

DRAMA AND DA'WAH

Making Drama Speak the Message

By

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This narration is a fictitious prequel adapted from the play entitled “The Fall of Our Local Mosque” staged by the Mass Media Club of the Muslim Converts’ Association of Singapore. The play was derived from the novel of Ali Akbar Navis entitled “Robohnya Surau Kami” a reflection of his society in his time. In the story, the author pitted the messages of piety against accountability. The novel is highly acclaimed amongst the fraternity of Malay literature and society.

In everyday life, ‘if’ is a fiction, in the theatre ‘if’ is an experiment. In everyday life, ‘if’ is an evasion, in the theatre ‘if’ is the truth. When we are persuaded to believe in this truth, then the theatre and life are one. (Peter Brook)

“Pak Ajo! Pak Ajo!” I called as I hastily paced towards the raw-boned man sitting by the dusty dirt track chewing a piece of sugarcane. “Pak Ajo...” I panted as I tried to grab his attention. A few feet from him I stopped. I suddenly get the feeling that I am not wanted here. Ajo Sidi did not flinch a hair hearing his name being called. There I was, inching sheepishly towards him. Not that I am afraid, but Ajo Sidi has a nasty reputation in this village. He was known to be a heartless man, but... a wise heartless man. The whole village thinks that he was the one responsible for the death of the old granduncle, caretaker of the mosque. He told him a story so eerie that granduncle committed suicide. Even then, he did not join the burial rites. He was off to work after leaving a bale of cloth for the ritual.

An arm’s length away from Pak Ajo, I squatted. I paused for a while to see if he had reacted to my presence before I said, “Assalamu’alaikum Pak Ajo.” I paused yet again. He continued to bite little pieces of cane, ignoring my presence. “My apologies Pak Ajo if I am disturbing you...” I shifted myself a little closer such that I was able to see his eyes.

“If you know that you are a disturbance, why are you still here... Don’t you have work to do?” he mumbled in a low voice, intermitted with a spit of the dry bits of cane.

It was startling. I cannot think straight. Should I go? But this is important... I need to find out what his views are... from his words and actions, I am somehow convinced... this guy is mean. I firmed up to leave and took a step back and was about to apologise again when Pak Ajo interrupted.

“What is it that you are here for? Surely you didn’t tread this muddy path for nothing. Have you lost your senses or did it fell along the way?”

“No Pak Ajo... I mean Yes... eh, No...No.” as I tried to make sense of myself.

Pak Ajo laughed at my silliness and passed me a few columns of sugarcane and said, "Have some. Sit and relax. I'm not going to eat you."

I picked the smallest cut and thanked the middle-aged man, old enough to be my father. I chewed a little piece of the sugarcane and softly mumbled to myself "He is not as mean as I thought." "So Dahlan. You think I am mean? You think I will eat you up? Ha! Ha! If I am as cruel as the villagers claim... I would not have shared that long, long story to that old man at the mosque. He must have trusted me somehow to have listened attentively," said Pak Ajo sneering away as he spoke.

"It's not that Pak Ajo.... At the warung, people have been talking about you since granduncle's death. They told me that, you narrated kakek a story the night before kakek passed away. They said the story made him decide to end his life. Was the story for real Pak Ajo?" I quickly replied as I didn't expect him to have heard my comments.

"The mouth of the pot you can seal...but not the mouth of man. So, is that why you are here about? That old man?" he looked at me unfazed.

"I wanted to know how you told him the story. I never knew stories can be so moving," finally, I managed to asked what I wanted to ask.

"Have you watched a wayang act before Dahlan?" pausing to see me nod my head before he continued, "Wayang or drama as you young people call it, is often an interpretation of a story. A story, that can be imaginary or a true account of life."

Pak Ajo tossed the frayed piece of sugarcane from his hand and stretched his legs as I leaned forward to listen attentively.

"A story, when told with vivid descriptions, can conjure images in the mind of listeners. These images will move and dance or sit and cry as the characters in the story manifest itself like ..."

"Ghosts?" I interrupted.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ghosts... you believe in those things young man? Anyway, as I was saying, a story well narrated is like a wayang play in the mind. The imagery you conjure will make you angry or sad or even mad."

"Was that what happened to Kakek?" I paused a little but decided not to pursue the matter and continued, "This wayang act in the mind, it is just to the person who is actively listening, is it not? Do you think that good stories should be acted out in a drama for many others to see?"

"Ahh! Acting out a story... To be frank, a story is worth only as an entertainment... unless you have a message that you want to tell others. Do you know how wayang acts or drama started?"

I frowned.

“You see, Drama... in contemporary theatre histories has its roots in ritual. It was more than mere entertainment, or a parody of whatever that is going on at the back alley of some kampong in a place you never knew, or the opus of an alternate universe where everyone has blue skin living under the control of a ‘Ratu’ who thinks not... Drama was, at one point of time, a profound expression. It was an act of sacrifice and glorification with the music, the chanting, the dancing and singing in a communal worship of ancient gods. Such acts, which can be potentially sacred as well as potentially blasphemous, can be seen as attempts in bringing together forces of good and beauty and the forces of darkness, of evil and gloom.”

I nodded, trying to make sense to what he said.

“Take for example the ‘wayang kulit’, the term wayang itself was religious in nature. ‘Wa’ meaning ‘for’ and ‘Hyang’ meaning ‘the Great Spirit’... and look at the Chinese community, during the hungry ghost festival, some of them will re-enact the lives of ancient characters on stage.”

I nodded again. I must have looked puzzled, and as if he can read my thoughts, he continued. “Yes! Over time, the sacraments began to peel. The bark on the tree of rites can be seen creasing and withering, falling off the trunk in bits and pieces. Soon enough, the tree was severed of its roots and its branches. It has lost its identity. It is a tree, not. But a piece of log to be sawn, and cut, and seasoned into timber meant for the pillars, walls and floorboards of what is to be known as the theatre.”

“But then, the early theatres, an organised form of entertainment, specific in location, detailed in action, précised in diction was never then a past time. Still it was, like the ancient tree, another part of life, and one. Not separated.”

“Everyone in the community was involved. It starts with the scriptwriter up on a veranda by the window, a view beyond the horizon, drawing inspiration from the sky that host the sun and chirping birds by day, the moon and the stars by night, sieving through the hustle and bustle of the market place, deciphering the echoes from the conversations of the trading men on the street. Citing the joyous grieve of a heartless love affair. So, he scribed. And the script is completed, for now. The director, making sense of the scroll on his hand, shouts his orders from the gallery... where the audience will sit. His hands gestures away, pointing left and high up in the sky and quickly the opposite as he changes his mind ever so frequently, with pauses in between... repeating every scene, over and over again, till the mimicry of his imagination is realised, by the actors, with moves so swift, as if dancing to the tune of melodious music, in reality, a coarse rendition of a fire alarm.”

“When the set is set. Midweek. Midday. The trading stops! The chirping grieving lovebirds congregate. All activity pauses as the community flock to the theatre. A mass ritual once again, a reflection of what happened, through the minutes that passed while the moon was chasing the sun, while the coin hopped from a purse to a pocket, while the teardrops dry up deciding, for delight or for sorrow. Everyone was involved. In drama was life, and life a drama.”

Picking every word said attentively, I now become the director of the actors in my mind as Pak Ajo dictated the script.

“Take a good look at the writings on the scroll. What can you see? It is not mere arrays of words. The script contains the message. In theatre today, it is the message that gives meaning to the acts. If you recall, in religion, our prophet encourages sharing of the message. A meaningful message of Truth.

Through words and actions, the message in religion was transmitted, like the tiny discoverer ant finding lumps of leftover sugar in a tiny corner of the dark kitchen closet, the message is passed on to every other ant he meets, as he makes his way back to his nest, to return to his queen. So they knew. The other ants knew, and they tell others. They, who were told, continue to tell, those who heard now learns to say. By the heap of sugar, they congregate, in line. Each waiting for their turn, to price a tiny bit away, and return to their nest, contented. Having contributed to the cause, for the day.

So that was how it went. The message of good, of truth and glad tidings, paved the deserts of Arabia, to Africa, to Europe, to Asia, to the many lands afar. The invitation to a common cause, justice and equality amongst humanity was passed on and on in many, many different ways. Messengers. Travellers. Scholars. Traders. But, for man, the bounty was more attractive than the lumps of sugar. The cause was more seductive than the return to the nest.

Da’wah, as they termed it, soon changes its character. Politics and power came into play. And Da’wah was no longer about the message of good, of truth and glad tidings... Like the tree that made the stage, the simple invite now turns a decree for obedience. Not to God, but to the cause. A cause that has somehow, meandered. A drama created in life. From simple acts or words of wisdom, it evolved to justify the expansion of kingdom, to win over subjects of rule, to captivate the learned, in many, many different ways. Use might if you must! Fear always works. But tell them some truth, half-truth. It is enough for them. The masses do not need to think. They do not need to know. Obey! The final message. The only message. Obey whom? God? Was it God who decreed for man to fight man? Was it God who commanded that might is right? Was it God who prescribed the dose of knowledge to the privileged few? Was it all in the name of God?”

Pak Ajo looked at me. Is he expecting me to answer? I shrugged and gave him a confused look.

“You know Dahlan, if you ever dare ask such questions to a teacher, they will say, ‘Why do you ask? Don’t you know that it is bad ethics to question your teacher? That it is tantamount to treason to doubt your ruler? That it is blasphemous to doubt the word of God!! An infidel you can be. The righteous is amongst the majority! The majority are amongst the ruled! And the majority has agreed. An infidel you are!!”

“You see. Drama and Da’wah is not the same. Yet, it is not much different. The seed that determines its worth is the message. When you tell a story, or write a script or direct an act... your story can be a medium of influence. What is it that you think is the important issue of your time that you wish to address? Could it be the problem of the sick and poor? Or the lives of the single mothers, left behind by their martyred husbands in wars they did not invite? Or could it be imagery of a utopian state of society that can never be achieved? Or a story of a little girl that was denied school because she puts on a hijab as she enters the gate accompanied by her elder brother clad in shorts? ... You know Dahlan. Today... drama

is not only confined to the theatre. Television is a powerful tool to share, to influence or to distract and to misconstrue. Like the theatre, the message behind the shows is most important. A young man like you should always be discerning and critical when you listen and watch stories. When you write, be very clear of the message that you want to disseminate. The stage is nothing but a tool, a very powerful tool. If you use this tool effectively, it will captivate, it will influence, it will move your audience in ways you cannot imagine.”

“It will?” I asked to myself. I turned my head towards the dusty track, beyond the horizon... I cannot help but to recall the imageries in my mind as he told that story. I am convinced. “It will. It will!”

Pak Ajo remained silent. He picked up his parang and shove it in its sleeve and he stood up looking down at me and said, “I have to leave now. You go get your friends on stage. Who knows, I may be among your audience. Good Bye.”

There I was still holding on to my sugarcane, trying to make sense of Pak Ajo’s words as I saw him walk away on the path that will take him back to the village square. As I dusted my pants, preparing to go, I remembered the granduncle that killed himself after listening to Ajo Sidi’s story... I shouted to Pak Ajo... “What about Kakek?”

I am certain he heard me... but Pak Ajo chose to move on. Inside me, I know he had answered my question, if others can be told of Kakek’s story... just maybe...

And so the story ends.

Some months later, Dahlan went on to tell his story, in the form of a play entitled, “The Fall of Our Local Mosque.”

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