

Stages of Identity: Faridah Merican and Postcolonial Malaysian Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Known as the First Lady of Malaysian Theatre, Faridah began her career acting in plays written in the post-independence era. As a pioneering member of the modern theatre community in the 1960s, the plays she was involved in were instrumental in creating dialogue on postcolonial themes of identity, nationalism and social justice. She later became one of the first female theatre directors in Malaysia, and has challenged patriarchal norms, created inclusive performance spaces and adapted western works to Malaysian perspectives. Through readings of journals and articles on her productions, observations of her rehearsal process, and conversations with selected people, this paper discusses her career trajectory through components of postcolonial theory, and in doing so, provide an evidence-based account of her contributions to acting, producing, and directing within Malaysian theatre.

Keywords: Malaysian theatre, Faridah Merican, The Actors Studio, cultural identity, Postcolonialism theory.

1. INTRODUCTION

Faridah Merican has carved herself as a significant figure in Malaysian theatre, with a career trajectory that has both resulted from and contributed to the formation of the country's cultural identity. From her involvement with postcolonial theatre productions in the 1960s to her creation of original Malaysian works in the 1990s and 2000s paralleled Malaysia's broader negotiation of cultural identity amid nation-building. By

discussing her trajectory within the postcolonial context, her artistic and strategic choices are reflected upon intersecting factors such as cultural identity, negotiations with state policies and institutional restrictions, and gender, particularly her position as a woman in the field.

Faridah's career began in Kuala Lumpur where she met other pioneering theatre luminaries: Krishen Jit, Syed Alwi, and Usman Awang. She started working with them as an actor in the country's earliest contemporary theatre productions such as *Lela Mayang* (1968), *Tok Perak* (1975), *Alang Rentak Seribu* (1979) and *Uda & Dara* (1972) (Ishak, 1987). Faridah's involvement as an actor was important at the time, as the plays she was involved in were commentaries on the conflicts present in the social and political milieu post-independence (Rajendran, 2012). Through these postcolonial works, theatre became a space to discuss identity, nationhood and social justice, and Faridah, through her portrayals, contributed a perspective shaped by a woman's lens (Ishak, 1987).

In 1989, Faridah and her second husband, Joe Hasham, established Malaysia's first privately owned and operated theatre company, The Actors Studio. Through The Actors Studio, Faridah honed her craft not only as an actor but also as a producer, and director, earning recognition for her diverse contributions. This was when her career as a director began. She is credited as one of the pioneering women directors in Malaysia, alongside Rohani Yousoff and Fauziah Nawi (Abdullah, 2016). These three women are important as they paved the way for future Malaysian women directors. Faridah's directorial debut was a monodrama titled *I'm Not Talking to My Mother* in 1996 (Iskandar, 1996). This was after she was selected for a Director's Workshop in England, organized by the British Council in 1993. Her next play was a staging of *Hamlet* at the National Arts Academy (ASK, now known as ASWARA) in 1999 (Abdullah, 2016). She has also directed *Rashomon* (2003), *Hamlet* (2005 and 2016), *Uda dan Dara* (2015) and

Thunderstorm (2017 and 2019). Her 2003 version of *Rashomon* was nominated for 4 awards at the Cameronian Arts Awards. Faridah has been commended for her efforts in making classics more accessible to the masses. She has adapted *Hamlet* in Bahasa Malaysia with students of ASWARA (Ishak, 2008), adapted Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara* to comment on the social and political climate of the 2000s (Pillai, 2016), and introduced the Chinese classic *Thunderstorm* to the English-speaking community by translating it to English (Chalil, 2019). This has established Faridah not merely as an award-winning director, but as one who continually interrogates Malaysia's evolving social microsystems and cultural landscapes through her work (Abdullah, 2014).

In curating, creating, and staging productions for The Actors Studio, Faridah lives by the motto 'Arts for All', which has since become the company's ideology (Kumar, 2021). In line with this, Faridah has produced plays and musicals to reflect the company's inclusive values. The 2012 play *Stories for Amah*, written by Mark Beau de Silva and directed by Joe Hasham, explores the struggle between the authoritative discourse of race and identity in Malaysia (Philip, 2004). This trajectory continued when Faridah Merican began the *Life Sdn Bhd* series in 2004 to explore the meaning of the term 'Malaysian'. The process, which began with the prompt 'What does it mean to be a Malaysian?', presented real-life stories of the performers who shared poignant experiences. The performances seemed to be cathartic for not just the performers, but also for the audience, as espoused in a review: 'The true stories told had a certain power to help people feel less alone in their life situations and feelings' (Shamsunahar, 2021). Faridah, with her brand of what 'Life' is, promotes the idea that our shared experiences can unite us more than the focus on race.

In 2007, The Actors Studio produced the musical *Tunku*. A patriotic work focusing on the events surrounding Malaysia's

independence, the production was staged in August, shortly before Hari Merdeka (Independence Day) to evoke patriotic sentiments among audiences (Hon, 2007). Productions such as *Tunku* illustrate Faridah's ongoing interrogation and articulation of Malaysian identity.

As a theatre producer, Faridah established and operated performance spaces under the banner of her theatre company, The Actors Studio. The Actors Studio was first operating in Dataran Merdeka (1995), then in Bangsar (2001), and now (2021) at the The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (from 2004). The Actors Studio also opened venues at Sungei Wang Lot 10 (2009) and Penang (2011), which have now ceased operation. The Actors Studio Dataran Merdeka housed a theatre, and an experimental black box. The venue operated for 9 years, until a flood destroyed the compound (Daneels, 2007). In 2001, The Actors Studio and Bandar Raya Developments Berhad collaborated to open a venue at Bangsar Shopping Centre. A 250-seater, the venue was a popular choice amongst the English-theatre community of Kuala Lumpur, until it closed its doors in 2009. Faridah now operates The Actors Studio at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre, which she also manages as the Executive Producer (Shanin, 2014). The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre consists of a 504-seater main theatre, a 200-seater experimental theatre, IndiCine for films, and 10 studios. The venue has won the Malaysian Architect Association awards in the Adaptive Reuse category (Goethe, 2005). The Actors Studio is one of the longest running, pioneer theatre companies in Malaysia. It has operated for 32 years and is still going strong due to Faridah's strong leadership, business acumen, and financial planning (Engku Abdul Rahman, 2021).

Although Faridah has never received formal education and training in theatre, her accumulation of knowledge through experience over the decades, has resulted in an expansive resource of information in

the performing arts of Malaysia, which has never been comprehensively documented (Sivanatham, 2016). The following chapters will endeavour to frame Faridah Merican's contribution to Malaysian theatre through components of postcolonial theory. It studies her involvement as an actor performing texts written by her male counterparts in the 1960s to carving her own postcolonial perspectives as a producer and director from the 1980s.

Methodologically, this study relied on several secondary and primary sources which comprised academic journals that included Faridah as an actor, newspaper articles documenting her productions and theatre entrepreneurship. Observations were conducted on her acting process in *Philadelphia, Here I Come!* and *Sisa-Sisa*, as well as her directing methodology of *Thunderstorm* and *Life Sdn Bhd* to articulate her artistic methodology and recurring thematic choices. In addition, interviews with key collaborators involved in these productions were carried out to expand on insights derived from textual analysis and performance observation.

2. ACTING THROUGH A CHANGING MALAYSIA

Faridah Merican has acted in plays since the 1960s. 'An Analysis of Modern Malay Drama' by Nur Nina Zuhra and 'Histrionics of Development: A Study of Three Contemporary Malay Playwrights' by Solehah Ishak provide a foundational framework to the social and political milieu in Malaysia when Faridah first started as an actor. In an interview with Faridah (Personal communication, 2022), she said:

"The 1960s was a time when every Malaysian wanted to do something for the country. Post-independence, we were energized with patriotism, and young creatives at the

time wanted to be heard, and the stage was an avenue. I remember rushing from the radio station where I worked to rehearsal spaces- we all had an urgency to tell this new Malaysian stories. It was the discovery, of our newfound voice.”

Solehah’s study is both necessary and comprehensive, tracing the roots of the contemporary Malaysian stage via the analysis of three Malay play amidst the developing political and social landscape of the country, while Nur Nina’s documentation of the growth of the modern Malay drama provides a trajectory and narrative that would fit the timelines of many Malaysian theatrical icons, including Faridah’s. Faridah is mentioned as Nur Nina expounds on the Malaysian Arts Theatre Group (MATG)¹, and especially in the chapter on Syed Alwi. Her involvement alongside her pioneering counterparts is a testament to the necessity of theatre at the time as a tool of expression and empowerment by the people to reclaim, rediscover and redefine a cultural identity that has been eroded and erased by colonization, a lasting effect of the British colonial rule (Gandhi, 2019).

1 Malay Theatre Arts Group (Group) was conceived by the British during colonial rule. During its inception, English actors played main roles while locals played supporting roles. This changed when Syed Alwi took over leadership of the group.



Picture 1: Rehearsal picture of Faridah Merican and Syed Alwi.
Source: Photo provided by The Actors Studio Malaysia

Susan Philip's thesis, 'Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatre of Singapore and Malaysia' provided more information on Faridah's involvement in *Lela Mayang*. The play written by K.Das, and directed by Syed Alwi, with Faridah in the role of *Mayang Sari*, was a landmark production as it signaled the transition of the Malaysian Arts Theatre Group's (MATG) leadership from the British to a Malaysian, Syed Alwi (Philip, 2005). As part of this new leadership, Syed Alwi endeavored to put forth local writings on stage, hence the staging of *Lela Mayang*. When asked about the performance, Faridah (2023) shared:

Syed Alwi was not just a director, but someone who had many pertinent things to say about the state of the country, particularly the welfare of the Malays. At the time, people like K Das and Syed Alwi were instrumental in documenting the way our nation was shaping up. A play like *Lela Mayang* documents what Malaysia was like at the time. It was the performance that started my career, and I never looked back since.

Other writings on Faridah analyses the production's discussion of language in relation to race and identity. Susan Philip's thesis, 'Re-Scripting Identities: Performativity in the English-Language Theatres of Singapore and Malaysia discusses this, especially the play, *Lela Mayang*. In the analysis, Susan notes that Rahim Razali, who acted alongside Faridah, felt a discrepancy being a Malay actor in a Malay role, mouthing the English text of the play (Philip, 2005). In this study on Faridah, an inquiry on her process in the production of *Lela Mayang* might yield a different respond to Rahim's, due to her Anglo-English education. When asked about this, Faridah (Personal communication, 2023) responded:

"I think the topic of connectivity between race and language will go one forever in our country. Even today, when I see works by young people, race and language are debated often on stage. The tensions that arise even today between the races in our country only prove that there is much dialogue that is necessary, and the stage is one avenue for this."

Faridah's involvement and presence during this period illustrated a colonized body grappling with cultural hybridity and patriarchy. Her upbringing and education placed herself as a product of colonization negotiating her ethnic mother tongue and the language of the colonizer, which was used to effect by writers like K.Das (Said, 1978).

Other writings on the dynamics between the ethnicity of the actor, and language used are explored in reviews on the play *Tok Perak* by Adibah Amin and Mat Solo. Adibah's review is a thorough analysis of the 1975 play, commenting on its directing by Krishen Jit, and the complexities of the script and how the director and cast tackled the source material. Faridah, who acted as Azizah in Syed Alwi's *Tok Perak*, was praised (as part of the ensemble) for her natural responses to the other cast members and displayed bold choices as an actor on stage (Amin, 1975). Mat Solo's article provided a perspective of the play's process and stated that although the play was staged in the Malay language, theatre writers who visited the rehearsals noticed the commitment of the English-speaking actors, like Faridah, in perfecting their Malay language delivery (Solo, 1975). These writings illustrate that the discussion on language and the body (identity) of the speaker have been prevalent since the 70s. Faridah continues this trajectory of examining the relationship between the Malaysian body and language throughout her career. She has acted and produced in plays like *A Chance Encounter* (see below), and most recently the bilingual play by Kuo Pao Kun, *Mama Looking for her Cat* in 2023 where she learned and spoke smatterings of *Hokkien* on stage, alongside a predominantly Chinese-speaking cast.

Charlene Rajendran's analysis of Krishen Jit's *A Chance Encounter*, and Hatta Khan's book on 4 musicals provides insight into Faridah's creative choices, as an actor. The revelation that she was not a trained musical theatre singer (but still managed to pull off singing in a musical), and showcased improvisational skills in an original play, depicts her beginnings as someone 'hands-on'.

Hatta Khan's book on the study of 4 musicals dedicated a few paragraphs on the performance of the 1972 version of *Uda dan Dara*. Hatta complimented Faridah Merican and Ahmad Yatim's (they were both the leads) singing voices. He elaborates that despite not being trained singers, or known for their singing, Faridah and Ahmad were commendable in their performance, and managed to deliver the simple melodies (Khan, 2014). Hatta's observation gives an insight into the way Faridah works as actor. She may not be classically trained and schooled in the craft of acting but works hard in rehearsals with the director and actors to produce performances that have made her a sought-after stage actor today. When asked on the acting methodology used at the time, Faridah (personal communication, 2023) would credit Joy Zinoman, an American theatre practitioner as a main influence:

"I have never gone to theatre school to learn acting. Everything I apply as an actor was learned through working with directors over the years. In the early 90s, a bit after opening the Actors Studio, I met Joy Zinoman. She is a determined director who would do all it takes to bring out the character in you, and in doing so achieve her vision for the play."

Actors like Faridah who relied on their own efforts and occasionally refer to Western models of theatre training reveals the lasting psychological and epistemic effects of colonization. While the colonized body is in the process of self-discovery, there is still the need to look to the former colonizer as a source of validation, highlighting internalized colonial mentality (Mikula, 2008).

The epistemic dependence of the colonized subject is explored more explicitly as theatre practitioners like Faridah commented on this directly in the plays. In the 1999 production of *A Chance Encounter*, which was devised by Krishen Jit, with two performers (Rowland, 2015), Faridah drew upon her upbringing when devising the dialogue of her character in the play, Fatima. Indian-Muslim cultural references and Malay superstition and beliefs were used to develop Faridah's character.

Rajendran (2010) discusses multiculturalism on the Malaysian stage by citing a newspaper review's (Dass), mention of Faridah fervent use of language in *A Chance Encounter*. Although her performance was not analyzed thoroughly in the article, it notes Faridah's ability to devise and improvise, effectively using her position as a colonized body as a form of creative methodology. (Latiff and Foley, 2017) also has a perspective on the same play, and notes Faridah's naturistic performance which owed to her embracing her cultural identity and channeling into her artistic practice.



Picture 2. Faridah Merican in rehearsal with Patrick Teoh in *Philadelphia Here I Come*.

Source: Photo provided by The Actors Studio Malaysia

Faridah's later roles pushed the discussion on cultural identity of a colonized body by portraying multiple roles of different ethnicities. She learned simple *Hokkien* to play the role of a Chinese mother in 2016 in the play *Sisa Sisa*. Other notable roles include thrice (1994, 1998, 2013) as Madge (adapted to Mak Cik Esah) in *Philadelphia Here I Come* (all times by Joe Hasham), and Auntie Noni in *Adam the Musical* (2010 and 2018). Through her portrayals, Faridah illustrated facets of postcolonial identity, while simultaneously reflecting on the evolving role of women in Malaysia across different periods. Her role in *Sisa Sisa* discussed the changing role of a motherhood through the lens of cultural hybridity, while Mak Cik Esah and Auntie Noni were figures negotiating space and voice in a patriarchal environment (Mikula, 2008).

3. RESHAPING COLONIAL MODERNITY THROUGH COMMERCIAL THEATRE IN MALAYSIA

From the lens of postcolonial theory, Faridah's work as a producer can be analyzed as a disruption into patriarchal structures. By producing works which presents strong female figures, taboo subjects and discussions of sexual identity, she challenges local patriarchal norms and what is traditionally deemed acceptable.

(Latiff and Foley, 2017) discusses how Faridah was compared as less political than Krishen Jit in the analysis but was noted for her liberated stance in advocating controversial issues on stage, with the producing of plays like *Vagina Monologues* and gay-themed skits- she provided an avenue for the voiceless, even if it meant negotiating with the authorities. In an interview with Joe Hasham (personal communication, 2022), he supported this view:

“Faridah and I wanted to provide a space for anyone to say something, which is why when we first started the Actors Studio at Dataran Merdeka, we had something from anyone to everyone. Afdlin Shauki presented his early stand-up material there, Dama Orchestra found a little home to showcase their love for music, and Lee Swee Keong experimented with movement. We were aware of what could and couldn't be done, but as artistes, we had to try our best to express what we wanted to.”

With the flourishing of self-expression in the 1990s to 2000s, theatrical concerns shifted from cultural identity to explorations of selfhood. Faridah, as part of the Actor's studio understood this transition. Her programming choices were not merely commercial calculations but reflected a keen awareness that for theatre to remain sustainable as both an art form and a business, the works produced and curated must resonate with the spirit of the times. As the nation's identity evolves, so too must its art (Gandhi, 2019).

This need to provide an inclusive space for a diverse range of expressions is balanced with Faridah's role as a pioneering female entrepreneur in the arts. Rowland (2015) discusses the impact of state policies on Malaysian English language theatre and provides more insight into the growth of Faridah and the Actor's Studio amidst challenges posed by policies which impacted the economic welfare of the theatre. The chapter in the paper on the corporatization of Malaysian theatre, cites Faridah as a pioneer of this movement when in 1995, The Actors Studio began operating at Dataran Merdeka, with the support of three corporates: Transfield, Carlsberg, and Malaysian Airlines. The space, underneath the Dataran Merdeka (Independence Square) of Kuala Lumpur which housed a 153-seat theatre, a 90-seat black box, and 4 rehearsal studios, was a successful venue for the arts fraternity of Kuala Lumpur and operated for almost 10 years, and Kathy's paper quotes theatre icon Mano Maniam as describing it as 'the most important development in Malaysian theatre in the 90s'.

(Abdul Rahman, 2021) credits the management of The Actors Studio for its longevity. She states that the Actors Studio's financial planning (under the leadership of Faridah Merican) has managed to keep the theatre company operating for more than 2 decades, despite the shortcomings from the state. She writes that many theatre companies do not survive due to the lack of governmental financial support, but The Actors Studio has stood the test of time by having a strong business strategy, and a well-thought-out annual budget. Faridah (personal communication, 2023) has shared the need for more government and corporate support over the years, and in an interview added:

"It hasn't been easy. Of course, there is the praise when people think we have managed for so long, but not without sacrifices, and a lot of help for certain individuals. For example, when we lost Dataran Merdeka to the floods, it was the help of Datin Seri Endon Mahmood, the late first wife of Tun Abdullah Badawi, and Tan Sri Francis Yeoh that kept The Actors Studio running. And then during the Covid-19 pandemic, corporate sponsors like Mr. DIY and Yayasan Sime Darby provided financial assistance that covered much of our operating costs."

Headed by Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham restored and refurbished the Kuala Lumpur Performing Centre in 7 months, at the cost of MYR 30 million. When it first began operation, a 40-member team was hired to oversee the management team, the marketing team, the creative team, and the technical and maintenance team. The center in its first year was aided by corporates such as Mercedes Benz Malaysia Sdn. Bhd (a sponsor until 2020) and Yayasan Budi Penyayang. (Kamaruddin & Harun, 2014).

Faridah's negotiating of changing cultural landscapes in the country as reflected in her creative programming with the state's institutional requirements illustrates the postcolonial challenge of a female figure within a historically patriarchal landscape. Her creative and entrepreneurial decisions helped inform the trajectory of future colonized bodies navigating the arts. Her endeavours in this regard I by having a *Uda* of Chinese descent and rooting the feuding families in two distinct locales one in rural *Kampung Penchala* (Penchala Village), and the other in posh *Taman Tun Dr Ismail*.² The paper concludes by commending Faridah's vision of recreating a new version of *Uda dan Dara* that leaves the audience in search of 'other possible meanings' in life. His summary of the performance highlighted Faridah's adaptations has now gone beyond language, to consider the deconstruction of the culture of the 'world of the play'. This is true for other adaptations that Faridah has done since *Uda dan Dara*, particularly the Chinese play *Thunderstorm*, which received a localized treatment.

In 2023, Faridah began working on an adaptation of *The Soong Sisters*. Staged in 2024, the play recounts the lives of the three sisters who played pivotal roles in early 20th-century Chinese politics, but highlighted themes of nationalism which Malaysian Chinese could relate to.

Faridah (Personal communication, 2024) states:

"I wanted to tell the story of these three extraordinary women who made their mark during a time dominated by men. I also

2 A mid-sized township in Kuala Lumpur, with modern amenities and known for its mid to high range housing.

believe many strong Malaysian women would relate with the Soong sisters' struggles, and this story is tribute of sorts to them."

4. CONCLUSION

Faridah Merican's journey as a theatre actor, producer and director has demonstrated the trajectory of a colonized body's endeavour to reflect upon, question and shape a nation's cultural identity through theatre. Her work as an actor, together with her pioneering counterparts have collectively shaped and presented the Malaysian identity on the stage. This success encouraged her growth into a theatre producer and director, where she continuously questioned the meaning of being Malaysian, as a colonized people, and as a country finding its identity through its diverse communities. Her culturally thoughtful adaptations, inclusive programming, and entrepreneur leadership have challenged patriarchal structures and expanded the possibilities for Malaysian theatre, particularly for women. Her legacy lives not only in the productions she has staged, but arts institutions she has established, the younger generation of artistes she has groomed and inspired, and the postcolonial dialogue she has started and continued to encourage.

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