COMMUNITY THEATRE IN THE ABSENCE OF COMMUNITY: THE TAMAN MEDAN PROJECT

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In Malaysia, notions of community can prove difficult to negotiate, given the socio-political structure and framework within which most Malaysians function. As soon we begin to think of community in terms of broad social networks such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, class and language, we enter sensitive and deeply contested terrain. The Five Arts Centre (FAC), however, through its Taman Medan community arts project, has chosen to tread on this terrain. In this article, I will look at what the FAC tried to accomplish through this project in Taman Medan, a socially and economically marginalized area of Kuala Lumpur – an area where, furthermore, "community" is a deeply unstable, even ephemeral, notion. What are some of the obstacles against which the project facilitators and participants struggled, and how did working on such a project help to foster an idea of what community means? Were they, in fact, able to build up any sense of community within this fractured area with its transient population?

Keywords: community theatre, engaged arts practice, communites (inclusion and exclusion), racial tension, economic tension

Community-based theatre, which had its genesis around the 1970s, is loosely defined as theatre which "includes all decentralized, educational, recreational, and community-based social activities using theatricality and performance."[1] While it is not a dominant activity in the theatrical world of Kuala Lumpur, there are some interesting community theatre projects that are significant. Actor-trainer Chris Ng, for example, in association with the Malaysian Aids Council, uses theatre to educate young people about HIV/AIDS; Ng's motivation as a facilitator and trainer is to "use theatre as a vehicle for young people to connect to the issue."[2] The Jumping Jellybeans company, which focuses on children's theatre, works closely with hospitals and care organizations, as well as volunteering at MAGIC (Malaysian Association for Guardians of the Intellectually Challenged), to provide theatre training for intellectually challenged participants aged 6–12 and 13–20. If "community" is taken "as a function of commonality,"[3] then the groups mentioned above form communities with fairly specific, defined thematic borders – youth, health issues, mental capabilities. Other notions of community,

however, prove much more difficult to negotiate, given the socio-political structure and framework within which most Malaysians function. As soon as we begin to think of community in terms of broader social networks such as ethnicity, religion, nationality, class and language, we enter sensitive and deeply contested terrains. The Five Arts Centre (FAC), through its Taman Medan community arts project, is especially noteworthy because it has chosen to tread on this terrain.

In this article, I look at what the FAC tries to accomplish in Taman Medan, a socially and economically marginalized area of Kuala Lumpur – an area where, furthermore, "community" is a deeply unstable, even ephemeral, notion. I want to consider the following questions: what are some of the obstacles against which the project facilitators and participants struggled, and how did working on such a project help to foster an idea of what community means? Were they, in fact, able to build any sense of community within this fractured area with its transient population? I will also look at the issue of community as it plays out in Taman Medan. In 2001 it became the focus of the nation as fatal clashes broke out among its inhabitants. The rapidity with which the violence broke out and the sheer numbers of people involved were shocking, especially considering the triviality of the triggering incident. Given the extent of the violence, and the way in which it was quickly tagged a racial incident, grave questions must be asked about what "community" can possibly mean in such an area. If community is about commonality, what do the various inhabitants in the area have in common apart from poverty? If community is also about barriers between different groups, how can those barriers be crossed?

I will also specifically consider the attempts by the FAC to work with the inhabitants of Taman Medan through engaged community arts practice. Here, I wish to stress the point that while the project is highly commendable, it is not a thorough-going success. Its failures, however, come from problems and barriers within the Taman Medan area, rather than solely from the execution of the project itself.

COMMUNITY IN MALAYSIA

Malaysia is a community which functions very much according to differences and distinctions. Beneath the broad umbrella of "nation," Malaysians must deal with being divided into distinct communities of race, language and religion. To officially be a Malaysian, one must be identified first on a birth certificate, and then from the age of twelve by an identity card, which identifies each individual by race and religion.

Although Malaysians are not unique in belonging to a nation, which, at the level of the individual, is broken up into communities of race, religion, culture, gender, language and so on, the key difference in Malaysia is that these communities are constructed by and imposed upon them by the authorities, whether directly or indirectly. Individuals are expected, for all official purposes, to identify with such authority-regulated categories of race and religion, rather than forming their own organic communities of belonging. This identification can be at odds with their identification with other communities to which they might feel a more comfortable sense of belonging. And because the constructed identities are imposed on so many levels, and individuals have to constantly identify themselves by those categories, a general understanding has become deeply ingrained in many Malaysians, that is, that these very broad categories are what fundamentally classify all Malaysians. This is a curious assumption to make, given that most individuals are also aware of the complexity of their own identities. As a result, stereotypes are constantly deployed in everyday social situations.

This kind of ideology indicates a society that operates on stereotypes and rigid categories rather than making any serious attempt to understand the myriad differences that actually constitute the mosaic feature of the nation. And yet, this insistence on boundaries is also a function of community:

> …as sociologists and cultural theorists such as Cohen, Paul Gilroy, and Iris Marion Young point out, commonality also implies boundaries, difference, and exclusion. In order for a community to distinguish itself, its members must differentiate themselves in some way from other communities through boundaries of land, behaviour or background.[4]

This kind of differentiation need not be negative; it can be a matter of recognizing varieties of cultures, languages, and ways of belonging. It becomes negative only when belonging within a community is used as a method of exclusion, or as a means of defining purity and exclusivity, such as in the case of South Africa under apartheid. To some extent, racial classification in Malaysia is also used to define belonging within exclusive groups, though certainly without the brutal marginalization of apartheid.

In Malaysia, racial categorization is highly politicized, and has been deployed to strategic effect by the State. At the national level of broad racial categorization it is not the communities which have distinguished *themselves* by race, as suggested by Cohen, Gilroy and Young in the above quote, but the authorities which have imposed these categorizations. Thus, at the national level, Malaysians have been taught to think in terms of division rather than unity. This is not to say that there

is no broad sense of community in Malaysia. Most Malaysians have no difficulty identifying themselves as simultaneously Malaysians and a member belonging to a specific racial/cultural/linguistic group that does not necessarily accord with the official categories. But this organic identification is always in tension with the official classification.

Further complicating the idea of "community" in Malaysia are issues of social class and disparities in access to wealth. Despite decades of affirmative action policies ostensibly designed to alleviate poverty among the Malays (who were perceived, in the post-Independence years, as being economically disadvantaged by the fact that the majority were rural and agricultural, compared to the business-savvy, urban Chinese), poverty is still rife in both rural and urban areas, among members of all races. It would therefore be far too simplistic to divide Malaysian society's communitarian instincts along purely racial lines, as social class and economic standing function as far more potent unifiers than does race. However, unity across racial lines is far easier to achieve in a middle-class environment where individuals not only experience fairly equal levels of access to social privileges and material comfort, but also have achievable aspirations for their children. In a more disadvantaged area, such as Taman Medan, economic deprivation and severely limited opportunities for advancement do not help to create a peaceful and harmonious atmosphere. Here, race and economic standing work together to create further, ever more complex divisions. Where middle-class areas tend to be racially mixed (though one can still speak of the area being more "Indian," "Malay" or "Chinese"), working-class areas (including low-cost housing and squatter areas) tend to be much more mono-racial. These areas, already divided from the mainstream of Kuala Lumpur's suburban population by their economic position, are also divided from each other by the exigencies of living in somewhat ghettoized low-cost housing schemes and temporary government-provided accommodation.

At every level, Malaysia is fractured into complex communities of race, class, language, religion and culture; however, as one commentator notes, "[l]egitimate differences do not make for troubling divergences."[5] The trouble is that the complexity of this picture is ignored at the official level where social patterns are painted with broad, essentializing strokes; difference is ignored in favor of rosy pictures of harmony amid racial tolerance. Because there are no attempts to confront and work through difference, no new understanding is reached, and old stereotypes and prejudices remain in place. Lack of social and political fervor also means that poor areas such as Taman Medan are generally ignored except during election time, or when violence erupts; this implies the low level of importance accorded to these areas in comparison to the rest of the city, and serves to further distance them from any notion of participating in a larger

community. As a result, areas such as Taman Medan struggle to come to terms with notions like community and belonging.

TAMAN MEDAN: BACKGROUND TO THE 2001 CLASHES

Taman Medan (formerly called Kampung Medan) is an area not far from the middle-class residential enclaves of Petaling Jaya and Bandar Sunway. It is possible from certain parts of the area to see the Kuala Lumpur Twin Towers, the symbol of Malaysian prosperity and progress. But the residents in Taman Medan are far from financially comfortable, and are highly unlikely to be able to partake of the economy which made the Twin Towers possible. It is a largely working-class neighbourhood; it is also somewhat racially divided, being made up of around 20 smaller *kampungs*, each dominated by a particular race. In their project concept paper, the Five Arts Centre noted the divisions between the various communities: "The working class communities of Malay, Indian, Chinese and Indonesian groups live next door to but separately from each other."[6] Politician Dr. Xavier Jayakumar expresses the racial divisions slightly differently: "Kampung Medan's residents comprise 70% Malays, 20% Indians and 10% Chinese. The Malays live in low-cost flats and houses. The Chinese are scattered, while the Indians live in longhouses and squatter settlements."[7] The area is dominated by Malays, and it would appear, since they live in "low-cost flats and houses," that they are slightly better off than the Indians in terms of accommodation. Longhouses are usually provided by the government as temporary accommodation to be used while waiting for low-cost housing to be built; according to Jayakumar, however, some of these people have been in the longhouses for more than 25 years. While the FAC description of Taman Medan focuses on the conceptual distance between people who live next door to each other, Jayakumar notes that even within this severely disadvantaged area are already hierarchies of disempowerment; Jayakumar's description also suggests that these hierarchies are racially-based. Despite these apparent discrepancies in perspectives, however, there is no denying that all the residents of Taman Medan are beset by problems associated with grinding poverty and neglect.

On 8 March 2001, tensions fostered by poor living conditions and economic marginalization erupted, and a temper tantrum ignited four nights of violence, leaving six dead and scores horribly injured. The genesis of these events were "a funeral, a wedding, and a misunderstanding over a broken van windscreen."[8] An Indian man, perhaps upset at finding his path blocked by a wedding tent erected by a Malay family, kicked some chairs. He was assaulted by the angry Malay family, fled, and later returned with a large group of Indian men armed with *parangs*. From that point, the situation spiraled out of control into a series of tensions and misunderstandings that resulted in serious violence.

The immediate response from some Malaysians was to tag the events as being racially motivated. Others, however feel, that although the clashes were mainly between Indians and Malays, it was fundamentally more about urban poverty and powerlessness than about racial issues. Xavier Jayakumar, for example, notes that the pervasive and all-encompassing poverty in the area helped to breed a "gang" mentality:

> Here groups and gangs are formed to meet basic needs since guidance and attention are lacking in a crowded home and a competitive neighbourhood. The young ones turn to a big brother for advice and safety in the belief that loyalty and honour will provide for their basic needs. They do get security and respect but the only way for them to maintain either is to be part of a politics of violence and fear.[9]

Jayakumar does not blame racial tension for the riots; rather, the problem lies with the framework within which they live (a framework where everyone, regardless of race, is poor), in which the only way to feel safe is to belong to gangs as a way of gaining power and inflicting fear and violence on others. For these gangs, brutality would appear to be the only solution to the events as they unfolded.

There is also a sense that the people within this area have been forgotten by, have no voice, or have gone unheard by the authorities. The first time voices from the area were "heard" was in the immediate aftermath of the clashes. As Dr. Denison Jayasooria notes, "the incident had brought to public attention the cries, concerns and issues facing low-income families in urban areas."[10] Yet, the inhabitants of the area have been pleading "for better housing and amenities" for over 15 years to no avail.[11] Even then, what was focused on by the authorities was not the residents' perceptions of the events and the significance for them, or what triggered them. Although there were changes in the environment in the immediate aftermath of the clashes (garbage, for example, began to be collected regularly), there was still a strong sense among the residents that things had not really changed, possibly because the authorities were looking at superficial rather than fundamental problems. While the authorities spoke about tolerance and racial harmony, and tried to quickly clean up the insalubrious and unhygienic surroundings, Taman Medan residents were concerned about long-standing problems such as flooding, zinc roofs being blown off during storms, and the difficulty of finding steady work, among many others. The community was "spoken about" rather than allowed to speak, and only within the context of the clashes, rather than in the larger context of the misery and a sense of helplessness that had given rise to the violence.

But in what sense does Taman Medan constitute a community? Geographically and spatially, the inhabitants occupy a large bounded area under a single place name. But this area is broken into smaller units such as Kampung Gandhi and Kampung Lindungan, and within these *kampungs*, further into correspondingly smaller racial and cultural communities with apparently very little cross-over or communication taking place between them. It might be possible to see the inhabitants as a community of the socially and economically marginalized or disempowered. But in this case, their marginalization and poverty served instead to disunite them further, to create tensions and suspicions, which only serve to undermine any chance at building communal bridges.

Racial and cultural differentiation within these distinct groups need not inevitably cause a sense of disengagement from, or lack of, community. Seyla Benhabib suggests that "modern societies are not communities integrated around a single conception of human good or even a shared understanding of the value of belonging to community itself;"[12] in a globalized, multicultural world, difference rather than homogeneity is almost already a given. But as Catherine Graham points out, this does not necessarily equate to a sense of a lack of community: "According to Benhabib, participatory communitarianism is instead marked by sentiments of political agency and efficacy, 'namely the sense that we have a say in the economic, political and civic arrangements which define our lives together, and that what one does makes a difference.'"[13] This sense of participatory communitarianism is singularly lacking in the Taman Medan area, as underlined by a poignant comment by one of the inhabitants. Living in a small wooden house on stilts (necessary to avoid flood damage) built by her husband in 1992, she struggles to make ends meet; they have applied many times for low-cost housing, but have been unsuccessful. Resigned, she sadly declares: "I think we'll just wait to be moved again,"[14] a statement redolent with a distinct sense of powerlessness. Clearly, she and her family are acted upon rather than allowed to exercise agency, and whose subjectivities and voice have no value.

The idea of just waiting "to be moved again" also points to another problem with the notion of community as experienced in Taman Medan. Despite the fact that many people in the area have been waiting 15 years for better housing, the population is constantly changing – some people move to other squatter areas, while others on to government housing projects, and their places are occupied in turn by more migrants from other areas of Malaysia. It is, in the end, a highly transient population: a difficulty that worked against the kind of project the FAC tried to introduce.

COMMUNITY THEATRE AND THE TAMAN MEDAN PROJECT

Given the deep levels of division that exist within Malaysian society, theatre can play an important part in discussing, negotiating and bridging difference. Because performance is both a physical and verbal art form, it is able to concretize and embody issues of difference in a very real way. Difference can be expressed and experienced in deeply physical and intellectual terms. Importantly, performance also must be experienced as a group, thus creating a space of sharing. Guglielmo Schininà, who has done considerable fieldwork in community theatre,[15] notes that theatre is much more than a way of achieving superficial unity:

> I arrived at the conclusion that the value of theatre does not lie in its capacity to emphasize what unifies human beings, but rather in its potential to emphasize their differences and to create bridges between them. I believe the theatre should work at the limits and the borders – and not at the centre – of what is defined as 'humanity.'[16]

The point of community theatre is not to reify easy notions of togetherness, but to work through difference without erasing it; Schininà suggests that "[i]f we work on the differences among and within all people, we might be able to turn conflicts into peaceful contrasts and exchanges – into ways of relating."[17] Sonja Kuftinec, writing in the context of her work with American community theatre group Cornerstone,[18] notes that it is difficult, but imperative, to move beyond the warm, fuzzy feeling of superficially creating "community":

> The difficulty of performing differentiation as opposed to "a group hug" resides in the negotiation of agency between Cornerstone and community members. As outsiders to the community, Cornerstone members may perceive issues and differentiations that community members interpret from their own perspective or simply do not wish to perform.[19]

This distinction is crucial in the process of creating theatre where the community speaks, rather than be spoken about. The theatre group, coming as it does from the outside, cannot know all the issues and subtleties involved within the community, and should not therefore take a dominant position in the creative process. Graham identifies community theatre as "a mode of public discussion that is not based on defining a problem in terms of present conceptual categories, but on a willingness and ability to engage with the storyteller in a public practice of meaning creation."[20] This kind of practice empowers the community in telling its stories and creating performances; it becomes an agent actively conveying issues and ideas pertinent to itself in meaningful ways.

These were the fine lines that the Five Arts facilitators had to learn to tread when they entered the Taman Medan area. Initially, they came into the project with some preconceived ideas about issues with which they must deal. According to project leader, Mark Teh, their main aim was actually to talk about the 2001 clashes, particularly since a lot of young people were involved in them. Says Teh:

> We had all these noble goals of how we were going to go in there and talk to the young people and get them to engage in those issues in their own way. It was not our intention to be exploitative. But what we came to realize was that we were dealing with people's lives and despite the theories and concepts we had, it wasn't useful once we were there because there was so much more beyond that. We learned a lot along the way, like what we initially thought were huge issues were not necessarily so for the young people.[21]

Teh's discovery reflects Jayakumar's realization, upon visiting the stricken area, that the inhabitants of Taman Medan felt "that fights were a common occurrence and hence nothing to worry about." Clearly, what had shocked the nation at large was seen within this community as a normal state of affairs. The difference between outsider and insider perceptions of the incident indicates the extent to which life in Taman Medan is cut off from the more affluent and privileged communities by which it is surrounded. Despite its rather central location, the communities who live in Taman Medan are thoroughly marginalized from each other, and from mainstream society as well.

The community project was then, initially aimed at addressing a particular issue seen by "outsiders" as being of central importance. Ultimately however, these designs were abandoned and the project enabled the participants to highlight issues which, to them, were more immediate and pressing. It gave them a platform, not normally available to them, from which to speak. Jayakumar feels that a central problem in this area is that people are simply not heard: "Many Malaysians feel like they are third class citizens. Their 'realism', cynicism really, comes from experience and knowing that mainstream society ignores them. The result is the perpetuation of an increasingly aggrieved population." Canadian community theatre practitioner, David Diamond, says that "[w]hen individuals don't express themselves emotionally for long periods of time they get sick […]. Communities, I believe, are the same."[22] The lack of a voice for the Taman Medan inhabitants in the wider public sphere was clearly an issue that needed to be addressed, especially as the community was already showing signs of "sickness."

The FAC came into the area (specifically, Kampung Pinang) about a year after the unrest (April 2002) precisely in order to address this issue of voicelessness. Their objectives were as follows:

1. To bring engaged arts activity into a community – we worked in and amongst the flats and squatter houses in the kampung for three to six hours every weekend for the six months.
2. To create a safe outlet for young people to express their ideas, thoughts and concerns – the project was free-of-charge and open access to anyone between 10 to 16.
3. To work with the young people to create arts work with them, for them, about them and using stories and materials from around them.
4. To dialogue and explore issues of ethnicity, gender, violence and empowerment.[23]

An important point here is not only that the project allowed these young people to speak, but also helped provide them with an audience that would listen to them. It was also important that the focus was on "stories and materials from around them," rather than adhering to any nationally-produced, imposed narrative of tolerance among races. A central part of the project was fundamentally about creating a safe space in which the participants could express themselves in a creative way, and in a supportive environment where they know that they were actually being heard. As noted earlier, to have a voice can slowly lead to a growing sense of participatory communitarianism.

The project had its inception in 2002, when the British Council sponsored Mark Teh to attend the first Connecting Futures Youth Forum (CFUF) in England. There, he worked with participants from other countries with large Muslim populations. The point of the forum was to find ways to build understanding and deepen respect among youth from different cultural backgrounds. As a concrete result of the forum, each participant was to propose a relevant project that the British Council can fund back in their home country. Teh proposed the Taman Medan Project; his objective "was to create and organize long-term engaged arts practice in economically depressed communities."[24]

The first phase of the project began in April 2002, with the participation of about 23 children aged between 10 and 16, over a period of six months. Participation was free, and the project was located within Taman Medan; rehearsals, art sessions, games and filming all took place on the community's *sepak takraw* court, their flats, or whatever available communal spaces. The activities took place on weekends, and there was no obligation on participants to appear for every session. Thus from the outset, the FAC sought to create an environment that took into account the logistic and economic issues facing the residents of the

Taman Medan area. Parents were not burdened with problems of transport or fees, and were generally pleased that their children had something constructive and educational to do on weekends. The FAC also decided to work with film rather than theatre in this project, since the participants were more familiar with the vocabulary of film and television than with theatre. Moreover, learning how to operate digital video equipments also taught them a new and potentially useful skill.

WORKING IN THE COMMUNITY

An early problem the project had to face was how to deal with a community that is not a singular entity. Taman Medan is a sprawling geographical community; given that community theatre demands close and detailed work done with a fairly small group of people, FAC had to focus on just one of the *kampungs* within the larger Taman Medan area. They chose Kampung Pinang, a predominantly Malay area with a mainly Tamil area, Kampung Lindungan, right next to it. Teh says that they "were expecting Malay and Indian kids,"[25] but in the end, only the Malay children showed an interest. Teh hoped, in the second phase of the project, to engage the Tamil speaking community of Kampung Lindungan. By the last phase, he notes that there were "a few more participants from Indian backgrounds, but there was a more equal representation of participants (Malay and Indian) in the last phase."[26] This last point is interesting – Teh suggests that the reason for the more "mixed" participation in the final phase came about because the FAC moved the site of their work to a nearby housing area specifically developed for the former inhabitants of squatter houses in Taman Medan. This implies that moving out of the temporary housing and into a more settled area, where people had a greater sense of ownership, might have fostered an easier sense of community.

Initially, then, the project had to battle with the fact that Taman Medan, as a whole, is an unsettled and unstable area with no sense of permanence and ownership amongst its inhabitants. Teh compares Taman Medan to "a mahjong table: communities of people who are constantly being moved around, every time there is a little spot of trouble or every time a new area development goes up – they just keep getting moved and moved."[27] If impermanence is the central feature of their homes, what sense of community and stability within a community, can be achieved? The FAC project demanded real engagement between the participants and their physical surroundings. All games, rehearsals and filming were done within the areas where the participants lived, and in both public and private spaces such as badminton courts, community halls, and even their own homes. Teh realizes that living spaces become erased and lose their identity in areas like Taman Medan, and so, the act of performing and filming in

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these spaces could help the inhabitants to stake a claim on their living environment, thus positioning them visibly within their associated spaces. Capturing the performances on video also helps to stabilize that which would otherwise be impermanent. One journalist notes that the "engaged arts process seeks to help young people in a community to be involved in their environment;"[28] such involvement can help foster a sense of belonging that the authorities do not provide. Bernardi states that this type of theatre facilitates "the structuring of the entire community and of the smaller social institutions of which the community is comprised, such as schools, hospitals, villages."[29] Given that Taman Medan is so deeply fragmented and is beset by a sense of impermanence, it is necessary to build a sense of community on a smaller scale of the individual *kampungs* before the process of building bridges across *kampungs* can be realized.

The FAC project, with its emphasis on frequent and prolonged contact with the participants, as well as the absolute lack of coercion, worked to foster a sense of cohesion among its young participants. The sessions began with ice-breaking games which demanded no special skills from the participants, but did require active, physical participation that often leads to much merriment and laughter. A Canadian community theatre practitioner has noted that initiating an activity with such light-hearted games and exercises is valuable, for "[w]hen we're having fun we have less barriers, we let go a little more quickly."[30] Breaking down barriers and establishing trust is vital in an area where "delinquency is high among youngsters […and…] children lack motivation to attend school."[31] This directly contributes to Jayakumar's comments about the formation of gangs amongst disaffected youths as a means to attain some measure of agency and empowerment. As one participant noted, Taman Medan is "a well-known black area where kids often get involved in unhealthy activities."[32] Indeed, all these function as barriers to the formation of a healthy sense of community: delinquency, truancy, gangsterism and drug addiction, add to the inhabitants underlying sense of disaffection and disempowerment. The participants interviewed concurred that the project was something positive because it gave them a focus during their usually ungoverned leisure hours, was fun, and had taught them new and potentially useful skills.

The FAC followed a structured plan for their six-month project that is "loosely adapted from Arts and Cultural Institute for Development (MAYA), an organization with a long history of community arts work in Thailand."[33] The plan is outlined in the Table 1:

Table 1: Six-month plan for Taman Medan Project

Procedure	Objectives	Activities
1. Icebreakers/warm-ups	Building supportive team environment	*Play oriented* - games - songs
2. Problem identification (INPUT)	Identifying the problem/issue, using methods that get participants emotionally involved	*Question oriented* - stimulus media - role play - field work research
3. Individual exploration (I)	Stimulate individual exploration of problem, development of creative ideas	*Think artistically* - drawings/comics - paper sculpture - body portraits
4. Group work (WE)	Stimulate group discussion, analysis, brain storming and document one agreed way to problem solve	*Dialectical discourse* - collage - tableux (*sic*) - mind maps
5. Communication (OUTPUT)	Transform agreed problem and possible solution into a presentation for feedback	*Presentation through artistic medium* - drama, dance - puppetry - video
6. Debriefing	To reflect on learning process and concepts – have they moved from abstract to concrete	- reality check - application possibilities - follow up

It is very clear that the main focus is teamwork and group support arising from individual ideas; the warm-up games serve to bond the participants as a team, which directly engenders a small and supportive community of participants. The next couple of steps are aimed at eliciting stories and ideas from the participants without any heavy-handed intervention from the facilitators. The fourth step (group work) is significant because it requires that the participants "document one agreed way to problem solve" by using a series of artistic methods (collages and tableaux), and the more logical method of mind-mapping. The activities call for individual explorations of the problems and issues highlighted with the final aim of reaching a consensus through dialogue on the possible solutions to problems raised. This again highlights a sense of being part of a united community that is focused on common goals. These goals were then concretely realized in the form of creative expressions such as a drama, a puppet show, a dance or a short video. The video, for example, was then screened for the Kampung Pinang community and the local media to reinforce, for the

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participants, the point that they had a voice and that there were people listening to it.

The project also worked towards empowering the participants by allowing them to tell their own stories. Cocke stresses the importance of this principle when he states that "[g]rassroots theatre is given its voice by the community from which it arises."[34] Graham notes that "[b]y allowing participants in popular theatre workshops to show what happens in their lives, without demanding explanation or analysis, this method allows groups to act out concerns that might not have been raised otherwise."[35] By letting the participants tell their stories, FAC discovered that its earlier, preconceived notions of what was important to the youth of Kampung Pinang, was erroneous and had to be abandoned. Directly from this, the facilitators also found that they had also arrived at a deeper level of understanding about the community.

The participants in the first phase came up with four short video films of around 5 to 10 minutes in length. They brainstormed the scripts and did the acting, directing and filming themselves. It is clear from the content of the films that their focus was very much on specific issues that directly impacted on their lives: two films dealt with truancy, one with rape by a trusted friend ("Abang Angkat"), and one with teenage runaways because of parental abuse ("Ira"). These stories did not in any way reference (at least directly) the larger issue of violence which so shocked the nation, and which had initially brought the FAC to this area. Instead, the message that came through in these films was the lack of focus and guidance in the lives of young people in Taman Medan. In the two films about truancy, the children began cutting school out of peer pressure, but had no adults to turn to for advice. In "Abang Angkat," the victim's isolation is powerfully resonant: being raped, and thus impregnated, she must bear her suffering alone because she cannot expect emotional support from anyone. "Ira," too, implies the lack of an adequate support system for the young person: the protagonist feels she has no other option but to run away from her abusive father. Aimlessness, isolation and helplessness are central themes in these films, and which are also the real reasons behind the violence that afflicted the area in 2001. As such, more than just creative works, these films function as fundamental documents that highlight profound issues, which would otherwise remain unnoticed and unaddressed.

Altogether, the FAC carried out three phases throughout its project that lasted between 2002 to 2005. Each phase can be seen as successful in that it drew participation from a significant number of committed young people. However, certain intractable issues also arose from the implementation of the project. These issues are, in many ways, unavoidable because the instability and transience of

the Taman Medan and the *kampungs* within it as sites of "community," is already so deeply rooted.

One facet of community theatre is that it should "root" itself in the community so that it can continue to tell its own stories; for this to happen, there must be a continuous process of training and transference of skills. Certainly, this is what the FAC initially aimed at when they spoke about "long-term engaged arts practice" in the area. But in an area like Taman Medan, this is unlikely to happen. In middle-class families, training in the performing arts can be an ongoing process because children have leisure time and parents have the means. Taman Medan families generally have neither time nor money to enable this. Thus, unless the training continues within the vicinity of their homes, the children will be unable to participate on a long term basis. In this context, the transience and mobility of the Taman Medan population proved to be a problem. As Teh notes: "the young people we worked with in the first phase would move to other places, and it became frustrating as we began to repeat our modules (for new batches of young people, often newly arrived from other locations), and we couldn't deepen or make the work more sustainable."[36] Even participants who had a more permanent status were unable to undertake an ongoing role in the project because there is the question of earning a living. There was, therefore, no follow-up work and further building on the foundations that the FAC had laid. Instead, each phase of the project had to migrate to a different area in Taman Medan, where the FAC had to return to basics all over again.

As a result, only a tenuous sense of community could be attained during the duration of the project's implementation. Teh notes that such a situation was at best "a temporary and transitory one." Additionally, there was also no infrastructure to transform this temporary and transitory sense of community into something more concrete. To a point, this is no different from what Kuftinec refers to as the "group hug:" a kind of quick-fix, feel-good notion of togetherness. The participants were united because of the novelty of having structured and guided activities with which to engage, one that is not unlike, as one participant describes it, their usual activities of hanging out with friends and playing football.[37] It is open to question how long the effects of this group work will last; as the children themselves lamented, the end of the project meant going "back to their usual weekend routine."[38] Given that a number of the participants, particularly those aged over 16, would have to start work very soon when the project ends, the group itself would almost certainly disperse. Because the FAC was unable to put in place a system in which locals could take over the training and facilitating process, the work it initiated cannot possibly continue. The sense of community fostered through this project is, therefore, fleeting at best.

But to even view the participants as a community, given the cultural and racial diversity of the area, and the mutual suspicion derived from this diversity, is already fraught with problems. It may be precisely in this context that a community arts project can be valuable, because it brings together people from diverse backgrounds in order to talk through their differences, but the tense environment that characterizes Taman Medan is too entrenched for such a project to achieve any meaningful and long-lasting result. Strong habits of communalism will certainly militate against such a desirable outcome. As Fahmi Fadzil notes:

> In the Taman Medan project, the facilitators had started off on the wrong foot by entering the community via a political party. When the community did not respond because of political affiliations or other reasons, participants were recruited through the ketua kampung [village headman]. This proved unfortunate too for he wished to secure the participation of Malay children only. While attempts were later made by the facilitators to recruit children from the Chinese and Indian communities, the ethnically exclusivist approach of the ketua kampung had set in motion that dreadful spell of homogeneity. Only 25 out of the 40 participants remained by the end of the program. While reasons for dropping out were varied, none of the Chinese or Indian participants remained. Although this was not fatal to the programme itself, it highlighted the need for other strategies of outreach.[39]

If community arts projects are meant to build bridges across notional divides between communities, what is to be done when these divided communities do not manage to even make the attempt? With multiple layers of division and communalism, compounded by reluctance on the part of community leaders to engage in dialogue, it is unsurprising that the project the FAC envisions was necessarily doomed to failure.

CONCLUSION

The FAC eventually stopped the Taman Medan project because "the very notion of 'community' was problematic."[40] The facilitators were too inexperienced to know how to "negotiate [the] transience"[41] entrenched within Taman Medan's population. Some had indicated that they needed to learn new models of community arts practice, and had indeed moved on to other community arts projects. This suggests that an awareness of the need for projects which allow for a variety of issues to be explored "through the use of the arts in a safe, democratic space,"[42] has been created, which, for all its worth, is a hopeful sign.

FAC's next project was called "Ada Apa" (2003), which can roughly be translated as "What's with…" The open-endedness of the title allows for a wide variety of issues to be raised. Unlike the site-specific type of work done in Taman Medan, this project saw the facilitators travelling to six cities within Peninsular Malaysia. They liaised through grassroots associations and organizations to ensure a broader reach within the community, such as "the Rotary Clubs of several cities, a Family Planning Association, and even a school."[43] These kinds of ties helped create connections and networks that were more inclusive and broad-based.

In 2010, the FAC began "a youth, arts & community mapping project" in Kuala Lumpur's Chow Kit area, called *Projek Chow Kit Kita* (Our Chow Kit Project).[44] This endeavor looked at "mapping" the area in a way that replicates a guide for tourists:

> Where can you find good food for cheap? The best hang out spots? Safe walking routes? Public facilities? How do you get around? And the best places to shop for clothes? Chow Kit Kita is a community mapping project by teens and for teens of Chow Kit. The map intends to show what they think and how they feel about Chow Kit and the community. Using the arts, it will incorporate their perspectives on information relevant to their surroundings and lifestyle. In other words, Chow Kit Kita is the young voice of Chow Kit.[45]

A project like this can help to reclaim spaces that have been marginalized because of misperception of such locations as dangerous, and therefore to be avoided. By rehabilitating these spaces in the public eye, the "teens of Chow Kit" can the actively challenge the prejudices aimed at them for being associated with these spaces. They can, in other words, show "outsiders" that they are not unfortunate denizens of a crime-ridden area, but individuals with dignity and self-worth. Undeniably, the FAC's work is valuable, although its effectiveness remains limited. It will require a great deal more money and public support before its projects can achieve the aims for which they are meant, and these projects to become an integral part of the communities for which they are created.

NOTES

1. Guglielmo Schininà, "Here We Are: Social Theatre and Some Open Questions About its Developments," *TDR: The Drama Review* 48, no. 3 (2004): 19.
2. Chris Ng, "Theatre in Communities," *The Star*, 13 April 2011, national edition.
3. Sonja Kuftinec, "A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre," *Theatre Topics* 6, no. 1 (1996): 91.
4. Ibid., 92.
5. Bunn Nagara, "Looking Forward to Keep the Peace," *The Sunday Star,* 18 March 2001, national edition.
6. The Five Arts Centre, "Taman Medan Community Arts Project," Project Paper.
7. Xavier Jayakumar, "The Kampung Medan Tragedy," *Aliran Monthly*, 2001, national edition.
8. Prasana Chandran, "Remembering Kampung Medan: One Year After," *Malaysiakini,* 8 March 2002. http://www.malaysiakini.com/news/10633 (accessed 19 April 2011).
9. Jayakumar, "The Kampung Medan Tragedy."
10. Denison Jayasooria, quoted in Tan Ju-Eng and Wong Li Za, "Fed Up of Being Left Out So Long," *The Sunday Star,* 18 March 2001, national edition.
11. Ibid.
12. Seyla Benhabib, quoted in Catherine Graham, "Performing Community in English Canada and Québec," *Theatre Topics* 10, no. 2 (2000): 102.
13. Catherine Graham, "Performing Community in English Canada and Québec," 102.
14. Tan Ju-Eng and Wong Li Za, "Fed Up of Being Left Out So Long."
15. Although the project involved the use of video to make films rather than staging a play, the general principle of community theatre – working with a community to tell its stories – is nevertheless still applicable.
16. Guglielmo Schininà, "Here We Are," 17.
17. Ibid., 18
18. Cornerstone is not based within a particular community. Rather, it travels to different parts of the country to work with communities to create theatre.
19. Sonja Kuftinec, "A Cornerstone for Rethinking Community Theatre," 96.
20. Catherine Graham, "Performing Community in English Canada and Québec," 103.
21. Mark Teh, quoted in Li Ee Kee, "Tapping Young Roots," *The Star,* 15 May 2003.
22. David Diamond, quoted in Catherine Graham, 103.
23. Five Arts Centre, "Taman Medan Community Arts Project."
24. Mark Teh, quoted in Li Ee Kee, "Tapping Young Roots."
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid.
27. Mark Teh, quoted in Benjamin McKay, "Questioning Mark. Discovering the Secrets of Success: Doubt, Stamina and Brave Failures," *Kakiseni.com*, 20 September 2006. http://www.kakiseni.com/print/articles/people/MDk0MA.html (accessed 19 April 2011).
28. Mark Teh, quoted in Li Ee Kee, "Tapping Young Roots."
29. Daniel Bernardi, quoted in Guglielmo Schininà, "Here We Are," 22.
30. Catherine Graham, "Performing Community in English Canada and Québec," 106.
31. Tan Ju-Eng and Wong Li Za, "Fed Up of Being Left Out So Long."
32. Li Ee Kee, "Useful Weekends to Remember," *The Star,* 15 May 2003, national edition.
33. Five Arts Centre, "Taman Medan Community Arts Project."
34. Dudley Cocke, quoted in Bruce McConachie, "Approaching the 'Structure of Feeling' in Grassroots Theatre," *Theatre Topics* 8, no.1 (1998): 37.
35. Catherine Graham, "Performing Community in English Canada and Québec," 103.
36. Mark Teh, personal communication with Susan Philip, 4 August 2011.
37. Li Ee Kee, "Useful Weekends to Remember," *The Star,* 15 May 2003.

38.   Ibid.
39.   Fahmi Fadzil, "Ada Apa Dengan Apathy? Are Our Young Disempowered? Five Arts Centre Empowers Them with Creativity, Digital Video Cameras and Cute Facilitators," *Kakiseni.com*, 18 March 2004. http://www.kakiseni.com/articles/features/MDQ4Mw.html (accessed 23 March 2004).
40.   Mark Teh, personal communication with Susan Philip, 4 August 2011.
41.   Ibid.
42.   Fahmi Fadzil, "Ada Apa Dengan Apathy?"
43.   Ibid.
44.   The Chow Kit area is notorious at night as the haunt of criminals, drug users and pushers, and sex workers. During the day, however, it is also a popular location for shopping.
45.   *Facebook.* "Projek Chow Kit Kita" ("Our Chow Kit Project"), August 2010. https://www.facebook.com/ChowKitKita?sk=info/ (accessed 19 April 2011).

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