

In the Threshold of Darkness: Visualizing Power, Identity, and Ambiguity in Datuk H (2026)

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500579>

Received: 12 May 2026; Accepted: 18 May 2026; Published: 08 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This practice-based research examines the application of Film Noir visual aesthetics in the stage performance of *Datuk H* (2026), focusing on costumes and lighting as primary dramaturgical tools. The study explores how noir principles such as Chiaroscuro lighting, visual fragmentation, and symbolic costuming that can be translate from cinematic language into theatrical form to construct meanings of power, identity, and ambiguity. Framed as a “threshold of darkness,” the performance investigates how visual design functions beyond scenography, using instead as an active system of storytelling. Through controlled use of low-key lighting, shadow layering, and monochromatic costume design, the stage becomes a sifting visual field where presence and absence coexist, reflecting instability in authority and character perception. The research is grounded in practice-led methodology, combining performance experimentation, design exploration, and reflective analysis. Theoretical engagement with Existentialism further supports the interpretation of identity as fluid and constructed under conditions of power and psychological tension. Findings suggest that noir-inspired visual dramaturgy enhances the audience’s interpretive engagement by foregrounding ambiguity as an aesthetic and conceptual strategy. Costume and lighting are revealed not as decorative elements, but as critical devices that externalize internal conflict and destabilize fixed readings of character and narrative. This research contributes to contemporary performance studies by showing how noir visual language can be re-contextualized within Southeast Asian theatre practice, offering new possibilities for embodied storytelling through light, shadow, and material presence.

Keywords: Noir Aesthetic; Visual Dramaturgy; Lighting Design; Costume Design; Theatre Performance, *Datuk H* (2026)

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between cinema and theatre has long shaped contemporary performance aesthetics, particularly in the translation of visual language from screen to stage. Among the many cinematic traditions that have influenced theatrical production, Noir Film stays one of the most visually distinctive and psychologically complex. Characterized by high-contrast lighting, fragmented compositions, moral ambiguity, and existential anxiety, noir appeared in the 1940s as a cinematic response to post-war disillusionment and urban alienation. While originally associated with film, noir aesthetics have increasingly transcended cinematic boundaries and entered contemporary theatre, dance, and multimedia performance.

This research examines how noir visual aesthetics can be adapted into live performance through the production of *Datuk H* (2026). Rather than merely reproducing cinematic style, the study investigates how noir functions dramaturgically within theatre. In this context, costume and lighting both treated as decorative or supportive design elements, but as active narrative systems that shape meaning, perceptions, and emotional atmosphere. Through the integration of chiaroscuro lighting, monochromatic visual palettes, and fragmented costume symbolism, the production constructs a theatrical environment that destabilizes identity and questions the legitimacy of power.

Theatre, unlike cinema, relies on the immediacy of embodied presence and spatial continuity. Consequently, the adaptation of noir aesthetics into stage performance requires significant transformation. Cinematic noir depends on camera framing, editing, and close-up imagery to construct psychological tension. Theatre, however, must

generate similar effects through live visual composition, scenographic arrangement, actor positioning, and controlled illumination. This shift from screen language to performative space forms the central concern of the present research.

The performance of *Datuk H* (2026) explores themes of authority, psychological conflict, and fragmented identity. The play *Datuk H* (2026) is an interpretation of the children's song "Pukul Berapa Datuk Harimau" which is popular among children in Malaysia. The playwright that interpreted from a children's song, has a Noir Film concept where the "black and white" element is taken as the main concept for the visual style for the performance. The character of *Datuk H* occupies an unstable moral position, simultaneously embodying charisma, dominance, vulnerability, and paranoia. Such ambiguity aligns closely with the philosophical concerns of Existentialism, particularly the notion that identity is neither fixed nor stable but continuously constructed through choices, actions, and social perception. Existentialist thinkers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus emphasize the tension between freedom, responsibility, and alienation, themes which resonate strongly within noir narratives.

In this study, Existentialism functions as both conceptual framework and dramaturgical lens. The visual fragmentation created through shadows, costume contrasts, and partial illumination reflects the fractured consciousness of the characters. Darkness becomes more than an aesthetic feature; it works as a metaphor for uncertainty, moral instability, and existential anxiety. Through these visual strategies, the performance invites audiences to interpret identity as unstable and constantly shifting.

Within Southeast Asian theatre contexts, the incorporation of noir aesthetics stays under-explored. Much scholarly discussion surrounding Film Noir continues to focus on Western cinema particularly Hollywood traditions. Consequently, there is limited research examining how noir visual language can be re-contextualized within local performance cultures and theatrical practices. This research addresses that gap by positioning *Datuk H* (2026) as a contemporary Southeast Asian theatrical experiment that merges cinematic visuality with live dramaturgical embodiment. The study therefore looks to answer the following research questions:

1. How can Noir Film visual aesthetics be translated into theatrical performance through costume and lighting design in *Datuk H* (2026)?
2. In what ways do lighting and costume function as dramaturgical devices in constructing meanings of power, identity, and ambiguity?
3. How does noir-inspired visual dramaturgy influence audience interpretation and emotional engagement?

By investigating these questions, the research contributes to broader discussions on interdisciplinary performance design, visual dramaturgy, and the adaptation of cinematic aesthetics into contemporary theatre practice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Film Noir and Visual Aesthetics

Noir Film is commonly understood not as a strict genre but as a visual and thematic mode characterized by darkness, pessimism, ambiguity, and psychological tension. Scholars such as Naremore (1998) argue that noir exists as a cultural discourse rather than a fixed cinematic category, while Schrader (1972) finds noir through its visual atmosphere and emotional sensibility. Noir aesthetics often employ low-key lighting, oblique angles, reflective surfaces, urban isolation, and fragmented spatial compositions.

One of the most significant visual characteristics of noir is chiaroscuro lighting, a technique inherited from German Expressionism. Through strong contrasts between light and shadow, noir visuality externalizes psychological instability and moral uncertainty. Shadows frequently obscure faces, fragment bodies, or divide physical space, symbolizing fractured identity and hidden intention. In cinema, such techniques are intensified through camera movement and editing. In theatre, however, these effects must be reconstructed spatially through live scenographic composition.

Noir also foregrounds ambiguity as a narrative strategy. Characters often exist within unstable ethical frameworks, where heroes and villains become difficult to distinguish. This uncertainty extends into visual representation. Costumes, silhouettes, and lighting conditions often conceal rather than reveal identity. Such visual ambiguity becomes essential in constructing noir's emotional atmosphere.

Visual Dramaturgy in Theatre

Visual dramaturgy refers to the process through which visual elements generate narrative, emotional, and conceptual meaning within performance. Rather than functioning merely as aesthetic decoration, visual components become active agents in shaping audience interpretation. According to Aronson (2005), scenography constructs relationships between space, body, and perception, while McKinney and Butterworth (2009) emphasize the importance of visual composition in creating theatrical meaning.

In contemporary theatre, lighting and costume increasingly work as performative texts. Lighting can direct focus, show psychological atmosphere, fragment spatial continuity, and manipulate emotional rhythm. Similarly, costume design communicates status, identity, temporality, and ideological positioning. When integrated dramaturgically, these elements take part directly in storytelling.

Visual dramaturgy is especially significant within non-naturalistic performance traditions. Unlike realism, which often prioritizes narrative clarity and representational consistency, visual dramaturgy embraces abstraction, symbolism, and sensory interpretation. Noir aesthetics align closely with such theatrical approaches because they prioritize mood, fragmentation, and psychological tension over objective realism.

Costume and Make-up as Psychological and Symbolic Representation

Costume and make-up design functions not only as an indicator of character identity but also as a material extension of psychological condition. Historically, costume has communicated social hierarchy, profession, gender, and ideology. While make-up, is to be enhancing, altering, or exaggerating facial features, makeup ensures an audience can clearly see expressions and emotions from the very back row. In contemporary performance, however, costume and make-up often use symbolically, reflecting internal conflict and emotional transformation. It also transforms an actor into a specific character, defines the historical time-period, and compensates for bright stage lights.

Within noir traditions, costume often reinforces ambiguity and concealment. Monochromatic palettes, dark tailoring, hats, trench coats, and silhouetted forms create visual anonymity. These garments construct characters who appear both powerful and inaccessible. In theatrical adaptation, costume can similarly destabilize identity by limiting visual transparency and emphasizing shadow interaction. Make-up also plays a very important role in the character development of the characters in *Datuk H* (2026). Each character has a different make-up structure and experiences difficulties. This is because the use of grayscale colors which is black, white, and grey, are extremely limited in forming the facial structure of each character. According to Tyas Asih Surya Mentari (2023), the competence of black and white and color photo make-up is the most difficult material to understand because the material is dense where everyone cannot figure out the theme and design of black and color photo make-up. To create make-up like in a Noir film is challenging by determining and making these 3 colors combine well in terms of their use.

The production of *Datuk H* (2026) employs costume minimalism and monochromatic contrast to construct unstable character identities. Rather than presenting psychologically coherent individuals, the costumes create fragmented visual impressions that shift under changing lighting conditions. Black fabrics absorb illumination, while selective reflective textures expose partial surfaces of the body, creating fluctuating perceptions of authority and vulnerability.

Lighting Design and Psychological Space

Lighting design plays a central role in constructing theatrical atmosphere and spatial perception. Beyond visibility, lighting shapes emotional tone, directs audience attention, and transforms scenographic space. In noir-inspired performance, lighting becomes particularly significant because darkness itself functions

dramaturgically. Low-key lighting techniques generate partial visibility and spatial fragmentation. Characters appear and disappear within shadowed environments, producing uncertainty regarding physical presence and emotional intention. Such visual instability aligns closely with existential themes of alienation and identity fragmentation.

The use of side lighting, backlighting, and shadow layering within *Datuk H* (2026) creates liminal visual zones where bodies appear suspended between exposure and concealment. This aesthetic strategy destabilizes the audience's ability to fully interpret character motivations, reinforcing ambiguity as both thematic and visual principle.

Existentialism and Identity Construction

Existentialist philosophy provides an important conceptual framework for understanding noir narratives and aesthetics. Thinkers such as Sartre, Camus, and Kierkegaard emphasize themes of alienation, freedom, absurdity, and identity instability. According to Sartre (1956), existence precedes essence, meaning that identity is continuously constructed rather than predetermined. Noir protagonists often embody existential anxiety. They navigate morally unstable worlds where truth becomes uncertain and ethical clarity collapses. Their identities are fragmented by guilt, desire, fear, and social expectation. Visually, noir aesthetics externalise these tensions through darkness, fragmentation, and obscured imagery.

In *Datuk H* (2026), existentialism informs both character development and visual dramaturgy. The protagonist's unstable relationship with authority mirrors existential concerns about authenticity and self-definition. Costume and lighting become external manifestations of internal psychological fragmentation. Shadows symbolise not only concealment but also the impossibility of stable identity.

METHODOLOGY

Practice-Based Research Approach

This research adopts a practice-based methodology in which creative production functions as both artistic process and primary mode of inquiry. Practice-based research positions artistic experimentation as a form of knowledge generation, allowing creative practice to produce theoretical insight through embodied exploration. Rather than separating theory from practice, the methodology integrates both within an interactive process of experimentation, reflection, and analysis.

The production of *Datuk H* (2026), served as the central research through which noir aesthetic were investigated dramaturgically. Costume and lighting were treated not as supplementary design components but as experimental variables that shaped audience interpretation and performative meaning. The research process consisted of four interconnected phases:

1. Conceptual development and theoretical framing.
2. Rehearsal experimentation.
3. Performance implementation.
4. Reflective evaluation and documentation.

Rehearsal Experimentation

Rehearsal sessions functioned as exploratory spaces for testing visual relationships between body, costume, light, and spatial composition. Multiple lighting configurations were experimented with including side-lighting, top-lighting, silhouette projection, and shadow layering. The research investigated how variations in illumination affected audience focus, emotional atmosphere, and character perception.

Similarly, costume experimentation explored texture, silhouette, color absorption, and material interaction with light. Monochromatic palettes were selected to reinforce noir visual identity while enabling dynamic interaction with shadow. Costume fittings were documented photographically to analyze how fabrics transformed under varying lighting intensities.

Improvisational exercises were also conducted to see how actors responded physically within fragmented visual environments. These exercises revealed that restricted visibility altered performer movement patterns, pacing, and spatial awareness, contributing to heightened psychological tension.

Data Collection

Data collection combined visual documentation, rehearsal observation, and reflective journaling. Rehearsal sessions were recorded through photography and video documentation to capture the evolution of visual composition. These materials enabled comparative analysis between experimental stages.

Reflective journal supported by the director-designer documented conceptual decisions, technical adjustments, and emergent thematic observations. This reflexive documentation allowed the research to trace the relationship between theoretical intention and practical outcome.

Analytical Framework

The analysis employed a qualitative interpretive framework grounded in visual dramaturgy and existential philosophy. Rather than measuring quantitative audience responses, the study focused on interpretive patterns and symbolic associations generated through visual design. The analytical process examined:

1. The relationship between lighting composition and psychological atmosphere.
2. The interaction between costume design and identity construction.
3. The role of shadows and partial visibility in generating ambiguity.
4. The interpretation of Malaysian children's song to visual symbolism and emotional tension.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Translating Noir Aesthetic into Theatrical Space

One of the primary challenges within the production of *Datuk H* (2026) involved translating the visual language of Film Noir into a theatrical form rooted in Malaysian cultural references. The performance was developed as an interpretative reimagining of the Malaysian children's song "Pukul Berapa Datuk Harimau" transforming a familiar folkloric structure into a psychologically charged noir-inspired performance. Unlike cinema, theatre cannot depend upon close-up shots, montage editing, or camera framing to manipulate audience focus and perception. Consequently, the production employed alternative scenographic strategies through spatial fragmentation, selective illumination, bodily composition, and controlled visual minimalism.

The visual environment of *Datuk H* (2026) embraced a monochromatic aesthetic influenced by noir sensibilities. Costume design adopted an English-inspired formal style consisting of coats, vests, ties, and tailored silhouettes, evoking structures of authority, class hierarchy, and concealed identity. This was further reinforced through grayscale make-up treatment, which reduced facial naturalism and transformed the performers into stylized figures suspended between realism and abstraction. The absence of vibrant color across costume, make-up, and scenography contributed to a visually desaturated stage world associated with noir psychological tension.

Lighting design intentionally rejected saturated theatrical colors, relying exclusively on amber color of Fresnel illumination to construct shadow density and atmospheric depth. Darkness functioned not merely as the absence of light, but as an active dramaturgical material that fragmented the performance space into unstable visual zones. Characters often appeared from and disappeared into obscurity, creating fluctuating states of visibility that destabilized audience perception. The asymmetrical distribution of light prevented complete visual access to the performers, obscuring facial expression and complicating moral interpretation.

This instability was further intensified through the performance's hybrid linguistic structure, which combined Bahasa Melayu and English dialogue. The coexistence of both languages reinforced the fragmented identity of the performance itself, situated between local cultural memory and Western noir visuality. Through this interplay of language, costume, lighting, and spatial concealment, *Datuk H* (2026) reconstructed the innocence of a children's song into a theatrical meditation on authority, ambiguity, and psychological unease.

Costume and Make-up as Visual Fragmentation

Costume design within *Datuk H* (2026) functioned as a dramaturgical extension of psychological fragmentation. The monochromatic palette reduced visual realism while intensifying symbolic abstraction. Black and grey tones dominated the stage image, creating continuity between body and shadow. The protagonist's costume evolved subtly throughout the performance. Initially structured and controlled, the silhouette gradually became visually disordered through loosened layers, distorted textures, and asymmetrical presentation. This transformation reflected the character's psychological deterioration and unstable sense of identity. Importantly, costume interacted dynamically with lighting conditions. Certain fabrics absorbed light completely, making sections of the body visually absent. Other materials reflected selective illumination, creating fragmented bodily visibility. These effects generated ambiguity on physical presence and emotional transparency. Costume therefore became more than representational attire. It functioned as an unstable visual surface through which identity was continuously reconstructed. Audiences were encouraged to interpret characters through shifting visual impressions rather than fixed symbolic codes.

Picture 1. Costume Monochromatic Palette.



The make-up design in *Datuk H* (2026) further extended this dramaturgical fragmentation by functioning as a visual mechanism of abstraction rather than cosmetic enhancement. Inspired by the desaturated visual atmosphere of Film Noir, the production used grayscale make-up to eliminate naturalistic skin tones and reduce facial individuality. Shades of black, grey, and pale white were strategically applied to contour the face, intensify shadow structures, and exaggerate facial depth under amber Fresnel illumination. This monochromatic treatment transformed the performers into liminal figures suspended between realism and theatrical stylization.

Rather than emphasizing emotional clarity, the make-up obscured psychological readability. Facial features were partially flattened or sharply contrasted depending on the angle and intensity of lighting, producing unstable expressions that continuously shifted throughout the performance. Under selective illumination, portions of the face often disappeared into darkness while other areas appeared with heightened definition. This interaction between make-up and lighting destabilized the audience's ability to show fixed emotional interpretations, reinforcing themes of ambiguity, concealment, and fractured identity.

The grayscale aesthetic also created visual continuity between the body, costume, and surrounding shadow, allowing performers to merge with the scenographic environment. In several scenes, the make-up caused facial surfaces to appear mask-like, suggesting emotional repression and performative identity construction. This visual strategy aligned with the noir-inspired dramaturgy of *Datuk H* (202), where characters were not presented as psychologically transparent subjects, but as fragmented figures negotiating unstable structures of authority and selfhood.

Furthermore, the stylized make-up design contrasted significantly with the performance's origin as an interpretation of the Malaysian children's song "Pukul Berapa Datuk Harimau." The transformation of a culturally familiar and playful source material into an unsettling grayscale visual landscape generated a sense of estrangement within the audience experience. Through this aesthetic dislocation, make-up used not merely as visual decoration, but as a critical dramaturgical device that mediated psychological tension, symbolic abstraction, and the collapse of innocence within the performance world of *Datuk H* (2026).

Picture 3. Idea board for Film Noir Concept of Make-up



Picture 4. Make-up for all characters in *Datuk H* (2026)



Lighting and Psychological Tension

Lighting design appeared as the central dramaturgical mechanism within the production. Noir-inspired low-key illumination generated a heightened sense of psychological claustrophobia and existential anxiety. Rather than providing consistent visibility, lighting continuously manipulated perception. Side-lighting was used extensively to distort bodily contours and produce elongated shadows. These shadows often extended beyond the physical body, symbolizing the psychological burden carried by the characters. Backlighting created silhouetted figures that appeared anonymous and emotionally inaccessible.

Picture 2. Noir-inspired low-key lighting



One particularly significant visual strategy involved the layering of shadows across multiple performers. During scenes of confrontation, overlapping shadows merged different bodies into unstable visual compositions, suggesting the collapse of individual identity within systems of power and corruption. Moments of darkness also functioned rhythmically. Sudden transitions between illumination and blackout disrupted temporal continuity, producing emotional disorientation. The audience experienced uncertainty not only narratively but spatially and visually.

This manipulation of visibility aligns closely with existentialist themes. Characters in *Datuk H* (2026) are never entirely knowable, either to themselves or to others. Lighting therefore externalizes philosophical uncertainty through visual form.

Ambiguity as Dramaturgical Strategy

Ambiguity functions as one of the defining characteristics of noir aesthetics and appeared as the central dramaturgical principle within the production. Rather than clarifying narrative meaning, the visual design intentionally destabilized interpretation. Audiences often reported uncertainty on the moral positioning of characters. This uncertainty was intensified through fluctuating visibility and fragmented costume imagery. The protagonist, for example, alternated between appearing authoritative and vulnerable depending on lighting angle and spatial placement. According to Ralph Riccio (2025), the allure of noir narratives lies in them to tap into our deepest psychological fears and desires. Film noir often delves into the psychological motivations behind criminal behavior, exploring the inner lives of its morally compromised characters.

Such instability encouraged active audience interpretation. Rather than passively receiving narrative information, spectators had to negotiate incomplete visual knowledge. The performance therefore transformed ambiguity into a participatory interpretive process. From a dramaturgical perspective, ambiguity also resisted binary oppositions between hero and villain, truth and deception, or authority and collapse. This resistance reflects broader existential concerns about the instability of identity and the impossibility of absolute certainty.

Existentialism and the Fragmented Self

Existentialist philosophy significantly informed the conceptual structure of *Datuk H* (2026). The protagonist exists within a condition of psychological fragmentation shaped by fear, authority, and alienation. Rather than presenting identity as coherent and unified, the performance emphasizes instability and contradiction. Visual dramaturgy became the primary mechanism for expressing this existential fragmentation. Shadows symbolized hidden consciousness and internal conflict, while monochromatic colors tone costume visibility suggested the incompleteness environment.

The performance also explored the tension between external authority and internal vulnerability. Although the character of Datuk Harrison as the main character in the performance shows the powerful characteristic through posture, costume silhouette, and spatial dominance. But, with the lighting continuously without colors undermines this authority of the character by exposing partial weakness and uncertainty follow into scene by scene.

This contradiction reflects Sartre notions of bad faith, in which individuals attempt to stabilize identity through social performance despite underlying existential instability. The visual language of noir enabled these philosophical tensions to become materially embodied within theatrical space.

FINDING

The findings of this research show that noir visual aesthetics can be effectively translated into theatrical performance through the dramaturgical integration of costume and lighting design. First, the study found that low-key lighting and shadow layering significantly enhanced psychological tension and audience engagement. Audiences responded strongly to partial visibility and visual fragmentation, interpreting darkness as emotionally meaningful rather than merely atmospheric.

Second, costume design functioned as an active narrative system rather than passive visual decoration. The interaction between monochromatic costume palettes and dynamic lighting conditions produced fluctuating perceptions of identity, authority, and vulnerability.

Third, ambiguity appeared as a productive dramaturgical strategy. Rather than creating confusion, visual ambiguity encouraged interpretive participation and heightened emotional investment. Audiences became more attentive to visual detail and symbolic suggestion.

Fourth, the integration of existentialist philosophy strengthened the conceptual coherence of the production. The noir aesthetic successfully externalized themes of alienation, instability, and psychological conflict through visual means.

Finally, the research shows that noir aesthetics can be meaningfully adapted within Southeast Asian theatrical contexts without simply imitating Western cinematic traditions. Through localization and performative reinterpretation, noir visual language becomes a flexible dramaturgical framework capable of generating culturally specific theatrical experiences.

CONCLUSION

This research investigated the application of Film Noir visual aesthetics within the theatrical production *Datuk H* (2026), focusing specifically on costume and lighting as dramaturgical tools. Through a practice-based methodology, the study explored how noir principles such as chiaroscuro lighting, visual fragmentation, and symbolic costuming can be translated from cinematic language into live performance. The findings show that costume and lighting can function as active narrative systems that shape audience perception, psychological atmosphere, and thematic interpretation. Rather than serving decorative purposes, these visual elements externalize internal conflict and destabilize fixed understandings of identity and power.

The study also highlights the significance of ambiguity within contemporary performance practice. By resisting visual certainty and narrative clarity, noir-inspired dramaturgy encourages active audience engagement and interpretive participation. Darkness, fragmentation, and partial visibility become productive theatrical strategies through which emotional and philosophical complexity can be embodied.

Importantly, this research contributes to the growing discourse surrounding interdisciplinary performance aesthetics and Southeast Asian contemporary theatre. The adaptation of noir visual language within *Datuk H* (2026) shows that cinematic aesthetics can be reimagined within local theatrical contexts to produce new forms of embodied storytelling. Future research may further explore the relationship between noir aesthetics and other theatrical elements such as sound design, choreography, digital projection, and immersive scenography.

Comparative studies between cinematic and theatrical noir traditions may also provide deeper insight into the transformation of visual language across artistic mediums. Datuk H (2026) positions noir not merely as a visual style but as a dramaturgical philosophy through which uncertainty, fragmentation, and existential tension can be materially staged.

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