

# **EXPERIMENTAL ADAPTATION OF TADASHI SUZUKI ACTING METHOD AND MALAY TRADITIONAL ENSEMBLE IN *HISTOIRE DU SOLDAT***

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this research is to find the results of experimental adaptation of Tadashi Suzuki acting method and music of Malay traditional ensemble into *Histoire Du Soldat* original score and performance. This study uses performance-led research to create new approach and innovative concept of integration of the Tadashi Suzuki Acting method, Malay traditional ensemble and classical music ensemble into *Histoire Du Soldat* original score and move beyond conventional performance. Actors and musicians together will bring the elements of spontaneity and improvisation through the acting and music of Malay traditional ensemble into classical ensemble performance. This trans-disciplinary exchange allows for a different, more sensual approach in supervening upon state-of-the-art works and in the creation of modernistic perceptions through performance led research: it expedites into new possibilities and perspectives in adapting to modern circumstances and finding new ways in performing Arts.

**Keywords:** Performance-led research; Tadashi Suzuki acting method; *Histoire Du Soldat*; Malay Traditional Ensemble

## **Introduction**

On 3rd of June 2016 *Histoire Du Soldat* (The soldier's tale) was staged at UPSI as a part of the program for minor theater project course. It involved UPSI students, lecturers from two departments (Theater and Music) and musicians in residence. Approximately 400 students and lecturers were in attendance of the performance.

Syarul Azlina binti Dato' Haji Sikandar and Mayya Musaeva have conducted performance-led research in the process of staging *the Histoire Du Soldat*. The rehearsal process, preparation and performance were recorded. As a part of the research the students distributed a survey at the end of the performance. The results were then collected and analyzed. The researchers aimed to find the ways to create new approach and innovative concept of integration of the Tadashi Suzuki Acting method, Malay traditional ensemble and classical music ensemble into *Histoire Du Soldat* original score and move beyond conventional performance.

## Igor Stravinsky

Picture 1. Igor Stravinsky



*Stravinsky, Igor Fyodorovich, (1882-1971)*- a cosmopolitan person, is often regarded as Russian-French-American composer. Born in Russia, he was exiled from his country during first world war and lived in various parts of Europe including Switzerland, Germany, Ukraine and France. Later in life he migrated to America where he spent the rest of his life. Claiming Stravinsky as their national composers, each of these countries had a valid reason. The composer, in his constants searches and evolution of style, was able to embrace something new by immersing himself into different culture of the countries he lived. Development and progress of his composition styles are representing searches and changes in music history of 20th century. Nevertheless, he never stopped being a truly Russian composer. Dmitry Shostakovich once wrote about him: "...Stravinsky is a true Russian composer ... Russian spirit is indestructible in the heart of this truly great, multi-faceted talent, begotten by Russian Motherland and vitally connected with it ..." <sup>14</sup>

### Histoiree Du Soldat

*Histoiree Du Soldat (HDS)*-is a theatrical work "to be read, played, and danced" ("lue, jouée et dansée") by three actors and one or several dancers, accompanied by a septet of instruments. The direct translation of the title in Russian would sound as "A tale about fugitive soldier and the Devil, to be read, played and danced." (Transl. mine). Igor Stravinsky composed it in collaboration with Swiss writer and Stravinsky's close friend C.F. Ramuz. The libretto was written on Russian Folktale *The Soldier and the Devil* from the collection of Russian folktales by Russian ethnographer A.N. Afanas'ev<sup>15</sup>. The choice of universal story of Faustian bargain told in folklore-like manner was inspired by the political atmosphere and the situation the two authors faced at that time. The idea of experimental theater was to create short dramatic piece that could be staged at different locations with smaller cast. The score is written for violin, double bass, clarinet, bassoon, cornet, trombone, and percussion. The narrator reads the story as it is being acted by two actors (the soldier and

<sup>14</sup> (Igor Stravinsky) <http://www.belcanto.ru/stravinsky.html>

<sup>15</sup> Afanas' Ev, Aleksandr. Russian fairy tales. Pantheon, 2013.

the devil) and dancers. Narrator also plays some of the minor roles. The cast and the musicians are to be present on the stage throughout the performance contributing to the “*balagan*” theatre atmosphere or Russian traditional theatre booths. The music of *HDS* was conceived with the thoughts of being independent from acting. The composer arranged a concert suite of five numbers for clarinet, violin, and piano and much later suite for the seven original performers. The score is characterized with ever changing time signature, repetitive fragments of Russian folk tunes and innovative rhythm use.

### “Russian” factor

In summing up Stravinsky works one could not deny multiplicity of his figurative stylistic technique each of them pertained to a particular period of composer’s life<sup>16</sup>. He used Russian folklore, folk art and ancient ritual traditions as a source for his compositions from 1908 through beginning of twentieth century, during so called “Russian” period. The musical style of this period is characterized by wide utilization of Russian Folk tunes and employment of innovative rhythms into orchestral score of *The Firebird*, *Petrushka*, *Rite of Spring*, notable compositions that brought him the world fame. *Renard*, a small theatrical composition (1916), which he called “A burlesque in song and dance”, preceded *Histoire Du Soldat* and laid pathway into experimental theatre exploits. Though *HDS* was written at the end of the “Russian period” of his life, by then Stravinsky became disillusioned by the Communist revolution in Russia and turned “West” in his work venturing into the new music, particularly into jazz. This explains the inclusion of the Ragtime, Tango and Waltz into the score.

### Performance history and adaptations

First performance has taken place in Lausanne, Switzerland on 28 September 1918 under the baton of Ernest Ansermet. Since then it was performed in various countries and in different languages. The most recent notable adaptations were the version set in Iraq and staged by Andrew Steggall in London<sup>17</sup> and performance by the Montreal Symphony Orchestra’s tour of Nunavik (the Inuit homeland in Quebec) in 2009<sup>18</sup>. The piece became popular and was staged in a number of Russian theatres. Unfortunately, there is no record of the full performance of *HDS* staged in Malaysia.

### Tadashi acting techniques

The cultural and historical settings in Malaysia led to the limited grow ballet popularity in general audiences. Due to some circumstances the researchers decided not to use ballet or traditional dance in the performance but utilize *Tadashi Suzuki* acting method instead. This acting techniques are progressively gaining popularity in theatres around the world through SCOT (the Suzuki Company of Toga, Japan), publications<sup>19</sup>, symposiums, and productions directed by Tadashi Suzuki. The unique acting ideology is explained in *The way of Acting*<sup>20</sup>, a collection of six essays. He argues about shortcoming of modern theatres, when the inner rhythm immanent to the language is not co-related to the body language in acting of foreign theatrical works in Japan. For Suzuki acting is a “living conversation” of

<sup>16</sup>Oliver, Michael. *Igor Stravinsky (20th Century Composers)*. Phaidon Press, 2008

<sup>17</sup>The Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/stage/2006/jan/12/theatre.iraq>

<sup>18</sup>Welcome to Social Doc – Social Doc <http://www.socialdoc.net/magnus/2009/09/16/tusarnituuq-the-mso-goes-to-nunavik/>

<sup>19</sup>Kominz, Laurence, Tadashi Suzuki, and J. Thomas Rimer. "The Way of Acting: The Theatre Writings of Tadashi Suzuki." (1987): 103-106.

<sup>20</sup>Suzuki, Tadashi. *The way of acting: The theatre writings of Tadashi Suzuki*. Theatre Communications Group, 1986, p.12

actors and not mere “recreation of superficial behavior”<sup>21</sup>. This idea became a critical factor in decision to use Tadashi Acting Techniques for Malaysian production.

### **Problem statement**

The Stravinsky’ *HDS* is a rarely performed piece in Malaysia due to complexity of the score and low popularity of the ballet among Malaysian audiences in general and university students in particular. Researchers implied that this Malaysian premier adaptation could appeal to the general audiences through innovative adaptation of Tadashi Suzuki acting techniques and inclusion of familiar sound of Malay Traditional ensemble into Western Classical music score. The research attempted to find through the survey how well this experimental adaptation could be received by the general audiences.

### **Objective**

The three objectives of this research were:

- 1) to identify the innovative concept in experimental adaptation of Tadashi Suzuki acting method and music of traditional ensemble into *Histoire du Soldat*;
- 2) to analyze the creative process of experimental adaptation;
- 3) to assess the impact of this experimental adaptation.

### **The adaptation process**

The rehearsal process started with the score and text adaption. The title was translated as *Kisah Si Askar*. The text then was translated by the students with the help of the university linguists. Then it was adjusted and re-articulated to co-respond with the rhythms in the score. Due to the impossibility to fit the Malay translation into original rhythmical pattern and number of beats, a few bars of instrumental music were omitted from the score. The Ragtime, Tango and Waltz were excluded from the performance inconformity with the idea to make this performance more appealing to general Malaysian audiences. The Malay traditional ensemble performed three popular traditional tunes, one of which was Joget<sup>22</sup>, instead.

The students-actors learned Tadashi Suzuki acting techniques and applied them to the texts of *HDS*. Stravinsky music performed with Malay text, which was adopted to the modern context. Malay Traditional instrumental ensemble(Pic.2) has brought in elements of spontaneity by playing rhythms and soundsresemblant to the music accompaniment of *Wayang Kulit*<sup>23</sup> and by imitating sounds of the nature.

Picture 2. The rehearsal of the traditional Malay ensemble

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<sup>21</sup>Theresa Ki-ja Kim, Brooklyn College, CUNY, Asian Theatre Journal © 1990 University of Hawai'i Press

<sup>22</sup> Malay traditional dance

<sup>23</sup> Malaysian/Indonesian Puppet theatre



### **The performance**

The performance has taken place at Sultan Idris Educational University on the night of 3<sup>rd</sup> June, 2016(Pic.3). The cast consisted of five actor-students, septet of music instruments(Pic.4), traditional Malay ensemble(Pic.5) and a conductor.400 people including students and lecturers were in attendance. The performance was recorded on the video.

Picture 3. Scene from Kisah Si Askar



Picture4. Performance: The septet and the conductor.



Picture5. Malay Traditional ensemble



## **Results of survey**

Survey was conducted through a questionnaire distributed to 400 people, most of whom were orientation students of the Sultan Idris Educational University. This group represented post-secondary school students aged 17-21. 274 filled up forms were collected. Questionnaire was designed as four open questions:

1. What is your opinion about this performance?
2. What is the strength of this performance?
3. What is the weakness of this performance?
4. What is your suggestion in improving this performance?

Overall results of the survey have shown positive response to the performance. 40.8 % of respondents answered that they liked, enjoyed and were entertained by the performance. For 22.9% of them this was first time experience of watching this kind of performance. 67.1% of them asserted that the music was the strength of the show. Among weaknesses of the production were the acting (40.9), the choice of the cast (27.4%), the intelligibility of the story (28.7%). Satisfaction with the costumes expressed only 12.4% and with the lightings only 5.6%.

## **Conclusions**

The results of the survey demonstrated that the performance was well received by the general audiences. It also pointed to the main weaknesses such as acting quality and some other theatrical elements, lights, costumes etc.

The innovative concept was used in localizing the otherwise foreign music art through bringing in Malay traditional music and making acting relevant to the Malaysian audiences through Tadashi Suzuki acting method.

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