Drama in the school — some thoughts after hearing Mr Patrick Yeoh

C. NESAMALAR
Language Centre, University of Malaya.

Mr Patrick Yeoh was pretty thorough in his talk on drama in schools, organised recently by SELTA. He dealt with the choice of plays, the aims of drama in general, the people involved in a play, props to be used, the do's and don't's of stage behaviour, how auditions should be conducted, how rehearsals should be run, what to do during the various sessions and so on. The play that climaxed his talk proved that his ideas were "workable": it was enjoyable for the audience and the students seemed to have enjoyed their parts: a fair number of students were involved and even though the dialogue sounded rather stilted in the mouths of the students the play went without a hitch – and it was all done in *one* week!

Mr Yeoh was demonstrably a success yet a furtive thought kept hammering against my head that this was all only one man's view, only one way of making things work. We still have a great deal of thinking to do and a great heap of knowledge to come by.

Mr Yeoh claims that the aim of drama is self-expression. We all agree that at least one of the aims of drama in general is self-expression, but what of drama in English in Malaysia? For many, English is still virtually their first language and so the need for self-expression can only be fulfilled by English drama, but what of students in, say, five or ten years when English becomes a second language?

Surely the need to express can, and probably will,be fulfilled by Malay or one of the vernacular plays? What then becomes of the role of the English play? Would the term "self-expression" still have the same range of meaning as it does now? What is the present range anyway? How much of the interpretation of the characters and situations should be the students' and how much ours in order for the aim of self-expression to be still meaningful? How much memorization should a student do and how much improvisation for the teaching of self-expression should there be for it to be ultimately effective? Once English becomes a second language, would the term "self-expression" still connote the higher reaches of creative and imaginative expression? May not a play become a magic device to occasionally exercise away the phantom of boredom that haunts English language classes? If it does become one of the devices of language teaching what sort of plays would then be "suitable"? Would this mean that plays have to be written with specific language items in mind or would just the fact of the extra exposure to the language alone be sufficient guarantee of learning? If the plays are written around linguistic items may not the play sound terribly synthetic and sterile?

Then again there is the problem of what kind of plays to choose and who should write these plays. Understandably, everyone I know (including Mr Yeoh) declares that Shakespeare should not be used. He (Shakespeare) writes in verse and his spelling is outrageous. Anyway, how can a sane teacher persist in holding him up as the greatest master of English poetry and at the same time insist that too many dependent clauses make a sentence clumsy and obscure, and hammer the table when saying that a student must *never* – absolutely *never* – use a singular verb with a plural subject when the "greatest master" himself is the greatest flouter of these sacred laws? We are all agreed that Shakespeare should never be used especially in the lower secondary. Then who should? *What* should? The only answer that many of us have is something as nebulous and evasive as "something suitable for the language level and particular requirements of the students" and what this means, in concrete terms, is the M.P.H. *Dramatic Readers*, Patrick Yeoh's own series perhaps and then ..... the teacher is left to his own devices. "Own devices" is fine, if the play is a once-a-year production, the teacher is very dedicated and imaginative *and* has lots of time to browse through libraries, *and* libraries are available *and* everyone's goodwill and enthusiasm can be relied upon in the reproduction of scripts and so on. What if a-play-a-month is the rule in your school Dramatic Society? What if the school-play is to be put up at the end of the year and you have two exam-classes to answer for? What if your school is in a small town and no libraries are available? What if there is no Mr Yeoh to offer his services in teaching you the art of stage make-up? What then? I think the teachers who are interested in drama in schools should pool their experiences, make a selection of the plays they themselves have tried out and found successful or write some themselves and get these published. Surely much time and energy can be saved and perhaps more effective teaching accomplished. Or would this perhaps cramp the individuality of the teacher and students and lead to complacency?

I do not know if I am at all representative of the average teacher. I think we need at least one seminar on drama, one exhibition of available texts and one course on the dynamics of production and a great deal of willingness on the part of teachers to question and to learn.