

# A Case for the Teaching of Drama in our Schools — 1

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It is a well known fact we have very little in the way of good theatre in our country. There are only a handful of buildings that can be called theatres of any standard and nearly all of them are in the Federal Capital. There are few good theatrical performances outside the city. My intention in this paper is to try and analyse the reason for the poor public interest in this very important aspect of our culture. Drama is an activity which can be a powerful educational instrument for adults as well as children.

Why is it that there is so little public interest in the theatre? What can be done to create a love for the theatre among Malaysians?

My feeling is that people are not keen on the theatre for two reasons: The audiences are not trained from early childhood to appreciate the art of the theatre, and the plays presented are for the most part not worth watching. Why should a Malaysian take the trouble to pay \$5/- or \$10/- to see a play when he can sit comfortably at home with his family and be entertained by Television?

Part of the reason why theatre groups have to charge exorbitant entrance fees is the crippling entertainment tax levied on them. The producers of any stage show have to pay a high tax regardless of whether the show is meant for charity or for private profit. This means that a high proportion of the production cost is spent on taxes with the result that less money is spent on making a play visually attractive and worthwhile for audiences to see. It is the general feeling of the entertainers in this country that if we are to foster some interest in the art of the theatre, some of the burden of paying for the cost of the production should be borne by the State. This is especially true of school plays and amateur productions.

At present much of the theatre activity in this country is in the hands of a few dedicated adults in the urban areas. These few individuals are heroically working against tremendous odds to keep alive the interest in the art of the theatre, but unless the authorities make a positive effort to help these artists, we will continue to have apathy and lack of interest and consequently poor standards in the theatre.

If we are going to have Malaysians interested in the theatre, then we must begin to cultivate this interest from childhood. The school is the obvious place to begin, and this is where we as teachers can be even more useful to the nation. The teaching of drama still does not get the attention it deserves in our teacher-training institutions, in the universities and elsewhere.

If we are going to have Malaysians interested in the theatre, then our teachers must be trained in the art of play-production and play-appreciation. Our training institutions should offer drama courses for prospective teachers. Obviously it will take time to offer these courses as we are still short of experts who can teach these courses effectively. But we can organize some short-term measures. For example, the Ministry of Education or some of our universities could organize short in-service courses for selected teachers from all over the country. These courses could be conducted once a year by the few qualified people we have now. In the meantime, promising students could be sent overseas for specialized training in drama so that full-scale drama programmes can be launched in five or six years time.

But this is not all. To develop our pupils' interest in drama, they should be encouraged to see as many plays as possible. In Germany today, school children can see the most expensive theatrical productions through the sale of government-subsidized tickets. Malaysians could start the same kind of programme here, though perhaps on a much smaller scale. This will obviously benefit our rural children many of whom will never see the inside of a theatre all their lives unless we do something about it. Also we must change our attitudes about the purpose of drama activity in our schools. So far drama in schools has been seen as nothing more than a vehicle for speech training by literature teachers who understand play scripts from a literary standpoint but who have no knowledge of the technical aspects of play production. Effective teacher-training programmes can emphasize the value of drama in making children express their emotional attitudes and to help them to understand the responsibilities of adulthood.

Too often the attitude in our schools is that the

experience of drama is merely a waste of valuable time – time that could be better spent in preparing for all important examinations. If the drama activity is tolerated at all, it is because profits can be derived from the sale of tickets. How many drama teachers have been told: “You could have some money from the school funds for your play, but make sure you get it back. Try and make a small profit for the library fund, will you?”. I always wonder why a sports master is never asked to pay back the funds allotted to him while a drama teacher has to make a profit. My point of course is that drama should also be recognized as vitally important to the development of a child and it should receive as much financial assistance as any of the other activities in the school.

We have long known the power of the theatre to influence human behaviour and relationships – throughout its long history it has been embraced and rejected

by governments and religious bodies depending on whether its influence was sought or feared. The theatre can be a powerful tool by which we can influence youths to accept the ideals of our society and to appreciate what it stands for. The theatre can continue to provide instruction to adults long after they have left school. But first we must cultivate a genuine interest in the theatre by presenting it as a pleasurable activity while they are still in school.

In this short introductory paper I have tried to figure out why our local theatre is so poorly attended. I hope to have provoked some strong sentiments in you through my remarks. Perhaps this paper will form the basis of a warm debate which may result in some positive action regarding the implementation of drama in Malaysian schools.