

Operation Resurrection Rises

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Abstract

Operation Resurrection: A Photographic Tribute to the Experimental Theatre was a photography exhibition that ran from 9 March till 21 April 2011 in the Main Library, University of Malaya (UM). It featured 49 photographs by students, chronicling the recent restoration of the Experimental Theatre, UM, which was declared a National Heritage in 2009. The project was conducted, with funding from the Library and the Department of Student Affairs and Alumni, by a team of students and recent graduates across seven faculties of the University.

Pameran gambar “Operation Resurrection: A Photographic Tribute to the Experimental Theatre” telah berlangsung dari 9 Mac hingga 21 April 2011 di Perpustakaan Utama, Universiti Malaya (UM). Pameran ini menampilkan sebanyak 49 gambar berkenaan usaha-usaha restorasi Panggung Eksperimen, UM, yang telah diberi status Warisan Kebangsaan pada tahun 2009. Projek ini diusahakan oleh sekumpulan pelajar dan bekas pelajar dari sebanyak tujuh fakulti, dengan tajaan daripada Perpustakaan dan Bahagian Hal Ehwal Pelajar dan Alumni, UM.

The Experimental Theatre, University of Malaya

In the days before The Actors Studio, KLPac, Istana Budaya and the Dewan Filharmonik Petronas—to name a few—the Experimental Theatre (E.T.) in the University of Malaya was a bastion of sorts for the arts scene in Malaysia. Many legends of Malaysian theatre and performing arts cut their teeth there—greats like Syed Alwi, Rahim Razali, Kee Thuan Chye, Ahmad Yatim, Faridah Merican, Mano Maniam, Che Shamsuddin Othman (Dinsman), director Chin San Sooi, filmmaker Dr Anuar Nor Arai and dancer Datin Azanin Ezane Ahmad.

Circa 1999, the University decided to renovate the E.T. so as to accommodate a larger audience, as well as to make use of the fly tower above the stage, which had hitherto been but a white elephant. Renovations commenced in 2001, but these works were never completed beyond a modification of the theatre’s ultrastructure. Between 2003 and 2009, the E.T. lay in disrepair, and it wasn’t until it was declared a National Heritage in early 2009 that plans to complete the E.T. were finally rebooted.

Mustapha Kamal, the architect of the 1999 renovation, was re-enlisted and a new contractor was appointed. The restoration works have been progressing smoothly, and the E.T. is scheduled to reopen for performances in April 2011.



The picture that started it all

Background to Operation Resurrection

Shortly before restoration works commenced in October 2009, a team of students conducted a photo shoot of the E.T., attempting to capture it in its bare and primal glory. These students, who come from seven faculties, also took photographs of the restoration process itself, documenting the recent revival of the E.T.

However, Operation Resurrection is, in fact, the culmination of three years of imagining, dreaming and experimenting. It began when then first-year undergraduates Benjamin Ong and Tan Kee Aun, of the faculties of Science and Education respectively, wandered into the E.T. one evening in April 2008. Awed by what they saw but completely unprepared for what they did not expect, they took a few photographs using a camera phone. Those photographs left such an impression that they decided that they would someday return for more.

When the University declared that restoration works would commence late 2009, the team thought it would be a great idea to take photographs of the E.T. before the transformation. Then Deputy Vice-Chancellor Prof Datuk Dr Khaw Lake Tee was very supportive of the team's proposal, and with her endorsement, the team pitched the project to the Vice-Chancellor, Datuk Dr Ghauth Jasmon, who gave the green light.

This time around, the team did not stop at merely taking architectural snapshots. Instead, they attempted to enact theatrical scenes within the 'ruined' theatre, to capture the living spirit of theatre in a dead place. They brought in friends to model, instruments to stage a concert and a handful of props and furniture.

The team wanted to take pictures built around the theme of 'theatre and theatricality', to convey a sense of the E.T.'s function as much as its form. And so with such theatrical elements as actors, stage lights, an audience, musicians and even a dressing room, the team created a 'living theatre' of sorts.

Technique

Principal photography in October 2009 was funded by the Student Affairs and Alumni division on a budget of RM1,000. Working with an ambition somewhat greater than the budget would allow for, the team improvised and built lighting setups, D-I-Y-style. While most of the photographs were shot under natural light, some of the concept shots required artificial lighting. The team built flood-light stands out of angle-iron bars, and tapped the electricity outside the *Bilik Anjung DTC* using cable reels.



During the principal shoot in October 2009, the team sought to convey the theme of 'theatricality' using light, space and composition to evoke the textures of the E.T

The photographs were shot using a mix of digital SLRs, automatic and manual film SLRs, and even so-called 'toy' cameras for low-fidelity footage.

More tedious than the photography was the printing of the final selection. The team wanted to make sure that the prints were of sufficient quality so as to stand the test of time; prints as immortal as the E.T. itself.

The black-and-white film footage was printed by hand using traditional silver-halide processes, while the colour footage (film and digital) was printed chemically on Kodak Endura paper for realistic tones.

Launch of the Operation Resurrection Exhibition

All in all, the principal shoot was a success. Shortly afterwards, the Chief Librarian, Dr Nor Edzan Hj Che Nasir, heard about the project from Datuk Khaw Lake Tee. She was interested in preserving a copy of the photographs, and so the team got in touch with the Library. Due to significant renovations and upgrading work in the Library at the time, the proposed exhibition was put on hold for nearly a year. Talks with the Library resumed in September 2010, and the exhibition "Operation Resurrection: A Photographic Tribute to the Experimental Theatre" finally rose on 9 March 2011.

The exhibition was officially opened by the Chief Librarian and was attended by special guests; Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Development, Prof Dr Kurunathan Ratnavelu, and the former Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Student Affairs and Alumni, Assoc Prof Datuk Dr Azarae Hj Idris. Also present were members of the Library's staff, who turned up *en masse*, as well as friends and family of the team.

In her speech, Dr Nor Edzan said, "I was really in awe when I saw this last night; something beyond my expectations. The presentation was different from what I'm used to seeing when I go to exhibitions." She went on, to say, "This project started in 2009 when [then Deputy Vice-Chancellor for Development] Datuk Khaw [Lake Tee] approached me, saying that a group of students had done some photography and needed someone to back them up and showcase their project."

According to Dr Nor Edzan, one of the strongest factors that latched her onto the project, was the fact that the team was comprised of students from various faculties. "This project is being done by students from different disciplines, but with a common interest--trying to document something that isn't going to be there anymore, in the form that it was in."

"This is the first time the Library is sponsoring a project whose origins we are not aware of, and in spite of the [budget limitations] they came up with something very



Dr Nor Edzan Hj Che Nasir, Chief Librarian, launching Operation Resurrection

impressive,” she added. “I’m really proud that UM has students who are capable of doing things without being asked, and when I saw this last night, I thought to myself that if students can do this, their future in the world outside would be okay.”

She also said that the Library would continue to support such endeavours and works of art by the students. She also praised the team for their effort in trying to piece together the history of the Experimental Theatre, for supplementing the photographs with historical documentation, displayed on the introductory panels as well as on the Operation Resurrection website (operationresurrection.blogspot.com).

Datuk Khaw, who was unable to attend the launch, dropped by in the afternoon. She commended the effort the team had put in, saying, “You have created wonderful pieces of art and history.”



Students and staff of the University, and members of the public, at the launch

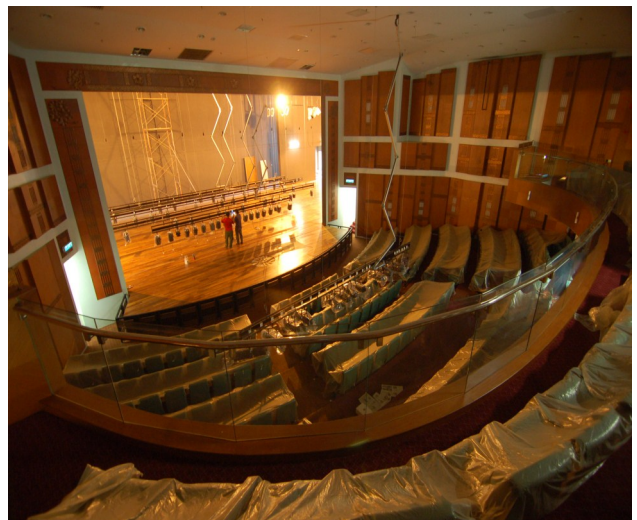
The return of the E.T.

When the E.T. reopens its doors, the first performers will be the students of the Cultural Centre’s graduating class of 2011. How apt that the Cultural Centre will take over this excellent resource, and it is the team’s hope that this will augur well for those who will, beyond their university days, contribute to the ever-dynamic performing arts scene in the country.

Among the graduation performances lined up are a dance, *Mengadap Rebab* (12 April), an original musical, *Gouden Roos* (16 and 17 April) and a music recital.



View of the E.T.’s stage from the gallery, October 2009



View of the E.T.’s stage from the gallery, March 2011

Appreciation

The burning question that the team sometimes asks itself, is why persevere over the years on a project like this? The answer lies partly in the belief that we are doing something worthwhile, something that will be of benefit to the university in the long run. But it also lies

in the conviction that this is what campus life is all about: doing ambitious things with friends, and having a lot of fun along the way.

What the team is most grateful for, is the support that has come from the university. Administrators do not have an obligation to be enthusiastic about fringe student projects that come up out of nowhere, and yet people like Datuk Khaw Lake Tee, Datuk Azarae Idris and Datuk Ghauth Jasmon were.

Above all, this project would not have happened without the unwavering support of the UM Library. In particular, the team would like to thank:

Dr Nor Edzan Hj Che Nasir, Chief Librarian; for saying yes to the project, and for allocating the RM11,000 budget to get the exhibition up on its feet and bring the 'digital' dream to tangible life.

Mahbob Yusof, Deputy Chief Librarian; for helming the project on behalf of the Library, meeting with members of the team periodically to work out the nitty-gritty of the project, and for supporting the process with such enthusiasm.

Nor Suzila Mohamad and Suzila Md Din, Chief Librarian's Office; for assistance with all financial matters throughout the project.

Emily Suhana Mokhtar, Chief Librarian's Office; for assistance with documents and paperwork.

Habik Saat Haji Zainal and the staff of the Customer Services Desk; for assisting the team with access to the Bilik Ilmuan, used as project headquarters, and for general assistance throughout the entire project.

Kamal Adnan, Chief Librarian's Office; for assistance with logistics throughout the entire setup process.

Haslan Tamjehi, Information Systems; for assistance in recovering historical footage of the E.T.

Mohd Jasny Razali, Information Systems; for assistance with the printing of publicity posters.

Hanim Abdul Manaf, Chief Librarian's Office; Zanariah Saupi Udin, Head, Information Systems; and Datin Komodhi Dhanaraj, Head, Client Services; for assistance with the exhibition setup.

Habib Mahbub Subhani, Media Unit; for assistance with the P.A. system on the day of the launch.

The team would also like to extend special appreciation to the Museum of Asian Arts for the generous loan of the display boards.

The team

The team of Operation Resurrection are:

- From the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences; Leong Yen Yen.
- From the Faculty of Economics & Administration; Kang Zarul Irwan.
- From the Faculty of Education; Tan Kee Aun.
- From the Faculty of Engineering; Adila Khairul Anuar and Nasha Lee Chia Hwee.
- From the Faculty of Law; Hannah Patrick.
- From the Faculty of Medicine; Timothy Cheng Tsin Jien and Lavania Jeevabala.
- From the Faculty of Science; Benjamin Ong Jia Ming, Nurul Fitrah Mohd Ariffin Marican, Amos Aw Teik Onn, Noorzilah Jailani, M. George Zachariah, Ruth Choy Ji Yi, Shannon Wong Xia-Jiunn, Firdaus Nejim Al-Asedi, Divya Mariam Chandy, Goh Ann Gie, Suzanne Ong Gui Xian and Zachary Yong Wei Ern.
- Friends of the team, from HELP University College; Michelle Hong and Doulos Lee.

Coda

The Star ran an article on the exhibition in its Star Two section, 25 March 2011. Through the mass media, the team's blog/website and personal correspondence, the team have been receiving feedback from many people who had been involved, in one way or another, with the E.T. in its heyday.

In fact, this database is growing by the day and the team welcomes input from anyone who has anything to share about the E.T., whether from a performer's, director's, writer's, choreographer's, manager's or even an audience member's perspective. We welcome correspondence from those who have experienced the E.T. in the past, as well as those who will experience it in its restored form. All of this is part of the E.T.'s incredible journey, which is certainly far from over. Please email Adila (adila.khairul@gmail.com) and share your stories!

For further information about the project, please visit the blog at the above address, or email the project director, Benjamin (benjamin@dimanajua.com). The blog will continue to be updated with more information about the E.T., as more facts and trivia are unearthed. An exclusive interview with the architect, Mustapha Kamal, was conducted and will be published on the blog soon. (operationresurrection.blogspot.com)