it entered the prestige stage of *Istana Budaya* in the city of Kuala Lumpur; the next change happened in 2006. *Mak Yong Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* was the production that introduced a male Pak Yong, Rosnan Rahman. According to Rahman (2006), he was inspired to play Pak Yong’s character after he watched a performance by Pak Su Mat in 2002 from a *Mak Yong* troupe called *Cahaya Bulan*. He was mesmerised with Pak Su Mat’s performance in *The Actor’s Studio* in Kuala Lumpur, which planted a seed of hope in him to perform *Mak Yong* (p. 12). Rahman’s appearance in 2006 as Pak Yong (male Pak Yong) created a new dimension in *Mak Yong* performances. Since then, Rahman has been the leading Pak Yong in most of the performances in Kuala Lumpur. Eliza Zainuddin, a scholar from the University of Malaya, criticised the changing of the leading role from female actor to male, claiming that it was awkward for the audience to have a male actor playing this role (Zainuddin, 2012, p. 442).

Another difficulty in accepting this role, was that the audience were used to seeing the female actress in makeup, wearing a glamorous costume and singing, and dancing using the body and voice of a female. The audience was not yet capable of accepting a transformation to a male actor.

*Mak Yong Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* injected a contemporary element by using new technology, screen projection and also a flying scene (al-Yahya, 2013, p. 17). This was the first time *Mak Yong* attempted this kind of spectacle especially the presentation of the flying scene. In this production too, it introduces two films stars Vanida Imran and Sofia Jane to act in the traditional theatre (p. 17). This *Mak Yong* production created its own history when it sold the tickets at the most expensive price RM253.00 ($85 AUD) which increased the value of traditional theatre (Yusof, 2013, p. 53). Critic, performer and lecturer of *Mak Yong*, Jumilah Tahir was
fascinated by the aesthetic of the stage and considers this production the best Mak Yong ever presented on the contemporary stage (2013, p. 47).

The shift of the location of Mak Yong performances has definitely changed the purpose of the performances. Mak Yong has changed from entertainment and healing for villagers, to palace entertainment for the king and royalty, to commercialised entertainment touring Kelantan districts for financial gain. In 1990, the government bodies and higher tertiary institutions produced Mak Yong in Kuala Lumpur, this too impacted on the conventions of Mak Yong (Kong-Chiang, 2015, p. 175). The urban Mak Yong is now performed in theatres, indoors with a proscenium or thrust stage, and the audiences conform to ‘Western standards of behaviour’ (Brown, 1999, p. 103) such as sitting on chairs in the auditorium. John Russell Brown, theatre writer and director, discusses his experience in watching Noh theatre in Japan and Kutiyattam in Kerala, India. He finds, sitting in the auditorium loses ‘the freedom’ (p. 103) which the villagers had previously. The same thing has happened in contemporary Mak Yong performances. Village performances ‘allow[ed] the audience members to talk amongst themselves, call out to the actors, move around and meet other people, or eat and drink, fall asleep’ (p. 103) but contemporary auditorium performances do not. Mak Yong has had to deal with the urbanisation of the form, due to the shifting of location from the village to the city, thus, today, the whole raison d’etre of Mak Yong performance has again transformed.

All these transformations reveal that Mak Yong is not a static art form. Director-General of National Department for Culture and Arts (Jabatan Kebudayaan Kesenian Negara – JKKN) Norliza Rofli (2014, pers. comm., 12 March) argues that culture is evolving. According to Rofli, culture can be seen as in a process of evolution, with every stage seen as authentic by those who create it. Nasuruddin argues that Boria, one of the theatres in Malaysia that was considered as modern in the past, is now considered traditional: ‘There is nothing authentic. There’s nothing original’ (2014, pers. comm., 4 February). And in the same vein, Schechner emphasizes that, ‘cultures are always changing—even if we do not (yet) know how to predict what changes will occur’ (1991, p. 310). From these five phases of Mak Yong transformation discussed here, it can be discerned that Mak Yong is not static and the dynamics of it continue to evolve.
Perceptions of Mak Yong and Authenticity: Analysis of Interviews

Following research into contemporary Mak Yong productions, I undertook a field trip to Malaysia to interview those who have been and still are actively involved in this theatre form. In the states of Kelantan, Penang and Kuala Lumpur, I interviewed representatives of three different groups: practitioners, scholars and ministry officials all of whom were involved in Mak Yong and other traditional Malay theatre forms such as Wayang Kulit (shadow puppet) and Main Puteri (healing ceremony). Of the three states, Kelantan has most of the older Mak Yong practitioners, their ages ranging from 55 to 70. Most of these veteran performers have been involved in Mak Yong from a very early age, learning it from their families. In addition to the older practitioners, Kelantan has the services of a new university known as Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), which has a Faculty of the Performing Arts offering traditional Kelantan arts in its program. I was able to interview some of the scholars there. My field trip to Penang took me to Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), which was the first Malaysian university to offer traditional arts programs. In Penang, I interviewed scholars who have written and researched in the field of traditional Malay theatre. USM has also hired some Kelantan practitioners who were capable of teaching Mak Yong and Wayang Kulit. Most of the Kelantanese traditional performers have moved outside of Kelantan to work in universities around Malaysia teaching the arts of Kelantan such as Mak Yong and Wayang Kulit. They have been hired for their high levels of skill and experience, and are known as masters or gurus. In Kuala Lumpur, I interviewed scholars, ministry officers, a leading Mak Yong actor, a director of Mak Yong, the masters or gurus in the arts who are directly involved in the mainstream performances of urban Mak Yong. The interviewees included the Kelantanese masters who are employed by institutions of higher learning such as the ASWARA, Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris, Universiti Teknologi MARA and Universiti Malaya. As mentioned earlier, the three main government bodies which are responsible for securing the future of Mak Yong are the Istana Budaya, ASWARA and JKKN. I also interviewed the director-general of these three bodies to gain an understanding of their roles in the development of Mak Yong.

In handling the interviews, especially during the trip to Kelantan, I had to be cultural aware and sensitive to the area and particularly alert to the differences between my own cultural background as a Malay from Kuala Lumpur in comparison with the Malays that live in Kelantan. Although it is the same country, the geographical differences reflect very different cultural attitudes with regard to attire, manner, and language/slang. Kelantan is governed by PAS, which emphasises a strong Islamic practice, consequently, a Muslim dress code needs to be followed. And with dress
comes manner and decorum, which meant that when entering the traditional theatre world I had to adhere to what was expected of me by these experienced practitioners.

In all of these interviews, the responses from the interviewees took the form of evaluating, criticising and commenting on the modern *Mak Yong* productions that had been performed in *Istana Budaya* recently. Following the interviews, I divided the interviewees into two groups: those who argued against the current transformations to the form, and those who welcomed them. I must point out, however, that most of the interviewees were critical of the changes happening in modern *Mak Yong*.

From these interviews, I have concluded that the predominant conflict with regard to this iconic cultural art form concerns authenticity, tradition and modernity. According to most of the participants, what is being presented as *Mak Yong* today is not the same as in the past, or *not asli* as most of the Kelantanese put it, which literally means not original or not authentic. In their view, the lack of authenticity of *Mak Yong* today is due to a lack of attention to essential elements, such as the particularities of the dances, songs, costumes, staging, performance time and quality of performance. The following section considers the issues that were raised by the practitioners.

Abdul Rahman Jusoh (2014, pers. comm., 14 February), the multi-talented percussionist on traditional instruments, argues that *Mak Yong* today does not adhere to traditional forms because of a tendency to shorten performance time. Additionally, the view from the majority of interviewees was that there was too much cutting of certain songs or dances, which Jusoh believes is due to the demand to limit the length of the performances. Jusoh suggests that contemporary performances of *Mak Yong* are expected to fit into modern lifestyles and can no longer last for several evenings. Jusoh adds that another factor contributing to a perceived lack of authenticity is the inability of younger performers to master the skills needed in songs, music, acting and dances, sufficiently. As a result, many elements of *Mak Yong* are being omitted from performances. ‘The problem is if they do not know how to play the song, they just choose to cut it’ (2014, pers. comm., 14 February). Che Mat Jusoh (2014, pers. comm., 5 February) agrees with Abdul Rahman Jusoh that the lack of singing ability of the younger performers has resulted in *Mak Yong* songs being removed. Che Mat Jusoh is a multi-skilled performer of *Mak Yong* who has taught in Universiti Sains Malaysia for almost twenty years. Che Mat Jusoh is also a columnist in *Pentas* magazine (a performing arts journal published by the *Istana Budaya*). He questions the need to cut the singing parts to accommodate the limited hours of today’s performances. In his view, singing is vital in *Mak Yong*, forsaking the songs and merely offering
acting and dancing means that Mak Yong is not complete. ‘Once UNESCO recognised Mak Yong as the world heritage with some hope, we can retain Mak Yong in the original form. However, they [the practitioners] just cut or throw bits out’ (2014, pers. comm., 5 February).

Wan Midin Wan Majid (2014, pers. comm., 13 February), a Mak Yong actor who is closely associated with the role of Peran (the king’s servant), claims that Mak Yong today is no longer authentic. He describes contemporary Mak Yong as losing its soul and claims that it can be called Mak Yong only because of the costumes. Majid sees the misuse of la manik (the accessory beads worn on the chest) in contemporary Mak Yong, as one of obvious problem:

If I want to mention about the aesthetics of Mak Yong today, frankly speaking, today we do not have it anymore. The costumes for example, in a group, if there are seven members of the group, there would not be seven headgears or seven la manik. No, it would never happen. That is modern! (2014, pers. comm., 13 February)

In the past, the king, Pak Yong, was the only character to wear la manik. However, in today’s performances everyone in the group wears it. As a result, every character looks the same in terms of hierarchy. The use of la manik by every character means that exclusivity for the king is lost. It also creates confusion for the audience, as the costume indicates a character’s status. This oversight, Wan Midin claims, is due to a lack of knowledge on the part of those who are involved in modern Mak Yong productions.

Mat Gel Mad Dali (2014, pers. comm., 13 February) a Mak Yong performer, musician and a maker of traditional Kelantan musical instruments such as gendang, rebab and serunai, agrees with Wan Midin Wan Majid’s despair at the homogenisation of the characters’ status. In addition, he argues that the use of dance in modern productions does not contribute, as it should. Dance in modern Mak Yong, he argues, has lost the precision of body and hand movement, together with its softness of manner, and this reveals an incomplete understanding of the character by the performers: ‘Mak Yong dance has its manner and gracefulness. When you are in the squatting stance position, your body must be bent. Do not open your leg too wide. It loses the manner of Mak Yong dance’ (2014, pers. comm., 13 February). He suggests that what is being performed today is nowhere near what was done in the past, and is the poorer for it: ‘Mak Yong in the past generation is not the same with the present Mak Yong’ (2014, pers. comm., 13 February).
Husin Yusoff, a well-known *Tok Dalang*, master of puppetry from Kelantan, comments negatively on the precision of contemporary body and hand movements. Yusoff’s views are similar to those of Mad Dali in criticising dancing in *Mak Yong*. He observes that *Mak Yong* performance in *Istana Budaya* lacks skilful performers. He states that the singing and the dancing are faulty, and the acting is inappropriate. As a result, the performance has become a performance without soul. He argues that he is not able to release his own inner ‘energy’ or *setok angin* when he watches a performance that does not communicate spiritually to him (Yusoff, H 2014, pers. comm., 5 March).

Overall, according to the participants in this study, the art in contemporary *Mak Yong* is lost. They argue that modern *Mak Yong* performances are not authentic, and some of them refuse to classify these performances as *Mak Yong*. For example, there are practitioners such as Nisah Mamat, the great Pak Yong (Mamat N 2014, pers. comm., 13 February), Norhayati Zakaria (Zakaria N 2014, pers. comm., 12 February) the daughter of Khatijah Awang, the late *Mak Yong* prima donna, who is teaching *Mak Yong* dance in University Malaysia Kelantan, and Awang Che Omar the prominent *rebab* (spike fiddle) player in Kelantan, all of whom consider that what is being presented today is nothing like the original (Che Omar A 2014, pers. comm., 13 February).

From the interviews conducted I conclude that there are several key concerns about what many term modern *Mak Yong*:

1. The excision of several songs in the structural *Mak Yong* form, which is due to time constraints and exacerbated by the fact that many actors cannot sing the songs sufficiently well.

2. The dancers of *Mak Yong* today are not considered of very high quality because of imprecise body postures and body movements, especially with regard to hand and leg movements. The awkwardness of the dancers is the result of limited time in learning the craft, making it impossible to master the routines.

3. The acting has been adversely affected by the inclusion of too much modern dialogue. It was considered unfortunate that traditional language is currently being omitted. In some cases over-exaggerated comedy led to a loss of deeper meaning. *Mak Yong* now relies too much on comic inserts.

4. The stage settings have moved too far from the original conventions. This is due to elaboration and lavishness in the set design of modern *Mak Yong*.
In analysing the interviews, I began to question whether it was authenticity that the practitioners were concerned about or whether they were talking about continuity between past and current performances. Certainly the structure of the performances may not be the same as in the past, but similar and different form are two different things which some practitioners have difficulty separating. The interviewees often compared past and present performances. Some practitioners object to any degree of change, creativity, or innovation. Yet the research reveals that *Mak Yong* is changing and according to Schechner, ‘attempting to fix cultures or stop them from changing is like trying to end or annihilate history’ (1991, p. 309).

In Malaysia the widely held practice of comparing and searching for similarities and differences between past and present performance is dominating the discussion about *Mak Yong* and other traditional performing arts. Many of the elder practitioners rely on what they remember and what they want to retain, whereas the new generation argues for the injection of new ideas into the art form. Accepting alterations to the form made by the younger generation of *Mak Yong* performers could be the main challenge for the traditional practitioners and some scholars. Mohamed Ghouse Nasruddin describes *Mak Yong* as a theatre of ‘imagination of abstraction’ (2014, pers. comm., 4 February) a view that demands the use of the mind more than the physical sense of vision. Consequently, he argues against putting *Mak Yong* in a lavish setting; rather he believes in retaining the simplicity of the traditional form, which is essentially a performance without a set. Nasruddin agrees that traditional theatre has evolved over time however he insists that audiences need to be re-educated to appreciate art of this kind.

Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, like Nasruddin, believes that *Mak Yong* should retain all its characteristics as traditional theatre and is adamant that *Mak Yong* should not be modernised. He exhorts the practitioners to allow modern and traditional plays to stand on their own – and he separately and strongly argues that the main elements of *Mak Yong* are the music and dance, which should be preserved, as they are serving the aesthetic elements of the form. He sees music as the most important part of *Mak Yong* as it has certain functions and effects on its audiences (2014, pers. comm., 20 January). Therefore, he argues that *Mak Yong* should remain without any alterations. According to Yousof, what is being produced now is too concerned with achieving glamour. Yousof challenges *Mak Yong* directors and producers to retain *Mak Yong* without adding unnecessary additional elements in the name of modernity.

On the one hand there is a strong emphasis from the academics for tradition and authenticity, whilst on the other hand, there are some practitioners who approve of injecting modernity into *Mak Yong*. These practitioners argue that tradition is not static and there is room for alterations.
Che Nasir Yusoff (2015, pers. comm., 7 January) maintains that *Mak Yong* and other traditional arts should be in line with the times. Che Nasir Yusuf is considered the ‘Master of Traditional Arts’ (*Adiguru*) at the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage Malaysia (ASWARA) and is a well-known master puppeteer skilled in acting and the singing and music of *Wayang Kulit* (the shadow puppet) and *Mak Yong*. He strongly urges that traditional theatre should be a part of the globalised world in order to reach a diversified audience. To achieve that, modernity should be injected into the traditional form by using current technology and adjusting it to contemporary audience expectations.

Similarly, Fatimah Abdullah (2014, pers. comm., 7 January), a long-time *Mak Yong* practitioner, supports Yusoff’s view. She maintains that *Mak Yong* should accommodate modern elements by adapting the technology of the contemporary stage in order to attract younger audiences. However, Abdullah lists aspects that should remain integral to *Mak Yong*, such as the concept of walking in a circle, the use of dialogue in linking the entrances and exits of scenes, the music and the main dance sequences. Even though she thinks *Mak Yong* should be modified, in her interview she also stressed the need to maintain these particular past practices. ‘To modify *Mak Yong* is fine, however, this must not be overly done until you destroy it’ (2014, pers. comm., 7 January).

Hatta Azad Khan, film and theatre director, academic and Director-General of the ASWARA, describes traditional theatre as the intellectual property of a nation. He posits that tradition involves a process of passing down knowledge, which should then be put into practice, without which the heritage will diminish and fade away. Khan argues that *Mak Yong* should adjust to modernity and up-to-date technology must be utilised in *Mak Yong* performances today. He is against the view that *Mak Yong* should only present its selected stories. He believes *Mak Yong* should be transformed in order to ensure its future (2014, pers. comm., 6 May).

Similar to Khan, Farok Zakaria (2014, pers. comm., 12 February) a scholar from *Universiti Malaysia Kelantan*, emphasises that *Mak Yong* needs contemporary influences. In order to be dynamic and take audience tastes into account, performance times must be reduced. Zakaria rejects the view that *Mak Yong* should remain the same, asserting that the traditional form so many elderly practitioners argue for will not attract an audience. ‘Current aesthetics means current practices jointly with the traditional practices married together become the aesthetic of current performances. *Mak Yong* belongs to a long time ago. You can never find it anymore. Everything changes over time’ (2014, pers. comm., 12 February).
The interviews I conducted in Malaysia with practitioners and scholars provided me with a deeper understanding of the real challenge in producing Mak Yong. They revealed to me the passion and the devotion of the practitioners, men and women who have struggled all their lives for this art form and for the values inherent in their performances. These interviews exposed me to the anger, frustration, comments, criticisms and hopes of artists.

Once I had charted the history of Mak Yong, and interviewed many of the elder practitioners, scholars and ministry officials involved in maintaining the Mak Yong form, and understood their concerns about the ‘authenticity’ or ‘inauthenticity’ of Mak Yong, it was important for me to analyse the relevance of concepts of authenticity in relation to this art form. The emphasis of the interviews was whether the present Mak Yong is still authentic. Most of the critics claim that Mak Yong is losing its identity. It is missing its characteristics. The practitioners and the scholars believe that something should be preserved. In their views, Mak Yong should retain its form and continue exactly as it was in the past or it reflects inauthenticity or not asli. Cultural authenticity concerns cultural ownership and cultural knowledge. The knowledge of a culture is transferred from one generation to another generation often through dance and song, allowing the culture to be owned by its society. Yet, changes too happen in society. As long as the community feels that it owns the changes to a cultural practice that is evolving it becomes possible for cultural ownership and cultural knowledge to be sustained. Cultural authenticity is related to the people. Cultural authenticity does not necessarily mean sticking to what a cultural practice has been in the past. Replication or a creative interpretation of a cultural practice can also be a sign of cultural ownership.

This research has found that Mak Yong has continually been transforming and that each generation longs for the style that they first encountered. What becomes more important in any Mak Yong performance, the research reveals, are the values embedded in the performance. What elements of ritual and tradition are retained to connect audiences with their past?

**Conclusion**

This chapter argues that Mak Yong can continue to exist for two different purposes. It can accommodate the needs of urban people in Kuala Lumpur (and other city people in other states in Malaysia too) and also rural people in Kelantan. Both forms are worthy yet different: the modern and the classic style of Mak Yong. Mak Yong still exists in Kelantan, performed as a healing ceremony, even though this form has been banned. What the Kelantanese require is not
the same as the Malays in other states in Malaysia. This process is already occurring concurrently, reflecting the needs of varying populations. *Mak Yong* need not be criticised if it has been transformed following current trends. Of more importance is whether modern *Mak Yong* creates an impact on its urban audience and what that impact is. Research into this area would be useful for scholars, practitioners and producers, but is beyond the scope of the current thesis. It might be important, however, to consider whether the transformations that have currently taken place in contemporary *Mak Yong* performances have been able to strengthen the identity of the Malays, through retaining some connection to Malay heritage and through embracing Malay culture.

This chapter explores the past and present of *Mak Yong*, the Malay dance theatre form from Kelantan. It investigates the identity of *Mak Yong*, from its origins, to existing productions. This chapter begins by providing an overview of traditional Malay theatre forms before introducing *Mak Yong*. In tracing the characteristics of *Mak Yong*, it has been important to the research to understand its origins, repertoires, stage conventions, performance structure, acting, and characters, and also the transformations that occurred before *Mak Yong* was banned in 1990. In addition, this chapter outlines the various stages of development in *Mak Yong*. It reveals transformations that occurred as *Mak Yong* moved from the villages to the court, during the era of Tengku Temenggung; the revolution brought about by the ticketing system when *Mak Yong* began to be commercialised; and the transformation of *Mak Yong* in the era of invention by Khatijah Awang and her group *Seri Temenggung*, which has shaped the identity of *Mak Yong* today. Further, this chapter discusses the evolution in the gender roles in *Mak Yong*, especially the reclaiming of Pak Yong’s character as a male in urban *Mak Yong* today. This chapter also provides an analysis of the modern *Mak Yong* productions performed at *Istana Budaya* and examines the interviews of three groups of respondents from my field trip to Malaysia. Notions of authenticity dominate the concepts of *Mak Yong* from the perspectives of the interviewees, however, this chapter reveals that *Mak Yong*, far from being a form that has never changed, has in fact been evolving ever since its inception, questioning the very notion that there was ever such a thing as an authentic *Mak Yong* performance. This chapter also argues that *Mak Yong* has evolved over time as a result of modifications made to aesthetics, techniques and conventions. The conventions of *Mak Yong* have transformed and have been reshaped according to political, economic, religious and socio-cultural demands. There is no ‘pure’ *Mak Yong* or any other cultural artefact, for according to Bharucha:
If tradition lives today, it is because it has always changed in the course of its history. How it changes within its own performative and cultural context is frequently undocumented and even forgotten, because the change occurs slowly, organically, in deference to the larger needs of its community. (1990, p. 196)

The research for this chapter further confirms the understandings revealed from the literature review stating the importance, for the intercultural practitioner and researcher (myself), of employing approaches that involve cultural sensitivity and cultural belonging. In dealing with traditional materials, the issue of cultural sensitivity is vital. When interviewing elder practitioners, respect is important. Being insensitive with the questions asked might offend or humiliate the practitioners. Dress must also be considered important when dealing with the Kelantanese. And cultural belonging is essential because *Mak Yong* is deeply connected to the Malaysian sense of community. This research suggests that in dealing with intercultural theatre, in this case the production *Throne of Thorns*, it was preferable that the director had a sound footing in her own cultural tradition. My trip to Kelantan, Penang and Kuala Lumpur proved that as a Malay living in Malaysia for four decades I still needed to learn continuously and work to understand my own cultural heritage. It is important to be able to internalise the cultural meaning and context of a culture in relation to the cultural materials being incorporated in an intercultural production. Bharucha discusses:

> if the Bengali woman could not smoke a cigarette after her meal, what could she do? Eat an orange perhaps? “No, never, we don’t eat oranges after dinner” “Why?” “How can you ask such a question? We just don’t eat oranges after dinner. Understand? (1990, p. 148)

The research for this chapter provided a strong context for constructing my creative project. Whilst I was not creating a *Mak Yong* production, in order to discover whether I could draw from such a traditional form, I needed to understand how that form had evolved over time. This chapter reveals that art forms are often borrowing elements from each other, and that economic and political circumstances often cause enormous transformations to those same forms. Bearing this in mind, it seemed possible that I might use elements of *Mak Yong* in my creative project, if I did so respectfully, and if I understood the precise meanings I was creating in the new art form.
As suggested by Daphne P Lei (2011, p. 574), it is important that intercultural theatre practitioners equip themselves culturally, because without a deep understanding of the art form, cultural misunderstandings and inappropriate interpretations are more likely to occur. *Mak Yong* has evolved over time as a result of modifications made to aesthetics, techniques and conventions. The conventions of *Mak Yong* have been revised according to political, economic, religious and socio-cultural demands. There is no ‘pure’ *Mak Yong*, as argued by Schechner (1991, p. 30). Having explored traditional theatre forms and techniques, it was important to examine contemporary performance directors and their practices, especially those that fused traditional forms with a modern aesthetic and I discuss this in the next chapter.
Figure 4: “Accepting the Throne” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara and Toni-Lea Porter. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
CHAPTER FOUR

CONTEXTUALISING MALAYSIAN CONTEMPORARY DIRECTORS

Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide an overview of Malaysian theatre in the latter part of the twentieth century and into the twenty-first century with particular focus on the work of directors who have fused traditional performance techniques with a contemporary practice and aesthetic. The first part of this chapter explores the four Malaysian theatre production styles according to the four major languages that are used in Malaysia: Malay, Chinese, Indian and English. Each of these four production styles are performed at separate venues and have different performers, producers, and audiences who patronise them. The current situation has its roots in the colonial era and has been continued and sustained through the post-colonial period. The chapter provides a brief account of Malaysian theatre from the 1950s to the present when Malaysian theatre changed dramatically and moved away from traditional theatre forms such as Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit, and Bangsawan. The changes were influenced by political events, two in particular: Independence in 1957, and the Ethnic Riots in 1969, both of which propelled playwrights to explore the concept of national identity. The Malaysian theatre transitioned from traditional theatre to realism, absurdism, to experimental theatre and to musicals. The final part of this chapter examines Malaysian contemporary directors: Zulkifli Mohamad, Aris Kadir and Joseph Gonzales, who have revisited traditional materials (myth, traditional dances, and traditional theatre forms) to create contemporary performances. This chapter argues that aesthetic integrity is vital to the creative process involved in intercultural performance. Aesthetic integrity brings together all those factors that shape a personal viewpoint, including cultural background, education, experience, beliefs and craft. It shapes an artistic work through one’s personal viewpoint. But more than this, it is a constant aesthetic rationale based on a personal politic. Aesthetic integrity is the individual approach to practice that is formed from cultural background, education, experience and beliefs. It is a continuous underlying ethical principle based on a personal standpoint. In some cases it may provide a platform between the director, the actors and the rest of the team to shape the aesthetic choices that frame the production. As mentioned in Chapter One, Gonzales claims that an artist is influenced by an ‘internal space’ and this research suggests that perhaps this ‘space’ could also be described as the artist having
aesthetic integrity (2010, p. 263). Aesthetic integrity is different from cultural belonging. Cultural belonging is a cultural connection to the particular culture of the individual. Culture in this case includes such aspects as language, festivals, foods, traditional practices, traditional arts and family values that are embedded in a person’s sense of self during the process of growing up. Aesthetic integrity relates to aesthetic choices made when working on the creative project. Aesthetic integrity is central in determining the director’s decision making and a director’s decisions affect the aesthetic results. The influencing factors for aesthetic integrity are moulded by the director’s background and cultural conditioning, but are more than that. For example, Malaysian visual artist Ismail Zain defines his own aesthetics ‘as having evolve[d] from the philosophical judgment but also from the politic, economic and social community considerations’ (Zain qtd in Mohamad, 2012a p. 158). Meanwhile, Gonzales attributes artistic integrity to being ‘a result of upbringing, educational and familial backgrounds, life experience and dance training’ (2012, p. 263). Aesthetic integrity affects not only those others engaged in the artistic project but also those viewing it. Aesthetic integrity is a vital element in devising an intercultural artwork, especially one that focuses on tradition and heritage. Throughout this research, I was continually made aware of the upbringing, education, familial background, life experiences and the artistic training of all those people who contributed to the thesis creative work, Throne of Thorns. Although the ultimate aesthetic choices were my own, it was the collaborative process shaped by my aesthetic integrity that brought the differing perspectives of cast, crew and interviewees into play as well. In turn, it was these differing perspectives that also informed my own performance practice and project.

Malaysian Theatre Milieu within Multi Language Theatre

In 2009 Malaysia’s sixth and current Prime Minister, Tan Sri Najib Tun Razak, initiated the concept of 1Malaysia, which acknowledges that, ‘the people think and act as united Malaysians’ (Ramli & Tengku Jusoh, 2012, p. 96). He states that ‘1Malaysia would demolish the great wall of ethical discrimination’ (p. 96), and is here referring to dealing with the integration of ethnic groups. The Prime Minister further explains that if 1Malaysia could be accomplished then Malaysia would ‘become a more developed and stable country economically, politically, socially, and legislatively’ (Wan Husin, 2011, p. 233). It is clearly vital to unite people from different historical cultural backgrounds in Malaysia, especially those citizens of Malay, Chinese and Indian descent. The four distinct languages that form part of the national Malaysian theatre mosaic
delineate invisible borders within the theatre scene. Malay theatre involves mostly Malays, uses Malay language and is attended normally by ‘90% Malays’ (Nge, 2008, p. 202). The Malay theatre is mostly supported by government institutions (p. 185). One of the government bodies is Istana Budaya the National Theatre. ‘Istana Budaya continues to be dominated by Malay language theatre and Malay theatre practitioners’ (p. 189). On the other hand, English language performances, professional and amateur companies, mostly perform in Chinese and Indian language theatres. ‘English, the only non-racially based language, is associated with the urban and educated elite, as well as a remnant of British colonial rule’ (Rajendran, 2011, p. 6). Shakespeare’s dramas were among the first English language plays introduced in the educational system during the colonial era. Today, there are independent theatre companies such as the Five Arts Centre, the Instant Café Theatre, The Actors Studio, and Dramalab, which are actively producing theatre and can be seen as anchors of the English theatre scene. The English language theatre in Malaysia is:

Mostly viewed as a middle class event, English language theatre manages to attract a racially-mixed middle class audience that is educated and English speaking. Chinese and Tamil theatre is very much community-and language-based and attracts audiences who are conversant in the respective languages. (Nge, 2008, p. 203)

Chinese Malaysians run the Chinese language theatres, which are influenced by theatre forms from Taiwan, China, Hong Kong and Singapore. There are a number of these companies, such as Dan Dan Theatre, Space Spirit Studio, Need Entertainment, Ping Stage and Zero Space. Loh Kok Man and Soon Choon Mee started the Dan Dan Theatre, which is highly influenced by Singaporean director Pao Kun. Meanwhile Space Spirit Studio led by Philip Leong and Caesar Chong mixes theatre with the visual arts. Chinese language theatre has survived using experimental styles as well as scripts written by the local playwrights (2008, p. 199–201). There are two important Indian theatre companies, Sehala Studio and Phenomena Seni Pentas with both attended primarily by the Indian community. Phenomena Seni Pentas was led by ST Bala and uses the Tamil language in its performances, whereas the Sehala Studio uses a mixture of languages. There is also a Malayalam language theatre led by Kerala Samajam (p. 202).

Language has become the border or barrier that defines the contemporary Malaysian theatre environment, however, theatre spaces are also defined through ethnicity. It is not the policy of the major theatre spaces such as Istana Budaya or Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLpac) to categorise specific languages to be performed in their premises, yet this has been the outcome. In addition, Malaysians tend to equate these major spaces with high status or with particular
social groups. The venues are closely related to audience perceptions and expectations. ‘Venues are also imbued with their own image and profile’ (p. 203), and a part of that profile is the widespread notion that the theatre is ‘sophisticated’ (p. 203).

Malaysians perceive English theatre as being more sophisticated than the theatre forms associated with other languages. English is considered the medium for the elites. ‘The use of English continues to give the impression that Malaysia is a modern, progressive and liberal nation that is part of the global community’ (Mokhtar-Ritchie, 2011, p. 15). As stated by Gonzales until ‘the 1970s, the national education system was another legacy of British colonialism, with English as the medium of instruction, Babasa Malaysia as a second language’ (2011, p. 15). This educational legacy has affected how Malaysian audiences perceive theatre.

The Malay Theatre

Traditional theatre is classified as Malay theatre. Mana Sikana, a scholar in Malaysia, divides Malay drama into three periods: traditional – Mak Yong, Boria, Main Peteri, Wayang Kulit; transitional – Bangsawan and Sandiwara (the Malay opera); and modern – realism, surrealism, absurd (2006, p. 29). In the 1940s, Bangsawan, the Malay Opera, started to lose audiences due to films and other entertainment influences (Nasuruddin, 2006, p. 11). The introduction of technology through television and radio contributed to the decline in popularity of many Malaysian traditional theatre forms (Sikana, 2006, p. 91).

Academic Roselina Johari Md Khir argues that the translation of Western and Asian texts in Malaysia became more widespread in the 1970s. She classifies three methods that are used in working with translated Western texts. In the first instance, the text remains as it is, only translating the language from English to Malay. In the second method, the texts are adapted to suit the local situation and adjustments are made to social background, acting style, characters, set and costumes. The dialogues are also attuned to local dialects. In the third instance the texts are deconstructed. In this method text elements are selected and altered, and emphasis is only placed on the crux of the play (Khir, 2009, p. 84). The play text may differ from the original, but the thematic or philosophical discourse generated by the new text will align with that generated by the original. Western plays that have been translated include Hamlet, Macbeth, King Lear, Romeo and Juliet, Death of a Salesman, The Glass Menagerie, and A Streetcar Named Desire. Greek plays include Oedipus the King, Bacchae, Medea and Antigone. These plays are also often actively presented by higher learning institutions (p. 85). Malaysia received its independence in 1957. In this period, the traditional theatre lost its prominence and was replaced by works from standard Western canon.
playwrights, such as Shaw, Strindberg and Chekhov. At the same time Malaysian playwrights, including Usman Awang, Syed Alwi, and Kala Dewata rose to prominence (Ishak, 2008). According to Ishak, ‘[t]he 1960s were a decade which saw a newly independent Malayan nation trying to fulfill the efforts of independence’ (2008, p. 63). ‘Bangsawan glorifies the legendary and esoteric aspects of the Malay ethos. Realistic modern drama, on the other hand, confronted the Malays with the challenges of the modern world’ (Nasuruddin, 2006, p. 14).

The early independence era was an important developmental phase in Malaysian theatre because Malaysia was struggling to build a nation. During this time, Western and local realistic drama was well received, as it attempted to portray the new reality on the stage, often using the local language and recognisable characters. This theatre had a strong audience appeal. Drama became one of the factors in the building of the new nation but surprisingly English maintained its status as a better language than Bahasa Melayu (Jit, 1986, p. 122). Lela Meyang (1968) a play written by Raja Ismail Iskandar for a television series and then translated to English by Adibah Amin and adapted to stage by K. Das (Lo, 2004, p. 52). This play, an adaptation of a traditional Malay tale, was the first Malay drama translated to English (Zuhra, 1991, p. 179). This was then followed by three other plays: All the Perfumes (1967), by K. Das, The More We Get Together (1968) by Syed Alwi, and The Need To Be (1969), by Patrick Yeoh. Given the fact that these plays were translated into English suggests that, in the theatre as early as 1968, English language was preferred over Malay by local directors and audiences (Jit, 1986, p. 122). In 1969, the country encountered the catastrophic Ethnic Riots that upset the harmonious relationship that had existed previously among the races in Malaysia (Nasuruddin, 2006, p. 15). The riots were devastating and the government ‘declared a state of emergency, suspended the constitution, parliament, and the elections in Sabah and Sarawak [were] delayed and implemented [by] the central government (Husin, 2010, p. 29).

The formation of a national identity can be seen through several strategies implemented by the government. In September 1970, Tun Abdul Razak was appointed as the second Malaysian Prime Minister and launched the Second Malaysia Plan (1971–1975), an economic improvement intended to provide balance in the economy, especially between the Chinese and the Malays. It was also a plan to deal with the poverty among the Malays and to restructure the society. One of the aims of the policy was to introduce the Malay language (Bahasa Melayu) to replace English as the medium of instruction through the National Education Policy 1970 (Husin, 2010, p. 29).

The Ethnic Riots in 1969 (Malaysians remember it as the tragedy of the 13th May) affected the shape of the Malay modern drama. Subsequently, many Malay writers moved to different genres,
ones that would allow them to express their fury, anxiety and frustrations (Ishak, 2008, p. 69). In the 1970s, absurd plays spread throughout Malaysia by way of playwrights such as Nordin Hassan, Hatta Azad Khan, Dinsman, and Johan Jaafar who, among others, contributed significantly to the expansion of experimental theatre. The rise of experimental Malaysian theatre was directly related to the historical events post-independence.

As a new independent country, Malaysian writers were strongly influenced by Westerners with the development of Malaysian drama in the 1970s thus affected, especially by those who had graduated from overseas universities (Sikana, 2006, p. 23). The 13th May 1969, however, marked the playwrights’ rigorous efforts to inject an awareness of patriotism and the inherent rights of the Malay people into their work. The playwrights of the post riots era recognised that total imitation of Western techniques was not helping the development of the country and they argued that the focus should be on the Malaysian identity (Wan Husin, 2011, p. 35). In order to give more local flavour to their plays, most playwrights mixed the richness of traditional theatre with a Western style. Noordin Hassan was one such playwright. His most well known plays are Bukan Lalang Diulang Angin (1970), Tiang Seri Tegak Berlima (1973), and Pintu (1972). Tiang Seri Tegak Berlima explores the five national pillars that had been developed by the government. His style was considered experimental and influenced other playwrights up until the 1980s (Abdul Rahman, 2007, p. 54). Noordin’s style takes the elements of traditional Malay theatre, modernised traditional character and the usage of Malay classic language, however his genre of surrealism and absurdism was inspired by the West. “The dialectic between tradition and modernity that emerged as one of the major themes of contemporary Malaysian theatre generated many folk characters from traditional literature and performance in the guise of cultural heroes, clowns, tricksters and jinns” (Jit, 2003, p. 58). As Gonzales states, ‘thus, began a journey to tell Malaysian stories, rework tradition and heritage, and place the experience within a modern context’ (2013, p. 162).

In the mid 1980s to 1990s, the Panggung Negara (National Cultural Complex), which was a government body under the administration of Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism ‘embarked on a plan to create a situation conducive for the creation, participation and viewing of dramatic works’ (Nasuruddin, 2006, p. 19). The strategy was called Drama Sebabak or the One Act Series, which presented new works by Malay playwrights such as Noordin Hassan, Syed Alwi, Rahim Razali, and Samad Salleh. With this effort, the Panggung Negara sought to increase audience numbers by having film or television stars in the plays. “The use of television and film stars and pop singers proved to be an added attraction to the lower and lower middle class segment of the
Malays’ (p. 19). *Drama Sebabak* attracted full houses and was well received by the audiences. This undertaking by *Panggung Negara* was considered instrumental in establishing a contemporary Malay theatre (p. 20). Some of the successful productions included *Malam Ini Penyu Menangis* (1995) and *Ciudai* (1990) by Noordin Hassan, and *Member of the Club* (1994) by Syed Alwi (p. 20). One of the proposals made during the National Culture Congress in 1971 was the construction of a Malaysian national theatre space. This space was completed in 1998 and in 2000 was named the *Istana Budaya* or Palace of Culture (*Istana Budaya*, 2014).

In the 2000s large-scale musicals dominated the Malaysian contemporary theatre. Categorised by Ishak (2012, p. 3) as a modern-supra national theatre, the *Istana Budaya* played an important role in expanding this genre in Malaysia. The first production in *Istana Budaya* was *Keris Sang Puteri* (1999) directed by Dato’ Rahim Razali which was the first to use sophisticated stage technology (Hassan, 1999a). *Keris Sang Puteri* was presented using a Broadway style and added to a strong sense of Malaysian aesthetics through the traditional costumes, Malay narrative which used the classic themes and traditional Malay music (Hassan, 1999b). *Puteri Gunung Ledang: The Musical* (2006) made Malaysian theatre history by attracting full houses from the opening night to the closing night. *Puteri Gunung Ledang* was presented in *Istana Budaya* and produced by Enfiniti Productions and ran for two seasons and attracted not only regular theatregoers, but new audiences as well (Michaela, 2007, p. 127). *Puteri Gunung Ledang* told the story of a classic Malay legend, the princess of Ledang Mountain. The script was the interpretation of Mamat Khalid and Saw Teong Hin. The musical presents a local story, using Malay costumes, and presented in Malay language but the music and the spectacle element on stage were inspired by the Broadway theatre. *Puteri Gunung Ledang* contributed to the musical fever in Malaysia. Subsequently, musical productions such as *Tunku The Musical* (2007) and *Ismail The Last Days* (2008), by KLpac, *I Have a Date with Spring* by the Dama Orchestra (2010), *Siddharta the Musical* (2009) and the *Cuci the Musical* (2009) and *Kampung Boy the Musical* (2011), by Tall Order Productions, were produced. These productions created more prospects for trained performers in the performing arts business (Gonzales, 2011, p. 10). Some of the success of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* was due to the fact that it was originally a film and adapted to the stage, which meant that audiences were already familiar with the work. Inspired by this success other musicals were adapted from films, such as *Impak Maksima* (2008), *Terima Kasih Cinta* (2011), and *Cuci the Musical* (2009) (Mohamad, 2012c, p. 41).

Following on from the success of *Puteri Gunung Ledang* biographical musicals of Malaysian legends and great politicians were commissioned and produced. These included the life stories of
various Prime Ministers – Tuanku Abdul Rahman, Tun Abdul Razak and Tun Dr. Mahathir Mohamad and of such notables as Tan Sri P. Ramlee, the great actor and director, and Datuk Mohd Nor Khalid, the talented cartoonist (Ilham, 2011, p. 14). Theatre critic Rebecca Ilham questions the need for these biographic musicals in the theatre scene (2011, p. 9). She disagrees with the practice, arguing that the biography of a person is not an appropriate source for theatre (p. 9). Biographical musicals, argues Mohamad, are more closely aligned with political parties rather than being concerned with aesthetics or dramatic arts (2012c, p. 41).

The question then arises regarding the direction of Malayan theatre in the 2000s. Since establishing Istana Budaya, musical theatre productions have dominated. Realism, absurd or experimental dramas are hardly ever seen in the venue, however, other theatre venues such as Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPac) still produce a variety of genres and styles. Currently, in Malaysia, there are fewer emerging playwrights as productive as those who wrote in the period between the 1960s and the 1990s. The popular musicals have not questioned Malaysian political, economic and social issues and given their lightweight nature, it may be strongly inferred that they have not reflected contemporary Malaysian problems and social conflict.

The mega musicals appear to be attempts by the producing companies to create the equivalent of Broadway or the West End in Malaysia. According to Milyana Arshad, a critic, Malayan theatre is heading too much towards the perceived image of Broadway (2012, p. 19). Another critic, Muhammad Colmann Abdullah, questions the future of a Malayan theatre which encompasses the values of Western theatre (2010, p. 45). In the 1970s, Malayan theatre practitioners began searching for a Malaysian identity and ceased imitating the West. In the twenty-first century, however, the prevalence of the musical form seems to be repeating a colonist impulse by setting the Western musical form as the benchmark of modernity. The process of searching and losing identity could be seen as a re-negotiation of identity (Holledge & Tompkins, 2000, p. 5). As Stuart Hall observes ‘identities are never completed, never finished … they are always as subjectivity itself is, in process’ (Hall, 1991, p. 47). In the search for a national identity, Malaysian contemporary directors have revisited traditional materials in order to create a new bridge towards modernity.

**Malaysian Contemporary Theatre Directors**

Le Quy Duong, a contemporary Vietnamese theatre director, explains the importance of combining traditional and contemporary performance techniques into a new practice so that ‘we don’t lose the beauty of tradition, but on the other hand make tradition take on new contemporary concepts’ (Le Quy, qtd in Hayes, 2013, p. 1). Using traditional practices to
investigate contemporary concepts is part of Zulkifli Mohamad’s performance practice. Mohamad is a Malaysian scholar who began his career as a dancer-performer and initiated his contemporary work through what he called a Tradition-Based concept. In his article ‘In Search of Identity Through “ Tradition-Based” Contemporary Dance and Theatre Performance’ (2012a), Mohamad defines the concept of Tradition-Based as ‘searching for modernity in one’s indigenous knowledge’ (p. 164). Mohamad argues that for Malaysians it is necessary to deal with the process of reinterpreting and remembering identity. He calls it ‘reminding ourselves who we were’ (p. 160). Mohamad regards traditional forms such as the Malay martial arts, Silat, the classical dance, Astik, and the Malay folk dances such as Joget and Zapin as innovative (p. 160).

His contemporary dance work, titled Dan Dia Datang (1999), is inspired by a healing ritual, Main Peteri. As explained in Chapter Three, Main Peteri is the traditional shamanistic healing ceremony specific to Kelantan that aims to heal spiritual sickness. In Malay, it is called angin, the inner wind (p. 161). ‘We were aware that we were not performing the real Main Peteri/Main Puteri. We did not even pretend to stage a realistic performance. We were merely taking the concept’ (p. 162).

In Dan Dia Datang Mohamad utilises the notion of a healing trance, structured improvisation and the concept of angin.

In examining Mohamad’s process in creating this work, he discusses his childhood experiences in Kelantan which exposed him to traditional forms such as Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit, Main Peteri, and Menora. These then became vital in the creation of his artistic work. This is in parallel to what Bharucha argues about childhood experience being integral in internalising culture (1990, p. 70). Mohamad classifies his childhood familiarity with traditional forms as an indication of self identity. Mohamad’s approach is that of ‘taking the concept’ (p. 162), through which he extracts those traditional materials that surrounded him in his past. Through expanding, exploring, remaking traditional forms, he has created his own aesthetic integrity, which is influenced by his cultural background.

Another Malaysian director who is combining the traditional with the contemporary is Aris Kadir. He started his career as a Zapin traditional dancer from Johore, one of the Malaysian states, where Zapin is a traditional folk dance (Hijjas, 2016). Kadir developed his dance practice to include modern and contemporary dance and after graduating from ASWARA, he won the best choreographer in the BOH Cameronian Arts Award in Malaysia several times. Among his award-winning productions are Berinai (2006), Nasi Putib (2009), and Perempuan Pandai Sendiri (2012). In all of his works Kadir investigates the Malay psyche by incorporating Malay themes in his works. Unlike Mohamad, Kadir does not focus on any specific traditional form. In Berinai,
Nasi Putih and Perempuan Pandai Sendiri Kadir uses Malay mythology. Berinai is one of his most ambitious works, and in it he tells a love tale through the perspective of Islam. According to Kadir:

When we talk about Muslims, there always seems to be that perception that there is a boundary between Muslims and the arts. People usually ask me, “Why are you dressed this way? Why are you dancing with girls when you are Muslim?” For me, this boundary is a part of creativity – it allows me to expand my ideas on what my religion is about. Just because there is a boundary, it does not mean you have to be stuck in the rut about ideas and creativity. (De Silva, 2007)

Kadir opens Berinai with the recital of a verse from the Quran, which speaks of the relationship between men and women in a marriage. He was inspired by this Quranic verse and it resulted in his choreography where his two dancers (a male and a female) dance without touching each other (De Silva, 2007). Kadir further explores Malay culture through his choreographic interpretations of love, wedding and the relationship between men and women.

According to Gonzales, Kadir explores ‘the Malay psyche more deeply, which would include the darker aspects of cultural practices, to stimulate dialogue’ (2011, p. 183). In an interview with Kadir, I questioned why he wants to work with traditional and Malay themes. His answer was that ‘it comes naturally because it is my background. I am Malay and I will tell my Malay story’ (2016, pers.comm., 25 April). His aesthetic integrity appears to be founded on three questions: who are you, what is your story, and what is your belief? It is clear when Kadir presents Malay themes it is because he is Malay and it is related to his personal background. He reveals his aesthetic integrity through his works and these tend to represent Malay mystical myths; to re-examine social issues as well as to act as a reminder of the past. His mise-en-scène presents a classical approach, although he does not employ traditional costumes, yet his productions have evoked Islamic, Malay beliefs and traditions. In developing my own aesthetic integrity, I had to question how much my religion should shape my artistic decisions in an intercultural theatre process that would encounter a mixture of beliefs from the various performers.

Dancer, choreographer, and director Joseph Gonzales also uses traditional forms in his contemporary performances. Gonzales is a scholar and Dean of the Faculty of Dance, at the National Academy of Arts, Cultural and Heritage (ASWARA). In his paper entitled ‘QADIM: An
Intercultural Contemporary Dance Collaboration in Malaysia’ (2009), Gonzales discusses his creation of Q-ADIM, initiated in 2007 at the Experimental Theatre, ASWARA. In this collaboration, Gonzales worked with eleven multi-racial dancers from Malay, Chinese, Indian and Venezuelan backgrounds. Gonzales holds the principle that the process is more important and stimulating than the final product. In QADIM he began rehearsals by asking the dancers in the team to share their individual stories, from the ages of 12–18 years old (p. 4). From this he created a vocabulary of movement inspired by the stories being told (p. 5). The performers also exchanged their diverse dance techniques, such as Zapin (Malay), Bharata Natyam (India) and classical ballet (Western). Through this intercultural exchange, the dancers and Gonzales each learned what is ‘alien’ (p. 5) to them. This exchange also expanded the skills of each individual dancer. Gonzales’ next step was to create a process to educate and re-educate the dancers in the diverse belief systems in Malaysia. In one of his workshops he was eager to create connections between the dancers who had differing religions. This process of sharing included teaching the dancers to observe Muslim prayers:

the non-Muslims were granted special access into the private spaces of personal worship. It was incredibly moving to be invited to witness the ritual of prayer. The sense of respectfulness was palpable and that inclusivity was reassuring, breaking down the barriers between self and other, between Muslim and non-Muslim.

(Gonzales, 2009, p. 6)

Gonzales argues that although Malaysia is a ‘multicultural country and multi-religious’ (p. 6), deeper exposure to each other’s religions is still lacking (p. 6). He believes that breaking down cultural barriers is vital to working in intercultural theatre. The ensemble members need to form a connection with each other and develop trust. According to Gonzales there needs to be an event or a moment in the rehearsal where the ensemble becomes ‘one’. Gonzales aims to achieve this though a process which includes seven stages: 1) Beginning; 2) Suffering; 3) Praying; 4) Stories; 5) Caring; 6) and Sharing (p. 7). These stages form the sequential sections of the piece he creates. He works in each rehearsal by ‘adding, subtracting, amalgamating, dissecting, discarding … and artistry’ (p. 7).

Q-ADIM is a production that reveals the collaborative processes in creating an intercultural theatre practice and how traditional and contemporary aesthetics are fused. It is an intercultural production that creates a contemporary performance, which does not align with any specific
tradition or culture. Gonzales’ collaborative process, involving each of the performers’ unique religious and ethnic background was fundamental to the production. It involved the contribution of four Malay Muslims, one Chinese Buddhist, two Indian Hindus and three Catholics (Gonzales, 2013, p. 208).

There is a specific difference between Gonzales’s and Mohamad’s and Kadir's work. Whilst Gonzales is an Indian, he does not reflect this ethnicity in his productions. On the whole, he brings his techniques as a ballet dancer to his work (p. 8), whereas Mohamad and Kadir both reflect their identities as Malay and as Muslim. Mohamad and Kadir's ethnic and religious backgrounds have affected their work. Mohamad is influenced by Kelantanese traditional art and Kadir’s career as a dancer has been shaped by the influence of his surroundings in Johor, which is famous for its Zapin dance. Gonzales was brought up in the city and went to the United Kingdom to further his studies. He is not an Indian classical dancer however, but has instead mastered Western classical dance.

Gonzales' work at ASWARA for the past twenty years may have also influenced him in his reflection of Malay culture in his latest choreography. Titled, Becoming King, Pak Yong Revisited (2014, 2015) Gonzales investigates Mak Yong dances, with Malay dancers. Through encouraging the traditional dance forms and physical training processes of the Malays involved, Gonzales offers a rehearsal process that is respectful of the cultural traditions he is dealing with.

Gonzales intercultural performance process, in particular that of QADIM, has influenced my own performance practice. Techniques such as sharing individual stories, exchanging dancing and movement traditions and finding themes have been integrated into my own rehearsals. By examining the processes and works of three directors in Malaysia who fuse elements of traditional forms with a contemporary aesthetic, I have been led to rethink my place in the contemporary performance scene. This research reveals that Tradition-Based techniques, such as those initiated by Mohamad, can be used in not only making contemporary theatre, but also in reflecting on national identity. Mohamad believes contemporary Malaysian practitioners and producers should change their perspective and refrain from continuously referring to the West as a sign of what is ‘modern and global’ (p. 165). In creating contemporary performance, these three directors show how the reinvention of traditional forms can be explored. Mohamad, Kadir and Gonzales’ works reflect how childhood experience, mythology, and religion can be significant materials in the construction of new contemporary performance works. Gonzales’ seven-stage development process is also useful in thinking through the development of my creative project Throne of Thorns. In an interview with Mustapha Kamil Yassin, a Malaysian
playwright, he states that ‘...the theatre is the most powerful medium we have for reinforcing our traditional values and maintaining our cultural identity’ (Gunawardana & Yassin, 1971, p. 107). It is this belief that has led me to create a contemporary performance infused with traditional Malay performance techniques.

Conclusion

This chapter begins by explaining the development of Malaysian theatre from the middle of the twentieth century and articulates the role of the dominant languages (Malay, Chinese, Indian and English) in this development. The research focuses firstly on Malay language theatre with its roots in traditional forms such as Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit and Bangsawan. As the popularity of traditional theatre started to decline, audiences for modern Western theatre grew. However, subsequent to the Ethnic Riots in 1969, Malay playwrights and directors realised the need to create performances reflecting the distinctive Malay cultural identity. The beginning of the 1970s saw the emergence of playwrights such as Usman Awang, Krishen Jit, Rahim Razali and Syed Alwi. These artists emphasised the need to create theatre that portrayed a strong local identity reflecting norms and values of the Malays’ culture. The playwrights also criticised realistic drama as being too Western (Husin, 2010, p. 35). In the 1970s locally written scripts appeared that were engaged in a search for national identity. Writers such as Noordin Hassan, the National Laureate, criticised the mind-set of Malaysians who eagerly imitated the West (p. 41). This chapter also outlines the interest by Malaysian producers and theatre venues (particularly in Kuala Lumpur) in the musical styles of theatre of the West End and Broadway. These musicals are widely produced. The proliferation of Western style musicals, however, has incited in many practitioners a search for cultural identity. After fifty-nine years of independence, it seems Malay theatre is still struggling to find its purpose and niche. The conflict between modernity and tradition, between the East and the West is still unresolved.

This chapter also investigates three contemporary Malaysian directors – Mohamad, Kadir, and Gonzales, in an attempt to understand how they use traditional materials to make contemporary performances. The research into Mohamad’s practice revealed that tradition could become a source of contemporary work indicating that it is possible to rethink and revisit traditions from the past and use them creatively for today’s audiences. Kadir uses Malay myths and themes as his fundamental subject matter. He has also injected a religious element to produce meaning in his creative works. Lastly, Gonzales’ working methods in creating the contemporary dance QADIM, provides a clear process for creating an intercultural ensemble. This chapter reveals that aesthetic
integrity influences how these artists develop and make their own creative work. As argued by Gonzales, recalling childhood, remembering the personal past, re-tracing family backgrounds, and re-questioning education can become the internalised journey of the creative research for a contemporary theatrical production (2012, p. 263). The research into these three artists shaped my own thinking in relation to using traditional materials in contemporary practice and assisted in the formation of my own ethical approach to artistic work. This thesis research provided a ‘reflection space’ so that I might form my own ‘aesthetic integrity.’ My artistic choices of direction and rehearsal process will be discussed in the next chapter, which concentrates on the creative project, *Throne of Thorns*. 
Figure 5: “Sequence 7: Contemporary Movement Using the Malay Martial Arts” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara, Natalie Wilson, Toni-Lea Potter, Daniel Cottier, Lauren Bacon, Nicole Samson, Tasha O’Brien, Georgia Broderick, Adrian Tolhurst, Daniel Hills. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
CHAPTER FIVE

THRONE OF THORNS: A CASE STUDY – STUDIO BASED INTERCULTURAL THEATRE RESEARCH

Introduction

This chapter will provide an analysis of the practical and imaginative journey undertaken in the realisation of the creative component of my doctoral project, *Throne of Thorns*. This thesis questions how a Malay-focused intercultural performance practice might fuse traditional Malay performance techniques (specifically taken from *Mak Yong*) with selected, adapted and reworked sections of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* in order to create an intercultural theatre production that reveals a contemporary performance aesthetic, and can communicate to a twenty-first century Malaysian and Australian audience. In devising *Throne of Thorns* the aim was to create a contemporary work that incorporated traditional Malay theatre forms. These traditions, my research has revealed, have been influenced by forces not only of the East, but of the West as well. This chapter provides an overview of the researcher’s previous creative practice, before outlining the ways in which Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* relates to the researcher, to members of the creative team, and to Malaysian culture. This chapter then provides an analysis of the doctoral creative project, *Throne of Thorns*, through four different lenses: reinvented ritual, cross-gender casting, costume and spatial design. In addition, the process the researcher engaged in with the cast in enabling them to contribute, as collaborators in creating this work will be discussed. This chapter reveals that developing a process that enabled collaboration between the members of the production, and facilitated openness in negotiating any circumstances faced in making this creative work, has been essential in the realisation of the aims of the project. Without these two elements, this intercultural theatre project would not have been a successful journey for all participants.

The development of this creative project I divided into several phases. The first phase I named the ‘Workshop Auditions and Introductory’ phase (September-October, 2014), a very important process where I selected the ensemble of ten actors. I ran four workshop auditions and in these workshops, I introduced the actors to Malay dance and performance techniques. The second phase was named ‘Devising the Third Text’ (November-December, 2014), in which I worked closely with the actors in physical training and also in finding the shape of the text. We employed several different approaches for the textual work – improvisational, traditional text breakdowns, and physical theatre. The third phase was devoted to ‘Strengthening’ (January, 2015), which
included a process of delving deeper into the text and image-making. The fourth phase was named ‘Refining’ (February, 2015), in which we attempted to refine the through-line of the ideas and narratives. The rehearsals ran for six months from September 2014 to February 2015.

Before the project could begin I needed to decide upon a text. I researched and reviewed a range of contemporary, Shakespearean and Greek plays to isolate the text I wanted to work with. I also considered devising from scratch but decided that having a text as a connective tool, between myself and the actors would be useful. We would respond to the text, employing sections that seemed appropriate to the performance needs. However, I also needed a text that might be fused with the traditional Malaysian theatre form. *The Tempest* held interesting parallels for colonial and post-colonial readings, for understanding and investigating the notion of oppression, and for thinking about how power, that of a king and that of an individual, might be realised in the physical body. *Mak Yong* stories, on the whole, present a sovereign as the lead character and narrate the adventures of the king’s journey. The stories deal with the powerful magic of the king, supernatural characters and their world, using highly poetic language. When I read *The Tempest*, it was as if I was reading a Malay classic story. I could relate it to my own cultural heritage. As a Malaysian, I was brought up to hold with the five National Principles: belief in God, loyalty to king and country, the supremacy of the constitution, the rule of law, courtesy and morality (Tambi, 2015, p. 10). This national ideology is taught to Malaysians in their youth. Every week during the school assemblies, Malaysians recite and pledge respect and honor for the king. The king is second after God and accepted as having divine status. ‘The Malay rulers were accepted as Allah’s deputy on earth’ (Gullick & Kling, 2006, p. 38). In the Constitution of Malaysia, Article 3 states the king in Malaysia is the Head of the religion of Islam (Constitution of Malaysia, 2015, p. 2). Historically, the concept of loyalty to the king was one of the Hindu cultural principles, and that principle has remained strong in the Malay culture. Therefore, when I read *The Tempest*, the story about Prospero, the king of Milan, had an immediate connection for me. Prospero is a king who has lost his throne in Milan, however he has power on the island and magical control as well. *The Tempest*, I decided, could provide interesting textual material that would inform an investigation of the concept of kingship and power, an investigation that would be quite personal, yet also universal. Apart from the elements of kingship, *The Tempest*, like *Mak Yong* stories, portrays the use of magic and has supernatural characters. The element of magic is compulsory in *Mak Yong* stories. Malaysian scholar, Mohammad Hatta Azad Khan argues that *Mak Yong* stories relinquish the world of realism and provide a world where logic no longer dominates (2015, p. 4).
The questions of logic, cause-and-effect and natural laws are non-existent. The stories revolve around extraordinary characters endowed with magical powers and chivalry unrivalled by others. The worlds are between the real and the fantastic, traversing beyond the seventh heaven and into the underworld or travelling in the deep ocean. (Khan, 2015, p. 4)

In previous eras Malay shamans were able to contact and communicate with the spirits, and in traditional *Mak Yong* these ritual acts are incorporated into the performance. Both unseen and seen creatures appear in *The Tempest* and *Mak Yong*. Prospero has the power to communicate with the unseen world, and Ariel is portrayed as an unseen spirit invisible to all but Prospero. Apart from the use of magic and the supernatural, both *The Tempest* and the *Mak Yong* stories have a richness of spoken language, and use comedy to explore notions of the oppressed and the oppressor. *The Tempest* was an appropriate choice for two other reasons. Firstly, I was working with an Australian cast made up of students and graduates from the University of Wollongong (UOW) Bachelor of Performance course, and *The Tempest* offered a story they could relate to, given that it is a canonical work and for most students drawn from their own theatrical heritage. Secondly, as a contemporary Malaysian artist and a global citizen, this same story offered opportunities for me to reflect upon my own country and its interactions with other nations. Given my desire to work with Australians in a way that made them co-creators, these twinned purposes made *The Tempest* appropriate for the project. Therefore, elements of *The Tempest* fused with elements of the *Mak Yong* form offered a unique opportunity to examine issues of universal and personal relevance while also refining my ideas about theatre direction and performance. So finally, *The Tempest* was the text I decided to use.

I began the adaption process by questioning what other ways I could react to and present Shakespeare’s work. I first looked at the work of Asian directors, such as Ninagawa and Tae Suk, but decided I wanted respond to the Shakespearean text rather than translate it as they had done. In my previous directing work *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* (2009) I had translated the full Shakespearean text into Malay, and presented it in the traditional *Mak Yong* style. For this research project, I wanted to explore my reactions to the text and present those reactions to an Australian and Malaysian audience. I worked with the text, using my supervisors as dramaturges, attempting to draw from Shakespeare’s play those textual materials which addressed ideas that interested me, ideas that circled around hurt, revenge, hatred and forgiveness. I divided the text and staging into
nine sequences, made up of a closing and opening sequence that wrapped around the seven other sections. Each of these seven sequences had a title: 1) The Shipwreck, 2) The Hidden Secret, 3) The Power of The Master, 4) The Conspiracy, 5) The Planning, 6) The Magic of Love, and 7) The Revelation. Each of these sequences were drawn from a particular scene in The Tempest. (The source scene or scenes for each of the seven sequences.) The opening and closing sequences were inspired from the traditional Mak Yong performance structure. In each of the nine sequences I developed a research question which was key to that section’s structure. The research question, however, might be better aligned with what creative writers call the thematic question, (an underlying thematic concern shaped into a question and applied to a play or section of a play), rather than the dramatic question (which might shape the action). I began my rehearsals with the outline of each sequence and the research question. For the first rehearsal, I started with a reading of my first draft of the working text, which I already shaped. I had a script with the prologue, epilogue and seven sequences drawn from the original script. We also discussed Shakespeare's The Tempest, followed by a reading and discussion of the sequence outline and questions I had developed. In the next set of rehearsals, we worked with particular scenes, again reading and discussing the materials. Once we had read through the material we improvised either verbally or with no words. We never limited ourselves to the written working text however continuously searching possibilities in enriching ways to present the scene effectively. Every sequence we approached differently in exploring it, for example, I divided the actors into two groups, gave each group the source scene from The Tempest and asked each of them to list down twenty important lines of dialogue. The group then presented their choices to the rest of the ensemble and we discussed the selected lines in terms of how each served the scene, the characters, and the narrative and how those lines related to the research questions I had composed. I then took each list and compared the choices of each group, and added those lines of dialogue I thought were important, if they had not been chosen by the actors. In this way I decided on lines that should be used in the Throne of Thorns sequences. In deciding the exact lines of dialogue, I debated as to what I wanted to achieve (accordingly to the research questions for the sequence) and then used the selected dialogue to achieve the goal. As the process continued I added lines (from the original text of The Tempest) or deleted lines. Through this process, I eventually came up with the final rehearsal text which I brought into the rehearsal room in week four, to be worked on with the actors. As rehearsals progressed the actors and I continued to re-select, rewrite or cut dialogue as we explored the physical aspects of the scene, until we felt we had completed the process of creating the text. We also examined the scene sequences without using dialogue. The
The purpose of the exploratory rehearsals was to test what kind of presentation would best portray our response to the original text of *The Tempest*.

Once I had the text in place I started to gather the rest of my creative team. This initially consisted of Kraig Grady, the music composer, and Bayu Utomo Radjikin, the set and costume designer. Later in the production I worked with lighting designer, Karen Norris. Working with ten Australian actors, and two stage managers, an American/Australian musician and an Australian vocalist/musician, with a Malaysian designer and a Maori lighting designer was, for me, a rich physical and spiritual journey. Exploring, searching, doubting, questioning and being ‘stuck’ for ideas, led to discoveries about ourselves as individuals, about the play and form, and about each other. As we experimented, we shared expertise and skills, exploring techniques from the East and the West. Techniques such as the Basic Malay Movement by Zulkifli Zain (inspired by *Silat*, the Malay martial arts) and those used in *Mak Yong* dance were employed. We also investigated performance strategies utilised by Tadashi Suzuki, Anne Bogart and Tina Landau, De Quincey Co. and Michael Chekhov. In rehearsal, however, we went further than mere skill-sharing, we also exchanged ideas, stories, secrets, languages, life experiences and cultural backgrounds. My rehearsals were what Anne Bogart might call an ‘active culture’ (2014, p. 107). The fundamental element for an active culture is ‘shared participation in the creative process by everyone present’ (p. 107). The rehearsal process allowed all members of the creative team to be involved in generating ideas for the production.

‘If you hurt me then I’ll hurt you’ is a mantra we hear constantly and see played out in school yards, suburban streets, and between nations. Revenge is a key motivator of violent action and the results can be devastating. Forgiveness, we are told, is the proper antidote to revenge, yet forgiveness is difficult to enact. Forgiveness demands that we discard hatred, resentment, bitterness, ill will, and sometimes, even memory. In creating *Throne of Thorns*, as a researcher, I was interested in exploring the act of revenge and the act of forgiveness and positioning them against each other. Taking a cue from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, most especially the conflict between Prospero and Antonio and the dispute between Prospero and Caliban, I entered the rehearsal process for *Throne of Thorns* with three questions: What causes revenge? Why do we harbour it? Why is it so difficult to forgive? The *Throne of Thorns* rehearsal process included unexpected cultural events – such as a terrorist attack in Sydney that had the potential to create tension within the rehearsal room – and I discovered that a particular kind of cultural flexibility was required. My research had revealed that cultural sensitivity; cultural belonging and aesthetic integrity were all important components of an intercultural production process. This chapter
argues that while there are significant intercultural practice approaches that can cover a general approach to intercultural productions, each production will no doubt include a very individual set of circumstances, and this is where cultural flexibility – what I shall call openness – specific to the production, becomes important. While the researcher had learnt a particular kind of production process in the past, one that belonged to the ‘guru’ system in Malaysia, the *Throne of Thorns* production process revealed how successful collaboration can be, and how important it is when creating intercultural theatre performances. Collaboration and openness provide a sense of shared ownership, which can equalise the power relationships. They also are necessary structural components for dealing with situations that might arise that involve compromise.

**Returning to Tradition**

I am a contemporary theatre director. I trained in the Western style of directing at ASWARA with Malaysian contemporary theatre directors Krishen Jit, Joe Hafsham, Zahim Al-Bakri and a Singaporean director, Kuo Pao Kun. I also trained as a performer in several traditional Malay theatre forms – *Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit, Bangsawan* and *Randai* – and have directed traditional *Mak Yong* productions, although I was never trained to direct in the traditional Malay way (whereby the student mimics the master). I did learn traditional Malay performance, however, in the traditional way, training with gurus such as Khadijah Awang (*Mak Yong*), Hamzah Awang Amat (*Wayang Kulit*), Rahman B (*Bangsawan*), and Dahmir Amin (*Randai*). Therefore, whilst my performance and directing practice are Western, I also have traditional Malay performance skills.

When *Mak Yong* was first brought to ASWARA in 1994 as a part of the curriculum, I was among the first set of ASWARA students to learn this traditional form within a tertiary institution. ASWARA invited the *Mak Yong* prima donna, the late Khatijah Awang, to be the master. In Khatijah Awang’s first ASWARA *Mak Yong* production, *Anak Raja Gondang* (1996), I acted as the main character, Pak Yong Muda (young Pak Yong, a prince). Performing *Mak Yong* demands that a performer acts, sings and dances. It was therefore necessary for me to go into one-to-one training with the master. After graduating from ASWARA, I acted in another *Mak Yong* production directed by Awang and was given the character of a *Mak Yong* princess. As my career as an actor evolved, I was also offered by ASWARA to direct a *Mak Yong* production. It was a restaging of *Anak Raja Gondang*. This production was performed in the Auditorium *Tunku Abdul Rahman* of the Malaysian Tourist Centre (MTC), Kuala Lumpur. *Anak Raja Gondang* (2001) was my first experience in directing traditional Malay theatre *Mak Yong*. Earlier in 1998, I had already
directed a monodrama titled *Di Bawah Lindungan Kaabah*. It was a touring performance, which travelled to four states in Malaysia. *Di Bawah Lindungan Kaabah* (*Under the Protection of Kaabah*) (1998) was an adaptation from a novel written by Hamka, an Indonesia novelist. Next, *Istana Budaya* offered me the opportunity to direct another *Mak Yong* production, *Raja Tangkai Hati* (*The King of the Heart*) (2003). *Istana Budaya* at that time wanted a director who had the understanding of *Mak Yong* with the knowledge of modern directing skills. When *Mak Yong* is shifted to large proscenium arch stages, the conventions of the traditional form have to be adjusted. Only certain existing practitioners are able to adjust to the modernisation of *Mak Yong*.

In 2007, I directed *Aladdin*, a children’s musical theatre produced and staged at *Istana Budaya* in Malay language. It was a commercialised theatre performance involving eighty children. Following this, I directed three different adaptions of *Medea*: in 2007 – a monodrama *Senjakala*; in 2008 – *Medea* (Greek concept); and in 2010 – *Medea* (Malay concept). The 2007 *Medea* was produced by ASWARA, followed by Universiti Teknologi MARA and the 2010 *Medea* was produced by The Actors’ Studio. The Actors’ Studio *Medea* was adapted and transformed to reflect the ancient Malay world and culture and the production was presented in Malay. Before *Medea* 2010, I directed my third *Mak Yong* production, *Titis Sakti* or a *Magical Drop* in 2009. It was my adaptation to *Mak Yong* of Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and was staged in the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLpac) and produced by the Actors’ Studio and National Department for Culture and the Arts (JKKN). This was a traditional *Mak Yong* performance translating Shakespeare’s story into Malay and adapting it into the *Mak Yong* form, including changing the names of the characters. The footage of this production has been archived by the Asian Shakespeare Intercultural Archive in Singapore (A.S.I.A). *Mak Yong Titis Sakti* and *Medea* inspired my interest in intercultural theatre and my desire to pursue PhD studies.

During this period, I urged Fatimah Abdullah (the new master in ASWARA who had taken over the subject after the unfortunate passing of Awang) to teach me *Mak Yong*. I received one-on-one training from her. Later, I disseminated my knowledge to a wider community by offering *Mak Yong* classes to the public. I would lead the sessions but I also invited Fatimah Abdullah to be a guest teacher. These classes were held for six months in a year, on every Sunday. I ran the program for three years from 2008 to the end of 2010. Working every week with Abdullah I developed my skills as a *Mak Yong* instructor. My doctoral project builds on my *Mak Yong* experience and previous use of Western cannon texts. My experience as an actor, director and *Mak Yong* instructor provided me with a valuable starting point to explore this traditional artform.
in my doctoral project, which would include leading an intercultural exchange and developing a contemporary aesthetic.

![Image of performers in a ritualistic pose]

**Figure 6: “The Opening Ritual” Throne of Thorns, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara, Natalie Wilson, Toni-Lea Potter, Daniel Cottier, Lauren Bacon, Nicole Samson, Tasha O’Brien, Georgia Broderick, Adrian Tolhurst, Daniel Hills. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.**

**Traditional to Contemporary: The Opening Sequence in Throne of Thorns**

Theatre is not merely telling stories to an audience; theatre is also about travelling. With *Throne of Thorns* I wanted the audience to metaphorically place their hands on what I call ‘our’ hands, meaning my hands and those of the ensemble, and follow us into the world of the play. The old Malay world is full of ritual and mystical beliefs that are specific to Malay culture. Therefore, how the audience travelled into the world of the story in this intercultural production became important for introducing the Malay culture. I wanted to create an opening that was ritual-like. Consequently, I did not begin my rehearsals of the opening of *Throne of Thorns* with inspiration drawn from Shakespeare’s opening shipwreck scene in *The Tempest*, but instead set out to explore whether we could create a ritual-like opening, one that reshaped the traditional *Mak Yong* ritual opening sequence. I did this in order to take the audience travelling, with us the ensemble, into a fused world, one that was deeply reliant on Malay culture and traditional *Mak Yong* yet which
also had Western influences. What was I really attempting to do by using a ritual-like opening? I was attempting to create connections: connections between the actors and spectators; between the actors, spectators and the space; between the actors and each other.

According to Holledge and Tompkins ‘ritual is inflected with religious worship or recognition of religious spirituality: the faith that maintains a culture or a community, whether in worship, re-affirmation, celebration, solidarity, or continuity’ (2000, p. 57). In Throne of Thorns, the cast and myself attempted to explore how we might create a ritual-like opening inspired by traditional forms, that incited the audience to travel along a ‘passageway’ (p. 57), acknowledging that while it might not lead to regaining or rediscovering a lost spirituality (p. 57), it might in some way evoke a sense of the spiritual. Perhaps spirituality might be a contentious word here, for I was not referencing religious spirituality, nor attempting to create a ritual that involved praying to a deity, but attempting to create one that might reawaken a sense of community. Ritual is created by the community for the community. Schechner states that ritual is ‘a way for people to connect to a collective, even mythic past. To build solidarity, to form a community’ (2002, p. 77). While there were paying audience members for Throne of Thorns, and while it was a contemporary performance with a particular aesthetic, my aim, and the aim of the ensemble in creating a ritual-like opening, was to move the audience towards the direction of ‘feeling’ a sense of community.

In developing the opening ritual-like sequence of Throne of Thorns, the cast and I began by examining Buka Panggung (the opening ritual of Mak Yong). Buka Panggung is followed by the opening dance Mengadap Rebab, (salutation to the rebab – spike fiddle) and then the characters are introduced, before the story begins. At the end of the story there is a closing ceremony Tutup Panggung, which includes a closing dance, a closing song, and ritual prayer. Traditionally, Buka Panggung in Mak Yong refers to a ceremony led by a bomoh (shaman) or an elderly member of the Mak Yong troupe (Zahari & Umar, 2012). The purpose of Buka Panggung is firstly to request protection from the spirits, but it is also to ask the spirits for permission to perform in the spirits’ locale. Akin to, although not the same as Australian Aboriginal beliefs, Malays believe that the spirits own the land and permission must be sought to perform on their land. It is important for a traditional Mak Yong performance to have guardianship from these spirits, because traditional Mak Yong performers strongly believe this ritual is able ‘to protect performers as well as audience members from any malicious influences (badi) existing in the environment’ (Yousof, 2011, p. 16). The ritual involves offerings (yellow glutinous rice, parched rice, an egg fried in fritter style, sweetened water, cotton thread or raw cotton thread etc.) that have been placed in bowls and put on trays (p. 17). The host lays these trays out. When the ceremony begins, the
shaman recites a mantra to ask protection from the spirits and eats the offerings. *Buka Panggung* then, is a ritual or process of preparing the space, preparing the actors and the audience for the beginning of the performance.

Before I could begin experimenting in the rehearsal room, I had to think about what exactly were the rituals we were trying to emulate and how did they function. I also needed to ask myself if it was appropriate to draw inspiration from these rituals. The term ‘ritual-like’ is defined by Lewis as ‘events recreated as they may have been’ and he sees ritual ‘as the most important kind of special event performed by the members of any given social group’ (2013, p.58). Thus, the cast and I in the rehearsal room were searching for ritual-like expressions of the original *Mak Yong* opening and closing ceremonies. On the first day of my workshops I began the rehearsal, by saying: ‘Imagine yourself as a shaman. You need to enter and cleanse this space’. This was the actors’ first task, prior to any discussion of the meaning of ritual or of shamanism. I let the actors enter one by one and explore their imagined idea. I was curious to understand how Western actors interpreted shamanism, and I was surprised to observe both their interpretations of a shaman and their concepts of ritual. Most of the actors created their own mantras, and used props and their bodies to explore shamanic characteristics. They also created trance-like performance bodies, as if they were a shaman communicating with the unseen world. This simple exercise was the beginning of a process of devising the opening sequence for *Throne of Thorns*.

‘Swinging the Tray’ Salutation

The performance of *Throne of Thorns* began with the ensemble entering the stage in silence, holding trays. They moved to centre stage and faced the *pohon beringin* (tree of life) that was painted on the wall. The performers and I created a ‘swinging the tray’ circular movement for this moment. This ‘swinging the tray’ circular movement was a salutation that hinted at the idea of ‘eternal recurrence’. The image of the tree was a visual reminder, throughout the production, of ‘eternal recurrence’, a circularity that is repeated in the circular shape of the trays. It also echoes a ritual that occurs in Malaysia, in traditional dance, when welcoming guests.
Figure 7: “Salutation to the *Pohon Beringin* (Tree of Life)” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara, Natalie Wilson, Toni-Lea Potter, Daniel Cottier, Lauren Bacon, Nicole Samson, Tasha O’Brien, Georgia Broderick, Adrian Tolhurst, Daniel Hills. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.

Opening Ritual-like Sequence

Following the ‘swinging the tray’ salutation I created a ‘performance mantra’ that echoes the shaman’s mantra in the *Buka Panggung* (Opening Ritual). In creating the opening sequence of *Throne of Thorns*, I combined elements of the *Buka Panggung* (in which Raja, the king, walks and recites a mantra, whispering, and using her wand) with the dance of *Mengadap Rebab*. In *Throne of Thorns* Raja (Prospero) enters after the ensemble has gathered. In this scene, Raja (Prospero) recites an inner dialogue, asking for protection for the actors and the space. She moves to the three different sides of the performance space, using the rattan wand and her breath to push imaginary energy from her hand to the audience. I wanted to create a sense of giving and receiving, and this giving and receiving is of an unseen and imaginary power. I asked the actor-playing Raja to imagine (my words were, say it in your heart) that she was asking the unseen spirits in the theatre to provide security for this performance. To me this ritual-like sequence, which I called in rehearsal ‘energy transference’, was created to remind the audience of unseen powers, such as spirits: a hint of other belief systems other than Western beliefs. The actors
repeat the same circular ritual-like movement at the end of the play echoing *Tutup Panggung* (Closing Ritual). As they leave the space, Makhluk (Caliban) takes up Prospero’s place on the throne, revealing that circularity might also involve change.

**Opening Song (Call and Response) and Dance**

Once the actor-playing Raja had completed this opening movement, the rest of the ensemble sat on the floor. Raja joined them and the whole ensemble began to dance gracefully using their hands and fingers. This movement sequence was inspired by the *Mak Yong* opening dance and song, *Mengadap Rebab*. Traditionally, the *Mengadap Rebab* ‘serves to salute or pay homage to the rebab, a three-spike fiddle with the actors facing it’ (Yousof, 2012, p. 152). *Mengadap Rebab* is also to ‘placate and pay homage to the spirits’ (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 45). In the traditional opening song and dance, all the female actors sit on the floor, facing east with their legs crossed. The actor-playing Pak Yong sits in front of the Rebab, the other actors sit behind her and begin to sing. Later, she dances and the other performers follow her.

In *Throne of Thorns*, the ensemble and I devised our own sequence of singing and dancing that was inspired by the *Mengadap Rebab*. In our performance piece Raja (Prospero) is akin to the Pak Yong character. She firstly sings a solo and is then followed by the rest of the ensemble, which in *Mak Yong* is known as the Jung Dondang (the Jong Dondang includes the ensemble, the rebab player and the musicians). It is a form of call and response. The Jong Dondang responds to Pak Yong’s solo, using a different phrase to the soloist, typically ‘Donde, Dongde, Dongde, Didonde Gak, Ayo la rue we… Eee…’ (Zakaria, 2015, p. 184). The Jong Dondang sings with a high pitch but the rebab player vocally improvises, varying his tone, so that it becomes higher than the ensemble. This layering of different voices and tone, of individual sound and group sound, creates a dynamic much like chanting.
I have often experienced a strong emotional reaction whilst watching and listening to the singing and music in *Mak Yong* performances in Malaysia. The musical instruments in the dance of the *Mengadap Rebab* have resonated with my senses and have created an overwhelming sense of wonder. The musical instruments of *Mak Yong* include the *rebab, gong, gendang, canang, kesi, geduk, gedombak,* and *serunai* (Hussin, 2015, p. 163). In *Throne of Thorns* the creative aim was to attempt to get the audience to also have a visceral reaction from the song that we created as an ensemble, inspired by the *Mengadap Rebab*. I wanted the audience to connect with my culture through this reinvented experience. I was attempting to draw from the original, retain elements of it, and yet create something new – a contemporary performance. According to Zahari and Umar, *Mak Yong* is ‘a very unique genre that not only encompasses all elements of the performing arts but also incorporates ritualistic elements that endow it with mysticism’ (2011, p. 1). It was this mysticism, or what perhaps I might define as a sense of magic and otherworldliness that I wished to share.

Figure 8: “Musicians” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Emily Duncan and Kraig Grady. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkaflı.
Process of Creating the Opening Song

During the early rehearsals of *Throne of Thorns* the actors, musicians and I first concentrated on the song of the *Mengadap Rebab*. This was a good way for me to introduce cultural elements to the group and for us to begin exchanging cultural attitudes. Each of the ensemble and musicians were given collections of *Mak Yong* songs including the *Mengadap Rebab* songs and their task was to listen daily to the music, although outside of the rehearsal. I was trying to gradually immerse the ensemble and the musicians in the Malay world through listening to the sound of *Mak Yong* music. We then experimented with *Mengadap Rebab* songs in rehearsal. My aim was for the ensemble to create a sound, music or any expression similar to the song of the *Mengadap Rebab*. The actors found learning this song was difficult but they persisted. The actors, musicians and I questioned each other about our initial responses to the song. We discovered that this call and response process gave us the sense of being an individual within a group. It made us feel like we had our own identity but were also connected to a larger community. In Act III, Scene II Caliban says:

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be not afeard; the isle is full of noises,
Sounds and sweet airs that give delight and hurt not.
Sometimes a thousand twangling instruments
Will hum about mine ears; and sometime voice
(Shakespeare, 1964, p. 93)
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Our opening song, we decided, would 'give delight and hurt not'.
Meanwhile I had given the *Mengadap Rebab* song to the musical director and composer, Kraig Grady, and asked him to create a sound inspired by the song. I requested that the music involve a ‘call and response’ sequence for a soloist and the ensemble. Grady’s initial response was that the music was intricate and difficult to imitate. However, he was eager to attempt his own composition, and to use new musical instruments that he had already invented to create microtonal intonations, which had a similar tone to the Malay sound. Grady returned with his composition after six months. His music was unique, stimulating and harmonious. I understood now that the rare aural experience of the invented microtonal instruments by Grady would infuse Western and Malay sounds into a new hybrid, creating a distinctive sound for the play. I gave a recording of Grady’s composition to two students, one a singer/musician and the other, my assistant stage manager, who is also a music student. I reminded them not imitate the recorded voices from the *Mengadap Rebab*, instead I wanted them to create something inspired by it. The phrases that the singers needed to use from the *Mengadap Rebab* song were: ‘Eeee… Adik wei… Ayoo.. Dondang Dondang.. Aaaa…’. However, a problem arose when none of us could create a singing style that seemed appropriate. I am not a singer and my singer/musician and actors were Australian and were finding it difficult to improvise using the given phrases. I needed to
create a vocal work complementary to Grady’s composed sound. After three days of working in rehearsals we still could not solve this problem, so I sent Grady’s composition to a Malaysian composer, Hafiz Askiak, in Kuala Lumpur and asked if he could improvise, using inspiration from the song of the Mengadap Rebab in relation to the composed music. Askiak, is a contemporary composer who graduated in music from an American university. He is neither a traditional music player nor does he comes from the Mak Yong coterie. In two days, he recorded an improvised song and sent it to us. I was pleased with the results but also interested that our problem was solved by another Malaysian. I believe that this is what Bharucha meant when he said that childhood experience in a specific culture allows a person, even unconsciously, to be able to internalise their cultural materials (1990, p. 70). This Malaysian singer had rhythms and tones of the Mengadap Rebab deep within his psyche. To me this process was culturally sensitive and respectful to Malay traditions, because we were not hijacking the actual song and dance, but with the composers, one American and one Malaysian, we were attempting to create a new contemporary piece. It was a culturally connected process because some of those involved had strong Malay beliefs themselves and understood them. It was also a process full of curiosity, for we discovered we were eager to understand each other, and learn more about each other’s cultural processes.

Figure 10: “Rehearsing the Hand Movements with Live Music” Throne of Thorns, [rehearsal - 14 November 2014], February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Kraig Grady and the ensemble: Adrian Tolhurst, Nicole Samson, Catherine McNamara, Natalie Wilson, Toni-Lea Potter, Daniel Cottier, Lauren Bacon, Tasha O’Brien, Georgia Broderick, Daniel Hills. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
As we moved through the different rehearsals the singing improved. We rehearsed three times a week with the composer, musician and actors singing through the opening sequences. Sometimes the performers had colds or were off-key. Sometimes they had been out late at night and were tired. At those times, I had to remind them of performance discipline, which they knew very well from their own culture. As we neared the final performance, we achieved a unique style of singing inspired from my tradition yet sung in a fashion specific to the production. The end result of the opening music created by Grady, with the singer and the ensemble, was a totally new hybrid creation, a combination of the Malay and the Western. In the final performance of *Throne of Thorns* all our rehearsal work came to fruition. The music, the solo voice, the ensemble singing and the dancing became unified. This collaboration between the actors and the creative team required ‘generosity, openness, a sense of adventure, a love of active culture, tenacity, truth, feeling, interest in others, decisiveness and willingness, at any moment, to give up attachment to the final result’ (Bogart, 2014, p. 122).

Figure 11: “The Dance” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Catherine McNamara, Nicole Samson, Lauren Bacon, Natalie Wilson, Adrian Tolhurst. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
Process of Creating the Opening Dance

As in the traditional Mengadap Rebab, in Throne of Thorns reinvented ritual dance we decided that the entire ensemble would sit on the floor, with crossed legs, and as the singing commenced they would begin to dance, using their arms, fingers and wrists. For this sequence, I selected five main hand movements from the traditional Mengadap Rebab dances and then added newly choreographed movements. The new choreographed movements were still (in our minds at least) serving the function of a spiritual preparation for the actors about to embark on the play’s narrative. The traditional dance of the Mengadap Rebab is the moment when the actors actually transform themselves into their characters. Mak Yong dances are primarily based on the movement of the upper body: mainly the hands, fingers, the arms, shoulders, head and the body contortion. Mak Yong dances, besides being reflective of images of flora and fauna, are also closely related to the earth, in that bodies can be seated, or pressed down, contrasting with many Western dances which often demand freedom from gravity, via lifts and leaps and dancing on toes (Nasuruddin, 2015, p. 216).

To develop our dance sequence, I shared with the actors my research into Mak Yong and my past knowledge of the form. Then we began to explore physically. Traditionally in my experience of learning from the master, the master would demonstrate the dance movements and the student would imitate. As the student imitates, the master would correct the movements. The demonstration and imitation would continue until it became perfect. However, in my creative project I was eager to develop a process of shared learning instead of one where I behaved as ‘the master’. The Mak Yong dance is different from the kind of dancing that Australian actors are used to. The dance steps move gently with intricate fingers and wrist movements. The Australian actors found it difficult simply because they never have had to dance in such a graceful manner, with a very slow music beat and maximising the stretching of their fingers.

The training I instituted involved several exercises (for fingers, wrists, arms, waist, and feet) that were designed specifically for the Australian actors. We set up a rehearsal routine where every morning after the warm up, the ensemble would do their exercises. The first stage was to train the detailed hand movements involving the wrists and the fingers. For example, in one exercise they were required to train their fingers out and in, twenty times in a very fast tempo and a very slow tempo. Following these exercises we would rehearse the dance itself and this became the daily routine undertaken before we began the scene rehearsal.
Another challenge to the actors' bodies was the need to hold specific positions for a long period of time. The actors found the unfamiliar positioning painful. This demanded the development of their muscles. The actors spoke about the muscle pains that they had while learning the dance and after practicing it. Once they had trained in the hand movements, and the dance began to find some form, I initiated concepts of emotion, expression and intention for the actors to embody. In my past experience, the masters did not tell their performers exactly how to react when moving or dictate why they might be moving. In this part of the traditional process it is usually up to the actors to imbue their dancing with a particular intention or emotion. However, in *Throne of Thorns*, because of the newness of the form to the Australian ensemble, I initially instructed them in terms of their intentions. Therefore, I instituted continuous body training able to improve the precision of the body, but in some cases it could not be improved due to the limitation of body flexibility. The experience of exchanging these skills began with continuous demonstration requiring much training and a lot of encouragement. The key training approach was to keep repeating the movement during rehearsals. The rehearsals demanded time, repetition and continuous practice. This was vital to make the unfamiliar familiar.

Further to this, the traditional dance sitting position presented a hurdle that some of the actors had trouble with, especially when sitting with crossed legs, with the thigh flat and the knees close to the floor. (Some of the actors, however, were able to sit perfectly). Training is not merely about mimicking but about continuously learning and applying visual memory to the body and responding to it. Only through vigorous training can success be achieved. Choosing leaders among the actors is one of the methods I used to help improve the training process. The performers would also offer suggestions on how the ensemble might improve, or what the ensemble might need to do more work on. This method of allowing a few actors to teach the rest of the cast provided an effective way to improve the learning process. Allowing peers to teach became the next level of training and occurred after the second month of rehearsals. The actors gradually improved; they learnt the correct positions and found solutions to make it work. I appreciated hearing what they discussed and how they interpreted technically the movements, and then tried to make it their own. This intercultural engagement via the actors' bodies definitely demands training that needs time and practice in order to grow and develop. Intensive and continuous training was undertaken in order to achieve success in developing the intercultural engagement enacted through bodies.

The ensemble and I discussed this opening sequence as we rehearsed and we decided to provide a space that was meditative. The choices made in the opening and closing sequences within the
play, although similar to Mak Yong, were new and collectively created. In Throne of Thorns I was not directing the ensemble to perform either the Buka Panggung or the Mengadap Rebab, but creating a ritual-like opening for a specific function within the production, aiming to evoke a sense of spirituality and community. Devising a ritual-like opening that drew inspiration from traditional materials required collaboration with the ensemble. It also demanded openness to each other’s cultural perspectives. By forming a ritual-like experience as an aesthetic choice for a contemporary Malay Australian performance I had hoped to transport the audience during the opening sequence into a Malay-centred world, yet do so within an Australian context.

Traditional to Contemporary: Cross-Gender Casting

In deciding on cross-gender casting, I thought of the character of Raja (Prospero) as the equivalent of Pak Yong in Mak Yong. Once I had cast Prospero as a female actor, I decided to cast the other royal characters with female actors as well. This group included Putera (Ferdinand), Tamak (Antonio), Setia (Gonzalo), Turut (Sebastian), Pesuruh (Stephano) and Pelawak (Trinculo). In Mak Yong, the Pak Yong has two Peran (servants/comedians). The characters are trickster figures. In analysing The Tempest, I found that there were two sets of equivalent royal figures who had Peran: Prospero has Ariel and Gonzalo has Stephano and Trinculo. The master-servant relationship Prospero has with Ariel has clear comparisons with Mak Yong scenes with Pak Yong and his two Peran. I created two Ariels inspired by the Mak Yong convention. Firstly, one called Halus (Ariel 1) and secondly, one called Mulus (Ariel 2). In Mak Yong the Peran is a male character. This role has never been played by a female actor. The Peran is one of the most challenging characters to be played in Mak Yong. In Throne of Thorns I was keen to experiment how it would look and feel if a female actor played one of the servants and yet, I did not want to make both of the Ariel roles, female. As Ariel is a spirit, this is a character who is essentially genderless. For this role, I decided not to indicate to my actors whether they should play the two Halus and Mulus as male or female and instead left them to allow their own sexual identities to embrace the role.
Figure 12: “Halus (Ariel 1) and Mulus (Ariel 2)” Throne of Thorns, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Daniel Cottier and Natalie Wilson. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
Figure 13: “Tamak (Antonio) and Lalang (Sebastian)” Throne of Thorns, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Nicole Samson and Lauren Bacon. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.

Figure 14: “Pelawak (Trinculo), Pesuruh (Stephano) and Raja (Prospero)” Throne of Thorns, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Tasha O’Brien, Daniel Hills and Catherine McNamara. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
In deciding the gender casting for Pesuruh (Stephano) and Pelawak (Trinculo) I cast Pesuruh (Stephano) as a male character played by a male actor and Pelawak (Trinculo) as a male character played by a female actor. At the beginning, I was aiming for Pelawak (Trinculo) to change into a female character; a female Peran. This would have meant that the two clowns were each a different gender; one male, one female. This would be new to *Mak Yong* as *Peran* has never before been performed by a female actor (Abdullah F 2014, pers. comm., 7 January). Throughout the rehearsals, however I felt that the jokes and language (the sometimes-bawdy jokes of *Mak Yong*) did not sit easily with the characters being a male and a female. Therefore, I had Pelawak (Trinculo) remain a male character played by a female. This allowed the jokes between the two men to work well.

I created Raja (Prospero) by examining and studying the cross-gender casting of the Pak Yong character in *Mak Yong*. Although Pak Yong is a king, in *Mak Yong* performances the concept of full impersonation does not occur as it does in Chinese Opera or Japanese Kabuki. There is no comparison between the Onnagata (from Japanese Kabuki) and Pak Yong in *Mak Yong* (Gonzales, 2013, p. 157). In *Mak Yong* the female actor performs the male by having a strong stance with ‘the head held high, arms held away from the body and folded behind the back, holding a bound band of rattan, the rotan berai and feet apart in a wide position’ (Gonzales, 2013, p. 255). From my training and observations of Malaysian *Mak Yong* performances the female actor playing the male character does not impersonate masculinity by changing her voice or hiding her femininity; instead in *Mak Yong* the actor’s femininity is still present and vividly expressed, particularly in the dance, where the Pak Yong dances gracefully as a woman, while singing beautifully using a high pitch, recognisable as a women’s voice, wearing feminine makeup and costumes with full accessories and flowers. Thus Pak Yong’s character displays both feminine and masculine characteristics. Yet despite these two aspects, the female playing the Pak Yong character has to attain certain masculine stances and gestures. In a *Mak Yong* training session led by Abdullah, when she was a *Mak Yong* advisor to the production I directed in 2003 – *Mak Yong Raja Tangkai Hati* (King of Heart) – Abdullah trained the actor that played Pak Yong in that production to be masculine through the actor’s shoulders being stretched; she must hold her chest and chin up, make firm gestures and have a straight posture. Abdullah demonstrated Pak Yong’s typical standing position and specific gestures: Pak Yong’s left hand, for example, needed to be put on the *keris* (dagger) which is placed at her waist (Yousof, 1976, p. 130). In this particular movement, every gesture should be exaggerated, vigorous and firm to portray the masculinity and the strength and power of a male king.
I retained this concept in *Throne of Thorns*. I reminded all my actors that they did not have to adopt male characteristics by pretending to walk the way a man walks or changing their voice, yet they did need to observe those traits that related to power. The actor playing Pak Yong developed her vocal characteristics and physical stance to portray those of someone used to being in command. The fact that she was female could remain. This allowed both sets of gender characteristics to be displayed in Pak Yong’s character. My process of building the character of a male king in a female body for Raja (Prospero) consisted of physically training the actor every day. This training I took from the methods developed by Malaysian actor/choreographer Zulkifli Zain who created his *Asas Gerak Melayu* (Basic Malay Movement) (Zain, 2014) using *Silat* (Malay martial arts). Through the exercises of *Silat*, such as the hand movement, upper body, and lower body exercises, the actor was able to create a strong stance, and develop precision, speed and tempo. The Malay martial arts training gave impulse and impact to the movements. These martial art movements, of the feet, legs, upper torso, hand and head, were used in the monologues of Raja (Prospero).

Besides this, I trained the physicality of Pak Yong through the Pak Yong solo dance, called *Sedayung Pak Yong*. In this song, Pak Yong sings and also dances. I initiated several gestures inspired by the feet, the hands and the arm movements from the dance of *Sedayung Pak Yong*. I started the exercises with the actor playing Pak Yong by working on the feet. First, I concentrated on transferring the weight from the ankle to the toes. These exercises were done very slowly, transferring weight gradually as the awareness of flat feet impacts on the entire body posture. Traditionally in *Mak Yong*, when delivering a speech, the actor stands still without any gestures or movements, however in *Throne of Thorns*, the actor used physical movements while delivering the monologues. The actor and I discovered that this added a strong dynamic to the words expressed by the king. The voice of the actor resonated through the space, giving the speech more power through the exaggerated body movements.

The actor playing Raja did not have much problem in applying these techniques as she is a dancer, however there were certain movements that she found challenging. Nevertheless, the continuous training helped her body to create the required movements which reflected power and status. By applying the Malay stance, controlling the weight on both legs and feet, especially when the knees needed to be bent and the pelvis needed to be grounded to the earth, she succeeded in establishing a strong kingly presence. The entire ensemble went through several stages of learning the basic Malay movements in training and expanding bodily expression. The training of this physicality was important in our rehearsal and vital in differentiating the status
traits of the different characters. While it is true, that this process was led by myself, as the director, it is also true that the actors and I worked collaboratively in developing the characters’ required physicality. Our exploration was carried out not only through Malay traditional dance and the martial arts, but also using Anne Bogart’s and Tina Landau’s viewpoints. We built the ensemble through the viewpoints exercises. We also investigated performance strategies utilised by Tadashi Suzuki through creating grounded bodies using the power of posture and feet. I was inspired by the works of Tess De Quincey. I had attended a talk by her in Sydney, in which I heard how the performers in her company develop bodily expressed images. I explored her method with the actor playing Raja (Prospero)as we worked with the monologues in Sequence 2, when Raja (Prospero) reveals his dark secret to Suci (Miranda). In this process, I asked the performer to deliver lines using physical movement and the actor would respond to an image. For example, I would ask the actor to walk across the space as if crossing an ‘an icy floor’, or as if running through ‘a burning fire’, or as if crossing ‘lava’, or wading through a ‘black sea’ or, as if you were a ‘tiger’. I would then ask the actor to respond physically to an image we had discussed earlier, or to one that was prompted by the text. This technique assisted the actor to create the movement with quick shifts of intense emotions and the images we explored also enhanced the delivery of the spoken text.

We also utilised the psychological gesture techniques of Michael Chekhov. Psychological gesture is about the expression of thoughts, desire and emotions of the character through physicality. It is related to inner and outer feeling. The actors think and question the inner world of the character and then a gesture is created from this thinking process (Rumohr, 2002, p. 17-18). Through psychological gesture exercises we created the physical characteristics for each character. For example, in conducting the exercise, if I mentioned the word ‘suffer’, then the actor’s body would gradually move accordingly to create the ‘suffer’ gesture. The actors were creating human sculptures. We did this exercise with many different prompts and the actors created numerous gestures. From the gestures created I selected those that best evoked interest, humour, emotion and differentiation. Therefore, the rehearsal process mixed Eastern and Western body training techniques to create the performance.

In the rehearsal room, the actors were constantly engaged as collaborators, observing their fellow actors and offering suggestions, a process they were already familiar with in their actor training at the University of Wollongong. This meant that on the rehearsal room floor we worked together, learning from each other and making decisions as we made discoveries that were appropriate to each individual body and role. For example, in creating the first appearance of Makhluk (Caliban)
with the ensemble in Sequence 3, I began the rehearsal by asking the actors to create a human sculpture. I asked the actors to give a title of the ‘artwork’, as I called it. We documented the process. I began with my own creation of a human sculpture, moulding the actors in the space to get the required image, and I took a photo of that sculptural image created. Next, I asked each of the actors to come out to the front of the others and create their own artwork, based on the Sequence 3 text. The actor creator then gave a title to the artwork and a photo was taken. Once the process was finished, and each actor had created their artwork, we discussed the creations and referred to the photos we had taken. We had eleven artworks. From these artworks, we collectively chose what images would be most suitable for the scene. Although I had the final say, this was a collaborative process. At the end of the session the actors stated how much they had enjoyed being the in-front creator of the image. It meant they could view the production from a different angle. This began a process that we used in devising many of the scenes in *Throne of Thorns*. It resulted in the entire ensemble claiming *Throne of Thorns* not as my piece, but as their creation. This strong sense of shared ownership is exactly what Bogart is aiming for when she (in talking about creative tasks) suggests that ‘perhaps rather than specific people, think of these jobs as windows through which any member of the collaborative team can approach the shared effort’ (2014, p. 111). In the example given, it might normally be considered the director's job to shape the image, but by sharing the task, a greater sense of ownership and commitment to the production was gained by each ensemble member.
Traditional to Contemporary: Costumes Design

In designing the costumes and theatrical space for *Throne of Thorns* I collaborated with Bayu Utomo Radjikin a Malaysian set designer and also a contemporary visual artist. My working relation with Radjikin began in 1999 when I was an assistant director on a theatre production and Radjikin was set designer. We subsequently worked on two other theatre productions in Malaysia and I came to understand his working style. In addition, when I directed *Mak Yong Titis Sakti*, an adaptation from Shakespeare, in 2009 in Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, Radjikin was the set designer. In *Throne of Thorns* there were many different cultural, practical and aesthetic concerns that needed consideration and I will discuss the costume design first.

For the costume design, we were keen to explore how we might create intercultural costumes that could indicate the Malay origin of this theatre production but also acknowledge some element of the Australian. Given that the production was a contemporary performance piece we wondered whether it was appropriate to use some elements of *Mak Yong* costume designs.
Practically, several actors in the ensemble were playing multiple roles, so how might the costume designers, Radjikin and myself, create designs that would fit dual purposes and facilitate quick changes? What might be aesthetically pleasing? Such questions needed to be addressed in a way that was sympathetic to the production ethos. In designing costumes for *Throne of Thorns*, Radjikin and I created costumes consisting of the following: 1) homogeneous tops and pants; 2) batik bandanas; and 3) re-designed sarongs. The process of costume designing began before rehearsals and continued throughout the rehearsals as we built scenes and experimented with designs that would suit the physicality of the performance.

Figure 16: “Makhluk (Caliban)” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Adrian Tolhurst, Nicole Samson, Toni-Lea Potter, Daniel Hills, Daniel Cottier, Natalie Wilson, Lauren Bacon, Tasha O’Brien, Georgia Broderick. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
*The Tempest* is about power, revenge, hurt, and forgiveness. Those with the most power have that power taken away and then returned. *The Tempest* reflects how gaining and losing power is a continuous cycle; power is not static, it is changeable. *Mak Yong* is a healing form of performance and the *Main Peteri* ceremony in *Mak Yong* involves a shaman curing a patient. The shaman communicates to the spirits and then ‘the shaman changes from one persona to the next, when a patient is helped into and out of trance’ (Laderman, 1991, p. 103). These changes, from one entity to another, indicate that healing too is a continuously transforming process. These transformational processes in both healing and in cycles of power led me to the decision that the costumes should also transform throughout the play. The aim of the multi-purpose costumes was to portray the possibilities of change as this also reflects the changeable power as much as the healing process involved.

In *Throne of Thorns*, Radjikin and I retained the traditional design of the *Mak Yong* top and pants, except we enhanced the design of the collar and reshaped it to give extra comfort and flexibility. We were also inspired by the official colour of Malay martial arts attire, which is black. We wanted to have plain black tops and pants of a strong material. We designed a homogeneous look for all the actors in order to represent the spirit of the ensemble. This design also bears a resemblance to the black top and pants (sometimes tights) often worn by students in Western theatre schools for student performances. So, the design had resonances across both cultures.

Radjikin and I were interested in exploring the costumes of the *Mak Yong* Pak Yong character as our inspiration for the character of Raja, the anchor character in *Throne of Thorns*. Traditionally, Pak Yong wears six pieces of attire, the first of which is ‘a round neck short sleeves top, a pair of pants, a knee-length sarong, a sash, and an elau that covers the chest’ (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 31). Elau, also known as *la manik*, is ‘a beaded article of adornment … draped over the shoulders, reaching almost to the waist’ (Sheppard, 1983, p. 36). Besides an *elau*, the most important feature to distinguish the king is the headgear, known as a *setanjak*, ‘a headgear that looks like a crown; a headgear that is ornamented with colorful beads … that has a rising peak above the forehead that can be represented as a sign of royalty’ (p. 36). ‘To complete Pak Yong’s attire, keris with rotan bera are used by Pak Yong to strengthen the symbol of kingship’ (Deenerwan, 2015, p. 263). *Keris* is the Malay dagger and *Rotan Bera* is the wand that I chose to use. The wand in this play is originally from the *Mak Yong* tradition. In *Throne of Thorns* the wand is his magical stick and his royal regalia. *Throne of Thorns* reflected this research in the design of Raja’s (Prospero’s) attire.
The three fundamentals in Pak Yong’s costumes became the same three in Raja’s (Prospero’s) costume: firstly the top and pants, secondly the headgear and thirdly the knee-length sarong. After the 1920s and until today, Mak Yong performances use a ‘head-dress that has a rising peak above the forehead that can be represented as a sign of royalty’ (Sheppard, 1983, p. 36). This headdress looks like a crown with glittering beads. However, in *Throne of Thorns* we became interested in an older traditional Mak Yong headdress, used before the 1920s and called *Setangan Batik*, ‘a low batek head-cloth which left the crown of the head uncovered’ (Sheppard, 1972, p. 64). This earlier headdress is a simple cloth that needs to be tied to the head. We decided to use this simple head cloth idea, called ‘batik bandanas’, for all the characters. In *Throne of Thorns*, the batik bandanas were triangles of cloth with batik motifs printed on them. The batik bandanas were tied in differing ways, depending on the role. They indicated status and power by different tying methods. By keeping the top and pants as homogenous, and by using the batik bandanas to
differentiate characters, the costume design reflected our growing understanding that intercultural theatre needs to recognise both similarities and differences between cultures. We brought the *batik* bandanas to the rehearsal space and with the cast experimented with the many ways in which the bandanas could be tied. The actors were attracted to the many images created by the way we tied the bandanas. They studied their looks in front of mirrors, taught each other ways to tie the bandanas, and some took photos of every bandana change. The bandanas were changed not only when actors changed characters, they also changed when the sequence of the play changed.

Thirdly, the costume design consisted of re-designed sarongs. In *Mak Yong*, Pak Yong wears a *samping* that is a knee-length sarong using exclusive hand woven material called *songket*. Radjikin and I re-designed this piece of attire for *Throne of Thorns*. Instead of using the original refined textiles in the *songket*, we used *batik* sarongs. The *batik* sarong is part of the Malay traditional daily dress. ‘The batik sarong is a lower garment that is used to cover the body from the waist to the ankles and is usually worn by Malay women’ (Legino, 2012, p. 1). Although the Malay sarong would have *batik* motifs covering all of the material, Radjikin designed a plain black sarong. In the process of designing, however, we add a stripe of the *batik* design, as an indication of the Malay cultural identity. Radjikin changed the *batik* motif (flowers pattern) to the plain black and enhanced the size of the ordinary sarong. In addition to this, we made the sarong reversible with a different colour on each side – black with the stripe of *batik* on one side and full red on the other. This idea was inspired by the work of New Zealand’s director/choreographer Lemi Ponifasio’s production of *Birds with the Skymirrors* (2011), where his male dancers wore black sarongs and long sleeved black tops, very similar to what Malay males wear at home and to attend prayers. It reminded me about my own cultural tradition that is ordinary to us.

In rehearsals, I brought the Malay *batik* sarongs and asked the actors to explore the uses of it and to experiment with the material (the texture), the sound and its purpose. This was an entirely new concept for the actors and even for me. This was also partly inspired by watching Oh Tae Suk’s Korean adaptation of *The Tempest* (2011). In the opening of his production, the twelve actors used long white cloth to create vigorous movements to represent the shipwreck scene. By using the long cloths, actually their long sleeves and an aspect of traditional Korean performance, it created a visually and physically dramatic opening scene. This taught me how simple materials could create spectacle and motivated our approach to the creation of the shipwreck scene using the re-designed sarongs. Interesting too is that sarongs are not as commonly worn in Australia as in Malaysia, although they are very much part of a beach culture.
This gave the actors a connection to the material, yet it was a connection that was different to the Malaysian experience. Malay people wear sarong as part of their culture. The Australian actors in the production had not been exposed to this part of the Malay culture. Their curiosity led them to an exploration of the use of the sarong. The creative exploration prompted an inventive use of the sarong in the play that was different from its regular usage. For example, the first task was to explore how the sarongs could be used, and the actors displayed several creative styles in the usage. They explored the shape and the usage of the sarong either using hands, arms, waists, legs, heads, in or outside the sarong. Some of them rolled themselves inside their sarong, some hid completely inside the sarong, some swung their legs on the sarong, some pulled the sarong high up using both arms and put their face under the sarong and there were many more interesting explorations. In addition, the shape of the sarong was also explored by the actors. Some pulled it until it became tiny, some crumpled it, some stretched it making it like a ball. The sarong became wings for some of the characters and there were many more variations. Their explorations reached beyond my imagination. I wrote and took pictures of the creative explorations. Next, I asked them to create sounds using the sarongs. The actors explored numerous ways in creating sounds, some stretched the sarong and their fingers scratched it, some flapped the sarongs on the floor, some stretched the sarong vigorously. The sound created by the ensemble was very impressive. I also asked the actors to create a sarong ship. Individual actors raised their sarongs. With no cultural background of the usage of sarongs in Malay culture, the actors were able to maximise their explorations in the tasks given. Several of the sarong forms found in this manner were selected to be used in the play.

We continued to discuss how to expand the use of the material. Radjikin suggested that we should maximise the usage of the sarongs in unconventional ways and that the sarongs should be able to transform and be used as props. Radjikin reminded me of how Malay children often play with sarongs. When we were young we used to tie sarongs over the whole body and only reveal the eyes and pretend we were ghosts and frighten our friends. Ann Bogart agrees on the importance of memory in the creative journey. ‘Every time you stage a play, you are embodying a memory’ (2001, p. 28). My task, as a director, was to think about what was to be experimented with in the rehearsal room; I let the actors find answers. I explored the memory of childhood in the scene where Makhluk (Caliban) was hiding from Pesuruh (Trinculo). The moment Makhluk heard Pesuruh’s voice, instead of hiding behind a big rock or trees for example, Makhluk hid inside his own sarong. This is the scene where all the Makhluk (five actors) took their sarongs, tied them on their faces so that they only revealed their eyes. This is in fact one of the traditional ways in which Malay children plays with sarongs.
Figure 18: “The Usage of Sarongs Inspired by Childhood Games” Throne of Thorns, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Georgia Broderick, Adrian Tolhurst, Toni-Lea Porter, Lauren Bacon, Tasha O’ Brien, Daniel Hills. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
I wanted to create transformations from the sarongs scene by scene. In the opening sequence it was used as sampeing, a knee-length sarong tied and hanging from the waist down to the knees. Then in the shipwreck scene in Sequence One, the entire ensemble loosened their sarongs, sat on the floor in a circle, and held the sarongs up covering their upper bodies. They then stretched their sarongs and with exaggerated hand movements created the image of ocean waves. The actors were at different levels, some sitting on the floor, some kneeling and lying on the floor and some back in the central position. As this was happening the cast slid their sarongs down to their waists and all the actors lay down on the floor letting their legs control their sarongs. They used their legs, against the sarongs to make loud thunder-like sounds. Once the sarongs created sound, the ensemble made intense shaking leg movements and gradually the movements become...
very slow and their legs fell to the floor. It was another interpretation as to how the shipwreck scene, adapted from *The Tempest*, could be presented to the audience. In rehearsals, we explored all the possibilities of working with the sarongs. We explored their shape, texture, and sound. We asked questions such as: How can these sarongs sustain the tragedy of the shipwreck? How can the sarongs portray for example, the ship, the boatswains, the sinking of the ship, the ocean waves, the thunder, the dying people as well as the emotions of the scene? These questions became a major part of the creation. In this way, I maximised the use of the costumes to help to create the dramatic, visual aesthetic of the piece.

The homogenous design of the pants and tops, the use of *batik* bandanas to differentiate character and status, provided a costume design that indicated the spirit of our ensemble, and the cross-cultural nature of our production. The collaboration with the actors experimenting and choreographing with the sarongs and other parts of the costumes created the kind of spectacle that I had witnessed in watching the work of Korean director, Tae Suk in his production of *The Tempest* (2011) and *Medea* (1984), directed by Yukio Ninagawa, a Japanese director was also influential. In Ninagawa’s production notes he states that he designs costumes beyond their practical purpose; for Ninagawa costumes have the potential to create ‘spectacle’ (Brokering, 2007, p. 391). In *Throne of Thorns* the costumes were more than mere costumes, they helped create the theatrical spectacle.
Traditional to Contemporary: Spatial Design

In designing the theatrical space for *Throne of Thorns*, I came to Radjikin with specific ideas in mind. I was keen to explore a three dimensional space where the actors were foregrounded over any particular stage element. I wanted to create a space that could vibrate with another world, a space that would not only suggest the world of the play, but would enable the audience to connect with the actors, and allow them to perhaps have a visceral reaction to the songs, music and dances, in other words a space that would enable them to travel to the world of the play.

In thinking about the theatrical space for *Throne of Thorns* I was influenced by a performance I witnessed of *Main Puteri – Mak Yong* in the village of Gunung Bachok, during a doctoral research trip to Kelantan in February 2014. *Main Puteri* is a pre-Islamic trance dance and shamanic ritual (Yousof, 1994, p. 15). Its main function, as discussed earlier in this chapter, is healing. This healing ceremony involves two male curers: Tok Puteri, the main shaman and Tok Minduk the rebab player. In enacting *Main Puteri*, Tok Puteri permits the spirits to enter his body and he moves into a trance. Tok Minduk, acting as the assistant, uses the music and singing to facilitate
Tok Puteri’s communication with the spirits. The musical communication between Tok Minduk and Tok Puteri reveals the cause of the princess’ illness (p. 194). This healing performance is usually performed in a private place, such as a home.

This small village is in Bachok about one hour from the city of Kelantan. To get there in February 2014, I travelled in the early evening along small winding roads and arrived at about 8.00 pm. The ceremony of Main Puteri was to be held in the compound of a private property. When I arrived the compound was empty and the host was laying the floor mat under the canopy. I assisted the host with some final preparations, such as attaching the food offerings to the yellow ritual cloth that hangs below the canopy, and placing food offerings onto small trays, along with gifts for the spirits, of cigarettes, coins, and other small objects, that were set on the ground, and slowly the compound was transformed into a place of performance. Gradually the villagers entered the area. I enjoyed the open-air atmosphere under the small canopy, the seating and stage space being simply floor mats. There was an intimacy between the performers and the actors. I was also interested in how the placement of different floor mats became the boundary between the two parties as the performance began. Mak Yong performances in villages do not demand any great staging, powerful lighting, any spectacle or even costumes. I once experienced a Mak Yong actor just in his ordinary clothes performing brilliantly. It was proof to me that Mak Yong is about the performers and the performance, not about other superficial theatrical aesthetics. Mak Yong does not need a set but Mak Yong needs a space to connect. Mak Yong needs a ‘given space’ as coined by McAuley. ‘If theatre involves communication between live actors and live spectators, then they must be present to each other within a given space’ (1999, p. 4).

Later, when designing Throne of Thorns it seemed appropriate to employ a minimalist concept that would pay homage to the village tradition where the relationship between performers and spectators is primary. Radjikin and I researched traditional spaces. Traditionally, as mentioned in Chapter Three, Mak Yong was performed on a ‘raised roofed stage or on the ground’ (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 36), in an arena which was open on all sides like a hut (p. 36). In rural settings, the theatre space (or panggung) of Mak Yong, was ‘a temporary structure made of bamboo and thatched palm leaves (attap) approximately four by five metres in size constructed in an east-west alignment’ (Yousof, 2004, p. 38) towards the sunrise (Sheppard, 1983, p. 34). In creating a spatial design for Throne of Thorns, I aimed to connect to the past, and to create those elements of visceral engagement and of a sense of community that I had experienced when I had visited
Kelantan. The aim was to maximise the connectivity between the actors and the space, between the actors and the audience and between the audience and the space. In this we were paying attention to Ranciere’s idea that theatre needs to be concerned with the power of the community rather than a passive interaction between actors and spectators (2009, p. 16). Ranciere argues that being active is not about producing activities or physical participation, instead it is a connection that is created between the performers and the spectators (p. 16). When there is a strong connection between actors and spectators it creates the power to associate and disassociate with the spectators’ own imaginings (p. 16). This minimal set design would allow the actors’ presence and their bodies to be foregrounded. Through the performers’ bodies moving in space, and through the lighting, we could create different atmospheres. In this play we aimed to let the energy start with the actors, for as Ninagawa notes, ‘if you get too carried away with the lighting and electronic development, you forget about the actors’ (Irvin, 2003, p. 97).

Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman, a Malaysian scholar, distinguishes the physical space of Mak Yong performance into two different areas: the ‘formal space – indoors’ – and ‘informal space – outdoors’ (2015, p. 46). He suggests that the communal and outdoor space form the informal space. ‘An outdoor space emphasizes informal concepts such as simplicity, minimalism and audience appeal’ (2015, p. 46). We were interested in the historical purpose of Mak Yong performance, which was closely related to the community and so ‘strengthened the unity, brotherhood and cultural harmony among the people involved’ (Zahari & Umar, 2011, p. 39). We decided to place the audience directly on the floor, with chairs provided as an option. The floor space would not have mats, because we could not control the colour tone of the floor mats, as the floor mats are ready made and are colourful with many designs. Furthermore, we felt that if we utilised original floor mats with colourful designs, the set would become a total imitation of a Malay village performance on an Australian stage. Instead, we decided to play with colour tone and not use existing traditional materials. The design of the floor space for the audience, however, was inspired by the motifs of the Malay floor mats. We created a deep thrust stage with three sides of the performance space. In front of the painted floor, we put red trays on each side, using the concept of an offering in a ritual, in which several trays of food are offered to the spirits as a means of protection by the unseen spirits. However, we left the trays empty, painted red, and spot lit. Philosopher Jacques Ranciere argues that ‘Artists do not wish to instruct the spectator’ (2009, p. 14). Ranciere suggests that between the actors and spectators there is a third thing, which is ‘not the transmission of the artist’s knowledge or inspiration to the spectator … it is a third thing that is owned by no one, whose meaning is owned by no one’ (p. 15). We wanted the audience to imagine what might be placed on these ritual trays. Mohd Kipli
Abdul Rahman spoke of the imaginative space between the audience and the performers. He explains that since Mak Yong does not have any scenery setting yet involves six dramatic action spaces (such as the palace space, forest space and the Peran’s space – the servant), the performers and the audience have to imagine those settings. The ‘audiences are free to explore the space of their imagination to create their desired six customary dramatic action space in a makyung [sic] performance’ (2015, p. 52).

In my early concept for Throne of Thorns, I planned to have food outside of the Performance Space at the University of Wollongong. This was an idea sparked during an interview in Kelantan with Abdul Rahman Jusoh, a Mak Yong practitioner. In this interview, Jusoh describes how ‘nuts, local desserts, rice and drinks were sold outside of the gate’ (Jusoh AR 2014, pers. comm., 14 February) of commercialised Mak Yong performances. My research had also revealed that when Shakespeare was working at The Globe, food and drink were sold outside the theatre (Gurr & Orell, 1989, p. 53). Apples and nuts were also for sale (p. 65). I decided our production would also provide Malay desserts and hot drinks outside of the theatre, in an attempt to create some sense of gathering, a way of communicating and eating together as a socialising activity that would precede the theatrical event. However, due to the health procedures required by the university and the time constraints, I decided to forgo this aspect of the production. In hindsight, I regret not forging ahead with the food offerings, as food is always a way to connect people to each other.
Radjikin and I explored the use of a cyclorama. In the first phase of our design, we wanted to represent a rural Malay setting on the stage. However, as I researched further, I realised that this doctoral project was not about staging a Malay village performance on an Australian stage but about being inspired by the ‘experience’ of witnessing *Mak Yong* in the village. We then began to extract from the initial design, reducing, recreating, and remaking. My previous theatre works in Malaysia were presentations of traditional *Mak Yong*, using traditional inspired sets that employed a canopy on an interior thrust stage. So designing for *Throne of Thorns*, Radjikin and I attempted to extract elements from the traditional *Mak Yong* set, reducing these, much like a line drawing of a painting, or like the Picasso drawing I had seen of a bull he had drawn, eleven times, each drawing containing less elements than the previous one (Artyfactory, 2015). This was a new process for us as a team. We placed a white image of a *pokok ru* (Casuarinas tree), from one of the *songket* motifs, on the cyclorama. *Songket* is a luxurious material, hand woven and worn by Pak Yong as a *samping* (to put on his waist). Casuarina trees are the trees that usually can be found on Malaysian beaches. For a brief period we put chairs in the space, completely changing the seating arrangements and the thrust space. My supervisors commented on how this altered my original intentions in terms of the audience and spectator relationship. I did not intend to lose that connection and reinstated the floor space.
I furthered my thinking process by contemplating the purpose of a cyclorama in theatre. It is a border between the backstage and the stage. The backstage is full of darkness and the shadow of actors, and is in total contrast to the front of the stage. It is a wall separating the backstage and the performance area, and yet also connecting them. It reminded me of another traditional theatre in Kelantan, which is called Wayang Kulit (Shadow Puppetry). I began thinking that the cyclorama is like the kelir or white screen in Wayang Kulit, where the shadows of the puppets are projected on a stretched white screen (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 5), which acts as the front of the stage. Kelir functions to display all the shadows. So Radjikin and I began thinking of the cyclorama in our theatre as the kelir, reflecting shadows, portraying images and this paralleled with my aim of portraying images using the actors’ bodies. In the opening of Wayang Kulit there is an important puppet, who remains on the kelir at the opening and the closing of the performance. It is the Pohon Beringin puppet, who represents the tree of life. Besides the Pohon Beringin, it has other names too, such as the Gunungan or the Kekayon:

   it has a symmetrical leaf shape and has a stylised tree decorated with flowers, birds, monkeys and other animals. The tree trunk is planked by two animals (beasts), such as a pair of tigers, lions and elephants, wild bulls or some other combinations. The tree and the mountain in the Gunungan represent two mystical symbols of the Hindus; one is the Tree of Life which nourishes and sustains all animals, some of which are represented on its face/trunk. The Tree of Life also symbolises the Celestial Wishing Tree of Myth bearing a solar symbol. The other is the mountain which refers to the mystical mountain of the gods, the world mountain known as Mahameru to the Hindus. (Nasuruddin, 2009, p. 7)
In *Wayang Kulit* performances, the *Pohon Beringin* signifies the entry to the mystical world. The *Pohon Beringin* is placed on the *kelir* (screen) before and after the show to symbolise the opening and the closing between the real and the nether worlds (p. 10). The *Pohon Beringin* or tree of life is a reminder that life is a circle with birth, life and death forming the circular action. The tree represents the circle of life; it is a motif of animals, reptiles and birds as well as a symbol of the cosmos. We all live and die. The events occurring on stage, the conflict, the crying, and the laughter are the elements of life that lead us, in some small way, to contemplate the nether world, or at least alternate worlds. In our third draft of the spatial design concept, this tree of life was placed on the wall as a bold image, reminding the audience of something larger than themselves.

The wall was painted red, since ‘colour speaks’ (Howard, 2002, p. 54). In addition, red portrays the energy, the pain, anger and vengeance of Raja (Prospero), and the love of Suci (Miranda).
This bold color was also chosen as it created a focal point for the audience’s eye. Radjikin and I also linked this red colour into the costume design, with one side of the actor’s sarongs being red. This red colour on stage was echoed in the trays held by the actors and three red trays that stayed on the stage throughout the performance.

I opened *Throne of Thorns* by welcoming the audience and introducing myself as a Malaysian theatre director. I spoke first using my Malay language, and followed this with English. In Malay culture, welcoming and respecting the guests is part of the tradition. Before the audience entered the space, I wanted them to walk to the other side of the building and to enter via an alternative entrance. The walk was through a number of small bushes. On the opening night it was raining and I did not manage to do what I planned. For the rest of the performance evenings, however, the audience entered through this bushy entrance to create a sense of a different entry point, suggesting that what they were about to experience might be different to their previous theatrical events at this theatre. I initiated the idea of the audience taking off their shoes for two reasons. Firstly, I imagined the theatre space or *panggung* as a sacred place where the action of taking off shoes is necessary to retain the pureness of the space: ‘Because rituals take place in special, often sequestered places, the very act of entering the “sacred space” has an impact on participants. In such spaces, special behaviour is required’ (Schechner, 2002, p. 63). The second reason was to introduce a Malay cultural element as the Malays take off their shoes before entering houses and mosques. Once the audience had ‘travelled’ through the bushes, entered the space, taken off their shoes, and sat down on the floor, the musician started playing, and the sound of an ocean breeze was heard. My aim was to activate the auditory sense of the audience. This moment of heightened aural stimulus was intended to awaken the aural senses of the audience. ‘Spatiality is created not only by a particular use of the space, but also by the atmosphere emanating from the space’ (Fisher-Lichte, 2014, p. 24). Fisher-Lichte argues that atmospheres, as defined by Gernot Bohme, are ‘placeless but can fill a space. They belong neither to objects nor to people. Yet they are usually the first thing a spectator/visitor senses’ (p. 24).

Part of the performance and design concept included placing the actors with the audience. This idea is derived from the traditional concept of *Mak Yong* where actors sit amongst the audience and change into their characters ‘by standing up and taking a pace or two towards the centre. An exit was made by taking a pace or two to the side and sitting down’ (Sheppard, 1983, p. 35). As Yousof states:
…they are, nevertheless, presumed by convention to be offshore when seated in the non-acting areas on the sides of the stage, leaning against horizontal bamboo bars for support and indulging in a host of activities not related to the action of the play being performed – smoking, chewing betel-leaves or drinking coffee – and assuming their specific roles or characters almost instantly when the time comes. (2011, p. 12).

Inspired by this village custom, in *Throne of Thorns* we decided that the actors would sit in front of the audience when they were not performing, and watch the performance. When they were to take up a character role, they would, like *Mak Yong* performers, simply stand up, and move one step forward onto the stage.

A Coda: The Lindt Café
On December 11, 2015, the rehearsal focused on Sequence 7 – *The Revelation* which was drawn from Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* (Act V, Scene 1) where Prospero and Antonio meet. My aim was to devise the sequence together with the ensemble. I began the rehearsal with a discussion about the idea of enemies. I had a list of questions that I asked the performers and collaborators: 1) How do we face our enemy? 2) What kinds of things do we forgive? 3) Can we forgive? 4) Does it hurt to forgive? 6) Why do we need to forgive? 7) How do we deal with apology? We also explored the meaning of forgiveness and how we dealt with pain. For example, how might either one of us react when being ruined and hurt by his or her own brother? How do we accept our enemy when the enemy is a relative or a part of our close community? As Bogart states, ‘Inside every good play lives a question. A great play asks big questions that endure through time. We enact plays in order to remember relevant questions’ (2001, p. 21). As might have been predicted, our reactions were diverse. At the next rehearsal, the actors were on their feet using drama and improvisations to explore the points made in the discussion. The actors were relaxed, exchanging stories, and sharing their personal feelings and emotions. Consequently, the discussions brought the ensemble and I closer together. Exchanging stories helped to create an openness among us. Sequence 7 was created and choreographed based on the information gathered in the studio story exchanges which led to the formation of two teams which opposed each other: *Raja* (Prospero) and *Tamak* (Antonio). At the next rehearsal, the actors were on their feet using drama and improvisations to explore their ideas. Leaders of each group led the movement and action and the rest of the ensemble followed. We explored physical contact, such
as holding hands, and ways of approaching each other that included hesitation, reluctance, and disengagement.

December 15, 2015 (a day before rehearsal) an event was unfolding at the Lindt Café at Martin Place (Sydney, Australia) that involved eighteen people being taken hostage by an armed gunman. From time to time during the day I followed the latest developments of the story via the television. That night I stayed up late in order to prepare for the next day’s rehearsal. I listened to the siege updates. Around two o’clock in the morning, my heart started to beat quickly as I heard that the police had rushed into the café after a gunshot had been heard. The footage kept being repeated, of the hostages running for their lives. And then, the news confirmed that a Muslim man was responsible for the carnage and terror. This broke my heart. I was both frustrated and furious as I asked the question, ‘Why again?’ The Quran does not teach this.

The next day, December 16, 2015, was my last rehearsal of the year and that morning as most Australians were beginning their day they received this awful news. The newspaper headlines worried me especially when the Muslims in Australia were being warned to be cautious that this event might inevitably raise resentment within the community. On my way to the studio I felt very uneasy in anticipating the reaction of my actors. What would they be like? Would they be angry with me because I am a Muslim and assign blame to me? Would they even turn up for the rehearsal? Would they still want to be involved? And would some of the actors leave the production because of this event? Although I was not responsible, somehow I felt like the actors might hold me responsible. I entered the rehearsal space that morning, no one looked up and I was not greeted as I was used to be greeted. All of the actors were sitting on the floor together and were busy with their mobiles checking the latest updates of the news and some were reading the reports out loud in order to share with one another. All of the actors were sitting in the middle of the room and I was alone at the corner of the studio getting ready for the rehearsal. I realized there were invisible borders between the actors and me: a circle of Australian actors, and I, the Asian Muslim director, by myself. I sensed a very strong division and realized that there was a problem and it had to be dealt with. I went to them and only then did they look at me. I mentioned the event and told them how I felt and began with an apology for what had occurred. It was my way of acknowledging I was distressed by the Lindt Café incident. This action on my part broke the division that I had sensed when I first entered the space. I was open about my feelings, and told the actors that I had been worried, thinking that they might not turn up for rehearsal. I told them that I felt embarrassed because my religion had been cited as a justification
for doing this horrible thing and was worried that somehow people might implicate all people of my faith in this tragedy. My actors came to hug me and convinced me that this event did not change how they felt about the production and about me. It was a moment of recognition of a wider social problem that would require forgiveness. Yet there was forgiveness in the rehearsal room too for the Australians were committed to this collaboration and did not, (as has often been reported around such events), see me in any way to be associated with those who inflicted this terror. If the Australians actors had not been rational and considerate people they could have disrupted the collaboration we were engaged in. It was an emotional moment – a moment of forgiveness and openness.

What we were investigating in the play was revenge, forgiveness, enemies, power, hurt, pain. The Lindt Café event caused the ensemble to have to deal with a potential divide within the rehearsal room that while not the same as the divide we were creating in the play, might be said to exist in the same territory. I learned that openness is crucial in intercultural theatre. As creative artists, we need to be open to all the different possibilities that might occur in the process. Making theatre is not just about making the performance; it is about how to make life. This research argues that openness is important in the intercultural theatre praxis. Transparency is required, and, so is being able to open your heart for acceptance, suppressing the ego, and being ready to negotiate and able to forgive. The hardest part is the willingness to ask for forgiveness. As Watson says, the interaction between cultures demands negotiation which includes ‘confrontations, conflict, collisions, appropriation, overlapping, withdrawal, separation, harmony, inclusion, unity, adaptation and change’ (2009, p. 6) and those qualities demand constant openness in dealing with it.

**Conclusion**

This chapter began by explaining my personal journey and my connection to Mak Yong, including my ‘returning to tradition’ phase in which I learned Mak Yong from the masters as well as directing traditional Mak Yong productions. It must be noted that this project was not a traditional Mak Yong production but rather a new contemporary and collaborative work. In finding the appropriate text, I followed my research objective, which was to create a Malay-focused contemporary intercultural theatre performance. The decision to respond to Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* was eventually made because it had a strong resemblance to Mak Yong stories, which reflect the Malay psyche and culture, and because it was also familiar to the
student performers I would be working with on the project. Herein is the beauty of Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* for although it is an icon of Western culture the story is open enough to also closely align with other cultures.

Following the introduction this chapter interrogates how the opening sequence for *Throne of Thorns* formed a ritual-like beginning and was explored in the rehearsal room in relation to *Mak Yong* rituals. It examines the researcher’s desire to lead the audience on a pathway that might inspire community connection traditionally achieved through performing rituals. Thus, in the opening sequence of *Throne of Thorns* I was hoping to reawaken a sense of community connection. Creating this ritual-like opening involved the elements of dance, singing and music. Ritual is a key belief in the Malay culture and my aim was to share it with a Western audience. The objective of the ritual-like opening was to initiate a sense of giving and receiving, and evoke the idea of an invisible and imaginary power. The creation of a ritual-like opening sequence was achieved through reciting mantra, through ‘energy transferring’ using the rattan, and through the gesture of ‘swinging the tray’ as salutation to the tree of life on the wall. It initiated the call and response song, with the added graceful dance. This sequence hopefully allowed the audience to experience the Malay sense of spirituality and community.

In deciding on the use of cross-gender casting, I was inspired by the *Mak Yong* tradition in which the character of the king, Pak Yong, is played by a female actor. In *Throne of Thorns*, I cast my actors according to this cross-gender practice. Through my analysis, I discovered that the performance of the Pak Yong character reflected both gender traits. Although the female actor playing Pak Yong acted as a male character, the performance presented both male and female traits. Working with Western actors allowed me to experiment and explore using different genders for casting than those used in the Malay traditional theatre. The casting in Malay traditional theatre is closely related to the Malay cultural taboos and religion in the country. My experiment in *Throne of Thorns* enables new possibilities in my future practice as to how I might work with gender and cross-gender casting.

The final design of the costumes came from the collaboration between the designer, Radiikin and the actors during their rehearsal explorations. We enthusiastically investigated how we might create intercultural costumes that could indicate a Malay origin yet also recognise some Australian character. The concept of the design related to the themes of *The Tempest* and of *Throne of Thorns*, which involves power, revenge, hurt, and forgiveness. Since power is not static, but constantly transforming, the concept we developed for the costumes was one of transformation. This play has multiple roles therefore the concept of changeable costumes.
through *batik* bandanas and sarongs were also practically useful throughout the play. Those characters with the most power in the play have that power taken away and then returned and the changeable costumes reflected this power cycle. The actors collaborated in rehearsals, experimenting with the *batik* bandanas and sarongs to devise and add spectacle to the performance as well as reflecting the themes of the play.

The theatrical space for *Throne of Thorns* was designed to allow the audience to connect with the actors and to bring the audience to the world of the play. The focus of the production was on the intimacy between the performers and the audience. Ranciere explains that theatre is about community (2009, p. 16). Therefore, the aim for making the ensemble sit in front of the audience was to emphasise the actor-spectator relationship. I was influenced in this spatial design by a ritual performance I witnessed of *Main Puteri – Mak Yong* in Kelantan. Radjikin the set designer and I wanted to retain the close connection between audience and performers achieved in village performances. *Throne of Thorns* used a minimalist concept: a painted floor inspired by Malay floor mats, a deep thrust stage, and a cyclorama. This minimalist staging foregrounded the performers' embodiment of the space; performer body and voice were primary. Mohd Kipli Abdul Rahman mentions that in *Mak Yong* performances in the village, there is no set, and the audience is required to use their imagination (2015, p. 52). Similarly the *Throne of Thorns* minimalist design demanded the imagination of the audience. This use of imagination is perhaps the ‘third thing’ as defined by Ranciere, something that does not belong to the artist or the audience. Ranciere states that the images and feelings received via the connection between the audience and the performers, actually belongs to no one, neither the artist nor the audience (2009, p 14).

In the rehearsal process creating a collaborative approach and being open to each other’s culture were particularly important. Through the development process of this project, the actors became my co-creators. This collaboration that involved different cultures needed constant negotiation and the willingness to be open in accepting cultural differences. In bringing together the four lenses of reinvented ritual, cross-gendered casting, costume and spatial design, this chapter reveals that collaboration was key in developing every single aspect of the creative work. Equality of power is a principal tool in intercultural performance practice, where misunderstandings, arising through different cultural viewpoints, can easily occur. In addition, openness is vital in negotiations, providing a means to collaborate despite differences. *Throne of Thorns* has provided me with valuable knowledge and new skills. As the Malay director working in a different land, with a different circle of people, in a different culture, the demands were on me to evaluate my
own culture. In my next and final chapter I summarise the research process in this doctoral journey.
Figure 23: “The Revelation Sequence” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Nicole Samson, Catherine McNamara, Toni-Lea Porter, Daniel Hills, Daniel Cottier, Tasha O’ Brien. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
CHAPTER SIX
CONCLUSION

The objective of this research was to analyse how a Malay-focused performance practice might fuse traditional Malay performance techniques (specifically taken from Mak Yong) with selected, adapted and reworked sections of Shakespeare’s The Tempest to create an intercultural theatre production that uses a contemporary performance aesthetic, and is able to communicate to a twenty-first-century Malaysian and Australian audience. Could this be done respectfully? And if so, what strategies might be useful for the rehearsal process? This thesis argues that in dealing with the fragility of mixing cultures in the making of the intercultural theatre project, Throne of Thorns, there were significant interconnected cultural approaches that became useful. These were as follows: 1) cultural sensitivity; 2) cultural belonging; 3) aesthetic integrity; 4) collaboration; and 5) openness. While numerous theorists have discussed similar approaches, this research illuminates how they operate in a specific Australian/Malaysian context, and provides a very particular insight to a unique project. Throne of Thorns had a Malay Muslim director and designer, an American/Australian composer, a Maori Lighting Designer, Australian actors and other creative and production team members, and used Malay performance techniques fused with selected, adapted and reworked sections of a script from the Western canon, The Tempest. That degree of cultural diversity demanded negotiation of Eastern and Western cultural practices and was done primarily by developing a rehearsal process that made use of the adat and other Malay customs as well as the Australian hugs and kisses. Negotiating the varied cultures, religious beliefs, sexual preferences, and intrapersonal styles was demanding, especially for a female Muslim director. It required that we establish a particular kind of rehearsal room sensitivity, one that left our moral judgment at the door.

This research combined an exegesis and a creative project. It used multi-methodological approaches including historical research on traditional Malaysian theatre forms and on the twentieth-century Malaysian theatre environment, interviews with practitioners, scholars, and administrators in the field, a theoretical examination of Eastern and Western intercultural theorists, as well as rehearsals and studio work. The exegesis analyses the Mak Yong form, and details its performance history. This study provided the researcher with a thorough knowledge of the Malaysian cultural materials that would be employed in the creative project, while the research on Malaysian directors who are creating contemporary performances using traditional materials clarified the work currently being undertaken in this field. The exegetical study also
discusses the different techniques that were employed, or might have been employed, in the creative project. *Throne of Thorns*, was performed by Australian actors with collaborative contributions from the American, Maori, and Malaysian production team. The production took place at the University of Wollongong (UOW) in February 2015, with a mixed audience of Malaysian and Australian students, parents and friends, scholars and art practitioners from the university community. In embarking on the creative project, I first needed to understand what theoretical, historical and creative research methods were useful (or not) in the creation of an intercultural production. Chapter Two provides the related literature on intercultural theatre theories and practices which inform the contextual, theoretical and conceptual frameworks of the creative component. This chapter begins with a brief exploration of the fascination Western theatre practitioners have had with Eastern theatre practices, and the fascination Eastern practitioners have had with Western theatre practices and the consequential ‘intercultural wars’ (Knowles, 2010). Many Eastern and Western scholars claim, however, that these cross-cultural theatrical undertakings create misappropriation. Bharucha is concerned that many intercultural theatre practitioners ‘are more concerned with strengthening their own visions rather than representing other cultures in their own contexts’ (1990, p. 5). Scholars such as Bharucha (1990), Carlson (1996), Lei (2011) and Hutchison (2010) raise the issue of respect and sensitivity arguing it must be included in performance processes for cross-cultural work. Bharucha suggests that there needs to be some personal historical connection to the culture and cultural materials being employed in the production. Bharucha famously criticised Peter Brook’s *The Mahabharata* because Brook had not ‘grown up’ (1990, p. 70) in India and therefore, could not internalise the Hindu’s spiritual beliefs such as *dharma*, *moksha* and *karma*. (p. 70). Bharucha suggests that Brook should have asked himself, ‘what does this epic mean’ to me? (p. 70). This chapter argues that while there is a constant exchange of cultural materials in intercultural productions, cultural sensitivity and cultural belonging are important to any intercultural theatre project. The literature review research informed my own intercultural practice and helped develop the cultural approaches that I put in place when developing the rehearsal of *Throne of Thorns*. Overall, it created the cautionary directive, that when creating intercultural theatre it is necessary to be sensitive to my own and other people’s cultural materials if misappropriation of such materials is to be avoided. One way of doing this is to make sure that at least some of those working on the production have a deep knowledge of the cultural texts or materials employed, and this often equates to at least some of the team having grown up with them, so belonging to the culture the source materials are derived from.
Chapter Three investigates Mak Yong, the traditional dance drama that is employed in the creative project. It was especially important to research the perspective of Malaysian practitioners. This research aimed to discover if the Malay form had changed over time and if so how, and whether anyone else in Malaysia had taken elements of a traditional Malay form and used them to create contemporary art forms. The research involved travelling to Malaysia to interview the practitioners, Mak Yong scholars, as well as The Ministry of Culture officials who are responsible for preserving the heritage of Mak Yong. Chapter Three examines the characteristics of the Malay culture and traditional Malay theatre, specifically Mak Yong. First, it introduces a number of traditional Malay theatre forms and then narrows the focus to Mak Yong, outlining the transformations within Mak Yong from before the 1920s to the present through five identifiable phases: 1) rural forms; 2) the royal court; 3) commercialisation; 4) transformation; and 5) urbanisation. From my research on the history of Mak Yong, I argue that Mak Yong is not static but has been evolving over time and continues to do so as the political and socio-cultural environment brings about changes to Mak Yong. The interviews conducted with twenty-four Malaysians provided primary research. In accordance with protocol and as a sign of respect in dealing with traditional forms, I first spoke to the elder practitioners in three different states in Malaysia. The interviews provided a context and data essential to the art of Mak Yong in Malaysia. These trips to interview and visit Malaysian Mak Yong practitioners were not only invaluable experiences, but crucial to the research as it provided an opportunity to meet the practitioners in their communities and fully comprehend their struggles with regard to their art and practice. Furthermore, it was significant as most of the collected information was not in any existing written documentation of Mak Yong. This chapter reveals that in a Malaysian context, while the traditional materials are constantly evolving, it is important to acknowledge the beliefs and artistic processes of past and present practitioners.

To undertake the Throne of Thorns project it was also important to understand the Malaysian contemporary theatre culture, to see how the traditional theatre forms were employed by contemporary theatre practitioners. Chapter Four, Contextualising Malaysian Contemporary Directors, investigates the changes that have taken place in Malaysian theatre since the middle of the twentieth century. The work in this period ranges from realism, to absurd and experimental theatre. With the arrival of Malaysian contemporary theatre in the 1970s performance practitioners began searching for a national identity. In the twenty-first-century Malay theatre environment the range of theatre is limited, and there is an emphasis on producing musical theatre inspired by Western musicals. This chapter articulates that the situation in post-colonial Malaysia, after independence and the ethnic riots, is the struggle and search for a national
identity. Holledge and Tompkins call this a constant re-negotiation of identity (2000, p. 5). This struggle for cultural identity has led contemporary directors to revisit their traditions. This chapter further examines the work of three Malaysian director/choreographers, Zulkifli Mohamad, Aris Kadir and Joseph Gonzales. Each of these directors has employed concepts of traditional theatre forms to create their contemporary work. In examining the work of these directors, it was discovered that cultural background and belief impacted on the artists in creating their works. Mohamad’s childhood exposures to Kelantan traditional theatres became his art vocabulary. He takes his contemporary concepts from traditional art forms. Kadir uses Malay themes, creating stories from myth, legends, and Malay taboos. Kadir’s works are deeply influenced by his religion. Gonzales’ process reveals that it is the continuous negotiation with, and respect for, ethnic, religious and cultural boundaries, that enables him to create a space for open collaboration. These three artists reveal that an artist’s personal viewpoint is predicated on their cultural background, beliefs, and education. This chapter argues that aesthetic integrity arises from an artist’s cultural environment and ethical stance and that these also shape any artist’s artwork. Being clear about the artistic processes being undertaken, and the particular beliefs that have shaped those processes, is vital for any artistic project and has been important to this intercultural project, the making of *Throne of Thorns*.

Chapter Five discusses the developmental phases and processes utilised in making the doctoral creative project, *Throne of Thorns*. This chapter provides an analysis through four different lenses: ritual-like opening, cross-gender casting, costumes and spatial design. The cast and the creative crew became collaborators in this process. The chapter first outlines the ritual-like opening that began *Throne of Thorns* that was inspired by *Mengadap Rebab* the *Mak Yong* ritual. Traditionally Malay ritual involves community and ceremony. In the ritual-like opening and closing sequences of *Throne of Thorns*, the aim was to reawaken a sense of community. The creation of the ritual-like sequences was a collaboration with the ensemble who devised with me the dance movements and took part in composing songs. The cross-gender casting was influenced by the cross-gender casting that exists in traditional *Mak Yong* where the character of Pak Yong, the male king, is acted by a woman. In *Throne of Thorns*, the casting explores different gender castings to bring different characters to life. The design of the costumes involved the recreation of tops and pants, *batik* bandanas and sarongs. The changeable concept of the costumes was based on the theme of *The Tempest*. The spatial design aimed to achieve a space for community. It also aimed to create a close relationship between actor and spectator. Living and working in a different country from my own and creating this new work pushed me to look at new methods in the studio. Consequently, a collaborative approach imbued the rehearsal room with a sense of togetherness
where the five intercultural approaches - cultural sensitivity, cultural belonging, aesthetic integrity, collaboration and openness - were employed. These approaches emerged from grounded experiences.

For example, cultural sensitivity was required when negotiating the traditional materials employed in creating the dance moves for the creative project. In each rehearsal, I explained the historical background, ritual, beliefs or practices of Mak Yong and many other forms of traditional Malay theatre. My hope was to elicit empathy and cultural sensitivity amongst the Australian actors. They responded with great respect although there were times when they may not have understood the cultural significance of the dance moves thoroughly. This attitude of shared cultural sensitivity created a very positive working experience that enabled the exchanging of cultural differences in the rehearsal space. For, in order to work with the Australian actors, I too tried to understand their culture, and they too shared their dancing practices.

Growing up in a specific culture affects the behaviour and the usage of the body in daily life. An example of the grounded experience of sharing cultural belonging in the rehearsal was my sharing of the mystical elements of traditional theatre in Malaysia. This was done by sitting together on the floor, while I revealed to the actors how Malaysian spiritual concepts and values were embedded within the traditional dance form. The actors were constant in their questioning and showed respect for Malaysian mysticism despite their limited ability to internalize Malaysian spiritual concepts and values.

As much as both parties wanted to learn from each other, however, there were cultural understandings that were embodied in different members and could not be taught. This is due to the cultural experience and belonging gained from living for years in a particular culture. For example, when learning a dance, and in giving the exact specification of body posture to the actors, there was a limit to their ability to reproduce the moves. Body training cannot be totally taught in the time we had for rehearsal. It is a cultural phenomenon, based on cultural belonging and needs to be experienced over a lifetime if a deep knowledge is to be attained.

The rehearsal work on Sequence 6, provides an example of my own aesthetic integrity shaping the creative work. During the love scene between Suci and Putera, the dialogue employed from the Shakespearean text says “Here’s my hand”. One day the actor playing Putera suggested they hold hands since the dialogue states that action. However, I wanted to present the love between the two Malay characters of Suci and Putera differently. I was able to show this love symbolically
through Putera placing the sarong over Suci’s head. My actors respected my direction and the beliefs and cultural conditioning that had shaped my aesthetic decision.

Sequence 4, the Conspiracy sequence, became the most difficult scene to stage. In the end the difficulties were solved through collaboration. During Sequence 4 the actors were required to create a line formation, seated on the floor, while delivering the text as well as simultaneously performing *Mak Yong* hand movements. Each time we rehearsed the sequence it did not work effectively. We developed numerous versions for Sequence 4 yet it was still not an effective scene. In facing this situation, I decided to work with the actors as my collaborators. I shared with them the problem and explained the challenge. The actors offered many possible solutions, they kept throwing ideas and rehearsing and rehearsing until the scene worked. Without their collaborative spirit and the sharing of power in this creative environment, the sequence would not have been successful.

Being open to one another was something that arose each day. In the early stages of rehearsal, for example, I found it very difficult to understand Western culture. It seemed to me as if there were no boundaries. I was surprised at how males and females mixed freely in the rehearsal room. There were no specific dress codes to differentiate the sexes and the socializing consisted of hugs and kisses. These behaviours, so different from my own culture, needed to be negotiated with the actors, as we went about our daily rehearsal practice, and also internally, with my own cultural beliefs and guidelines. Through this delicate process, it became clear to me that intercultural theatre, as defined in this research, is a continuous renegotiation of cultural values. In every new meeting of people from diverse cultural backgrounds, it is possible to create new discoveries. The Sydney Lindt Café siege crisis came at a critical time in the rehearsal room process and taught me the significance and value of constant negotiation.

While the five approaches outlined may be useful to similar intercultural theatre productions, this research has also led me to conclude that each intercultural production should be treated as unique. The creative team involved in developing an intercultural production need to consider the artists and cultural materials involved, and develop cultural and performance processes that are specific to the project.

The research also reveals many areas that will be fruitful for further study. One such area is on the intersections between Shakespeare and *Mak Yong* that might be examined through storylines, themes, styles of acting, cross-gender casting, and dramatic structures. Future research would also be useful in investigating internationally recognised Asian theatre practitioners who use their
traditional forms and materials, combined with Shakespearean texts, to create internationally acclaimed intercultural theatre. The Asian directors Ninagawa, Tae Suk, Keng Sen and others, have based their careers on fusions of Shakespeare and Asian performance practices. An investigation of other Malaysian artists who use traditional materials for contemporary work also offers stimulating avenues for future research.

As a final note, I would like to reflect on the journey of this project. The world not only separates us physically, but also by classifying us using skin colour, race, religion, gender, rich and poor, bad and good, East and West, First World and Third World and many more categories. In some ways, human beings are actually very different from one another. Nevertheless, as human beings, we try to connect with each other because there is something important that ‘connection’ offers us. Intercultural theatre performance is a platform for making a connection between very different cultural entities. In making Throne of Thorns, the cast, creative team, and I sought to make a connection with the audience. Through the rehearsal process we realised that our differences needed to be negotiated, and we also discovered that there were certain things that could not be negotiated, such as religion. We adapted well to each other because we wanted to ‘walk’ the same path, and because we shared the same space and time. We searched for convergence. According to Inga Clendinnen:

>culture is more than a bundle of legal principles, a matter of going clothed or naked, of cherishing privacy or ignoring it, of sharing or not sharing. It is best understood as the context of our existential being: a dynamic system of shared meanings through which we communicate with our own. Because those meanings are rarely explicit, understanding another culture’s meanings is and always will be a hazardous enterprise. (2005, p. 287)

In creating the intercultural theatre project *Throne of Thorns* our shared aim, as cast and crew, was to attempt to allow the audience to find a convergence between cultural differences. Theatre is a space to explore differences, but it is also a place to discover connections.
Figure 24: “Makhluk (Caliban) and his Throne” *Throne of Thorns*, February 2015, Performance Space, University of Wollongong, Adrian Tolhurst. Photograph: Norzizi Zulkafli.
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*Twelfth Night*, 1980, DVD, BBC, directed by John Gorrie, acted by Alex McCowen, Robert Hardy, Felicity Kendal.


Zakaria, F 2015, Lagu-lagu Mak Yong, Mak Yong Warisan Malaysia Warisan Dunia, Jabatan Warisan Negara, Kuala Lumpur.


APPENDIX

SELECTED

INTERVIEWS
SUMMARY OF THE INTERVIEWS

TOPIC: RESEARCH ON MAK YONG AND OTHER TRADITIONAL MALAY THEATRE

DURATION: 7TH JANUARY – 12TH MARCH 2014

VENUES: KUALA LUMPUR, PENANG AND KELANTAN, MALAYSIA.

RESPONDENT: PRACTITIONERS, ACADEMICS AND MINISTRY OFFICERS.

INTERVIEW LIST

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<td>Fatimah Abdullah</td>
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<td>7 Jan 2014 11.30 am ASWARA</td>
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<td>Che Nasir Yusoff</td>
<td>Practitioner / Lecturer</td>
<td>7 Jan 2014 3.25 pm ASWARA Kuala Lumpur.</td>
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<td>Academic</td>
<td>20 Jan 2014 2.30 pm University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur.</td>
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<td>Academic</td>
<td>22 Jan 2014 11.00 am Universiti Teknologi MARA, Shah Alam.</td>
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<td>Academic</td>
<td>4 Feb 2014 11.00 am Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang.</td>
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<td>Dr Hardy Shafii</td>
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<td>Norhayati Zakaria</td>
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Fatimah, can you describe your early involvement in this field?

Fatimah Abdullah

After my mother passed away when I was seven years old, I spent a lot of time with my father. Father always brought me along for his Mak Yong performances. I often watched my father performing Mak Yong on stage. Around the age of seven or eight, I tried to imitate the movements of the performers. For example, when they danced, I also danced at the back of the stage behind the curtain. Since then I knew that I was interested in Mak Yong. I trained under Khatijah Awang, at her house, until she passed away. I also learnt the art from my grandaunts, Mok Nah and Che Kemal, the latter being the wife of Tan Sri Dato Nikmat Kamil. When I had grown up a little and reached the age of around eleven, I had already started singing.

When did you start lecturing at Aswara?

I began lecturing after the demise of Khatijah Awang.

Can you briefly describe the differences between Mak Yong performances in villages and your own Mak Yong performances at Istana Budaya? There must be some differences between them. And how do you resolve these differences?

Mak Yong performances in the past were full of sound effects. For example, if they wanted to make the rumbling sound of thunder, they used oil cans. Behind the stage, they hung the cans on a rope. They pulled the rope so that the cans would hit each other, thus producing the sound of thunder. For lighting, they used gasoline lamps. Unlike today, the instrument then was rather rudimentary. But they were resourceful then, always thinking of the ways to enhance their performances. To create interesting sounds and effects like burning fire, or lightning, they used a lighter and kerosene. They put kerosene in their mouths and then spat it at the lighter, thus creating fire. Yes, they would also made sounds using the oil cans as I have mentioned before. They blew kerosene towards the lighter to create a swirl of fire, and then hit the cans – this produced the effects of thunder and lightning. Although I was still young at that time, I keenly observed the way Mak Yong was directed and performed previously. The main difference is the stage, which is unlike today’s stage. In
the past, the front stage was occupied by the musicians. At the back, they built rooms and a kitchen. The front and back parts of the stage were divided by a screen, rather similar to the screens used in bangsawan performances.

NZ Can you tell me a bit about your experience in directing theatre productions in Istana Budaya?

FA The audience reception of a theatre production today is not the same as previously. Today’s audience are more inclined to focus on modern elements in a theatrical performance. I have decided to fuse old and new elements. What this means is that we can utilise every sophisticated technical aspect offered by Istana Budaya. By doing that, we can actually strengthen the many elements involved in directing a theatre production.

NZ Does that mean you are using every technology available in Istana Budaya?

FA I have to do this in order to further strengthen a performance that I direct, and to make it acceptable to today’s audience. This is not wrong, you see, as long as you still keep its originality and meaning. Your key intention here is to match the performance to the venue where it is staged.

NZ So, what are the original elements in Mak Yong that you think need to be retained?

FA The movements in a circle obviously need to be retained because Mak Yong is often performed in a circle. Performing it in a square, and not circular, formation is to drift away from its originality. We definitely can make use of modern directing methods, or have a scene with flying actions in it. This is to make a performance more interesting and compelling. Otherwise, we should preserve and maintain most of the other elements. For example, the performers’ stage entry and exit must always be accompanied by singing.

NZ What else do we need to retain in a Mak Yong performance?

FA We should retain its rhythmic section, i.e. its music and singing. We also should never change its original dance movements. This is important because when the audience watch our play they will immediately know that it is a Mak Yong performance. However, if we want to be more creative, we can even enhance our performance, for instance, by creating choreography that responds well to the scenes we are portraying – such as the scenes of merriment or of farming and agricultural activities – or to the story we are narrating, or to the songs we are singing.

NZ What about the ucap tetap? (stock or fixed dialogues)
Yes, we must know how to perform the *ucap tetap*. There are different forms and styles of *ucap tetap* for different scenes: in the heavens, in a field, or at a beach. The dialogues can be uttered in many ways, and this came about because when *Mak Yong* first emerged it often used a very sparse and minimal set.

From this I can assuredly conclude that the original elements of *Mak Yong* that should be retained are:

- Its circular formation,
- Its rhythmic section,
- Its dance movements,
- Its *ucap tetap*, or stock or fixed dialogues.

The strength of a *Mak Yong* performance largely lies in its dialogues. Pak Yong is played by a male performer. The strength of the acting of Pak Yong relies on how effective the performer can be in portraying that role. In uttering his dialogues, his voice must be loud and clear. His intonation, or the style of his utterance, of the *ucap tetap* can help strengthen his *Mak Yong* performance. Voice intonation, or *lenggok*, plays a very essential role. When one hears it, he or she will immediately know that it comes from a *Mak Yong* performance. It is an element that can bring satisfaction to the audience. Thus, *Mak Yong*’s strength mainly lies in its dialogues, and, consequently, in the performers’ clear and loud voice projection and proper voice intonation in uttering those dialogues.

A book written before the 1920s mentions that Pak Yong is played by a male actor. I would like to know, from a historical perspective, whether the role of Pak Yong was initially played by a male or female performer?

Historically, Pak Yong was initially performed by male actors; even the troupe at Kampung Temenggung also used male actors in Pak Yong roles. The reason for this change was that most of *Mak Yong* actresses were someone elses’ wives or fiancés. So, there was a strict ruling against touching and hugging. It was Tengku Temenggung who changed it to female performers.

Oh, it means that the Tengku Temenggung was the one who changed it?

It was Tengku Temenggong who changed the practice of using male to female performers to play the role of Pak Yong, but not of Peran. By doing this, if they touched or hugged each other nobody would get jealous since all of them were female. However, they dressed and acted like males.

In the past, did the man who played Pak Yong wear flowers on his head?

Yes, and it is still being practiced today. The costumes then were rather simple. In the past, they could not afford to buy good costumes. But now they can
afford them. Today’s costumes are expensive. Yet they look beautiful and elegant.

NZ

How did the Mak Yong costumes change over the years, because I saw in old photos in a book by Zahari and Umar (2011) that Mak Yong performers initially wore kebaya and then they adopted the fashion of berkemban, i.e. wearing only sarung tied around their midriffs?

FA

It was since the Japanese Occupation that the Mak Yong performers had started adopting the style of berkemban. In the 1970s, the Sri Temenggung Troupe changed their costumes from kebaya to berkemban. So, in order to cover their uncovered body parts, they wore la manic beads. Nowadays, for Mak Yong performances at Istana Budaya, we wear ‘inners’ (long sleeve top) to cover our exposed body (aurat). This is the age of the pious female Muslims (Muslimah).

NZ

How about the Peran character? Can it be played by females?

FA

Surely. However, no female actresses have ever played the role of Peran in Malaysia. But in Bangkok, it is performed by females. Peran is not played by female performers because it also has to carry out healing rituals. Its position is higher. The Peran character is difficult to be performed and, moreover, the performer’s responsibility is enormous. At times, Peran needs to know how to recite prayers/mantra (doa) to prevent something bad from happening to other performers while performing on the stage. The roles of Pak Yong and Peran are equally important.

NZ

How was the Mak Yong performed in the past?

FA

Previously, there was not any systematic approach to it. The old system involved learning by imitation. Young performers imitated other performers before them. At present, there is a proper system of training and education. In the past, they just imitated and followed senior performers. It took a rather long time to become good at it. Mak Yong plays in the past were a bit ‘village style’ (kampung in style) as they involved a lot of singing. From the song sung upon meeting with Peran 1, to the songs of Mengadap Rebah, Sedayung Mak Yong, Kijang Mas, Sedayung Pak Yong, Jarob Bilik Pengasuh, and Barat Anjur. Previous Mak Yong performances were full of singing and dialogues. Today’s Mak Yong performances have been cut short, taking in only important parts and acts. This is mainly due to the inexperience of the performers and their inability to perform for a long time. Performances can be lengthened only if the performers are professional. We have to respond to current developments. We have to give what the audience want. Older people certainly want to hear a lot of songs that can affect their angin, spirit and healing process; but younger generations of audience do not want that. Younger audience want to be entertained; they want to listen to jokes and stories; they want to see dance movements. It is the wish of these young people that we have to react to. There is nothing wrong in doing that. If we were to stick to the old system, I
would not have had so many students as I am having right now.

NZ  How was the training system in the past?

FA  The owner of the panggung, or stage, would sit together with the performers in a circle, like in a script-reading session. He then decided the character to be played by each performer and the story to be performed for that night. There was not any script available. The post of the director of Mak Yong performance only came into being probably during the time of the Sri Temenggung Troupe. Discipline was non-existent in the past. Every performance was not properly organised. Nowadays, it has become more disciplined and systematic. Previously, whatever found on the stage would be used as props. For example, a piece of unsewn batik sarong would be utilised as props and other items. After being declared as a cultural heritage by UNESCO, our Mak Yong has improved in terms of its performance. A lot of improvements have been done, especially with regards to the discipline in performance. Without these improvements, the Mak Yong performance and stage management will still appear to be undisciplined and disorderly.

NZ  It is a known fact that Mengadap Rebab is an important component in Mak Yong performance. Why is it so important?

FA  Mengadap Rebab is important, firstly because rebab acts as the guru or teacher that teaches other musical instruments. Other musical instruments have to follow the rhythmic patterns of rebab. It is a symbolic act. A Mak Yong play performed without the Mengadap Rebab ritual will be incomplete because it is the opening act of any Mak Yong performance. Without the Mengadap Rebab, the play is incomplete. The Mengadap Rebab dance symbolises our paying respects to the king. Pak Yong represents the Malay king to whom every person must bow in obedience. Everyone must obey the king. Pak Yong symbolises the Malay king, and sitting behind Pak Yong are the king’s subjects. The Mengadap Rebab ritual is symbolic of the relationship between the king and his subjects. Pak Yong begins singing to introduce himself and his country. “Hai bilang royak berito nok timbul” (Timbul means emerging). Emerging here means emerging on the face of the earth. Like new-born babies, we are just able to see, to eat and to drink. So great is God’s creation of life. When we are born, we open our mouths to taste our mothers’ milk, thus receiving blessings from our Creator. The lyrics of the Mengadap Rebab song make a comment on today’s society. The king is the leader, and through this song he introduces himself. If we do not have a king, what will happen to our country? We do have our king!

NZ  What is your hope for the future of Mak Yong?

FA  For me, I would like to see the continuance of the legacy of Mak Yong. Without this traditional Mak Yong, the good name of Malaysia will suffer in the future. It is our culture and art that help promote our nation’s name abroad and make
us gain respect. As such, we should not discard our *Mak Yong* tradition. Preserving its legacy can strengthen our relationship with foreign countries, because the White men, the Japanese, and other foreign peoples appreciate this kind of cultural traditions. In their countries, they seldom see this kind of traditional performance and play. That’s why they like it so much. And it is also the reason why *Mak Yong* is recognised by UNESCO as a cultural heritage. It is unique and different from others. We have to preserve it for our future generations, but with correct and proper ways. Make sure that in our performance we do not present anything unpleasant to the audience. This means that in order to stage a good *Mak Yong* performance we must free it from any unwarranted and strange elements. In my opinion, it is also inappropriate if we alter too much some of its components but only to ruin it. So, we only use what we have already known to be useful. But do not try to make excessive change to the extent of eradicating the characteristics of *Mak Yong* performance, and of making people confused and cannot identify the true value of *Mak Yong*. We preserve what we want to preserve.

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**Interview 2:**

**WAN MIDIN WAN MAJID**

**Date:** 13 February 2014

**Time:** 5.00 p.m.

**Venue:** Pasir Mas, Kelantan

**Wan Midin**

**Wan Majid**

The more we learn about the craft; the harder it becomes. However, the more we learn, it will be more refined. Nowadays, the *Mak Yong*
performance is no longer authentic. It is has been modernised. For example, Rosnan, Asmah’s student, I think he has not mastered the craft yet. It's there, but it is not completely. For me, today’s Mak Yong does not have any aesthetic elements. We can recognise Mak Yong through its appearance, the costumes especially but the art of Mak Yong has long been gone.

NZ Why did you say that?

WM Because Fatimah (the main master in ASWARA) is my second cousin. Fatimah is not yet a master. Only because she went to Kuala Lumpur, then she became the teacher. It is because in Kuala Lumpur there is a lack of masters. Whereas here, there are so many masters of Kelantan’s Mak Yong. She can’t become a master here in Kelantan but she can if she is in Kuala Lumpur. What she is teaching her students is not complete. She has not fully completed her crafts in mastering the aspects of the dance, dialogues, movements and the art form of Mak Yong. If it is according to the past styles of Mak Yong. But if it wants to be modernised then, it is fine. If I want to mention about the aesthetics, frankly speaking, today we do not have it anymore. In the costumes, for example, in a group, if there are seven members in the group, there would not be seven headgears or seven La. No, it would never happen. That is modern!

NZ Who is wearing the La?

WM That is modern! In the past, the king is the only character that wears the La.

NZ How about the Queen?

WM No. The Queen can never wear the La. A female never wears the ‘La’. Only the King. If seven members of the cast wear the ‘La’ how can the audience differentiate who is the King? It is for the audience who do not know. But not for me, I am aware of which one is the King. But for the ordinary audience, they hardly recognise which one is the King due to the similar appearance by wearing the La. The King wears the headgear and the La. Mak Yong has lost its aesthetics in this sense. For the Queen, she needs to use a smaller headgear worn on the forehead. They do not wear the headgear. I also had experienced watching Mak Yong performances in Kuala Lumpur. For me today, there is no aesthetics in Mak Yong performances. I was in a meeting with cultural officers and I raised this issue in the meeting, that if we do not subscribe to how it was performed in the past, then, it is not authentic. The officer in the meeting said that we must follow the current state. We must follow what the audience wants; the current needs.
I mentioned about authenticity in today’s *Mak Yong* performance, firstly in the aspect of costumes, secondly on the opening dance sequence of *Mengadap Rebab*. Previously we started off with the *Ghoiyak Ilang* and even I was the one who taught Khatijah Awang, the late famous prima donna; from the beginning of her career until she becomes the main prima donna. I taught her for 3 years when Dato Nik Ahmad Kamil was still alive. I taught her around 1966 or 1967, when she first started.

In 1969, Tan Sri Mubin Sheppard wanted to bring a *Mak Yong* performance to Europe. Sheppard also wanted a *Wayang Kulit* troupe to travel Europe. At that time I was 30 years old in the year of 1971. I brought Sheppard to Hamzah Awang Amat’s house and showed him around. I went to Europe, to 30 places in 3 months in the year of 1971. At that time I was the Young Master of puppeteer. Pak Hamzah Awang Amat was my main master. He was 31 and I was 30 years old. After I came back from Europe, I started teaching with the group of Sri Temenggung. However when I taught Khatijah, she seemed to have her own opinions. I decided to leave the group.

I started my involvement in this line, as someone who has a background in shadow puppet; as a master of puppeteer. Then I was involved in *Mak Yong*. In 1980, they did not have enough performers as a Peran. I can also play all percussion instruments except the *rebab* and *serunai*. At that time, they were no groups. There are only performers who were also the villagers. I took over the *Mak Yong* performers due to the passing away of the leader. I named it after my village, Sri Gabus.

I crafted the shadow puppet when I was 10 years old. It all began with the musical instruments. I did not go to school. I followed my dad to play the *Wayang Kulit* music. That’s how I was able to master the skills until I became the puppeteer.

**NZ**

*Your dad was a master puppeteer too?*

**WM**

No, my dad was only involved in the *Wayang Kulit* music. Not as a *Dalang*. I was the one who was into the puppetry. Now, we cannot simply perform, as we need to seek permission from the state government. We have to perform secretly. I experienced that when I went to see the officer; he said that I was not supposed to come and let him know. It is because I could be served with a summons for doing so. He said; just perform. He said that I didn’t need to come and tell him. If you want to perform, perform secretly. He said that Wan Midin might need to let the police know about their performance. Whether the government allows it or not, I will still perform it. I did perform every night here when I was teaching Patricia Matusky, an academic from America. She is a foreigner and yet she could learn the craft very well,
sadly none of us wanted to master the craft. Today, it is very hard to find students who want to learn *Mak Yong*. The new generation does not see the importance of learning *Mak Yong*. Like me, I did not finish my school and yet I had the opportunity to travel the world due to my talent and skills. But the young generation seems to think that it is not important and the same situation is happening with my children. They all do not have any passion in the arts and they are just concerned about their main careers [current jobs].

NZ So you already have the passion since you were small?

WM Of course. I was the one who was eager about the arts. I went through a hard time to learn from the masters. Those times were not easy to travel to the master’s house with no electricity and other modern technology. Besides, it was compulsory for the students to come to the teacher’s house. If you must know, I had to travel to my teacher’s house. I had 5-6 teachers so I would select the best one so that I could apply myself better. My family, too, came from the arts background. My late grandfather was a shaman. My dad was a musician as well as my uncles. However, none of my children has any interest in it. The new generation does not see traditional performances as vital to them. They are more concerned about their current work. This is because they do not have any interest and passion in it.

NZ What is your emotion regarding this?

WM I feel that *Mak Yong* will cease to exist. If you find it in Kelantan, now I am the only one existing source that can share what happened in the past. Others had already died.

NZ Can you describe your experience in playing as a Peran?

WM My experience playing a Peran can be described as being a comedian. However, during my time, everything was unscripted. It is all because of you have to understand on how to appropriately react to actions and interactions with your co-actors. For instance, in a scene with the king, you must know how to respond accordingly by reacting to the king and how he responds to you. That is why for him in *Mak Yong* it is very hard to have a script. It is because each actor acts differently and you can only know how to react to them spontaneously. That is why I said it is very hard to teach and perform *Mak Yong*. When I started my own group here, it was 17 of them. But now, they are all gone. One by one left the group due to lack of passion and complexity of the *Mak Yong* itself. How can I force them? I can’t because they do not have any interest. Not like me, I had been performing since I was 10 years old due to my passion in
arts. My love in the arts since I was 10 years old up until now that I am 67 years old, and yet I am still in this field.

NZ: Do you still perform now?

WM: No. There are no more performances. But occasionally I perform the healing ritual *Main Teri*. Sometimes in a week, it may extend to 2-3 days of performing the healing ceremony. Sometimes there will be no ceremony at all for 2-3 months. It all depends because it is a ritual to heal a patient.

NZ: You play percussion music for the *Main Teri*?

WM: Yes, nowadays they combine healing *Main Teri* with *Mak Yong*. We have firstly the repertoire of *Main Teri*, and then we ask the patient if he or she wants to perform *Mak Yong*. If they do, then we will play *Mak Yong*. The healing ceremony cannot define what exactly the sickness is but the ritual can detect the source of the sickness. There are also people who label them as ‘syirik’ that it is against the Islamic law. *Main Teri* is an alternative way to heal in which they also pray to God to heal any sickness. It is not actually a belief in asking favours from other spirits to heal the pain. The offerings are not meant for the spirits or ghosts; the offerings are for other creatures such as ants, flies, bugs and other small creatures.

NZ: In performing *Mak Yong* in a healing ceremony, what character do you play?

WN: Of course I play the character of Pak Yong. But in the healing ceremony, it all depends on the patient. In some cases, there is *Main Teri* without the *Mak Yong* character. If the patient has the desire to perform *Mak Yong*, then we have to put them in the costumes and the king’s headgear. I am only guiding them to play the Pak Yong character. Most of them do not know any dialogues, lyrics or dance movements, and that is where I will guide them.

NZ: How do you feel when performing *Mak Yong* in *Main Teri*? Do you feel satisfied with merely guiding the patient rather than be in the actual performance itself?

WM: It is okay. I am used to it. There are also times when I really could not perform due to the angin [angin tak maghi]. It might be related to the fact that the panggung [stage] was not opened thoroughly. It made me weak; I can hardly sing properly to the melody, my voice hardly projects. So I just went on acting for the sake of the ceremony. It is not actually to fulfill my needs and desires or my angin to perform.
Is it compulsory to do the opening ceremony?

In an ordinary *Mak Yong* performance, if they do not do the opening ceremony, it is still okay. However, for healing purposes, it is compulsory to do the *baca kenduri* (ceremony prayer recital). Sometimes, I do the preparations at home and bring them to the ceremony. I am worried that some people might not prepare elements according to the needs, such as with the *pulut kuning*, so I prepare it myself for my own personal protection.

So, now basically *Mak Yong* can’t be seen performed in the villages in Kelantan?

No, it can only be seen in the healing ceremony. *Mak Yong* is now banned and cannot be performed openly in Kelantan since PAS took over the state government. Before that, *Mak Yong* can easily be seen. Even yearly in Puja Umur the king’s birthday we can perform *Mak Yong*.

How do you react to the ban?

I am disappointed because I could not entertain the younger generation with *Mak Yong*. We actually went up to see the Deputy Minister to discuss about this matter.

In your view, why do they ban *Mak Yong*? Are there any differences in performing *Mak Yong* before and after the banning?

We cannot be seen entertaining the community. Before this, we can use loudspeaker to let the public know about current or upcoming *Mak Yong* shows. Nowadays, they must play as quiet as they can. Even some villagers can report to the police saying that there is a *Mak Yong* performance in the village.

Where did the *Mak Yong* stories originated from? Does it have some Indian influence? Siam? Or any other country?

It began from Pattani. There was some source that mentioned it was for the Kings. The queen enjoyed *Mak Yong* as an entertainment which has the elements of comedy. In the past, Pak Yong was played by a male actor. That was why they called it Pak Yong. But nowadays, male actors do not dance because they are very stiff. Their voice is also very rough. When it went out from Pattani, they change the name to *Mak Yong* as the female actors played the role of the king. However I can’t guarantee you this piece of history is true because each person has a different view.

How to increase the interest of the youngsters towards *Mak Yong*?

We have to motivate them all the time. However, the problem is that,
maybe, they are too concentrated on their existing jobs. They are too obsessed with money, to buy a house or busy working at the factory. Because there is no money given (if they are learning Mak Yong), then, it is hard to find Kelantanese who would want to learn Mak Yong as they are already busy with their ordinary jobs.

NZ How long did you learn Mak Yong before being able to perform?

WM One and a half years. At the beginning, I learned the song of Sedayung Mak Yong. Finally, then only I learned the song of Mengadap Rebab. I was very hard working. Every afternoon I will sing and practice, by myself. Then I mastered a song of ‘Jaruh Bilik Awang’ until I manage to play the Pak Yong character. My first role was as Jong Dondang which is a part of the ensemble.

NZ The introduction of Mak Yong is quite long; can we actually shorten it?

WM Yes, it can be shorten.

NZ Which one can be shorten? Which part?

WM For example, if we play the story of Dewa Muda. We want to play for only one night. Therefore, we want to shorten it by performing just the spoken dialogues. The scene can be shorten by performing just the dialogues by the Peran. The story of Dewa Muda can be played within 3 nights.

NZ From Mengadap Rebab, the Sedayung Mak Yong, can we shorten it?

WM If the performance is for healing purposes, it can be shorten. But if it is solely a Mak Yong performance, then it cannot be shorten.

NZ Oh. So, it can’t be shorten.

WM It is compulsory to have Mengadap Rebab. Then, for Sedayung Mak Yong, if it has two songs, then can be shorten it to just one song. This means, Kijang Emas can be avoided. After that, all the sequences should remain as it is. Nevertheless, we can make it shorter by taking only one verse of the singing. We cut the verses only. For example, if the song has 4 verses, we only take 1 verse.

NZ Or maybe the dialogues can be shorten?

WM Yes, we can do that.

NZ Is the Kenal nama or introducing the name of the King and the
Peran compulsory?

WM  Of course it is compulsory! Of course the Peran knows his King. But he purposely pretends not to recognise the king.

NZ  What is behind the symbolic notion of the Peran pretending not to recognise the King at the beginning?

WM  Actually he wants to berseloroh [jest] with the king. How can he not recognise his own King. He is the Pengasuh [custodian] of the King. The Peran raised the king. So he pretends to not know him and wants to test the King's love towards him. The Peran wants to test King’s loves towards him and the King wants to test Peran’s obedience in serving the King.

NZ  Or maybe that scene is actually to introduce the king to the audience in a subtle way?

WM  It is done in that manner because we want to show the relationship between masters and servant. This scene is portrayed as such in order to show the intimacy of their relationship. The Peran is the one who raised the King. He can even hit the King from the waist to the feet if he wants to.

NZ  Does the banning of Mak Yong affect your living?

WM  We are never going to develop the arts by banning Mak Yong. We have nothing to show to the villages despite all the talent that we possess. It also has affected our monthly income. If we can have the opportunity to perform here in Kelantan, then we can earn more income. As a result, even the Kelantanese do not know what Mak Yong is.
Norzizi Zulkafli (NZ)  Pak Agil, the Kelantanese state government has banned *Mak Yong* performances. Do you think *Mak Yong* will one day become extinct?

Mad Gel Mat Dali (MGMD)  I think *Mak Yong* in Kelantan today has already died out. We only have a few people who can perform the original form of *Mak Yong*, veteran performers like Imah the wife of Che Man, Nisah Midin, Minah Fauzi of Machang, Mek Esah Din, and Imah of Wakaf Bharu. Although they are now in their advanced ages, they actually come from a slightly new generation. There are only five or six of them. That’s why when a *Mak Yong* performance is to be held, all these veteran performers will combine together as a group. At present, we do not have any *Mak Yong* troupe. Today’s youngsters do not want to learn this art. I think if you want to see beautiful *Mak Yong* performers today, it is better for you to go to Kuala Lumpur. This generation of students wears beautiful costumes, and they can dance uniformly and harmoniously too.

NZ  Does that mean the Kelantanese youth are losing interest in the traditional performing arts?

MGMD  Because they do not want to learn the arts.

NZ  Or, is it due to the absence of classes that teach the art of *Mak Yong*?

MGMD  We have classes arranged by JKKN (the State Department of Culture and Arts) in Kota Bharu. However, not many youngsters are interested to join these classes. Moreover, the government also takes a rather lackadaisical attitude towards the effort. We do have people who are willing to teach *Mak Yong* but the government, except JKKN, does not want to help. The government does not give support to those willing to teach in villages. The problem is that, while the government wants to revive our culture, like *Mak Yong*, they do not try to help the current teachers; the government wants to create a new generation of teachers but they do not lend support to them. So, how could they survive? No, they won’t survive. The government does not care for the existing teachers. Yet they want to find new teachers. But they also do not help
them to teach. Thus, how could the culture survive? It won’t.

NZ What about in comparison to Dikir Barat?

MGMD Dikir Barat is still performing. But its present situation is different from that in my era, in the 70s. Now, only 40% of them are still active performing.

NZ Really?

MGMD 60% of them have stopped. There are many Dikir Barat groups but not enough venue for them to perform. I have 10 children. Throughout my life I did not do any other things except performing Dikir Barat and Mak Yong, and I was able to raise my 10 children. I could do that in the past but not anymore now.

NZ You cannot afford it, right?

MGMD For survival, yes, but not to become rich. Not to say that I’m well-off but just manage to survive. At present, it is difficult. There are many Dikir Barat groups in Kelantan. You can say that every village has its own group. However, there is not enough venue for them to perform. The only venue available is during wedding receptions.

NZ So, they only rely on invitations from the people?

MGMD Or during political events. In the past we used to issue tickets. We organised and we sold tickets. But now we do not do that anymore. People do not want to see our performance. If we organise a performance, not many people will come. Additionally, tickets are getting more expensive. Moreover, there are many CDs on sale today. A CD costs $10.00 ringgit (Malaysian Ringgit), and you can watch it for 3 or 4 months. Apart from that, the world and the society have changed a lot. Now, they have become slightly more Islamic. The only thing is that it has not been banned by the state government. They have only issued some strict rulings against it. Today’s society is more aware about Islam than they were in the 70s. We can say that the Malays in the 70s lived somewhat in a state of ignorance (about Islam). Today’s situation is different.

NZ What about Wayang Kulit then?

MGMD Like Mak Yong, the same thing has also happened to Wayang Kulit. The only difference is that the state government still gives some toleration and allowance to Wayang Kulit. The government provides a place at the cultural arena for Wayang Kulit performances on every Thursday night.
There are only a few *Tok Dalang* in Kelantan today. Once registered, they can perform there every Thursday night. Each *Dalang* perhaps can perform only twice or thrice a year. That’s all. But at least there is a venue for *Wayang Kulit* to be performed for tourists.

NZ But are there still many groups in villages?

MGMD Yes … there are still many groups there.

NZ Pak Agil often performs *Mak Yong* for state functions as well as ordinary people. What are the differences between these two groups of audiences?

MGMD There are some differences between them.

NZ What are those differences?

MGMD One difference is that when we perform for ordinary people we need to include some comedy.

NZ I see.

MGMD Yes, we play the same storyline as in *Mak Yong* but our dialogues are with the sick person.

NZ Can Pak Agil imagine what will happen to all cultural traditions in Kelantan within the next 10 years? *Mak Yong, Wayang Kulit, Dikir Barat*. Can these traditions make a comeback, or will they one day disappear?

MGMD I think all of them will disappear. Even nowadays we cannot anymore find the original form of *Mak Yong*. We can only see it in the *Mak Yong* costumes and other paraphernalia that the performers use; but they really cannot perform *Mak Yong*. Today, there is no real *Mak Yong* in terms of its dance movement, its singing, its acting. No more original characters of *Mak Yong*. Although there are many *Mak Yong* performances in Kuala Lumpur but what is taught in *Mak Yong* classes is deviating from the original form of *Mak Yong*.

NZ In Pak Agil’s opinion, what are the true characteristics of *Mak Yong*?

MGMD One of the original characteristics of *Mak Yong* is the dance. Today’s dance has changed a lot. The costume also is very much different from the original one, especially the dresses worn by the inangs at the back. All of them want to look beautiful. All of them want to wear *la manik* (chest bib) and tengkolok (head-dress). All of them want to look like princesses. It is thus difficult to differentiate who is Pak Yong and who
is the queen. You can’t differentiate.

NZ  The inangs did not wear la manik in the past?
MGMD  No, they didn’t.

NZ  Did they wear kebaya labuh?
MGMD  Yes, kebaya labuh, and if they wanted to look good, they wore uniform costumes. I’m sure that many Mak Yong performers in Kuala Lumpur do not know how to dance.

NZ  What is lacking in their dance?
MGMD  Their postures are wrong. Today’s performers do not know the fundamentals of Mak Yong dance.

NZ  What are the basics of Mak Yong dance?
MGMD  Today, the performers squat when they do the Tari Ragam dance. They can’t actually squat in that manner with their legs wide open. That is not how Mak Yong dance should be done. We must refer back to Mak Yong in the 1940s. In Mak Yong, there is a position called Ibu Tari (literally, the mother of dance, as it is the key movement in Mak Yong). Mak Yong dance should be done with graceful movements. Furthermore, Mak Yong is performed by female dancers. Therefore, they are required to display gracefulness. In doing the dance movement of yong, they need to use their knees.

NZ  How long did you learn Mak Yong before being able to perform?
MGMD  One and a half years. At the beginning, I learned the song of Sedayung Mak Yong. Finally, then only I learned the song of Mengadap Rebab. I was very hard working. Every afternoon I will sing and practice, by myself. Then I mastered a song of ‘Jaruh Bilik Awang’ until I manage to play the Pak Yong character. My first role was as Jong Dondang which is a part of the ensemble.

NZ  I see.
MGMD  They have to maintain a straight posture all the time. If you watch a Mak Yong performance by the old performers in Kelantan, you will realise that they perform it differently from the current generation of performers. I also can teach Mak Yong dance since I have learnt it. That is why I feel difficult to answer questions from people coming from Kuala Lumpur because their questions may involve some issues with Mak Yong in Kuala Lumpur. The style of Mak Yong in Kuala Lumpur came about through the influences and teachings of the masters in Kuala
Lumpur. The students there are shaped and moulded by their teachers. For example, the style taught by the late Khatijah Awang involves slightly different dance steps and gestures.

This dance style was then adopted by Awang’s daughter, Che Su Yati, and subsequently by Rohani, a trainer attached to JKKN in Kelantan. What does Rohani know about Mak Yong? She probably knows how to dance. That’s all. But she does not know how to sing. Why did JKKN appoint her as a teacher? She does not know much! That’s why I said that it is a very sensitive issue to talk about. The costumes must be worn with la manik, must be uniform, and must look beautiful. That is not Mak Yong. It has deviated too far. In Mak Yong, you need to know the songs first. You have to understand the lyrics. Only then you know what you are singing about and what you are dancing to. Only by understanding the songs can we dance gracefully. The lyrics in the song of Mengadap Rebab addresses the graceful and elegant movement of a prince going out for a walk; unlike the way we walk to go to work in the field. Nowadays, people do not anymore put emphasis on the lyrics and the gracefulness of the dance. Their only priority is to meet the audience’s needs. They tend to do everything by shortcuts.

NZ What is the philosophy behind Mengadap Rebab (the opening dance in Mak Yong)?

MGMD There is nothing symbolic about the Mengadap Rebab ritual. There is no philosophy that requires us to worship the rebab, as some people might have thought. No. The actual idea is that when the performers come up to the stage, they are required to sit down and face the rebab. This is done simply because rebab is the musical instrument that plays the melody line. Being the leading singer, Pak Yong has to face the rebab player in order to listen to the music while she sings to the accompaniment of the rebab.