



PROJECT 1

Developing Art Audiences In Kuching

By Abdul Walid bin Ali

FOCUS
- Performing Arts

ARTIST
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A Perspective on Performing Arts and a Glimpse of Sarawak Culture

Theatre is in its infancy in Sarawak – both a challenge and an opportunity. Building an audience from almost nothing is daunting but, equally, it could be a theatre director's dream. With little expectation to conform to, Sarawak theatre is an open field for experimentation. It is a chance to take the best of contemporary theatre, weave in a Sarawak style, and stage something never before seen. If only we can find our audience and our artists!

The rich island culture of Borneo has its own traditions of performing arts – in dance, in poetry, in other oral forms of expression and even in ritual – though the theatre is only just gaining a foothold. But these traditions themselves are the source of great inspiration and talent. Each ethnic group has its own performance culture and quality of movement and local artists, both traditional and contemporary, often incorporate elements of their culture into their work, frequently including Sarawakian motifs and sounds. These artists are our assets. With our wealth of cultures, languages, musical traditions, and our distinctive Sarawakian stories and issues, the potential for contemporary theatre is there. All we need is a company of players to create a new art form for Sarawak's public, establishing a tradition for the future.

Establishing an audience

Of course, without an audience, whether mainstream or niche, contemporary or traditional, popular or intimate, art becomes unsustainable. More Sarawakians have spent time overseas, seen the theatre in larger cities – often favourites from musical theatre or a more established theatre tradition from abroad – and now want to

see something similar at home. However, with a limited homegrown tradition, most Sarawakians have still never attended the theatre before.

But they want to. In a recent survey asking what kinds of events people wanted to see happen in Kuching, the most common answer was theatre. With a burgeoning performing arts scene in the city, audience members are looking for new events to attend. Many Kuching millennials are potential theatremakers and goers, eager to do things in their hometown. But, with so many first timers, their first show would be crucial: they need to experience good theatre put on by expert theatremakers. Then they will return. In turn, for our future theatremakers, they have the opportunity to truly shape the theatrical experience of an entirely new group of theatregoers. From this, Projek Spektrum was born.

Background of Projek Spektrum

My own experience in the theatre tended towards the experimental and the avant-garde. After returning from the UK, I began a project called 'Hidup Luar Kotak' (Life outside the box). After a few months in Sarawak, my friend from Kuala Lumpur invited me to direct a playlet in Teater Modular – a series of theatre shows by Ridhwan Saidi and various directors. Back in Kuching, however, while young people have a huge wealth of talent in music, dancing and the visual arts, the town lacked experienced theatremakers. In my view, Kuching needed more young, progressive theatre directors. I just had to tempt them into a new view of theatre. I wanted to challenge the idea that theatre must be performed in a proper space with a complicated set and expensive lighting. I believed a more natural performance in a more intimate location to be key for a new Kuching audience and

1

Teater Ajak Crush Awak

A site-specific theatre, challenging theatrical aspects, performed with only 4 people

2

Controlled (Boilerhouse 2016)

A performance which focuses on humans and the many things which control their lives

for potential theatre makers who had new ideas but limited budgets.

This led me to the Borneo Art Collective. I met Wendy Teo Bin and asked if I could turn her creative laboratory into a site-specific theatre to develop an audience in Sarawak. I called this 'Projek Spektrum' and it has become one of the Borneo Laboratory Pillars. The title of our first performance was Ajak Crush Awak. It involved four members only, to prove to audiences in Kuching that there are many ways to do theatre, and that it is possible to use any space as a performance space. The show exceeded all my expectations, playing to a full house. I wanted to use this as a springboard to bring in new talent. We aimed to tackle the real issues facing Sarawakian youth, from the spectre of debt to relationships and the struggle to find employment. We did this to draw in new young audiences but also to give a platform to discuss contemporary issues and help Sarawakians to overcome these in their own current way.

In addition to promoting theatre and giving exposure to young directors, Projek Spektrum hosts 'Rumah Filem' – a biweekly screening followed by a discussion. The aim of this project is to promote

growth through the exchange of ideas and opinions.

The Project so far

In the first two years of the project, my job was to work with these eight budding theatremakers to tailor their ideas for an audience made up both of artists and event mavens, but also of newcomers to the theatre scene. In the first year, I found four directors: three for the first season and one for the second. In this introductory phase, my focus was more to foster curiosity, expecting questions and anticipating that people's curiosity and conversation would lead to word-of-mouth promotion. In the first season, all the directors were men – two students and one a member of 9Lives, a Sarawakian art group – each with their own style of writing and creating performances. The first director, Daniel Dahiri, focused on what women discuss when they talk about men. In his comic piece, two girls gossip about how they do not understand men, eventually falling asleep, apparently more important for the girls than figuring out men! The playlet was followed up by Kumpau. In this play, the actor was on stage performing fishing techniques while he spoke about how he missed his grandfather. The last performance by Husni Zuhairin was an expression of himself as an artist. He spoke about his struggles using rap, music and popular culture.



3

Holding Hands

Theatre is group work. Arranged in a circle, everyone in the team has to look similar

4

Ringkasan Shakespeare (2012-2015)

Our most important performance which has already been staged in many established locations

During the second season of Spektrum, Ardilla Latif directed a piece about missing her hometown and her friends when she moved away to study. The story moved from her initial happiness in her hometown, to her studies in another town and subsequent return to her friends and home. This piece was performed outdoors with the audience in a small road in front of Indah café. The set was the café itself and the window on the second floor. In one scene, a long white piece of fabric was tossed out of this window, which created a very memorable visual.

Currently, I am coaching three new directors, making seven in total. For the latest Spektrum, all the directors are women. They will focus on female empowerment, on topics chosen by each of the directors. The last Spektrum will be an interesting one, because there will be only one director left. He or she will be the eighth director, ending the scouting phase.

The Future

Looking forward, we will now have eight directors to present new theatre and to support each other in the process, improving each other's shows and exploring the possibilities in theatremaking. The process of

education must continue through workshop series to foster new, future theatre groups. As the standard of theatre in Kuching grows, so will the audience. Promotion will be key, using innovative media to target audience members. Projek Spektrum could even become a group of supporters and critics, all in a spirit of appreciation and growth. The Spektrum team could write a book about their achievements. This book would serve as a reference for contemporary theatre in Sarawak.

My hope for Kuching is new shows, both by Projek Spektrum directors and from the new groups that they have inspired. Sarawak has many things to share with outsiders and, therefore, has the potential to be a major art town. It is the young generation which needs to do something for the theatre scene. Through them, Kuching can create something truly modern and experimental, dealing with contemporary Borneo issues. Through them, the scene can build new audiences for this new art form. We are building a stable of theatremakers in Sarawak who now know that theatre can be what you make of it. Projek Spektrum is a spark, one that will hopefully inspire many similar projects in the years to come.





**Borneo
Laboratory**

—
A Laboratory
for Borneo
Aesthetics

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