





**THEATRE**

## **BANI BUANG**

The father of modern Malay drama in Singapore.

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 Time taken: >15mins





Local cultural organisations must work hard to enliven the art of Malay drama. These efforts are needed to popularise the art as it did in the sixties.



Berita Harian, 27 Nov 1973

Regarded as the father of modern Malay drama in Singapore, Bani Buang is a noted director and producer who began his artistic career in theatre at the age of 17. He went on to direct and produce numerous Malay plays, introducing contemporary and unconventional elements such as realistic sets, staging and dialogue to Malay theatre. He also co-founded Malay theatre group Perkumpulan Seni, nurturing many young theatre talents. He also was an illustrious television director and producer with Radio Television Singapore (which became the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation), heading the Malay Drama Unit and helming 1970s Malay television series Sandiwara. In 1979, he received the inaugural Cultural Medallion for theatre for his contributions to theatre in Singapore.

Bani Buang was born in 1929 in Singapore. He received his early education at the Sepoy Lines Malay School, Monk's Hill School and studied English at the Anglo-Malay Evening School.

His foray into theatre started as early as 1944 in Kampung Agas, Pasir Panjang. With the help of a Japanese officer during the Japanese Occupation, Bani and a few other friends built a makeshift outdoor theatre using an oil drum and wooden planks in the housing compound of a villager named Pak Tambi. There, he produced his first play, the improvisational piece *Ahmad Berbudi*.

After the war, Bani joined the Cahaya Timur Sandiwara, which staged theatre productions by Indonesian playwrights such as Adlin Affandi (*Gadis Modern*) and Surapati (*Corak Dunia*). In 1946, at the age of 17, he joined Singapore's first Malay theatre group, Pemuda Baru Sandiwara, which was formed during the Japanese Occupation by a group of sawmill workers at Kampong Agas in Bukit Chermin. The following year, Bani was given the opportunity to direct *Gadis Modern (Modern Girl)* to raise funds for the Anglo-Malay Evening School.

Starting out in theatre in the '40s meant that Bani's development as a theatre practitioner was markedly influenced by the popularity of bangsawan and sandiwara, two contrasting theatre styles commonly performed in Singapore and Malaysia that would usher in the birth of modern Malay theatre.

Bangsawan—a style of entertainment perhaps best described as Malay opera for the masses—featured the sometimes loose and unscripted dramatisation of fantastical or mythical stories through acting, singing, orchestra music, and dancing. Sandiwara was introduced to Singapore by visiting Indonesian drama troupes at a time when bangsawan was losing its appeal. Originally a form of traditional dance-drama from West Java, it developed a repertory of original scripts, often with a focus on social issues, as well as leanings towards realism and naturalism.

Bani's earliest plays, particularly from the '40s, displayed influences from both bangsawan and sandiwara. They incorporated elements such as scriptless, improvisational dramatisation and loose narratives as well as simple, linear, contemporary stories, with a focus on realism in acting, costume and setting. His amateur play *Helang Hitam (Black Eagle)*, a modest effort performed on the verandah of a house, became Singapore's first modern Malay play.

In 1954, he directed *Anak Tiri Boyan* at the Victoria Theatre to raise funds for the Singapore Bawean Association. The next year, Bani's chance to be involved in professional theatre arrived when he was employed by Victoria Theatre. It was there that he honed his skills, working as a clerk for the theatre until 1969, eventually moving on to become the manager of the National Theatre.

On 8 July 1956, Bani and a few friends, including reporter and playwright Hussein Jahidin, composer Zubir Said and poet Usman Awang, founded Perkumpulan Seni, which would become one of the three prominent Malay theatre groups of the period, together with Persatuan Persuratan Pemuda Pemudi Melayu (4PM) and Sriwana.

With Perkumpulan Seni, Bani established his reputation as a theatre director, helming most of the plays staged by the group. Through the decades, he produced and directed Malay plays, introducing elements from other theatrical forms and styles to Malay theatre such as a revolving stage for his play *Bacheman*. He also staged Singapore's first Malay

and styles to Malay theatre such as a revolving stage for his play *Rasihonon*. He also staged Singapore's first Malay-language musical in the '70s with *Gema Seni (Artistic Echoes)*.

In 1973, Bani left the National Theatre and joined Radio Television Singapore as a producer and director. For the company and its subsequent incarnations as the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation, Bani headed the Malay Drama Unit and produced and directed several television series including *Sandiwara*. He also produced several Malay television programmes throughout the '80s and '90s with the Singapore Broadcasting Corporation Drama Unit.

For his contributions to Malay-language theatre, Bani received recognition in the form of the Sri Budiman Award from Sriwana and the Jasawan Seni Award from Perkumpulan Seni. In 1979, he received the inaugural Cultural Medallion for theatre for his contributions to theatre in Singapore.

In 1996, Bani Buang passed away at age 67 in Singapore.

## Timeline

**31 Jul 1929**

Born in Singapore

**1946**

Joined Pemuda Baru Sandiwara, Singapore's first Malay theatre group.

**1947**

Director, *Gadis Moden (Modern Girl)*.

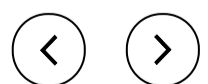
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## Image Gallery



Perkumpulan Seni's first committee. Bani Buang (standing, far left) with Zubir Said (standing, far right) and Abdul Ghani B: Hamid (crouching, far left). 1956.

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In putting together this collection, the *TributeSG* team consulted an external advisory panel, consisting of Arun Mahiznan, Choo Thiam Siew, J. P. Nathan, K. K. Seet, Kwok Kian Chow, and Iskandar Ismail. Those selected to be profiled in *TributeSG* met one of the following criteria: they were at least 60 years of age as of 12 Oct 2016, or deceased, or had received national recognition in the form of the Cultural Medallion. This journey of arts archival officially came to a close on 12 Oct 2016, after four years of extensive research, interviews and collation of information graciously provided by the *TributeSG* pioneers, their families and peers. *TributeSG* also benefited from enthusiastic help from like-minded friends and organisations who supported Esplanade's cause—to remember, honour and celebrate Singapore's arts pioneers.

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