



Betrayed Babies
Director: Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit
Singapore Fringe Festival
Recital Studio Esplanade
16-17 Jan 2009

Scene from *Betrayed Babies*

The M1 Singapore Fringe Festival is an annual showcase of theatre, art installation, film, and music by local and international artists to celebrate innovation and foster discussion. Currently in its fifth installment, the theme of the festival for 2009 is *Art and Family*. One of the highlights in this festival of creative artistic expression was a Malay theater performance at Recital Studio Esplanade on 16 & 17 Jan 2009. In the world premiere of *Betrayed Babies*, the conventional Malay style of performing is preserved in exploring the notions of relationship in a Malay family setting. The acclaimed local director Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit¹ has incorporated the performing antics of the popular Malay genre in the 70s known as *sandiwara* in her craft. *Sandiwara* is known to contain tautological references involving *citing the obvious*, e.g. asking the mother if she is still awake upon entering the house when it is already obvious to the child who returns home late at night.

All the actors in this performance, who juggle multiple roles in the performance, are female. These actors all have to double, as cast and crew in the performance. Elnie S Mashari has the roles of producer and Mother; Juraidah Rahman plays the assistant stage manager and Marliah; Kala Raman doubles as assistant lighting designer and a lover; Junaidah Yusoff portrays set designer and Grandmother; Nurhidayah Mahadi plays the roles of costume mistress

and Maya; Nureen Raidah doubles as lighting operator and Sarah; Gloria Tan has the roles of FX operator and Chinese doll; Farah Ong becomes the surtitlist and Wedding Planner; and Nani Salam is make-up artist as well as elder sister. Helmi Fita is the male lighting designer and technical manager of the production.

From the outset the audience can see that all actors are the crew behind the scenes as a production team. The crew is getting ready for a technical rehearsal, although most of them, except the producer, have received the SMS (short messaging system) from the director that the rehearsal is not possible for that day. Upon realizing the intended rehearsal will not happen, the producer marshals her crew to rehearse on the actors' behalf to capture the flow of production, including blocking the position of actors in each scene, perfecting the lighting design, and selecting the relevant sound tracks for the respective scene. That is where Malay *sandiwara* fun begins to unfold in an oscillating in and out of rehearsal mediation.

The technique of crew role-playing for the actors is brilliant. This approach clearly sets the scene that the crew is acting the acting on behalf of the professional actors. The Brechtian mode of performing is the underpinning style in the performance. This approach reminds the audience that the actors are acting and intermediating between roles of cast and crew. This constantly jolts the consciousness of the audience and prevents a prolonged stretch of subjective fantasy from becoming salient. This could not be clearer than with the ringing of a mobile phone in the middle of the 'rehearsal', which reinstates the temporarily suppressed reality of the other. Comedic attempts of similar impact include the request for a change of lighting in the middle of a serious scene such as praying, which augments the dramatic effect of role intermediation. Tacky remarks, such as the make-up artist's anxiety about acting poorly, which are groundless because she has been a natural actor all along, are bountiful.

With the crew acting out the rehearsal, the story of Maya, a young Malay woman who is due to marry her fiancée Johari, comes to life. The comedic effect is high with the mother in her traditional Malay costume folding a pile of glittering clothes on the sofa in the middle of the night. When questioned on the suitability of such props, the costumes mistress replies, “You asked for pile of clothes you get a pile of clothes-lah!” The late returning Maya asks her mother if she is still awake in the *sandiwara* fashion. The acting-acting of these two actors inject Malay flavor into the performance effortlessly.

As the wedding days press near, Maya’s mother feels the pressure, as the skeleton she has been hiding for 28 years is set to leap out of the closet. That Maya is fathered by another man is too much news for a bride-to-be [end of scene one]. The plot is interwoven with the technical glitches and idiosyncratic behavior of the crew in the middle of the rehearsal. The audience is, thus, not absorbed by the subplot that Maya has a licentious mother and a grandmother who enjoys liquor. That the audience is constantly aware of acting-acting is consonant with Peter Brook’s cautions about dead theatre which has been popular around the world for decades.² Although the Grandmother is confined to the wheelchair, her character is hilarious, especially when she taunts Maya’s younger sister, Marliah, with words like “Retarded” and “Stupid!” This is tautological since Marliah, who is fathered by another man, is indeed mentally challenged. Such remarks are hence wickedly comical. As a special child Marliah likes to imitate the words she hears with her good memory. This is the technique used to spill the beans of betrayal in each and every character of the performance in the final scene of acting-acting.

The betrayals include Johari’s affair with his cousin Sarah of ten years. That Maya is keen to be Johari’s legal wife because of his family’s wealth. That Maya’s elder sister is enjoying bondage with her soul mate. That Maya’s mother has three men in her life and that

Marliah is fathered by a so-called holy man. That the wedding planner never thinks highly of Maya and that her wedding is undeserving. All these secrets provide a thick plot in *Betrayed Babies* that intertwines between many realities, both 'real' and imaginative. The male characters, for example, never exist; they are invoked in phone calls and in conversations.

The notion of cheating is cleverly planted into the plot in another plane of reality in this performance. Cheating begins with the make-up artist gone missing for two hours. Cheating from the director who cancels the technical rehearsal painstakingly planned by the producer for the production is a more serious betrayal. The director intentionally omits the producer from his dissemination of SMS. The crew's claim that they do not know how to act is a form of cheating to avoid work for a day. Even the Chinese doll is capable of betraying her owners. The doll, named Shi-Ann, is a present from Mr. Connor to the Grandmother. She reveals the drinking habits of the grandmother, and she describes the sexual desires of the mother who she has observed since she her teenage years.

The performance is multilingual: English is spoken among the crew and Malay is used in the rehearsal of the story. Furthermore, Mandarin is heard in Shi-Ann's monologue and dialogue with Marliah. In response, Marliah occasionally replies in Mandarin to Shi-Ann. All the linguistic exchanges are also available in written English projected on a screen, which is another indication of Brechtian influence in the performance.³ The audience at the performance included Caucasians, Chinese, Eurasians, Filipinos, Indians, Japanese, Malays, among others.

Inadvertently, an all woman cast, with male actor excluded from the play, invokes thoughts about gender politics. Although male characters are banished to distant phone calls and immaterial memories, the life of the women in the plot coils around the males' existence. For example, Zubir, the real father of Maya, creates a deep crack in Maya and her mothers' life; Mr.

Connor's doll scrutinizes the grandmother, her daughter, and her daughter's daughter; and Suresh, an abusive husband, turns his wife to look for different love. The males, whether alive or dead, affect the well being of these women from afar and become all the more powerful from a distance.

The director illustrates the complexities of betrayal behind secrets in a family through creative expressions of acting-acting in theatre performance. The performance was rated R-18, so only persons 18 years old or older may view it. The logic behind the rating would be that a performance befitting a family theme has to meet a standard of quality that is accustomed to basic values. The values are characteristic of universal family mores, as even the gallant American singer Pink sets a certain standard for what it means to be a family in the song "Family Portrait."⁴ The melancholy voice in the song begs the parents to stay together for the sake of their daughter. The chorus of the song equates constant family dispute with World War III, as experienced by the daughter who suffers its reality. The moving plea in the songs reflects the sorrows of those affected in *Betrayed Babies*.

Notes

¹ Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit is the founder & director of *Panggung Arts*. She has toured Malaysia, Hong Kong, Australia, Romania, Hungary, and Scotland with her Singapore-brand theatre.

² Peter Brook (1990 [1968]) *The empty space*, Harmondsworth: Penguin,

³ Jyh Wee Sew (2007) Review of Theatre: The Return, *Intersections 15*
http://intersections.anu.edu.au/issue15/sew_review1.htm accessed on 18 Jan. 2009

⁴ The music video of *Family Portrait* is available on this website <http://myplay.com/video-player/pink/?bcpid=18617176&bclid=18584623&bctid=1313477304> accessed on 18 Jan. 2009

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