

Issues and Challenges of Theatre in the University: A Review of MAKUM Theatre

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Published online: 29 June 2021

Cite this article (APA): Mohd Baldev Shah, S. (2021). Issues and challenges of theatre in the university: A review of MAKUM theatre. *Jurai Sembah*, 2(1), 1-13. <https://doi.org/10.37134/juraisembah.vol2.1.1.2021>

Abstract

MAKUM Theatre, organised by the collective cultural body of public universities in Malaysia, is an ambitious theatre-based programme which aims at several objectives. However, once a yearly event, its presence was later made sporadic, and is altogether missing from the scene at present. This paper reports a qualitative study on the MAKUM Theatre Festival 2014-2015, the last cycle prior to its absolute absence. Data was collected in the form of observation in which the critical incident technique was applied to support the view of the research, interviews with staff-secretariat and students, and a performance analysis of the students' theatre productions. The study essentially deliberates upon factors which may assist in explaining the conundrum that is MAKUM Theatre, pointing to the issues and challenges of theatre within the university and its issue of sustainability. Analysis of the findings suggests several emerging features of MAKUM Theatre which may have influenced its (dis-)continued presence and presumed relevance, among which include a contesting ideology and application, format and rules, censorship and autonomy, race, culture, gender and religious representation, as well as the ever-present matter of finance, leadership, and transparency.

Keywords: Issues and challenges, MAKUM, relevance and sustainability, university theatre

Introduction

First introduced to the academia in tertiary education, theatre in the context of Malaysia's education system exists either as a full-fledged academic programme, a minor course in a related programme, or an extracurricular activity generally organised by the university cultural body. This study focuses on the third form of theatre in Malaysian public universities known as MAKUM Theatre. A unique council of the arts and culture for universities in Malaysia, MAKUM or Secretariat of the Cultural Council of Universities Malaysia was established in 1993 as an outcome of the institutionalisation of the ASIAN Universities Arts Council (AUAC), as it was then known, in Bali-Indonesia in 1992. One of its many endeavours is MAKUM Theatre, an intra-level theatre competition strictly for public universities in Malaysia which caters to undergraduate university students.

The initial brainchild of University of Northern Malaysia (UUM), the programme was introduced as *Pertandingan Teater IPTA*, or, Theatre Competition for Public HEIs in 2000. In 2002, the event was taken over by the National University of Malaysia (UKM) and in 2004, it was handed over to the University of Malaya (UM). Reintroduced as the MAKUM Theatre Festival, UM has been solely in charge of the said festival and acted as main host from 2004 up until 2012. In 2012, members of the secretariat decided on another change to allow other universities to host the event. However, UM was reverted as the main secretariat, although taking on a more advisory role, due to the universities' inability to provide the necessary facilities and resources. The current practice sees the designation of specific tasks among the participating or member universities.

Albeit its years' worth of active engagement, MAKUM Theatre has been subject to scrutiny and criticism over its supposed benefit and outcome. The role and significance of theatre, especially as a form of curricular activity at the university level, has rarely been addressed within an academic perspective. Simultaneously, the issues and challenges of an effort like MAKUM Theatre has been minimally, if ever,

examined, hence the purpose of this study. MAKUM Theatre 2014-2015 was the most recent cycle prior to vanishing from the scene altogether. It was marked by change, innovation, and sensationalism in more than one aspect from the structure, management and productions, down to the people. Unlike the previous cycles which were mainly held on a yearly basis, the 2014-2015 Theatre Festival was lengthy and took almost two years to complete. Reportedly a success, this paper attempts to iron out the irony to its discontinued activeness by identifying factors which may have played a role in the programme's vitality.

Literature Review

MAKUM possesses more than twenty years' worth of presence and influence into the handling and promotion of the arts and culture across the community and population of public universities in Malaysia (Abdul Rahman, 2013). It conceptualises culture as the Malaysian way of life which is in accord with the national cultural policy. With the motto "Knowledge (is the) Image (of) Culture," it is the policy of MAKUM to advise, guide, coordinate, and supervise in matters of culture among the public universities in Malaysia to achieve the goal of "creating a society that is civilised and cultured" (MAKUM Secretariat, 2011/2012).

MAKUM Theatre comes with its own sets of rules and regulations, among which include eligibility of participation (strictly for public university students) and manner of performance (i.e., form of theatre, script, plotline, etc.). Participants are also discouraged from using languages other than *Bahasa Melayu* and should refrain from engaging in politically charged performances, nor to touch upon racial and religious sensitivities as well as violence. MAKUM Theatre 2014-2015 was the last cycle organised which attempted to revitalise and restructure the presumed old and boring format of the competition.

The goal of the MAKUM Theatre is to ensure that the community of all public universities, particularly students, have an understanding, appreciation, and respond favourably to theatre and drama activities as an intellectual and leisure activity born of a civilised, knowledgeable, and "sovereign culture and civilisation."¹ The objectives of MAKUM Theatre as stated in the MAKUM Booklet (2011/2012) are:

- To invigorate theatre and drama activities as a campus community activity in order to give birth to students who are literate in the arts, as passion and tendency towards the arts is something innate.
- To foster integration, toleration, and cooperation among students from various groups and ethnicities through group work, which will contribute towards a harmonious, safe, peaceful, and vibrant campus life.
- To assist university parties in offering alternative activities through theatre activities in order to shun students from engaging in non-beneficial activities which can compromise their future.
- To provide a vehicle for students who possess a serious tendency in the field of acting, staging, public speaking, voice art, and music in order to sharpen their talent and knowledge in the field.
- To enliven the campus atmosphere with artistic activities, appropriate to one of the roles of higher education institutions as the 'custodian of high culture.'

Methodology

This paper presents findings of a study on the MAKUM Theatre in which data was collected in the form of observation, interviews with various individuals who were directly involved with MAKUM Theatre Festival 2014-2015, and performance analysis of students' theatre productions. For that purpose, observations were done during the North Zone, East Coast Zone, and Final Stage of the programme, in which the critical incident technique of analysis was applied (see Swanson & Davis, 2014). This means that any occurrence or peculiarity observed in the production stages and the final performance are noted and included in the performance analysis.

As such, several locations were visited and they include the Cultural Hall of University of Science Malaysia (USM) Gelugor-Penang, National Department for Culture and Arts Kuala Ibai-Terengganu, and National Department for Culture and Arts Ayer Keroh-Malacca of which the programme took place. For the interview, semi-structured guiding questions were formulated to elicit the respondents' feedback on their perception of MAKUM and MAKUM Theatre, and on a number of variables concerning the programme which include management, judging, participants, the current cycle, its impact, as well as the issues and problems they wish to highlight. The interviews were done during the pre-, in-, and post-

production stages of the students' performance. To note, several versions of the interview guide were formulated to fit the role of the participant-respondents. The performance analysis examines several features of the student-productions, paying attention to selected work, plot and storytelling, themes, highlights, and others.

The participants in this study were public university student-participants of MAKUM Theatre which were largely undergraduates, MAKUM secretariat and cultural officers, and others (i.e., academics, freelancers) – a Malay-dominated population. A total of 11 universities took part in the study. They were Universiti Malaya (UM), Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS), Universiti Malaysia Pahang (UMP), Universiti Malaysia Terengganu (UMT), Universiti Malaysia Kelantan (UMK), Universiti Utara Malaysia (UUM), Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM), Universiti Teknologi MARA (UiTM), Universiti Teknikal Melaka (UTeM), Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris (UPSI), and Universiti Tun Hussein Onn Malaysia (UTHM). Each of the competing teams consisted approximately 30 members with an additional one to two chaperon or advisor.

This study is therefore geared towards the current application and significance of theatre and performance among youths at the university level via MAKUM Theatre as medium. The discussion of theatre and education in Malaysia is interlinked with other connecting variables such as managerial policies as well as race, culture, gender, and belief. It investigates the way theatre is understood, imagined, and structured based on what is projected in the productions of MAKUM Festival. This allows the study to subsequently determine the influencing variables that affect the programme's execution and realisation.

Results and Discussion

Presumably, the conclusion of MAKUM Theatre 2014-2015 should signal a healthy future and development of the said programme. Nevertheless, a further review may reveal several factors which have influenced its current state of absence.

Varieties of MAKUM Theatre

The findings reveal the differing understandings, perceptions, and manners in which MAKUM Theatre has been applied among participants of the programme. In simpler words, a uniformed conception and goal-orient of MAKUM Theatre is likely missing. Elicited responses indicate the various ways in which the programme is conceptualised, and that the feedbacks garnered suggest a mere partial connection between the participants' perception and the actual description of MAKUM Theatre's objectives. This may be due to the visions and missions were not made explicit enough during each cycle of the programme. Student-participants mostly view it as a platform to showcase their talent and to gain further skill and experience while at the same time relishing the performances. Their objective may not be in line with that of the university they are representing which is understood to focus on winning and securing recognition.

Moreover, the manner in which the event was executed differs from one university and location to another depending on the hosts' ideals, conception of the programme, their capabilities, and the availability of resources and facilities. This is undeniably a challenging factor and MAKUM should consider to minimise, if not eliminate, those barriers particularly since any competition-based programme should attempt at fairness and neutrality. Although this may signal the council's flexibility on one hand, it also suggests an imbalance of effort and capability on another.

Competition-Festival Terminology

Interestingly, even after its restructure, the change in terminology from 'competition' to 'festival' yields little result in terms of the treatment and form of the programme, which continues to focus on the former. As these terms connote different meanings, the decision to change the programme from a competition to a festival appears only at face value. Presumably, this terminological inconsistency and fusion may have contributed to the participants' conflicting and confusing perception of the programme.

Contested Ideals and Visions

The implication of cultural sovereignty may be a highly idealistic sentiment expressed by the Council with regards to the programme, furthermore is the matter of MAKUM's claim of art as high culture. John Carey

(2006, p. 101), in his review of the moral prospect of the arts, cited numerous scholars who have disagreed with this injunction which is not based on factual evidence. For instance, Hans and Kreitlers claim that art is unable to modify behaviour which is influenced by numerous variables. Also, Eisner (2003) contends that the effect of students' contact with the arts cannot be determined. This similarly goes to another objective of MAKUM Theatre which is to offer alternative activities to prevent students from engaging in non-useful activities that may be detrimental to them. This rather moral and paternal role of the Council ignores the idea that participation in theatre offers a space that allows for an openness to discuss the reality of (im)morality, for instance. The Council's expression of exemplary ideals and the extent of its truth is in need of further investigation, especially since the management has been subject to criticism itself in terms of conduct and behaviour.

Art for Art or Something Else?

According to Abdul Rahman (cited in MAKUM Secretariat, 2011/12), MAKUM has yet to reach the same level of recognition enjoyed by other festivals available in academia. Abdul Rahman's discourse highlights the economic value of the arts in an educational setting due to his emphasis on "human capital," albeit one that is holistic. In one sense, we can see this as ignoring the artistic value of the arts itself. Students as would-be art practitioners would work in an environment which attempts to cater for the demands of the masses rather than their own thoughts and feelings. Placing a price on the art is, however, not uncommon in this money-driven world, and artists' survival depends on their ability to market their work and product. The Council believes that the MAKUM programme assists in the production of holistic human capital which is gaining prominence in the discussion of the economically-laden value of the arts. This involves four dimensions, which are ensuring a high level of education and skills, growth through skills upgrading, equal opportunities to all Malaysians, and ensuring that current students are ready to fill future jobs. Academics in the country have deemed that such effort necessitates a world-class workforce that possesses high knowledge and skills, enhanced with creativity and flexibility, and instilled with a positive work ethic and spiritual values (Zuher & Basir, 2015).

Conservation and the Conservative

In MAKUM Theatre, the call for innovation for sustainability exists along old thoughts, thinking, patriarchal behaviour and attitude. Although the Council pays importance to the continued presence and relevance of MAKUM and its programmes, MAKUM's attempt at sticking to tradition with regard to the Theatre Festival ever since its commencement in 2002 was only ever reconsidered after a ten-year period in 2012 as the Council entertained the idea of a zoning system which finally took effect in the 2014-2015 cycle. This suggests that making changes is a lengthy process and rarely considered as far as the Theatre Festival is concerned.

Other elements in which conventionalism has been observed in the said programme include preference over the same judges over younger and newer theatre practitioners, manner of production assessment, Malay dominance (i.e., the absence of non-Malay officials and the limited number of non-Malay students' participation), rules and regulations, and the thematic engagement of the student productions which among others involve the representation of gender and gender roles. These factors will be discussed later in their own subsections.

Need for Change and Value

The MAKUM Theatre Festival has been criticised as stagnant and lacking in terms of its effective contribution. It was marred by its lack of impact upon the theatre scene at both the national level and higher institutions. The effect of the programme post-production has not been documented and this does not help to resolve this issue as claims made by the Council are merely made based on opinionated points and not concrete empirical evidence. One of the most vital issues to be addressed is the negative attitude and perception towards MAKUM. Academicians, in particular, are most notorious for criticising the Council and its programme based on its supposed lack of effect on learning. It is not uncommon to hear those demeaning words, "*Ada apa dengan MAKUM?*" [What is there to MAKUM?]. In simpler words, MAKUM is regarded as beneath other arts councils available in Malaysia, and this is certainly a sad state of affairs, since MAKUM is generally very much applauded by the population of university students.

Such is the sentiment towards MAKUM even after its many years of establishment, that the Council makes it a mission to change this perception towards MAKUM by securing recognition and for others to acknowledge its value. The objectives and missions which have been spelled out in its formulation serve to justify MAKUM's presence and necessity. However, since theory and practice do not necessarily merge and the benefits of MAKUM lack solid proof, it is difficult to argue against critics and MAKUM finds itself trapped within the same debate and dilemma.

Zones and Locations

MAKUM Theatre Festival 2014-2015 adheres to a newly-enforced zoning system which is divided based on geographical location. They are the Middle, North, and East Coast Zone. The zoning system and location affect the number of participation and target audience. The zones were created to fulfil several objectives. First is to increase the participation of universities in the surrounding area. Second is to make traveling and transportation easier to participants, and third as a filtering process to select the best candidates for the Finals. However, teams may opt to compete in a particular zone based on the competitors in the zone, and not on location. The degree of competition in the East Coast Zone is regarded as of lesser-level as it is full of amateur teams as opposed to the Middle and North Zone.

Whereas access and travelling were made easier by the different locations, this remained a problem to some. For example, team UMS had to travel by air with their costumes, props and equipment, leaving behind other basic and personal necessities, and they had to do this not once, but twice. In another, the UTHM team had to travel from the southern state of Johor to the east coast of Terengganu. Apparently, this method does not help to resolve this issue for all.

The shift from a university location to an off-campus venue was made based on several factors. One is due to the lack of the facility at the host university, and another is to offer the public a taste of MAKUM Theatre. Although the number of audience members was smaller compared to a university venue even though the event was made free and publicised to the public, it was effective in obtaining serious theatre viewers. Supposedly more accessible to the public, the lack of advertising caused a limited turnout in those public spaces. This especially relates to the venue for the Finals at the National Department for Culture and Arts, Ayer Keroh, Malacca. The venue was within the outskirts of the city of Malacca and was far from public access, hence was not an effective location to attract visitors. The off-campus venues were also much quieter and more secluded than that of a campus hall, thus lacking the atmosphere of excitement that can influence the performers' morale.

Duration

The timeframe for the programme is another contradicting element. For some, it was too long and for others, it was too short. The waiting period to reach the Finals was simply too long and exhaustive for the earlier competing troupes, especially for teams in the Middle Zone. This non-standardised period caused many teams to disband from its original makeup with change in team members. This shift in membership likely affected the production itself as new members means different skills, levels, and ability. It simply makes the assessments of the teams during the selection stages void.

The MAKUM Theatre Festival 2014-2015 was certainly exceptional in the sense of its longevity. Previous festivals normally took around one to two weeks to complete per season. By contrast, the 2014-2015 cycle took a duration of one year to complete. This lengthy time frame does not necessarily mean that competing troupes were allocated more time to practice and perform. Mostly, at their disposal were mere weeks for preparation as dates for the competition were not revealed early on, and this may include shifts and changes. Another repetitive and probably unnecessary procedure is the review of the recorded plays to select teams for the finals. Waiting for the release of the official result and decision of the Secretariat is already a lengthy process, and this move certainly prolonged the entirety of the process.

Judging and Assessment

Student productions for MAKUM Theatre are assessed based on a panel assessment form in which the marks are divided as follows; 20 marks for direction and adaptation, 30 marks for acting, 20 marks for performance technique, and 10 marks each for sound and lighting, costume and design, and props and setting. Prizes are awarded for best top three performance and two special jury awards for most promising

group. For the category of direction and actors, prizes include best direction or adaptation, best principal actor (male and female), best supporting actor (male and female), and top four promising actors. For the category of creativity, prizes are awarded for best performance technique, best sound and lighting, best costume and design, and best props and setting.

This manner of assessment is implied as a simplified version to a more detailed evaluation, which is up to the judges' discretion. A member of the jury panel claims that the criteria assessed are unsuitable for MAKUM Theatre, as the same measure of evaluation for *Festival Teater Malaysia* [Malaysia's Theatre Festival] cannot be used to assess the plays in MAKUM due to the fact that the former are professionals whereas the latter are students. Moreover, as much of the work for theatre happens during the pre-production stages, he further admits the significance of the preparation process and that viewing the final product is only a bonus. Even so, none of the juries observed the preparatory stages of the productions, hence another irony.

The jury panel, referred to as the Review Panel, is made up of those who work in theatre or have some sort of background in theatre. A condition they have to meet as a jury is that they are not actively working in any public higher institutions. Furthermore, they must not be involved with any competing teams. Whereas the juries are responsible for 70% of the assessment and cultural officers the other 30%, the North Zone affords judges full authority over the student productions. Hence, both external (i.e., non-university theatre individuals) and internal figures (i.e., university cultural officers or MAKUM secretariat) are tasked to evaluate the performances. The decision of the Review Panel is considered final and the organisers will not entertain any appeal as it does not constitute an Appeal Tribunal.

This non-standardisation of assessment across all zones and the Finals was criticised as unjust and caused much dissatisfaction among participating teams. The assessment was also compromised due to presumed judging bias, favouritism and impartiality. The secretariat's judgement has been argued to be biased as a cultural officer may be impartial towards his/her own team. In the case of internal judging, students express their discontent in the panel's failure to acknowledge their effort, especially in their position as non-performing arts and non-theatre students. Judges tend to place high expectations on the student performances, often lamenting and harshly criticising the presumed lack of quality. They have been vocal in expressing their discontent and discomfort over watching the student plays, calling them exhaustive and torturous. The judges need to acknowledge that it is not easy to secure participation by only those in the field of theatre, or those with the expected sets of knowledge and skill considering the lack of access to that kind of learning and training. Moreover, students have attempted their best effort to produce a play that is theatre. Thus, it is unfair for the juries to complain over their exhaustion alone when students have also spent time, money, and energy into the event.

On a different perspective, the lack of an outcome-based assessment in MAKUM Theatre for each and every student-participant certainly undermines this claim and objective. At the end of every cycle, awards are given to a small number of categories which are judged (i.e., best direction, actors, performance technique, sound and lighting, costume and design, props and setting). Simply said, the event does not evaluate the extent to which the individual participants have grown and developed in terms of knowledge and skill as a result of their participation in MAKUM Theatre.

Judges' Sensitivity and Preference

In relation to the assessment is a consideration over the judge's sensitivity and preference. MAKUM concentrates highly on judges' preference and sensitivity instead of that of the students, as certain judges' preference over a genre or form of theatre they are known to prefer takes precedence over that of the students. This simply ignores the priority of the students in a student-oriented programme. Those who are aware of this factor would select a play based on judges' preferences.

Haikal Fadzil (2008), an experienced Festival participant, wrote of his ever-present dilemma in the selection of plays and scripts considered suitable for the programme. He questioned whether student-participants should select a work based on their ability and skills or based on the expectations of the judges and their preferences. Fadzil pointed out the contrasting relationship between ability and demand practised in MAKUM Theatre, which causes problems for students who lack education and training in theatre. His writing serves as a warning to those in a similar position as himself as a non-theatre student.

In MAKUM Theatre 2014-2015, students' consideration over the judges' and audiences' sensitivity was apparent. Scenes which may be uncomfortable to the viewers were not directly shown on stage. For example, in UUM's *Tukang Tilik*, the immoral man-woman relationship was implied by the male

performers' repeated visits to the female performer's house, never their intimate scenes, although this was briefly shown later in the climax, and in UMP's *Asam*, a scene depicting marital abuse was executed with only the perpetrator (i.e., husband) seen visually on stage and the victim (i.e., wife) hidden behind white screens with only her shadowy outline visible. In this particular scene, it was implied that the husband used a belt to hit his wife repeatedly. This attempt at self-censorship may also be influenced by the performers' own sense of morality and ethics, suggested by their own background and education.

Rules and Regulations, Censorship and Autonomy

As with any competition-formatted or university-controlled programme, there are rules and regulations. Problems arise when these rules and regulations are not followed equally by all. Such was observed within the secretariat and cultural officers. The North Zone management opted for its own assessment scheme, and certain officers either make their own rules or undermine and disregard existing rules. For example, they directly involve themselves in the student productions by assigning themselves the leadership role. When participants are required to adhere to the juries' preferences, the rules of the Festival, and the officers' authority, this can affect their creative tendency and originality.

Past cases have seen the disqualification of a team due to the presumed unsuitability of the work staged subject to the judges' approval. This is in actuality, a form of double censorship as students need to adhere to both MAKUM rules and regulations and the judges'. The student productions navigate through these barriers in many ways. For team UTHM, the debate on Islam versus the performing art (dance) in *Ustaz Zapin* was controlled by having only male dancers even though there were female actors in the assemble. In UMP's *Asam*, a female performer wore a double layer headscarf as she took off one layer of the headscarf to imply that she was no longer a good and dutiful Muslim wife by abandoning the *hijab* without having to show a single strand of hair which would otherwise be considered unlawful and indecent in Islam.

Imbalanced, Non-Standardised Collaborative Effort

It is certainly not easy for a large-scale production to cater to everyone's whim. Dissatisfaction and discontent over management, judging, selection, timeframe, finance, and others are apparent in MAKUM Theatre. This study believes that this has been the result of an imbalanced and non-standardised collaborative effort between the secretariat, universities and cultural officers, officers and students, and in some cases, between the students themselves. In terms of practical action, the balance between the officers' involvement, commitment, and workload is a matter which needs to be addressed.

MAKUM's offer of assistance and resources are further limited and inconsistent across the zones. An example is the availability of workshops for MAKUM Theatre which was only made available at the Middle Zone. The number of seats for the workshop held is also inadequate as universities may only send a small number of representatives to attend the workshop, and these representatives are tasked to further the information to others. Moreover, only the North Zone has at their disposal student committees to assist competing troupes in terms of food and lodging and other necessities.

MAKUM assumes that students coming into the competition would automatically engage in cooperative and collaborative effort, but the reality may be different as observed in MAKUM Theatre 2014-2015. Sennett (2012) discusses the issue of motivation and cooperation in his work, *Together: The rituals, pleasures and politics of cooperation*. As he dissects contemporary society's premise of cooperation, he finds that society is becoming ever more complicated in terms of materials, economy, race, ethnicity, and religion. According to him, individuals tend to avoid those similar to them in a social setting. As the students all come as competitors, it is therefore unsurprising that they would deliberately avoid each other which contrasts with modern politics' supposed emphasis on unity. According to Sennett, cooperation is not a matter of moral attitude towards others and shared ideals, but an embodied craft which is conveyed by social rituals. In contemporary society, traditional rituals which encourage people to bond with others such as face-to-face interaction are waning. MAKUM Theatre faces this threat from its shift as a village-like theatre to the zoning system.

Communication and Transparency

In terms of communication, two emerging themes presented themselves, and they are mutual respect and effectiveness in communication. In the observation and interview, respect in communication is a matter which concerns both officers and students. In certain instances, witnessed in MAKUM Theatre 2014-2015, there is a sense of disrespect in the relationship between fellow officers and between officers and students.

Related to this matter is communication breakdown. There is a disconnect in officer-student communication, as officers fail to communicate and orient the objectives of MAKUM Theatre to student-participants, as well as in some cases, its rules and regulations. Within the order of hierarchy, officials act as intermediaries between the secretariat and students. When this role is not performed properly, it causes communication breakdown which can lead to misunderstanding. Oftentimes, students become the victim to this barrier. Students were also left in the dark and offered little explanation and information on decisions made by the Council.

Further related to this is the matter of transparency, of lack of it, which is a prominent feature in decision making and assessment. This can be seen in the Council's direct and indirect refusal towards information sharing, particularly when the Council offers vague and sometimes contradictory statements that cause further confusion and frustration among students. USM as host in the North Zone is notorious for its disfavour towards openness, keeping its team distanced from others, and keeping the performance recordings private and inaccessible by others. This contradicts that of UMT as the East Coast Zone's main host, in which the university's official made the recordings public via an official YouTube account, as he believes that such experience should be shared and made available for all to enjoy.

The Matter of Finance

A concern for finance is to be expected of a large-scale programme like MAKUM Theatre. Universities and students bear the cost of production and entry into the competition. There is also food, lodging, and travelling expenses to consider. Some universities have at their disposal funding to cover the costs, and others do not. Students in the latter category find themselves having to chip in their own resources for the project and having to work on an extremely tight budget. As such, their costumes, sets and props may not be up to par to others with secure funding, and they are further criticised for this delimitation. It further becomes an issue when they are left in the dark about where the money goes.

MAKUM is costly, and this feature of the programme is a disadvantage for participants. UMS, for instance, finds itself seeking external funding in order to be financially able to participate in MAKUM Theatre. The notion that bigger is better therefore needs to be addressed. A smaller-scale production requiring a smaller budget allocation may be more attractive and feasible for some, thus should be a more prominent and viable option. Snellman et al. (2015) finding serves as warning in which students without financial security are increasingly excluded from participating in extracurricular activities.

Race, Culture and Belief

Another emerging theme in MAKUM Theatre is race, culture and religion, which is further divided into multiculturalism, theatre and Islam, and gender representation. Even though MAKUM promotes itself as a custodian of high culture, this claim is unsubstantiated, especially in consideration of certain individuals' questionable conduct which goes against the expected culture of dignity and honour.

According to Ismail (2018), issues highlighted in Malay theatre performances are highly relevant for youths of the modern society. The plays performed suggest the influence of students' own background and surrounding environment. An examination of the student productions gives a glimpse into their concerns from family issues and social issues to the wider political and economic picture. The troupes' thematic engagement serves as a reflection of Malaysia itself with politics, social norms and relationships, beliefs, culture and the economy among those prevailing.

The Council, participants and audience members are almost exclusively Malay. The highly limited presence of non-Malays can be seen among the student-participants, but not that of the Council and audience members. Although MAKUM heavily emphasises Malay culture, the representation of both Islamic and non-Islamic ideals is present. Albeit limited, a further finding is the presence of the queer in MAKUM which will be discussed together in this section.

Multiculturalism

The agenda of multiculturalism is a contested space in MAKUM Theatre although MAKUM is supposedly 'open and welcoming to all.' The Festival makes less effort, if any, to attract the involvement of other races and cultural constituencies in the programme. It instead practices Malay-centrism which calls for a major overhaul if the Council wishes to adhere to the national interest of racial integration. Plays which involve characters aside from the dominant Malays include UiTM's *Titik Belum Selesai*, UMS's *Dewan Persidangan*, UPSI's *Garis-Garis Pelangi*, and UMK's *Lif-E*. Among these, only UPSI and UMK used students of the same race to portray characters of that race, and UiTM and UMS had actors of different races as a Chinese and Indian. Akin to whitewashing in casting, this point is also debatable. For MAKUM productions, this move is justified by the non-availability of non-Malay students, hence to cast Malays in non-Malay roles. UMS includes a minor Chinese character who was a chicken breeder played by a non-Chinese, and there was an Indian actor in the minor role as student in UPSI's production. In UMK's team, an Indian female acted as a voiceover. None had any non-Malay as a major character.

The work selections in MAKUM Theatre highly favour Malay writers. Its emphasis on Malay literature and Malay language maintains MAKUM Theatre's adherence to the NCP. Resolving Malay and non-Malay's conflict in literature and performing arts within the national culture and art policy can therefore be a further objective. In the 2011 Cycle, UM's adaptation of *Irama dan Lagu* which was based on the work of Abi Morgan, was heavily criticised by a female judge for lacking elements of Malay culture and tradition. The same judge also proposed the use of an upturned *tepak sireh* to symbolise the couple's relationship becoming distant, therefore suggesting the need to easternise a western work in which suitability is questionable.

MAKUM's way of fostering racial unity among the campus community is by creating a healthy competitive spirit. This view is somewhat ironic and paradoxical, as competing does not necessarily unite people, particularly when they compete against each other and not against a foreign element. Rather than working via collaboration and cooperation, this statement describes the conflicting relationship of the different races in Malaysia. It remains to be seen how racial unity can be achieved when there is a dominance of one race over the rest, and that Malay assimilation is present as members of other races are required to follow the dominant culture instead of showcasing their many individual cultures. Even among members of the same race, unity is still questionable. For instance, Malay Muslims vary in their understanding and practice of Islam, some being more moderate and others strict in their belief.

On Language

A related subtheme is language, as MAKUM Theatre only allows scripts and plays in the standard Malay language and participants are advised to avoid the overuse of local dialects and accents. MAKUM therefore does not acknowledge the reality of languages and of language users in Malaysia, although Nanney (2012) and Yousof (2004) posit that Malaysian theatre is fostered in a variety of languages which include Malay as the national language, English, Mandarin, Tamil, and other spoken languages in the country. Table 1 presents an overview or a summary of the analysis for the selected productions.

Table 1: Analysis of selected productions

University	Production	Theme	Setting	Highlight	Others
UiTM	<i>Titik Belum Selesai</i>	Nationhood, colonialism	Colonial rule	Gender anomaly, representation; the female Muslim as a Chinese	Live band
UUM	<i>Tukang Tilik</i>	Mystical/Spiritual deviation	Single parent life	Gender representation; morality, religiosity	Dance (chorus)
UMS	<i>Dewan Persidangan</i>	Power abuse, corruption	Judiciary system	Political satire	Social media; Facebook and Instagram

UPSI	<i>Garis-garis Pelangi</i>	Youths' coming-of-age	Adolescent to career world transition	Character development; gender representation	Dancing, singing, and technical assistance
UMP	<i>Asam</i>	Marital discontent, economic status	Village-like (smaller-scale)	Simplicity and subtlety of technical ability	-
USZA	<i>Gadis dan Serigala-serigala</i>	Man falling into temptation	(A whole) village	Gender representation; West-East influence	-
UTeM	<i>Say-Well</i>	Unhealthy psychological obsession	Mental health facility	Commitment to characterisation	-
UTHM	<i>Ustaz Zapin</i>	Arts (dance) versus Islam	(A whole) village	Acting/dancing and technical ability	-
UMK	<i>Lif-E</i>	Economic status (lower-middle class), economic disparity	Low-cost housing flat	Use of recyclable materials for set and props	-
UM	<i>Kawad</i>	Familial relations	Military family	Emotionally-engaging scene (non-visible character)	-

The Need for MAKUM Theatre and Further Assistive Need

Latiff (2006) asserts that theatre programmes indirectly exemplify the level of thinking and intellectual achievement of a university and its community. Hence, it is wise for universities and their cultural officers to continue to motivate and maintain their support toward students' involvement in the programme. A similar concern was expressed in Utusan (2008), a locally circulated newspaper publishing company. According to the writer, merely crowning the winner of the Festival does not benefit theatre in academia and the nation as a whole. It is the writer's view that there should be a continuation in the troupes' productions after the completion of the event.

Cowart (2013) studied the perception of former students on the impact of theatre on their psychological needs and life skills. The results were positive as participants experienced beneficial psychological outcomes such as cognitive abilities, confidence, accomplishment, and sense of belonging, and reported gaining life skills such as social skills, hard work, career training, and perseverance. Pitfield (2012) studied the development and changes experienced by drama student-teachers' from initially passion-motivated to pedagogically-affected. There was a significant interplay between prior and on-course experience in shaping the positions of the participants, suggesting the complexity of the situation.

Students in the study have shared their limited experience with live theatre. MAKUM Theatre fills this gap by providing them with the experience. Both theatre and non-theatre students are keen on MAKUM Theatre. The programme is of value as a space to explore and develop skills and knowledge, as a space to apply those theoretical knowledge and practical skills, as another form of experience, as career enhancement for students, as a start or enrichment in the appreciation towards theatre and other disciplines, and many others.

MAKUM Theatre is therefore a reward on its own. Many went home empty handed but still expressed interest in re-joining the programme. Even though the students may complain over funding, they were nevertheless willing to invest in the programme financially aside from spending time and energy for the production. They felt rewarded simply by joining the event. The prizes and awards are purportedly just a bonus. Preston (2013) reflects on Hochschild's concept of emotional labour to investigate the emotion work undertaken by artists facilitating participatory arts to understand their resilience of the practitioner.

Among others, they feel a strong personal commitment and moral purpose. A similar account was shared by UMSAD1 who expressed her sense of responsibility to continue teaching students in theatre.

There is a need for MAKUM and MAKUM Theatre, as the Council is the initiator of the programme without which MAKUM Theatre would not be possible. As suggested, there is a need for assistance among officials and students in MAKUM Theatre. This ranges from management to the requirement for facilities and resources. For the secretariat, MAKUM Theatre is very much encouraged and welcomed but is conditional. The Council and juries have expressed the need for student preparedness, observance of the rules, and others of concern. As the responsibility is simply too large for the Council to carry alone, the task is left to the effort of individual universities.

The MAKUM Council calls upon public universities in Malaysia to organise their own versions of smaller-scale theatre productions, activities, events and programmes instead of solely depending on MAKUM Theatre. UTHM arranged its own version of FESStKUM in 2019, the only indication of an alternative for MAKUM Theatre. A short theatre competition was held on 4th October 2019 in Tunku Mahkota Ismail Hall, UTHM, in which prizes include best script, best technique, best actor, best director, and top three best performances (UTHM, 2019). The competition was won by team UM with *Rumputnya Lebih Hijau* [The Grass is Greener], UMK as first runner-up, and UTHM as second-runner up. UTHM's initiative is an example to help sustain the presence of the event and theatre in public universities.

However, certain universities are still shy of the programme, a concern which has been expressed by Latiff (2006) who used to serve as an academic in the field of theatre education and as head judge in the 2006 Cycle. Furthermore, retaining membership should also be one of the agendas in MAKUM Theatre as universities have opted out of the programme as seen in the current cycle. The programme's survival and sustainability should not depend on the basis of new intake students as a new cycle or season begins but the commitment of its alumni as well.

The students' influence in decision-making should be expanded as part of the main stakeholder in MAKUM Theatre. They should therefore have ownership over the programme. The typical demography of the MAKUM programme is marked by students and cultural officers. Largely missing from the scene is the presence of the academic population, and this separation can be a damaging factor. Inputs and feedback obtained from diverse parties may assist in the development of the project that is carried out as well as in the identification of issues and probable solutions to the problems based on different perspectives. This may further increase the sense of MAKUM as a serious contribution to academia.

Conclusion

The findings have revealed various aspects of MAKUM Theatre which should be highlighted as influencing factors to the success as well as failure of MAKUM Theatre. It is apparent that MAKUM Theatre requires a more sustainable approach to its continued existence and popularity. The lack of further concentrated effort for its survival suggests a marginalised importance on theatre as part of young adults' university experience and engagement. The grand scheme of MAKUM Theatre Festival 2014-2015 fell short to reinvigorate itself and regrettably marked its very end. Future efforts of a more or less similar programme for theatre in academia may do well to be wary of the identified factors.

The continued absence of MAKUM Theatre is definitely a loss for its most avid supporters – the students. An effort like MAKUM Theatre, albeit its many challenges and issues, paints a promising picture which is evident by the high number of university participation and student involvement. Nevertheless, this promising market is threatened by issues in terms of management, regulations, and others as identified in the discussion. The current state of MAKUM Theatre offers a chance for it to re-establish its presence, sense of purpose and influence, rebranding itself as a significant contributor towards theatre in the university.

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Notes

¹ See Appendix Jiv: Mission and Objectives of MAKUM Theatre Festival.

Appendix A

Missions and Visions of MAKUM

The missions of MAKUM are:

- To expand arts and culture through research, training, festivals, competitions, seminars, cultural tours, and support in providing inclusive facilities in the interest of arts and cultural activities among students in public higher academic institutions.
- To plan, coordinate, and implement arts and culture activities for students in public higher academic institutions.
- To offer advice and provide guidance for associations, clubs, or other cultural and arts bodies in public higher academic institutions.
- To encourage the participation and involvement of students from various races in cultural and arts activities in public higher academic institutions, which will directly create national integration.
- To establish a cooperative network in the area of arts and culture with agencies related to culture and arts.
- To acknowledge and appreciate students who are consistent and committed in involving themselves in arts and culture activities.
- To act as a stimulant for students to continue their involvement in arts and culture when they join the general public in the future.
- To create closer and more effective ties between the students and the public higher academic institutions.
- To boost the morale and competitive spirit among students so that they become more active in each arts and culture program in- and outside the campus.
- To foster racial unity among the campus community by creating a healthy competitive spirit.
- As part of the effort to popularise arts and culture in public higher academic institutions.

The visions of MAKUM are:

- To build students with admirable traits, creative thinking ability, and capable of a range of skills.
- To build students who have a high sense of national identity.
- To build students who will continuously love, defend, and lift the uniqueness and beauty of the nation's cultural heritage to the global stage/level.

Source: https://www.facebook.com/pg/sekretariatmakum/about/?ref=page_internal