

**CENSORSHIP OF MALAYSIAN DRAMA IN ENGLISH: THE CASE OF CHIN SAN SOOI'S *REFUGEE: IMAGES* (1980)**

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**ABSTRACT**

In Malaysia, historically, freedom of artistic expression has been regulated through censorship laws and licensing procedures at both national and state levels. This study investigates the censorship of Malaysian drama in English (MDE) using the staging of Chin San Sooi's *Refugee: Images* as an illustrative example. It explores how the play as well as contemporaneous MDE navigated censorship regulations for public staging in a climate marked by ambiguity, arbitrariness and improvisation. It shows that the frustration endured by playwrights as being due to the lack of a unified, consistent and systematic approach to censorship, which also explains the occasional instances of excessive caution, if not institutional overreach. It argues that the topicality and, by extension, the controversiality of the subject matter, is another factor that affected censorship. Lastly, it shows that some elements in the plays could be construed as political activism to effect social change by questioning, if not challenging, some of the sacred cows of the Malaysian constitution. This study concludes that for a newly independent country and a fledgling democracy, Malaysian authorities were relatively tolerant of dissenting playwrights as long as they respected the triumvirate of sensitivities—race, religion and politics—in multiethnic Malaysia.

**Keywords:** Malaysian Drama in English, MDE, censorship, Chin San Sooi, *Refugee: Images*, freedom of expression.

**INTRODUCTION**

As the most public and immediate of the genres in literature, drama is a powerful tool for transmitting ideas. Unsurprisingly, then, plays have been a target of censorship throughout history. Indeed, drama has often been wielded as a propaganda tool by those who hold power; plays that are not only outright disparaging or insufficiently supportive but even slightly critical of the ruling ideologies are either eliminated or modified.

Chin San Sooi (b. 6 June 1941), Malaysian playwright, director and co-founder of Five Arts Centre, began writing at a time of draconian censorship by the government. Experimenting with sensitive issues such as politics, race and religion, besides national language and culture, was considered not only taboo but also risky, if not punishable under the Internal Security Act (ISA). The ISA notoriously permits detention without hearing or legal counsel from sixty days up to two years.

This study investigates the censorship of Malaysian drama in English (MDE) using the staging of Chin San Sooi's *Refugee: Images* as an illustrative example. It is divided into four sections. The first section gives an overview of the regulation of public performances in Malaysia; the second provides the context for the study by presenting a brief summary of contemporaneous MDE as they navigated censorship regulations for public staging; the third analyses Chin San Sooi's *Refugee: Images* as it went through multiple revisions to satisfy censorship requirements over more than two decades until its final uncensored version; the fourth section discusses the justification for censorship of MDE around the "sensitivities", a euphemism for politics, race and religion; and finally, the fifth concludes that for a newly independent country and a fledgling democracy, Malaysian authorities were relatively tolerant of dissenting playwrights as long as they respected the triumvirate of sensitivities—race, religion and politics—enshrined in the constitution.

## THE REGULATION OF PUBLIC PERFORMANCES IN MALAYSIA

In Malaysia, freedom of expression is regulated by the Home Ministry via censorship laws. The May 13, 1969 racial riot resulted in the tightening of such laws concerning censorship, the most notable being the dreaded Internal Security Act (1960) or the ISA, which was implemented following Malaysia's independence; the alleged aim was to end the armed rebellion of the Malayan Communist Party during the Emergency era. The ISA gave the government the indisputable right to arrest and keep a person in custody indefinitely without trial. The tenure of Prime Minister Dr Mahathir saw the tightening and enforcement of the Constitution to render illegal all criticisms against the government, Islam, bumiputra rights, Malay language and the monarchy. Under the *Ops Lalang* (Operation Lalang) crackdown that began in October 1987, more than a hundred government critics, NGO activists, opposition party members, journalists, writers, artists, students and public figures were rounded up and detained under the ISA. The publishing licenses of four newspapers—*The Star*, *Sin Chew Jit Poh*, *The Sunday Star* and *Watan*—were repealed.

Moreover, the amended Police Act 1967 made it mandatory for all public events or assemblies of more than five individuals in a public space to submit applications for police permits fourteen days before the event. The Act also required performance groups to disclose cast lists and complete scripts before any permit could be obtained. This applies to all theatre, dance, or music productions (Tan, 1992: 284).

All public performances in Malaysia are currently subject to the following laws and regulations. Depending on where they are performed, shows must also conform to the respective state rulings. In the case of Kuala Lumpur, the following applies:

- a) Local Government Act 1976
- b) Street, Drainage and Building Act 1974
- c) Entertainment Act (Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur) 1992
- d) Entertainment Duty Act 1953 & Rules of Entertainment Duty
- e) Rules of Entertainment (FTKL) 1993

The Entertainment Duty Act of 1953 made it compulsory for entertainment companies to pay tax in advance based on the forecasted turnout of a show, that is, before any tickets are sold or any publicity done. Taxes on unsold tickets were refundable only after the show upon application to and approval by the Ministry of Finance. However, shows for philanthropic purposes were exempted from entertainment tax (Mervyn Peters in Rowland, 2005:121).

The Entertainment Act, 1992 which is “[a]n Act to provide for the licensing and regulation of entertainment and places of entertainment and matters incidental thereto”<sup>1</sup> outlines that Kuala Lumpur City Hall (DBKL) reserves the right to grant performance licenses, revoke them any time should there be any breach of regulations, and conduct spot checks of performance venues anytime without a warrant to ensure that all rules are in place.

Prior to Malaysia’s independence, the British introduced the Sedition Act 1948 with a two-fold aim: firstly, to outlaw subversive discourses that undermined the colonial government and, secondly, to suppress communist insurgency in Malaya. After the 1969 racial riot, the Malaysian government expanded the scope of the Sedition Act to include censorship of free speech and expression.

Each state in Malaysia is subjected to the by-laws of local authorities. For instance, in Muslim-dominated Kelantan, public entertainment is censored subject to local sensitivities; this includes but is not limited to performances such as *wayang kulit*, *bangsawan*, and *makyong*. In Kuala Lumpur, live performances including theatre are regulated by the Entertainment (Federal Territory of Kuala Lumpur) Act, 1992. In 2003, the DBKL Script Evaluation Committee for Theatre Performances was set up as a knee-jerk reaction to Instant Café Theatre Company’s controversial performance: *2<sup>nd</sup> First Annual Bolehwood Awards*. According to Kakiseni’s co-founder, arts activist and researcher Kathy Rowland as reported in the *New Straits Times* (30 Sept 2003), the sudden decision to set up a script-vetting committee was done without any consultation or discussion with the arts community who were unaware of it until the press announcement. It can be safely assumed that prior to the above incident, scripts were not vetted by DBKL itself. That responsibility fell to the Special Branch of Royal Malaysian Police when applying for the police permit. The 2003 Script Evaluation Committee comprising of theatre activists, Royal Malaysian Police and DBKL staff was established to ensure that “every theatre performance has a valid license from City Hall” and “performances are held in an atmosphere that is ethical and takes into consideration the interest of all parties and does not give rise to any uneasiness or feelings of unrest among individuals, agencies or organizations” (Khoo et al., 2003: 118). The committee would vet all performance scripts submitted to them, change or delete where necessary, request a preview if needed, and only grant licences if the performances do not (see Khoo et al., 2003: 119):

1. touch on racial or ethnic sensitivity
2. touch on the religious edicts and beliefs of any religion
3. touch on the Institute of Royalty
4. ridicule, put to contempt, disrepute or shame heads of states
5. impinge on policy and administration of nation/ states
6. touch on issues related to Laws of the nation/ state
7. utilize obscene/vulgar and 'lewd' terminology or acts
8. [use] attire that reveals the breast/private parts (genitalia)

## **CENSORSHIP OF MALAYSIAN DRAMA IN ENGLISH**

This section presents a chronological summary of Malaysian drama in English (MDE) that are contemporaneous to Chin San Sooi’s theatrical performances. Though non-exhaustive, it provides

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<sup>1</sup> Malaysian Legislation (2006). Retrieved from : [http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/consol\\_act/etokla1992504/](http://www.commonlii.org/my/legis/consol_act/etokla1992504/)

an insight into the trials and tribulations of local dramaturges as they attempted to accommodate a triumvirate of sensitivities—race, religion and politics—to get their works showcased to the public.

*Halfway Road, Penang* (1971), staged by the late Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof two years after the May 13 incident, is a good start. As with all public performances, police clearance and permits were mandatory. In Penang, the final approval and permit for public stage productions fall under the remit of the Special Branch of the Penang police headquarters. The initial proposal for the performance of *Halfway Road, Penang* was to stage it in Convent Green Lane Hall (13-14 August 1971) and open it to the public through ticket sales. Upon inquiring about the delayed response by the district police branch where the application together with the script was submitted several months prior, Ghulam-Sarwar was notified that the Special Branch of Penang wanted to interrogate him regarding the performance. Three Special Branch officers despatched for the interrogation insisted on the removal of all references to the May 13 riots, failing which no permit would be issued. Ghulam-Sarwar refused to comply on the grounds that the play would be robbed of its substantive content and message; the drama's realism, conflict, integrity and intended audience response would be irreparably lost. The officer in charge then expressed his displeasure at the negative portrayal of the Malay characters in the play, particularly Rosnah as a bar waitress and prostitute, and Ramli as her sleazy and drunk patron. Although all three officers were fully aware of the risqué activities occurring in the actual Halfway Road (Jalan Sekerat) in Penang and the play's accurate depiction, they did not want such dirty laundry washed in public; therefore, they demanded the removal of other related passages, to which the dramaturge adamantly refused. Thereafter, Ghulam-Sarwar was asked if he could guarantee that there would be no riot or provocation of racial sentiments if the play were staged. After his honest yet unsatisfactory reply that predicting audience reaction is not an exact science, he was denied the licence for a public performance. Consequently, he moved the performance to the School of Humanities at Universiti Sains Malaysia (SEAMEO-RECSAM) campus. Thanks to the fanfare generated through extensive newspaper publicity for its police involvement, non-issuance of permit, ticket refunds and sudden change of venue, *Halfway Road* finally opened to a full house of students and the public.

An exceptional case was Kee Thuan Chye's agitprop theatre *1984: Here and Now*. Based on George Orwell's *1984*, it was staged in 1985 by Five Arts Centre. Many described it as "a rare event" in Malaysian theatre" (Hariati Azizan, 2016) for being defiantly critical of the government and yet issued a staging permit; it was performed without incident to a full house every night from 12-16 July 1985. The play openly contested every aspect of Malaysian life—from bumiputra privileges to civil (dis)obedience, human rights and cultural policing, all of which were taboo topics of the day and still very much so today. At best, this discrepancy could be an honest attempt by a popular and confident government to let a more mature public be the judge of the contents of *1984: Here and Now*. At worst, it could be a ploy by a heavy-handed government to allow some dissent to slip through the censorship net into the public space in order to appear democratic and, therefore, tolerant of some civil disobedience. Whatever the real reason, it was an obvious outlier as shown by the next case.

In 1986, Five Arts Centre wanted to stage Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole* in Kuala Lumpur. The authority categorically refused them a performance permit on the grounds that both Kuo Pao Kun and his play were anti-government (Rowland, 2002). However, Kee Thuan Chye (the lead actor in *The Coffin*) and Krishen Jit (the play's director) believed that the permit denial was not fundamentally aimed at censoring Kuo or his play; rather, it was more a case of "retaliating for *1984*" (Yeo, 1999:10). Again, while we might never know the real reason for the ban, a case could be made that a decisive crackdown on inflammatory

propaganda—including anything that might be construed as potentially subversive to the authorities—was underway, as illustrated by *Ops Lalang*.

*Ops Lalang* of 1987, purportedly to prevent racial riots, was one of the most notorious crackdowns by the Malaysian Police on dissidents, namely NGO activists, students, opposition leaders, academicians and artists, among others. Among those arrested was Chow Chee Keong, the founder of Pentas Drama Kreatif—an amateur, people-based theatre group founded in 1986 which was believed to be directly influenced by the Philippines' PETA, a non-profit Marxist theatre association (<http://myartmemoryproject.com/censorship/>). Pentas presented two plays on social change: *A Thousand Planks* (1986) which portrays the poverty-stricken condition of squatters in Kuala Lumpur; and *Inch by Inch* (1987) which depicts the repercussions of overdevelopment in the city. Chow's detention was based on the suspicion that he was disseminating Marxist thoughts in the country (Rowland, 2005: 119).

Six years after the *Ops Lalang* brutal crackdown, Actor's Studio production of Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1993) was perhaps the most sensational controversy on the Kuala Lumpur performance stage. Although DBKL approved the public staging permit for the show, a critic's unfavourable review of the show in a Malay language newspaper after the opening night stirred up some dispute about Ramona Rahman, a Malay Muslim actress who played Stella. The press criticized Ramona's kissing of Stanley (played by Andrew Leci) as un-Islamic and immoral. Krishen Jit, writing as Utih in his column on *Sunday Style*, lashed out that "as if the police watch on play-scripts and actors was not enough, now the Kuala Lumpur theatre producers have to get through another investigative obstacle before they can put up a play" (Utih: 1994). Reacting to the controversy, DBKL insisted on the censorship of several "inappropriate" scenes in the play, besides a ban on all scenes that required close physical contact of the opposite sexes on stage. Taking it one step further, DBKL tightened its control by ordering a full preview of all future staged performances prior to any issuance of performance permits.

That one isolated comment from the public could become law, especially where religion is involved, is not unusual in the Malaysian drama scene. Two noteworthy cases illustrate this point. In December 2001, Eve Ensler's *The Vagina Monologues* premiered and it was re-staged in January 2002 to full houses. Due to popular demand by the audience, the producers Five Arts Centre and Actors Studio Theatre applied to DBKL for performance permit extension. However, the request was rejected "following a complaint received from an unidentified source purportedly unhappy with the sexual content of the work, and by some locally inserted segments that touched on Islam in the production" (<http://www.myartmemoryproject.com/censorship/>). The authorities reacted in the same way when in July 2003, the Instant Café Theatre Company (ICT), known for its satirical comedies, staged its 2<sup>nd</sup> *First Annual Bolehwood Awards*. After the opening night, an anonymous letter, "Bolehwood Awards Teatre Komedi Yang Melampau," [Bolehwood Awards, the Extreme Comedy Theatre] was published in the local Malay daily *Utusan Malaysia*, expressing disapproval at the insensitivities of the script content (Khoo et al., 2003: 85-87). DBKL reacted by demanding the immediate removal of 'sensitive' parts; however, after legal consultation with their lawyers, ICT stood firm with their decision not to censor anything. DBKL then informed ICT that their public performance license would be revoked and all their future shows would be banned. Finally, to bring closure to a painful chapter, the Mayor of Kuala Lumpur interceded and reversed the ban, but "he undermined this apparently positive move by very quickly instituting the Script Evaluation Committee and the guidelines listed [above]" (Philip, 2007: 41).

A political play that had to bear the brunt of the censorship board is Huzir Sulaiman's *Election Day* (2004) when its restaging by Five Arts Centre was refused a public performance permit.

*Election Day* was a response to the 1999 General Elections and former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim's dismissal from his post on charges of alleged corruption and sodomy. DBKL refused to grant Five Arts Centre a performance permit unless "all proper nouns or references to actual individuals be removed. This included words such as Guardian Pharmacy, Dr Mahathir, Volkswagen and Datin Seri Wan Azizah" (<http://www.myartmemoryproject.com/censorship/>). Huzir complied by replacing sensitive names with "thinly veiled approximations"—Dr Mahathir became Visionary Leader, Datin Seri Wan Azizah was replaced with Gentle Lady Doctor, and Member of Parliament Shahrizat Abdul Jalil was renamed 'Big Hair' and 'Big Smile' (Philip, 2007: 53 )

## CENSORSHIP OF CHIN SAN SOOI'S *REFUGEE IMAGES*

The musical *Refugee: Images* is undoubtedly the most political of all Chin San Sooi's plays. Edited by Kathy Rowland, the script is published in Five Arts Centre's *Staging History: Selected Plays from Five Arts Centre Malaysia 1984-2014*. It provides a sequence of opposing images throughout its two acts to emphasize the theme that everyone is a refugee looking for fulfillment in life. Set in the late 1970s at the height of the Vietnamese refugee crisis, the musical opens with scenes of Vietnamese boat people fleeing Vietnam after the fall of Saigon, and crossing treacherous seas before landing at Pulau Bidong, an island in Terengganu. It narrates their concerns, aspirations and quest for a better future. In juxtaposition to these images, local Malaysians are also portrayed as struggling with their own fears, conflicts and everyday problems while discovering the beauty behind the chaos. One week prior to the opening of *Refugee Images* in 1980, Chin San Sooi was called up for interrogation by the Special Branch of the Police in Bukit Aman regarding the play script. On the desk of his interrogator was a yellow file containing all details of the play that needed to be vetted and clarified. Among the matters deemed "sensitive" in the play were those that the authorities thought could not only tarnish Malaysia's image, but could also be "diplomatically embarrassing to the government" (<http://www.myartmemoryproject.com/censorship/>). One of the issues pertained to the university quota system as illustrated in the following.

Act One Scene VI (Two Friends) features two friends discussing the university quota reserved for the bumiputras. Under the affirmative action race-based university quota system of the New Economic Policy, Malaysians of indigenous Malay origin are given preferential treatment in university education, with easier access to government scholarships. The quota reserved in public universities is 55 percent for Bumiputras, 35 percent for the Chinese and 10 percent for the Indians. Friend One complains about the injustice of the quota system and is therefore resolved to leave the country with his family for the sake of his children's education:

Friend One: ... You know it is for our children's sake that we are leaving. What life can we give them in this country when the future's bleak, when lip-service is paid to justice? It is hard to stomach. Their education will be hampered. Places in the universities are limited. It is not easy for me to go. have to forego so much—friends, dear ones, mother, a whole way of life. (Chin, 2015: 85).

Friend Two tries to persuade Friend One to stay, assuring him that "[t]hings will always change...Australia, Britain don't need us. They want us. Malaysia needs us" (Chin, 2015: 86) but Friend One is still keen on migrating.

The topic of migration spills into the next scene with “The Beauty and the Artist” deliberating on Malaysian society’s appreciation of creative talents. The Artist is frustrated that “[n]obody understands [his] art” and laments that if he “were in America, [he] would have won fame and fortune by now. [His] talents would have been recognized” (Chin, 2015: 87). Finally, the Artist makes up his mind to emigrate to Australia where he would receive his much-craved adulation:

Artist: The adulation is to fan my creative ego. It gives me a sense of belonging. In this country, I can’t get it. We have a dumb public, dead wood! Kung-fu addicts. *Peyton Place* addicts. Theatre philistines and misfits. (Chin, 2015: 88).

Chin San Sooi was questioned by Bukit Aman Police regarding the issue of migration as the “subject matter was not very comfortable to Bukit Aman”<sup>2</sup>. He had to explain that those were the characters’ rather than his own concerns. Indeed, in creative writing, it is crucial that the playwright penetrates the characters’ psyche to portray as realistic an image as possible. The interrogating officer also queried the playwright regarding his unflattering portrayal of Kuala Lumpur. The conversation between the Artist and Beauty in this section is essential in understanding alienation and belonging, the central themes of *Refugee: Images* in which every single one of the characters is a refugee.

Beauty: ...London is my home. I can’t orientate myself to the Malaysian environment, this small-town mentality, Kuala Lumpur thrust upon with city status when she is not ready for it yet, where every little thing is an achievement and not an expression of its life. Soulless city... (Chin, 2015: 88)

Act Two Scene II is set at Café Bidong and includes a scene in which a prostitute offers her services to four male refugees at the Bidong camp. This part of the scene was initially ordered by the police to be censored in the 1986 production because of the prostitute character. After explaining to the interrogating officer that the character is actually Vietnamese and not Malaysian, the scene was eventually allowed to remain as long as it does not portray Malaysia and bumiputras in a negative light.

Act Two Scene VIII (Another Part of Pulau Bidong) directly mentions the then Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Dr Mahathir Mohamad in the opening voiceover of a radio programme:

Voice of the World: It was reported in Kuala Lumpur that the Deputy Prime Minister Datuk Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, said that the Vietnamese Boat People would be shot if they attempted to land on Malaysian shores. (Chin, 2015: 102)

The censorship officer in Bukit Aman was apprehensive that the country’s then deputy minister Datuk Dr Mahathir Mohamad was negatively depicted despite its ubiquitous coverage in the international media, the most notable being *The Washington Post*.

Since Islam is the official religion of Malaysia, the authorities are understandably very sensitive of any acts that could potentially insult or confuse the predominant local Muslim population. Accordingly, the police also asked the playwright to censor a chant in Act Two Scene IX

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<sup>2</sup> Chin San Sooi. (3 Nov. 2017). Class lecture. International Islamic University Malaysia.

(Everywhere) as it mentioned places of religious pilgrimages of other faiths alongside Islamic sacred places (Medina and Mecca).

All: Benares, Benares, Benares, Benares  
 Under a Bo tree, under a Bo tree  
 Medina, Medina, Medina, Medina,  
 Mecca make a Mecca, Mecca make a Mecca  
 Bethlehem, Bethlehem, Bethlehem, Bethlehem  
 Calvary, Calvary, Calvary, Calvary  
 Benares  
 Bo-tree  
 Medina  
 Mecca  
 Bethlehem  
 Calvary

(Chin, 2015: 104)

Unsatisfied with a demand that he reckoned was too extreme, the playwright eventually decided not to stage the musical to a public audience at the Petaling Jaya Civic Centre Auditorium. Censoring too many parts of the musical, he believed, would render it incomplete and meaningless. Moreover, it is much harder to make changes to a musical piece due to the demanding syllables, metre and rhyme scheme; any last-minute changes could disrupt the flow. Time constraint was another factor as the playwright had less than a week to rewrite the “sensitive” parts and re-collaborate with the musicians if he opted to do so.

In the 1986 production, *Refugee: Images* was retitled *Morning in Night* to avoid controversies elicited by the word “refugee”. While a public performance permit was approved this time, it was subject to several conditions. Act One Scene V (The Landing of the Boat People) had to be entirely removed because the police found it “too violent”. The scene features five episodes of locals and refugees transacting for daily necessities in five different camps. As each episode progresses, the hostility towards the refugees increases until, eventually, in Camp Five, a refugee is murdered amid a transaction:

*(Camp Five. Sound of night.)*

Refugee: That you?

Local: Yes.

Refugee: Have you got the provisions?

Local: Yes.

Refugee: Yes. Let's have the provisions.

Local: Here it is. *(Knives him).*

*(As at the beginning of the scene. Boat people are prevented from landing on shore. Shouting reaches a crescendo with the statement 'Don't force us to be murderers' above the din. Silence.)* (Chin, 2015: 85).

Although the playwright tried to convince the officer that the scene was based on facts reported in local newspapers, the police insisted that it had to be censored if a public performance permit were to be issued. Reluctantly, the playwright agreed but staged the play under protest, with the censored scene communicated to the audience through notes in the programme book. Another condition was that the controversial Pulau Bidong must not be named in the play. Instead, it should be replaced



with Pulau Harapan. It was clear that any references that link Malaysia to international controversies were to be eliminated although they were widely reported in local newspapers.



Figure 1: A screenshot of Chin San Sooi's *Refugee: Images* performance by the Canticle Singers, 9-13 August 2006 at Panggung Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur. Picture courtesy of Chin San Sooi's private collection.

In 1980, when *Refugee: Images* was denied a public performance permit because of the ongoing Indo-China refugee crisis, Chin San Sooi brought the play to be staged at his rehearsal studio in Petaling Jaya. The play garnered a lot of publicity and the support of quite a substantial audience; it was staged to a packed full-house of about 110 viewers. In 1986, *Refugee: Images* was renamed *Morning in Night* before being staged without the knifing scene. However, twenty years later, from 9-13 August 2006, the musical was given a public performance permit without any censorship and, for the first time, finally, it was allowed to be staged “in its complete and original form” at the Panggung Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur (Jayagandi Jayaraj, 2006).

## DISCUSSION

Ever since the May 13, 1969 racial riot, government authorities in Malaysia have been vigilant that public performances do not offend certain “sensitivities”, a euphemism for politics, race and religion. To that effect, they imposed a litany of preemptive measures such as script vetting, Special Branch interrogations, licensing, permits and spot checks. Not surprisingly, most artists in Malaysia have been cautious enough to ensure that their works do not transgress into perimeters deemed “seditious”.

Even after the release of the DBKL Guidelines of 2003, MDE playwrights still had to rely on guesswork to self-censor their plays as they tried to accommodate the “sensitivities”. Oblivious of what would exactly constitute an offence to the authorities, they were bound to run afoul of the law as they experimented through trial and error with grey areas to determine what is acceptable to censorship authorities who were themselves improvising as they encountered new situations. This became apparent as officers in charge at both national and state levels used their own discretions to determine what is permissible. This explains what actually looked like a statistical veto such that, say, for every dozen risqué plays that were censored, one of them would slip through the net.

As Susan Philip (2007) aptly puts it,

...theatre practitioners have generally worked in ignorance of what might or might not upset a censor, knowing only that there are particular 'sensitivities' that, if trodden on, might jeopardize the granting of their license. Guidelines were, for a long time, vague and arbitrary at best (p.40).

The lack of a unified, consistent and systematic approach to censorship also accounts for the occasional instances of excessive caution, if not institutional overreach. A notable example is the denial of staging licence partly due the inclusion of Rosnah the prostitute and her patron Ramli in Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof's *Halfway Road, Penang* (1971)—although the scene is a close depiction of reality. Another example is the kissing scene in Tennessee Williams' *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1993) and the ensuing ban on close physical proximity between the opposite sexes. The fact that MDE is confined to an elite artistic community and staged in Kuala Lumpur which is a relatively liberal capital city renders the scene quite anodyne, besides giving the censorship regulations an anachronistic overtone.

Another factor that influenced censorship is the topicality and, by extension, the controversiality of the subject matter. Thus, with time, the authorities softened their stance on censorship, eventually allowing the staging of Chin San Sooi's *Refugee: Images* as originally intended two decades later when the refugee issue was no longer trending. Indeed, what may seem offensive or controversial at a certain moment is not static but reflective of the socio-political and cultural values of a certain time and place. The first staging of the musical in 1980 coincided with the peak of the refugee crisis in Southeast Asia. Malaysia's treatment of the boat people was not reported favourably in the international press despite global indifference about their ordeal. Therefore, the authorities saw it necessary to curb any further attempts to demonise Malaysia, which explains their vigorous attempts at censorship. Admittedly, the censorship imposed on the second performance in 1986 was milder than the first one; for one thing, the playwright did not have to endure any arduous interrogation. The refugee crisis had been brought under control by then, and although refugees were still fleeing Vietnam, the Orderly Departure Program had somewhat reduced new arrivals in Malaysia. By 2006, the third performance of *Refugee: Images* was allowed public staging without any censorship, and for the first time, it could be experienced as intended by the playwright. Coincidentally, Malaysia had just celebrated its second World Refugee Day on 20 June, 2006 with UNHCR. The musical ran for five days from 9-13 August, 2006 at the Panggung Bandaraya, Kuala Lumpur. However, the show did not garner much attention from the public, theatre critics or political commentators. In fact, it was uncertain if the musical was deemed a success as a "staged performance of social realism, comic relief, or musical entertainment" (Hedman, 2009: 297). Notwithstanding the reduced impact as a result of being far removed from the urgency of the times, *Refugee: Images* (2006) did manage to create an awareness in the audience of the plight of migrant workers in Klang Valley and other major cities in Malaysia, many of whom are refugees. To quote Hedman, "the musical provided a point of reference for more contemporary concerns about the proliferation of (other) Others in residential neighbourhoods and inner city areas, as well as in makeshift shanty-like dwellings on the suburban frontiers or 'jungles' closer to factory, construction, or plantation sites" (2009: 296-297).

Nonetheless, it is possible to infer in some MDE an attempt at political activism to effect social change by challenging, if not simply stirring a debate, around some of the sacred cows of the Malaysian constitution: government, Islam, bumiputra rights, Malay language and the monarchy. This is especially obvious in Chin San Sooi's *Refugee: Images*. Thus, Act One Scene VI (Two

Friends) can be read as a criticism of the quota system based on ethnic representation in favour of a meritocratic system. Similarly, it is not far-fetched to interpret Act Two Scene VIII (Another Part of Pulau Bidong) as the demonization of country's political leadership, something which is hardly tolerated even in liberal democracies; indeed, all governments attempt to control political speech when their interests are at stake. Moreover, the threat to shoot on site by Dr Mahathir was more rhetorical in nature; it was a shock tactic to steer an indifferent world to action on the refugee situation which was getting out of control. As for the mention of Mecca and Medina in Act Two Scene IX (Everywhere), although not deliberately provocative or offensive, it can rouse an atavistic reaction among some Muslims; therefore, the playwright could have avoided these religiously loaded words.

## **CONCLUSION**

The history of MDE in Malaysia is punctuated with the application of unprincipled and arbitrary censorship as the authorities improvised to deal with new situations that trespassed into sensitive areas related to race, religion and politics. Understandably, this has been a cause of much frustration among playwrights who felt harassed as they were questioned by officers in charge. Undoubtedly, most of the time, playwrights were left with no choice but to edit their works failing which no staging permit would be issued. Notwithstanding all their interrogations, the authorities were mostly willing to engage in dialogue with playwrights to find a compromise. For a newly independent country and a fledgling democracy such as Malaysia, this is commendable. Despite all the initial faux pas, which are unavoidable teething problems, the censorship board did eventually come up with some guidelines. Unlike liberal democracies, Malaysia, as a responsible democracy, imposes limits to freedom of expression for peaceful coexistence in a multicultural society.

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