

## Translating and Adapting Shakespeare to the Malaysian Stage

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### Introduction

In the world of translation, the Twentieth Century is full of contradictions and ironies. During the first half of the century, translation works were done in the satellite countries within the orbit of the colonial cultural domination. In Malaya, texts in English were translated into the Malay language for the purpose of introducing the colonial culture to the natives. At the same time, the natives were also persuaded to learn the new language. English language and cultures were learned, and Malay translations were introduced to the natives, so that they would eventually be familiar with Aesop's tales, Lamb's Tales and with Shakespearean literary works.

Many colonial officers learned the Malay language in order to communicate effectively with the native chiefs and to prolong colonialism. For those colonial officers who did not manage to speak the native's language, native translators and writers (*munshi*) were hired in order to ease their communication problems. Thus, from the end of the nineteenth century, and perpetuated until the end of the 1950s, translation was one of the most important survival kits for the colonial administration and its cultural domination. It was, more or less a one-way flow of cultural elements, and a process of diffusion that was hoped would eventually take place. The end-result was the creation of a small group of English-educated and Western-cultured natives who later became the political and administrative elite in this independent country.

Translation has always enjoyed State support as seen through the following bureaux, institutions or departments. In 1923, a Translation Bureau was established in the Sultan Idris Teacher's Training College (better known as the SITC), now the Sul-

tan Idris University of Education. Headed by Zaaba, the Bureau undertook the task of translating works in English into Bahasa Melayu. Such a practice was a one way traffic where Malaysians were mere recipients of other works.

Another example of State support for translation as practiced in Malaysia was seen in the establishment of the former Translation Section of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (the Institute of Language and Literature Malaysia) in 1986. The Translation Section oversees the publication of works translated both into English and Bahasa Melayu besides being engaged in manuscript acquisition and research.

Ten years earlier, in 1976, the Persatuan Penterjemaah Malaysia (Association of Malaysian Translators) was established. The Association lends support to Malaysians who are involved in translation works. It also gathers together translators in the nation. With a strong membership, the Association has held and participated in numerous international conferences on translation studies. The Association, in conjunction with other bodies and corporate organizations, has held competitions to judge the best works, both literary and non-literary, that have been translated into Bahasa Malaysia [this term is interchangeably used. Although the State prefers the term "Bahasa Malaysia", this writer, personally prefers the term "Bahasa Melayu".]

In October 1993, the Institut Terjemahan Negara (ITNM, the National Institute of Translation) was officially set up. (In 1995, the Translation Section of the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka was officially closed.) ITNM now oversees most translation works.

Translation, either from Malay as a source language to English and other target languages or from English and other source language texts into target Malay language text has always been a much encouraged state-supported activity. With this inherent background and given the universal popularity of Shakespeare it is not surprising that theatre productions too encompass the productions of translated plays.

In fact in terms of dramatic productions, adapting Shakespearean plays was already a popular practice during the *bangsawan* (Malay opera) era of the 1930's—1940's. *Macbeth* and *Hamlet*, which became known as "Omlet" were two popular Shakespearean plays produced as *bangsawan* theatre. This popularity continued into the *sandiwara* period in the development of modern Malay plays. In fact Shaharom Hussain, whose name is synonymous with the *sandiwara* period, has always been

proud of the fact that he was greatly influenced by English literary works, especially Shakespeare. As he confessed, he learned from these classics and thus learned to im-bibe poems in his plays.

### Performing Translated Texts

A dramatic text is never complete unless and until it is performed, namely, until it becomes a theatre production. In fact, drama is a unique literary genre. The text alone does not contain all the meanings and contentions of all the words and sentences. The dramatic text has to be spoken—it has to be dramatized and acted in order to make alive its hidden and embedded lives. To translate a play is to translate both the written and the unwritten languages, to find the signifier and understand the signified.

Having done all of the above, the text is still dependent on the producers and users of theatre who will interpret it, give it added meaning or take away some of its meanings. The text will be exemplified with the help of visual clues, lighting, cos-tuming and acting. It will be further analysed and elaborated by the audience and the critic.

Translating plays is to translate the rhythm and music of individual words within their composed and culturally-loaded meanings and to transport them into the target language milieu, within its own cultural baggage for without its contextual culture, language would only have superficial meanings. It is culture which gives words a total life—its manifest as well as latent life. Thus translation comes with many choices to translate literally, emotionally, intellectually or culturally? To magnify, to minimize or to correlate?

Translating plays is not only translating the text but the performance too. It is also translating the cultural milieu, the language biases and barriers, the unique or univer-sal identities or traits found in the plays. Translators, after all, surely function as in-terpreters of texts and as conductors of cultural transferences. And as interpreters they have a heavy burden to fulfill for they must fully understand and comprehend the source language text with all its inherent ramifications and also (then) situate it

within and amongst all the innate problematics and possibilities of the target language text.

Indeed, translations are heavily nuanced textual readings. To render a source language text into a target language text is to produce a work that has been deeply engaged in highlighting and interpreting the text. More importantly, it makes us see the source language text in a new light and under new, broader, “foreign” dimensions often associated with the “other”. But almost always though, translators are never completely happy or satisfied with their works!

This paper focuses on the production of *Hamlet* for the Malaysian audience and traces briefly the production of Shakespearean plays in Malaysia. Producing Shakespeare in English has never been a “problem”. The now defunct Malaysian Arts Theatre Group, which was better known as the MATG had always been associated with the productions of English language plays. The MATG produced English language plays, mostly British, with the occasional American play until 1965. It was the MATG which gave Kuala Lumpur “A Midsummer Night’s Dream” in 1951 in the Lake Gardens under the sky and amid trees...” (Solehah, 1989). Universally popular, Shakespeare has been translated into many languages, one of which is Bahasa Malaysia. Amongst the translated Shakespearean plays are *Macbeth*, *Hamlet*, *The Tempest*, and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Already “in 1954 *Macbeth* came to the Town Hall in traditional Malay costumes. No kilt but *sampin* [an embroidered piece of short sarong worn by men over their Malay styled *baju*/shirt]. No fire, no drums to sound the battle of clans; only the *nobat* [a set of traditional Malay musical instruments reserved for the Sultan]. For swords, *krises* [Malay dagger], (Solehah, 1989).

Translating and producing Shakespeare is not something new but had been a “common” practice prior even to independence itself.

Besides the MATG, other groups responsible for producing translated plays are the Drama Centre, The Actor’s Studio and various drama groups. These various groups produced and directed not only plays by Shakespeare, but also Chekhov, Strindberg and Tennessee Williams amongst others. I myself translated Tennessee Williams *A Street Car Named Desire* and Arthur Miller’s *A View from the Bridge* into the Malay language for a production sponsored by the then Ministry of Culture, Youth and

Sports. Numerous other plays have also been translated and produced. These include Greek, Japanese, Chinese, French, German and Arabic plays amongst others.

### Translating Hamlet for the Malaysian audience

One of the first early modern productions of "Hamlet" in the Malay language was done by the students of University Sains Malaysia at the Experimental Theatre of University Malaya on February 13, 1980. Prior to the University Malaya production, the students did a special show for the participants of a Literature Symposium at the USM campus. It was directed by Helen van der Poorten, a member of the teaching staff of USM's Pusat Seni (Arts Centre). This being a Malay language production, it was not surprising that there were inherent weaknesses which needed to be overcome. The production took three long hours, that too, after the script was heavily edited. Although it was acceptable, the production was said to be "unclear," "uninteresting," and that it lacked "focus".

Helen wanted to give it an Eastern slant and highlighted these Eastern/oriental effects. Unfortunately, it was reported that the production did not reflect these Eastern elements. Instead there were confusion and eclecticism which generally weakened the theatrical production. In terms of costuming, although there were dominant Chinese elements, it was on the whole a Western biased costume that was displayed. Props too were not carefully planned. The production, simply put, lacked a production spine and was haphazardly executed, or so it was reported. When weapons were used, they seemed to look like long swords, but when these were unsheathed, they were in fact only the plastic toy swords used by children!

There was stylized acting but it was not fully incorporated into the production. In the duel scene between Hamlet and Laertes there were some *silat* movements but these were not fully exploited. There were even some heavily accented Japanese movements especially in the scenes where Hamlet wanted to trap Claudius. In this production there were some Malay elements, mixed with Chinese and Japanese traits but on the whole, it was primarily a Western style, westernized production albeit with an infusion of some Eastern, Asian traits. Only the language used was Bahasa

Melayu. But pronunciation and articulation left much to be desired. Syntax was confused, pronunciation horrible and articulation bad. Within this innate malaise, theatre's main medium of communication, dialogue, failed to please and convince the audience.

On the whole, although this was a laudable effort, the production, as theatre production, unfortunately, did not succeed to make waves on the Malaysian theatre scene. But this, I must stress, is seen in an anachronistic manner based completely on hearsay evidence from newspaper reports. How it was received then, is anybody's guess. I personally would like to think that, given the "hazards" and often "thankless" task of doing theatre, Helen's efforts must still be commended, whatever its production shortcomings. For its time and place I should also say it must have been a meaningful production what with its fusion of Japanese and Chinese elements. To see this within a translation-adaptation formula, is not doing justice to the production for we do not have visual documentation to prove or disprove the production milieu. Helen's "Hamlet" is mentioned only to highlight Faridah Merican's 'Hamlet' and to show the universal, unabated popularity of one of Shakespeare's well-used play. It is also to highlight the fact that almost always translating foreign language texts into Bahasa Malayu target language texts involve, firstly, changing the language as a medium of communication and then changing the accouterments into Malay/Eastern/fusion attire. First done during the MATG era, changing the actors raiments and nativizing them makes it more interesting, but it also jars the audience into seeing the characters in a different light which sometimes, ironically, enhances instead their "otherness".

Translated plays have also been performed where only the language has changed but the wardrobe remains completely Western as happened with Tennessee Williams *A View from the Bridge* and *A Street car Named Desire*. Either mode of changing the play and metamorphosing it into the local, cultural ambience seems to instill further the oddity and quirkiness of the translated and transposed efforts. For the audience familiar with Western plays the mind seems to see **both** the original English Shakespeare or the American play, as well as the translated Bahasa Melayu production **simultaneously**, one in the mind's eye and one on the real stage production seen live on stage.

To see Shakespearean characters in Malay/Asian/fusion costumes and conversing in Bahasa Malaysia do not automatically and easily make the translated play more easily and readily understood, absorbed and accepted by the target language audience. The cultural divide, in fact, seems to be, ironically even more magnified. Herein lies one of the great Anamolies of performing translated texts: instead of there being a synthesis, it is the anti-thesis that seems paramount and inescapable almost. As said earlier, the physical eyes visually see and comprehend the translated production on stage, but the mind's eyes is also playing its version of the original source language play in the theatre of its own imagination. These contrarities seems to further enhance an anti-thetical disharmony for audiences both familiar **and** unfamiliar with the source language texts and productions. More so with the former but still applicable to the latter, for to see Western-clad characters speaking in Bahasa Malaysia in itself provokes a disjunctional and dysfunctional perception, as undeniably it also promotes and provokes other cultural de-codings. All of which would then seem to highlight the fact that translation, although it serves as a means of building bridges across nations, seems also, ironically to further enhance and magnify those divides and impossibilities. Unless of course, theoretically one must do as Coleridge says, "willingly suspends ones disbelief!"

### Hamlet in the 1990's

This production of "Hamlet" was done by the second year students of the National Arts Academy (ASK) in March 1999, by the Actors Studio. Well known veteran actor, now Executive Director of Actors Studio (a professional theatre company) who also teaches, part time, at the then National Academy of Arts (renamed in August 1, 2006 as ASWARA, the National Academy of Arts, Culture and Heritage), Faridah Merican directed the "Hamlet" production. Although the same translated text was used, namely the Indonesian translation by Trisno Sumardjo, the ASK production used standard Bahasa Malaysia language, as opposed to the USM production which used Bahasa Indonesia.

The Indonesian translation was used as a catalyst to create a new, Malay language

production text. The text was edited and adapted for the Malaysian audience by well known actor-director Ahmad Yatim. (Later in 2002 he also directed “Hamlet” for the Mara University Technology theatre students.)

The first important step of making sure the text can and does speak to the audience was undertaken by Faridah when the Bahasa Indonesia text was re-adapted and re-transposed into a Bahasa Malaysia text merely to ensure that the theatre production does not become too many times removed from the Malaysian audience. Had this not been done it would be difficult to comprehend the whole scenario. Imagine this transference:

#### Helen van Poorten’s ‘Hamlet’ Production

1. Hamlet in Shakespeare’s English  
   ↓(Text)
2. Hamlet in der Bahasa Indonesia (Trisno Sumardjo)  
   ↓ (Text)
3. Hamlet directed by Western director (Helen van der Poorten), a Dutch Director  
    in Bahasa Indonesia  
   ↓
4. Hamlet with a mixture of Chinese, Japanese, Western  
    elements—A new fusion theatre adventure.

#### Faridah Merican’s Production

1. Hamlet in Shakespeare’s English  
   ↓
2. Bahasa Indonesia Hamlet—Trisno Sumardjo’s translation  
   ↓
3. Bahasa Malaysia Hamlet—Ahmad Yatim’s adaptation of Trisno’s translation  
   ↓
4. Hamlet—Faridah Merican’s production



The text "simplified" and adapted into Bahasa Malaysia was then contextualized into the Malaysian social-cultural "political" milieu. As director, Faridah emphasized the fact that it was her paramount duty to impart the necessary knowledge, but beyond that it must also be the student's duty, responsibility and involvement right from the early beginning stages of production until the actual opening night itself to see the transformations, education and final conclusion of the theatre production. This was important for it was a student production, which formed the crucial component of their examination. The students must see the text from beginning to end.

The director made the decision to limit production time to two hours. Thus important choices had to be made, which entailed her having to choose important acts without compromising the storyline. To do the whole of Shakespeare would have meant a three or four hour production time.

Casting was also carefully done, especially so for a student production. Students too gave their own decisions on choices where casting was concerned. The crew went through the whole practice of "auditioning", reading the script, ensuring correct pronunciation, verbalization and the whole process of syntax. Students took turns to verbalize the dialogues to make sure they sound right and acceptable in Malay.

The students/cast then had to act out the scenes act by act. Rehearsals took about one and a half months. Almost every student took part in the production. Whilst the USM production wanted to imbibe some of the Malaysian/Eastern aura and scenography, Faridah and the ASK students wanted to do a production which resembled "Shakespeare's time/era" to give a "feel" of Shakespeare to the students. The reasoning put forth was that to know Shakespeare they should do a Shakespearean production and not aimed for an adaptation or translation. It was enough to simplify the text and adapt it to the Malaysian milieu. But the whole idea of the theatre production was to study, translate both literally, culturally, symbolically and finally, visually, Shakespeare by and for the students.

Set was simplified and entailed the building of platforms so as to accommodate all the scenes in the play. The small set consisting of several platforms made of plywood was starkly painted black. The scenes encompassed the harbour, palace, garden and bedroom scenes. Designed by Utomo Radjikon, currently enjoying great popu-

larity in Malaysia, the set was created to visually prepare a world for the student actors to act. It was not build to subsume the actors. It would seem that the style of presentation had been abstracted in order to enhance the acting possibilities of the students. Faridah wanted to return to the basics of doing theatre, emphasizing only the text and the actors: namely she focused on telling the story and enhancing the acting.

The student actors exploited their simple stage to its utmost. Almost in a Grotowskian manner they acted, completely dependent on their most basic tools: their bodies, their voices, their expressions, their agile movements. In the comic scenes they made the audience laughed, in the fighting scenes the audience were silenced and hushed into tensed anxiety. The ghost scene to some were really frightening, to others quite hilarious. Some of the student actors had to perform multiple roles to overcome the problem of a shortage of actors. The important scenes were accompanied by live music.

Costuming was simple. The student actors were dressed in either long sleeved or sleeveless tee-shifts. The male actors wore black Levis jeans and roles were symbolically portrayed. The queen would just have a tiara and the king for instance wore a golden colored crown and a long flowing robe.

Lighting, as admitted by the director, was rather limited and in fact weakened the production. Lighting even failed to fulfill its most basic function: to provide light so as to enable the audience to "see" the production. Lighting was not exploited to the full to enhance the mood of the episode. Often what was used was simply the spotlight which not only disturbed the audiences' views but also interfered with the acting of the students. It also created a lot of shadows.

On the whole it was a rather unsatisfactory production both in terms of visual theatre and within the normal context of a usual theatre production. But it cannot be seen as "a normal theatre production" for this was a theatre production in which Faridah, as instructor at the then National Academy of Arts aimed to instruct and inform the students and in this particular case, it was also aimed to introduce them to

Shakespeare. The paradigm within which the production was located and conducted were made very clear to the students who perhaps understood better the meanings and significances of doing theatre based on Shakespeare's *Hamlet* although this play had gone through the filter of an Indonesian translation and then re-filtered again through a Malaysian, Ahmad Yatim translation. The transference and re-transference and re-interpreting of the cultural nuances, of the innate signifiers and signifieds of Shakespeare's original play has metamorphosed into other new entities whilst at the same time trying to remain loyal to the original discourse. The production became the inevitable polyphonic enhancement of both the "local" source and "local" target language re-presentation. This in itself makes it interesting theatre. The students though certainly had a hands-on approach, as was appropriate, for acting students who have to produce a play and act in it. Within these set objectives, this production worked very well, not only "directly" in terms of fulfilling the production and acting processes but also indirectly in terms of re-presenting alterities between "selves" and "others".

### From Source Language Text to Target Language Production

To translate a source language play, in whatever language, into a target Malay language theatre production for a multi-racial, multi-religious, multi-cultural Malaysian audience, poses varied problems even as it enhances myriad, polyphonic possibilities. To attempt to do an English source language Shakespeare play into a target Malay language theatre production, adapted from a target Indonesian language theatre production, complicates further all the inherent problems and dilemmas. To translate source language Shakespeare into target language Bahasa Melayu is to empower it to speak across boundaries to the native "Other" (from the perspective of the source language text) so as to better comprehend the universal, borderless, global Shakespeare. There are many ways of doing it, paramount amongst which would be to: firstly, translate the dramatic text according to theories and principles of translation in as poetic a manner as is possible without deviating from the source language text. In this effort, the translation is aimed at **imitating** and **reproducing** the source lan-

guage text into a different target language text, in this case Bahasa Melayu.

Secondly, it is to analyze Shakespeare's complex, compelling and universally known text and from it abstract the salient, pertinent themes and episodes relevant to the target audience. In this endeavor, the audience would only be seeing a condensed, abridged version of the real, "source" language Shakespeare. The choices made would also be chosen by an individual, hence colored by his/her views, ideology and perceptions. Still this second "method" is derived from the source language Shakespeare.

Thirdly, the source language text is used only as a catalyst to create a completely new text, based on the ability, expertise and acculturation of the target language doer. It can be a parody, it can be an adaptation, it can be whatever the target language doer wants to do and how he/she chooses to speak to his/her target language audience. All three approaches are valid and viable but often, (except for the third approach), the first and second approaches can be and sometimes are both used simultaneously.

## Conclusion

Translating source language text into target language theatre production entails a different spectrum of juxtapositions and contrapuntal relationships. More so when the target language production is based on a translation already once removed from the source language. The theatre director is primarily, initially, working on a Bahasa Indonesia target language version, which is already colored by the translator's education level and cultural exposure. Some Indonesian words carry different literal and cultural meanings. Even if literally it may mean the same, culturally it might be different. Hence the need to tune it to a different Malay language target audience.

A source language Shakespeare text is noted for its beautiful poetry, universal themes and archetypal images which supposedly can transcend borders. To turn it into a different target language text entails still maintaining the universal values, qualities and thematic concerns and problematics that have made source language Shakespeare so beloved universally. Such an endeavor is nevertheless hampered by

the fact that the translation cannot be, firstly, a word for word translation and, secondly, it has to be colored, culturally, ideologically, aesthetically by the target language translator. These choices entail changes to the final target language text, for choices, whether we like it or, will have to be made. And within this context of making choices the text becomes layered and acculturated within the target language milieu both sublimely and openly. Ironically, a target language production would still be compared to the source language text, only by virtue of Shakespeare's universal qualities.

The target language audience sitting in the auditorium, whether she/he likes it or not, consciously, unconsciously, subliminally even, will be comparing the target language production with the source language text. Questions abound for this target language audience. These include: Why this text? Why translate it from another target language? Why was not the original source language text used? Why the abstractions? Why the expansions? Why the eliminations? Why was the language stilted? Why was the play transposed wholly into the Malaysian milieu? Or why was not the play adapted, transformed and suited to the Malaysian milieu? Whatever was done, or not done, would be fodder for thoughtful and meaningful discussions or mere fodder for blatant criticisms.

In the final analysis whatever the play, whatever the do's and don'ts there will always be the whys and the wherefores. This is because doing a target language production opens the door to these blatant scrutiny. Whatever the critics say the fact remains: translating a play from a foreign source language into a Bahasa Melayu target language opens forth like a Pandora's box, a myriad possibilities and adventures. In the case of the National Arts Academy Production the objective is plain, clear and simple: to get the students back to the basics of doing theatre by exemplifying the story and by relying on their acting abilities.

This does not preclude the many other ways of doing Shakespeare literally, or transposing it and adapting it to the local cultural milieu. Whatever the objectives, the fact remains unaltered: translating plays for the stage means translating and/or altering the cultural signifiers and signified of the source language into and for a different target language audience with its own cultural, ideological, political filters and

magnifiers. Translation is a process of a myriad transformations, linguistically, culturally, visually and theatrically. But still, ironically, translations, or perhaps, productions of translated and transposed texts, almost always serve to enhance the contradictions both inherent, prevalent and abstracted by virtue of it being but a translation. There can be no correct reading and even less correct, real seeing of the translated, transposed, decoded, re-coded productions. One is always seeing a new production. Herein lies the beauty, intricacies and challenge of doing translations and translating productions.

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