



**Krishen Jit:**  
**An Uncommon Position**



## PREVIOUS LIDRA PRODUCTIONS.

1960	<b>The Waters of Lethe</b>	Directed by Krishen Jit.
	<b>Antigone<sup>++</sup></b> (Anouilh)	Directed by Tan Jin Chor.
1963	<b>The Servant of Two Masters</b> (Carlo Goldoni)	Directed by John Augustin and Bertram Hogan.
1964	<b>The Respectable Prostitute<sup>++</sup></b> (Jean-Paul Sartre)	Directed by Bertram Hogan
	<b>The Bear</b> (Anton Chekhov) (reading)	Directed by Vijaya Samarawickrama.
	<b>The Lesson</b> (Eugene Ionesco) (reading)	Directed by Bertram Hogan.
	<b>Ghosts</b> (Henrik Ibsen) (reading)	Directed by Pritam Singh Sekhon.
	<b>The Maids</b> (Jean Genet) (reading)	Directed by Nomita Paul.
	<b>Creditors<sup>++</sup></b> (August Strindberg)	Directed by Antony Price.
	<b>The Bald Prima-Donna<sup>+</sup></b> (Eugene Ionesco)	Directed by Antony Price.
1965	<b>In Camera</b> (Jean Paul Sartre) (reading)	Directed by Bertram Hogan.
	<b>The Father</b> (August Strindberg) (reading)	Directed by Pritam Singh Sekhon

<sup>+</sup> **First production in Malaya**

<sup>++</sup> **First production in Malaysia.**

## Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position

Selected Writings



WRITING ASIAN ARTS IS A PROJECT OF  
THE CONTEMPORARY ASIAN ARTS CENTRE;  
ITS AIM IS TO FACILITATE NEW WRITINGS  
AND CREATE AN ARCHIVE BY PUBLISHING  
EXISTING WRITINGS.

Project Editor: T.K.Sabapathy

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Foreword by Baha Zain



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Krishen, right, as Julius Caesar in the Malayan Arts Theatre Group's 1959 production of *Julius Caesar*. At left is Leslie Dawson.

## PREFACE

T.K. Sabapathy

I recall the appearance of *Talking Drama with Utih* in October 1972 in The New Sunday Times. (Earlier in that year I commenced to teach in the Fine Arts Section of the School of Humanities, Universiti Sains Malaysia, Penang).

No, *Utih* did not jump at and grab you with splenetic fervour that Sunday morning or on any other Sunday. On the contrary, it crept up to and around you, quietly and somewhat insistently. The initial reviews intimated a voice that could unfold incrementally and one that would be around for quite a while. Yes, *Utih* appeared one Sunday in October 1972, moved in and settled down for twenty-two years.

It was a column devoted to reviewing modern theatre in Malaysia along multiple fronts. *Utih* appeared as sandwiched between columns of varying lengths but of unvarying width, on a page featuring reports, opinions, reviews and overviews as well as skimpily stitched anecdotes on a range of issues, events and personalities. It stood alone in appraising theatre practice and in forwarding cultural analysis. *Utih* jostled for attention and vied to register a presence. Wedged in streams of competing voices on divergent subjects, it could well have passed unheeded as it was not distinguished by design or sign.

Yet, *Utih* refused to go unnoticed because its voice was uncommon. And *Utih* endured longer than any other columnist.

I was drawn to *Utih* in part by knowledge of the identity of the writer employing this pseudonym, namely: Krishen Jit. We met in 1963 at the Berkeley campus of the University of California while pursuing our masteral studies. We shared lodgings for three years, developing mutual as well as separate interests in history, literature, film, theatre, art and food. We leaned towards interdisciplinary, extraterritorial (although these designations were relatively unknown then) approaches to our respective studies; these dispositions endured. For that matter, Krishen's creative and critical practices are continuously redefined, reconfigured by fresh thinking on interdisciplinary as well as extraterritorial strategies and approaches. Symptoms of these engagements entered into *Utih*'s purview and set it apart from others.

*Utih* signaled Krishen staking a position, claiming a voice in the public domain for theatre and for thinking on culture. The column was not the only site marked and consolidated by him; there are others, although *Talking Drama with Utih* was primary and the most enduring. In prospecting some of the others, which he undertook concurrently and by setting aside the guise of *Utih*, Krishen widened his compass; he did so also by mov-



ing out of Malaysia and entering the region of Southeast Asia and beyond. These entries and exits are never finite, never neatly compartmentalised. They meld into one another, impinging upon conceptions of nation and region and bearing upon critical and creative practices.

I was drawn to *Utih* for another reason; it has to do with prospecting expanded, jostling grounds for explicating modern/contemporary theatre in Malaysia. The driving force is history. Krishen's readings of history are distilled. At times his mediations appear as backdrops; at other times they percolate through the web of analysis that he weaves in appraising a particular production/work/issue. To pursue these ends in reviews for a newspaper is formidable; they generate tensions as they run counter to insistence on the contingent and the transient—attributes that underscore journalism. *Utih's* reviews are marked by these conflicting ambitions. Yet, Krishen persisted; in doing so he engendered a critical tenor that was singular and consequential. In this regard, *Talking Drama with Utih* was a test site for writing critical histories of theatre in Malaysia and Southeast Asia.

These and other dimensions of Krishen's writing, their impact on theatre practice and its reception, their influence in shaping the history of Malaysian (and Southeast Asian) theatre are discussed at length by Kathy Rowland in her introduction. Krishen has also produced significant commentaries on visual art and artists; these are now firmly lodged in Malaysian art historiography.

*Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position. Selected Writings* features a selection of writings on theatre, visual art and cultural issues that span thirty years. This publication gives writers and practitioners familiar with Krishen opportunities to re-visit, analyse and re-evaluate writings that have influenced their thoughts and practice. For those who are encountering Krishen for the first time, the publication affords grounds to crystallise as well as direct responses to themes and issues that are significant to their own critical and creative research.

In these respects *Krishen Jit: An Uncommon Position. Selected Writings* is issued in conjunction with a project designated as Writing Asian Arts by the Contemporary Asian Arts Centre. This publication signals a continuing aim of the Centre to build archives of existing writings that can serve as touchstones for present day writers, practitioners and publics in determining contexts that are germane to practice and to the reception of artistic creativity.

## THE KRISHEN JIT I KNOW

Bahá Zain

To many people, the name Krishen Jit is synonymous with English-language theatre. In actual fact, Krishen represents the meeting point between Malay and English language theatre in Malaysia. In addition, he is also an authority on both national and international performing arts practices. Since the 70s, Krishen has been a prominent voice in the theatre movement of the country, speaking to a theatre-going audience that was either supportive of, or rejected local theatre. His contribution towards the appreciation of local theatre has made Krishen the most important reference point in the development of current theatre in Malaysia.

To write about Krishen Jit in a special publication discussing his contribution and importance within the arts in Malaysia is a difficult task, but a most honourable one.

I first came into contact with his ideas in the 70s when his commentaries on theatre and culture first appeared in the monthly magazine, *Dewan Sastera*, a literary magazine launched in January 1971. Undeniably, the person instrumental in encouraging him to put pen to paper for *Dewan Sastera* was our National Literary Laureate, the late Usman Awang, who was the editor of the magazine at the time. Usman was not only a poet but also a writer of plays, and it was his personality, open-mindedness to different communities, and the quality of his own drama scripts that drew Krishen into a close relationship with *Dewan Sastera*.

The tragedy of May 1969<sup>1</sup> appeared to awaken the artists and urban intellectuals in Kuala Lumpur to the realisation that art, poetry and theatre—as manifestations of man's deepest expressions—were capable of transcending boundaries of ethnicity. The arts could serve as a bridge to connect people and as an antidote to the traumatic and tragic experience. Krishen, as an art and theatre advocate during the May 1969 crisis, was not just concerned with art and culture in isolation, but was also motivated by the same hope, that through the arts, a traumatised Kuala Lumpur would heal her soul with humanity, beauty and community goodwill.

Krishen's commentaries and discussions about theatre productions and other developments in the performing arts, published in the English dailies and in *Dewan Sastera* from 1971 till the 80s (I was appointed Chief Editor, *Dewan Sastera* from 1977), were invaluable, given the dearth of theatre critics in the country. He was a guide and

<sup>1</sup> The 1969 General Elections campaign inflamed inter-ethnic tensions, leading to riots breaking out on 13 May 1969.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



tions, regional collaborations and a network of relationships—often sit uneasily, with each other. It is tempting to construct a master narrative underlining the various strands of Krishen's career within the context of our social and political environment. It would enable us to speak of a mosaic of different pieces forming a coherent picture, and allow us to 'contextualise' and 'locate' Krishen Jit. We can then add him to the iconic figures of Malaysian arts, as a guide to meaning and direction in our own creative and artistic journey. However, this publication does not seek to impose such symmetry upon a multifaceted career.

Krishen's importance stems from his multiplicity—in formative influences, in positions taken, in choices made. Few can match the depth and breadth of his involvement; fewer still have sustained the measure of relevance Krishen continues to maintain after four decades, committed to the arts.

Special Thanks go to Marion D'Cruz and Five Arts Centre, Datuk Baha Zain, Datuk Noordin Hassan, Puan Wairah Marzuki and Encik Amiruddin of Balai Seni Lukis, Datin Rose Ismail of the New Straits Times, Staff of the NST Resource Centre, William Harald-Wong, SC Shekar, Rosihan Zain, Eddin Khoo, Faridah Merican and The Actors Studio Theatre, Barbara Gan, Maureen Atkinson, Susan Sara John, Professor Ghulam Sawar, Amir Muhammad, Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka, Arkib Negara, TheatreWorks, Wild Rice, Temple of Fine Arts. And to Krishen Jit for his faith and generosity of spirit.

## I THEATRE :: Essays



Ismail Zain's poster design for Noordin Hassan's *Cindai* (1988) is an example of the artist's entry into computer graphics.



A SURVEY OF MODERN SOUTHEAST ASIAN DRAMA<sup>6</sup>

Tenggara: Journal of Southeast Asian Literature, 1989

## Early Modern Drama

The idea of the modern in Southeast Asian theatre was, until about two decades ago, hitched to notions of Western dramaturgy. The early playwrights were educated elite, for the most part, scions of a privileged colonial education, who congregated in the metropolitan areas at the dawn of the twentieth-century. (An exception is to be found in British Malaya, where the pioneer indigenous playwrights passed through Malay-education that was by no means a sign of privilege). They were literary men steeped in the Western liberal tradition, and in nationalist ideals. Impassioned by the prevailing revolutionary fervour, they wrote romantic spoken dramas, presumably in the manner of their mentors, Shakespeare, or Goethe, and Schiller. But their penchant for melodrama unmasked the powerful residual effects of autochthonous dramatic experiences. Their plays were written and performed for their peers: urban students, teachers, artists, journalists and professional men. On the whole, the pioneer dramatists adhered to an amateur ideal and stood proudly above and apart from the theatre professionals dispensing popular theatre entertainment in the burgeoning towns and cities of colonial Southeast Asia.

The first to write Western-influenced dramas, the Philippines and Thailand offer contrasting images of elitism prevailing in the early modern theatre of Southeast Asia. The Philippine revolutionary dramas (1902-06) were mostly written by a middle-class and Western-educated elite, but some among their number were also theatre professionals. They garnered responses beyond the small coterie of men of their rank and occupations. The so-called "seditious" plays emerged while the Philippines were locked in brutal guerrilla warfare with the Americans, and caused its creators to be harassed, if not imprisoned. The spoken dramas were the creations of the *ilustrados* (educated elite), such as Aurelio Tolentino, Juan Abad, and Juan Matapang Cruz, who regarded themselves as heirs to the committed literature tradition of Balagtas and Rizal. They also wrote the Spanish-influenced musical play, *sarsuwela*, which in the early American Occupation era, was just as inflammatory as the spoken dramas. Couched in allegory, in part so as to escape detection of their seditious purposes by the American authorities, the incendiary plays struck a responsive chord with the politicised Filipino populace. The theatre scholar, Tiongson, informs us that the "masses everywhere constructed make-

<sup>6</sup> This essay is a revised and expanded version of an essay first published in the *Cambridge Guide to World Drama*, Editor: Martin Banham. 1988. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 43-49. 1969.

shift stages of bamboo to enable non-professional actors from their own class to present these plays" (Tiongson, 14). The spoken drama and the *sarsuwela* ousted the indigenous Spanish folk drama, *komedya* from the Manila stage, and drove it to the provinces. Despite its short duration, the revolutionary spoken drama and *sarsuwela* left a legacy of passionate allegorical theatre and "people's art" that is vivid with contemporary Filipino theatre practitioners.

Once the fury of the Filipino Revolution was contained by the Americans, the spoken drama and *sarsuwela* sputtered into political innocuity, and turned into domestic tales of middle-class romance and moral persuasion. The *ilustrados* switched their allegiance to the Americans with the coming of the "Second American Occupation" in the seductive guise of the American education system. The result was doldrums in modern Filipino drama. The self-conscious literary homilies generated by the American-sponsored drama education could hardly compete with the *bodabil* (vaudeville) and the movies, which became increasingly popular in the 1930s.

The early Thai Western-inspired drama was a singularly elitist enterprise, for its plays were written and performed principally by and for the aristocracy. Actually, modern Thai theatre has a fitful history, and much of it remains undocumented. Fortunately, the beginnings of Thai spoken drama (*lakon puth*), zestfully pioneered by King Rama VI (1910-25), is well told in Walter Vella's *Chaiyo! King Vajiravudh and the Development of Thai Nationalism*. Never colonised by a Western power, Thailand nevertheless nurtured a Western-educated elite, initially of royal and aristocratic lineage, that was receptive to European influences in politics and art. Original, adapted and translated plays were written and performed as early as the end of the nineteenth-century, and something of a climax in dramatic activity was reached during the reign of Rama VI.

The future king's nine-year sojourn in England (1893-1902), that took him to Sandhurst and Oxford, transformed him into a Victorian gentleman, insofar as he was infected with English upper class clubby habits, including a love for amateur theatricals. Vajiravudh was also imbued with a passion for the Thai traditional arts, and he was mindful of its historical depth and charismatic value in enhancing royal power. The synthesis of tradition and Westernization implicit in his thought and behaviour, found artistic expression in the promotion, simultaneously, of Western theatre and Thai classi-



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Krishen Jit is one of the most influential figures in the arts in South East Asia. He has distinguished himself as a director, dramaturge, critic, academic, arts advocate, educationist, historian and regional powerbroker in a career that spans over 40 years. As a critic and scholar, he has defied the boundaries of language and genre, making his body of writings an indispensable resource in the structuring and historicizing of arts practice in Malaysia. Krishen's critical studies have appeared in *The Asian Theatre Journal*, *Dewan Sastera*, *The New Sunday Times*, *The Far Eastern Economic Review* and *The Cambridge Guide to World Theatre* amongst others. *An Uncommon Position* features a selection of Krishen's essays and articles written from the early 1970s to date, covering theatre, dance and visual art. Articles include an analysis of contemporary theatre in South East Asia, the impending polemics of religion and art in Malaysia, the dynamics of multiculturalism in performance and the artist's role as a Public Intellectual. This collection is a must for anyone seeking an insider's perspective of the arts.



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