Bangsawan: Creative Patterns in Production

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Bangsawan, an operatic form, is a living theatre in Malaysia. This article examines its structure and creative processes, associates it with social issues and acceptance by a multiethnic audience, and relates the history of the genre.

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As articulated by Brandon (1967: 37, 58), bangsawan fits the form of “popular theatre,” which emerged in Southeast Asia in the late nineteenth century under colonial impacts. Bangsawan is a Malaysian version of such urban entertainments, featuring a combination of song, dance, and melodramatic narrative; charging entrance fees; and freely borrowing elements of both the traditional (stories, martial art styles, and role types) and the then modern (stories, perspective scenery, new lighting techniques, touring groups, multiple ethnicities/mestizo performers in the company, and Western musical instruments or dance styles as well as local Malay, Indian, and Chinese instruments and movement styles).1

Background: Bangsawan Begins

The advent of British rule in Malaya2 opened the need for leisure pastimes to appeal to all three racial groups that made up the colonial population: indigenous Malays; Indians, mostly Tamils brought either as indentured laborers for the plantations or as recruits in the British army; and the Chinese, who came as coolies or traders.3 Western and specifically British control in the Malay states of Singapore, Malacca, and Penang promoted an intermingling of these three ethnic groups. Within this culturally diverse social milieu bangsawan found expression.

The form, however, did not originate locally but first arrived in 1879 under the name of wayang parsi (Parsi theatre) from Bombay (now Mumbai) in British-ruled India, as entertainment for the Indians serving the British army, by theatre troupes that sought to capitalize on an audience in need of entertainment. It used Indian performers and the Hindi language.4 The troupe disbanded in 1880. Starting out as an offshoot of the wayang parsi, local bangsawan was formed as traveling performance troupes and quickly evolved in the midst of the sociocultural dynamism of the time. Ghulam-Sarwar (1986) ascribes this dynamism and changeability as characteristics of bangsawan derived from patterns in wayang parsi, which had been given status by its affinity to the British and the British-influenced Indian troops who were part of their colonial endeavor. A highlight of the performances was the Western painted backdrops and wings presented on a proscenium-style stage, which represented all that was new and modern to local viewers.

These Parsi theatre stage properties, the lore has it, were purchased in 1880 by Mamak Pushi, a rich Indian Muslim in Penang, who then transformed the performance by using local actors speaking the Malay language.5 The show was then named bangsawan (literally, “aristocrat”), it is said, to reflect the lofty tales of kings and princes that made up the early repertory.6 Though properties and sets were from wayang parsi, eclectic narratives popular with Malays, Indians, and Chi-
nese were now added to the repertory, and Shakespeare’s plots, too, became source material. Meanwhile, music, dance, and other features appealing to the multiethnic performers and audiences made this theatre. The form incorporated and reflected the diverse groups of a nation moving into modernity.

Mamak Pushi’s troupe was well received by the population of the Straits Settlements of Penang, Malacca, and Singapore, and the form quickly became popular in the other Malay states of Perak, Selangor, and Johor by means of the touring circuits Pushi developed for his company. His bangsawan toured to the northern part of Sumatra and then Jakarta in Indonesia, where it would have interaction with the stamboel form there (see Cohen 2006).

Elsewhere, Rahmah Bujang (1989) has argued that bangsawan’s emergence as a national genre superceded the regional performance forms of the precolonial era:

Each city of Malaysia had a center for presenting bangsawan. In Kuala Lumpur Sungai Wang Plaza was the foremost place that bangsawan was presented and the site was known as Happy World. There are too many groups to name all that have been active from the beginning. The ones that lasted longer are, for example, Nahar Bangsawan, Malayan Opera, Kinta Opera, Indera (Beautiful) Bangsawan of Penang, City Opera, Peninsular Opera, Seri Permata Opera (Star Opera), Jaya Opera (Victory Opera), Zanzibar Bangsawan, Dean Union Opera, Dean Tijah Opera, Seri Nooran Opera, Norlia Opera, Morisco Opera (Moorish Opera), Rose Opera, Gray Noran Opera, Indera Permata (Diamond) of Parit Buntar, Jupiter Opera, Comet Opera, Alfred Theatrical Company of Selangor, Constantinople Opera, Rahman Opera, Kencana Wati Opera, Bangsawan Jenaka Melayu (Young Malaysia), and Bolero Opera. (1989: 3; all translations are by the authors unless otherwise noted)

The titles alone reflect the trends of the eras: some name the star performers (Dean, Tijah, Nooran, Rahman), some evoke exotic otherness (Zanzibar, Constantinople, Bolero, Rose), and some point to national pride (Young Malaysia, Victory), while others reach for the stars (Comet, Jupiter).

Bangsawan in its heyday (1920s–1930s) was the prime commercial entertainment, accessible to all; it was performed all over Malaysia by traveling troupes that emulated that first company and kept on evolving with the times. Bangsawan performers became popular idols and set the fashion, modeling behavior for the young and young at heart. Dean (Khairuddin) and Tijah (Cik Wan Tjiah) were a husband-and-wife actor team who in this period were much sought after by troupe
owners. Alfred, who owned Alfred Theatrical Company of Selangor, was among producers of bangsawan who would vie to lure top performers like Dean and Tijah from a rival group. Thus, troupes named after or belonging to the actors themselves were saved from the struggle of collapsing due to actors bolting to another company. Given the commercial rivalry, bangsawan troupes did not just revamp themselves by changing their troupe names (with their lead actors) but constantly innovated acts to grab audience attention. Innovative troupes were usually more successful. Tan (1993: 67) gives the example of Menah Yem, who earned the moniker “Queen of Dance” and would actively learn the latest vaudeville dances that came to Malaysia via the Philippines by watching foreign films with rumba or samba and quickly bringing these dances into shows. Actress Miah Alias was admonished by her mother that if she wanted to be good bangsawan artist, “[She] must have ambition to be better than [her] friends” (quoted in Tan 1993: 67)

This paper will highlight the creative process of bangsawan from the past and then in more recent productions (Plate 3). The samples discussed will demonstrate responses to historical circumstances and the form’s flexibility with regard to change. The article seeks out what is “special” about bangsawan and analyses its creative process.

**Capitalism, Commercial Theatre, and Survival of the Fittest**

Indigenous Malay theatres, like wayang kulit (shadow puppetry found in Ketantan and in Javanese communities along the east coasts), main putri (“playing the princess,” a Patani-Kelantan healing genre), menora (a Patani-Kelantan-area dance drama), and mek mulung (“forest lady,” a Kedah-area dance drama) were linked to entertainments at lifecycle events or for curing. Performances were subsidized by the patron who supported the event for ritual purposes or to enhance a celebration with audiences watched for free. Traditional forms adhered to taboos (pantang larang) that were commonplace. Other forms, like inang (a female dance-song genre) and makyung (also mak yung, mak yong; a Kelantan area female dance-drama supported by aristocratic patronage), enhanced the status of elites and may have served, in part, as value symbols of the kingdoms. Additionally these forms often required gender segregation—with males playing female roles or vise versa. Bangsawan, by contrast, existed purely for commerce and met the needs of the times as colonial powers organized resource extraction, wider trading circles, and new business possibilities. Likewise, gender segregation was not practiced in bangsawan. Tan notes one performer’s acute memory of the embarrassment of being in a troupe that did not have enough women, so that he had to play a female (Tan 1997: 67),
but that was an exception; the norm in bangsawan was mixed gender performance. Groups were “modern”: female players as well as males were the stars of the group. With the emergence of large urban centers, audiences with spare cash and leisure time were available and bangsawan was developed to entertain them. Maximizing the audience at venues where tickets were sold maximized profit. Appealing to all groups rather than one ethnicity or a niche market ensured a steady revenue stream. This created a new world of entertainment in Malaysia in which the economic incentive predominated. Troupes rose and fell in the competitive environment of the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century theatre produced by capitalist entrepreneurs who based decisions on profit. Ritual and hierarchy, attaining blessings, or raising one’s status by the hosting of rich artistic performances with gender-segregated stages were no longer “in” in this free-market environment.

In order to survive each troupe needed to attract its audience, and new ideas concordant with the times were the choice of popular troupes. Regarding this issue, Ghulam-Sarwar (1986: 51–55) has indicated some of the innovations made, including the introduction of the proscenium arch, painted backdrops, and movable scenery; a strict separation of the playing space and audience with viewers confined to a darkened auditorium; and paid entrance to the performance event. Ghulam-Sarwar points out that “due to this [mixture], bangsawan can be characterized as a transitional theatre: that is it has characteristics of traditional drama and those of Western drama which becomes a large influence on the development of [Malaysian] modern theatre” (p. 53). As a function of the time required to facilitate the scene changes, “extra turns” interludes, presented in front of the stage curtain while the drop and wings were altered, were required.

One staple extra turn is the introductory narration wherein a performer recited in syair-style verse form the background information on the storyline to come. In between scenes the main male or female star (or both) would fill up an extra turn slot by singing, doing a comic skit, or presenting a magic show or dance number. The turns did not necessarily have anything to do with the plot and could just be a hit song or fashionable new dance. But often extra turns scenes were manipulated also as street scenes wherein they functioned as segments that tied the previous scene with the next one.

In some ways one could see bangsawan’s emergence as going through the same cycle of transition from a ritual- or festival-linked entertainment to an urban secular, commercial, professional one that gave birth to other urban popular genres with the rise of modern capital, such as the commedia dell’arte in Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth century, which evolved from elite court entertainments
toward popular theatre; kabuki in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Japan, which was begun by Okuni, a dancer linked to the Izumi Shrine, but quickly became a secular genre linked with the entertainment districts of emerging cities; or jingju in eighteenth-century China, which has roots in troupes of aristocratic houses or groups performing for temple festivals but developed as pure entertainment linked with male prostitution in China under the Ching dynasty.

These forms may have other commonalities too. Commedia, for example, had comparable use of the role type specialization of actors, stories that mix fantasy and comedy and are derived from varied sources, the use of improvisation to generate the text, and the tendency to combine dance, music, song, and popular spectacle. Like bangsawan, commedia depended on a society changing from a more rural, oral, and land-based society to one that was more urban, moving toward wider literacy and monetization. This emergent town society allowed for the commercialization and professionalization of a theatre that was responsible to a general audience, rather than depending on aristocratic or religious patronage. In the same way that Parsi theatre evolved in the Bombay area based on urban commercial models (Hansen 2002) or jatra branched out from more religious theatres in Bengal during the British colonial era in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Dutt and Munsi 2010: 121–164), so bangsawan developed into a popular theatre for a mass audience in Malaysia with a close correlation between audience identity and stage representations. The inclusion of both genders, multiple stories, and many song and dance sources could be taken as a sign of its modernity.

The British saw the form as light entertainment. Although they indeed first helped to promote it for their Indian soldiers, the colonial authorities largely kept a hands-off policy, letting the market drive the evolution. If colonialism itself was a capitalist initiative, bangsawan fit the Adam Smith–like policy of economic liberalism that the market would be self-regulating and the successful entrepreneur would win. By 1930 bangsawan performances were the mainstay of amusement parks, where people came in leisure time to be entertained. The form was both reflecting and generating a secular, multiethnic society in which democracy of taste and the market held sway. Bangsawan was seen by the ruling powers then as a popular medium for their purposes, given the support of the masses for the art form. The Japanese occupation of Malaysia during World War II (1942–1945) capitalized on this by using bangsawan to spread the propaganda of “Asia for Asians.” The form experienced a collapse in popularity in the 1950s with the rise of sandiwara. This latter genre was a Malay theatre that developed in the 1940s with written texts that borrow structurally from bangsawan
but also from the Greeks and Shakespeare, and sandiwara was used in building national identity in the postwar period. In addition, both film and television were adopted as media for mass entertainment in this period, functions that bangsawan had served in the first half of the twentieth century, leading to bangsawan’s near demise.

However, beginning in the 1970s the works of theatre researchers at the local universities (University Sains Malaysia [USM] and later University of Malaya [UM] and Akademi Seni Kebangsaan [ASK National Academy of Art], commonly called ASWARA) and officers of the government culture bureaus, especially Zaifri Husin in the Jabatan Kesenian dan Kebudayan Negara (JKKN National Office of Art and Culture), have delivered support to revive interest in bangsawan. Using university resources (see Puteri Li Po at the University of Malaya in 1999 discussed below) or government funding (for example, Zaifri Husin through JKKN has used rm500,000, about US$150,000 a year, for ten productions a year since 2006), a steady stream of productions have been presented in venues like USM, University of Malaya, Panggung Bandaraya (City Theatre, Kuala Lumpur), and Istana Budaya (“Palace of Culture” [National Theatre]).

**Bangsawan in Production**

The production of bangsawan at present owes many of its characteristics to the rapid development of the theatre form in the 1920s and 1930s. Any further transformation involved is proof of its creative versatility and flexibility. Based on the prewar models we can see some of the basic structural features that are necessary to understand prior to our discussion of the innovation and creativity that the form allows even in its present manifestations. In our analysis there are four salient features to consider: performance, scenario/text, scenography, and music. Ideally, the bangsawan form that prospered during the British colonial period can be seen as characterized by the following.

First, performance: This involves the method of improvisational acting: the use of stock characters, which include orang muda (young man/hero), seri panggung (female lead), ahli lawak (clowns), raja/datuk (king/nobleman), permaisuri/datin (queen/nobleman’s wife), mentri-mentri (ministers), jin afrit (genii king), orang pertapaan (hermits), dayang (female palace attendents), and hulubalang (warriors) (Ghulam-Sarwar 1994: 15); and expansive movement skills, which include dances from traditional Malay inang (Malacca female dance) and joget (Malaccan partner dance) to modern European dances like the waltz and foxtrot in addition to expertise in pencak silat, traditional martial arts or Chinese kuntau (martial arts using sticks). Slapstick comedy was needed for clown scenes while noble rhymed dialogue was required
for court or love scenes. Singing was another skill of the multitalented bangsawan exponents. Lagu tarik (a mode of singing to prolong scenes and dramatic situations) could draw out a scene to its most melodramatic potential. Hambat cerita (the technique of shortening the storytelling when unfavorable weather conditions, audience restiveness, or lack of audience members prevailed) could tie up the story quickly if required. Bernasib (a masterful way of demonstrating dramatic situations of sadness) could make the audience weep (see School of the Arts USM [n.d.] for video clip of bernasib and other musical features). Players did not necessarily have to excel in all areas but could make their names through singing prowess, dancing ability, fighting technique, or comedy. While the elements below supported the performer, he or she was at the center of the show and talented artists were the sine qua non of a successful troupe.

Second, story: The actions of noble lords are the main theme, but the characters’ interactions with hantu (ghosts), djin (genies), peri (fairies), and raksaksa (giants) expand the storyline into a world of fantasy. The action and language used must necessarily be in concordance with courtly style. Bloodshed, gallantry, and power are associated with the hero’s actions.8

Third, scenography: The set shows the difference between the elite and the lower class in painted wing and drop sets and furnishings. Bangsawan scenes depicting royalty would show lush palace gardens and decorative palace buildings or rooms. The lower class would interact in modest-looking street scenes, in marketplaces, and on the seashore. The fame of a bangsawan troupe was also tied to having an able scene painter in the troupe’s employ. For example, Rahman B. (Abdul Rahman bin Abu Bakar, b. 1934) is well known primarily for his ability to paint and execute bangsawan scenography. He has been honored with the award of Tokoh Seniman Negara (National Artist 2004) by the Malaysian government and teaches young Kuala Lumpur artists bangsawan today.

Fourth, music: This is an important element in shows and, depending on the choice of stories in the repertoire, the accompaniment would be Western (waltz, march, or from the 1920s tango, foxtrot, or ragtime) or Asian (Malay, Javanese, Indian, or Chinese) as suits the social background of the story. For Asian stories the music associated with desert sands shows a strong tendency toward Hindustani influence, while Javanese gamelan or kroncong music types might accompany Indonesian stories.

These four points serve as a short background to the bangsawan history and characteristics. These ideas help one understand bangsawan as a creative production. The pattern of opera performance is
further accentuated by the characterizations, singing, dancing/movement style, costumes, and scene types. The opera format requires the establishment of roles into stock characters that fit the heroism theme in the male (orang muda) and female (seri panggung) lead roles. Heroic characterization for lead roles requires good looks, the ability to sing, and refined and balanced movements. Also, these figures must overshadow all other roles in the show with their courage and ability to execute martial arts (by always winning). They will be dressed in brighter colors and royal attire.

Pitted against the lead roles are the antagonists (jinn afrit, for example), who by virtue of their negative roles are meant to create conflict and disturbance. Their looks are less refined and their voices will be gruffer. They fight and move roughly and engage in hands-on combats with the hero (only to lose). They will often be dressed in darker colors. In contrast to the hero and heroine, characters of low social status must be costumed in simpler outfits in more muted colors.

The acting style is representational, making full use of rhythmic dialogue, which employs metaphors, similes, rhymed verses, and even a sing-song mode that is part of the communication technique in performance. The show gains dynamism by using methods of exaggeration, contrast, and unity that are usually served to a great extent by music and sound effects. The whole structure of storytelling in the play is spatially arranged into a stereotyped form of storytelling wherein there is always a palace garden scene, a court scene, a fighting scene between the hero and villain, a romantic scene between the hero and the heroine, and an adventure scene wherein the hero is, for example, traveling on a mission. Players use their own devices to interpret why such a situation or scene occurs and what exactly happens in it. With such stereotyping of characters and specificity of scenic action, it is also easier for the musicians to prepare their accompaniment or sound effects to support the players singing or delivering rhymed dialogue. Everything around a bangsawan performance must support emotional development, and the audience is guided step by step into the play almost as certainly as the scenery provides the milieu.

Scenery itself was an innovation of bangsawan (see Ghulam-Sarwar 1994: 18 for discussion). Other traditional theatre forms, like the makyung, menora, and mek mulung, did not employ a backdrop. The hand drawn and carefully painted scenery clearly delineates the place of action. The visual display was well loved by the audiences previously used to viewing an empty stage. As was noted, if time was needed for changing scenery, the extra turn could fill the gap. For these scenic changes a drop with the troupe logo or of plain color design would mask the backstage transition.
Bangsawan Modernizes

In the preceding section we noted characteristics of bangsawan in its early development. We also noted the accelerating changes as the form expanded through the 1920–1930s, when it reached its prime. Social changes brought about by the colonial power were shifting Malay society from its traditional and closed lifestyle through unprecedented exposure to outside influences. Changes were happening culturally, politically, and physically in the urban setting, and this entertainment kept up with the changing times; actors were generally ethnically appropriate to the roles they played, and the stories presented could be Western (perhaps portrayed by Eurasians), Indian or Middle Eastern (by Indians), Chinese, or Malay. As Tan clarifies:

As commercial theatre, bangsawan was innovative and constantly adapting to the times. Bangsawan performers incorporated many of the songs, chorus dances, and comic sketches of vaudeville and operetta troupes which toured Malaya. The introduction of stories with Malay historical and contemporary themes in bangsawan in the late 1920s and 1930s was inevitable, the audience having been exposed by them to the new type of tonil [theatre] performed by Indonesian troupes as well as the sandiwara scripted and staged by local amateur ones [groups]. The audience was also getting bigger and becoming better educated . . . This changing audience increasingly preferred reality to fantasy. (Tan 1993: 58)

Bangsawan was by this era of the 1930s a cross-cultural form that treated heroism from many cultures other than Malay. Performers were now generally of the cultural background being portrayed in the narrative. Thus Muslim-Indian players were involved in stories with a Persian or Indian cultural background, such as Aladin dan Lampu Ajaib (Aladdin and the Magic Lamp), Ali Baba dan Empat Puluh Orang Pencuri (Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves), Laila Majnun (The Love of Laila and Majnun), Gul Bakawali (Princess Bakawali Flower), and Siti Zubaidah (Lady Zubaidah). Intellectuals schooled in Western culture were familiar with and used Shakespeare’s plots, such as Hamlet, Othello, The Merchant of Venice, Macbeth, Julius Caesar, and A Midsummer Night’s Dream (for example, see Tan [1993: 220–228] for scene breakdowns of bangsawan versions of Hamlet). From the Chinese repertoire (and perhaps favored by Chinese performers) the most popular story was Sam Pek Eng Tai (Butterfly Lovers). From Indonesia stories that were popular were tales drawn from the stories of Panji, a lover prince from East Java, such as Panji Semirang (False Panji) and Raden Panji Jaya Asmara (Prince Panji, Warrior of Love). Of course, Malay tales like Raden Mas
Ayu (Golden Princess), which is about a Javanese princess who flees to Singapore for safety, and Puteri Gunung Ledang (Princess of Mount Ledang), which tells of a Javanese princess who spurns a Malay king’s offer of marriage, were also included (see Tan [1993: 209ff.] for examples of repertoire). Malays or performers of Indonesian descent might chose such Malay-Javanese tales.

The 1920s and 1930s also saw new entertainment forms being introduced, like the orchestra and Western operetta forms, Chinese xiqu, and South Indian theatre influenced by theatre figures like Sankaras Swamigal (1867–1922), who combined principles of older dance-sung Tamil theatre with modern proscenium staging. There were also the technological-based entertainments of gramophone, wireless radio, and silent film imported from the West, China, and India. These forms influenced bangsawan and were used by bangsawan artists. The first Malay film was the Singapore-made talkie Leila Majnun in 1933 (directed by B. S. Rajhans), with a story popularized by bangsawan. Western film plots could morph to bangsawan episodes. At urban centers there were amusement parks to facilitate these modern entertainment forms, and bangsawan artists borrowed freely from newer media for material.

It was around this time, too, that new Malay intellectuals became more prominent. They were Western educated and working toward Malay nationalism. They came forth by the 1940s with an essentially Malay performance form called sandiwara that treated issues of colonialism and history. Sandiwara as a performance type dwelled more on stories about the common people (as opposed to mythic royals, although it also uses local history as its source. Script trumped the stock scene or actor-centric mode of bangsawan story building for sandiwara. Shaharom Husain was the most prolific dramatist writing in the sandiwara format, and his historical dramas arguably built toward national sovereignty in a way that bangsawan’s more actor-centric theatre did not. Bangsawan prefers stories that deal with heroism and legends, though composed sandiwara scripts with clearer dramatic builds were becoming more desirable and could deliver messages in a more holistic form that would prevail later. Extra turns were excluded, Shakespeare was emulated, plots were tightened, and social problems and national aspirations were interrogated. As Nancy Nanney (Nur Nina Zuhra) points out, “Sandiwara was a reaction against bangsawan, especially against the embellishments, interludes, and improvisations style . . . . Sandiwara playwrights often assumed they were creating drama with a seriousness of approach to content, as well as a concern for artistry of form, not emphasized in bangsawan” (Nur Nina 1992: 83). These plays were praised for literary merit and, unlike bangsawan,
which was an actor-staged entertainment, a director (often the playwright) was core.

The bangsawan performance was a technically advanced theatre of its time, although later researchers and academics tend to label it as stereotypical and old-fashioned in its support of the status quo (by contrast to sandiwara’s nationalist thrust (see Nur Nina 1992: 23–29). For example Johan Jaafar (2007) writes that Za’Ba (Zainal Abidin Ahmad, 1895–1973), a nationalist thinker, said there had been practically no drama in the country before World War II, dismissing bangsawan’s “fables and fancy stories which make little sense” (quoted in Johan 2007). Johan agrees with Nanney that sandiwara was a step forward: “Sandiwara marked the emergence of ‘the thinking class’ in Malay drama production” (Johan 2007).

From the onset bangsawan was created with a specific form, content, and scenic format, but having leeway for creative reinterpretation. That has been its stated aesthetic philosophy, which coauthor Rahmah Bujang has seen as “sesuai dengan kehadiran bangsawan dalam zaman penjajahan Barat, sedikit banyak tentulah terdapat pengaruh Barat di dalam seni Bangsawan” (with the appearance of bangsawan in the colonial period, more than a little in bangsawan was influenced by the West) (1989: viii). Rahmah has long seen the form as manipulating the contemporary popular aspects into its performance in order to lure audiences of the time. The creative versatility of the performance enhances the ability of the play to offer an aesthetic experience to its audience members while they vicariously experience the struggle of good versus bad, beauty versus brawn, and so on. The visual support with full scenic devices and the updated scenes of palace life, forest encounters, love, and combat can still effectively excite, thrill, and satisfy modern audiences. If other traditional performance forms remain simple and minimal and if sandiwara, which often took up contemporary themes, turned toward a more realistic stage, bangsawan is the very opposite, creating spectacular theatre.

To achieve this spectacle, the script tailored within the mold of bangsawan often portrays courtly happenings in a courtly style. Stereotyped representations and the language used is mostly rhymed verse, poetic in style. In concordance with the formula of a bangsawan story, all royal characters and court warriors are depicted as gallant and heroic.

**Bangsawan in Modern Performance: Selected Examples**

Bangsawan had and has a dynamic scope for creativity, building upon its identity as a spectacular performance medium. Current sociocultural, political, and socioeconomic factors influence contemporary
bangsawan. This can be seen in the availability of new stories penned from local history: *Puteri Li Po* (Princess Li Po, 1992), which, along with *Megat Terawis* (Prince Terawis, about the first Bendahara of the Kingdom of Perak) and others, are scripts by co-author Rahmah Bujang for new bangsawan (for scripts see Rahmah 1989). *Puteri Li Po* has perhaps been the most frequently produced of these works. It toured to Mekala in 1982 (the Malacca sultanate is the site of the story) and to Negri Sembilan, Selangor, and Penang in 1992, and it was revived in its most elaborate manifestation in 1999, at the theatre offering to commemorate the fiftieth anniversary of the University of Malaya (see Nur Nina 1994 and Kong 2001 for discussions of the production and questions about its historicity, respectively).

A change in today’s bangsawan is that plays are fully scripted. While the character types of the old theatre and the scene types are used, the ability to improvise in bangsawan style has largely been lost by modern performers. Most of the actors are young people newly graduated from tertiary theatre training programs at USM, UM, or ASWARA, who may have taken a class or two in bangsawan technique but do not have the ability to improvise their dialogue interspersed with poetry, song, and dance. They lack the movement base to snap into *pencak silat* or *kuntau* battles without a choreographer to guide them. Though Rahman B. and a few of the stalwarts of the old bangsawan are teachers working beside the young directors (who are de riguer for neo-bangsawan), most of the performers do at most one or two bangsawan performances per year and play only for a few nights per show. Therefore, a through-composed script is vital. Actors are guided by a script, director, and choreographer toward understanding of the conventions, role types, and style.

While some scripts aspire to do no more than “tell the story,” most new bangsawan authors are university trained and aspire to address the issues of today in the way that the old bangsawan did not. Take for example *Puteri Li Po*. The script was based on the Malay Annals, which relate the history of Malacca. The fifth king Sultan Mansur Syah (1456–1477) had four wives, one of whom was said to be a Chinese Princess Li Po, who married him in 1459 when she came with the Chinese eunuch admiral Zheng Ho (also Cheng Ho). Issues of polygamous marriage, ethnically diverse groups (Chinese and Malay) who must learn to live together for the good of the kingdom, and a woman’s personal desire versus moral duty were some of the topics that the play “took on” in co-author Rahmah Bujang’s handling. While still using the formulas of traditional bangsawan, this was intended as a “thinking woman’s” bangsawan, and in that way shared some of the characteristics of later Malay forms, such as sandiwara or the more recent form, modern drama. But
where sandiwara was overt in its messaging, this bangsawan script sought to deal with issues more indirectly.

The plot showed the homesick princess, Hang Li Po (seri pang-gung/heroine), married to the Sultan Mansor (raja/king) and converted to Islam. She wants her husband to send a message to China, which he fails to do (court scene). The dayang-dayang (attendants) led by Dang Wangi try to ease her grief as they pick fruit (Plate 4).

Li Po falls asleep, and her husband reappears in her dream as the fearful jinn afrit. The play made an innovative and psychologically motivated use of a stock character. The princess is actually in love with Hang Jebat (orang muda/hero), a well-known Malay hero who in prior versions of the Li Po story has no connection with the princess. Here we learn that Li Po conceived a romantic affection for him before her marriage. She meets the gallant (the love scene), but, out of loyalty to the king and because the warrior already promised to Li Po’s attendant, Hang Jebat demurs. With the help of her Javanese co-wife Galuh Raden and her lady-in-waiting Dang Wangi, Li Po reconciles herself to a woman’s state as co-wife and naturalized Malay—Sultan Mansor is her lawful spouse and Melaka is now her home. While her female desire and Chinese identity are treated sympathetically, Li Po, as is requisite in bangsawan’s heroic order, chooses loyalty to family and national unity in her adopted home. The general good and not her personal wishes must be served. Female solidarity and compassion were probably more visible in this script than in some of the swashbucklers of the past, but it was still firmly within the form.

The works treats two issues being addressed in Malaysia today. First, polygamy is a major hurdle that many Malay wives may confront during their married lives. Second, there is the question of whether citizens of Chinese heritage should think of themselves as Chinese or Malaysian first. But here the issues are addressed within the context of courtly characters with the common people (rakyat) as supporting characters. The message is for today, but delivered in bangsawan mode.

As an opera form, bangsawan of the early twentieth century had regularly taken stories from other nations. Writing in the 1990s, Tan argued that a Malaysianization of bangsawan was taking place: stories with Malay settings and characters prevailed and other ethnicities were being left out (though she noted that Puteri Li Po was an exception to her rule). She stated: “Even though—or perhaps because—bangsawan is promoted by the State, by State-sponsored universities, and by State-sponsored television and radio, it is not ‘alive’ . . . . Official bangsawan of today is performed as cultural show-pieces at State functions, coronations of Sultans, cultural festivals to entertain tourists, and (occasionally) on television” (Tan 1993: 187). Tan noted that rather than a hetro-
geneous, multicultural art, bangsawan in the 1990s was “an increasingly traditional Malay theatrical form” (p. 186), and she attributed this to the emphasis given to Malay culture as part of the national culture policy put in place after the ethnic riots of 1969.

While a Malay emphasis on bangsawan may have been stronger in the 1990s when Tan was writing and productions were more limited, we feel that she overstates the case. Indeed the intention in writing Puteri Li Po was to deal with a multiethnic society, Malaysia today. What is more, the more recent burst of bangsawan, prompted by regular funding for the form by JKKN, has lead to greater diversity in settings. We do see cultural diversity. Scenes from Perso-Indian climes are frequent. For example, USM in 2010 presented a bangsawan Sinbad, based on A Thousand and One Nights and under the direction of Rosnan Nordin, whose hope was to take the form back to its mixed roots: “I wanted to bring back the glory of the original Malay bangsawan in Penang, which was call ‘Bangsawan Parsi’ back in 1875 (Rosnan as quoted in Tunku Shahariah Tunku Yusuf 2010). Western sources were invoked, in “wicked Queen Sheeba, Rosnan recalled his childhood fairytale of Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs and picked local soprano Shafinaz Selamat. She was dressed in a pencil slim long dress, which clung to her slim body, complete with an elaborate headdress” (Tunku Shahariah Tunku Yusuf 2010). The Kuala Lumpur Panggung Bandaraya bangsawan productions show stories like Bakawali (Indian), Laksmana Cheng Ho (Chinese-Malay interaction), Siti Zulaika (Middle Eastern), and Puteri Maharani (Indo-Persian). And extra turns today are as likely to be jazz dance or belly dance as typical Malay dances (see, for example, YouTube versions of the 2011 production Alang Buana’s extra turns, Fig. 1). Indeed, in some of the recent shows the extra turns can become the major audience draw, sometimes outshining the drama.

Dramatization and acting techniques especially cater to the stylization mode. There are movement forms that have become part and parcel of bangsawan; for example, the court scene needs some elaborate dramatization in the presence of the ruler of the land. The key is that whatever representation is occurring onstage the movements have to be adjusted to the role of the moment (see Effindi 2005). Improvisation and spontaneity have been kept alive within the bounds of bangsawan’s stylization process.

New technological discoveries also allowed for better motifs and drawings for the bangsawan background scenery; backdrops and side-wings are in some cases still constructed for the proscenium stage. But modern lighting techniques and computer programs allowed for the play of colors and hues, providing an intensity that can be controlled to a minimum or maximum brightness, thus giving scope for a
Bangsawan: Creative Patterns in Production

Bangsawan finds growth and creativity while keeping abreast of current technological advances in digital media and contemporary lighting and sound techniques.

Recent performances at the well-equipped theatre of ASK for example take a Middle Eastern court with belly dancers in yellows and against lush curtain drapes of orange—both the dances and the lighting are “hot.” This is far removed from the formality of the typical Malay court (see, for example, YouTube clips of Haris Fadilah and Siti Zawiyah). However, it should be noted that the costumes in current bangsawan (in the actual drama) may be more enveloping than in the past, to fit with current Islamic mores. The arms and shoulders of the female players are more covered than they might have been in bangsawan of earlier times.

Creativity in the music and song was also developing with the

![Figure 1. Alang Buana, June 2011 bangsawan offering funded by JKKN. (Poster: Courtesy of JKKN)](image-url)
times. Although bangsawan by nature of its stories must still retain the traditional song composition of ronggeng asli (an ensemble accompanying the Malay joget couple dance that includes the exchange of verses) or inang music (a lively dance song of Malay origin, literally “nursemaid”), the rendition can be enriched by the accompaniment of other musical instruments. Bangsawan traditionally used a simple ensemble of harmonium, tabla (Indian drum), and violin, but there are now a Western drum set, clarinet, saxophone, and flute. Yet the tunes produced are still the old ones; for example, the court scene will have its requisite “court” tune. As needed, performers have the same wide sources of the past: there are the Hindustani, Malay, Arabic, Sinitic, and Western musical forms or a syncretic musical mixing. The musical treatment is definitely richer and more complex and approaches an orchestral assemblage with the addition of more instruments. For example, in Puteri Li Po, performed for the fiftieth anniversary of University Malaya, the show was backed by the university’s orchestra.

New dances intertwined with the dramatic storytelling were choreographed, but the ever popular bangsawan repertoire of dances, like the waltz, rhumba, and acrobatic dance moves, as well as Malay dances that were suited to the stories, are all still performed in bangsawan. Movement is nonliteral and deeply connected to feeling. Body position, movement imagery, and visceral communication are possible in this medium of movement. For example, use of the dance movement choreographed by Effendi Samsuddin was made to good effect to demonstrate that even in sleep Princess Li Po was not happy (Fig. 2).

What was once a makeshift staging characteristic of traveling troupes was replaced with available permanent theatre buildings with complete facilities. For example, for Puteri Li Po the whole interior of the Dewan Tuanku Chancellor (the premier hall of the University of Malaya) was transformed spatially to represent the Malay courts of the past with the involvement of colleagues from the Faculty of Built Environment of the University. The availability nowadays of proper and technologically equipped stages in permanent theatre buildings fulfills the possibilities of staging of bangsawan. Hand-drawn and hand-painted backdrops are sometimes still made. For example, in Puteri Li Po we used hand-drawn and hand-painted scenery and built sets for the room scenes of the palace. When funding allows, old sets can be replaced by near perfect pictures of the desired locale. Theatres like Panggung Bandaraya in Kuala Lumpur or Istana Budaya have all the technological strength to facilitate a good bangsawan performance.

To keep the staging time to as short as an hour or two for shows, the now slick and swift scene changes can help do away with the use of extra turns. Nowadays extra turns are often maintained in bangsawan
because they add pizzazz to the program: popular songs by currently favorite artists add a breath of fresh air to shows. JKKN budgets allow producers to hire top singing stars who will pull in larger audiences; bangsawan does not have to remain, as Tan complained in the 1990s, “boring” cultural heritage, but it embraces, with its flexible format, current pop culture and favored stars. ASWARA productions, where the many young choreographers or dancers are hungry for chances to create work, will be replete with extra turns. For Alang Buana in June 2011, dances by ASWARA students and songs by M. Nasir, Safua Yaaob, and Sehra Zambri often outshone the limited acting and martial arts skills of the aspiring actors presenting the script of Rahman B. and under the direction of Mazlan Tahir. On the other hand, in works like Puteri Li Po, where Rahmah Bujang felt the interludes would obstruct narrative flow, such random interludes were excluded.

Bangsawan’s gender-straight casting is another feature that is embraced by modern audiences. Scholars viewing contemporary makyung may, for example, quibble that it is more like menora when a male takes the role of pak yong (the male hero, traditionally played by a young female). In bangsawan, past or present, gender debates like this do not pertain. Bangsawan was not an elite or ritual form; it reflected the time

Figure 2. In Puteri Li Po expressive modern dance was used in the dream scene to show the princess’s unhappiness. (Photo: Courtesy of Rhamah Bujang)
and interests of performers and audiences. The form is more malleable than traditional genres with their specters of authenticity and religious or cultural ownership—bangsawan in the past and at present is ready to teach and entertain.

One of the biggest changes is length; show times are now shortened from four hours or more to two hours or less. The concept of continuing a show for more than one night, which was standard in the early days, is gone now that people live modern, urban lives with tight schedules and limited time to devote to attending live theatre.

The above adaptations of bangsawan are needed to suit the preferences of the current audience and to keep up with new forms of drama and concerts, but the basic form of bangsawan remains intact. Our work as contemporary artists creating a new work like Puteri Li Po has been to adapt the form, keeping the heart (character types, stock scenes, song styles, court movement styles, and setting) intact.

Two features of bangsawan are core: the pattern and method of acting, and the importance of visual presentation to the stories being staged. In adapting Puteri Li Po, we found that many aspects of bangsawan needed streamlining so the productions could be suitable for the times and please the audience. Bangsawan cannot remain alive if it doesn’t move. It must be suited to the audience, and if that means new technology and shorter playing time, so be it. Creativity is needed in bangsawan of the present as much as it was requisite in bangsawan of the past. The form of stylization, the use of language, and the presentational performance can be maintained and upgraded to make bangsawan rise anew without losing its core identity. Today, contemporary Malay authors, directors, choreographers, actors, and designers embark on productions creatively, reworking bangsawan without feeling guilty about making changes. In the final analysis, bangsawan must live where it was born—on the Malaysian urban stage playing to the diverse audience and giving them the spectacular sights, musical moments, graceful movement, proud characters, expansive stories, and sheer wonder which are at the core of the form.

NOTES

1. Matthew Cohen (2006) gives a detailed analysis of Indonesian stambboel, which shares features of this kind of popular genre and was partly inspired by bangsawan. Thai likay (Virulrak 1980) is another genre of popular theatre that emerged in the same period. Detailed comparisons of these forms that interacted historically have yet to be fully undertaken, but would be fruitful. Brandon (1967) is still one of the authors to look at the patterns of popular theatre in a cross-Southeast Asian perspective.
2. The Anglo-Dutch Treaty of 1824 designated areas of the peninsula, including Penang (then called Prince of Wales Island) and Singapore, as British East India Company sites, and they were governed through Calcutta. Meanwhile the Dutch withdrew from Malacca. In 1867 these sites, along with other British holdings that were collectively known as the Straits Settlements, became Crown colonies directly under the British Colonial Office in London. Over the course of the nineteenth century additional areas came under the control of the British, and by 1896 the peninsula was ruled and protected by a British Resident General.

3. While Chinese traders settled in ports as early as the fifteenth century, the Opium Wars in China in the 1840s began a larger wave of migration. Chinese started as coolies or indentured laborers in rubber plantations and tin mines but over time established themselves in trade and the economic sphere, becoming a third of the population on the peninsula by the 1930s.

4. Wayang of course was the name of traditional Malay puppet theatres and was appropriated in the Straits Settlements as a generic name for theatre. The term “Parsi” shows the form’s relation to the popular urban theatres of India, especially Bombay, where the Parsi (i.e., Zoroastrian) population had taken the lead in developing urban popular theatre. See Hansen (2002) for background on Parsi theatre.

5. A reviewer of this paper noted that though this is commonly thought to be the case in Malaysia, the 1880 disbanding and the buying of stage effects by Mamak Pushi are not verifiable.

6. A reviewer pointed out that an alternate origin that was more likely was the term coming from the story “Indra Bangsawan,” which was also the name of an early troupe.

7. Wayang kulit, main putri, menora, and mek mulung are traditional performances that function as ritual first and as theatre second. Thus, the availability of shows is confined to the rites associated with each type of performance. Of these four forms, only wayang kulit has emerged as a theatre form in its own right.

8. “Heroism” as a concept never existed in the Malay Annals (1612) and other old historical writings. What was more important is the concept of the people’s pious allegiance to the ruler, who had been associated with godliness. Any other being that can be regarded with awe would be the ethereal kind: dewa (godlike beings) were used by such traditional theatres as mak yong, mek mulong, and menora. In bangsawan we see a change in ethos that may indicate a more active, enterprising spirit suited to a modern, free-market world.


10. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LkOIBcExad8; http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3X-dPIShNE.

11. http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nQwEIA9dDvY

12. For further reading on changes and creativity in the form see Tan Sooi Beng (1993). Of course, in addition to creativity, funding is important. Part of the current revival in bangsawan has been due in part to university support and, more recently, JKKN’s steady funding. Ghulam-Sarwar, in a blog
post written on 2 January 2009 (Ghulam-Sarwar 2009), called for a revival of the form not just in Kuala Lumpur (where JKKN is helping it happen) but also in Penang, where the genre was born. He writes that what “needs to be done is simple enough. First must come the firm resolve to make bangsawan live again in Penang. Next, the provision of enough funding to sustain one or more permanent companies—say 60 people in all, beginning from basic training. These would include actors, musicians, dancers and the whole gamut of technical people from costume to set-designers. They don’t all have to be full-timers. Third, the provision of space for regular performances, which, for a start, can be scheduled once a month for two or three days. And finally, some kind of mechanism to ensure that the whole scheme does not collapse after a performance or two, as has often happened in the past, not only with bangsawan, but, elsewhere in the country, with mak yong, wayang kulit and what have you. That’s all. And of course, where’s the money going to come from? That perennial question again; this time, hopefully, without the perennial answer, given the very special circumstances. Over to you bangsawan enthusiasts, be you Melayu, Cina, India, Baba, Mamak, Peranakan, Serani, Lain-lain, or simply Malaysian... you who would so passionately claim bangsawan as your own through your forefathers. Over to you, Penang State and City Fathers of Heritage City George Town. Over to you, Corporate types, who so ever or where so ever you may be. Surely it would not be impossible, for a start, to raise a million or two, for such a vital cause—even in these gawat times!”

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