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## GROOVE onstage

**T**HERE was a time when local universities were a cauldron of theatrical innovations, playing a major role in the experimentation and development of theatre and drama in the country. In the early 1960s, for example, University Malaya, being the only university at that time, led in both English and Malay drama productions.

Now, we see the absence of serious and challenging works from local universities with the exception of the annual Drakon and Monologue drama competitions organised by the Higher Education Ministry.

Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), through its Theatre and Drama Department, has taken the lead in producing major productions such as *Naga-Naga Di Mana Kau*, *Naga-Naga Siapa Kau* and *Turandot* by Belgian lecturer Professor Tone Brulne. Another lecturer at the university, Professor Roger Long, has contributed to elevating USM as a leading institution in university theatrical performances.

I, too, have produced *Happening And Dance* that combined both traditional and modern theatrical elements. These USM productions have toured the country playing in Kuala Lumpur, Johor, Sabah, Sarawak, Brunei and Singapore, bringing university theatre to the people and educating them on the formal aspects of theatrical production through performances and workshops

while, at the same time, generating interest among school leavers in pursuing a drama and theatre programme at the university.

## NONDESCRIPT POSITION

Other universities then followed USM's pioneering effort in theatre and drama by establishing their own drama department: We now have such studies at **Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia**, **Universiti Teknologi Mara**, **Universiti Malaysia Sarawak**, **Universiti Malaysia Sabah** and **Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris**. Except for workshop performances, no serious dramatic works have emerged from these universities.

Perhaps this has to do with the focus and emphasis on science and technology and later, to compete in the Times Thompson Ranking of universities. As such the performing and visual arts creative activities are relegated to a non-descript position existing as an anomaly, unlike in western universities where artistic activities form a vibrant part of campus and community life.

While theatrical activities in the main established public universities have lapsed into the doldrums, Universiti Malaysia Terengganu has paved the way for a possible rejuvenation of university theatrical and dramatic performances, through its staging of a musical, *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari*, by National Literary Laureate Datuk Dr Noordin Hassan.



(Above) Abu Bakar Omar as Pak Yatim. (Right) Muhd Nur Shayid as Zahiruddin Syah.

It is quite an achievement for a university specialising in marine studies to stage this play without the support of a drama department, except for a cultural unit within the Student Affairs Department. This effort had the full support of the university vice chancellor, Professor Datuk Dr Nor Aieni Mokhtar, who understood the importance of dramatic and theatrical activities in the development of students' character.



## A MUSICAL FEAT

Universiti Malaysia Terengganu has paved the way for a possible rejuvenation of university theatrical and dramatic performances but overall, there's still an absence of serious and challenging works, notes **Datuk Professor Emeritus Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin**



UMT vice chancellor posing with the students.

Not only that, but with the help of USM, which pioneered arts therapy research and intervention for special needs, spastic, autistic and dyslexic children, Nor Aieni is also considering establishing an arts therapy programme for special needs children at Taman Sinar Harapan, a rehabilitation centre for disabled children.

The play, *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari*, which was performed at Universiti Malaysia Terengganu's Dewan Sultan Mizan from Feb 19 till 21, was directed by associate professor Dr Rohani Yousoff, a lecturer there and a well-known actor and director.

The cast consisted mostly of diploma students, staff members and marine studies lecturer Dr Nor Omaima Harun. Wan Fatimah Nurulain Wan Nor, a staff member of the university's cultural unit, played lead role of Puteri Kamaliah.

Two original cast members and music director from the premier performance

In the 1990s were invited as guest performers. They were Abu Bakar Omar, the celebrated TV, film and stage actor who played the lead role of Pak Yatim, and Pak Ngah, whose real name is Datuk Suhaimi Mohd Zain, an accomplished virtuoso musician, composer and arranger as the musical director.

I was not only one of the choreographers of the show but also played the role of Abdul Penjual Sarbat, who also played the violin.

## ILLUSION OF REALITY

*Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* was structured in a Bangsawan-styled performance, but it incorporated western Brechtian element of alienation by inserting breaks in the flow of the dramatic action to jar the audience from empathising with the dramatic emotions. It was to prevent them from being drawn into the illusion of reality of realistic theatre so as to enable them to think about the actions of the play.

Unlike a Bangsawan in which a realistic setting supports and locates the dramatic actions, *Sirih Bertepuk Pinang Menari* employed a non-committal space in which the changing locations are indicated through basic symbolic props and the use of dialogue as in traditional theatre.

The story is about the king of Indra Mahkota, Sultan Idris Bistari, who