

Ruby Thiagarajan: Many of the responses to the play that I've seen have referred to it as a history lesson. Would you agree with this assessment?

Performances such as *Merdeka* written by Alfian Sa'at and Neo Hai Bin definitely has some edifying aspects. the play is self-aware and reflexive.

Because it's an artistic performance, it's definitely subtler than a lecture, a proximate medium or genre, also a performance of course. Audience members are actively engaged. Sociologist Robert Sampson speaks of this as "[collective efficacy](#)," which he originally defined as "social cohesion among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the common good" although the term has mostly been deployed in sociology of crime. Plays such as *Merdeka*, and other interlocutors in the Singapore Bicentennial commemorations participate in creating some sort of collective efficacy, civil society intervening to disrupt entrenched narratives. A theatre production different from a history class in college, because it's a discipline, we're training students to be critical, budding historians every single time instead of teaching them the historical narrative per se, knowledge of which they acquire incidentally almost.

Ruby Thiagarajan: Is it important to differentiate between art and history? What are the responsibilities of artists to represent history accurately?

Most people are clear on the difference. In art, intentions of historical actors could be imagined and dramatized more fully. Academic historians adhere to sources more closely don't move far from the narrative in sources, we grant ourselves a shorter leash.

One thing that I would emphasize is specificity.

- 1) Specificity, example of the story of Syed Yasin who stabbed Farquhar in March 1823 in what is known as first story of amok in Singapore. I would emphasize identities of people involved of same rank socially being merchants and descendants of the Prophet, therefore couldn't abide being in jail though obviously not economically and this gap in economic stature which what brought Syed Yasin to jail in the first place.
- 2) Amok involved swift movement, superhuman strength, involving a kris, a small sharp dagger, associated with piracy. Associated with the Bugis and to a lesser extent the Malays. "The agricultural Malay is generally peaceful and comparatively humane." Agriculture rather trade out at sea is much preferred vocation in British eyes because they were not so mobile, settled, sedentary, part of feudal system in parts of the peninsula. So this tells me that amok was not about race, or violence primarily but about colonial anxiety about mobility. Not surprisingly, a play is able to dramatize the dynamism of mobility more effectively than an account on paper.

The play calls attention to the role of paper in other ways— flyers come down at end of play, *Fajar* newspaper and of course the characters are part of a reading group. Archives space organized to facilitate flows of storage and retrieval. Namwali Serpell, scholar at Berkeley describes an archival document in the Zambian archives as "[a hodgepodge of ink, a cacophony of claims, and ... a balance of trouble](#)." In theatrical performances, we get that energy, that noise, enthusiasm, people are speaking over each other, sometimes they bulldoze over each other, sometimes they relent and let another player/character speak. Most people imagine archives as files which are discrete objects that exist in a physical place, paper retrieved from a bulky metal structure. What follows is a reflection on the experience of long, hard research in manuscript and print sources and the challenging task of working up the results into a persuasive interpretation.

With digitalisation, comes compression in the technological sense, taking up less space. I appreciate that the play sensitizes us to paper at a time when digitization also leads to more importantly, abstraction. Now people can abstract everything away into databases, links and logic, and provide it as a consumer service with all the topology and complexity hidden out of sight. What is missing in the frame is context. New technology generally reorganizes our consumption away from ownership and towards access. It gives an illusion of access anyway.

- 3) History is compressed in *Merdeka* unlike in academic writing where we expand on things, and explore things from as many angles as possible. In essence, we enlarge vision trapped in historical sources. The artist Jenny Odell, as an artist who often works with archives, "[I've always thought that although a picture is worth a thousand words, it often only intends a single sentence](#)." As a historian, we tend to be the opposite and be aware that in each line we write could be written differently in multiple ways, and we never forget this, each line we write carries its own baggage always. "torrent of singularities." Behind every case in the hundreds of legal cases I consulted is a singular individual who cannot be assimilated in a general proposition, because there is always another individual whose experience will contradict it. It can be very hard to describe patterns when examining all the lives exposed in vast stretches of documents. Because we have to respecting the peculiarity of each document and the integrity of the life that appeared, however fragmentarily, in the ink scratched on the paper, we share this view of history with artists and theatre

practitioners perhaps though not all. Historians, unlike social scientists, tend to not create composites. We retain the life story of the historical actor even when we anonymise their identity.

**Reading list**

[Miranda, Lin-Manuel. "The Role of the Artist in the Age of Trump," \*The Atlantic\* \(December 2019\)](#)

[Smith, Zadie. "Fascinated to Presume: In Defense of Fiction," \*New York Review of Books\* \(October 24 2019\)](#)

[Interview with Hilton Als, \*The Art of the Essay\* no. 3 by Lisa Cohen \*The Paris Review\* \(issue 225, Summer 2018\)](#)