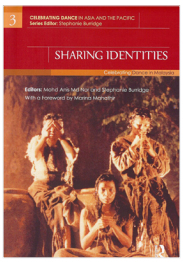
Malaysia



Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stephanie Burridge, eds. *Sharing Identities: Celebrating Dance in Malaysia*

London, New York, New Delhi: Routledge, 2011. xxvi + 279 pages. Hardcover, £65.00/US$95.00. ISBN 978-0-415-56445-8.

This book is an eclectic volume of collected essays, combining the views of academics and journalists as well as dancers, instructors, and choreographers. A dozen chapters, including a foreword by Marina Mahathir, are book-ended by a section titled "Artists Voices and Biographies," which is "curated" by Joseph Gonzales. This section, which could be classed as somewhat of a bonus section, is rather lengthy and takes up about one third of the entire book. Written in the first person, the chapters of the latter section of the book are more autobiography than biography. But just to be on the safe side, each artist's autobiography is neatly signed off with a brief biography, presumably written by Gonzales.

Sharing Identities begins with the aforementioned foreword, although the first sentence does not mirror the scholarly nature of the volume as a whole: "In these fractious times, Malaysians often look back in nostalgia at the 'good old days' when we all got along much better" (ix). This is ambiguous to say the least and Mahathir does not go on to explain why the current period is "fractious," nor does she provide a specific date or time period for the so-called "good old days." Mahathir then reminisces about her childhood, with a particular focus on how she missed out on learning Malay dance as she attended a Catholic school with very few Malay girls. Again, we are left to our own devices to try and understand why a Catholic school would not have many Malay girls (presumably because in Malaysia to be Malay one must be, by law, Muslim?). The remainder of the foreword discusses some of the key problems with dance in contemporary Malaysia, namely the modernization of dance and the commensurate lack of authenticity, lack of knowledge, and lack of interest among the young for dance and, perhaps above all, a "missing" sense of "Malaysian-ness" (xi).

After a cursory preface by Burridge and a brief introduction by Nor and Burridge, the book proper begins in a more scholarly vein with three excellent chapters by Marion D'Cruz, Mohamed Tharuwat Ismail Bakti, and Nor. These chapters are well-placed as they outline the roots of Malay dance in the Malay Peninsula, with a focus on the ways in which various dances were indigenized through the influence of the Malay royal courts. D'Cruz describes the historical ebbs and flows of *joget gamelan*, which is a female classical dance tradition dating back to the mid-eighteenth century, when the royal courts actively patronized the arts. Many of the courts in the Malay Peninsula, as well as the courts of Java, maintained their own groups of dancers and musicians whose sole function was to perform in royal

precincts. D'Cruz carefully delineates the manner in which Javanese court dance and music found its way to the courts of the Malay Peninsula, via the nineteenth-century Riau-Lingga empire, which incorporated the peninsula states of Johor, Pahang, and Terengganu. To this day, *joget gamelan*, as performed in Malaysia, has its own distinctive style and character, even as it is no longer found in the Riau islands or Java.

In a similar manner to D'Cruz, Tharuwat's chapter, which is in interview form, delineates the history of another court-based dance, the *asyik* dance of Kelantan. Nor's chapter describes the history and heritage of key Malay folk and social dances such as Joget, Inang, Asli, and Zapin. The chapter by Tharuwat in particular touches on what has happened to the court dances in the postcolonial era, and the picture he paints is disturbingly similar to the *joget gamelan* described by D'Cruz. As the dances of the royal courts in particular have been shifted in space and time away from the confines of the royal palaces since independence, the dances have undergone a process of dilution, "reconstructed" and "rearranged" to satisfy the nebulous expectations of urban crowds and dignitaries. More often than not based in the capital of the new nation-state, Kuala Lumpur, the new post-colonial audiences often consume dance in large stadiums or arenas. In this context the dances, as performed by new generations of non-court dancers and musicians, are merely another form of entertainment. Tellingly, in terms of the story or deeper meaning of the dances, the dancers are often as clueless as the audience.

Among much that has been lost in the current era in terms of dance repertoires, storytelling, costumes, and props, most prominent is the now-missing intangible concept of *rasa*, or inner feeling, which is a fundamental element of truly stunning dance performances, which are now rarely seen. Nor, however, describes the postcolonial nationalization or "heritagization" of Malay folk dance—which in its "authentic" form is a complex and lively mixture of borrowed traditions from the Portuguese, the Middle East, and the Malay world—as just the latest chapter in "eclectic and syncretic processes" that have led to the creation of a unique "Malaysian" dancescape (54). This somewhat rosy view appears to be slightly out of step with the previous two chapters, but in this book eclecticism seems to be the recurring leitmotif when it comes to Malaysian dance which, like Malaysia itself, is indisputably a thoroughly hybrid creature.

A sense of hybridity—or is it discordance?—grows in the next few chapters, which discuss jazz dance (Murugappan), expatriate Malaysian dancers (Hijjas), and ballet and modern dance (Gonzales). The book then focuses on the dance cultures of Malaysia's large ethnic minority groups, including Chinese choreographers and dancers (Poh Gee), classical Indian dance (Thiagarajan), and three "strong" female choreographers of varying ethnicity (Aboo Backer). This chapter sensitively broaches questions of gender and sexuality in the context of contemporary dance versions of Indian and Chinese myths such as the *Mahabharata* and *Lady White Snake* respectively.

Pugh-Kitingan's penultimate chapter examines the fascinating role of dance in ritual contexts in what could be arguably claimed as another minority context, namely the indigenous societies of Sabah, the east Malaysian state in northern

Borneo. A closer focus on the salient ethno-religious histories of each of the predominantly indigenous districts chosen for analysis would have been welcome. But then again the editors seem to have conducted a tightly-run ship, where "less is more" seems to be the operative phrase, especially when we consider that many of the chapters are reasonably truncated affairs.

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to mention that thematically the collection appears to be concerned more with the cultural heritage of dance in Malaysia than the cultural politics of dance. One could argue that highlighting and untangling the politics of heritage is just as important in Malaysia as in other contexts, if not more so, given the fact that Malaysian society and politics remain deeply divided along racial lines. Before launching into Gonzales's aforementioned curation, the essays are nicely rounded out by Su-Ling Choy, who without irony reminds us that dance writing, to paraphrase Kriegsman, "extends the life of the performance long after the curtain goes down" (196). This is a salutary reminder, as one might argue that scholars and critics of dance in Malaysia perhaps have more responsibility than most to engage with broader issues saturating their nation's society and culture, long after "the curtain," as it were, "goes down." On the one hand, this collection richly succeeds in its modest aims of celebrating dance in Malaysia, and the authors and editors should be congratulated for this. On the other, the collection's underlying celebratory impulse ensures that the somewhat darker undercurrents of Malaysia's postcolonial cultural identity are smoothly glossed over.

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