

Technology Enhancements for Spectacular Elements in Mak Yong Productions at Istana Budaya

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Abstract

Istana Budaya, the Malaysian National Theatre, took the initiative to preserve and maintain the traditional art form of Mak Yong when it was banned by the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS) in Kelantan, its place of origin. This action ensured that Mak Yong would survive outside of Kelantan. In 2003, Istana Budaya staged its first production that involved contemporary technology, making it unique and modern. On the other hand, Mak Yong is also considered a theatre of imagination that focuses on the relationship between the actors and the spectators. Until 2019, Istana Budaya had produced eight Mak Yong productions with its unique artistic vision in creating performances that connected with the space and engaged with Malaysians. This article examines the visuality of these Mak Yong productions and discusses their crucial role in sustaining this traditional theatre.

Keywords: artistic visual, Istana Budaya, Mak Yong, modernity, traditional Malay theatre

Introduction

Mak Yong is a traditional art form that originated in Kelantan and is the “cultural product of the Kelantanese Malays, an art form which was created by and for them” as Solehah Ishak (2012, p. 15) states. The term Mak Yong is derived from the words *Mak-Hiang*, which means the spirit of the paddy that watches over rice crops. It was traditionally performed in the villages to ask for blessings from the spirit. Mak Yong is the earliest existing dance drama of the Malay that consists of dancing, singing, music, improvisational acting, dialogues, story, and ritual. In 1990, the Muslim Pan Islamic Party (PAS) won the Malaysian 8th General Election and took over the administration of Kelantan. PAS then banned Mak Yong and other traditional theatre practices due to their beliefs that Mak Yong was against the Islamic guidelines. Mak Yong has not been performed in Kelantan since then. Therefore, in the early 1990s, several Mak Yong practitioners moved out from Kelantan and worked in Kuala Lumpur or other states to revive Mak Yong, especially in Kuala Lumpur (Zulkifli Mohamad, 2012).

Mak Yong in Kuala Lumpur is performed in Istana Budaya (Palace of Culture), the Malaysian National Theatre. Istana Budaya is considered to be “among the top ten most sophisticated theatres in the world and is proud to be the first theatre in Asia equipped with cutting-edge stage equipment” (Foley & Sabzali Khan, 2012, p. 425). Istana Budaya has two theatre spaces: Panggung Sari and Lambang Sari. Panggung Sari is a proscenium arch stage with a capacity of 1413, while Lambang Sari is a thrust stage with a capacity of 281 audiences. Istana Budaya is a venue for performing arts in Malaysia and hosts performances from both local and international artists. Istana Budaya has produced eight Mak Yong productions: *Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2006), *Endeng Tejeli* (2008), *Raja Besar Senyanya* (2009), *Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010), *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011), *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* (2013) and *Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2019). Four productions were staged in Panggung Sari: *Raja Tangkai Hati* (2003), *Anak Raja Dua Serupa* (2010), *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* (2013) and *Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2019); and another four in Lambang Sari: *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2006), *Endeng Tejeli* (2008), *Raja Besar Senyanya* (2009) and *Dewa Indera Indera Dewa* (2011). Mak Yong performances in Panggung Sari were presented with a lavish and grand setting, while those in Lambang

Sari had a more simplified set up and remained faithful to the convention of Mak Yong in the village with minimal additional artistic values. This paper will discuss the spectacular elements created by Mak Yong productions staged in the theatre hall, Panggung Sari.

Mak Yong at Istana Budaya

Mak Yong *Raja Tangkai Hati*, staged in 2003, was the first Mak Yong production in Istana Budaya after its opening in 2000. It was a challenge to present this traditional art form in such a lavish theatre hall, since it was a new space and claimed to be world-class. Traditionally, Mak Yong would be performed outdoors, in an open space surrounded by the audience and the community. The performance space, called *bangsal*, was a temporary construction made from bamboo, with thatched palm leaves for the roof, and was about 1.5 metres high (Ghulam-Sarwar Yousof, 2004). According to Rahimidin Zahari and Sutung Umar (2011), Mak Yong is a minimalist performance that does not require backdrops, scenery, curtains, wings, or backstage space. Most of the scene changes occur through the dialogues delivered by the characters.

The production of *Raja Tangkai Hati* made full use of the stage facilities that Istana Budaya had, such as stage lift, side wagon, rear wagon, white and black gauze, screen projection, and flying bars. *Raja Tangkai Hati* was the first Mak Yong production in the new Malaysian National Theatre, and the eagerness to maximise the stage facilities was evident. Moreover, the audience had high expectations to see how the banned traditional Malay theatre would adapt to an enormous stage. Unlike traditional Mak Yong performances that did not rely on any theatrical scene changes, this production used various set designs with maximum use of lifts, wagons, fly bars, and other special effects for each scene. This was in line with Foley and Sabzali Khan's opinion that Mak Yong needed to be merged with new technology to make it relevant for today's audiences (2012). They suggested that the latest technologies should be considered as necessary solutions to connect the older form of Mak Yong to the present, which was what happened on the Istana Budaya stage.

Mak Yong *Anak Raja Dua Serupa*, staged in 2010 in Panggung Sari, had drastic changes from what was presented in *Raja Tangkai Hati*. This production was much simpler than the previous one. The stage lifts were only used at the beginning of the play, where all the dancers were brought up to the main stage level. The stage remained the same throughout the play, except for some leveling of the stage that was done to create some depth in several scenes. This was due to the main structure of the set design that was on stage throughout the play, which represented the structure of a ship. There was also a built-in trap door for the appearance of a character. In this production, the actors stayed on stage throughout the performance, following the traditional form of Mak Yong.



Figure 1. Mak Yong *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* (2013), Istana Budaya. Photo courtesy: Istana Budaya.

The most lavish production was Mak Yong *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang*, staged in 2013. Until then, this was the most expensive production of Mak Yong, which cost RM250,000 (Ringgit Malaysia) (Rosnan Rahman, personal communication, May 28, 2021). According to Irwan Ismadi Shahrim (personal communication, August 7, 2021), the Artistic Director of Istana Budaya, he took the concept of fantasy in visualizing this story. The technologies that were used included screen projection, visual 3D animation, moving image and flying set. There was no use of stage lifts or stage wagons in this play. The stage technologies were simplified, but they explored the capacity to fly actors on stage. Therefore, *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang* emphasized these unique elements in Mak Yong and was the first Mak Yong production to apply the flying technique. *Mana Setangginya*, the first theatre in Malaysia to use this spectacular element by flying the actors in 2009, used the technical team from the USA and the cost was expensive (Nor Hafizah Hasan, 2009). However, in *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang*, a local company was assigned to be in charge of the flying techniques for the three actors involved. Besides the flying spectacular elements, the usage of 3D Animation moving images helped them create the magical moments. For example, in *Kesaktian Anak Raja Gondang*, special effects such as dry ice and bubble effect were used for a scene in which the Princess was taking a bath (Irwan Ismadi Shahrim, personal communication, August 7, 2021). To add to the richness of this production, and since the stage was static, movable sets were used. There was a scene that used a movable set that was a mystical tree and was pushed in and out of the stage. Lastly, the spectacular elements in this production used the flying bars to indicate the locations of the play.



Figure 2. Mak Yong *Raja Besar Maha Gading* (2019), Istana Budaya. Photo Courtesy: Reef Omar.

The latest Mak Yong production was Mak Yong *Raja Besar Maha Gading*, staged in 2019. Irwan further explained that it was not an easy task to decide on the artistic values in Mak Yong, as Mak Yong styles were in the transition between realism and the fantasy world. For this play, Istana Budaya still retained the use of flying bars in changing the settings for each scene. Mak Yong *Raja Besar Maha Gading* did not apply any stage facilities, so it had a built-in set, horizontally, a huge platform with several levels. The set was the main structure on stage, which allowed all the actors to be placed on stage throughout the play. The spectacular elements came with the pyrotechnics to create the magical effects, for example, the appearance of the Nujum character, the scene when a character slept and woke up suddenly turned into a rich man, and the magical effect of pyrotechnics when the Nujum opened his book. In this play, the flying bars were essential in creating the aesthetic of the scenes, besides indicating the locality. In addition, the 3D multimedia projection also remained in this play with the moving images. Finally, the movable set was used in this play, which had to be pushed by the stage crews in and out. All the actors stayed on stage throughout the play. In this particular production, although Mak Yong enhanced it with the spectacular visual, it also

retained the convention where all the actors remained visible to the audience without going backstage. This was because there was no backstage in the past.

Discussion

From these four lavish and grand settings of Mak Yong productions, it can be concluded that the transition of Mak Yong exploration on the Istana Budaya stage is mainly influenced by the stories of Mak Yong. The stories themselves shape the visual designs. The stories of Mak Yong are not only about the kingship, but they also travel from the real to the fantasy world. The same applies to the characters, which are not only human, but also include supernatural characters such as *dewa-dewa* (gods and angels), *jin* and *gergasi* (ogres and giants), as well as *burung* and *binatang* (birds and animals). Mak Yong stories are full of mystical elements. As Howard (2002) states, “the scenographer visually liberates the text and the story behind it, by creating a world in which the eyes see what the ears do not hear” (p. 33). Howard further explains that the scenographer finds the visual solution for the play by exploring the text where the story is hidden and through the language. Aristotle explains that spectacle is something that can be seen or heard in performance. Creating spectacle is to provide entertainment to the audience and to consider the artistic values (Kenny, 2013). Therefore, the Mak Yong repertoire embraces the visually spectacular.

Theatre is a building and a physical space that “mark the distinction between inside and outside in different ways, each provides a different experience of crossing the threshold for the theatregoer, requiring a different kind of physical and mental effort” (McAuley, 2000, p. 51). When Mak Yong performances moved from the rural setting in Kelantan to a new space, the performance had to evolve. The building itself shaped the expectation of the audience. Mak Yong in Istana Budaya applied high stage technologies to the performance. It involved various efforts to transform a play for the local community in Kelantan into a prestigious stage, as claimed by Istana Budaya “*Seni Pentas Bertaraf Dunia*” (world-class performing arts). Foley and Sabzali Khan (2012) mentioned that the use of stage technologies improved the visual of Mak Yong performance and how to make Mak Yong more dramatic and uplifting, giving the sense of viewing Mak Yong as an international opera. They raised the question, “How could lifts, wagons, fly bars, fog machines, dry ice, and other effects mould that work and enhance emotional understanding?” (p. 428). Azz al-Yahya (2013) further stated that *Kesaktian Raja Gondang* was a contemporary Mak Yong enriched with visual enhancement through modern technologies to increase the interest of younger audiences. Thus, the spectacular elements were interrelated to the space in enhancing Mak Yong visually.

Finally, Mak Yong productions in Istana Budaya created the spectacle through the magic produced on stage. The magical elements were achieved through stage technology, special effects, and techniques. The magical elements used several techniques such as pyrotechnics, flame effects, spark-producing devices, trap doors, and fly systems. Hafshizan Hashim et al. (2020) who coined the term Technical Design of Special Effects (TDSE) defined that the technical visual was an artistic decision between the director and the designer of a production. According to them, “it was a creation of displaying a solving idea and solution in a different, unique and able to deliver the message of the story by bringing a greater presentation to impact beautifully” (p. 719). Hence, by staging Mak Yong productions in Istana Budaya, it aimed to create magical scenes through the technology that enhanced the visual spectacle of the productions.

Conclusion

By analysing these four productions, it can be concluded that the visual spectacular elements in Mak Yong Istana Budaya stem from Mak Yong repertoire itself. The stories demand magic and spectacle to happen on stage. Secondly, the shift from the village to a new space like Istana Budaya requires a significant change as well. The space demands the visual to be spectacular. Finally, the productions create magical moments using technologies and techniques. Although Mak Yong Istana Budaya has been criticised for the authenticity of Mak Yong, which has been presented in a lavish setup rather than a conventional one, Mak Yong is evolving by positioning itself with the visual spectacular elements. The option of having Mak Yong in two different setups should be acceptable, as Mak Yong in Panggung Sari is very lavish and in Lambang Sari Hall is more correlated with the convention. These four Mak Yong productions with extraordinarily spectacular visuals are the attempts to make Mak Yong appealing to the contemporary audience and to enhance the appreciation of the dying traditional Malaya theatre. Therefore, in sustaining the future of Mak Yong, the spectacular visual should be seen as the strength of modern Mak Yong, not as a loss of identity. Mak Yong is struggling to survive and adapt to live in the new environment.

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