

Musical practice of Bangsawan in Singapore

The term literally means “of good birth, noble”.¹ For Joseph Peters², **Bangsa** (rasa) and **wan** (royal lineage) has come to collectively refer to Malay opera. Chopyak informs us Bangsawan refers to a form of musical theatre which arrived in Penang but known in Indonesia as **stambul**.³ According to Mustapha Kamil Yassin, this form can be traced to a visit in 1870 by an Indian theatrical group whose, *repertoire consisted of well known classical stories from the Middle East and India...the [musical] pieces played were Indian and Arabic at the beginning...Later they adapted Malay classical music and in turn produced numerous tunes which today have become Malay classical pieces.*⁴

A full-length article on Malay Opera by Shaik Othman bin Sallim draws on its similarity with Bangsawan in the Straits Chinese Magazine of 1898.⁵ In his introductory remarks:

*Although the Malays form a large section of the population of this colony and by far the largest section of the people of the neighbouring states of the Malay Peninsula, they are nevertheless little known and still less understood. One reason lies, I think, in the fact that the literature relating to them, their manners, habits and thought in other than the native tongue is scanty and not yet popularized. It does not require a very careful observer to see that the Malays holding antiquated and old-fashioned views of things, are fast disappearing before the path of European civilization. And the Malays themselves have perhaps shown the least care and taken the least interest to gather and preserve in a literary form the superstitions, folk-lore, manners and customs of their own people which will soon be lost in oblivion.*⁶

*When I was asked to write something about my own countrymen for the Magazine, I remembered reading Mr. Wilkinson’s intensely interesting paper on the “Poetry of the Malays”. From the nature of the essay, it was necessary that the “Bangsawan” or Malay opera should have had but a short paragraph devoted to it. But as during the last few months, there has been a “Wayang Bangsawan” performing nightly to large audiences. I am of the opinion that a paper on the Malay opera, as presented on the stage by the Jawi Peranakan Theatrical Company in North Bridge Road will be read by some with interest.*⁷

I suppose most playgoers who might after night found their way to the theatre referred to, would go home quite pleased that they had succeeded in getting hold of

*the words of a couple of the songs sung to tunes which had caught their fancy. So far as the plot of any particular play was concerned, it would indeed be difficult to say how much of it was understood by the majority of the audience who sat out of hearing of the words very frequently spoken in a sort of mumble, or sung in a voice too small or too low to compete with strong orchestral accompaniment. The handbills, printed both in Malay and Romanised characters and intended to contain the Argument of a play, would not reflect much credit on the party responsible for their appearance in regard to the style and class of words used in the description of the plot.*⁸

Several visits to the “Bangsawan” gave Shaik Othman the opportunity to make careful observations and to take mental notes:

*It is not my desire to be hypercritical but there are many directions in which slight improvements would make the three or four hours spent in watching any of the plays more pleasurable and less monotonous. It need hardly be said that a set of ten or twelve curtains could not possibly suffice for a company whose repertoire consisted of twenty or more pieces; nor could one avoid a sinister smile to find “Bombay” staring in large characters on a curtain intended to represent a scene in Baghdad. For all these shortcomings, if the water colour paintings on these curtains are not works of art, they at least do not offend the eye and appear to have been done by a person who knows something of perspective drawing. In so far as the use of these curtains obviates the necessity of sticking up boards announcing to the audience, the locality of each scene as is still done on the Chinese stage and used to be on the English stage of Shakespeare’s day, it is an indication that the Malays have made more progress in histrionic art than the Chinese.*⁹

Here one is given some insights into his observations of a staged performance by the Jawi-Peranakan Theatrical Company in North Bridge Road. Shaik Othman notes how the Bangsawan Company confined its attention exclusively to operatic pieces excessive in length and took up to six nights to finish it. In this case, it is the reputable romance called Panji Samerang, which is filled in his words “*deliberately narrated to the minutest details*”;¹⁰ and he takes to task the versifier for not having used his discretion to keep the main plot of the story, eliminating all matters of minor importance. He in fact draws attention to all the surface elements which he found most annoying – *the poetical portions of that and other pieces might with advantage be curtailed, while the chorus parts which are sung without any sense of time or harmony, need not be repeated more than once or twice.*¹¹

Other instances that invite his irate responses include the following: *it is again unfortunate that the majority of the poetical passages are sung in a sort of monotonous chant with the disadvantages of a feeble voice and of a strong orchestra consisting of a trumpet, drum and two fiddles within two yards of the actor or actress. The Company itself suffers from the disadvantage of having a small selection of airs. Now and again a pleasant change is given to the audience of hearing popular English tunes, but as these latter have been learnt by ear, it is not to be wondered at that often they are incorrectly rendered. Besides “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay”, I have heard attempts at singing “Daisy Bell”, “After the Ball” and “Two little girls in blue”. These tunes have been used by an actress who always played the role of the heroine of every piece I have seen – one of the very few members of the Company who had a fairly creditable voice – and in ignorance of better things, she sang the first verse of one of her songs to the chorus of “Two little girls in blue” and the subsequent verses to the air of “Daisy Bell”. I have no doubt that the principal performers would greatly benefit by taking lessons in part-singing (which is such a nice feature of Western music) and also in the art of public singing. Improvements might also be made by doing away with the silly practice of putting out first one hand then the other by way of gesture while a song is being sung; and by insisting on the actresses singing with their faces to the audience and not to the curtain forming the background of the scene. When it is borne in mind that the “Bangsawan” puts only opera on its boards, then these criticisms will be seen to be quite legitimate.*¹²

The Malay opera not being arranged into acts and scenes, a breathing interval is unknown. Nevertheless to gain time for preparing the stage for the next scene, a comic interlude is introduced which is often more loudly applauded than the other parts relating to the plot of the piece. The Malays cannot resist the temptation of popularizing a piece on the stage by the introduction of a clown whenever one can safely be brought it. There is of course the danger that the ludicrous antics of such an actor might spoil the impression which a particular scene was intended to make on the minds of the audience. That was the feeling I had when I saw the opening scene of Hamlet on the only occasion that this Company produced it. Instead of a sense of awe and solemnity pervading the audience on the appearance of the ghost on the stage, there were roars of laughter owing to the antics of the watchman each time the ghost brushed past him.

A nightly source of annoyance to those who wish to follow a play closely is the interpretation of the ice-cream or lemonade vendor who appears every ten or fifteen minutes below the stage walks across the hall and shouts “Sherbert, ice-cream”, quite unconscious that he is thus spoiling the evenness of temper of some

*of the people in the front seats. Perhaps he is indifferent to it. It is curious indeed to notice how many people are suddenly reminded that their throats require to be moistened. I do not blame the ice-cream vendor but the bad arrangements of having no intervals during the play for refreshments.*¹³

*Having said thus much of the Bangsawan in the way of adverse criticism, I will now proceed to give some points in its favour. The Malay opera is, so far as I know, the only kind of dramatic performance for the large section of the community speaking the Malay tongue. It is as popular among the Straits Chinese as among the Malay people: and it is no uncommon thing to see the ladies galleries filled en masse by the Straits Chinese women. I used to wonder why the Straits-born Chinese themselves have never taken to acting, even in the shape of private theatricals. On enquiry, I was informed that the stage was regarded as a low and degrading profession, and that the actors on the Chinese stage come from the lowest and poorest ranks of the people. I suppose therefore that so long as such is the current opinion, there is no likelihood of the Straits Chinese going on stage. And yet I think it cannot be denied that even the stage may be utilized for the purposes of educating the people towards higher views of life, domestic happiness and morality. One fault which an European or a native with a proper sense of delicacy will instantly detect in the Bangsawan plays is the exhibition of rude and filthy manners as well as the use of coarse, if not indecent language. It is not unfair to say that some of the plays would lose much of their popularity were these objectionable portions to be left out.*¹⁴

*I must confess however that I am not altogether satisfied with the explanation given to me by my Chinese friends as to the reason why the stage is shunned by their people. Not only the “Bangsawan: but the Chinese theatres or “wayangs” are largely patronized by the Straits-born Chinese who do not thoroughly understand the language of the actors. I take it therefore that the passion of the Straits-born Chinese for the drama is just as strong as that of any other class of our community. Why should not some of them form themselves into a dramatic company and act popular English pieces, translated into fairly good and intelligible Malay to start with? They will not do so, because they are too independent and dislike anything that demands a constant mental strain. I may be wrong in venturing this statement, but that is my honest impression.*¹⁵

But to return to my subject. In the Bangsawan plays, one finds ingenuity and resourcefulness called into action in the attempt to make the scenes as natural and true to life as it is possible on a narrow stage. Even the appearance of the winged steed in the “Indra Bangsawan” or of daintily dressed fairies riding on swans or

*perched on the lotus flower, one of the good genius from the clouds in the “Hawai Mujlis” or of the ghost of Hamlet’s father from half a dozen Malay tombs is not beyond the scope of the stage management.*¹⁶

*There is no doubt that the patrons of the Bangsawan get the full value of their money: for as I have already said, a play is performed without intermission for at least three hours and sometimes for an hour longer. One would be willing to excuse any sign of exhaustion in the performers in the latter part of the play but as a matter of fact the principal dramatis personae sing and act with spirit all throughout the piece. They all must needs have good memories, for their plays exist only in manuscript form and there is no possibility of any of the performers studying his or her part except at rehearsals.*¹⁷

The final telling remark is that *The Bangsawan Company which is the subject of this paper hails, I believe, from Penang.*¹⁸

In an advertisement in the Singapore Free Press: Friday, 7th April 1905, the **Opera Yap Chow Tong** (according to Tan Sooi Beng, the oldest bangsawan troupe in Malaya, originating from Penang) featured a very special **Band Performance** under the patronage and in the presence of Major Phra Rajahvarmthr** and A.D.C (aide-de-camp) to the King of Siam.¹⁹

Interestingly, regulations of the Straits Settlement Ordinances of 1895 do not include bangsawan in its ‘regulation’ and demands for licenses to be applied for its staging. Yusnor Ef informs us of the first appearance of records featuring Malay music in 1914. In it are featured bangsawan songs like **Jula Juli Bintang Tiga, Inderagiri, Bintang Terbit, Pularu Pandan and Mata Setan Tango**. Yusnor informs us it became popular and retained popularity till the 1950s.²⁰

The introduction of the Indian bangsawan was a highpoint in the influence of Hindustani songs on Malay society and enjoyed a golden age of popularity between 1920 and 1935 but according to James Chopyak, faced stiff competition from the film industry. Bangsawan is described by Chopyak as process-story telling in which the actors have no actual scripts, only a basic story line and are required to improvise their lines.²¹

Mustapha Kamil Yasin informs us of the way music was used in bangsawan: *Every Bangsawan troupe would have an orchestra consisting of five to fifteen...instruments. At the beginning, there were only the percussion (drums, tambourines, cymbals) and stringed instruments (lute, mandolin) and also harmoniums. Later on the instruments became more sophisticated like the flute, clarinet and saxophone.*²²

According to Joseph Peters²³, immigrant surroundings and foreign cultures were merged with Malay drama, music, dance and silat (martial arts). The indiscriminate manner of drawing of sources were aligned with the original purpose—to entertain. When Singapore gained independence, **Minah Bakar** and **Din-Tijah Bangsawan** remained as the two groups performing in New World and Happy World. The poetic elements of the Malay language are used foremost in the speech aspects of the performance. However, music is the focus of presentation and the bangsawan could have up to a much greater content, Peters speculates up to 80%, delivered in a manner approximating. The most common musical instruments used were the violin, harmonium, tabla, drums, saxophone and piano. In 1978, the former Radio Television Singapore, together with some of the local cultural bodies including the **Sriwana**, staged **Jula Juli Bintang Tiga**, a classic bangsawan from the 1920s. This production particular work is considered the beginning of modern bangsawan in Singapore.

Bangsawan troupes, Craig Lockard argues, *toured the country combining music and drama in their performances. Bangsawan was an eclectic, even multi-ethnic, urban popular theatre developed for purely commercial purposes in the early 20th century, with influences from Western, Arab, Latin American, Turkish, Indonesian, Indian and Chinese cultures.*²⁴ Tan Sooi Beng argues *Bangsawan.....emphasised variety and heterogeneity, constantly adapting to the changing tastes of urban audiences....As a product of the time, bangsawan articulated the transformations in Malayan society in the late 19th century and early 20th centuries. Its emphasis on variety, novelty and innovation corresponded to the social, political and cultural processes of change.*²⁵

Peters informs us that in 1982, Janaka Bangsawan (comedy opera) came into being with the staging of *Raja Dangdut* by Sriwana, created by M. Saffri A. Manaf who had been experimenting with comedy a few years ago. By 1986, there was a consensus to return to more traditional forms largely because the comedy, which had been inserted to sustain an audience, was reducing the plot, the use of language and the music.

More recent attempts have been initiated by Sri Warisan to re-introduce bangsawan into the Singaporean consciousness, its socio-historical context and eventually how one needs to be engaged in its teaching and learning in its entirety. Perhaps this might well be the appropriate response to Shaik Othman when he observed in 1898, *in the course of this sketch of the Malay opera, I have casually referred to the absence of Straits Chinese drama; but I do not forget that the local Malays themselves have nothing to show in the shape of a local operatic company. If the above remarks should lead my Malay readers to organize themselves into a dramatic company which would in time, win as great a popularity here as the “Bangsawan” has already won, my paper will not have been written in vain.*²⁶

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- 3 Chopyak, op.cit., p.128.
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- 14 Ibid., p.131.
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- 16 Ibid., p.131.
- 17 Ibid., p.131.
- 18 Ibid., p.132.
- 19 Singapore Free Press, 7th April 1905, under the advertisement columns.
- 20 Ef. Yusnor, Perkembangan Muzik Melayu Singapore 50-an Hingga 90-an, in Dinamika Budaya, Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapura, Peoples Association HQ, Kerjaya Printing Industries, 1991, pp.351-376, p.354. Translations are mine.
- 21 Chopyak, op.cit., p.129. The effect in Malaysia may not have been the same as in Singapore where newly emerging film industry in the 1930s was likely to have been a contributing factor in the decline of bangsawan.
- 22 Mustapha Kamil Yassin, The Malay bangsawan, traditional Drama and Music of Southeast Asia, 1974, p.150 in Chopyak, op.cit., p.128-129.

23 Peters, Joseph, Dondang Sayang in "Singapore" in Santos. Ramon P. ed. The Musics of ASEAN. Philippines: ASEAN Committee on Culture and Information, 1995, pp.93-131.

24 Lockard, Craig, op.cit., p.212.

25 Tan Sooi Beng, Bangsawan, quoted in Lockard, op.cit., p.212.

26 Shaik Othman bin Sallim, op.cit., p.132.