



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

ON SILENCE, SINGAPORE MALAYS, AND JACQUES RANCIÈRE

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This article stages the silent adventure of watching theatre about Singapore Malays and reading Rancière in Singapore: on the left, an analysis of the efficacy of two Malay performances in the light of Rancière's articulations of the politics of aesthetics and interwoven with resonances from the author's experience of life in Singapore; *<on the right, the author's silent thoughts, words, and actions as a theatre spectator and as the author of this article>*.¹

< The house is open. I step in. >

The Southeast Asian city-state of Singapore hosts an impressive landscape of theatrical activity: from the most established and commercial companies to an ever-flowing stream of new collectives and small troupes; from the Shakespeare production catered for expats to the amateur staging at one of the many regional libraries; and from the exquisitely curated international festival to punk theatre late night at the indie hub, The Substation. For the careful observer this landscape has more to offer than what appears at first sight. Rising from the constant negotiations between the state apparatus and the evolution of a local citizenry, the history of theatre in Singapore includes episodes of bans, jailed artists, national awards and cultural medallions alike.² And while it is true that the infrastructure that the city offers for theatre education and production is certainly attractive, it is also true that

any enthusiasm is met with a complicated set of laws, norms and uses that leaves Singaporean theatre torn between the desire to become an explicit voicing of fundamental anxieties about the political and legal system of the young nation on the one hand, and its own instrumentality as a societal regulator on the other. A paradox becomes sensible here: political performance in Singapore is always already regulatory inasmuch as it satisfies the need for a perceptible space of 'voicing out' that is allowed by the law, and especially so when it concerns matters regarding the anxieties of and frictions between ethnic and religious identities.

The argument here blurs the real and the fictional, the voice of the author with the voice of the spectator, philosopher Jacques Rancière's voice with the silence of Maya Raisha, a Malay-Muslim girl. In doing so, the piece seeks to evidence that as a consequence of the regulatory nature of performance in Singapore, more than creating a moment of disruption against the normative sphere, silence announces the instrumentality that 'speaking up' in the theatre has for the normativity of the city-state. Performing silence in Singapore thus offers an intriguing possibility for political action, one that would hardly be able to happen inside the rehearsed apparatus of the theatre and that is necessarily in excess of the already sanctioned performativity of silent obedience. Here Rancière's work on what he has called 'the partition of the perceptible' (or distribution of the sensible³) is useful in articulating the power that silence may have to compromise a social order that is largely based on the association of behaviours with religion and race.

Rancière argues that 'politics is generally seen as the set of procedures whereby the aggregation and consent of collectivities is achieved, the organization of powers, the distribution of places and roles, and the systems for legitimizing this distribution' (Rancière 1999, 28). For him, however, this understanding of politics is incorrect and he suggests instead naming this set of procedures as 'the police'. 'The police is essentially the law, generally implicit, that defines a party's share or lack of it' (Rancière 1999, 29). In order to perceive this, one must first identify what he calls 'the partition of the perceptible'. The police is thus an established partition of the perceptible, which is:

...first an order of bodies that defines the allocation of ways of doing, ways of being and

< I take my seat in the theatre. I open the program booklet. It opens with an introduction on the first page. My fellow spectators are also taking their seats. I sit tight, and read. >

ways of saying, and sees that those bodies are assigned by name to a particular place and task; it is an order of the visible and the sayable that sees that a particular activity is visible and another is not, that this speech is understood as discourse and the other as noise. (Rancière 1999, 29)

In the name of the one common national mission of subsistence, development, progress and prosperity, Singaporeans are organized through a partitioned order, a *demōs* that associates race with specific capacities, and in which several ethnicities are organized according to their proper places, their proper sounds and their proper images. This partition is effectively exercised through a state-based ethnic profiling that places each individual in one of the four official ethnic groups that form the nation's people, i.e. Chinese, Malay, Indian, and "Others". Singapore's population is therefore distributed according to race. Broadly speaking, the numbers are 75% Chinese, 15% Malay, 7% Indian, and 3% "Other".

In addition to a burgeoning scene of English-speaking theatre, each of these communities includes theatre companies that produce work in their mother tongue (Mandarin, Malay, or Tamil or others).⁴ In turn, these companies often take up the role of voicing the struggles that their particular community faces as a consequence of being part of a multicultural society located at the centre of the Malay Archipelago. This is especially the case with Malay theatre companies, who constantly address the regularized discontent that Singapore Malays share about becoming a minority in a region over which they feel they have a historic claim.

One of the most visible Malay theatre companies is Teater Ekamatra. In 1999, Ekamatra became the first Malay theatre group to be awarded a one-year grant by the Singapore National Arts Council. More recently, the company shifted its focus and while it remains dedicated to producing work in the Malay language, they have ceased to describe themselves as an exclusively Malay theatre company, in favour of identifying themselves as a 'Singapore arts company that spotlights contemporary experimental theatre' (Teater Ekamatra 2016). This could be read as indicative of an intention to consolidate a leading role in the local theatre scene, and by the same token, to reinforce their relevance in the context of ongoing debates around nationhood

from the Malay standpoint. Consequently, for the end of its 2012 season, the company staged Zizi Azah's *Not Counted*. Written in English, the play is about the relationship between Benjamin Lik, a Singaporean Chinese CEO who has a salary of S\$800,000 per annum, and Muhammad Ashraf, a Singaporean Malay taxi driver with a degree in Chemical Engineering who can barely survive on his earnings.

< Next page. The introduction continues >

The Necessary Stage (TNS) is one of the oldest theatre companies on the island, and its founders, Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma, were among the first to take up theatre making as a full time job in Singapore in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Tan and Sharma belong to a generation of Singaporean theatre makers that started to work with little or no infrastructure at all—from the absence of any academic offer in theatre to the lack of funding structures for non-commercial work. In thirty years, they have passed from founding one of the first professional companies, to being accused of being Marxist activists after studying with Augusto Boal in 1993,⁵ to both being awarded the cultural medallion—the highest honour that the Singapore government gives to an artist after a lifetime of achievements. Over the years, TNS has achieved the prestige of a company heavily involved in the community and debates around nationhood by producing work that reflects on the issues that erupt primarily as a consequence of the legal frame that encompasses the multicultural negotiations within the nation. Indeed, its mission statement is to 'create challenging, indigenous, and innovative theatre that touches the heart and the mind' (TNS 2015). In 2012 the company premiered *Best of*, a solo piece in which young actor, Siti Khalijah Zainal (or Siti K as she is usually known), plays a woman who sits for an hour to tell us the story of a day in her life. As the story develops, we learn that she visits her cousin in jail to ask him for help. She wants him to convince her husband to grant her a divorce. The problem is that her voice, a Malay-Muslim woman's voice, is not counted in such matters.

< Everybody is in their place. I see the lights dim. I start to listen. >

Straits' noise

Best of starts with Siti K entering from stage left. She sits on a chair at centre stage. She tells us that she attended the same school as her cousin, whom she remembers fondly—like an elder brother. She describes the ordeal she has to go through in order to visit

him in jail. She speaks about her negotiations with the guard. She reproduces that dialogue while sitting on the chair, facing us. She says:

So... can I see him? He pause. He look at me.

Inside here got a lot of Malay.

I know got a lot of Malay. Every Malay knows at least one Malay who is in rehab or in prison or who died in a road accident. Every Malay knows at least one Malay who didn't pass 'O' levels. If I cannot see him, tell me. I have another appointment. I cannot cancel.' (Sharma 2014, 2)

Not Counted begins with Ashraf's entrance, also from stage left. He is visibly nervous. He opens the door and then enters Benjamin's office. Benjamin informs Ashraf that he needs an appointment, that he is not welcomed at this time. But Ashraf insists. He presses Benjamin until a meeting is finally granted but only after some hours, at 5 pm. Ashraf can't wait that long, he is desperate. He goes to the door and appears to be leaving, but instead he quickly locks it and in a jump he kidnaps Benjamin, who immediately interprets the attack — we hear him say so — as a terrorist act. They struggle and eventually Ashraf wins. After a long silence he then reveals his intentions. He brings a newspaper out of his black bag, puts it on the desk where Benjamin can see it and then points to it with his finger: 'I want this job,' he says. 'I have all the qualifications.' Benjamin tries to explain that whether he can hire him or not is up to the people at Human Resources. Ashraf does not believe him. He rapidly answers by recounting the many times he has sent his CV to them, via email and post, without getting any answer, not even an acknowledgement, only silence. The room turns unbearably tense as words begin to be shouted. It is evident that Benjamin keeps the real reason to himself.

< *He does not hire Malays.* >

A third scene (but one that takes place outside the theatre): a young girl, Maya Raisha has just been called 'stupid Malay' by her Chinese friend in the midst of a quarrel over who dropped a book in the classroom. But Maya does not respond to the insult. She simply walks away. Her parents, alarmed on hearing of the incident, diligently stress the deeper implications of being insulted in such a way. Maya is my wife's cousin; a fourteen-year old Singaporean Malay-Muslim, top-of-the-class student. The

parents—one, an ex-member of the Parliament of Singapore and the other an ex-professional rock singer—even suggest that Maya (who has received multiple awards in oratory contests), create a racism awareness movement within her school. Yet, despite the ordeal of her parents' sermon, Maya prefers to keep the event somehow invisible. 'It's not like Dada has to speak about it in Parliament!'—she insists and, like the people from Human Resources in Benjamin's story, she holds on to her silence.

And Maya's parents are partly right. We should not be fooled by childish racism. It is not enough to argue that the aggression occurred because Maya's friend simply "did not know any better". She said what she said because she knew what those words meant and intended the effect of those words on Maya. What she did not know, perhaps, is that those words draw the line of a partition that was already there, waiting to be performed on every disagreement that involves a Malay-Muslim in Singapore, a line that Ekamatra and TNS stage in *Not Counted* and *Best Of* respectively.⁶ Maya's anecdote thus evidences the partition of the Singaporean *demōs*, a partition of the perceptible ways of being, doing, making, speaking, and thinking in which Singapore Malays are often associated with laziness and economic inefficacy. This is a partition that dates back to the colonial period and is maintained by the typical narrative of the lazy/stupid indigenous subject. For example, a story that is commonly heard in Singapore, and even told by some Malays themselves, relates how the Temenggong of Johor is fooled into selling the island for a stupidly low amount to British officer, Sir Stamford Raffles.⁷ Raffles, in turn, intelligently sees the potential of the island to become a wealthy colonial and commercial hub. Amongst others, this foundational national narrative sets up a natural association between 'Malay' and 'stupidity'.⁸

Indeed, the associations of 'Malay' and 'stupidity' can be traced back to pre-independence Singapore. For instance, in July of 1908 *The North American Review* published an article titled 'One way of Governing Malays', authored by anti-opium champion and advocate of American international interventionist policies, Elizabeth Washburn Wright. In the following extracts we can trace an association of the Malay with a specific type of being that sentences this ethnic group to economic (and therefore political) submission. Washburn claimed that:

<Stupid Malay?

Oxford English Dictionary; Stupid: As the characteristic of inanimate things: Destitute of sensations, consciousness, thought, or feeling; wanting in or slow of mental perceptions; lacking ordinary activity of mind; slow-witted, dull. >

[...] To that civilization which represents the forward march of the crudest folk the Malays have added little.

[...] They have no architecture, no literature, no art in its wide significance; little, in fact, to distinguish their habitation of the Peninsula from that of the rudest root-eating aborigines.

[...] They are sullen, *silent*, indolent, utterly immoral or unmoral with a lively capacity for intrigue and deception.

[...] So today the Malay sits paralyzed beneath this touch and drowns through the long sun hours, while the Chinaman is up and doing, the Tamil is at his slave work, and all men are helping themselves from the fullness of his land.

[...] Firmly, philosophically he [The Malay] sits upon his stoop calmly chewing betel, while the power of the land is passing irrevocably from his hand. But the Chinaman is here and here to stay. (Washburn 1908, 881–91, my emphasis)

< I realize that the play began long before Ashraf entered Benjamin's office. >

We can trace forward this colonial partition of ethnic perceptions to the early years after Singapore's independence, once the process of nation building had been set in motion. In 1968, the founding father of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew (1923—2015), addressed the Southeast Asia Business Committee with a speech titled 'The Differences Between the Malays and the Chinese'. In his words, Lee declared that:

One of the problems that has worried me is the uneven rate of development within the community, because the Chinese, Indians, Ceylonese and Eurasians progress at faster rate than our Malays. If we do not correct this imbalance, then, in another 10 to 20 years, we will have a Harlem, something not to be proud of. (Lee Kuan Yew in Kuang et al 1998, 399)⁹

Lee was worried that uneven progress might emerge as the fundamental reason for the failure of social cohesion and found an explanation for this problem in the cultural conditions of the one group that worried him the most, the Malays. In his speech, Lee quoted Brian Parkinson, who in his article 'Non-Economic

Factors in the Economic Retardation of the Rural Malays' (1967) argues that:

neither one is necessarily superior to the other, it is simply that the maximizing postulates of the Chinese are more likely to lead to economic development in the Western sense than are the maximizing postulates of the Malays. (Parkinson 1967, 46)

And that:

there is nothing irrational about Malay values, and to criticize them in terms of their values is reprehensible. But if the values of the Malays remain unaltered, and there is no reason in Malay terms to explain why they should alter, then it is likely that economic advance for them remains relatively slow. (Ibid.)

Lee then concluded his speech by arguing that the solution to the problem of Singapore Malays rested in the core of their family upbringing, as they remain rooted in their "traditional" way of being, which is an obstacle for their economic development. He argues that to improve Malay economic performance, there must be a conjoined effort, both from the Malay family nucleus and the government, to guarantee that Malay children keep up with the competition from those who have taken up the Western way of living.

Lee's speech already renders the contradictions within the core of the Singaporean social partition. It assumes that formal education would guarantee the optimal development of the individual in order to satisfy the need of the nation-state to have an intellectually homogeneous *demōs*. The educational system would therefore guarantee that the individual is able to participate in the correspondent democracy through the design of a very neatly defined multicultural speech. This implies the existence of one true educational model suitable for all children regardless of cultural differences. At one and at the same time, these differences must be selectively blurred for the sake of national development and global currency but also remain fixed in the national census, thus allowing a fundamental democratic contradiction in the City-State. By the same token it attributes economic value to cultural difference, which goes on to explain

economic stratification as a consequence of the fixed racial and cultural conditioning of a whole group. It assumes an equality that is based on the reprehensibility of cultural intolerance, yet simultaneously asserts that it is the communal culture that determines economic success, therefore making equality almost impossible—presented at most as an educational challenge for the minority.

In this light, Maya's silence evidences the partitioning of the Singaporean *demōs* and the contradictions that inform, for example, the national pledge, which is uttered by all Singaporean kids every school morning.¹⁰ The pledge, in a reverse sort of way and perhaps due to its performative *inefficacy*, is in itself a mis-performance through which the ideological infrastructure of institutionalized racism is perpetuated. As a core feature of the national narrative the Singaporean pledge is inclusive as much as it is elusive. While on the one hand, it aims to include several groups of people within its scope, it also aims to erase or overcome the conflicts that marked elder racial partitions in and of the region. It is as if with the edification of the modern nation, there is the belief that performing the pledge could somehow erase the racial tensions and violence that has marked intercultural relations in Southeast Asia for centuries. At this point, a partition of perceptible beings according to regional history, postcolonial inheritance, nationalistic discourse, education and the fundamental conflicts between these factors becomes visible. Having Maya's anecdote as an amplifier, we can hear in *Best of* and *Not Counted* the contradictions out of which the partition of the Modern Singaporean *demōs* is distributed. Then and there, that 'many Malays do not pass through 'O' Levels' and the invalidity of Ashraf's application make sense as evidence of the current national partition. This is the partition that both plays seek to unsettle, but that at the same time reinforce by fulfilling the need for a racial Police order to remain operative. In speaking up, they perform the very same compartmentalization they wish to get rid of. This is how Malays should sound and look like. This is their correct place, their correct anxiety. Such is the tragedy of political performance in Singapore, always torn between its ambition to speak up and its own instrumentality in keeping unwanted noise in silence.

*< We, the citizens of
Singapore, pledge
ourselves as one united
people, regardless of race,
language or religion, to
build a democratic society
based on justice and
equality so as to achieve
happiness, prosperity and
progress for our nation >*

< Stupid Malay >

*< Lights fade up. The
intermission begins. I hear
some chitchat in the room. In
the meantime, I am thinking of
the plays' underlying intentions.
I wonder whether the Malays in
Singapore are truly the sole
national victims or whether
there is more to say about the
Singaporean partition of the
perceptible. >*



*Fig. 1. Publicity Image for Not Counted. (Left to right Gerald Chew and Najib Soiman).
Photo credit: Irfan Kasban. Image courtesy of Teater Ekamatra.*



*Fig. 2. Image of Siti Khalijah in Best Of. Photo credit:
Alan Lim, Courtesy of The Necessary Stage.*



*Fig. 3. Zizi Azah receiving the Young Artist Award. (Left to right: Zizi Azah
bte Abdul Majid, ex-artistic director of Teater Ekamatra, and Associate
Professor Dr Yaacob Ibrahim, Member of Parliament, Minister for
Communications and Information, and Minister-in-charge of Muslim
Affairs) Photo credit: Izmir Ickbal.
Image courtesy of Zizi Azah.*

Regional echoes

On 26 November 2012, Singaporeans witnessed the first strike in twenty-six years. Around a hundred bus drivers of Chinese nationality performed a protest in which they asked for a pay rise and an improvement of their accommodation facilities. Their pledge was apparently based on a call for equality: to be treated and paid as much as the Singaporean workers. But the issue became larger than their pledge. Sudden strikes are illegal in Singapore. If a group of people wishes to perform a public act, and especially if this act is a performance of dissent, they need to have the consent of the written law. The government rapidly sanctioned the Chinese strike as an illegal one.¹¹

The drivers, who were brought to Singapore under a governmental program that invites Chinese nationals to work as drivers in the national public transport fleet with a good promise of improving their social status, were now under arrest and publicly condemned. Addressing the denomination of labour strikes in an European context, Rancière argues that a 'strike is not political when it calls for reforms rather than a better deal or when it attacks the relationships of authority rather than the inadequacy of wages. It is political when it reconfigures the relationships that determine the workplace in its relation to the community' (Rancière 1999, 32–3). Was this the case? Probably not, but the bus drivers' strike did bring the 'foreign troublemaker' to the front of the stage. And in this case, the foreign troublemakers were Chinese. They became illegitimate speakers once they aspired to redistribute the public order and disagree with the nation's distribution of wealth. Furthermore, their case also suggests the connections of the nation-state with a larger network of partitions of the perceptible, which we may think of as a translocal enmeshment of Police orders.

What comes to the fore here is an understanding of Singapore as a node where migrations of labour from China meet with the cultural and religious links that bind Singapore Malays with the centuries-old dispersion of Islam into the Southeast Asian region. However, the Singaporean law counters older local and current partitions on the basis of an apparent equality that works as a stratified nationalistic justice: not all residents are speaking bodies and not all speaking bodies are allowed to produce public discourse, regardless of their cultural conditioning. Equality shows

itself to be, indeed, much more complex than a matter of rephrasing childish racism by redeeming the Malay struggle. The Singaporean partition is larger than the boundaries of the nation and, likewise, the mission of performing politics in its context is not as simple as an ethnic face-off.

< *Back at my seat. Lights fade out.*
Not Counted resumes >

The city and its voices

After a reconfiguration of the set, the second part of the play begins; but things have changed. Ashraf and Benjamin are now the best of friends. In this parallel reality, perhaps the ideal one, both characters have agreed to set a mock terrorist kidnap to teach Singaporeans a lesson about stereotypes and racism. These men continue with their racial role-playing, and while they do so, these two Singaporean actors, Malay and Chinese, speak Zizi Azah's words, the words of a Malay-Muslim woman.

In 2012, shortly before *Not Counted* opened at the Beijing Theatre Symposium,¹² the Singapore National Arts Council of Singapore awarded Zizi Azah the Young Artists Award. Two years later, in 2014, the award was also given to Siti K. In both cases, the award came after more than a decade of theatre making. Given to artists 'whose artistic achievements have distinguished them among her peers' (NAC 2015), it also gives a fair and clear visibility to both as leading Singaporean theatre makers (and, in the case of Zizi Azah, her local visibility continues in spite of recent relocation to the US). Zizi and Siti K are the second and third Malay-Muslim women to receive the award in the twenty-one years of the prize existence. The first one was Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit, who got it only a few years ago, in 2008. This places all three women in relation to a larger partition of Islamic perceptions. These Singaporean theatre makers stand on a stage where Muslim women achieve legitimacy as perceptible beings, able to be heard as artists, professionals and politicians inside and outside the boundaries of the Islamic worlds and their overlapping distributions. Paradoxically, in 2013, shortly after Zizi Azah received her award, a Malay-Muslim woman, Madam Halimah Yacob, was appointed as Speaker of the Parliament of Singapore: perhaps one of the positions with least political or executive power in the national parliament. Her appointment grants her a visibility that could be taken as a gesture of

empowerment. Yet the little political impact that she has in that specific role subtly counters her public political voice.

A crucial update to the position of Madam Halimah in Singapore's government came on 8 November 2016, when the Prime Minister of Singapore announced changes to the scheme of the elected presidency. The main change announced was that the 2017 election would be reserved for Malay candidates. This means that Singapore will have its first Malay president since Yusof Ishak, who became president when Lee Kwan Yew became Prime Minister and Singapore became an independent republic in 1965. As the president is a figurehead who does not have executive power over the government, in the aftermath of the announcement many claimed this to be merely a tokenistic gesture. Nevertheless, Halimah is one of the four front-runners, suggesting a strong possibility—at least at the time of writing—that Singapore might have a Malay Muslim woman as president. A Malay presidency in itself may be tokenistic, but when placed in the current geopolitical context, 'President Halimah' would arguably make a significant statement in sharp contrast with the reawakening of Islamophobia and white nationalisms across North American and Europe, *and also* as a key strategic positioning with respect to Southeast Asian neighbours with a Muslim majority, like Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei.

Halimah's trajectory in Singapore's government might also be understood in relation to Gayatri Spivak's influential essay 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988). There, Spivak undertakes a minute analysis of the gesture in re-presenting the colonial subject as subject but only on the terms according to which Imperial practices (e.g. law-making and intellectual practice) grant such presence to be structured as such. Spivak argues that such a gesture is not only identifiable as the 'epistemic violence... remotely orchestrated, far flung, and heterogeneous project to situate colonial subjects as Other' (76). Crucially, Spivak argues that the obliteration of subjects and knowledges should also be located in the colonies themselves and as the formation of the colonized subject became porous with the formation of the colonizer subjectivity. In that sense, Spivak identifies that 'within the effaced itinerary of the subaltern, the track of sexual difference is doubly effaced' inasmuch as 'both as object of colonialist historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context

of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow' (82–3). Halimah's political figure is caught in an intriguing place located at the intersections of the postcolonial construction of the Singaporean Malay woman, the Islamic subject 'woman', and her own weight as a member of the ruling elite. Torn between the forces at that intersection, Halimah's political voice flees into the silence of Spivak's postcolonial feminine subaltern while at the same time she remains as Speaker in the national Parliament and a hopeful for the presidency.

In the meantime, Maya holds to her silence. She is empowered by it. She does not want to speak up against being called 'stupid Malay'. Neither does she want someone else speaking for her. She decides to be silent. In the meantime, Siti K has not stopped speaking. In the play, her words have begun to be in excess of themselves. Paradoxically, the character speaks meaningfully about how mute she truly is, about how she is not heard and how her husband's silence is making her suffer:

In Singapore, according to Syariah law, if a man wants to divorce, it's automatic. He say divorce, it's done. But if the woman wants to divorce, she has to go to court to file. Then must go for counselling. The first time, he didn't turn up. The second appointment, he also didn't turn up. (Sharma 2014, 4)

Rancière's politics is performed through acts of subjectification. Subjectification is a mechanism through which the police order is broken by itself, by one of its own parts, the part of those who have no part and who have decided to perform the 'wrong' of negating the negation of their existence. In other words, a counter-negation that gives place to a disagreement of parts that speak. Thus, subjectification means 'the production through a series of actions of a body and a capacity for enunciation not previously identifiable within a given field of experience' (Rancière 1999, 36). 'Any subjectification is a disidentification, a removal from the naturalness of a place' (ibid).

Thus, political action is 'a mode of subjectification [that] does not create subjects *ex nihilo*; it creates them by transforming identities defined in the natural order of the allocation of functions and places into instances of experience of a dispute' (ibid). Yet, at the

< I have not forgotten that these theatre makers have been allowed to speak and are doing so within the limits of the proper—perhaps even using propriety as a strategy to speak words of disagreement. Siti K is there, sitting in front of us. We hear her, no doubt, and she, both actress and character, knows it. Along with her, there are Zizi Azah, Ashraf and Madam Halimah Yacob, who are all visible. We all hear them and they all make sense to us. It is only now that I realize I am the spectator of a Police order that, after some rehearsals in which it has incorporated the proper word and cleansed the noise, has allowed itself to be represented and be performed...

same time, for Rancière, an action is political only if it brings about a process of subjectification that arises from 'a meeting of Police logic and egalitarian logic that is never set up in advance' (1999, 32). This is an intriguing nuance in Rancière, for it suggests that politics is but a performance of spontaneity that arises from the already perceptible partition of societal roles and identities. Equality for Rancière 'is not a given that politics then presses into service, an essence embodied in the law or goal politics sets itself the task of attaining' (1999, 33). Instead, equality is the central axiom in Rancière's politics, which correspondingly should only be identified as such to the extent that it involves performing a verification of equality. Nevertheless, equality does not have any 'vocabulary or grammar of its own, only a poetics' (2011, 6), that manifests in the 'framing of a future [that] happens in the wake of political invention rather than being its condition of possibility' (2011, 13). The in-existent is therefore 'a poetic framing of specific appearances rather than a phenomenology of the apparent' (ibid.). The materialization of equality through performance is thus when a new experience, previously unannounced, becomes perceptible. Rancièrean politics becomes sensible when equality is verified in the creation of a new experience in the association of action and identity.

If Rancière is right, if politics can't be predicted nor announced, then politics appears to be very unlike *Not Counted* and *Best Of*. According to this Rancièrean nuance, censored and licensed theatre is hardly the proper place for politics to occur. If we follow his words and politics can only occur 'out of place and in a place which was not supposed to be political' (2011, 4), where can Rancièrean politics be performed? If it has no proper place, no planned nor rehearsed intention, and it can only be created within the very same Police order it aims to transform, where and when can the true Rancièrean political 'actor' play?

Siti K ends with a reflection on death. She then stands up and walks out, always from stage left. On the other stage, the security guards are giving an ultimatum to Ashraf, because they think he is the perpetrator of the kidnap. Blackout. Gunshots.

Silence

Power is entitled to silence. But is the contrary the case? Except for Maya, the characters and examples so far present us with a

...This is how Malays should sound and look like. This is their correct place, their correct anxiety...

...I feel abandoned. I am there, in the silent auditorium, watching a rehearsed police order that has allowed itself to be shown. I've been watching two plays that may cancel themselves out. I've been watching the Malays speaking their proper Malay complaint and I wonder whether the Malays really play the part of those without a part. What could happen if Malays expressed an anxiety that did not sound like their usual self?...

...I hear the other spectators clap. I am clapping too. We have just watched a generalized rumour be performed, one that is heard in the quotidian life of the police order in the city-state. This rumour we all hear; hearing it is what we have in common; we are a community that makes sense in that it needs to be addressed. We all agree there. Singaporeans should all be equal. We all agree on that. These are the voices of the on-going movement, the voices that help negotiate the process for the nation's history. The citizens, including these theatre makers, are speaking. Each one of them with both social and individual voices that diversify the common force of resistance that, however censored, unites them. >

catalogue of oppressive silences—Ashraf not receiving a response, Siti K's husband not replying to her divorce request, etc. We can immediately recognize and relate to this silence. It is the sound of loss and defeat. But the contradictions appear when the speaker of parliament is a Malay-Muslim woman whose power is mute, both privately and publicly, and when a Malay-Muslim girl decides to keep silent as a way to empower herself in the face of racism. Maya's silence remains. Perhaps she does not want to become unseen by her friend—perhaps she does not want to break the order. Perhaps she thinks that speaking about the problem will make her mute, another speaker of the usual cause. But perhaps we can listen to how Maya is simply using her silence as a point of departure, as a political performance that resists giving her voice the chance to be regulated into the propriety of a Malay-Muslim complaint in Singapore. Perhaps her silence is the act of thinking and in her thought, the words of her classmate are but the theatrics of a police order. Perhaps she prefers to watch the show. She could answer, but she prefers not to. Perhaps she might have her reasons and yet unknowingly she is evidencing the Singaporean partition of the perceptible, making it transparent to itself.

Rancière's notion of emancipation is important here as it is the immediate consequence of a performance that verifies equality. Rancière debates it, firstly, in the context of education:

In the act of teaching and learning there are two wills and two intelligences [those of the teacher and of the student]. We will call their coincidence stultification [and] we will call the known and maintained difference of the two relations — the act of an intelligence obeying only itself even while the will obeys another will — emancipation. (Rancière 1991, 13)

For him, emancipation is achieved when the speaking being becomes aware of his power to talk and therefore becomes aware of his natural intelligence, equal to any other speaking being. From this argument, using the egalitarian logic of emancipation and his discussion on education, he draws a line that unites his work on emancipation with spectatorship. Rancière then commands an attack against the partition of the perceptible in theatre and defends the spectator against all claims of passivity by redeeming

< *My mind wanders back to Rancière* >

< *It remains to be said that today I did not participate in this rumour of inequality, the unequal rumour of the equal speaking beings. I only watched it being said. Perhaps I decide not to speak because, as a foreigner, my word may fall out of place. Perhaps the cop in my head is too strong to be defeated. Yet, I also decided to keep silent because I wanted to watch the plays. And as I was watching, holding my word, I was thinking of what could and should be said about what I was watching. The actors never saw me but I was there. While I watched them and did not speak, in that time and space, I have experienced my own thought...*

the active involvement of the acts of watching and thinking. He observes that:

...the paradox of the spectator...is easily formulated [as] there is no theatre without a spectator...But according to the accusers, being a spectator is a bad thing for two reasons. First viewing is the opposite of knowing [and] second, it is the opposite of acting...To be a spectator is to be separated from both the capacity to know and the power to act'. (Rancière 2009, 2)

In turn, he argues that:

...emancipation begins when we challenge the opposition between viewing and acting, when we understand that the self evident facts that structure the relations between saying, seeing and doing themselves belong to the structure of domination and subjection. It begins when we understand that viewing is also an action that conforms or transforms this distribution of positions. The spectator also acts. (Rancière 2009, 13)

Silence, as Gabriel Rockhill comments on Rancière's work, is where 'the voices of the muted masses interrupt the partition of the sensible by constantly hesitating at the border of silence' (Rockhill 2004, 67). Indeed, the problem with the politics and aesthetics of silence is that it can be understood as an assumption, a submission, as the cops in the head, as the embodied mark of inequality or even as some irrelevant quasi-mysticism. Yet, a different account of silence may lead us to say otherwise and claim that in silence there is, if anything, the in-action of the spectator's dissident thought. There is a fine line between these two extremes, yet the differential between them is indicative of the multiple possibilities, some of them political, that silence may have. Rancière's work allows us to remember and redistribute the power of silence and think of The Political as the mute landscape where the silent, emancipated spectator subjects to the will of performance while allowing herself to think freely. This view on silence challenges the all too common binary and rhetoric that casts 'silence' (the presumed response to the presence of oppression, and/or a lack) against 'voice' (overly symbolic of

What are your thoughts?

...And in my thoughts,

I leave the theatre. >

empowerment) advocated by much socially engaged critical literature.

The relationship between the politics of performance in Singapore and Rancière therefore allows us to think of silence in at least two potent ways. Firstly, silence is the place within the police from where politics will emerge in the constant movement of the redistribution of perceptible partitions. Secondly, and most importantly, silence is an emancipating action, a performative that problematizes censorship by redistributing the perception of policed speech. What is at stake here is that silence may be a political reply, one that in not being scripted, not being expected, perhaps not even by its performer, sheds light on the machinery of the normative command to always be a speaker—even when your words are not counted, even when you are not considered the best of society.

Theatre may often be a gathering of silences and silence seems to be the lesson that Maya can teach us, regardless of whether she knows that she is teaching us. Silence as that place where politics lives, perhaps perpetually, in its muteness, vacuity and invisibility, in the potentiality of its subject-specific interpretation and implementation. This is not the silence where purity remains. This is political silence; a silent action that may resist generic redistribution, a silent crisis of censorship, silent emancipation, silence.

The origins of Rancière's thought is the night 'whose conquest was the first step in social emancipation, the first material and symbolic basis for a reconfiguration of the given state of things to be' (Rancière 2011, 7). The night is where silence flows, invisible but there, around the planet and its millions of subjects living across layers of partitions of the perceptible, with their own imperceptible, perhaps clandestine and mute, but certainly not stupid ways to exist.

< It is late and I have watched a long play tonight. I walk home. In the distance, I see the Singapore River and its delta, a landscape full of tall buildings that few years ago were not there. They stand on land that was reclaimed, redistributed from the bottom of the sea. The shores of the city grow with time. It is as if it wanted to conquer the invisibility of the sea with the solidity of soil, make it all visible and full of common sound. I reach home. There is a family dinner and Maya, the Malay-Muslim cousin of my wife, is there. I ask her again if she has told her friend anything about that incident. She looks at me, says nothing and goes to sleep. Maya's silence is the Singaporean play for Jacques Rancière, where the sun that blinds us to see the censored partition disappears and enters the night of our silent thought. >

Notes

¹ I would like to thank Graham Wolfe, Azy Alias, Ella Parry-Davies, Matt Yoxall, and Fezhah Maznan for their timely feedback and kind help at different stages in the development of this piece.

² The best example of this is Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002). Kuo is often identified as one of the pioneers of contemporary theatre in Singapore. Born in China, he migrated to Singapore in 1949 where he quickly became involved as a writer and broadcaster for a local Mandarin-speaking radio station. In the early 1960s, he underwent formal training at NIDA (National Institute of Dramatic Art) in Sydney, Australia. Upon his return to Singapore, Kuo's work was heavily political, often to his own misfortune. In 1976, he was arrested under Singapore's Internal Security Act due to the political views expressed in his plays, which were often in alignment with communist ideals emanating from China. Kuo spent almost five years in prison. However, the relevance of his contribution to Singaporean theatre would not go without official recognition and, perhaps paradoxically, in 1989 he was awarded the Cultural Medallion. Kuo was instrumental in the foundation of several cultural institutions, like the Intercultural Theatre Institute (formerly named Theatre Training and Research Program) and The Substation Theatre. He was also an important mentor for an entire generation of Singaporean theatre makers, Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma included.

³ In the English version of Rancière's book, *The Politics of Aesthetics, The Distribution of the Sensible* (2004), Gabriel Rockhill translates the original term '*Le partage du sensible*' as 'the distribution of the sensible'. This translation is perhaps the most widely known in Rancièrian scholarship. I divert from this translation in favour of 'the partition of the perceptible' as a way to maintain the etymological tension between the root of the French '*partage*', i.e. to share, and the English 'to part' (to divide). In my view, evidencing this tension does justice to a central tenet in Rancière's work on the politics of aesthetics and the aesthetic regime of art, which is precisely the shared division that becomes perceptible in the impossibility of sharing an equivalent experience of a Police order. In turn, I opt for 'perceptible' instead of 'sensible' as I argue that it renders a more accurate description of the possibility of performing a Rancièrian politics; i.e. an action that effectively re-partitions the sanctioned roles in a Police Order, bringing new forms and realms of experience and cognition in being.

⁴ As examples, Ravindran Drama Group produces work mostly in Tamil, while Nine Years Theatre uses Mandarin as the main language of their work.

⁵ On 5 February 1994, the *Straits Times* published an article with the title 'Two Pioneers of Forum Theatre Trained at Marxist Workshops', authored by Felix Soh. There, Soh recounts how Tan and Sharma had started using Forum Theatre in July 1993, after their return from New York, where they had attended a workshop with Augusto Boal. Among other allegations, Soh famously argued that the workshops attended by Tan and Sharma in New York 'were conducted by the Brecht Forum, a Marxist cultural and public education organisation whose founder, Augusto Boal, has declared that all theatre is necessarily political and that it is a "very efficient weapon for liberation". Soh then questioned whether 'The Necessary Stage [was] using theatre for a political end?'

⁶ In *The Malay Dilemma* (1970), Mahathir Bin Mohamad argues: 'Historically, the link between Malaya and Singapore is well known. Singapore belonged to Johor until the English-man Stamford Raffles installed a puppet sultan, and obtained a dubious concession. The puppet was later dropped when his usefulness was over. The main reason for the British takeover of Singapore was the weakness of the state of Johor. It had nothing to do with legality. It is no good therefore talking about historical links of systems of Governance, of language of administration, of similarity of education, etc.' (Mohamad 1970, 182). Mohamad is clearly elaborating a partition of roles and places that answers to his moment and place in the border of the two countries. These words were written during the first years of the separation and therefore it would seem that the commanding narratives, on both sides of the causeway, aim to distinguish one nation from the other.

⁷ Temenggong: Malay title of nobility.

⁸ The coupling of Malay and Muslim is another case that deserves attention as it describes the nature of the citizenship of one particular subject in Malaysia that has some repercussions of the perceptions of identity in Singapore. Under this distribution, which is stated in the civil law of Malaysia, every Malay is a Muslim. Article 160 of the Malaysian constitution defines Malay as a Malaysian citizen born to a Malaysian citizen, who professes to

be a Muslim, habitually speaks Malay language, adheres to Malay costumes and is domiciled in Malaysia or Singapore. See Constitution of Malaysia ([1957] 2016).

⁹ It is worth highlighting that Lee was employing the comparison to Harlem in a negative sense, probably referring to the 'ghetto' stereotypes that are often pregnant with connotations of crime and social conflict.

¹⁰ For a complete history of the Singaporean pledge, see National Heritage Board (2016) and *Singapore Infopedia*.(2016).

¹¹ See *Yahoo! Newsroom* (2012). It is noteworthy that in the image that accompanies the report, the strikers' faces are blurred, already indicating the process of visual and aural muting from the social sphere.

¹² The world premiere of the play was on 13–15 December 2012 at Penghao Theatre in Beijing. This is a significant milestone in the trajectory of Teater Ekamatra as its international agenda has been previously reserved mostly to the immediate neighboring countries. Furthermore, presenting this particular work in China opens up a series of queries about the particular reception to which the work as exposed.

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Biography

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