

BOOK REVIEW

REVIEW OF *EXCAVATIONS, INTERROGATIONS, KRISHEN JIT AND CONTEMPORARY MALAYSIAN THEATRE*. CHARLENE RAJENDRAN, KEN TAKIGUCHI AND CARMEN NGE, EDS. SINGAPORE: EPIGRAM BOOKS, 2018. ISBN978-967-13594-1-9. (189 PAGES)

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When I first received this book, I assumed that the title was *Excavations, Interrogations: Krishen Jit and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre*. The actual punctuation – a comma instead of a colon – is significant, and speaks to the intention behind this book. A colon would imply that the excavations and interrogations in the book are about Krishen Jit and Malaysian theatre. The comma, however, implies that Krishen is, in fact, a part of the process of excavating and interrogating that goes into making contemporary Malaysian theatre. I use the present tense deliberately when speaking of his participation in this process – despite the fact that he passed away in 2005, his influence continues in many ways.

For those less familiar with Malaysian theatre, Krishen Jit began to involve himself in the nascent post-independence theatre scene while holding down a day job as a history professor at the University of Malaya. He acted and directed, wrote an influential theatre column under the pen name 'Utih', and was a founder member of the Five Arts Centre, one of Malaysia's most challengingly experimental and socio-politically thoughtful arts collectives in Malaysia. After his retirement from academia, he worked full time in the theatre as a director, often collaborating with colleagues from across Asia, playing with new

performance vocabularies and fresh ideas for exploration and discussion. As a Malaysian theatre director, he was insistent on grounding himself in broad terms as a Malaysian, embracing his inevitable hybridity, rather than remaining within the customary racial boxes which seek to define all Malaysians.

This book, which had its genesis in a conference held in 2015 to mark the tenth year of Krishen's passing, is not the first to focus on him. Kathy Rowland edited a volume entitled *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position. Selected Writings*, which is important for bringing together several of his writings about theatre. This new book, however, opens up the frame of discussion by asking a variety of writers, performers, directors, etc., who may or may not have known Krishen personally, to write pieces *about* him or his work.

The result is a book which works more like a dialogue or discussion – a deliberate choice on the part of the editors. They say that “Good stirring dialogue often lingers and creeps under one's skin according to each person's context, politics and point of entry” (12). Because of this, they have invited contributions from people who knew him well (Charlene Rajendran, Marion D'Cruz, Mark Teh), and some who never met him (meLê yamomo, Alvin Eng Hui Lim). This allows different perspectives to emerge – Rajendran and D'Cruz, for example, are able to provide a historical understanding of Krishen's work. Teh shows us how Krishen's productions and ideas influenced him in developing his own style and focus. Alvin Eng takes Krishen's continued influence in Malaysian theatre as an entry point to discuss the importance of archiving, and the relevance of the past to the present and the future; yamomo discusses feeling like an outsider at a family gathering, but taking in all the different memories of and responses to Krishen, and pointing out the need to “make sense of these multiple threads” (165).

The sense of dialogue and discussion is further enhanced by the way in which the book has been structured, as well as by the structure of some individual chapters. The third chapter in Section One, e.g., (“Unusual Business in Five Arts Centre: ‘Let's Conference!’”) is a literal dialogue between Marion D'Cruz (a founder member of Five Arts Centre) and Janet Pillai, also a member of Five Arts Centre. While Pillai is essentially interviewing D'Cruz, she also brings her own experience with Krishen and Five Arts to bear, intervening with her own observations. In Section Two, the four chapters take the form of an essay and a response to that essay. T.K. Sabapathy reminisces about his days in Berkeley, where he and Krishen were both postgraduate students. Charlene Rajendran then responds to this by teasing out how the influences Krishen encountered in Berkeley might have informed his later work in theatre. Similar dialogues appear in Section Three, with Kathy Rowland responding to the

‘performance’ cum discussion carried out by Huzir Sulaiman and Claire Wong, which was based on their memories of rehearsing with Krishen. Finally, to further emphasise the idea of dialogue, we see the editors visibly intervening in the discussions in the various chapters. Throughout this book, red asterisks appear in the essays, leading to ‘footnotes’; unlike footnotes in academic tomes, these do not offer sidelines or expanded thoughts from the writer of the chapter. Rather, the editors put in their own responses to points brought up by the writers, thus expanding the conversation by including other ideas and points of view. For example, when Makoto Sato talks about “sustaining relationships among the artists”, the editors intervene: Rajendran discusses dialogue across borders, Nge talks about access, whether physical, cultural, linguistic or financial, and Takiguchi brings in the impact of state funding on the exchange process. All this radically expands Sato’s discussion of his own experiences.

This is not strictly an academic work, though some of the contributors do bring in a certain academic rigour. The ‘academic’ label is kept at bay by the visual impact of the book. The cover, with its bright-orange, uneven text and a caricature of Krishen, sets the tone for the interior. Text in the chapters does not necessarily have regular margins; it might appear in columns, or blocks, with editorial interventions in orange, or boxed off in red. Some text is curved, like an arch, or a wave – though to be honest, texts like these I found a little hard to read. The overall appearance of the book is imaginative and unusual, and perhaps reflects the refusal of the Five Arts Centre as a whole to follow well-trodden paths.

The book will prove useful to researchers in Malaysian and Asian theatre, allowing them access into the history of how Malaysian theatre has developed, and the influence of Krishen Jit on that development. It also gives a good idea of the kind of cross-cultural links that have been nurtured as a result of Krishen’s work.

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