



## Profile

Ms. Marion D'CRUZ

(Five Arts Centre representative)

Five Arts Centre is an artist organization founded in 1984. Its activities center on the five arts of dance, drama, visual arts, music and children's theater. The Centre works actively toward the nurturing of young artists and promoting arts in ways that stimulate local societies. In 2002, the Centre launched Malaysia's first performing arts awards program, called the Cameronian Arts Awards. In the three years since, this program has given awards to artists in the dance, theater and music categories, making the Centre a true leader in the Malaysian performing arts world. Ms. D'Cruz is one of the founding members of the Five Arts Centre and is presently active as one of its representative members. She is one of Malaysia's representative dancers and choreographers and constantly a leading presence in the country's dance world. <http://www.emuang.org/FiveArts/>

# Presenter Interview

プレゼンターインタビュー  
The activities of the Five Arts Center, toward the creation of contemporary Malaysian theater

2005.5.17

マレーシアの現代演劇の創作を目指す  
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Before we enter our interview with Marion D'Cruz, let us talk a quick look at the status of the performing arts in Malaysia.

Malaysia is a multi-racial country with three main ethnic groups, the Malays, Chinese-descent Malaysians and Indian-descent Malaysians. These groups coexist in Malaysian society while retaining a strong sense of their respective ethnic identities. This unique social situation is often referred to as the "Malaysian type multiethnic society." For example, in the primary public education system, there are not only schools taught in the national language, Malay, but also schools that teach in either the Chinese or Tamil languages, thus enabling children to study in their mother tongues. English is also widely used, thus making this a "multilingual society" where most of the people understand two or more languages.

Needless to say, there are considerable difficulties involved in keeping this type of society functioning. And, in fact, there was an eruption of interracial strife in 1969 that took many lives. The social situation has also led the government to initiate an affirmative action program known as the Bumiputra policies, which are aimed at improving the socio-economic status of the majority Malays who have long been the most economically disadvantaged of the three main ethnic groups.

It can be said that the Malaysian theater arts world also reflects these social conditions. Theater companies naturally tend to be formed by people of the same linguistic group and there are not always active exchanges between groups based in the different languages. It is the same with the audiences, with a separate audiences existing in each of the three main linguistic groups. Due to the constant potential for interracial strife, it is forbidden to make public statements relating to religious or ethnic problems, and in the theater world, productions are subject to strict censorship by the regional censorship bureaus concerning contents. Also, due to the Bumiputra policies, most of the government funding for the performing arts goes to Malay theater companies. Also, most of the productions staged in the national theaters are in Malay, with the natural exception of invited foreign productions. Private-sector theater companies get most of their financial support from corporations, and most of the theaters where they perform are smaller facilities with seating capacity of 300 or less. However, 2005 saw the opening of the first large-scale private-sector theater facility, the KL Performing Arts Centre in the nation's capital, Kuala Lumpur. Now much attention is now focused on how this facility will be used.

Within this social background, the artist organization Five Arts Centre has been one of the major presences in the Malaysian performing arts world for two decades. In this month's presenter interview we talk with one of the founding members of the Five Arts Centre, Marion D'Cruz, about her activities with the Centre and as one of Malaysia's representative dancers and choreographers. (Interviewer: Ken Takiguchi)

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Five Arts Centre can be described as an "artist collective" rather than a theatre company. I believe this is a quite unique organization in Malaysia. How was Five Arts Centre established? What was the intention in creating this company?

When Five Arts started, it was the time when the idea of "local playwrights" was not established. Some companies did English language theatre, but all the way foreign plays — Shakespeare, Chekhov, Tennessee Williams — mainly either American or British. These plays were considered as the high standards. There was very little consciousness or desire to create English language theatre that is the Malaysian folklore. Some English language plays were written as early as 70s by the people such as K Das or Lloyd Fernando, but they were staged mainly by university groups — there was no sense that professional theatre could be tapping into local playwrights. So, when Five Arts Centre was created, it was created mainly with the intention of giving space to homegrown theatre, Malaysian creativity. And actually that have been the intention of Five Arts Centre right up to now. Initially Five Arts Centre had five members, namely director/playwright Chin San Sooi, director Krishen Jit, playwright KS Maniam, visual artist Piyadasa and myself — a dancer and choreographer. That time, it was a very loose organization, just five people coming to the theatre. Piyadasa did set design for us then although he didn't stay long. KS Maniam stayed till 1995 and then left (also didn't stay long,) but he played a big role in the early days because the early pieces we staged were written by him and Chin San Sooi. Actually, the very first play Five Arts Centre did was KS Maniam's *The Cord*. It was in 1984. It was staged for a week and it was very unusual for most so-called English language theatre audience then to do that long and do a lot of publicity for an English language play. The audience was so divided at the time — it is divided even now, though — into English language theatre, Malay language theatre, Chinese language theatre and so on. We never call ourselves "English language theatre" although we're still pursuing English language plays. But, actually, over 20 years, our theatre has done things in Malay, bilingual or even trilingual. More than 80 productions were done so far, but almost all of them were creations of Malaysians with very few exceptions.

Now, Five Arts Centre has 13 members from various generations. How has the company grown?

In the first 10 years, various people worked with Five Arts Centre. Although they were not our members, they can be called the "core" people. In 1994, Krishen got the idea - "Now we're 10 years old. Let's call the people who have worked with us and ask them if they want to become a member. We should be organized a little bit more". At that time, we were only three of us — Chin San Sooi, Krishen and myself operating out of my house. We had a small studio but paid rental from our salary — everything was very ad hoc basis. But things were happening and happening and we decided to call people. We also decided to do a series of things in every area to celebrate our 10th year. That's how we started to get our members and develop the whole idea of the artist collective. Legally, of course, there are directors of the company, but there's no one artistic director who's going to decide the vision of the company.

And by that time in 1994, we identified five areas that Five Arts Centre deals with, which were theatre, dance, music, young people's theatre and visual arts. We got people who are in administrative side as well by then. And we've kept inviting people to become a member of Five Arts Centre.

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people to become a member of Five Arts Centre.

We were very lucky to have attracted the young generations. It is interesting that many young people are serious to do arts in full-time basis now. This was very unusual in Malaysia before — it is very healthy and exciting. Five Arts Centre has a group of young artists called Akshen that was originally formed by the group of students of a college. We invited them to make a strategic alliance in which Five Arts Centre provides them a rehearsal space to develop their work and ideas and in exchange they help us in the front of house and so on. One of the members of Akshen started a community project to confront the racial issue in the community where racial conflict happened recently. They are now starting director's workshops. These young members are now an important part of the work and vision of Five Arts Centre.

I feel that these young practitioners have very different concerns but very very bright and committed. I think we should start handing over the company to these young generations. If you hand over with trust, they will take it. I feel fine even if the vision of the company changes because of it.

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Manchester United & The Malay Warrior

Five Arts Centre celebrated your 20th anniversary last year. How has the theatre scene in Malaysia changed in 20 years?

As I mentioned, 20 years ago, local English language theatre was so rare. But now so many companies are doing that - most of them came along around late 80s and early 90s. And the status of local performing arts has been changed a lot. Talking about dance, 20 years ago, only classical ballet enjoyed high status. Things have been changed completely — classical Malay dance and Indian dance has achieved high status as well now. When I started to dance — it was before Five Arts was established — my personal intention was to create contemporary dance in Malaysia that is not traditional, but not Western modern either. I was so concerned with the vocabulary of east / west and traditional / modern then. The meaning of "modern" in Malaysia does not necessarily mean "Western" — I feel that Asia still has this problem. Japanese Buto may be the only exception as it is the only non-western contemporary dance form that has spread around the world.

In early 80s, some important dancers came back to Malaysia from overseas such as Ramli Ibrahim who is an Indian classical dancer. I myself came back from New York in 1981. We performed very actively first 6-7 years to prove the fact that contemporary dance can exist in Malaysia and we can combine east and west. Some experimental shows were slammed by local papers saying, "this is not dance" or "Marion D'Cruz is not a choreographer". But they were necessary to empower Malaysian creativity. Our composers, our choreographers, our playwrights are as important as — or more important than - the foreign ones. And at the end of the day, we have to tell our own stories — whether it is theatre, dance, visual arts or music — about our lives as Malaysians. The theatre, besides as the entertainment, should be provocative and make people think.

The number of audience surely increased. For example, our last year's production, Election Day which was one woman show, dark and heavy gathered packed audience for all 14 shows. 20 years ago, if we could have 5-day show at 200-seater theatre, it would be considered a big success. Audience comes to identify their story — they would say, "Oh, this is my story!" Interest in the local theatre is much higher than before.

Over last 20 years, there are higher production values as well. Productions were much more ad hoc basis before, but we have got a little bit more clever now in terms of marketing or publicity. Professionalism is emerging. We are trying to pay as much as possible because now a lot of people are trying to survive solely as artists. We are trying to support industry. Corporate sponsorship is definitely much more than before too.

I think the establishment of the new ministry - Ministry of Culture, Arts and Heritage (MOCALH) - is a remarkable event for Malaysian artists. MOCALH has started the dialogue with local artists since its establishment last year and is setting up grant programs which we couldn't expect from the former Ministry of Culture, Arts and Tourism. While many artists seem to welcome this movement, some are still skeptical and afraid that the Ministry would not help much. Do you agree with them? How do you think the government should support local artists?

Right now, I'm very optimistic. Having made huge public announcement, they cannot just turn around. Actually this is the very first time to see the Ministry showed their strong will to support local artists in this way. In fact, we have been getting support from the Ministry for years although it was not huge amount of money given, though. For example, whenever we use theatres owned by the government, we appeal to get minimum rental fee. But something is happening now — they

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even try to set up an arts council.

The question is how long it will last. Are these things going to be a policy that is clear, understood by everybody and last forever? Or do they last only as long as these people are there? Problem of this country is that a lot of institutions, whether government or not, depend much on the individuals.

Establishing an arts council is one way. Once a concrete institute is established, at least it lasts even if the founders leave the positions. It will make it easier for private companies to think about donations because they will enjoy tax exemption and recognition from the government. I think the arts council in Singapore is doing very well — some artists say that it is not functioning well and they should try other resources, though. All arts councils around the world have pluses and minuses and I'm still wondering whether it is the best solution or not.

**When Five Arts Centre staged *Election Day*, a story about Malaysian general election, last year, you had to fight with Kuala Lumpur City Hall's censorship committee to get the permission. How do you think about the censorship in Malaysia?**

We are bringing the issue of censorship to the dialogue with the Ministry. This is going to be a big battle because we really have to begin to see if Malaysia is a matured society. We have already been doing a lot of self-censorship and are very aware of Budaya Kita (our culture) but there are so many different thinking about so-called "sensitive issues" like politics, religion and race.

What we suggested once was a rating system for theatre. We announce in the publicity material that this show contains adult material and people can make decision by themselves. Another idea was leaving it to practitioners. You can do whatever you want, but if you go against the rules, you have to face the consequences. But this is very tricky — you don't know if you are against the rules and what is the consequences — and very dangerous idea for us.

But, in a way, whole Election Day battle was better because the story came out on the paper, we put every correspondences in the lobby of the theatre and had discussions with audience every night. It was interesting for me that this became a huge public discussion. Audience discussed among themselves and was really involved in the process. The response was not always supportive. Some artists blamed us for agreeing to amend the script as requested by the censorship board. I'm not quite sure about the recent development, but I think you don't have to submit scripts to the censorship committee any more — Kuala Lumpur City Hall has dissolved the committee after the *Election Day*.

Censorship is a very evil thing. Whenever I talk to my students at National Arts Academy, they are so scared to talk about "sensitive issues". The only reason why the issues are sensitive is that we don't talk about them. If you talk about them, they are not sensitive any more.

But it is very difficult. For example, talking about the racial issues in Malaysia, we are in much more racially charged society than the time when I was 10 years old. At that time, when I went to my primary school and secondary school in Johor Bahru, all Malay, Chinese and Indian students mixed together. If you go to the schools today and watch students during the break, you will see that Malays gather in a group, Chinese gather in a group and Indians gather in their own group. The situation is really bad. The only places the cross over may happen are rock concerts, football games or any national games at the National Stadium and the contemporary theatre.

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Now many Malay people identify their culture with Islam. But Islam came here only in 1400s. They have no memory about any Malay society and culture existed before Islam. Actually, Malay culture has all Hindu elements and animistic elements. They are trying to ignore that fact and I feel very scary about it. A Malay dance practitioner once said to me, "*Budak India tidak boleh menari Melayu* (Indian kid cannot perform Malay dance)." Such racism is still there even in the field of arts. Recently, Malaysian government started the national service program with the aim to achieve "national unity". But how can those young people who have been educated in the racial system for 18 years change their attitude with 3 month's national service? Whenever we request a support from the Ministry, they ask us "How many Malays in your company? How many Chinese? Indians? *Lain-lain* (others)?" For me, this is disgusting. But their rationale is that they have to promote the mixture of the races. We must stop thinking that way.

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Spring in Kuala Lumpur

In its 20-year history, Five Arts Centre has actively participated in international collaborations including the ones with Japanese artists. What was the reason behind the company's interest in collaborations?

From the very beginning, Five Arts Centre has been focused on the cross-disciplinary works as we have members from various areas. Theatre worked with visual arts, visual arts worked with dance and dance worked with music. You will know that such separation is very artificial if you look at any kind of traditional theatre. For example, the *Dalang* (master) of *Wayang Kiri* (shadow puppet theatre) is everything. He is a musician, a singer, an actor and a puppet maker. But so-called modern theatre created the separation. So, we tried to move back to more integrated style of theatre and that's why our children's theatre program is called "integrated arts". So, collaboration is already quite an intrinsic part of Five Arts Centre.

We found it very enriching. Five Arts is a collective. Our meeting is usually very long but inputs from members are very important. The process is long and tiring, but the result is very good. Same thing can be said for the collaborative work. Sometimes process is very very difficult, tiring and painful, but eventually what you learn from it will be much richer.

Five Arts Centre's major collaboration projects with Japanese artists include *Dance Tonpu II* (1996, with Takeya Keiko Contemporary Dance Company, directed by Makoto Sato, choreographed by Keiko Takeya) and *Spring in Kuala Lumpur* (2003, with Pappa Tarahumara, directed by Hiroshi Koike). Can you compare these two collaborations?

International collaborations are, in a way, very organic mixture of the things. When Makoto Sato approached with *Dance Tonpu II*, his opening premise was interesting. We had known Black Tent Theatre since long time ago as their works were very political and our works were also political, maybe not as political as them, though. He was very open and honest about Japan's relation with Southeast Asia — how can Japan have relationship with Southeast Asia. He understood that we had to deal with some of the issues of the war. Hence his and his wife, Keiko Takeya's desire to collaborate with Asian artists — he had already started with PETA of the Philippines especially — was sincere.

They had done the first piece of *Dance Tonpu* with Indonesian and Thai artists. In it, they just separated sections like this - one section was choreographed by a Thai choreographer and another by Keiko. When they approached us for the part two, I suggested not bringing only dancers from Malaysia because I am from Five Arts' multi disciplinary background. We took one visual artist, one actress/dancer, one musician, one Malaysian Buto dancer and one dancer/choreographer — this is myself. The result was very strange group of people. From Japanese side, other than Keiko herself, there were two contemporary dancers, one Buto dancer and one musician.

The reasons we wanted to collaborate were, firstly, we believed in the work of Makoto and Keiko. Secondly, we believed that the whole concept of the collaboration can provide very rich experience. We used the arts to learn about each other, get through each other and break down so-called cultural stereotypes. At the end of the day, it was not only about the production but also about the whole relationships.

It was one of the most equal collaborations that I have ever experienced.

Collaborations always move like this - whoever talks more or has strong ideas tends to colonize the others. Collaboration is often about colonization. But the way

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this one worked was really attempted to give every one of the ten people time and space to create material and ideas. The structure was very very interesting. And we had Makoto Sato as an artistic director. The outside eye was really required — Makoto's director's eye brought them together eventually.

The interesting thing for me was, when we performed in Japan, Japanese audience said that definitely Malaysian dancers colonized Japanese because vocabulary and style was non-dancing which was very Five Arts style. But when performed here in Malaysia, Malaysian audience said, "Oh, Japanese dancers colonized Malaysians" because it had very Japanese looks in terms of lighting or costumes. When I see *Tonpu* now, I agree both of the views. It was very meaningful and deep collaboration.

*Spring in Kuala Lumpur*, I think, let me know that the word "collaboration" has different meanings to different people. After the a few workshops, I realized this was not a collaboration that I had got used to — "I give my ideas, you give your ideas" kind of thing. Hiroshi Koike's idea of collaboration was to put all the performers together and he's the director. Many people said this is not a collaboration. It was director's story, director's vision — especially Hiroshi had a very clear vision — which he wanted to see. So when we moved to the production, I told the performers "Go into this with your eyes open. You will learn a lot. But don't think this is the collaboration in that sense". So I don't know if I should call *Spring* a collaboration. It was a wonderful experience and eventually the performance was very good. But it was the director directing the whole.

There was performative collaboration, though, through the rehearsal with Japanese performers that was also an upgrading process. But basically performers were requested to realize director's vision. Interesting for me was — maybe this is because I was older in the group — Hiroshi never directed me while he directed the others. In that sense, between him and me, it was a collaboration. As a whole, I don't know how to call it, but it was not a collaboration in the common understanding of it. On the other hand, I believe all the creative work is collaboration. In that sense, *Spring* also can be called a collaboration. But *Tonpu* was a real, painful and joyous collaboration. Every minute was the collaborative effort.

Recently I visited Tokyo and watched Setagaya Public Theater's production, *Hotel Grand Asia* that was a collaboration project among 16 artists from all over Southeast Asia. This gave me a lot of interesting insights about Asian collaboration. What is Asian collaboration and what is Asia — we've been asking these questions for 20 years beginning from Makoto Sato. Now we need to go for new directions. I strongly feel that we need to ask new questions.

Condolence

The co-founder of Five Arts Centre and the husband of Ms. Marion D'Cruz, Mr. Krishen Jit passed away on 28th April 2005, just one week after this interview was done. He was the most respected and influential theatre practitioner in Malaysia without any doubt. Our deepest condolences to Ms. Marion D'Cruz.