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## The migrants' story

Manveet Kaur

A GROUP of youngsters has taken it upon themselves to explore how meaning alters through time, by using the history and current state of Stadium Merdeka as a starting point.

Sounds intriguing, doesn't it? Directed by Kitrhona Ramday, the Five Arts Centre presents the theatre group Akshen, which questions Malaysian notions of migration, identity and independence in its inspired play entitled Stadium.

A continuation of last year's highly-acclaimed Lebih Kecoh!, this original work is said to be more lively, with more patriotic songs, dancing and jumping, cross-cultural and cross-gender nuances. It stars Fahmi Fadzil, Kubhaer T. Jethwani, Gabrielle Low, Mark Teh and newcomer Joannou Jigme, all in their early 20s.

Stadium tells the story of four immigrants arriving in Malaysia and leaving again, interspersed with all sorts of insights, says Kitrhona. It explores migration in this country and how we view people as natives, migrants or illegals.

"These could be characters who came to Malaysia 200 years ago or two years ago. It compares historically how these changes have happened and how they haven't changed." Teh says.

The characters all have some sort of attachment to the stadium.

Although there are only four characters in the play, each actor plays multiple roles in this work which took six months to put together.

Low says the four characters are all undefined by gender, race, age and religion - all the information that needs to be put on a person's IC.

"Basically, they are all anonymous to a certain extent," says Kubhaer.

With support from The British Council, Stadium was initiated seven months ago by Contact Theatre, a Manchester-based theatre company, and Akshen was invited to participate in the Contacting the World Youth Festival in Britain, where six British youth theatre groups were twinned with six international partners.

Teh explains: "We started off by exchanging six objects or visual symbols that hold particular significance for each country with our partner Newcastle's Live Youth Theatre. So we e-mailed them images of Dr Mahathir Mohamad, the Malaysian Mega Sale Carnival, Stadium Merdeka, identity cards, a baju Melayu and excerpts from the Malaysian Constitution.

"They in return sent Akshen images of Mr Happy, a mobile phone, the Tyne Bridge in Newcastle, the interior of a music shop, people flying and cutouts of people."

From there, both groups responded with 36 questions each about the objects and the issues each provoked, leading to the identification of common themes and issues that were important to both sides.

"The issue of migration is important to Akshen because six of the eight Akshen members are overseas eight months of the year studying at foreign universities. Because of that, we want to look at the reasons why people leave a country and hence what is a nation actually," notes Teh.

"By the end of the process, there were two pieces of work with a shared structure and themes, but which have developed in very different ways stylistically," says Kubhaer. This is one of the key objectives of the whole exercise - to show how the telling of a shared story can be presented in different cultural forms.

Kitrhona agrees that although it all sounds a little overwhelming, the audience should have no problems understanding it. "What we're hoping to achieve through the play is having people identify with us. It's not just them listening to us but it's them looking at themselves as well. So the play would be as much about you and your background, as it is about mine. Because our backgrounds would probably be very similar."

Stadium will be staged at The Actors Studio Theatre, Dataran Merdeka, Kuala Lumpur, from today to Saturday at 8.30pm. There is a matinee performance on Saturday at 3pm. On Sunday the show is at 3pm. Tickets are priced at RM27 (adults) and RM17 (students). For more information, call 03-26945400/26925927

It will also be staged in Manchester from July 14-20 as part of CULTURESHOCK, the 2002 Manchester Commonwealth Games Cultural Festival.

\* The writer can be contacted at [nstent@nstp.com.my](mailto:nstent@nstp.com.my)

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