

## **The Transformation of *Latar Tirai* in Bangsawan Tengku Anum (2002) Istana Budaya**

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### **Abstract**

Bangsawan is a theatre form that consists of acting, singing, music, dancing, and has a strong influence from Wayang Parsi from India. It was brought to Penang, Malaysia in the 1870s by the Indian workers who worked in Penang at that time. It experienced a period of fame in the 1890s and began its downfall in the early 1940s. The opening of Istana Budaya in 1999 gave opportunities for *bangsawan* to be revived in the twenty-first century, especially in dealing with modern stage technologies that were available. *Bangsawan Tengku Anum*, which is the third *bangsawan*, was staged in Istana Budaya from 18-22 December 2002, directed by Rosminah Tahir. This article examines the stage design of the *bangsawan*, mainly focusing on the usage of *Latar Tirai*. *Bangsawan* uses seven types of *Latar Tirai* that are used for each scene in this performance. *Latar tirai* is a backdrop hand painted on canvas representing the scene location and it is placed on stage as the stage background for each scene in *bangsawan*. It is painted on a canvas measuring 20' feet wide and 15' feet high, according to the suitability of the stage venue, and requires a high cost and is very time demanding. *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* transforms the use of hand painted *Latar Tirai* on canvas to paintings projected using a projector. It provides an innovation in traditional theatre performance. This paper discusses the transformation of *Latar Tirai* in *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* in adapting to the current modern stage technologies and in competing with the contemporary theatre today.

*Keywords:* *Bangsawan*, *Bangsawan Tengku Anum*, stage design, traditional Malay theatre, transformation

### **Introduction**

*Bangsawan* is an art form that combines elements of acting, singing, music, and dance (Rahmah Bujang, 1975). It was the most popular form of entertainment in the 1880s. Various elements of arts exist in *bangsawan* performance: the art of acting, dance, music, singing, comedy, and visual art (Jefri Haron, 2014). It was established in the 1870s in Penang after the introduction of Wayang Parsi or Mendu in Malaya (Rahmah Bujang, 1975). It originated from India, where the Indian traders and laborers who came to Penang to work with the English East India Company performed in Hindustani languages, representing stories, music and dances (Mohamed Ghouse Nasuruddin, 2009). *Bangsawan* that developed in Penang received a great influence from India and the Penang community in those years understood their language (Rahmah Bujang, 1989).

*Bangsawan*, also known as the Malay Opera, involves acting, dialogues, dancing, singing, and jokes that are accompanied by music throughout the performance. Since its existence in the 1890s until now, *bangsawan* has still and has undergone several adaptations and adjustments to respond to its location, political and social setting (Nur Affifah Vanitha Abdullah, 2017). Moreover, during its evolution, *bangsawan* became famous and succeeded in attracting audiences not only from the Malays, but also from Baba and Nyonya, Jawi Peranakan, Chinese, Indian, Arab, and European audiences. The popularity of *bangsawan* is a strong attraction for the audience besides the acting, music, and dance orchestra (Tan Sooi Beng, 2011). The development of the *bangsawan* has created various active groups such as Nahar *Bangsawan*, Malayan Opera, Kinta Opera, Indera *Bangsawan* of Penang, City Opera, Peninsular Opera, Seri Permata Opera, Jaya Opera, Zamzibar *Bangsawan*, Rahman Opera, Kencana Wati Opera, *Bangsawan*

Jenaka Melaya and many others (Rahmah Bujang (1989). The popularity of bangsawan lasted for a long time, more than 30 years, and was finally affected by the arrival of the film industry at the end of 1950s. Most of the actors in bangsawan moved to film productions. The popularity of bangsawan actors attracted the audience from theatre to Malay films. The decline of bangsawan theatre was also influenced by the increase in living standards and high capital used to stage bangsawan productions (Rahmah Bujang, 1989).

According to Tan Sooi Beng (1993), bangsawan is a new form of theatre that receives influences from the West. Bangsawan, adapted from the Persian Wayang, has western elements such as the use of musical instruments and the storyline. The first professional bangsawan group was Mamak Pushi/Mohammad's group Pushi Indera Bangsawan of Penang. It is the name of the group founded by Mohamed Pushi and he started to promote bangsawan and became active in 1885 with a lineup of singers who used the Malay language. The popularity of the bangsawan began in 1911 and declined in the early 1940s, which was during the Japanese colonial era in Malaya, and began to disappear in the 1950s. After the decline of bangsawan, there were still small groups that performed as invitations to small events, but they did not last long. The opening of Istana Budaya in 1999, which led to the initiative of numerous productions of bangsawan, gave a new light to the survival of bangsawan. Bangsawan produced by Istana Budaya are *Bangsawan Tun Perak*, (2000), *Bangsawan Siti Zubaidah* (2000), *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* (2002), and *Bangsawan Naga Chini* (2006). *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* was written and directed by Rosminah Tahir, Hamzah Tahir as an artistic director and stage designer is Badrul Zaman Abdul Jalil. *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* produced and staged in Istana Budaya on December 18-22, 2002. *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* tells the story of Tengku Anum, who was a royal relative of the Kingdom of Kedah. The Kingdom of Kedah has fallen into the hands of the Kingdom of Ligor (Thailand) after being defeated in the war. With the wisdom of Tengku Anum, the last King of Kedah returned to the throne of the Kingdom of Kedah.

### **Bangsawan, Latar Tirai and Transformation**

Bangsawan was the first Malay theatre that was developed professionally for commercial and entertainment purposes in Malaya in the late 19th century (Rahmah Bujang, 1975). Bangsawan is a transitional theatre between traditional and modern, and it can be interpreted that bangsawan is one of the theatres that has its own strengths and has its own performance structure to be staged. Bangsawan has gone through several phases of change since its golden age. Since the 1980s, there have been several changes to the traditional and modern characteristics of bangsawan. The changes are: the omission of the opening and closing rituals of the stage, staging the story for several continuous nights, improvisational form of acting, and in some productions losing the extra-turn segments. Thus, there are some changes that were made including the presence of a script and a director, the use of multimedia as a substitute for decorative backdrops, and actors miming songs during the performance (Nur Afifah Vanitha Abdullah, 2017). These changes follow the era, venues of the performance, and the sophistication of the stage.

Rahmah Bujang (2016) mentions that bangsawan began to use modern musical instruments such as pianos, violins, and others. The use of this musical instrument is to get a pleasant sound and make the background music more interesting for the audience. Apart from the aspects of music, actors, sets, and technology, bangsawan also has changes in the use of the story. The story begins to use the adaptations of the Western stories and extra-turn also used a lot of modern performances. Extra-Turn itself has its own development in bangsawan. It is because bangsawan performances should meet the preferred choices by the current audience. Therefore, modernity to the contemporary entertainments and the audience demand is crucial in bangsawan (Jamiat Al Sheikhiah, 2015). Besides, the adaptations of the stories that are used in bangsawan, the stage design, costumes and make up are involving the evolution processes. In bangsawan performance, it allows hybrid performance because in bangsawan not only use local stories but also using Western adaptation story and it is interesting to see Malay actors acted in Western stories, using English aristocratic clothes and delivering Malay language (Armin Azhari, 2018). Bangsawan is a Malay drama art that has applied western staging techniques. According to Rahmah Bujang (1975), bangsawan was the first to use Western staging techniques and use English dramas.



Figure 1. This figure portrays the scenery of the village for the play *Bangsawan Mustika Sakti* directed by Md Sukor Md. Noor at Panggung Bandaraya Kuala Lumpur in 2009 (Source from Tan Sooi Beng, 2011, *Bangsawan Malaysia staging cultural diversity & change*).

Figure 1 shows the scenery of the village for the *Bangsawan Mustika Sakti* and using a Latar tirai that is painted on a canvas. Latar tirai or painted backdrop is one of the main sets in every bangsawan production. It is compulsory for bangsawan productions to have latar tirai. These latar tirai sets are usually 18 to 20 feet wide and have a height of 7 to 8 feet. The size is determined by the size of the stage or performance space. There are mostly six main Latar Tirai in bangsawan which are: a view from inside the palace, scenery of the road, scenery in the forest, view of a garden, an interior poor man's house, and a view of an exterior landscape such as rice paddy field (Rahmah Bujang, 1975). Latar Tirai is a main background for every scene and the *sebung* is a perspective for the two dimensional scenery that is painted in Latar Tirai. Latar Tirai will change every scene and follow the sequences of every story. Bangsawan performances usually will arrange the latar tirai by sequences and hang on a flying bar but depend on the facilities at the auditorium. This Latar Tirai will be backed by a two-dimensional set, hand prop and sebung and a few realistic sets for visualizing a scene.

### Research Methodology

This study uses qualitative methods by collecting the data from books, journals, newspapers articles, sketches of *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* set designs and semi-structured interview with the set designer, Badrul Zaman Abdul Jalil from Istana Budaya. This research also is based on a video recording of the *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* directed by Rosminah Tahir and produced by Istana Budaya in 2002. This research also compares the set designs in conventional bangsawan from the historical background and the production of *Bangsawan Tengku Anum*. The comparison recognizes the changes that were made by this production in transforming bangsawan set design to the current stage technology.

### Latar Tirai Bangsawan Tengku Anum

The set designer of *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* is Badrul Zaman Abdul Jalil, a graduate from Art & Design Universiti Teknologi MARA. In 1997, he had the opportunity to gain experience in the field of Theatre Design in the United Kingdom. He has been working as Assistant Artistic Director (Production Department) at Istana Budaya since 1991. Badrul Zaman has extensive experience and handles designing sets, props, costumes, and make-up for Istana Budaya's productions such as theatre productions, dance productions, orchestra concerts and choirs. Badrul Zaman has been involved in more than 50 theatre productions as a Set Designer, Costume Designer or Artistic Director. Some of his works in theatre productions are *Tanah Bernanah*, *Raja Lawak* (1992); *Malam Ini Penyus Menangis* (1994); *Bangsawan Lindungan Bulan* (1995);

*Tun Mamat & Puteri Ledang* (1996); *Lantai T-Pinkie* (1997); *Mencari Juita* (1998); *Bangsawan Siti Zubaidah* (2000); *Malim Deman dan Cindai* (2001); and *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* (2002).

In designing for *Bangsawan Tengku Anum*, he began his designing process through a field trip to Kedah for field research. Badrul Zaman visited Kedah Palaces, some caves to get visuals of the cave, and Siam Palaces. Indeed, a set designer begins his visual aspects through the historical research to get visuals before designing the scenic design. According to Sabzali Musa (2009), in designing set design, the process is not one that happens instinctively. It demands processes that take time, creativity, energy, research, discipline, and funding. According to Pavelka (2015), “theatre designer’s work from original materials, written, arranged, designed, and improvised” (Pavelka, 2015, p. xiii). According to Badrul Zaman, bangsawan needs to be staged in different venues therefore it must face with variety of technologies and as a designer, it must work within the scope of the existing technology at the current time (Badrul Zaman Abdul Jalil, personal communication, March 27th, 2018). Besides the field trip, Badrul Zaman had also to research the conventions of bangsawan set designs. He had to consider the set designs that he wanted to create, the conventional bangsawan stage designs and the existing technology in the Istana Budaya.



Figure 2. Overture Scene. Set Designer Badrul Zaman, *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* directed by Rosminah Tahir, Istana Budaya 2002 (Source from Tan Sooi Beng, (2011), *Bangsawan Malaysia staging cultural diversity & change*).

This figure shows the technique that blends the projection on canvas, special effect and lighting that give a visual impact that the designer tries to portray. In his design for *Bangsawan Tengku Anum*, Badrul Zaman converted the actual photographs of the palaces and exact locations to drawing the images on the smaller canvas, and from the images of the drawings, projected on the cyclorama. The reason for Badrul Zaman to decide to take the actual images of the photographs using camera and turned it into drawing was to retain the characteristics of bangsawan which uses canvas which is drawn on a curtain that is 18’-20’ (w) x 7’-8’ (h). However, for this innovation, the drawings on A3 size were re-photographed and projected on the screen projector. Badrul Zaman aimed to get a more realistic scene background instead of hand painted images. This technique saves time of hand painting on large canvas that have a very high cost. Furthermore, the designer used *sebeng* that is a part of prop that is used as a separator for every *latar tirai* that is painted on the canvas but has a larger amount of *sebeng* according to the scene. The usage of existing technology and facilities on the stage is also part of the audience’s spectacle for the performance on the stage at Istana Budaya. The stage designer also employed a multi-purpose set, with the front set depicting the King of Kedah’s throne and when the removable set was tuned, it portrayed the King of Ligor’s throne. This technique saves time in sets changing and makes the set multi purposes.

Looking at the changes that occurred in the development of bangsawan theatre, many transformations have taken place over time, and in facing the twenty-first century, more changes have been applied to the bangsawan form. The transformation comes from the English word *transform*, which means to control a form from one form to another that social and cultural transformation discuss about the processes of structural change, social systems, and culture (A. Zaeny, 2005). Transformation requires a process of change and transformation may occur in a variety of forms and methods. The main change is in

the Latar Tirai, which is indeed a point of transformation in the bangsawan scenic design. Conventionally, bangsawan uses a curtain background painted on canvas as a Latar Tirai curtain backdrop for each scene. It is also dependent on the performance space facilities, such as the numbers of 'fly bars'. The fewer 'fly bars' available in the theatre, the less Latar Tirai could be hanged.

*Bangsawan Tengku Anum* has simplified the method of changing the Latar Tirai from the fly bar to the projector technique. As mentioned by Abdul Samad Salleh (2006), "the specialty of bangsawan is the curtain that is present in this performance" (p. 57). In addition, Latar Tirai is drawn efficiently to present the background of the locations and become an attraction for the audience everytime the curtains go up. It became the spectacular element in bangsawan through the magnificence of Latar Tirai. The transformation of paintings on canvas to drawing that are projected provides a new method of conveying the setting of the location in the scenes in bangsawan. Latar Tirai that is usually used in each performance will be changed or arranged according to the scenes.

### Conclusion

*Bangsawan Tengku Anum* has evolved in its current time. It has utilized the technological sophistication available at Istana Budaya and absorbed it into the traditional form of bangsawan performance. In designing bangsawan in the twenty-first century, it could be concluded that the set designer wants to retain the aesthetic, the elements and the characteristics of bangsawan. However, the innovation is compulsory as an attempt to produce bangsawan to the contemporary audience that demands new innovation. As Badrul Zaman, the set designer for *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* attempts to retain the conventional elements of hand painting on the canvas by transforming photographs images from the realistic set and panorama on the drawing, and then projected on the screen. *Bangsawan Tengku Anum* creates a new injection in representing the background of the curtains. This decision could cut the big cost in producing the curtain backdrop of bangsawan and allow bangsawan to be revived and contemporary.

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