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Performance Review


Theatre goers in Kuala Lumpur were able, in February and March 2018, to enjoy two remarkably different performances, both of which spoke in different ways of what it means to be a Malaysian. The two plays were: Ola Bola The Musical, a musical extravaganza which took advantage of the staging technology and large stage available in the Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture); and Version 2020 by the Five Arts Centre (FAC), a much smaller production staged within the narrow confines of the FAC’s Kotak, a small, black box performance space situated in a suburban housing area.

Ola Bola, which ran from 8 February to 11 March 2018, trades on nostalgia and past footballing glory, while Version 2020 (16–18 March 2018) bridges past and present without the rose-tinted glasses implied by the word “nostalgia.” Ola Bola tries to unite its audience around a particular vision of a Malaysia long gone. Version 2020 offers no “unified” picture of Malaysia, focusing instead on individual experiences. Both resonate in different ways with a contemporary audience.

Ola Bola The Musical is an adaptation of a 2016 film, called Ola Bola, which was directed by Malaysian filmmaker Chiu Kheng Guan. The film is a fictionalized retelling of one of Malaysian football's
moments of glory, when the national team (known as Harimau Malaysia, or Malaysian Tigers) qualified for the 1980 Olympics, only to find that Malaysia had decided to boycott the Moscow games in protest against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The film was extremely popular, touching as it did on national sporting pride, nostalgia for the glory days of football, and, for many, the simpler days when racial difference was not a constant in Malaysian society. While there were many rivalries among the teammates, the film never tied these rivalries to racial issues. Given the prevalence of racialized rhetoric that seems to dominate much political and civil discourse in Malaysia now, with calls to defend Malay rights, or demands that non-Malays "go home," this refusal to politicize race was unusual and moving. Personally, watching the film, I found myself nostalgically tearful at this vision of a unity that seems now to be subordinated to questions of race. It was a reminder of what the nation once was.

The musical was directed by Tiara Jacquelina, who also wrote the adaptation together with Shamaine Othman. Music was by Mia Palencia, with lyrics by Palencia and popular rapper Altimet. Although the play is set in 1980, the music is very contemporary, with a great deal of emphasis on hip-hop—following, perhaps, in the style of Hamilton. The driving rhythms of hip-hop were not inappropriate—they were strong and energetic, and reflected something of the need of the team to find their own drive and rhythm.

The staging of the play was ingenious, combining high- and low-tech to create surprisingly convincing moments of action on the football pitch. In some cases, the actors would interact with on-screen projections. In other cases, where more human tension was needed, the director resorted to simpler, more immediately physical tactics. In one or two memorable scenes, for example, a ball was affixed to the end of a stick, which was slowly twirled by a figure clad in black. The footballer who needed to kick the ball was lifted into the air by two more black-clad figures, so that he could execute a leaping kick in slow motion.

The production should also be commended for the consistently high quality of the performances, especially given that many of the cast members were not experienced stage actors. I particularly enjoyed the appearance of Altimet who (aside from cowriting the lyrics) played the role of Sergeant Ahmad, who gets the players working as a team; as a performer he displayed a confident, commanding stage presence. Iedil Putra as the rookie sports commentator and Douglas Lim as Uncle Chong were also strong performers. The actors playing the team managed to work together very effectively as a team, none outshining the others.

One of the strengths of the story (both film and stage versions) is that it shows the vulnerable human face behind the team of underdogs.
The script intercuts training sessions with scenes in which some of the team members struggle with family members who cannot understand their devotion to the team. Other scenes show locals gathering at a coffee shop, criticizing the team, and writing them off as failures. As the team learns to work together properly and starts winning matches, we see how the attitudes of the local fans change.

From the start, the play primes its audience to express a sense of national pride. Before the house lights dim, a warm-up act leads the audience in a series of chants (which they can then continue during the on-stage matches). There are Harimau Malaysia banners hung from the balconies. There are projections of cheering crowds filling the seats at Stadium Merdeka. This is in line with the stated aim of the musical to show “a story of unity, determination, and brotherhood,” and to “learn of a time when this little nation of ours believed in dreaming big” (www.olabolamusical.com/synopsis/). The tag line (for both the movie and the musical) is “You Will Believe Again.” I wonder, however, how true that is—whether we remembered or (for those born too late to remember that moment) were told. But did that translate into any kind of renewed belief in “this little nation of ours”? Was there any interrogation of where that “unity, determination, and brotherhood” have
gone? Any interrogation that emerged was purely individual, with most people lamenting that “those days” were gone but not asking what could actually be done to bring those days back, or indeed to ask if those days were as rosy as they seem in hindsight. The play itself did not demand active engagement with difficult ideas; it remained content to entertain and to tug at the heartstrings.

It is, perhaps, unfair to ask those questions of a production which does not purport to be anything more than an uplifting, feel-good night out. Certainly, on the basis of joyous entertainment, *Ola Bola the Musical* delivered. However, the much smaller, more intimate *Version 2020* had the space and freedom—which *Ola Bola* lacked—to bring out challenging and uncomfortable questions. Part of this has to do with the physical spaces within which the performances took place. Istana Budaya (The Palace of Culture) is a huge edifice with a very large stage and auditorium. It is a good venue for big, technically demanding productions. However, because of the costs involved, producers are forced to think about how to appeal to the broadest audience, to get as many bums on seats as they can, simply to recoup their investment. Does a production staged in a space like this have the luxury of making its audience think, of making them feel uncomfortable? This is where FAC has a distinct advantage in being able to control their venue and audience sizes.

The performance space used for *Version 2020* was a black box, with perhaps thirty to forty chairs for the audience, though most were seated on the floor. The space is owned and managed by FAC; it is a bare space with none of the bells and whistles afforded by the Istana Budaya—but also with none of the attendant high costs. The smallness of the space (and the fact that there is virtually no distance between performers and audience) fosters a high degree of closeness and intimacy. This is emphasized by the fact that audience members are required to take off their shoes before entering the space—something we normally do before entering a person’s home. Because the theatre-going community in Kuala Lumpur is fairly small, we often find ourselves greeting old friends before the show starts. All of this primes us, as audience members, to be open to the idea of an intimate chat about interesting ideas.

*Version 2020* looks at what has happened in Malaysia over the past twenty-seven years. The title plays on the idea of *Wawasan 2020* (Vision 2020), an idea put forward in 1991 by then-Prime Minister Mahathir Mohamad, to turn Malaysia into a high-income, developed nation by the year 2020. Since 2017, that idea has been supplanted by a similar idea, *Transformasi Nasional 2050* (National Transformation 2050), which seems to push the development agenda 30 years further down
the road. But how do individual Malaysians fit into these plans? Importantly, what do these plans mean to the individual? This is what the FAC tries to excavate by looking into the lives of five Malaysians over the space of twenty-seven years.

*Version 2020* is a work in progress, constantly being developed through research and performance. It has been performed in Tokyo, Munich, and Kuala Lumpur. Each of the performances is different, with the focus changing depending on who the audience is, or what the director (Mark Teh) wants to foreground. One common prevailing thread in all the performances, however, is that of personal experience narrated or acted out by the performers. In the program for the Kuala Lumpur performance, Teh describes the process of researching and mapping out the ideas they want to talk about; the floor is “strewn with too many images, documents, and newspapers,” and in the midst of this, one of the performers, Faiq Syazwan Kuhiri, suddenly says: “I just can’t find myself in these landscapes.” The performance, then, can be seen as a way of finding oneself within this ideological national landscape. It is important to note that the FAC and Teh are not trying to speak to or for everyone. The experiences presented are very personal, spanning the past (the younger days of the performers) and the future (what they hope or think will become of Kuala Lumpur). The future is, according to Teh, multiple and “incomplete.”

The five performers—activist Fahmi Reza, actor Faiq Syazwan Kuhiri, actor/producer/director Imri Nasution, dancer Lee Ren Xin, and filmmaker Roger Liew—turned in strong performances, rooted as they were in personal experience. *Version 2020* does not have a plot; rather, it consists of vignettes narrated by the performers, all based on incidents in their past. As each performer talks or recollects his or her past, and their responses to the developments in the country, we are reminded of this multiplicity and incompleteness. Fahmi Reza, for example, recounted how he was given a Malaysian government scholarship to study engineering in the United States. While this was part of Malaysia’s effort to develop and modernize, for Fahmi, it also represented personal development in another direction altogether—it was in the United States that he encountered and embraced punk culture (much reviled back in Malaysia). Imri Nasution reminisced about taking part in a National Day parade as a schoolboy, foregrounding his excitement and enthusiasm; the story culminates in a moment when he is convinced that he has a moment of personal eye contact, during the parade, with then-Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamad. Dr. Mahathir (now Prime Minister once again) features prominently in both Fahmi’s and Imri’s stories, underlining how central he has been to the development of Malaysia. It is certainly
appropriate that he appear in the performance, given that Vision 2020 was originally his idea. What is noteworthy is that through these intimate and personal reminiscences which encompass a broad range of experiences, questions are raised about what Malaysia was, is, and is becoming.

In a country which often tries to impose fixed identities and ideas on its citizenry, the reminder about multiplicity is important. Vision 2020 was presented as a kind of grand overarching design; but that design was not visible (or relevant) to the individuals. Imri Nasution was excited at being able to take part in a National Day parade. Fahmi Reza recalled being sent to America to eventually become Useful to the Nation, but instead getting involved with "degenerate" punk culture. Roger Liew and Lee Ren Xin highlighted how young they were in 1991, so that for them, Vision 2020 was always vaguely in the background rather than being a revolutionary new concept for Malaysia. All these contrasting responses are equally valid; indeed, the multiplicity is important as a reflection of the variety that is Malaysia. Because the performance is about Vision 2020, there is some projection into the future as well as the past, with the performers articulating their visions of what Kuala Lumpur might become. There is no structure or discussion—the performers just pour out their ideas in
a flood. Some of their ideas about the future of the city are darkly dystopian, while others foreground the idea of safe spaces for mothers and children. The future, they suggest, is wide open—it has not been fixed by any of the grand designs articulated by successive leaders.

Physical theatre is a hallmark of productions by FAC, and this was no exception. The performance space was scattered with old cartons and mineral water bottles, some stuck together to represent iconic Kuala Lumpur landmarks such as the Twin Towers. At times the performers wore these awkward, shaky constructions as they acted. At other times, small cityscapes were built and subsequently destroyed by their movements. This very personal, physical interaction with recognizable landmarks helped us to question our relationship with those landmarks—are they just there, in the background, places to which we take visiting relatives from abroad? Are they meaningful to us in any way? The most physical part of the performance came when Lee delivered a long monologue while writhing on the floor, moving along by shifting her feet and her shoulder blades; as she did this, she knocked down some of the constructions, and rucked up the floor covering. What she was doing looked incredibly uncomfortable, and made several of us in the audience feel uncomfortable—again, for me, demanding that we question our sense of being comfortable within the Malaysian landscape.

While neither production offered any magic answers, each was successful in its own light. Ola Bola was high energy and very entertaining, presenting a possible vision of Malaysia without asking tough questions. Version 2020 was harder to grapple with—simply because it asked harder questions. Both, however, were performed and produced to a high standard which bodes well for the development of theatre in Malaysia.

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