

INTRACULTURAL EXPLORATIONS IN PERFORMANCE: LLOYD FERNANDO'S *SCORPION ORCHID*

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Abstract

The focus of this article is on intraculturalism in the adaptation and performance of Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, looking at the staging of the play (adapted from Fernando's 1976 novel), by Krishen Jit and the Five Arts Centre. Fernando's novel questioned racial positioning and belonging within the nation. I suggest that the play uses intracultural performance to take this questioning a step further; the performance represents a means of resisting and questioning the essentialised and monolithic cultural and racial identities constituted by the state in accordance with official policies of multiculturalism and multiracialism. Where multiculturalism posits a policy of harmony through separation, intraculturalism seeks active engagement with other cultures, leading to the exploration of new, possibly hybrid, spaces of expression. This move towards hybridity challenges the state's insistence on difference. Intracultural exchange is, potentially, a site of dialogue and interaction which can challenge the rhetoric of harmony and separation apparent in state discourse.

Keywords: Intracultural performance, Lloyd Fernando, Malaysian theatre, Singaporean theatre

This essay will look at the adaptation and performance of Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid* in 1994 and 1995, focusing on the intracultural work done by Krishen Jit and the Five Arts Centre. Originally written as a novel and published in 1976, *Scorpion Orchid* was re-worked as a play in 1994 by Krishen, in collaboration with the author. It was presented at the 1994 Singapore Arts Festival, with Krishen and Singaporean director Lok Meng Chue co-directing for TheatreWorks. In 1995, Krishen collaborated with Joe Hasham of The Actors Studio to stage the play in Kuala Lumpur.

I suggest that intracultural performance represents a means of resisting and questioning the essentialised and monolithic cultural and racial identities constituted by the state in accordance with official policies of multiculturalism and multiracialism. Where multiculturalism posits a policy of harmony through separation, intraculturalism seeks active engagement with other cultures, leading to the exploration of new, possibly hybrid, spaces of expression. This move towards hybridity challenges the state's insistence on difference. Intracultural exchange is, potentially, a site of dialogue and interaction which can challenge the rhetoric of harmony and separation apparent in state discourse. In much of his work, Krishen focuses on a

variety of local performance and cultural modes, negotiating the construction of a Malaysian identity which crosses racial and cultural borders.

I would like to make clear at this point the difference between *inter-* and *intra-*cultural practice. Interculturalism is the appropriation of one culture (the source culture) by another (the target culture), towards the production of a new mode of cultural expression or experience. At one level, this implies sharing and growth. However, it must be acknowledged that intercultural exchange often represents a power relationship, generally with the dominant Western culture appropriating parts of Eastern culture as it sees fit. Patrice Pavis, for example, introduces his idea of “a theatre of *culture(s)*” from the dominant western perspective, stating that: “Never before has the western stage contemplated and manipulated the various cultures of the world to such a degree”.² Richard Schechner admits that: “Some very sinister forces are present in interculturalism. [...] First off, it is people from the economically advantaged places that are able to travel and import”.³

Another, equally serious charge to be levelled against this practice, is the tendency of intercultural practitioners to simplify and decontextualise the cultural material which they appropriate. There is an assumption, visible in the works of such frontline practitioners of intercultural theatre as Schechner and Peter Brook, that it is entirely possible to know someone else’s culture through a performance of it. Schechner, for example, advocates “actually doing [different cultures...]. So that ‘them’ and ‘us’ is elided, or laid experientially side-by-side”.⁴ His comment on the elision of ‘them’ and ‘us’ through intercultural performance underlines the glibness of his vision; he does not problematise the social, political, and economic situations which lead to the existence of a “them” and “us” dichotomy. He implies further that the entire meaning of a culture lies within the performance of it, rather than within the social framework in which it is embedded.

Una Chaudhuri and Rustom Bharucha, who are both critical of the practice of interculturalism, imply that the key point in interculturalism should lie not in unearthing apparent similarities between diverse cultures and thus universalising them, nor in merely celebrating difference, but in confronting the conditions which have created these differences, in moving beyond codes of difference produced by political hegemonies, and in allowing those differences to *be* different and specific, rather than trying to subsume them into some universal practice. This is the kind of practice which challenges what has been reiterated and normalised. Bharucha contends that such practice is more likely to come from *intraculturalism*.⁵

Lo and Gilbert state that: “*Intracultural theatre* is Rustom Bharucha’s term to denote cultural encounters between and across specific communities and regions within the nation”.⁶ Bharucha states that “‘intra’ [...] refers more pertinently to the differences that exist within the boundaries of a particular region in what is assumed to be a homogenized culture”.⁷ He views intraculturalism as having the potential to explode “organicist notions of culture by highlighting the deeply fragmented and divided society [...] that the multicultural rhetoric of the state refuses to acknowledge”.⁸ While Bharucha uses the term to challenge the “notion of cohesiveness” that is assumed in a multicultural state,⁹ it can also be applied to the already divided cultures that prevail in Malaysia. The Malaysian state demands that individuals of immigrant stock give their allegiance to the ancient cultures of China or India, thus attempting to create a kind of intra-racial cohesiveness while maintaining

the divide along inter-racial lines. By focusing on the multiplicity of cultures available within the nation, apart from those that are officially identified, intraculturalism can challenge the “notion of cohesiveness,” thus more sharply and critically questioning the basis of the national identity. Furthermore, because it is open to dialogue with ‘unofficial’ cultures, intracultural work can also examine those organically hybrid Malaysian cultures which have developed at the level of lived reality, but which are not acknowledged at the official level.

Five Arts Centre has long been invested in the search for this slowly developing culture. In a brochure celebrating their fifteenth anniversary in 1999, their philosophy for theatre is outlined as follows: “Five Arts Centre seeks to create theatre that is distinctly Malaysian [...] and give voice to what we feel is Malaysian.” The Five Arts Centre concept of what constitutes Malaysian theatre forms “draws strongly from Asian dance traditions and Martial Arts – like classical Malay dance, Indonesian dance, Silat, Tai Chi, etc. – and reconstructs these into new forms combining tradition and modernity, east and west, old and new”.¹⁰ The mix of old and new is particularly significant, as Goh Beng Lan points out: “The formation of the local, as seen from the bottom up, thus is *not* an attempt to leave behind old identities or to overcome the past by carving out an empty space for new identities. Rather, it is an attempt to juxtapose ‘old’ and ‘new’ identities”.¹¹ There is an implicit recognition that the new has grown out of the old, but that there has been divergence from the path of the ‘old;’ this divergence naturally develops into the new. It is through intracultural exchange, by working with diverse traditional and cultural forms, and attempting to produce a new cultural identity from their intersections and clashes, that Five Arts Centre challenges the construction of Malaysians as racially and culturally separate beings who maintain harmony by assiduously avoiding the sensitive issue of racial and cultural difference. In *Scorpion Orchid*, Krishen evinces a deep concern with the problem of communicating across cultures and races within a specifically Malaysian context.¹²

Intraculturalism in *Scorpion Orchid*¹³

Scorpion Orchid is set in the 1950s, in pre-independence Singapore, at the time a part of Malaya. A fictional entity called ‘British Realty’ (a thinly disguised version of Malaya’s British colonisers) is considering pulling out of Singapore, and this is causing social and political upheaval. The city is plagued by riots, strikes and racial violence. Fernando’s play focuses on four friends, university undergraduates, called Peter, Santinathan, Guan Kheng and Sabran. Each man represents one of the four major races of Malaya: Eurasian, Indian, Chinese and Malay respectively. The play follows the disintegration of their friendship in the face of racial violence; by extension, since the four men reflect the racial make-up of the nation, Fernando portrays the possible disintegration of the entire nation. Eventually they go their separate ways, with Peter deciding to migrate to Australia. Caught up in their lives is Sally, a prostitute of indeterminate race, who is brutally gang-raped by an unidentified mob and is left disillusioned about her friendship with the four men.

In the staging of this play, the Five Arts Centre made a concerted effort to create an intracultural dialogue between various local art and performance modes, rather than maintaining the boundaries between them. Whereas the state posits all

individuals as a homogenised mass within specific racialised spaces, intraculturalism can challenge this view by focusing on differences within that apparent homogeneity. I will look at the text and staging of *Scorpion* as intracultural interventions which disrupt the authoritative construction of cultural identity. Fernando states that the play “recognises our awareness of our different pasts [...and] reorders these pasts in a manner suitable for contemplation;” he acknowledges that “the pasts still jangle a bit”.¹⁴ Fernando’s focus is on difference rather than homogeneity, and he is aware of the tensions still inherent in race-relations in Malaysia. However, he is insistent about the need for “contemplation” of these differences and tensions, in contrast to the state’s desire to remove these matters from the arena of public discussion and exchange. Such discussion can pave the way towards the slow development of a more inclusive identity – something for which the Five Arts Centre actively searches: in a brochure produced in conjunction with their twentieth anniversary in 2004, for example, they specify a desire to find “new ways of performance that explore and give voice to what is Malaysian”.¹⁵

As Bharucha notes, intracultural exchange “is, perhaps, the sharpest way of puncturing the homogenized categories and pretensions of the multicultural state” because “while the ‘intra’ prioritizes the interactivity and translation of diverse cultures, the ‘multi’ upholds a notion of cohesiveness” based on authoritatively constructed links to primordial cultural and racial identities.¹⁶ This is, of course, the situation which prevails in Malaysia with ‘Indians’ (for example) presumed to be a harmoniously cohesive group despite evidence of cultural, social and economic gaps among them, as well as, sometimes, outright hostility. Based on this false assumption of cohesiveness *within* the racial group, the policy of multiracialism extrapolates further, assuming ‘tolerance’ *between* the various racial groups. These assumptions, as well as the official refusal to accept challenges to them, militate against dialogue and discussion. The dialogic element of intracultural exchange exposes the rhetoric of multicultural cohesiveness as a sham.

Fernando’s play verbalises and embodies the racial tensions which are all too often elided in public discourse, and challenges official constructs of multiracial harmony. While the text represents experiences of racial tension and separation, the strategies of performance and staging offer a glimpse of the positive potential of intracultural dialogue to cross boundaries, thus constructing identities which are not bound by the official discourse of multiracialism which foregrounds separation. However, it is uncertain how successful the production is at reiterating a hybrid ‘intracultural’ identity, as the general reaction to the clash and mix of cultures represented in the performance seems to be uncomfortable, at best.

Given that the whole idea of ‘Malaysianness’ is still under development and still subject to negotiation, I would argue that any attempt to ‘capture’ this identity will be largely unsuccessful. The attempt itself, however, would form a part of the ongoing process of negotiation and construction. As will be discussed later, the work of *Scorpion* music director Sunetra Fernando and choreographer Aida Redza is evidence of an attempt to express a Malaysian identity which is filtered not only through the overall vision of the directors, but also, importantly, through the experience of both Fernando and Aida as Malaysians who are not comfortable within their essentialised racial and cultural ‘boxes.’ However, the response of the public to these attempts suggests that they are not entirely successful in communicating an inclusive Malaysian

identity. The playtext presents a world which focuses on difference. The intercultural element, through the music and movement, is brought into the production as a tentative solution, with the performance itself suggesting strategies to overcome this insistence on difference. But given the current state of the nation, are these strategies workable?

Koh Tai Ann, writing in 1986, sees the novel as being about “alienation and exile,” but suggests that it is ultimately hopeful; she calls it “a novel of acceptance of the new society that could only become the good society and worthy home through the commitment and faith of its citizens”.¹⁷ Diamond, comparing novel and play in 2002, notes a bleak tone in the play that is not present in the novel: “In the novel, Fernando allows two of the characters to extract some meaning from their predicament, but not in the play”.¹⁸ In the intervening years between the writing of the novel and the production of the play, there has been little change or progress in the basic dilemmas described by Lloyd Fernando. Martin Spice suggests that in this play, Fernando asks “to what extent is it possible to escape the shackles of the past and of race”.¹⁹ The more pessimistic tone of the play, compared with the novel, suggests that it is not possible. The production is trapped within this dilemma, attempting to move beyond racial division but at the same time hemmed in by the entrenchment, over nearly four decades, of those divisions.

In *Scorpion Orchid*, Krishen engages with an issue that has troubled theatre practitioners in Singapore and Malaysia, as evidenced by this pertinent question from a Singaporean play, *Desdemona*: can we “have a conversation when we have different histories, different memories and different languages”.²⁰ The question is complex; when the novel was written, the problem of a populace with divergent histories, memories and languages was very real. Most contemporary Malaysians, however, do in fact have common memories, histories and languages, although they remain fundamentally constructed as separate racialised beings. This construction was central to the formation of relationships in Krishen Jit’s view. For him, the most absorbing question arising from the play was: “Can you ever know a person of another race, can you truly create a genuine bond of friendship with this person?”.²¹ The novel and its subsequent theatrical adaptation discuss race relations and the possibility of ‘outsiders’ belonging in Malaysia or Singapore. The production, however, is infused with a 1990s sensibility, in which that particular question (of belonging) is no longer so openly problematic, in part because of authoritative proscriptions against open discussions of the matter, and in part because of a slowly-growing feeling of groundedness within the nation. The awareness of racial difference does, however, continue to underline and constrain all social and political relations in the country, as pointed out by Krishen, who states that for most Malaysians, “it is impossible to live [...] without thinking of race”.²² The play adds resonance to the discussion of the issue of race by placing it within a framework of intercultural performance which asks questions and suggests possibilities not present in the original text. Where the text reflects an experience of separation between the races despite superficial camaraderie, the performance brings together elements of Malaysian culture in an intentionally hybrid form which challenges the pessimism of the text, as well as questioning and examining the state of race relations and the perceptions of racial and cultural separation and categorisation.

So sensitive is the topic of race that very few Malaysian writers attempt to engage with it. Fernando was himself unsure of treading on these almost taboo

areas; he states that he hesitated “to cross cultural barriers which he has no business crossing,” feeling that he should avoid writing about things if he does not know enough about them.²³ Despite this hesitancy, in *Scorpion* he faces his subject uncompromisingly. Diamond calls *Scorpion Orchid* “one of the first Malaysian novels seriously and imaginatively to address race as *the* major social issue challenging Malaysia/Singapore”.²⁴ Fernando commented in 1991 that “no Malaysian writer can claim to be writing with truth if he does not carry, woven into his fiction, the reality of relationships between the races, and its unavoidable undertow of threatened violence”;²⁵ fifteen years after the publication of his novel, the comment remained valid. In 1995, when the play premiered in Kuala Lumpur, the issue of tension and potential violence between races was still current. In their Directors’ Notes, Hasham and Krishen confront this issue, asking “how can you confront the travail of racial identities and actions and in its trail avoid following their aggressive stances and posturings”.²⁶

Despite the official, divisive policies of multiculturalism and multiracialism, Fernando remains convinced that unity at a much deeper level is possible. Krishen, for example, states that “Fernando’s life, career, including his writing, is an answer to this question: how to live with people of other races”.²⁷ Abishegam points out that “Fernando is the kind of person who writes *Malaysian* on a form in the space where they ask for race”.²⁸ His perception of himself as ‘Malaysian’ rather than as ‘Malaysian-Indian’ points to a desire to re-name himself, to reconstruct his official identity, to overcome the imposition of difference and move towards unity. The relationships in *Scorpion* disintegrate into a mass of distrust and resentment; and yet, there remains some sense that unity can be found, if individuals will just reach beyond their authoritatively-constituted borders of race and culture to explore the possibility of a new and different identity, unmediated by the state.

This potential is hinted at in the framing device Fernando uses in his play. *Scorpion* is framed by a Prologue and an Epilogue, which are set in vaguely historical times. The prologue shows the four main characters “*dressed in clothes of an earlier era, poling a boat upriver*”.²⁹ They are journeying into the unknown; a disembodied voice informs them that the area before them is ruined and dangerous, and “hidden in thick mountain mists”.³⁰ The scene then changes to a representation of the ‘sale’ of Singapore to the British by Sultan Shah. After the scene with the British officials, Fernando moves on to the Japanese Occupation, which Peter, one of the main characters, refers to as: “Another Empire day”.³¹

The various roles – the Sultan, the British representative, his Deputy – are taken on in turn by the four actors who play Sabran, Peter, Santinathan (Santi) and Guan Kheng. Although the four men are dressed in historical costume, they are also still their modern selves (this is suggested by the fact that they continue to refer to each other by their modern names, rather than by the names of the personages whom they play). While the scene goes on, the characters not immediately involved in the action comment on it; thus Sabran reacts with shock when Sultan Shah signs the agreement with the British, while Santi notes wryly that: “When it comes to bribery, you can’t hold a torch to the Brits, then or now”.³² The effect of this intersecting of eras, as well as the direct commentary from the modern characters, is to create a sense of the continuum of history. One hegemonic authority is seen to succeed another; the representation of British colonial power segues into Japanese Imperial authority,

back to colonial rule. Although Fernando does not continue beyond this historical point in his text, the staging of the scene – with all the characters being played by the same actors, thus linking one historical era to another – implies that the dominance will continue beyond the departure of the British, thus also obliquely drawing the post-independence government and its policies into the frame of reference. In his *Writer's Notes* in the Kuala Lumpur program, Fernando states that “our past is not culturally separable from our present. The way we look on the entire continuum makes the difference”;³³ his inclusion of the historical frame locates contemporary race relations within a long tradition of underscoring difference. It is not, therefore, purely a modern phenomenon. The emphasis on its long history suggests that the system is deeply, ineradicably entrenched within society. However, by providing external commentary from the four modern characters, Fernando allows a space for questioning of that entrenched system.

The suggestion of hegemonic authority continuing unaffected as a kind of overarching system is emphasised by the Epilogue. The four men are again poling a boat upriver, their journey as yet uncompleted. Tengku Siak, a historical figure, asks the four men if it is true that the Sultan in Singapore really has no more power. They confirm that this is true; but whereas in the prologue there was a sense that the lack of the overarching power of authority would lead to disintegration, the same is not true here. Guan Kheng tells Tengku Tanjung that despite the Sultan's loss of authority, trade in rubber and copra remains stable, and the price of silver is increasing.³⁴ The suggestion here is that ultimately, it does not matter who is ‘in charge;’ there is a power structure which remains in place regardless. This structure aims at constructing individuals in specific ways, in the furtherance of its own goals – in this case, it is suggested, economic stability and wealth.

The four men, representatives of the four major races which make up Malaysia, are shown as being continuously constructed by authoritative powers: by the British as “loyal subjects,” and by the Japanese as “Japanese children.” The colonising figures in the prologue can be read as symbols of identity-constituting authority. By showing us the bitter, scornful, mocking responses of the four men towards these figures, Fernando suggests that they desire something else, some other way of living and connecting. Their boat journey, then, represents the movement towards the discovery of this new way of living. We discover that the hinterland into which they are heading on their boat at the beginning of the play is ungoverned; they are told that the “Chiefs are all gone. Their palaces [...] have all fallen into ruin,” while beyond that flow “rapids which have taken many lives”.³⁵ This could be read as a journey towards an area beyond hegemonic intervention, where authority (represented by the Chiefs) is weak. If the four men find themselves ungoverned in the sense of being unrestricted by authoritative constructions of their selves, does this mean that they are heading towards danger and destruction? Can their society, thus unshackled, survive?

By the end of the play, the description of what the four men are heading towards has been somewhat modified. Tengku Siak tells the four men to “[b]e careful as you journey through our country. All along the river as you go upstream there are homesteads, and in the river there are fierce crocodiles”.³⁶ Instead of focusing on the dangerous rapids mentioned in the Prologue, a sense of peace and settlement is implied by the presence of homesteads; yet this is undermined by the existence of hidden dangers in the form of “fierce crocodiles.” And yet, Fernando's vision tends

towards optimism, as suggested by the stage direction which calls for “*Gamelan music for a thumping finale*”.³⁷ Theatre reviewer Antares refers to Sunetra Fernando’s composition for *Scorpion* as “avant-garde”,³⁸ implying that it moves away from traditional styles of composition. The use of a traditional instrument for non-traditional music suggests a space of dialogue and exploration. The music underscores the impression Lloyd Fernando creates of a journey from social disintegration in the prologue to social integration (signalled by the talk of co-operation, and the exchange of friendly greetings) in the epilogue. That his hopeful vision cannot yet be fully realised is evident in the mention of lurking crocodiles.

Diamond compares *Scorpion* to the “*Bildungsroman*” which charts an individual’s maturation.³⁹ My reading of the play suggests that the maturation of the four men comes only in the form of their realisation that their friendship has no solid basis. They do not mature beyond this into an awareness of how, for example, to rebuild that friendship on a firmer footing, because they remain trapped within the state-created discourse of racialisation. In the 1950s the threads connecting Malaysia and the ‘original homelands’ of those of immigrant origin were still visible. Today, however, the discourse of racialisation has largely been internalised; individuals do not, despite their increasing cultural and even racial hybridity, move easily beyond racial borders, because hybridity has not been normalised within social or authoritative discourse. The answer tentatively suggested in the epilogue (namely integration) is not explored by the characters within the main body of the play as they, like modern-day Malaysians, remain caught within divisive categories.

The possibility of intracultural/interracial exchange is examined through the interactions of Sally and the four men. In their relationships, Fernando seems to suggest that intracultural exchange leading to deeper bonds is impossible. Among the four men, any sense of harmony is tenuous, despite their professed friendship, because they all seem to work within the borders of interracial communication as instituted by the state. In other words, they are reluctant to question their positions or push their alternative opinions. Although they state their opinions, they do not move beyond authority-prescribed boundaries in their actions and reactions.

Sabran and Santi remember a time of togetherness, when all of them went to Sabran’s *kampung*⁴⁰ for a visit. Santi says: “Oh, that time. We cycled past the *sawah*. We sang *dikir barat*. Yeah. Even then. You had me fooled”.⁴¹ Santi’s words suggest a shared cultural experience, as non-Malays and Malay join in the singing of a traditional Malay form of song; however, he undermines this by highlighting what he sees as Sabran’s insincerity. Despite appearing to be close to them, Sabran keeps at a distance. When Santi points this out Sabran’s response exposes his resentment, as a Malay, of the flow of immigrants into his country; he declares that “I feel sometimes like the Red Indians in the United States watching the tide of all of you come over us”.⁴² Clearly, Sabran cannot think beyond the categories which posit the Malays as the original inhabitants and all others as interlopers. His authority-influenced patterns of thought reify these categories, so that he is unable to engage with them critically and dialogically. Sabran’s silences have sprung, it would appear, from his inability to confront these issues openly. This same reluctance to confront can be seen in Santi, who glides past the newly opened space of discussion by apologising, rather than engaging with what Sabran has said. There is no dialogue or exchange, even though their quarrel briefly offers them the opportunity.

Like Sabran, Guan Kheng reiterates his racialised (Chinese) identity; he compares himself to his immigrant grandfather, who felt “a longing to be home.” Guan Kheng claims to “have the same longing, but it is for this land and these peoples;” yet he undermines this claim by singing “*an old popular Chinese melody*” and stating that he had “better be practical, hold on to what I’ve got, my heritage and my culture”.⁴³ The sense of separation is deepened to the point where it seems that there can be no communication between these racialised individuals, a view echoed by Peter: “Yeah. You are Chinese, I’ll stick with the Brits, Santi can go back to Madras, and Sabran back to Kuala Pilah. All those talks we had in the hostel, those nights we stayed up and dreamed – that was stupid, wasn’t it”.⁴⁴ Peter’s anger and despair are echoed by the violence and confusion in society, which spring from the inability, if not the refusal, to engage in active dialogue between cultures and races.

Sally is represented by Fernando and the directors of the play as a site where such dialogue might take place. She is a prostitute, on good terms with all four men. Her race is indeterminate: she could be Chinese or Malay, and she speaks both Malay and Cantonese fluently. She treats all four men equally, as friends. Daizal Samad points out that Sally’s role is deeply symbolic: “she is a *place* where the four friends of different races meet.”⁴⁵ This point is echoed by Abdul Majid, who suggests that Sally “can also be interpreted as Malaysia itself, as a symbolic representation of the country”.⁴⁶ Sally symbolises the country as a site of openness and welcome to all; because she herself is racially indeterminate and because the four men are all close to her, she represents Malaya/Malaysia as a site of potential conjunction rather than disjunction. Sally rejects the idea of being labelled. When she tells a policeman her name (Salmah binte Yub), he responds with surprise: “Mean to say you’re not Chinese.” Her reply is enigmatic: “I didn’t say that”.⁴⁷ She refuses to claim a particular racial heritage. However, all the races seem to want to possess her and put their chains on her.⁴⁸ Rather than accept her openness and racial ambiguity, there is a desire to fix and clearly identify her, which speaks of an inability to accept racial and cultural crossings and negotiations. Finally, Sally is betrayed. Abandoned by Guan Kheng as the violence escalates, she is gang raped by a multiracial group of men. It is significant that no single race is indicted in this betrayal, and no race is omitted from it. Symbolically, the nation has been violated by all its inhabitants.

Because race is central to the play, casting is of particular interest. It seems to very subtly refute the rigid racial divisions visible in the original novel and in the text of the play. It should be noted that most of the actors involved in this production are well known in Malaysia through their work in theatre, film and television; their racial heritage would also, therefore, be fairly well known to the audience. Some of the actors reiterate the racial divisions specified in the text: Peter was played by Eurasian actor Vernon Adrian Emuang, and Keith Liu, who is Chinese, took the part of Guan Kheng. Sabran, however, was played by Zahim Albakri who, although officially labelled Malay, has an English mother. The Indian Santi was also played by a mixed-race actor, Hans Isaac. The use of mixed-race actors points to the organic hybridity of current-day Malaysia as a challenge to the essentialising stance of the state. The potential challenge represented by this sort of casting can, however, fail. In the Kuala Lumpur production, Sally was played by Samantha Schubert, who is of Chinese-Caucasian parentage and speaks with a distinctly English accent; to a Malaysian audience, sensitive to accents and to racial ‘appearance,’ she both looks

and sounds more Caucasian than Asian. This unsettles Sally's role in the play as a welcoming, racially indeterminate site of communication. Samad feels Schubert was miscast as Sally: "we never get a sense of her significant heterogeneity, nor of her symbolic premium. We are confronted by an actress who can hardly be taken for Chinese or Malay. And while she is given, admirably, some dialogue in Malay, she utters no Cantonese; and [...] the Malay she speaks is wooden."⁴⁹ Thus instead of being representative, through her racial indeterminacy, of the whole nation, Sally (as embodied by Samantha Schubert) does not represent the nation at all. The cross-racial casting does reflect the undeniable hybridity of modern Malaysia; but in this particular case, it has undermined the message inherent in Fernando's text.

The play seems deeply pessimistic; it shows race relations to be volatile and inter-racial friendships to be fragile. The one character who is able to rise above categorisation is brutally violated, her trust destroyed. Where, then, is the maturation mentioned by Diamond? Abdul Majid states that Fernando's main point about interracial relationships in Malaysia is "that a true understanding and acceptance of each race by the other has yet to take place and the relationships are thus fragile, fraught with tensions which can at any moment shatter them".⁵⁰ Such understanding cannot take place until differences are openly examined and negotiated; until this takes place, each race will occupy its own separate space. Intracultural dialogue will allow for the emergence of a space of discussion and production. Although there is no public space available for discussions of race, this play provides, through the fact of its being staged, a simultaneously public and private space for the discussion of the tensions and ambiguities of race relations.

The pessimism that characterises the text is to some extent resisted by the intracultural elements that infuse the staging, demonstrating the attempt to develop connections and intersections between different cultural vocabularies and thus provide a subtext which challenges the discourse of difference and separateness. A shared cultural vocabulary has not yet developed; but what comes to the fore here is a willingness on the part of the theatre practitioners to explore and confront similarities and differences, rather than enshrining them and thus putting them beyond the scope of discussion and development. *Scorpion* overturns rigid definitions; music and dance are created by practitioners working very clearly *beyond* their racial and cultural 'scope,' as officially defined.

The backgrounds of music director Sunetra Fernando and choreographer Aida Redza are relevant here. While Krishen experienced May 1969 and the increasing racial polarisation of society as an adult, Fernando and Aida are of a younger generation more familiar with the experience of organic hybridity. Their work represents an attempt to express that hybridity.

Fernando is Eurasian; as a musician, she works almost exclusively with the gamelan, which is viewed as a Malay court instrument. As a player and composer for the gamelan, "she has become a strong advocate for a contemporary Malaysian sound by mixing traditional and modern instruments and compositions".⁵¹ She has taken a traditional Malay form of performance and, by channeling it through her own non-Malay but undeniably Malaysian consciousness, worked towards making the form expressive of a more inclusively Malaysian identity:

Traditional gamelan in Malaysia was formerly an exclusive court entertainment, which then became a mono-ethnic cultural show product and a prominent symbol of

identity within the Malay community particularly around post-Independent Malay nationalism in the 1970s and onwards. By recontextualising gamelan, Rhythm in Bronze has found a way of integrating the local and the global, and its concerts demonstrate the possibility of multi-vocality in working within the traditional-contemporary musical dialectic.⁵²

Aida is Malay, but grew up in Chinese-dominated Penang feeling like “an outcast” from her own racial group.⁵³ She is strongly aware of the complexities and disharmonies ignored by official designations of identity. As a dancer and choreographer, she fights against the position that creative work “has to come from your ethnic and traditional dance background;” instead, she feels that what is important is “the essence of what you are and who you are, against the background of the growing global sharing, and parallel and divergent borrowings of the different Malaysian and Asian influences”.⁵⁴ In her work, she tries to avoid the pressure to create dance which reflects only her Malay heritage, attempting instead to find a vocabulary of dance which reflects a more broadly Malaysian experience.

Sunetra Fernando states that for her, *Scorpion Orchid* was controlled by two “musical forces”.⁵⁵ One was Western, with piano and jazz vocals, featuring such period songs as *Getaran Jiwa* and *Rose, Rose I Love You*. The other force was the gamelan. Thus, she situates the play culturally, within largely Malay boundaries, by including music she has created for “instruments from the Malay gamelan ensemble.” In fact, she thus sets time and place within specific boundaries, as suggested by the playtext. However, she then oversteps these boundaries by including what she calls “extras,” namely “Chinese gongs, a rebab, some highly useful plastic recorders, with plentiful vocals abounding”.⁵⁶ What this eclectic mixture of musical instruments and styles suggests is the clash and mingling of race and culture in Malaysia, reflecting both the Malaya of the 1950s and contemporary Malaysia.

Her choice of music indicates an awareness of the continuum of history as expressed in this play, of the intricate links between past and present. Her central focus as music director for this production was: “What type of music would work for a play placed at the crossroads of post-war Singapore where the literality of culture becomes blurred, and what is the musical language of our contemporary English theatre scene in KL today?”.⁵⁷ In seeing the need for a music that connects the two eras, Fernando also shows her sensitivity, both to the authoritative discourse of racialisation which has long characterised social interaction in Malaysia and Singapore and to the grassroots experience of hybridity which can challenge it. Culture, as she points out, became less ‘literal,’ less easy, in the lived experience, to pin down to one particular time, style and place.

In the play, Lloyd Fernando does not approach the development of an organically hybrid identity with much optimism; what hybridity there is, in the person of Sally, is brutalised and betrayed. Sunetra Fernando’s music engages with the playwright’s concerns in a complex way. She does not merely reach for “happy hybridity”,⁵⁸ blending disparate instruments and musical styles in a superficial fusion. Rather, she has chosen “the path of multiplicity, of the co-mingling of sounds, as well as a path of undeliberated clashing of material, in total the experience of KL today”;⁵⁹ that is, she engages with intentional hybridity. She indicates here that while there is a degree of fusion in cultures, there are also areas where the borders remain in place and only ‘clashes’ occur. Her music, therefore, does not simplify the complications inherent in

the development of a Malaysian identity. The mix of Chinese, Malay and western influences in her music confronts not only the possible meeting grounds of these cultures, but also their distinct differences, and the difficulty of finding common ground and a common voice. An interesting moment occurs in the scene in which the four men and their expatriate English lecturer attend a tea dance; Spice notes that the “scene was beautifully realised as the characters swapped [sic] barbed comments in time to the strains of the waltz”.⁶⁰ In this scene the four men dissociate themselves from dependence on the colonising power; that they do so in time to the waltz suggests not only that they have harnessed colonial language and discourse to their own needs, but also that they have absorbed western culture, that it is part of their organically hybrid culture.

Aida Redza’s approach to the choreography for this play suggests a non-racial, non culturally-bound way of working, which springs in part from the technical demands of choreographing for a play rather than a dance performance. Aida states that the difficulty of choreographing for a play is that it is challenging “to communicate through intricate expressive body movement which differs tremendously from the typical presentation of Dance”.⁶¹ This suggests that with dance and movement created for plays, the focus must be on the outward expression of an inward, emotional life. Aida’s method in *Scorpion* was to “begin with an image, then create an improvisation working with gestures, adding active rhythmic emotion”.⁶² There is an implication here that the choreographer begins from a culturally more or less neutral space, except that in Malaysia, it is virtually impossible for the individual to inhabit a neutral space. Each space is overdetermined, defined by the state and internalised by the individual. An emotional or spiritual response will, therefore, also necessarily be culturally determined.

Aida attempts to move beyond this cultural specificity by “reconstructing a contemporary dance methodology that strives to bridge a fusion between traditional disciplines and contemporary training to reaffirm her identity in performance”.⁶³ Clearly, Aida recognises that her identity is not ‘pure’ but rather involves a ‘fusion;’ there is also clear recognition of the fact that both the traditional and the modern are central elements in that training.

In *Scorpion*, Aida’s choreography and movement work mainly involved the ensemble, which provided the crowded background to the central story of the four men and Sally by taking on the part of rioting crowds, university students, a gang of rapists, and so on. The ensemble was young and multicultural, drawing talent from all the major racial groups of Malaysia. In this, it reflected Lloyd Fernando’s careful construction of the central cast with each man representing one race, and Sally representing a racially-indeterminate site of confluence and conflict.

The multiracial nature of the ensemble meant that Aida could not realistically draw solely on one cultural tradition while developing their movements. Neither could she, given their youth, focus purely on tradition *per se*. The experience of youth in Malaysia must necessarily include a modern, partially westernised vocabulary of culture. Her work in *Scorpion* therefore draws on various Asian performance traditions, but bound within a skin of contemporary, expressionistic movement.

However, the response of reviewers to these extra-textual elements in the production was on the whole negative, suggesting one of two possibilities: either the attempt to integrate inter-cultural elements with the text was unsuccessful, or viewers

are not yet ready to accept and engage with these active attempts to express a different identity. Spice expresses "reservations about the integration of the dance with the drama at the expense of other things".⁶⁴ Samad wonders if the inclusion of dance and music points to "a desperate need to be 'innovative?',"⁶⁵ suggesting that these extraneous elements detract from the strengths of the play itself. Was the message of the play diluted or lessened by the possibly distracting inclusion of music and dance? In one episode, for example, Peter is tortured by shadowy figures demanding to know if he wants "to join this society or not?" (a question which recurs throughout the play, contextualised differently). His torment is not allowed to be expressed purely through the actor's performance; dancer and Five Arts Centre co-founder Marion D'Cruz appears behind Peter, performing angular and disjointed movements which have their basis in Malay dance but which tend towards the abstract and menacing. Her movements could serve to highlight Peter's inner angst but could also serve to distract from Peter's situation.

I would suggest that part of the problem with including intracultural elements here lies in the fact that Fernando's play, having been developed from a novel, is strongly textual and language-based. Thus, the intracultural elements in the performance of *Scorpion* are extra-textual, added on to an already complete text. What is more, these inclusions did not always reflect the writer's intentions; Fernando notes that on occasion, while watching rehearsals, he would wonder "whether they were ever going to use my script at all"; when he did venture a comment, he was asked by Krishen if he wanted to be director, after which he "shut up".⁶⁶ This suggests that the writer was somewhat excluded from a collaborative rehearsal process; does the production, then, represent a significant move away from the message as expressed in Fernando's text? Further, does it imply Krishen's dominant presence as director? Did he ultimately impose his hegemonic view?

Fundamentally, there is an uneasy fit between text and performance. Fernando's text states that racial difference is deeply, perhaps inextricably, entrenched in society. The strategies put in place by Sunetra Fernando and Aida Redza hint at the possibility of not eliding difference but of confronting and working through that difference in a culture which requires 'tolerance' without discussion, confrontation and understanding. The generally negative response of the reviewers to the clash and noise produced by these strategies suggests that in a public forum, they were largely ineffective. This does not, however, suggest that the work itself is without value, but that it cannot yet make an impact on a society still ruled by division.

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- ¹¹ "*Scorpion Orchid* Talks # 1. Grasping the Scorpion's Sting: Directorial Choices." By TheatreWorks. 4 June 1994. Videocassette, 1994. This is a videotaped discussion of Krishen's directorial approach to the Singapore production of *Scorpion*.
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- 36 The gamelan is a Malay musical instrument, traditionally associated with court performances.
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