"Don't be a foreigner in your own country": An Interview with Jo Kukathas

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Jo Kukathas

Jo Kukathas has been one of the leading figures in Malaysian theatre since the early 1990s, despite not actually having spent a lot of time in Malaysia prior to that. Returning to Malaysia after a peripatetic youth spent in places like Australia, Hong Kong, India, and England (where she went to university), she volunteered with local theatre companies, and went from being a general dogsbody, to becoming an actor, to co-founding the Instant Café Theatre Company, one of the most successful theatre companies in the country, to now being a well-regarded writer, director, performer, and teacher with connections and collaborations around the world.

Susan Philip: Jo, thank you for agreeing to this interview. I'd like to start by talking a bit about your background. You grew up overseas, right?

Jo Kukathas: Yes, because my father was in the foreign service. So I left Malaysia when I was seven, and came back when I was 21, but in between we came back of course, for holidays, and between postings. After a while my father decided to leave the foreign service, and started working for the *Far Eastern Economic Review* (*FEER*). We thought we were going to migrate to Australia, but my father decided one day "no, we should stay and fight the good fight, so we're not moving." So we came back to Malaysia, but none of us could speak Malay. My dad, very eccentrically, didn't want to send us to a foreign school in Malaysia. He always said "I don't want you to be foreigners in your own country. You can be a foreigner in someone else's country." So he sent us to boarding school in India, then I went to university in the UK.

SP: So when you came back to Malaysia after university, did you have to readjust?

JK: Yes, completely. And it wasn't just readjusting. When I got back I realised that I really knew nothing; because I'd never even been to school here, the only people I knew were my parents, really.

It was an interesting time to come back to KL, though. It was the '80s, KL was really booming, you know? And my father was still working as a journalist, so he used to get invited to a lot of these large dos and parties, and I went with him to everything. So I saw a very different side of KL, that hugely wealthy, extravagant side, the haves and the have-yachts. And at the same time, my parents were separated, so I was living with my mother in my uncle's house, with four of us sharing one room. I was going from this little environment in Cheras, and taking three buses to go to KL, to where these fabulously wealthy people had their life. Then I'd take three buses and go home to Cheras.

SP: So was that disparity the main thing that you felt you needed to readjust to?

JK: I think it was actually even more basic than that. I just had to sort of figure out who I was in this country. I got my first job as a general dogsbody in the marketing office of a nightclub. We used to work really long hours, and one of the staff one night was crying in the stairwell because she couldn't go home to look after her young baby, and I just told her that she has rights as a worker. I got into a lot of trouble with the boss, who told me that I was coming in with my communist ideas and my western-centric notions and that I didn't belong here.

So that shattered me, her saying that "you don't belong, you'll never belong." Because I think I did feel I didn't quite belong.

But I always had an interest in theatre. One day I went for an audition for *Caught in the Middle*.[1] And didn't get a role. But they said to me, "do you want to help out?" So I said 'sure', and that's how I got involved.

Joining theatre is what created an entry for me. And so I did my first proper job as a teacher at Garden School.[2] Suddenly you get to know, very quickly, the lay of the land. I got to know how kids here thought. So in that way I got introduced to perspectives, I guess; how people saw the world quite differently from the world I had inhabited in my school in India.

SP: You didn't have any training in theatre when you started. By now, I don't know how much formal training you've had but definitely more experience obviously.

JK: I didn't have much formal training except that back then, a lot of people would come to KL and do workshops, so I signed up for every single workshop. And I think the learning just came from working with different people in different companies. Because also, in the '80s and '90s, everybody was an amateur, so you recognised it. You rehearsed every night, for 3 or 4 months; and part of the rehearsal process was training. And if you're working with someone like Krishen,[3] it really was like three quarters of the process was training. But I always did feel I didn't have that training, so I read a lot of books about acting, about directing. To try and make up for that shortfall.

SP: How did you feel about the kind of theatre that was dominating KL in the '80s? This was when it was the Liberal Arts and the Selangor Phil[4] and so on.

JK: You know, at the time I didn't have hugely strong opinions about it. Because the first play I did was *Caught in the Middle*. So that was quite different, it was very much Malaysiana. I didn't get a role, but I joined the production, and took over when somebody dropped out. And then from there I went and got roles in those conventional plays, like *The Millionairess* or *Guys and Dolls*, and *Absent Friends*. But I didn't feel necessarily that this was a bad thing. Because I was still in there to learn. Then one day Krishen interviewed me, Zahim, Hayati and Jit[5] about being in *Romeo and Juliet*. And he said to us "why are you so content doing other people's plays? What's the theatre YOU want to make? Who are your heroes in Malaysian theatre?" And we all said "we don't have any". He was a bit cross. I think he thought it was just because we were ignorant, but we weren't actually ignorant. I mean I knew about people because of my father; my father's best friend was Syed Alwi.[6] So

I had been to see a lot of Syed Alwi's plays, I had been to see all the Five Arts plays that were on at the time, I had read the plays in *New Drama One* that Lloyd Fernando had edited. So I wasn't unaware. But if I was honest, they weren't plays which then made me think "I'm part of that lineage." But after Krishen said this, then I went and thought about it. And I thought, well I do need to figure this out, I do need to figure out what is my history, in some way.

SP: You started the Instant Café Theatre Company soon after we did *Romeo and Juliet* in 1989. Can you tell me more about that?

JK: Through *Romeo and Juliet*, Jit, Zahim, Andrew[7] and I became friends, and talked a lot about what was going on in the country, talked about politics and all the rest of it. We were saying in a very desultory way, "we should form our own theatre company." Just talk. And then Narelle McMurty who ran Bon Ton[8] in KL offered us a performance space, and we said "let's move on and do our own thing". It was very clear that we wanted to do comedy; and we talked about things we wanted to say, about what was going on in the country. Even the name Instant Café Theatre came from the idea of the café theatres of the Weimar Republic. There was this time of fermenting of political thought, in cafés and café society, and we thought we would be like that, we would be the clowns speaking truth to society. But this was of course all a result of 1987's Operation Lallang.

For me it was very clear when we formed Instant Café that I wanted to write things that were Malaysian. So we thought with this company, we can devise and create things.

Those first shows that we did, at the Theatre Upstairs at Bon Ton, the word of mouth was so incredible. I mean, it got sold out just like that. And the audience was this close (gesturing). If you sat on the stage and you went like this (gesturing) you'd smack somebody! The audience were really, really close, and the stage was really tiny. But it just caught on, like crazily, and before we knew it, people were getting in touch with us, hotels were saying "come and perform in our ballroom". And at the same time other people were telling us "you won't last a week, this is too political, vans will come around and pick you all up". And we were like "no, it's ok, we'll carry on".

SP: You said that none of you quite knew what you were doing. Did that help you to just go ahead and do whatever you wanted?

JK: We had a lot of discussions about our manifesto, and what are we trying to do. And in the end we decided that we would not have a manifesto. Because we were trying to respond to what was going on out there. We

wanted to say something about what our country is about. So we decided our manifesto would be that we had no manifesto, but we would be instantly responsive to things – so again, going back to the Weimar Republic, the clowns, the comedians, to say "well, we will show you what's going on"; and that whole idea of being 'instant' was based on that. So I don't say we didn't know what we were doing in that way. We were all people who were very politicised. When I say that we were naïve, I mean that artistically, we were not people who said "well this is our connection to the theatre community". We were just like "well, we're going to do this". And maybe that might have upset people a little bit. Because it still wasn't saying we have heroes, it was "oh, we have things that we want to say". And we didn't necessarily say them with reference to what other people were doing or saying.

SP: Is that necessary?

JK: Maybe not. I don't think it's necessary. But I think that it made people in the theatre community look at us a bit askance. A bit like "who are these people suddenly coming on just throwing spaghetti at the wall and hoping it'll stick", in that way.

SP: Upstarts, really.

JK: Kind of. I think so. The people who came and joined Instant Café were all kinds of people. Some of them were very experienced, while others had no experience. And we gradually came to understand what our roles were. I slowly came to understand that I was interested in the big picture, so I was interested in directing. Jit was very clearly from the start wanting to write. It was a struggle, because we were trying to find what we were trying to write. So in that way I guess we were naïve. But at the same time I look back and I'm really happy that we were because it was just like "we'll figure it out. We've got a deadline, we've got a show, and before that show we need to figure out what direction…"

SP: So you weren't telling yourselves "you can't do this"?

JK: No. We'd already made a commitment to each other, and to Narelle, so make or break, we were going to put a show on. But you know, because we knew we wanted to write something about here, now, us, whatever that meant, we were just trying out everything. We didn't sleep for weeks; finally we did that show, and people loved it! And because we did Friday/Saturdays, we thought "well, we'd better write another show" for next week. So we wrote a whole brand new show.

SP: You didn't do repeats?

JK: No, we didn't repeat anything. We didn't know that we could do that! So we wrote a brand new show every week, for months. I have no idea how we did it. But it was really good because then we learned what didn't work. I still remember to this day, this one particular sketch that Na'a[9] and I wrote that when we presented it to Andrew and Jit and Zahim, they just fell off their chairs, they thought it was the funniest thing they'd ever heard. But it went down like a lead balloon on the day of the show. It's really important to know that some things that we find personally very funny, aren't going to work out there at all.

But we did also know that the political stuff really resonated. As much as people said "you can't do that", they were also like "my god, you're doing that". And we liked doing that, a lot. And suddenly all these big venues wanted us to perform.

SP: And these were corporate shows?

JK: No, the hotels themselves. The hotels would sell tickets. We couldn't believe how many people came; you have the ballroom with 600 people, 3 nights in a row, and you haven't even been around for a year yet.

SP: I think for the longest time you didn't suffer the kind of repercussions that people thought you would, right? Until the infamous letter to *Utusan Malaysia*.[10]

JK: Well, we did have actually before that as well, just that they were not so public. The *Utusan* letter was very public. Before that, we got called in by the Home Ministry, but they were always very nice to us. And they always said "you know, we really like what you do, it's funny, but the opposition are taking advantage of you." I remember they were particularly upset about something we had said about the Plight of the Penan. It was a YBee[11] thing, and YBee was asked "what have you got to say about the plight of the Penan?" And YBee says [*slipping into Ybee persona*] "The Penan? Plight of the Penan? I don't think there's any problem with the plight of the Penan, I am quite sure that MAS still flies to Sabah Sarawak. So there's no problem, the Penan can take whatever plight they want, no problem with the plight of the Penan!" But they asked "why must you say there's a problem with the Penan? You know, we're just trying to help them, because we don't want them to live in trees. So when you make fun like this people will think we are not helping the Penan." So of course we just knew to agree: "Oh, so sorry, I see…". They were very polite to us, and they were very friendly. But on another occasion I remember it was a bit more heavy handed, where they said to us, "You know, it's like you're

walking on a train track. And suddenly if the train comes and hits you then how?" But it wasn't said like a threat. It wasn't said like "we will be the train". It was like "if you do that, the train will hit you. We are here trying to help you make sure you don't get hit by the train. Just like we're here to make sure you're not exploited by the opposition". So we just went "oh, I see, we didn't realise…"

SP: But that clearly didn't stop you.

JK: No, because again we had a very weird relationship with the government because at the same time they were hiring us, a lot. We did a lot of shows. Mahathir[12] famously also came to watch our show at Copperfields,[13] and he said "yeah you're very funny, and we'll send the Black Marias round later". We did a show for the International Trade Delegation in Langkawi where Anwar[14] was the guest of honour. And we didn't censor anything we said. Afterwards the protocol officers got very angry with us, about what we'd said in the show. And as they were berating us, the doors of the ballroom opened and all the delegates came out saying "oh, such a great show, we didn't realise Malaysia's so open, so tolerant, such a good democracy, etc.". And I remember telling the protocol officer "see? We help you tell your lies". And it did make us stop and think a lot, about what role are we therefore playing as comedians? When you get seconded, in a way. And even though we were not changing our material to suit our client, in a way, inadvertently, we were still making the government look good, because we were allowed to do this sort of stuff. But I think that changed post Reformasi.[15] I think Reformasi is what changed everything, that whole Anwar-Mahathir thing, when basically Umno lost its way, lost its strength, and began to be much more unsure of itself.

SP: After the *Utusan* letter, did you as a company change the way you worked?

JK: I don't think it affected us. Definitely we didn't decide to self-censor. I think if anything it actually made us more bloody minded. It wasn't like we talked about it at great length, but I do know that when the letter first came out, and DBKL came to interview us and tell us we had to make changes to our scripts, we decided as a collective, with the advice of some lawyer friends, that we would not change anything. That's when they decided to ban Instant Café over the whole incident. But it was the last night of the show, so... What they did say to us was that henceforth they would not give permits for Instant Café to perform. So in effect it was a ban. Though later they said they never said that. So that one was more public, but over the years, there have been other kinds of pressures; I remember we did a show in '98, we were told Special Branch were coming; so I told everybody backstage, and one of the actors got a bit spooked by this. And later, at the end of that show, he and

another actor decided then they didn't want to work with Instant Café any longer, because they were concerned about their careers.

SP: I think this is something that a lot of Malaysian writers and performers have to contend with, which is, "how far do I self-censor?" Do you think that's a necessary evil? Or that's just the price that you pay for doing theatre in Malaysia?

JK: I still feel that I would say to people, "don't self-censor". But naturally, as human beings, there are places we don't go. And we don't regard it as self-censorship, but maybe it is. For example, I would never do something about the royal family. Because I know that if you were to write a sketch about the role of royalty in Malaysia, there is no recourse, legally speaking. With religion also, it's difficult. So we didn't really do much about religion partly because I think it's hard to be funny about religion in Malaysia.

SP: About any religion?

JK: Any religion. Because if you are funny about one religion, then they'll say "oh see, you won't do that but you'll do it here". So it just becomes something where you can't get it right for the audience. And I think that actually our interest was always much more about political corruption, social injustice, environmental concerns. We didn't go searching for things that weren't making the headlines. But if it made the headlines, then we used it.

SP: We hear so much now about cancel culture and how you have to be so careful about everything you say. How careful do you think we need to be? Or should we just say the hell with it and offend people?

JK: Yeah, that's a tough one. I don't know actually. Because more scary than the government are young people (*laughter*). I struggle with this, because I wonder if any of my characters can really say anything anymore because you have to be so careful how to couch everything now. I do understand that we can't just blithely go through life disregarding differences. So I think the awareness that it created was good. But like all things which are good, they can become monstrous. I think it has become a bit monstrous right now, right? You should be able to make fun of 'woke' people. At the same time acknowledge that they have a point. And I think, as with all comedy, it's not like you're being superior. It's like you're saying we'll make fun of you; we have our own faults, you can make fun of us too. But don't cancel it, because if you cancel it then no one is making fun of anybody. Then you have a real fear. You're constantly motivated by fear. At the same time I think of course,

when you see people mocking people with disabilities, for me I just don't get it. I don't think that's the point of comedy, and especially satire.

SP: It should not punch down.
JK: Yes. Exactly. So then it doesn't make sense to do that kind of comedy, and I don't enjoy it, so I'm quite happy for that kind of thing to be cancelled.

SP: Can we talk a bit about Dramalab? What prompted that?
JK: Well, it was that Jit was writing longer and longer sketches for Instant Café comedy revues. I think we were already saying to Jit, you should write more. And he said "no, no people aren't going to expect Instant Café and then watch a play that I wrote". So I said "well, why don't we form another arm of Instant Café, and then we do it under that arm?" So then he said ok. So really, Dramalab was formed as a way to get Jit to write his more longform plays. Our first production was a double bill of *Gold Rain and Hailstones* by Jit, and *Happy Families* by Ann Lee. We decided that Dramalab would be something that would be to develop different kinds of writing, with different writers. That was its genesis. The whole idea was for us to write our stories. So it was about developing Malaysian writing.

SP: Do you think you've been successful at mentoring new talent?
JK: This is a very hard question for me to answer. I mean, I always wish I could have done more, so I guess if I was honest, I don't feel successful all the time, because I feel "what, only so few writers came through the whole process?" It's been erratic because I do a bit of this, then I do a bit of that. But I've always really been interested in developing new plays.

SP: Do you think we have enough institutional support here, for this kind of thing?
JK: I feel sad for people like Jit, because I feel he should have written so many more plays. If he was in Singapore, Jit would have written play after play after play, because he would have been part of a theatre company where he is given a salary, and all he has to do is write plays. That's the kind of support I think you need as a writer. But when you are also having to think about "how can I make a living?" your own artistic journey is very messy, and it can go very wrong.

SP: I suppose, our theatre financing being what it is, the only sort of steady support could come from government sources but then I feel that there would be so many strings attached.

JK: Well, the landscape is changing now. Instant Café now has government funding from Cendana.[16] They're very good about not questioning what we do. But also when we apply, I don't ever put in, for instance, Instant Café comedy revue, because I just know that would be something that they wouldn't want to fund. And they have even said to us, "anything that you think is not suitable for us, just don't include it. You can do other things that would be things that we would fund". It's still not easy, but at least now I feel that there's a movement towards realising that you need to fund artists. But, unfortunately, it's very paternalistic. I find, even when people here want to give funding, they want to tell you how to do your work, they want to tell you how to be an artist, and they want you to not do certain things.

SP: What do you think of language in Malaysian theatre. Would you say that Malaysians still think of English as the coloniser's language?

JK: I could be completely wrong about this, but I think my generation didn't see it as a coloniser's language. I think certain demographics would feel oppressed by English because they feel they cannot achieve some of their own life goals without English. But I think also there are a lot of people who grew up having to learn Malay in school who resented it, and who then have an attitude that Bahasa is oppressive, so they regard that as a colonising language on them, on their own ethnic community. I remember in the '90s going to so many talks about writing, and every single time, there'd be at least one person who'd say "I don't know what I'm doing, I feel so repressed because actually I can only think in English but I know as a Malaysian writer I should be writing in Malay".

I remember this one young woman who came to watch *Parah*,[17] and at the post-show talk she said "you know, I've always felt very resentful about Malay, I've always felt like I don't want to speak Malay well because as a Chinese growing up in Malaysia I feel like a second-class citizen, so why should I learn your language? It is not my language because I am not as important as somebody who's Malay." She was very blunt. She said listening to *Parah,* listening to people speaking Malay, she was so moved. She really felt like that is her language, because of the things that were being said. When you feel that something is not yours, politically, socially, mentally, emotionally, you do reject it. And I often wonder whether my inability to learn Malay early on was because I was confronted by so much racism when I first came back that kind of shocked me. Because I did not know this about Malaysia. I didn't know that we did not have certain rights. And so you feel oppressed by that,

because it was "Well you'd better learn it, but actually you can't get XYZ. You're not the same, you're not equal to me". So then it does become something to colonise us. Because it demands an unequal relationship of you.

SP: Do we still have language streams for theatre?

JK: Well, I don't know actually. I think the English Language theatre world is very mixed. If I look at what I've been doing over the last how many years, I do work in Malay and English. I don't know if it's equal, but I do both, as does Five Arts Centre and KLPac.[18] And there's never any thought about sticking to one language. But if you go across to the Chinese and Malay theatre worlds, they don't mix languages. Some years ago I did this project with Nam Ron and Kok Man.[19] And we had said let's try to do this collaboration very often.

SP: Was that *Ka Si Pe Cah*?

JK: Yes, *Ka Si Pe Cah*.[20] The whole idea was to get away from this English/Malay/Chinese divide. Because our audiences would then come to watch together. I go to watch things in all theatres, Chinese, Malay, English. And I like it. But not everyone likes to watch things in translation. I've noticed that a lot more people are trying to overcome that. If you go to watch shows done by a Chinese theatre company, they'll have English and Malay subtitles. In Malay theatre, I've noticed they've started putting in English subtitles. So at least you are opening it up to a larger audience. I think the important thing is that we need to say to ourselves, as a country, we are multilingual. We need to embrace it. Rather than fighting whether it should be Malay or English or Chinese, let's say 'all'.

SP: So are audiences clearly demarcated along linguistic lines?

JK: I think our demographic is shifting. I think it used to be much more clearly the English speaking audience; now we are attracting a more Malay speaking audience, once we started doing certain plays like *Parah*, like *Nadirah*.[21] And we've got a lot of young people especially coming who are more Malay speaking.

SP: How deeply embedded do you think English is in Malaysian society?

JK: I don't think it's as deep as us KL-ites think it is. But again, that might be changing, because of internet, smart phones, people are naturally curious, they want to be connected to what's going on elsewhere in the

world. But I don't think therefore they're solely connected to English, but also to other languages; Korean is such a big thing.

SP: But if it's as you say, other languages, Japanese, Korean, all these are coming in because of the internet, and when English does come in I think it's a very Americanized English as well? To me that's just a continuation of what this country has always been. It's just a bunch of different languages this time.
JK: Well, you're right. We are always absorbing, right? At its best, that's what we're always doing.

SP: So just quickly – is there such a thing as a Malaysian identity?
JK: I'll give you an anecdote because I don't think I can give you anything clearer cut. Some years ago I was part of a regional collaboration, initiated by a theatre company in Japan. And they got together a group of around sixteen theatre-makers from Malaysia, Japan, the Philippines, Indonesia, Thailand, Singapore. The three people from Malaysia were myself, Kok Man, and Nam Ron. We all decided we would create this theatre which was called *Hotel Grand Asia*. That was an omnibus kind of production, three different major stories in it. We formed little groups. So in the end you have this Indonesian story, you have this Philippine story, which was also about a Singaporean going to the Philippines and his encounters. Then you have this Japanese story. And there's no distinct story which told you something about Malaysia. And we didn't even notice it. Until one day somebody said "eh, how come there's no Malaysian story?" And then we were like "oh ya, ah." Because we never felt any compulsion. And we realised it was partly because the three of us Malaysians, could work with anybody, and we did work with anybody. But also, with that one story, whose story would it be? Would it be Nam Ron's, Jo's, or Kok Man's? What language would it be? So we didn't even notice it. We didn't think "we must go and find out what our identity is, and impose. And everybody else must understand us". Malaysians know how to listen. It's because that's what we need to do to get on, to be a Malaysian here, you're working interculturally all the time. So later, Kok Man and Nam Ron and myself said "that's what we should do in Malaysia", because we realised, we are constantly working interculturally, right? So that's our identity to me. I don't like the idea of one language dominating. I still have people saying to me "oh if we got rid of vernacular schools[22] then everything would be fine". I don't agree with that, I think we should learn how to actually have all our different languages in this country, and be respectful and learn from that, rather than saying "let's get rid of all that". Because when you get rid of language, you get rid of culture. So – why do we want to get rid of culture? What are we, if we are not cultural beings?

SP: Well, it depends on what culture, doesn't it?

JK: Exactly! Which is why, then, rather than saying "let's choose one", let's just say "we choose all". Just choose all, then it enriches you. Nobody has any more rights than anyone else. I think that it does come down to an idea of rights. As long as people have different rights for different ethnic groups, there will be this problem. The problem is not language. The problem is equality.

SP: Is what's going on on stage more reflective of just letting different cultures be? Or is there still that sort of "this is Malay culture, this is Chinese culture…"

JK: I think that still happens. I don't think there's as much hybridization going on as there should be. Especially in the national theatre. And in the funded Malay theatre world. I don't talk about the independent Malay theatre world which is very different. I think that we have very rich cultures here but I think because of this unspoken – no actually it's not unspoken, it's often spoken – belief that the only culture that is really significant is Malay culture, the dominant culture, then we aren't really going to take the other ones seriously. It's a very messed-up relationship actually. What does that mean for who we are as a country, what does that mean about our identity?

SP: What are some of your favourite Malaysian plays of the past century, of this century?

JK: I don't know that I can say I have a favourite. I mean you read certain things and have admiration for them at the time.

SP: Like reading *New Drama One*.

JK: Yes, yes. Things like that. Some of those are not really good plays, but I really found them compelling to read, for what they were.

SP: For what they said.

JK: I think I like that generation of writers because they wrote in a different kind of way, I mean they were influenced by the Absurdists and things like that. When I read those plays, I just think "well, what were you going through?" I wish sometimes I could stage them, but then I also think "maybe they'll feel not relevant". They may just feel really out of date. But as a kind of insight into the minds of artists, I thought that was a really interesting period.

SP: Jo, thank you so much for your time and your insights.

Notes

[1] A 1987 play, credited to Thor Kah Hoong as playwright and director, but largely improvised by the cast.

[2] An international school in Kuala Lumpur.

[3] Krishen Jit, one of the founder members of the Five Arts Centre, and an extremely influential theatre director.

[4] The Liberal Arts Society and the Selangor Philharmonic were very active in staging plays in the 1980s and 1990s. Their focus was more on the canonical Western oeuvre.

[5] Actor and director Zahim Albakri, actress and artist Hayati Mokhtar, and writer and actor Jit Murad.

[6] Datuk Syed Alwi Syed Hassan, a leading Malaysian playwright.

[7] Andrew Leci, who directed this production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and was a founder member of Instant Café.

[8] A restaurant situated in the centre of Kuala Lumpur.

[9] Na'a Murad.

[10] After one performance in 2003, an aggrieved audience member wrote in to local newspaper *Utusan Malaysia* to complain about the performance and the political material. As a result, Instant Café suffered some repercussions in terms of licensing for future productions.

[11] One of the characters created by Jo Kukathas for Instant Café Theatre. 'YBee' is a play on 'YB' or "Yang Berhormat" (The Honourable), a title used by members of parliament.

[12] Dr Mahathir Mohamad, Prime Minister at the time.

[13] A popular fine-dining restaurant in KL, since closed.

[14] Anwar Ibrahim, former Deputy Prime Minister, and current Opposition member.

[15] A political movement which began in the wake of the sacking of Anwar Ibrahim in 1998.

[16] Cendana is the Cultural Economy Development Agency of Malaysia.

[17] A play by Singaporean playwright and poet Alfian Sa'at, first staged in Kuala Lumpur in 2012, with Jo Kukathas directing.

[18] KL Performing Arts Centre, a performance complex in Kuala Lumpur, run by The Actors Studio.

[19] Nam Ron (Shahili Abdan) is a director, writer, and actor; Loh Kok Man is a director, actor, lighting designer, and lecturer. Both are Malaysian.

[20] *Break-ing/Ji Po/Ka Si Pe Cah* was a 2008 performance with three plays in three different languages (English, Chinese, Malay) by Jo, Loh Kok Man, and Nam Ron, all presented on the same night.

[21] *Nadirah* is a play by Alfian Sa'at.

[22] Vernacular schools teach the government-endorsed school syllabus, but in either Tamil or Mandarin, rather than in Bahasa Malaysia.