

The long and short of Malay Theatre in Singapore

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Fezhah Maznan is a creative producer and performance dramaturg. Part of her work centres around creating opportunities for new development and presentation of Malay arts and artists in Singapore and abroad.

WIDER DEVELOPMENTS

EVENTS IN SINGAPORE MALAY THEATRE

PRE 20TH CENTURY

Pre 3rd Century

Mak Yong

Mak yong is a traditional Malay dance theatre.

It combines dialogue, dance, singing, music, and storytelling.

The stories include histories of Kelantanese and Patani Kings, and legends based on Islam and animism.

Mak yong was created in Patani and spread to Kelantan, Terengganu, Kedah, and the Riau Islands via Singapore.

It was performed as royal theatre under the Kelantan Sultanate until the 1920s. *Mak yong* reached its peak from the 1950s to the 1980s.

The art form declined but was revived after UNESCO recognition, becoming part of Malaysian identity.

Watch: **Mak Yong Theatre** by UNESCO



In 2005, Mak Yong was proclaimed as an Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

9th Century

Wayang kulit

Wayang kulit, or shadow puppet theatre, is a form of traditional theatre that tells a story through puppetry, music and sophisticated handcraft.

Wayang kulit is usually performed as entertainment during religious ceremonies and celebrations. The stories are usually from the Hindu epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, or from Javanese tradition.

In Singapore, *wayang kulit* usually tells the stories of local heroes, Malay characters, and historical figures such as Sang Nila Utama, Hang Nadim and Hang Tuah.

Today, in Singapore, there are two versions of the art forms—Javanese, which is practiced by Sri Warisan, and Kelantanese, which is practiced by only one group in Singapore, Sri Setia Pulau Singa.

1870s

Bangsawan

Bangsawan is Malay opera featuring music, dance, and drama performed by a troupe. The term “bangsawan” means “nobleman” in Malay.

It originated in the Malay Peninsula, Riau Islands, Sumatra, and coastal Borneo.

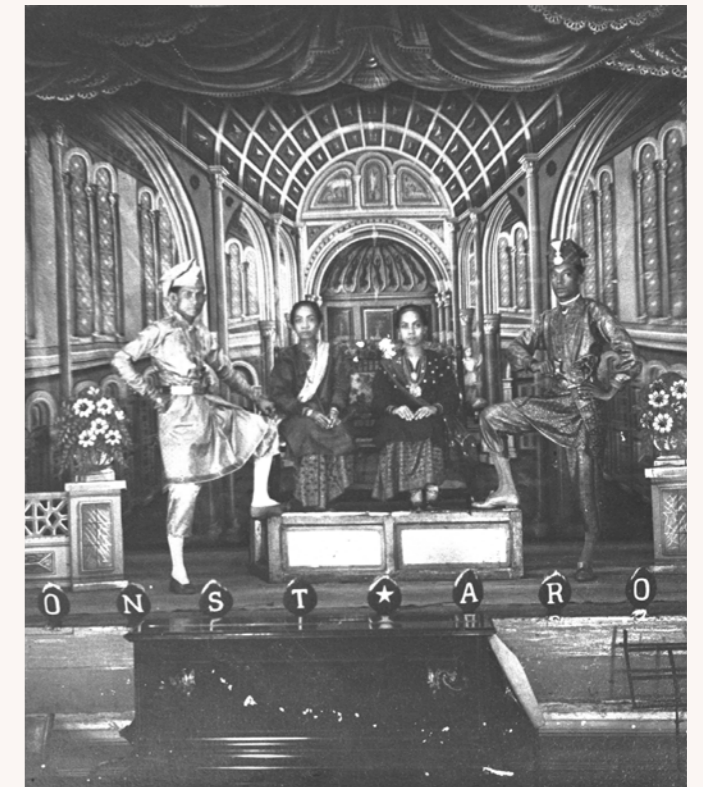
Developed in Penang, Malaysia, it has roots in South Asian Parsi theatre from Gujarat, India. It incorporates European theatre styles and stories from Arab, Indian and Western traditions. It features myth and fantasy with a flexible structure that evolves over time.

It was the first commercial theatre to attract diverse investors and audiences.

1880s

Bangsawan was introduced in Singapore in the 1880s.

In Singapore, Shariff Medan was then known as the “Father of Bangsawan” for his roles as a performer, producer and film actor.



A *bangsawan* scene taken at the Union Star Opera. The Union Star Opera was formed in the mid-1920s and was known to have operated till the late 1930s. Mohd Amin Bin Kadarisman Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

20TH CENTURY

1940s

Purbawara

Purbawara plays emerged, depicting historical and mythical characters, reflecting the glory of the Malay sultanate during the period leading up to World War II.

These plays were a response to British colonial rule and fueled Malay nationalism post-World War II.

Shaharom Husain was a notable *purbawara* playwright, Malaysian school teacher, historian, and playwright-director who would later become a key contributor to the development of Malay drama in 1960s Singapore.

1940–41

The start of Malay cinema which sees an increased number of Malay films being produced. The period between 1947–1972 has been dubbed as the golden age of Malay cinema.

1944

Bani Buang created a theatre performance with a makeshift stage at Kampung Agas in Pasir Panjang, using oil barrels, wooden boards, and canvas sheets.



Read about Bani Buang's life on Esplanade Offstage.

Under the name Pemuda Baru Sandiwara, he performed *Helang Hitam* and *Ahmad Berbudi* at Tambi's house compound.

Bani Buang later directed plays including Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, earning him the title "Father of modern Malay theatre."

1948

The Malay Youth Literary Association (4PM) was formed.

Kalam Hamidi, a prominent dramatist and cultural arts leader, authored works like *Sial Bertuah* and *Anak Nazar Tujuh Keramat*.

He and Bani Buang were key directors of the time.

1950s



Sandiwara

After World War II, *sandiwara* replaced *bangsawan* in Malay theatre.

Sandiwara depicts contemporary life and everyday issues. It aimed to evoke nationalistic feelings and recall pre-colonial heritage.

This form later influenced Malay film and television.

1954

Bani Buang was the first to stage a Malay play, *Anak Tiri Boyan*, at the Victoria Theatre to fundraise for the Bawean Association of Singapore.

1955

Sriwana started as a *keroncong* band named Orkes Keronchong Sriwana, which later evolved into a multidisciplinary arts group.

It was founded by Nongchik Ghani, a dance maestro, playwright, and choreographer, and Sulaiman Jeem, a journalist.

1956

Perkumpulan Seni was formed by prominent arts personalities—Zubir Said (film and music), Usman Awang (literature and playwriting), Hussein Jahidin (journalist and playwright) and Abdul Ghani Hamid (literature).

1960s

Rawan Hiba (Rahman B), Kalam, Onn Abdul Rahman, Nongchik, Hussein Jahidin, Yusnor Ef, and Shaharom Husain contributed to the development of Malay drama in Singapore.

Shaharom Husain was known for his period drama *Si Bongkok Tanjung Puteri*.

Yusnor Ef transitioned from acting to writing and directing, mentored by Kalam.

Rawan Hiba wrote *Lela Satria*, a *purbawara* about Malays struggling against tyranny, which was adapted into a film by Cathay-Keris Film.

1962



Nadiputra (far right) with Chinese Opera actors for *Jenaka Bangsawan* at Victoria Theatre. 13 May 1998

In 1962, a new talent emerged when 16-year-old Almahdi Al-Haj Ibrahim, wrote, directed and produced his first Malay-language play *Tercecer (The Dropout)* while still a student in Bartley Secondary School.

That year, he received Malay Arts & Literary Association Award for *Malisa* which was staged by 4PM.

Also known as Nadiputra, Almahdi Al-Haj Ibrahim also used various other pseudonyms such as Esje Sahar, Tun Temasik and Mega Putih, reflecting different stages of his life.

Nadiputra is recognised as a playwright, actor, director, producer, TV scriptwriter, voice-over artist, and poet.

20TH CENTURY

1963

Singapore joined the Federation of Malaysia.

The National Theatre was officially opened on 8 August 1963 to commemorate Singapore's self-governance and was the first and largest national theatre in Singapore back then.



The National Theatre circa 1970.

National Theatre Malay Drama Workshop was formed. It was founded by **Zulkassim Daud** and **Salim Bachik** which lasted until 1984.

1964

Pesta Drama Sriwana, led by Nongchik Ghani, aimed to boost theatre by discovering talent in acting, writing, directing, and stage performance, from 1968 to 1990.

The festival introduced a new comedy genre blending *purbawara*, *bangsawan* and modern theatre under M Saffri A Manaf.

It showcased emerging talents like Nurbuana (Jumali Kasmadi) and featured renowned composer M Nasir in *Angin*.

1965

Critic Martin Esslin coined the term “Theatre of the Absurd” in his 1960 essay of the same name, which begins by focusing on the playwrights Samuel Beckett, Arthur Adamov, and Eugène Ionesco. After a long run of realist theatre, theatre of the absurd made its way to Asia.

On 9 August 1965, Singapore separated from Malaysia and became independent.

The constitution took effect which included the following:

Article 152.2: The Government shall exercise its functions in such manner as to recognise the special position of the Malays, who are the indigenous people of Singapore, and accordingly it shall be the responsibility of the Government to protect, safeguard, support, foster and promote their political, educational, religious, economic, social, and cultural interests and the Malay language.

Article 153A.2: The national language shall be the Malay language and shall be in the Roman script.

Perkumpulan Seni staged *Sumbangsih* by Rawan, directed by Bani, featuring a one-legged youth separated from his lover.

The drama, premiered in Malaysia as *Cinta Si Kudung*, included the song *Sumbangsih*, performed by M Bakri with music by Zainal S Abbas and lyrics by Rawan.

It was staged at Victoria Theatre on 5 December 1965.

1967

Singapore Cultural Society was formed and featured works by playwright and director E F Kamaludin.

Malay cinema in Singapore is on the wane due to the rising popularity of television and foreign films.

1970s

Ramli Ahmad, scriptwriter and son of musician Ahmad Patek, gained recognition in the 1970s through Sriwana's drama activities.

Ramli's notable play *Ekstremis* was funded by the Drama Promotion Scheme. *Ekstremis* explored individuals who, in their zeal, contradicted Islamic teachings.

Sandiwara theatre was replaced by film and television.

1975

Malay theatre critic Djamal Tukimin wrote *Amar Bin Yasir*.

He also wrote *Simpang* (1981), *O*, and *Seekor Kerbau Hitam Dalam Mimpi Pangeran TomTom* (1993) for the stage.

1977

The first edition of Singapore Arts Festival took place.

The Singapore Kemuning Society was founded. It is an arts group delving in realist and absurdist theatres through experiments by E F Kamaludin and Lut Ali. Kemuning organised the Festival Teater Remaja, which unearthed new voices and talents, contributing significantly to the growth of Malay theatre and entertainment in Singapore. Notable figures such as Atin Amat, Keatar HM, and Siti Hajar Abdul Gani are among those discovered through this initiative.

Kamaludin began his journey in theatre as a student at Indonesia's State Islamic Religious Institute. His works, which delved into religious and moral themes, included *Rentak Kiblat*, *Membaka Kiblat*, *Suara Dari Astaka*, *Ibuku Di Tara Taqwa*, *Cecandan Di Kuburan*, and *Garis Lintang Anak Haram*. The latter was staged multiple times at Victoria Theatre during the 1970s and 1980s. Kamaludin also incorporated elements of absurdism into his works, such as *Cerberangkabo* and *Si Albacilakyiah*.

1980s

Singapore Malay theatre in the 1980s focused on life in a cosmopolitan city, often lacking a traditional plot.

During this period, Singapore Broadcasting Corporation (SBC) scriptwriter Mohd Raman Daud brought attention to issues like leadership, identity, history, socioeconomic, and environmental in programmes such as *Bicara* (1981), *Juara* (1983) and *Tugu* (1985).

Ahmad Ishak explored identity in *Aku*, while Nor Effendi Badron's *Kupuja* (Kumpulan Pemuisi Remaja) employed multilingual theatre, incorporating Malay, Mandarin and English in plays such as *Cakap-cakap: Terima Kasih Pada Salam*, *Pada Bulan*, and *Pada Bintang*.

20TH CENTURY

1982

At 18, Sabri Buang wrote and presented his first play, *Warna-Warna Lakon (The Colors of Acting)*.

He went on to write and direct dramas including *Gersang* (1983), *Laksamana Muda Lela* (1986), *Arwah* (1988), *Setengah Jalan Merah* (1991), *Laluan* (1993), and *Uri* (2001).

His mentor was **Nadiputra**.

1985

Nadiputra founded Theatre Nadi, Singapore's first Malay children's drama group.

In the same year, the group performed *Cermin Ajaib* (The Magic Mirror) in conjunction with the Young People's Theatre Festival organised by the Ministry of Community Development.

1986



Haji Hamid bin Ahmad, also known as the Father of Bangsawan at the opening night of Chingay 2011. Photo from Ministry of Communications and Information Collection, courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.

Sri Anggerik Bangsawan was established by the late Haji Hamid bin Ahmad who was hailed as the “father of bangsawan” in Singapore.

National Theatre was demolished due to structural reasons and to make way for the nearby construction part of Central Expressway along Clemenceau Avenue.

Teater Artistik was founded in November 1986 by Khairul Anwar Salleh, Muhammad Rafaat, Roslan Mohd Daud, Norman Hir, and Islani Ishak. The group performed in both Malay and English.

The group's notable performances include *Mayat* by Hatta Azad Khan, as well as *Tuk Ketua* and *Setengah Jalan Merah* by Sabri Buang. They also staged *Bicara*, written by Mohd Raman Daud, in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, and Jakarta.



Production photo of *Bicara* by Raman Daud. Photo courtesy of Teater Artistik.

After 2000, due to their members' changing priorities, Teater Artistik shifted their focus to community-oriented theatre projects, such as forum theatre and various arts programmes. They remain active till today.

1988

Teater Ekamatra was founded by Lut Ali and Rubie Lazim to create contemporary experimental Malay theatre blending traditional styles with modern techniques.

The company focuses on socio-political themes to engage both Malay and non-Malay audiences. It has featured works by Noor Effendy Ibrahim, Alfian Sa'at, Aidli Mosbit, and others.

The group has staged foreign plays like *Berakhirnya Sebuah Perjuangan*, *Perhiasan Kaca*, *Orang Kasar*, and *Raja Lawak*, and transcreated works including *Hope/Harap*, *A Clockwork Orange* and *Poop/Berak*.

Teater Ekamatra has performed at international festivals and won Life! Theatre Awards, including Best Original Script for *Kakak Kau Punya Laki* in 2014.

Since 2000, it has used English surtitles to reach non-Malay speaking audiences.

The group has been led by various figures including Rafaat Hamzah, Gene Sharudyn, Khai Hori, and Shaza Ishak (as of 2023).

20TH CENTURY

1989

Nadiputra wrote and directed the first local Malay musical, *Jefri and Maria*. Presented by Sriwana, it is based on a true story set in Geylang during the 1960s. The musical featured a cast of 120 actors.



Behind the scene of *Pentas Opera* (1998) by Teater KAMi. Can you spot the talents who are still gracing our stages and screens?

Teater KAMi was founded by 11 members including Roslan Badron and Atin Amat, the latter known as the “first successful Malay female theatre director,” after the closure of Kemuning Drama Club.

From 1990 to 2014, the group produced over 100 plays, with Roslan directing works like *Budi Sang Tikus* (1992) and *Tekanan* (1993).

Notable productions include *Munshi* by Hadijah Rahmat (1998), *Pentas Opera* by Zakaria Ariffin, and international works like *Langit Kelabu* (1992) and *Rashomon* (1995).

They staged traditional *mak yong* dance-drama such as *Anak Raja Gondang* (1996) and their first *bangsawan* performance, *Indera Bangsawan* (1997). They are also known for staging *Salina* (1993 and 1997) and *Lantai T. Pinkie* (1996).

Many prominent Malay theatre and TV creatives began their careers with Teater KAMi, including Zamberi Abdul Patah and Aidli Mosbit.

The group was the first Malay theatre company to receive National Arts Council (NAC) Major Grant Funding but faced challenges due to funding and mismanagement. Atin Amat remains as Artistic Director, supported by Dalifah Shahril and a new generation of theatremakers.

Atin Amat is closely associated with Teater KAMi, shaping it through socially conscious and female-forward works. She draws inspiration from Malay literature, history, and folklore, appealing to those interested in naturalistic Malay theatre. Atin has directed over 48 plays and consulted on numerous local and international performances, setting a high standard for Malay theatre.

Born in Singapore in 1957, Atin began her theatre career with the National Theatre Malay Drama workshop and was mentored by Nadiputra.

She has mentored many Malay theatre, film and television talents throughout her career.



Watch Atin Amat share more about her life in theatre, as part of the Malay Heritage Centre's Intangible Cultural Heritage Conversation Series.

Teater Rewang

In the late 1980s, *teater rewang* or devised theatre made its mark in Singapore Malay theatre.

Young directors and theatre graduates such as Sabri Buang and Khairul Anwar Salleh experimented with producing scripts from collaborations among actors.

Scripts such as Khairul Anwar's *Ke Garisan, Sedia, Mula* were produced and complemented with spontaneous dialogue and action as suggested.



Khairul Anwar Salleh in 2006 moved on to lead media companies like Astro and Media Prima in Malaysia where he currently resides. He has been conferred the title of Dato'.

1991



A young Sabri Buang. Photo courtesy of Sabri Buang's family.

Sabri Buang graduated from Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang with top honours in performing arts.

1992

Anak Melayu by Noor Effendy Ibrahim shocked its audience member by his use of sexual innuendos, coarse dialogue peppered with lingo common to Malay youth and a depiction of their deviant lifestyle.

20TH CENTURY

1993

Nadiputra received the Malay Literature Prize.

Nadiputra acted for the first time after 20 years, as Pak Seman in *Singkap (Unveil)*, directed by Lut Ali. The play was staged in conjunction with the Festival of Asian Performing Arts.



Lut Ali (right) and Osman Hamid (left) with Professor Tommy Koh at the Cultural Medallion and Young Artist Awards presentation ceremony.

Lut Ali received the Young Artist Award for his contribution to theatre.

After a decade of contributing to the local arts scene by writing and directing plays mainly in Malay, Sabri Buang was awarded the \$35,000 S. Rajaratnam Scholarship Award to further his studies at the University of Hawaii where he obtained a Master of Fine Arts (Theatre and Drama).

Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit writes, directs, and performs, graduating from Queensland University of Technology and earning a Master of Education from the University of Adelaide.

Her breakout role as Salina in the adaptation of A. Samad Said's classic novel *Salina*, was widely praised.

In 1993, her play *Kosovo* stirred controversy for featuring the first Malay-Muslim actress to don a nun's habit.



First staged in 1995, then in 1996, *Rosnah* starred Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit and was performed in Melbourne in 1997 to critical acclaim. In 2006 and 2016, the role of Rosnah was played by Siti Khalijah Zainal.

Her 1998 play *Ikan Cantik*, featuring an all-female cast shaving their heads, also attracted controversy, overshadowing its focus on marginalised voices in the Malay community.

Kosovo and *Dan Tiga Dara Terbang Ke Bulan* won Literary Awards from the Malay Language Council, Singapore in 1995 and 1997, respectively.

In 2003, she published her scripts *Dan Tiga Dara Terbang Ke Bulan* and *Ikan Cantik* in the anthology *Bisik* with Effendy and Alfian.

In 2016, her collection *CHANTEK* won the Hadiah Persuratan (Literary Award) from the Malay Language Council, Singapore.

Aidli has collaborated with local companies like The Necessary Stage, Teater KAMi and Wild Rice, and has toured internationally.

She is affectionately known as "Kakak" to many in the Malay theatre scene.

1995

Lut Ali handed over the reins of Teater Ekamatra as he pursued a drama degree at the Edith Cowan University, Australia.

1998

Titisan Temasek was formed as a student drama group at Temasek Polytechnic, focusing on *bangsawan*.

The group nurtured a new generation of theatre makers, including Najib Soiman, Saiful Amri, Anwar Hadi Ramli, Shahril Wahid, and Al-Matin Yatim, who continue to influence the theatre and entertainment scene. Titisan Temasek remained active until 2014.

From 2002 to 2005, graduates from the 1999–2001 cohort established Teater Titisan under Majlis Pusat, continuing the focus on *bangsawan*.

Dendam Berahi (A Revenge of Passion), was the first full-fledged Malay dance opera, which saw a collaboration of talents from Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia. Nadiputra wrote the script and composed the *syair* (quatrain).

Sabri Buang was appointed an executive member of Majlis Pusat Pertubuhan-Pertubuhan Budaya Melayu Singapore (Central Council of Malay Cultural Organisations Singapore) to help revitalise its programmes.

1996

Bani Buang passed away.

1999



Laluan by Sabri Buang was presented as part of Singapore Arts Festival in 1999. The ensemble included Nadiputra whom Sabri recognised as his mentor. Photo courtesy of Sabri Buang's family.

Laluan (Passage), produced by Sriwana, was staged during the Singapore Arts Festival.

It was the first Malay play to have a half-hour pre-performance tour that took the audience in batches for a behind-the-scenes look at the staging of a play.



Sabri Buang pictured with his LASALLE-SIA students where he was the head of School of Drama from 1999–2003.

21ST CENTURY

2000

Nadiputra founded a new theatre group, Theatre 2000.

Sabri Buang represented Singapore at the Mødestedet 2000 International Theatre Festival in Slagelse, Denmark, where he wrote, directed, and produced a double bill featuring an English play titled *Waves* and a Malay drama, *Sangkar (Cage)*.

In the same year, he directed a performance for the Mosaic Youth Theatre of Detroit, becoming the first Asian invited by the esteemed theatre company.

The collaboration led to a reinterpretation of the classical Greek drama *Medea*, staged in Detroit in late 2000 and in Singapore in July 2001.

Sabri also directed a Malay version of the controversial play *Talaq* by Elangovan, but it was not staged due to cultural and religious sensitivities.

2001

The inaugural Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards were held.

Sabri Buang became the only Asian director to have his work presented at the 5th International Theatre Awards in Caracas, Venezuela. The work, *Project Woyzeck: Last Walk Within* won Best Set Design, Best Lighting Effects and Best Sound Effects.

2002

Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay opened.

Causeway 2 by Alfian Sa'at was presented as part of Singapore Arts Festival and later restaged at The Actor's Studio Bangsar in Kuala Lumpur. It was the first Malay play to be written after 9/11.

The first edition of *Pesta Raya – Malay Festival of Arts* was presented by Esplanade.



Festivities at the very first *Pesta Raya* in 2002.

Sabri Buang's Asian interpretation of the classical Greek play *Antigone* was staged at the UNESCO-ITI World Theatre Festival in Athens. The young LASALLE-SIA performers in the play became the first Asian group to perform at the festival.

2007



Production poster for Zizi Azah's first play which was presented along new works by Faralina Ali and Fezhah Maznan.

Zizi Azah Abdul Majid achieved popular success with her first play, *How Did the Cat Get So Fat?*, which featured a notable performance by Siti Khalijah Zainal.

She worked part-time as a stage manager and lighting designer with companies like The Necessary Stage and TheaterWorks before joining Esplanade as a full-time stage manager. In 2009, she became Teater Ekamatra's first female Artistic Director, leading the company to increased funding, audience growth, and multiple awards.

Since 2011, Zizi has been based in the United States, continuing her career as a playwright while still creating works in Singapore.

2008

Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit received NAC's Young Artist Award for Theatre.

Panggung ARTS was founded by an artists' collective including Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit, Najib Soiman, Zulfadli Rashid, Helmi Fita, Elnie S Mashari, and Molizah Mohd Mohter.

This multidisciplinary group supported each other in staging their original works.

Drama Box presented *Trick or Threat*. Created by Kok Heng Leun and Aidli Mosbit, this forum theatre performance explored racial biases surrounding terrorist threats. This work was created in consequence of the rising discrimination against Malay/Muslims in the aftermath of 9/11.



Trick or Threat is Drama Box's longest running forum theatre performance. Above is the production photo from its 2018 run as part of Esplanade's *Feed Your Imagination* series, a platform targeted at schools.

21ST CENTURY

2008



Gemuk Girls starred Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit (left), Siti Khalijah Zainal (centre) and Najib Soiman (right).

The Necessary Stage premiered *Gemuk Girls*, devised and performed by Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit, Najib Soiman, and Siti Khalijah Zainal.

The play follows Kartini and Juliana, a loud mother and a straitlaced daughter on the brink of politics, who are forced to confront their family's past when they learn of Kartini's father's arrest in the 1960s.

Gemuk Girls won Best Script, Best Actor, and Production of the Year at the 2009 Life! Theatre Awards.

Keelat Theatre Ensemble was founded by Gene Sha Rudyn and Adila Mohckeram. The group creates theatre with Islamic content as a way to delve into pertinent and relevant issues, with the hope of bridging differences.

2009

Zizi Azah Abdul Majid became the artistic director of Teater Ekamatra.

2010

Teater Ekamatra presented *Charged* by Chong Tze Chien.

The play examines race relations in Singapore through the lens of an army drama, where a Chinese soldier allegedly shoots his Malay colleague and then himself. The investigation reveals tensions in the multicultural fabric of the nation.

Charged won Best Original Script at the 2011 Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards.

2011

Atin Amat received the Cultural Medallion Award.

2012

Zizi Azah Abdul Majid received NAC's Young Artist Award.

Panggung ARTS staged its final production – *Times 5*.

2013

Nadiputra received the Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang from the Malay Language Council, Singapore.

The Anugerah Tun Seri Lanang is the highest award given for significant contributions to Malay literary arts.

2014

Islamic religious teacher, Ustaz Noor Deros, launched an online campaign called *Wear White*. It asked Muslims to don white clothes the following Saturday evening to protest against homosexuality and to defend traditional family values.

This campaign involved some Malay theatre personalities and caused discord in the Singapore theatre scene where people of different sexual orientations had found a safe space.

Siti Khalijah Zainal received NAC's Young Artist Award.

A group of young theatremakers—Gloria Tan, Ghazali Muzakir, Johnny Jon Jon, Faizal Abdullah, Nur Khairiyah, Nadia Cheryan, and Hafidz Abdul Rahman co-founded **Hatch Theatrics**.

2015

Singapore marked its 50th year of independence with SG50 celebrations.

Yusof, was commissioned by Esplanade and written and directed by Zizi Azah Abdul Majid in conjunction with *Pesta Raya's* SG50 commemorative celebrations.

21ST CENTURY

2016



Main Tulis Group's founding members (L-R from the top): Adib Kosnan, Hazwan Norly, Nessa Anwar, Farhanah Diyanah (FD), Johnny Jon Jon, Sabrina Dzulkifli, Ahmad Musta'ain Khamis, Nabilah Said and Zulfadli Rashid. Image courtesy of Nabilah Said.

Main Tulis Group was founded by Nabilah Said.

The group is Singapore's only playwright collective focusing on developing English and Malay scripts. The emphasis is on "main" and "tulis"—writing organically, without restrictions while also being about playwriting as a craft.

Raden Mas: An Epic of a Princess, a *bangsawan* by Sri Mamanda Bangsawan Pte Ltd, was staged at Esplanade Theatre with a \$1.3 million budget and international touring plans.

Despite its high production values, the show suffered financial losses and struggled with local support due to high ticket prices (\$88 to \$300) and other factors.

Aras Theatre was founded by Hidayat Nordin. It is a youth theatre collective that works with young artists from different disciplines.



Aras Theatre's 2024 announcement featuring its team of young collaborators.

2019

Sri Anggerik Bangsawan was renamed Anggerik Temasek Bangsawan Singapura (ATB).

As the leading Malay opera troupe in Singapore, ATB focuses on traditional *bangsawan* theatrics and community education, especially for youth.

The troupe continues the legacy of the late Haji Hamid Ahmad ("Pak Hamid") and adapts *bangsawan* to modern times, collaborating with local and regional arts groups. ATB practices various genres of *bangsawan*, including comedy, musical and experimental, aiming to preserve and revive the art form for future generations.

As part of Malay CultureFest 2019, Drama Box, a socially engaged theatre company that does work mostly in Mandarin, presented *Tanah•Air 水•土: A Play In Two Parts*. The work looks at the dispossession and loss of the indigenous Malays and Orang Seletar of Singapore. "Tanah" (land) and "Air" (water) were their homes, ("tanah air" in Malay) until the arrival of foreign interventions, displacing them from both. The deep sense of loss continues to be felt today.

Tanah is inspired by Isa Kamari's *Duka Tuan Bertakhta*. Set in 1819 Singapore, a young girl loses her home on the sea and is forced to come ashore. As she navigates around the various parties who stake their claims to this land, she questions her identity, and struggles to find her footing on this land she calls home.

Air is a verbatim performance that looks at the displacement of the Orang Seletar, an indigenous community of Singapore, and how as Singapore evolved, they had to resettle in Johor, only to face the threat of being displaced again with the impending development of their customary territories.

Performed in Malay and Chinese, with Malay, Chinese and English surtitles, the play asked what happens when a community's ties to their land are severed. It posed critical questions: When should we fight, negotiate, or simply succumb to agents of power?

21ST CENTURY

2020

Irfan Kasban received NAC's Young Artist Award.

Panggung Digital is a digital stage that presents Malay programmes that centre stories from the community. The project is inspired by M Saffri A Manaf and Nadiputra with the support of M Fadlin and Saiful Amri during the Covid-19 lockdown in Singapore. The slate of programmes included five radio script reads. To date, *Panggung Digital* is no longer active.

RUMAH by Khai supported under-represented Asian diaspora artists, primarily based in the UK. It offered artist development, creative workshops, festivals, and networking events. During the pandemic, it included a solidarity project for Singaporean Malay artists. *RUMAH* ceased operations as of 2022.

baca skrip: #___ by Fezhah Maznan and Teater Ekamatra featured monthly online readings of Malay plays by notable playwrights like Irfan Kasban, Noor Effendy Ibrahim, Aidli Mosbit, and Alfian Sa'at.

Each session included an introduction and critical response from guest critics. The project aimed to support Malay artists and engage contemporary audiences with significant works from Singapore Malay theatre history.

2021

National Arts Council, Singapore (NAC) announced the Self-Employed Person Grant (SEPG). It is a time-limited scheme that aims to provide support to Arts Self-Employed Persons (SEPs) affected by COVID-19. Through this grant, NAC looks to create work opportunities for arts SEPs by encouraging them to come together and work on projects, especially projects that can make a longer-term impact on arts SEPs' practices, professionalism and livelihoods.

Sabri Buang passed away suddenly from a pulmonary embolism.

The SEPG gave opportunities for two key capabilities development programmes to happen for Singapore Malay theatre:

- *PERTAMA: Rangkaian Pelakon Teater Melayu Singapura Pertama* aimed to re-establish the traits of Malay theatre actors in Singapore. Produced by Saiful Amri, Anwar Hadi Ramli, Suhaili Safari, and Dalifah Shahril, the program brought together diverse generations of Malay actors to share performance techniques and learn from each other.
- *Tunjuk Arah / இயக்காளர்* focused on the development of Malay and Indian theatre directors. Produced by Fezhah Maznan in collaboration with Centre 42 and Teater Ekamatra, this program offered mentorship and masterclasses to enhance directorial skills. Malay directors in the program included Hazwan Norly, Hidayat Nordin, Adi Jamaludin, Kaykay Nizam, and Fadhil Daud.

Keluarga Besar Encik Karim, produced by Checkpoint Theatre and written by Adib Kosnan, depicts the daily life of Karim (Rafaat Hamzah), his wife Normah (Dalifah Shahril), and their daughters Rinny (Rusydina Afiqah) and Balqis (Farah Lola), blending family dynamics with traditional Malay practices.



Keluarga Besar Encik Karim was commissioned by Esplanade and performed and presented as a digital work.

The drama, framed by Balqis' husband Aqil (Adib Kosnan), uses football metaphors to explore themes of belonging.

Due to Covid-19 restrictions, the performance was filmed and offered on demand by Esplanade.

Both Sides Now: Mengukir Harapan is a two-year community engagement project created for the Malay community to address end-of-life conversations. Presented by Drama Box and ArtsWok Collaborative, the project, led by Adib Kosnan, Molizah Mohter, and Kok Heng Leun, is conducted entirely in Malay and aims to normalize discussions about living well and leaving well.

21ST CENTURY

2022



Bangsawan Gemala Malam is a contemporary offering of the classical Malay opera form. The work is the brainchild of Singaporean directors Mohd Fared Jainal, Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit and Malaysian playwright and filmmaker, Ridhwan Saidi.

Teater Ekamatra presented ***Bangsawan Gemala Malam*** which was commissioned by Singapore International Festival of Arts.

2023



Shaza Ishak (left) and Mohd Fared Jainal (right) have been helming Teater Ekamatra together since 2011.

Mohd Fared Jainal's role as Teater Ekamatra's Artistic Director was taken over by Shaza Ishak. Shaza has been managing the company since 2011.

Air Da Tohor is a theatre performance by Asnida Daud and Firdaus Sani who are two of Singapore's *orang pulau* and *orang laut* descendants.



Air Da Tohor was the first time that a performance that centred the lived experience of Singapore's *orang pulau* and *orang laut* was included as part of the Malay festival line up.

Their families lived on Pulau Semakau and Pulau Sudong. These islands, located in the south of Singapore, were once home to indigenous *orang pulau* (people of the islands) community.

The work navigated through their complex identities, loss of cultural tradition and heritage through spoken word and movement.

2024



A production photo of the 2024 staging of *Air*.

Air was restaged as part of *The Studios*. First staged in 2019 as part of the well-received double bill *Tanah•Air*, this new iteration of *Air* is a further development of the threads presented in the play's original staging. In the careful hands of acclaimed playwright Zulfadli Rashid, materials new and old are woven into a tapestry of stories, resulting in an emotionally potent play that resonates now more than ever, confronting the issues of land, dispossession and community. *Air* was helmed by co-directors Adib Kosnan and Kok Heng Leun, and a cast comprising Dalifah Shahril, Rizman Putra, Saiful Amri, and Suhaili Safari.