

The Actors Studio's *Uda dan Dara*: An Adaptation-Reinvention

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ABSTRACT

*As the dynamic duo of Malaysian theatre, Dato' Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham, founders of The Actors Studio, are among the first generation of pioneering theatre practitioners that have toiled to shape the landscape of performing arts in Malaysia. Their insights offer opportunities to the new generation of theatre enthusiasts for the interrogation of theatrical and cultural sources in theatre practice. In 2015, The Actors Studio Seni Teater Rakyat premiered Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara* to the Malaysian audience. This review attempts to unearth and validate the justification behind Dato' Faridah Merican and Joe Hasham's adaptation-reinvention treatment of Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara* play.*

Keywords: *Shakespeare, performance studies, adaptation-reinvention*

What immediately envelops my mind when I come across the phrase "star crossed lovers!", is a myriad of images and colours bombarding my psyche. As in a hail storm, I am bombarded with vivid imaginings of "lovers" across the cosmos, woven in time, be it, by fact or fiction, myth or literature, to mention a few; Orpheus and Eurydice, Odysseus and Penelope, Marie and Pierre Curie, Erotokritos and Arethousa, Cleopatra and Mark Anthony, Ines de Castro and King Pedro, Queen Victoria and Prince Albert, Tristan and Isolde, Paris and Helen, Pyramus and Thisbe, Heloise and Abelard, Salim and Anarkali, Paola and Francesca and from the most famous Western playwright of the renaissance world; Sir William Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet.

And of course, in this very train of thought, inspired by Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet,² we now move on to Malaysia's very own, The Actors Studio's adaptation-reinvention of Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara*.

In utilising literary devices, the very mention of the phrase "star crossed lovers", exudes a relationship hindered by external forces, ruled by the fates of others, clouded by a malign star, and destined for doom from the beginning. Alas! The fate of all star-crossed lovers.

"*Hujan emas di negeri orang, hujan batu di negeri sendiri, baik juga di negeri sendiri*" as the saying goes in the Malay language, means that the grass is always greener on the other side, but nothing is sweet as home sweet home. In this context, the retelling of a Malaysian star-crossed love, offered as a tribute to national laureate Dato' Dr. Usman Awang, performed at stage 1, PenangPAC from 21 to 25 April 2015 to a packed house, unearths a tragic story of a society in feud.

In establishing the scope of the play's analysis, my review of The Actors Studio's *Uda dan Dara* play will be based on Dato' Faridah Merican's and Joe Hasham's adaptation-reinvention concepts, juxtaposed against the backdrop of Shakespeare's Romeo and Juliet's plot structure as an analysis platform for the reconstruction of *Uda dan Dara's* reinvention.



Photo 1 Mark Lim as Uda and Hana Nadira Binti Mohamed Mazlan as Dara.
Photograph courtesy of Ch'ng Shi P'ng, www.shipng.com

Both plays mirror the main theme of "Love conquers all, even death itself", followed by the secondary themes of "hatred, violence, animosity, falling in love, tragic love, first love and death".

The play, revolves around Uda, a young Chinese ethnic man and his single mother, from a simple, humble background, moving to the Big Apple of Malaysia; Kuala Lumpur, in search of greener pastures. Fate brings him in contact with Dara, a young woman from a Malay aristocrat family.

In Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, both families come from noble backgrounds, but in an inevitability of fate, have an ongoing feud. Both *Romeo and Juliet* were destined to be with another; upon their first gaze, love beckoned, and their hearts followed.

While the narrative in both plays may be different, the conflicts are similar; resulting from love, family honour, pride and ego. In *Romeo and Juliet*, both characters face adversity from their families with regards to their love, which follows a similar vein in *Uda dan Dara*; they received objections from both mothers. In *Romeo and Juliet* and *Uda dan Dara*, the characters are informed that they should reject each other, but in both plays, they surrender their will to love's call.

In terms of balancing the voices in the script and capturing the aesthetics of the original writing of Dato' Dr. Usman Awang, was the adaptation-reinvention justified? In elucidation of the play's reinvention (in collaboration with Mark Beau de Silva), KLPAC's resident Director, Omar Ali said that:

the hardest part of it was not to go too far because it is such beautiful writing and we didn't want it to lose its voice. So, the first thing we did was to go over the script countless times, trying to get a sense of what it is trying to say, and what were the possible meanings. At some points, to move the story, we had to – and I say this very carefully – try to understand what Usman meant but at the same time, include other possible meanings to it. It was very tricky!³

As both de Silva and Ali cited the translation as volatile (tricky), we ask the question: Was justice done to Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara* adaptation-reinvention? Based on their statement above, and in attempting to further recover "possible meanings" for the reconstruction of the text, de Silva and Ali say:

There were already questions being asked of and to Usman in the 1972 production about the ending. After Uda dies, Usman wanted [...] an uprising of the village folk but Krishen and Rahim very strongly didn't want that. The compromise was that Dara becomes mad after Uda is killed.⁴

To this compromise, Faridah interjected by saying,

We had to re-look at the ending for this production. I suppose it fitted very much then for the heroine to go crazy but our Dara is a very strong young woman and she doesn't have to lose her mind, neither do the people have to fight and rebel.⁵

More so, the production was aimed at reinventing the play to make it contemporary, current and relevant. The writers recreated Uda of Chinese descent, the settings were changed to juxtapose the rural simplicity of Kampung Penchala against the affluent uptown aesthetics of Taman Tun Dr Ismail.⁶

Faridah further goes on to add that:

There is so much more to this once upon a time love story that we can present to a current audience. Usman's work talks about the uncaring people around you, and about those who regard status as something important.

It is interesting to note that both de Silva and Ali executed a commendable reconstruction of the play.



Photo 2 Foreground Left: Priscilla Wong as Mei Ling, Centre: Mark Lim as *Uda*,
Right: Gani Karim as *Utih*.

Photograph courtesy of Ch'ng Shi P'ng, www.shipng.com

What about their journey ending tragically in resolute: for Uda in death, and Dara to endlessly mourn Uda's passing? To answer this question, Faridah adds that:

Our Dara is stronger because of the people around her and that is where we leave her at the end, to fight her own battle.

Leading to the climactic ending, in the catastrophic falling action of the play, one would naturally think that the plot would follow that of *Romeo and Juliet's* tragic end, where both protagonists end their lives, but in a twist of fate, Uda is killed and Dara mourns his demise. Bravo!

In conclusion, the directors, Merican and Hasham, in reviewing their overall adaptation-reinvention of Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara*, have achieved a viable artistic modelling in their search for 'other possible meanings'.

As this was my first ever viewing of Dato' Dr. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara*, I must add that the ending took me by surprise, a twist to Shakespeare's tragic lovers; one of them lives!

NOTES

1. "Star-Crossed Lovers" was a phrase first coined by William Shakespeare in his play entitled, *The Most Excellent and Lamentable Tragedy of Romeo and Juliet*, Foster, Ruth, Migliaccio, Eric, Cone, Sharon, & Hedges, Bruce. 2001. *Take five minutes: fascinating facts and stories for reading and critical thinking*. Westminster, CA: Teacher Created Materials, pg. 112. As such, in utilising literary devices, whenever the phrase "star-crossed lovers" is used, by default, it invokes the influence from Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.

2. In the 1972 *Uda dan Dara* Musical, produced by Datuk Krishen Jit and directed by Datuk Rahim Razali, a pristine comparison was made by Maganathan in an interview with Faridah and Joe, citing that the play was a "Malaysian equivalent of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*", Maganathan, Dinesh Kumar. "Faridah Merican on theatre, her childhood, and directing Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara*", People: *The Star Online*, dated 3 April 2015, <http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/people/2015/04/03/faridah-merican-talks-about-her-childhood-her-foray-into-theatre-and-directing-usman-awangs-uda-dan/>, access date 1 February 2016.
3. Maganathan, Dinesh Kumar. Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara* deals with issues close to the heart, Arts: *The Star Online*, dated 3 April 2015, <http://www.thestar.com.my/lifestyle/entertainment/arts/on-stage/2015/04/03/the-latest-staging-of-usman-awangs-uda-dan-dara-deals-with-issues-which-are-close-to-heart/>, access date 1 February 2016.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Devan, Subhadra. Romance swirls at KLPAC for *Uda dan Dara*, "Showbiz", *The Malaysian Insider*, dated 17 March 2015, <http://www.themalaysianinsider.com/showbiz/article/romance-swirls-at-klpac-for-uda-dan-dara>, access date 1 February 2016.