

# THEATER AND NATION IN CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIA

## The Work of the Five Arts Centre

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### **Abstract**

How does theater interrogate a nation that preaches racial harmony, on the one hand, yet practices racial inequality, on the other? Focusing on the work of the Five Arts Centre, an artistic company in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, this paper finds that this interrogation takes place on the symbolic plane of words, images, movement, and sound, all of which cohere in performances that offer middle-class audiences alternative scenarios of a pluralistic Malaysia. Its intent is to destabilize the state's policies on racial privileging and political suppression, to create a space for free discourse, and to advocate a pluralistic Malaysia. To do so, however, requires a social movement organization to espouse a frame of action that fuses performance and commentary, and to support this work by building and mobilizing resources, among them networks, financial resources, and political leverage. But the Five Arts Centre's focus, since its founding in 1983, largely remains with the Malaysian middle class. To reach out to economically disadvantaged groups, if deemed necessary, will challenge the collective's creativity as it continues to construct a more inclusive Malaysia.

### **Keywords**

Five Arts Centre, Intercultural Theater, Malaysian Performing Arts, Resource Mobilization, Social Movement Organization, Sociology of Performance, Theater and Nation

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I stayed in Malaysia for four months in 2014 to study the link between theater and nation, and sought that link in the work of the Five Arts Centre, a collective of artists and producers committed to articulate multiple Malaysian identities against the backdrop of the state's racial privileging policies. How does Five Arts, I asked, interrogate a nation perceived to profess racial harmony on one hand and practice racial disharmony on the other? What forms and styles of performance does it adopt to advocate racial pluralism and in so doing, posit options to state policy? How does Five Arts as an organization sustain its work?

I sought concepts in the study of social movements to answer these questions. First, I establish a "frame" that guides the work of the Five Arts Centre. Second, I show how this frame informs the kinds of theater that Five Arts fields in the public sphere to destabilize state policy. Third, I identify selected resources that Five Arts mobilizes to support its work. A concluding section suggests that Five Arts interrogates the nation on the symbolic level—with words, images, movement, and sound, the elements of performance, and does so with the energies of a social movement organization.

The article begins, however, with an overview of the Centre and the artistic legacy of its guru, Krishen Jit.

### **THE FIVE ARTS CENTRE: AN OVERVIEW**

The Five Arts Centre, founded in 1983, sees itself as "a collective of artists and producers dedicated to generating alternative art forms and images in the Malaysian creative environment" (Rowland, *Staging History* 236).<sup>1</sup> Its scope of work, as the company name suggests, covers five arts: theater, dance, music, visual arts, and young people's theater. In its 30 years of existence, the Centre has produced 90 plays, 100 workshops, as well as countless dance concerts, exhibits, and tours abroad. It boasts an interdisciplinary, intergenerational, and racially diverse team of 14 artists and producers as members of the collective, all of whom come from the middle-class of Malaysian society. The style of interaction among them and their associates is dialogic, collaborative, and non-hierarchical. Its office is a two-story unit in Petaling Jaya, a suburb outside Kuala Lumpur, seen by many as a "haven or refuge" for those who seek to address racial issues through the arts (Sreenevasan).

Central to the work of Five Arts is the legacy of theater-making shaped by Krishen Jit, one of its founders, and "the acknowledged doyen of Malaysian theater" (Rajendran, "Modern, Mixed, and Multiple"). Born in 1939, a son of Punjabi immigrants, Jit spent his boyhood in the textile district of Kuala Lumpur where he

was exposed to *bangsawan*, a traditional Malaysian musical theater, and Chinese Opera (Rowland, “Icon”). As a student of the colonial Victoria Institute, he was also exposed to such western classics as Shakespeare and Shaw. In the 1950s, Jit joined the Malaysian Arts Theater Group, and played several roles in English productions with British expatriates as co-actors. He later enrolled at the University of Malaya and became active in the university theater scene. In 1962, Jit received a Fulbright grant for graduate studies at Berkeley. He returned home to teach history. Soon after the 1969 racial riots, he began to direct plays for the Malay language theater to express what it is like to be a holistic Malaysian and not simply someone who belongs to a category within a racial classification system introduced by the British colonial government.

But events swirled against him. His appointment in 1979 as Artistic Director of a Theater Festival honoring the 25<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the University of Malaya’s Malay Studies Department brought the ire of Malay nationalists who felt that Jit, was unfit for the position. Rowland elaborates:

The heightened atmosphere of ethnicity of National Economic Policy Malaysia however intruded upon his rise in Malay-language theatre. Anonymous letters began to circulate questioning the appointment of a non-Malay to such an important position, and accusing him of being unqualified. Although playwright Usman Awang and journalist-writer A. Samad Ismail both publicly defended Krishen, the trajectory of his theatre career was forcibly shifted, irrefutably changing the course of Malaysian theatre as a result. (“Icon” 2)

Unable to quell the opposition, Jit left his post, studied at New York University, and returned to Malaysia to begin a life as a journalist and theater critic. In 1984, Jit published a report where he lamented the inability of local theater groups to consolidate efforts in promoting Malay plays. One consequence, he wrote, is that “there is very little else exciting about contemporary theater in Malaysia” (Jit 111). To pursue a new vision of Malaysian theater in the aftermath of the 1969 racial riots, Jit teamed up fellow artists, the “Gang of Five,” as it was called—Marion D’Cruz, later his spouse, Chin San Sooi, K. S. Maniam, and Redza Piyadasa—to launch the Five Arts Centre.

From 1984 to his untimely passing in 2005, Jit staged productions that unsettled orthodox ways of theater-making, and left behind him a mine of ideas and practices that present members extract, enrich, and extend. It is in the context of Jit’s life and work that we can configure a frame that anchors Five Arts’ theater productions. Crucial to this frame are the events surrounding the racial riots in 1969 Malaysia.

## THE 1969 “RACIAL RIOTS”

The May 13 racial riots saw Chinese and Malay citizens lash out against each other along the streets of Kuala Lumpur in an orgy of blood and violence unparalleled in Malaysian history.<sup>2</sup> In its aftermath, official figures reported that 143 Chinese and 25 Malays died, while a total of 439 persons were injured during the riot (National Operations Council). Some 753 cases of arson were also reported and 211 vehicles were smashed or severely damaged.

The riots started to materialize three days earlier, when the General Elections gave the largely Chinese-dominated Democratic Action Party and the Gerakan Rakyat Malaysia more votes than the Malay-controlled United Malays National Organization and its allied groups. Members of the winning party marched in triumph through Kuala Lumpur, passing through some largely Malay areas. As they walked the streets, taunts and insults were exchanged between the marchers, who were mostly Chinese, and the Malays, who watched them from the sidewalks. What started the heated exchange is open to speculation. But as the hurling of invectives surged, weapons of all sorts were drawn and a bloody melee soon broke out. Many marchers died or were wounded, and innocent bystanders, trapped in the crossfire, also died or suffered injuries.

A state of national emergency was declared and a National Operations Council wielded full power as a caretaker government. A Council report attributed the cause of the riots to an “interplay of forces” that included “the part played by the Malayan Communist Party and secret societies in inciting racial feelings and suspicion; and the anxious, and later desperate, mood of the Malays with a background of Sino-Malay distrust, and recently, just after the General Elections, as a result of racial insults and threat to their future survival in their own country” (National Operations Council). This official line has been disputed by Kua Kia Soong among others who attests that the “racial riots” were a plot hatched, quoting a British official, to “formalise Malay dominance, sideline the Chinese and shelve Tunku” (Bowring). These assertions have been rebutted by a blogger who insists that the official version is correct (*Jebat Must Die*). The issue has not been resolved, and this lack of closure has privileged the official line. It has also fueled Five Arts to question the state’s reading of the events, depicting this in a 2014 forum called *An-Other May 13: An Ongoing History of Artistic Responses* that aimed to challenge the official reading of the 1969 race riots as it is taught in schools and disseminated to the citizenry (see <https://www.facebook.com/events/1486138271604730/> for details).

In 1971, after order had been restored and the parliament reconvened, the National Operations Council disbanded and a new coalition party, the Barisan

Nasional, assumed the reins of power, but not before the caretaker government had passed a set of policies to suppress dissent and secure the hegemony of Malay Muslims over other racial groups.

Three kinds of policies had a crushing effect on race relations:

*Economic.* The “Sino-Malay distrust” that the Council Report alluded to arose, in large part, from the existing economic disparity between the affluent Chinese who dominated the economy and the Malays who were subordinate to them.<sup>3</sup> Realizing this disparity, the Malaysian government enacted, in the 1950s and 1960s, affirmative action policies that gave Malays preferential options in obtaining employment, particularly in the state bureaucracy. This manner of racial privileging deepened after the 1969 racial riots with the passage, in 1971, of the National Economic Policy which sought to reduce poverty among Malaysians and eliminate disparities in wealth by race. In practice, this meant favoring the Malays, or the *Bumiputera* (indigenous people)—who according to Department of Statistics Malaysia, now comprise 65 percent of the total population—over other racial groups, notably the Chinese (25 percent) and the Indians (7 percent). These policies expanded the employment opportunities for Malays, and granted them greater access to land, capital, training, and public facilities. The non-*Bumiputera* groups, in turn, were largely disregarded as recipients of similar bounties.

*Political.* So threatening were the 1969 riots that the caretaker government also moved to suppress free speech and assembly. Upholding the 1960 Internal Security Act, the National Operations Council suspended Parliament, imposed press censorship, controlled political gatherings, defined any criticism against the government as illegal, and indefinitely detained any suspect without trial. The Act applied to all Malaysian citizens, but probably had the most chilling effect on the non-*Bumiputera* who wish to question their treatment under the law.

*Cultural.* Two other policies, enacted in 1971, added cultural dominance to both economic privileging and political suppression. In 1971, a National Culture Policy strengthened the symbolic presence of Malay culture and Islam in the public sphere, relegating Chinese, Indian, and indigenous Malaysian cultures to the margins (Lee; Abdullah; for the actual policy, see [www.jkkn.gov.my/en/national-culture-policy](http://www.jkkn.gov.my/en/national-culture-policy)). Restrictions were placed on non-Malay cultural performances, places of worship, and even burial grounds. Also in 1971, a National Education Policy stamped the Malay language as the medium of instruction at all educational levels, forced the conversion of English schools to Malay schools, and threatened the survival of other local, notably Chinese, schools (Lee).

These policies worsened racial relations in Malaysia, and prompted Krishen Jit to create works that would “heal the communal wounds of the race riots” (Rajendran and Wee). Jit’s initial response was to collaborate with Malaysian artists and direct Malay plays as a way of expressing the ideals of all Malays regardless of race. But, as noted earlier, the collaboration did not last: Malay nationalists exerted pressure to sever Jit from this work (Rowland, “Icon”). Forced to leave, Jit collaborated with close theater associates to establish the Five Arts Centre in 1983.

In 1994, and under Jit’s direction, Five Arts re-staged K. S. Maniam’s *The Cord*, a play about the disenfranchisement in a British plantation of Indian-Malaysian estate workers who resented being treated as outcasts in their home country. As director, Jit read the play as a commentary on the Malaysian racial situation. It was an attempt, “to engage how cultural conflicts across race, class and gender were linked to wider national advances towards economic affluence and a streamlined cultural rationalism in Malaysia” (Rajendran “Modern, Mixed, and Multiple” 6). Seeking thus to show that all races, and not only Indian-Malaysians, had been disadvantaged by state’s racial policies, Jit chose a Malay-Malaysian to play the role of the Indian-Malaysian worker without altering the text and casting actors of varied “Indian” descent to play the “Indian” roles. Rajendran reports that this staging “disappointed audiences,” and while reviewers were critical of several aspects of the production, only one actor, the Malay-Malaysian, was singled out as being “miscal” in the role of the angry young worker (“Negotiating Difference” 103). Jit’s similar experiment in casting, this time having a Chinese-Malaysian actor play an arrogant Indian clerk in a 1984 staging of the same play, the Centre’s first production, also drew some negative feedback. The casting choice “may have unsettled audiences” (102) or created a “few disturbing moments” (104), as Rajendran observes, but was generally found acceptable because of the actor’s reputed skill, his role as an outsider of the Indian-Malaysian community, and the fact that he played a villain in the play. Or as Rajendran notes: “The ‘other’ as bad guy is easier to process than when the ‘hero’ is cast from the ‘other’” (“Negotiating Difference” 105). Equally easier for the audience to process are Malaysian actors of different descents play “foreign” roles in western plays, be it the dark-skinned Othello or the fair-skinned Blanche du Bois.

These reactions, Rajendran perceives, illustrate “the politics of difference” not only between being Malay-Malaysian and Indian-Malaysian, caught up as it is within the state’s racial privileging policies, but also among members of different racial groups as well (“Negotiating Difference” 104). That Malaysian theater is, on the whole, segregated by race and language use (Rajendran, “Negotiating Difference” 106-107; also see Nge, “Theater in Malaysia”), reinforces the politics of difference. It is not surprising, then, as Rajendran also writes, that a much earlier production of *The Cord* with an “all-Indian” cast drew the most unproblematic

audience response (“Negotiating Difference” 103-104). That the Malay-Malaysian actor who was “miscalc” for the role had class origins aligned to the character in the play compared to the Indian-Malaysian actor who came from an urban, upper-middle class background (and a better English-speaking background as well) did not pose difficulties for the audience.

This politics of difference was a wall that Krishen Jit’s theater sought to break, and in terms of this paper, his way of interrogating the nation as well. His task lay in offering through theater alternative sites that respected racial diversity and reimagined paths for solidarity and dialogue among racial groups. It did not matter to him that a theater production would be unfamiliar or disturbing to audiences at first glance. This reception, he hoped, would change in time. Far more important was to persist in implementing his vision of theater. I hasten to add that because *The Cord*, despite its political critique, met no sanction from the state when it was mounted as the Centre’s first production, Jit must have also realized that Five Arts could pursue its critical work without state reprisal—an encouraging sign no doubt.

Jit’s death in 2005 did not halt this task. Instead, Five Arts found ways to sustain and extend Jit’s work. In what ways did the collective pursue its creative work? What resources did Five Arts tap to support its artistic agenda? How did the group manage to resist state intervention? Key elements in the sociological study of social movement organizations help answer these questions.

## **SOCIAL MOVEMENT ORGANIZATIONS: AN OVERVIEW**

If social movements are “broad alliances of alliances of people connected through a shared interest in either stopping or instigating social change” (Boundless), then a social movement organization or SMO is “an organized component of a social movement” (Zald and McArthy 21), one of several that a larger social movement supports. *Old* social movements, the dominant vehicles of organized change during the industrial economy period, focus on “materialistic concerns” such as wealth distribution or economic development (Boundless), using conventional party politics and traditional pressure groups to accomplish their goals (Thompson). *New* social movements, in turn, coming to the fore with the advent of a post-industrial economy, “pose new challenges to the established cultural, political and economic orders” (Hallsworth 7) by confronting two broad “postmaterial” concerns: issues and threats to the natural environment and issues related to civic or human rights. The Five Arts Centre, we contend, shares the latter concern. And like these new social movements and their respective SMOs, Five Arts shies away from traditional formal structures; favors informal networks; distrusts authorities



be it the government, the business community or the scientific community; and attracts members who tend to be young and from the middle-class (Haralambos and Holborn 580-90).

Be it old or new, social movements, and by extension SMOs, “organize people, resources, and ideas for social change” (Armstrong and Bartley 4448). In Edwards and McCarthy’s typology of social movement resources, *people* falls under “social-organizational resources” that include network building and alliance formation; *resources* specifically refer to “material resources” that include financial and physical capital; and *ideas* denote “cultural resources” that cover cultural products and conceptual tools such as frames and cultural productions (125-132). A full inventory of these resources lies beyond the scope of this paper.<sup>5</sup> To illustrate how Five Arts sustains its work, we focus instead on three specific resources—the frame and its manifestations in theater productions to represent “cultural resources,” social networks to characterize “social-organizational resources,” and sources of financial support to depict “material resources.” Of these three, we discuss the Five Arts frame at length since this set of ideas lies at the core of the Centre’s artistic and organizational work.

## THE FIVE ARTS FRAME

The sociologist Erving Goffman states that a “frame” enables people “to locate, perceive, identify, and label” events within their lifespace and the world at large (21). It is “an interpretative schemata,” add Snow and Benford that “simplifies and condenses the ‘world out there’ by selectively punctuating and encoding objects, situations, events, experiences, and sequences of actions within one’s present or past environment” (137). In the world of performance, the frame may also refer, to the “maps” and “narratives” that artists use to guide what they receive and what they do (Wallis). What, then, constitutes the Five Arts frame?

Passages from a Five Arts brochure, “Celebrating 30 Years,” subtly articulate that frame. Words like “race,” “state,” or “government” are not explicitly mentioned but are hinted in phrases like “multiple Malaysian identities” and “Malaysian identity in the arts.” The 1969 riots and questionable state policies are also unmentioned, but are implied in the phrase “contemporary social and cultural issues impinging on Malaysian life.” The political thrust is likewise suggested in terms like “art activists,” and “generating alternative arts forms and images.” The sense of nationalism appears in the phrases “championing local creativity” and “the growth of Malaysian identity in the arts,” and the artistic mission appears in phrases like “creating experimental, interdisciplinary and intercultural work,” “the Malaysian creative environment,”

and “exhibitions, performances, and creative and research workshops.” Moreover, reference to the collective’s founding in 1983 and the inclusion of members “from across the generations” suggest a sustained and intentional struggle to reach out to diverse sectors.

These allusions publicly define Five Arts as an artistic company with a nationalistic thrust, not a political organization geared to wrest power from the state—a trait of new social movement organizations. This nuanced definition avoids direct identification as a political group that may position Five Arts on the state’s watch list. In addition, by not specifying those issues “impinging on Malaysian life,” Five Arts allows itself a wider latitude to tackle social issues that underlie its creative projects. Engaging in this form of “strategic adaptation” (Chua), especially in “authoritarian, semi-authoritarian, or quasi-democratic” (Rajendran, “Performing Cosmopolitan” 175) states like Malaysia, permits Five Arts to “shun direct confrontation, and avoid being seen as a threat to the existing political order (Chua 713).”

Altogether, the Five Arts Centre frame revolves around six tenets:

1. By and large, existing state policies have worsened racial relations, stifled freedom of expression, and falsely fosters an ideal of racial harmony.
2. Artistic expression is a way to destabilize the state’s view on race and civic rights, offer the nation alternative scenarios of change, and help audiences articulate the need for change.
3. Artistic expression demands a free space to create new works, experiment with forms and styles of presentation, and address critical issues impinging on Malaysian life.
4. Artistic expression should be local born. Malaysians ought to recuperate their identities through a reflection of their lives as citizens of a modern nation.
5. Free artistic expression empowers artists, producers, and audiences.
6. The work of the collective to raise funds, build networks, and the like is vital to sustain this artistic expression.

The series of demonstrations sparked by what has been called the 1998 Reformasi reinforces the salience of the Five Arts frame.<sup>4</sup> The Reformasi saw tens of thousands of Malaysian citizens, of *all* races, trooping down to Plaza Merdeka in Kuala Lumpur to protest the sacking of Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim on trumped-up charges and to demand the resignation of the Prime Minister. In 2008,

Anwar, now released from prison, led a new political party to win 31 seats and emerged as the largest opposition party in Parliament. His victory, Postill contends, received much support in late 2007 from three separate demonstrations, again participated in by all races. In 2011 and 2012, the *Gabungan Pilihanraya Bersih dan Adil* or Bersih assembled thousands of citizens in rallies demanding fair and clean elections. Some 50,000 people joined the rally, which saw authorities use excessive physical force to disperse the crowds (Welsh cited in Postill).

These protest rallies allowed Five Arts to recognize more fully that Malaysians of all races can work for a single cause (Postill). They also underscored the notion that racial diversity can thrive in the context of a “participatory democracy,” an organizational form in which decision-making is decentralized, non-hierarchical, and consensus-oriented (Polleta).

## CONTINUING RELEVANCE OF THE FRAME

Incidents like the Reformasi reveal that racial injustice and the suppression of civil rights continue to persist long after the 1969 riots, thus making the Five Arts frame as relevant to date as it has been in 1983 when the collective was initially formed. The racial issue, for one, aggravated by pro-Islamic policies, continues to fester in Malaysia. As the journalist Jeswan Kaur reports:

Forty-five years after the May 13, 1969 racial riots, Malaysians continue to face the onslaught of racial harassment at the hands of the very people who professed to care. Be it Prime Minister Najib Tun Razak or his deputy Muhyiddin Yassin, both have let the *rakyat* down with their racial rants and rhetoric (Free Malaysia Today, 15 May 2014).

What infuriates Kaur is that state authorities have tolerated these inflammatory statements, and in some cases, justified them. No wonder, reports *The Malay Mail Online* (9 May 2014), the May 1969 generation believes that “Malaysia is still a country divided by the old topic of race.” The sociologist Charles Hirschman makes the same observation, claiming that 50 years after Independence, “ethnic divisions and differing ideologies of fairness continue as the major fault lines in Malaysian society.”

In addition, the Merdeka Center, a survey organization, confirms this point when it reports that despite perceptions of improved racial relations, only 20-33 percent of the respondents claim to understand the culture and customs of other races, and less than half admit they still do not trust members of other racial groups (“Viewpoints on Ethnic Relations”). Ethnic segregation by residence (Ibrahim) and

by school enrollment (Raman and Sua) compounds the problem as these exacerbate ethnic boundaries and limit opportunities for members of different racial groups to dialogue with one another. Additionally, Muslims in Malaysia are barred from marrying non-Muslims, and with public approval: in a Merdeka survey, 73 percent of Muslim Malaysians oppose inter-faith marriages (“Muslim Youths”). To race, then, we must add religion as an added ingredient of ethnic tensions.

The politics of racial privileging thus remains intact, and with it, the robust influence of the Malay nationalist lobby. In 2013, for example, the Malaysian President proposed revisions to the special economic and social preferences accorded to ethnic Malays under the New Economic Policy of 1970. He dropped the proposal after facing strong opposition from Malay nationalists. Race thus intersects with class and, because of the hegemonic status of Islam, with religion as well. If the state grants some concessions, it is because, argues Lee, political authorities are confident that the existing policies are well-entrenched in contemporary Malaysia.

What kinds of theater-making, then, does Five Arts conduct given these circumstances? How do these works align with the Five Arts frame? We return to the works of Krishen Jit.

## KRISHEN JIT AND THE FIVE ARTS CENTRE

Much has been written about the theater of Krishen Jit in personal memoirs (Jit, “A Report on Contemporary Malaysian Theater”), anthologies of his writings (Rowland, *Krishen Jit*), scholarly publications (among them, Diamond; Rajendran, “Performing Cosmopolitan,” “Negotiating Difference,” “Modern, Mixed, and Multiple”; and Rajendran and Wee), and obituaries (Rowland, “Icon”; Siebel, “The Legacy”), among others. At the risk of oversimplifying this diverse set of materials, I highlight five aspects, and show how these forms and styles stay consistent with the Centre’s collective frame.

*Dedication to Local Texts.* Five Arts dedicates itself to local texts, meaning plays or devised works written by Malaysians. Krishen Jit charted this path by directing local plays such as *The Cord* by K.S. Maniam, Kee Tan Chye’s *1984 Here and Now*, K.S. Maniam’s *The Sandpit*, and Lloyd Fernando’s *The Scorpion Orchid*. Examples of devised pieces include *1984 Here and Now*, *Chance Encounter*, and *Baling* (see Rowland, *Staging History*, for transcripts of these plays). These devised pieces veer away from the conventional dramatic structure which entails a narrative plot that builds on conflict, climax, catharsis, and the Aristotelian unities (Sugiera). Hewing closer to postdramatic theater, these pieces privilege statement and audience

engagement more than aesthetic experience or the manipulation of emotions (Jürs-Munby).

*Multiple Embodiments.* Jit believed that multiculturalism in Malaysia rested on the bodies of performers who lead lives in constant inter-racial interaction (Rajendran, “Multicultural Belongings”; Diamond). His belief stemmed from his own multicultural experiences while growing up in Kuala Lumpur. Indeed, for decades before Malaysia declared its independence from the British in 1957, Jit, like Malaysians of all races, entered one another’s worlds with greater ease than today. In a personal interview (24 June 2014), for example, Jo Kakathis, Artistic Director of Instant Café Theater, recalls that as a young girl, she visited the homes of families and friends—Malays, Chinese, and Indians—who were celebrating their holidays. Marion D’Cruz, now Five Arts Centre Director, also recalls similar experiences of inter-racial collegiality as a student in a multi-ethnic Catholic school (interview, 15 June 2014). Even the *bangsawan*—a traditional theater form that combines drama, dance and music—was a performance event that absorbed Malays of different races until the state appropriated the form and made it an exclusively Malay form (Diamond; Muthalib).

Jit was aware of this fact. He realized that the 1969 riots stiffened racial boundaries more so than those created in earlier decades. But he knew that this plurality of cultures still resides in the bodies of Malaysians, one that could be recovered through the medium of performance. Many Malaysians, for example, remain bi-lingual or tri-lingual; as such, the language of the stage, despite a predominantly English script, can shift easily to other Malaysian languages, accents, dress, and physical expressions. Jit represented the notion of a trans-ethnic Malay identity in many ways. One was through interracial casting, as in *The Cord*. Another is to make racial hybridity visible and viable through works like the classic *Emily of Emerald Hill*, a play about a matriarch whose ethnic origin fuses both Chinese and Malay (Peterson 60-63). Still another was to show how Malaysians of different races can find common ground as the Chinese and Malay housewives who meet in the cosmetics section of a department store do in *A Chance Encounter* (Rowland, “Icon” 224–255).

*Multiple Performance Modes.* Much of Jit’s work is stylistic, deconstructed, or non-representational—theater pieces that seek to highlight social issues through symbolic forms. To achieve this, Jit used a collage of images and styles drawn from, among others, traditional and contemporary forms, as well as from different artistic genres. The younger members of the collective members add an engagement with technology and social media in performance as well as the use of other activist theater techniques (Thornton). The result is more than mere form or a derivation of styles. The use of multiple performance modes recuperates the image of multiple

Malaysians: just as mixed modes of performance converse with each other to shape a production, so too can the different races converse with each other to build a more equitable society.

*Experimentation, Excavation, and Empowerment.* Existing dramatic texts are often unable to provide Jit with the kinds of material he needed for his kind of theater. As such, Jit experimented with forms (traditional, modern, postmodern), mixing them up in many ways, and used these collages to give unique interpretations of existing texts. He also encouraged the creation of devised works that drew from the well of cultural or autobiographical memory, indigenous performances styles, and existing documents. Excavating these sources and using them in performance link present realities with past events to imagine a more inclusive future for the nation. As well, Jit was not an autocratic director: he listened to suggestions and gave his team the freedom to explore, a collaborative model that serves as a model for inter-racial dialogues. As designer Carolyn Lau remarks in a roundtable discussion: “There is this *FiveArtsness* way of doing things and whatever that is, it just allows you to do things. It is comfortable to play because it is unconditional and they accept it. It is experimental. There is no hierarchy. Even if there is a hierarchy, it is the kind where you do your bit, I take it and I move on, and there is a respect for what you have contributed. So there is a kind of balance in that sense” (quoted in Nge, “Roundtable on Theater-Making” 27). One consequence of this style of collaborative directing is the empowerment of artists and producers who take active roles in shaping a performance—a form of empowerment that is consistent with the Five Arts frame.

Another form of excavation entails looking back into Malaysian history to correct official versions of events. To celebrate the 57<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Malaysian independence, for example, the Five Arts Centre hosted in May 2014 an event to review the works of Malaysian artists using the 1969 race riots as inspiration. This event, titled *An-Other May 13: An Ongoing History of Artistic Responses*, assembled an archive of texts, photographs, and videos, materials drawn from mainstream and non-mainstream sources, to review the events that led to the riots, and to several artistic events—plays, exhibits, forums among others—that exposed the national trauma brought about by the violence of the 1969 riots (for event details, see <https://www.facebook.com/events/1486138271604730/>). The vivid review aimed to correct the official version of the events as they are taught in schools and disseminated to the citizenry.

Five Arts also strives for audience empowerment. By encouraging audiences to take an imaginative and critical view of the status quo, Five Arts hopes for personal transformation in the lives of its viewers. One of the pieces developed in 2006, for example, was *The Baling Talks*, where audience members read passages from

the transcript of the “peace talks” that involved representatives of the Malaysian government, the Singapore state, and the Malaysian Communist Party.”<sup>6</sup> As they read the transcript, audiences discerned the ways in which state representatives conspired to contain the Communist Party. In *Emergency Festival*, audience members were asked to proceed to laptops installed in the performance area where they could re-write history by encrypting on Wikipedia their own experiences and thoughts on the 1969 riots. “The victor writes the history while the loser fades away,” states the program brochure (see <http://findars.blogspot.com/2008/09/emergency-festival.html>), “...Is that always true?” By having audience members edit Wikipedia entries, the performance, says the blogpost, “offers people an alternative and interactive approach to presenting history...and offers often unheard *rakyat*-centric experiences of the Emergency.”

*Reimagining the Political.* Being imbued with a historian’s sense of social context gave Jit’s works a sharp awareness of the racial asymmetries embedded in the policies and practices of the present political regime. Some works like *The Malaysian Decameron*, *US: Action and Images*, and *Election Day* pointed explicitly to political events in Malaysian history. But other works have extended what is considered political (“political parties” in the usage of old social movements) to include areas such as construction work, housework, cleaning toilets, building tours, television interviews and other mundane activities of everyday life—a perspective that new social movements adopt to recast the notion of power (Hallsworth). *Chance Encounter*, mentioned earlier, displays the political via an ordinary conversation between two women, one Chinese and the other Malay, in a cosmetics shop. Though different in racial and economic status, the two slowly come to share common concerns. In *Two-Minute Solos*, two separate monologues dealt with memories about racism and domestic violence (“Time for a New Stage,” *The Malay Mail*, 6 June 2014). An earlier version of this production, done in 2013, showed an anonymous migrant construction worker waxing nostalgic about his family back home while undertaking the “tedious, repetitive, and often dangerous labor” on which Malaysia is built (Hijjas, “How the Other Half Lives”; also Hijjas, “Review”). And in *Dream Country: A Lost Monologue*, a piece of dance theater by Marion D’Cruz, women weaved in and out of gigantic urns that represented patriarchal structures, and later broke free of them, the movements depicting women’s oppression and liberation (Rowland, “When Empty Vessels Speak Volumes”).

In these and other Five Arts performances, the act of reimagining the political resides in the interaction between performance and audience. Rajendran explains how Five Arts invites audiences to “watch’ with reflexivity:”

As a result of the performative turn in theatre, which decentralises the verbal text and expands the importance of the non-verbal *mise-en-scène*, the physical ‘presence’ and ‘participation’ of performer and spectator are consciously heightened . . . It further imbricates their subjectivities in mutually experienced encounters, and opens up a ‘transformative’ capacity to radically review culture and identity.

Even if it appears that the performer is voiced and the spectator is silenced, the ‘feedback loop,’ a form of ‘conversation’ that occurs between them, is crucial. In effect it sets up a ‘conversation’ between strangers . . . (“Multicultural Belongings” 40)

In this case, political change is sought on the level of the subjective, in attempts to alter states of mind and heart—a “politics of perception,” if you will, based on Fischer-Lichte’s discussion of the audience-performer relationship (11-23). This is what Five Arts productions seek to accomplish. *Two-Minute Solos*, for instance, exposed audiences to twenty short monologues without an explicit thread that stitched the separate pieces together. In the open forum that followed the performance, it was clear from the artists’ responses to audience queries that the act of stitching lies in the viewers’ minds: it is an exercise on empowerment and an attempt at subjective change.

Clearly, audience empowerment is not geared to arouse a direct confrontation with the state. Five Arts productions aim instead to yield alternative scenarios for audiences to consider, an effort to create what Mark Teh (interview, 26 April 2014) calls a “dissensus,” or a way to destabilize or disrupt accepted ways of looking at issues. Audiences are free to accept or reject them. Far more important, contends Teh, is the creation of an alternative space for discussion and dissent, and for audiences to realize that despite strict laws, this space can be created (and recreated) in contemporary Malaysia. The creation of that free space is a major tenet of the Five Arts frame.

## **SOCIAL NETWORKS**

Building and maintaining social networks entail the tasks of forming coalitions and aligning with other organizations to create solidarity and secure other resources. We focus on social networks that enable Five Arts to strengthen links with other groups in the larger artistic movement, gain legitimacy, and sustain its membership.

The three festivals I attended in Malaysia, all organized by private groups, attest to the links that bind Five Arts with the larger artistic community in the country—and by the extension, the larger social movement in which Five Arts



belongs. Like Five Arts, these festivals share a mission of “unleashing Malaysian creativity” and “articulating multiple Malaysian identities” through the creative arts.” This shared purpose gives Five Arts, an active participant in these festivals, an ideological umbrella of support from other artistic groups. This sharing of “master frames,” where different groups arrive at “common understandings of injustice and a common social vision” (Carroll and Ratner 434) serves as a source of unity among groups and points to “the viability of counterhegemonic politics” (435).

The Damansara Performing Arts Festival, held on April 2014, advanced the theme “The Art of Being Malaysian,” and featured a variety of local performances across different genres. Two festivals in September 2014, both of which coincided with Malaysian Day celebrations, also promoted Malaysian arts. The Yayasan Sime Darby Arts Festival subtitled “A Malaysian Community Project,” showcased a gamut of local performances and workshops across many genres. Another festival, the Kakiseni International Arts Festival, featured foreign productions, but was largely a colorful mix of Malaysian artistic creativity, both traditional and modern, in several performance genres. Five Arts showcased its works in all three festivals.

Five Arts also keeps personal and informal ties with several theater and performing arts organizations. One is with the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Center, a company that dedicates itself to producing Malaysian or Malaysian-inspired performances of western drama. Its co-directors, Joe Hasham and Faridah Merican (interview, 26 June 2014) used to work with Krishen Jit and Five Arts. Another company, the Instant Theater Café, also devoting itself to political theater, is run by Jo Kakathis (interview, 24 June 2014), a featured performer in many Centre productions. As well, since Five Arts cannot always accommodate performances in their home venue, its performances are staged in several venues, one of them being the Damansara Performing Arts Center in Kuala Lumpur. Outside Malaysia, Five Arts has also forged, over the years, strong linkages with international art and performance groups through conferences and festivals. In the last two years, for example, *Baling*, the show that had people reading transcripts of a supposed peace talk, played to several audiences in Europe and Asia (for tour details, see <http://www.fiveartscentre.org/baling-2015-2016>). The Centre has also established networks and alliances with private firms, local and international foundations, non-government organizations, some state agencies, and with the Malaysian middle class that constitutes its main audience. Several of these networks, as we shall show later, have been vehicles for securing other kinds of resources—and we add, political leverage as well.

One offshoot of network participation is a wider recognition of the works done by Five Arts and of the artists behind these creative projects. Edwards and

McCarthy classify these forms of acclaim as examples of “moral resources” that imbue SMOs with “legitimacy, solidarity and sympathetic support” (125).

The Malaysian artistic community, for instance, has consistently honored the Five Arts Centre since its founding, legitimizing the collective as an artistic organization with a socio-political edge. In September 2014, the Five Arts Centre received the Bobo Underdog of the Year Award for its creative accomplishments over the past 30 years. Similarly, several Five Arts members, Jit among them, have consistently won honors for outstanding artistic work at the annual Boh Cameronian Arts Awards since its launch in 2002. Beyond awards, as the Five Arts Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/FiveArtsCentre/>) reveals, are grants and invitations from local and international groups to engage, among others, in performance or community action work, undertake training workshops, organize lectures and fora, and even fund artistic projects through such vehicles as the well-received Krishen Jit Astro Fund. These sources of recognition give Five Arts a hefty measure of cultural capital to pursue its work, gain status in the artistic community, enhance human resources, and attract young artists to sustain the Five Arts agenda. In January 2015, I joined a throng of Five Arts members, friends, and supporters at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Center for an event entitled *Unfinished Business: Conference on Krishen Jit's Performance Practice and Contemporary Malaysian Theater*. The three-day conference, judging from the responses of the participants, was a time to remember Krishen Jit, to renew one's commitment to his artistic ideals, and to reinforce the Five Arts frame as a guide for future work. It was a heartfelt experience for all participants, myself included.

## FINANCIAL AND ECONOMIC SUPPORT

Five Arts operates within the private sector, i.e., outside the state's institutional and organizational channels. While it has received some government support for particular projects, Five Arts relies mainly on private firms, fund-raising activities, grants, ticket sales, and volunteer service to pay rent, cover overhead costs, and support its projects. The collective also taps on their networks to present shows outside their home venue and in a variety of privately-owned rather than government spaces. In contrast, Istana Budaya, or the National Theater, gives preferential space to Muslim Malay productions (Nge, “Theater in Malaysia”).

Five Arts also runs on a low level of bureaucracy. Only an Executive Director is named, and the distance between the Director and members blurs in practice as decision-making is highly participatory. The 14 members of the collective are co-equals as Artistic Directors, with each one free to pursue projects consistent

with the Centre's frame. All members of the collective meet, however, to discuss a project and offer suggestions to enhance it (interview with Marion D'Cruz, 15 June 2014). A sense of family, in fact, pervades the team, an atmosphere that Krishen Jit himself generated (Rowland, "Icon").

The low level of bureaucracy saves on costs, enabling Five Arts to deploy its financial resources to projects that matter. And the art collective has remained small since its founding. No more than 14 persons have been named as members and no plans are afoot to expand membership size. Inter-office communication moves with ease and the transfer of resources occurs with a minimum of paperwork.

That Five Arts remains small, working with limited financial resources, also carries with it a political benefit as the Centre is unlikely to be perceived by the state, at least numerically and financially, as a political threat (personal communication with Md. Anis Nor, 29 March 2014, and with Hardy Shafii, 6 April 2014). The low level of bureaucracy may thus be seen as a political advantage. That Five Arts publicly presents itself as an artistic company that champions creative expression rather than a political entity that seeks political power also allows the Centre to skirt censorship regulations—a form of control which has eased over time. While the Centre has had brushes with state censorship—in the early years, involving sending scripts to the police and being interviewed by authorities, none was grave enough to warrant a show's closure. The most serious threat Five Arts has had was the false alarm of a bomb scare (interview with Marion D'Cruz, 15 June 2014).

Support from the Malaysian middle class also carries a political as well as a financial advantage. The Malaysian middle class, one notes as background, is a diverse group, its composition and numbers reliant on what criteria are used to define it (Jomo; Aihara). For example, Wan Saiful Wan Jan, interviewed for *The Malay Online* (28 September 2014), claims that the middle class consists of persons who earn between RM3000-RM9800 (roughly US\$1000-US\$3267) a month which, according to his calculations based on official 2012 statistics, comprise about 51.8 percent of the Malaysian population. It is a fairly sizeable group, and one that constitutes the audience niche of the Five Arts Centre.

Five Arts productions are attended mainly by middle class and upper middle class people. This is expected, says Marion D'Cruz, since people from these classes "have the interest and the money to go to the theater" (*Options*, 8 January 2001). As well, Five Arts productions, while using a multi-lingual format, are largely English-based, a language that sits better with audiences from the middle and upper classes than with the working classes. Aside from being racially diverse and inter-generationally mixed, the members of the Five Arts collective also hail from the middle class, many of them being educators, some with degrees abroad, and

all professionals. On this point, Five Arts distinguishes itself from many activist theater groups that work primarily with economically and politically disadvantaged groups. It can be argued, however, that in Malaysia, the middle and upper classes are just as disadvantaged as the other classes by the state's repressive policies, and it is this group that Five Arts largely attracts to watch and support its presentations.

Middle class audiences come to buy tickets for shows, support fund-raising campaigns, attend Centre events, serve as volunteers, and donate money. Their support on matters financial and economic converts to social and political capital as well. Middle-class citizens in the private sector, including schools and artistic companies, both in Malaysia and abroad, help expand the Centre's influence and recruit new supporters. This kind of assistance gives Five Arts a sense of legitimacy and demographic leverage, both of which are forms of political capital. That the middle-class audience has grown in size over the years, particularly among young people, augurs well for the social and economic sustainability of the company (interview, Mark Teh, 26 April 2014).

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

How, then, does Five Arts interrogate the link between theater and nation?

The prevailing view argues that theater enhances the life of a nation. Five Arts questions this naïve view and asks: what does "enhance" mean? What kinds of "enhancements" capture the sense of a nation? Who does the "enhancing"—and for what purpose? And how, in the first place, do we conceive of a nation?

Earlier accounts of the so-called "state of the nation" plays imagine the nation as a homogenous entity, a community that shares similar values and headed for the same goal (Holdsworth). Such a position, however, flies in the face of globalization, overseas migration, transnational exchange, technological advances, and the cultural diversity of many societies (Rebellato; Kolig et al.). It also flies in the face of nation states like Singapore (Peterson) that employs and funds theater to pursue the state's political agenda. So while the nation is still imagined, as Anderson observes, that nation can no longer be imagined from one but from a plurality of points, or what Appadurai calls "imagined worlds." That alternative views of nation will emerge is likewise inevitable in places like Malaysia where the nation, represented by the state, has lost, at least in Five Arts' eyes, its legitimacy as keeper of a just order. Five Arts thus interrogates the nation by releasing its creative energies to field alternative scenarios of multiple Malaysians and champion the path of shared diversity. Following Harvey Young's notion of a "post-race" theater,

Five Arts enjoins audiences to reflect upon “the legacy of racial discrimination and violence within society” (83), and to imagine what Malaysians can become given the damages wrought by time, place, and politics. Five Arts “interweaves cultures,” to use Fisher-Lichte’s term, and focuses on interweaving varieties of Malaysian cultures in diverse ways. Its preference for postdramatic or avant-garde presentations (Lehman; Fisher-Lichte) as well as its use of activist theater performance modes also give Five Arts greater room to experiment with forms and styles in the service of its utopian vision (Dolan).

The confrontation with the state is thus fought on the symbolic plane, that is, with meaningful words, images, movement and sounds— the key elements of performance. As Jo Kakathis metaphorically puts it (interview, 24 June 2014), “the government throws ‘ghosts’ on us and we throw back ‘ghosts’ at them.” This contest of meanings—compounded with the Centre’s advocacy of post-materialist values, its work through private sector channels, its support from the middle class, its coalitions with the larger artistic community, and its rejection of intricate bureaucratic structures—aligns the work of Five Arts with that of a social movement organization. In this work, theater and performance represent “both the arena and the means of protest” (Buechler 3208). As arena, the struggle involves contests over meanings, symbols and identities in the sphere of culture—racial politics and civil rights in this case. It also entails labor to deflect state reprisal. As a means of protest, the struggle involves using theater and performance to transform consciousness, create spaces for open discourse, and form solidarities among racial groups.

Where, however, are the poor and the working class who, like middle class Malaysian citizens, are just as oppressed by racial misclassifications and uncivil rights? That Five Arts uses English as its lingua franca, solicits middle class support, and advocates so-called postmaterialist values seem to alienate a substantial segment of the Malaysian population. Rajendran alludes to this point in a discussion of Krishen Jit’s partiality to English Language Theater or ELT:

Jit’s theatre was largely part of ELT, and his explorations and articulations of ‘what is imagined’ were within this somewhat excluded and elite space, confined to urban Malaysia and participated in primarily by upper- and middle-class Malaysians – thus making his cosmopolitan stagings susceptible to the criticism of being unavailable to the masses. (“Performing Cosmopolitan” 181)

It is a thorny issue, and one I did not hear addressed directly during my stay in Malaysia. It is apt to say, however, that the advocacies of Five Arts address all Malaysians regardless of class and race, and that it triumphs in releasing spaces for open discourse. Both these are steps forward in advancing the civil rights of all Malaysian citizens. It is also reasonable to claim that the Five Arts theater, much

like ELT in nearby Singapore, where Krishen Jit worked as a director and dramaturg from 1988-1994 (Rowland, *Krishen Jit* 236), has provided “the sharpest insights into the effect of government policies on emerging cultural formations” (Peterson 3, also see 51-82). Yet Five Arts neither engages directly with low-income people nor focuses its productions, with few exceptions like *The Cord*, on the everyday struggles of the economically disadvantaged.

Part of the difficulty lies in the linguistic separateness of Malaysian theater: ELT plays side by side with Malaysian, Indian, and Chinese-language theater (Nge, “Theater in Malaysia”). To be able to represent all Malaysians and to avoid a preferential bias for one language, English, ironically the colonial language, has become the neutral tongue. But neutrality is a political stance as well, supporting in this case one class over another. If Five Arts opts to open up more to the struggles of other disadvantaged groups, the greater the likelihood of “new portrayals” (Jasper 4459): The Five Arts frame will alter, its theater-making will grow more complex, and its networks will expand—all of which will require more pipelines of support and shifts in the Centre’s organizational life. It is a challenge for the future—one that has to be imagined continuously.

“Art-making, and Malaysia-making,” says Mark Teh in accepting the Bobo Underdog of the Year Award “is ultimately an expression of hope” (“On Receiving”). Casting glimmers of hope for a nation in crisis is the mission of the Five Arts Centre. And its weapons of change are neither those of the strong nor of the weak but of the persistent and the brave.

## Notes

This paper is a revised and edited version of the paper presented at the Regional Conference of the Asian Public Intellectuals (API) program, held in Hiroshima, Japan, on 8-14 November 2014, and released in 2015 as part of the conference proceedings entitled *Infrastructure and Superstructure: The Papers of the 2014 Asian Public Intellectuals*. Thanks as well to the anonymous reviewers who gave me an opportunity to reflect more on my earlier work.

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1. What follows are based on books, articles, playbills and related collaterals found in the Five Arts Centre archive.
2. This summary of events surrounding the racial riots was drawn from several sources, including: KTemoc Considers @ <http://ktemoc.blogspot.com/2012/09/like-father-like-son.html>; Beh Lih Yi, “Unveiling the ‘May 13’ riots,” 11 May 2007 @ <http://sloone.wordpress.com/2007/05/11/malaysiakini-unveils-book-on-may-13-riots/>; Greg Lopez. “May 13, 1969” *New Mandala*, 22 May 2010; and Heather Gray, “The 1969 Riots against the Chinese in Malaysia,” *counterpunch*, Weekend Edition. May 26-28, 2007. Other sources are cited in the text. A Five Arts Centre event, called “An-Other: An Ongoing History of Artistic Responses,” was also helpful in eliciting alternative views.
3. The facts here were obtained from three online profiles of the Malaysian economy: IndexMundi ([www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/economy\\_profile.html](http://www.indexmundi.com/malaysia/economy_profile.html)), BBC News –Malaysia Country Profile ([www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15356257](http://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-pacific-15356257)), and the Malaysia-Canada Business Council ([www.malaysia-canada.com/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=142&Itemid=236](http://www.malaysia-canada.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=142&Itemid=236)).

4. The events surrounding Reformasi 1998 were culled from several sources, including: Hwang, In-Won, *Personalized Politics: The Malaysian State under Mahathir*, Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, 2003; Shanon Mohamed Salleh, "From *Reformasi* to *Political* Tsunami: A Political Narrative of Blog Activism in Malaysia from 1998-2008," *MPEDR* vol. 64, no. 11 (2013); and "Reformasi (Malaysia)," Wikipedia @ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformasi\\_\(Malaysia\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reformasi_(Malaysia)). Other sources are cited in the text.
5. A full analysis of the role of resources in social movements is a complex proposition. Edwards and McCarthy ("Resources and Social Movement Mobilization"), for example, propose that such an analysis must consider five types of resources (moral, cultural, human, social-organizational, and material), defining each in terms of their attributes, i.e. whether the resource is fungible or context dependent and also, whether the same resource is proprietary or universally available in the public domain. How organizations gain access to these resources and how they mobilize them to meet their targets also need attention. Such a herculean task lies beyond the scope of this paper, and best left for subsequent research.
6. In 2016, *Baling Talks* was remounted in a new production, this time simply titled *Baling*. The production earned much critical acclaim in Malaysia and in several festivals abroad. See <http://www.fiveartscentre.org/baling-2015-2016>. For review of a tour show in Japan, see [http://artscape.jp/report/review/10129768\\_1735.html](http://artscape.jp/report/review/10129768_1735.html).



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