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[untitled]

Sandra Sodhy

Panel: Why I Write What I Write and How I Write It

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Sandra Sodhy (Malaysia)

Introduction

I am an actor, first and foremost, and it is through my involvement in acting that I became a producer, publicist and writer. I am a trained economist and used to teach in the university in Kuala Lumpur. I also taught in and then ran a government-sponsored Intensive English Program for scholarship students who were going abroad to further their studies in the UK, the US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand.

After that, I joined a corporate training company and conducted management training for companies in Jakarta, Bangkok, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur—effective presentations, effective business and technical writing, and effective listening. I also began to teach communication and public speaking courses in American Associate Degree programs in Kuala Lumpur. This was about the time when I also began to get involved in the Instant Café Theatre Company, Malaysia's foremost political satire group. I ended up traveling not only because of training commitments but also show commitments. Life proved too schizophrenic and I had to choose which career I wanted. I chose theatre, and, till today, have no regrets!

This presentation can be divided into three parts, namely:—

- I. What I write
- II. Why I write it
- III. How I write it

I. What I write

I write primarily for performance. The piece could be for:—

- i) Stage: as in scripts for plays and musicals, songs and sketches for the Instant Café Theatre Company, scripts for product launches and to commemorate corporate celebrations.
- ii) TV: as in scripts for sitcoms, documentaries for corporate clients such as the National Library, talk shows, home improvement-type DIY shows, holiday variety programs, and even storylines for soaps and sitcoms.
- iii) Advertisements: as in scripts for TV, radio and film. Also product booklets for marketing, etc.

II. Why I write it

People write for a variety of reasons—for fame and fortune, for altruistic purposes or even just because they can! However, anything written by me would be better identified by two main characteristics. First, I must want to write it and second, it must be crucial that it gets written! And we must not forget economic considerations i.e. lucre/money/moolah... Yes,

money is necessary, but I must admit that if I wanted real money, I would have stayed in the corporate world!

I am always trying to push back the boundaries of my world. I believe it is never too late to try something for the first time, no matter how old you are.... and if you never try, you will never know whether you are capable of achieving your goal! Perhaps then, this is why my career is so chequered with so many different and diametrically opposed experiences, but I believe that my life and my work are far richer having experienced them.

III. How I write it

I believe in cutting my coat to suit the cloth—boundaries help make us creative in finding ways to surmount them. If we had unlimited resources, creativity would be killed because there would be no limiting parameters that we have to transcend. A well-known Malaysian architect who worked for the Sultan of Brunei once rued his impossible situation thus—he said that when money was no object, he had no idea what to design for his majesty’s delectation—without a limitation on costs and materials, he found it impossible to create anything of note!

The situation in Malaysia is not perfect—there are laws controlling what can or cannot be written about and the Internal Security Act and the Official Secrets Act make sure that people toe the line. Malaysia is well-known for its strict censorship laws—and as surely as there is a law against doing something, there will be a way around it! Take this piece for the Instant Café Theatre Company. It was written when there were too many helicopter crashes and there was talk that some of the top brass had been guilty of corruptly siphoning off money meant to pay for repairs.

(Sung to the tune of *Close To You*)

Why do choppers fall down from the sky
Every time they fly by
Maybe the guys in the scam don’t give a damn
‘Bout me and you....

On the day that they were bought, the generals got together
And decided to cream off a buck or two
So they went to Lego, bought some parts
Fixed the Nuris with Blue Tack and glue

That is why all the brass in town (brass in town)
Feel much safer on the ground
Just like me, they long to be
In one piece, not two.
Waaaaaaaaaah stuck with glue
Waaaaaaaaaah that’s why they blew
Waaaaaaaaaah, I’m tellin’ you!

Another example would be *Jalan Impian*, or *Street of Dreams*. *Jalan Impian* was designed as a platform for teens who were interested in musical theatre, so that they could work with professionals both on and off stage. My partner and Executive Producer, Farah Sulaiman, shared my belief that kids, if given the opportunity and a little guidance, could be capable of fantastic things. We decided to run it as a professional show from the word “go.” We called for auditions in August last year through the local English media and we had about 350 kids turn up for the tryouts. They had to fill up forms and wait their turn, just as adults do. We had originally wanted twenty kids, but they were so good at the initial auditions that before we were through, Farah and I had agreed to take in fifty kids, so I had to rewrite the script! We had callbacks by late November and, from ninety hopefuls, we cut them down to fifty. However, as we required them to keep up with their schoolwork, and to attend rehearsals consistently, only forty-four made it onto the stage. I also managed to beg/cajole/bully six well-known Malaysian performers to appear with the kids on stage, but now with the kids as the stars and the performers as the supporting act!

Jalan Impian had the following objectives:—

1. Raise funds for a registered home for special children—Persatuan Kanak-Kanak Istimewa Hulu Langat, Selangor—that runs on private funds.
2. Promote the use of English—as most of the kids only spoke English as a second language.
3. Develop the children’s creative talent and a love for the arts.
4. Develop more confident, well-rounded individuals by developing the whole person.
5. Promote this idea:
Don’t give up but believe in yourself, hold on to your dreams and reach for the stars!

Here are excerpts from the DVD recording of the actual show.

Thank you!