

Review of *The Amok of Mat Solo* (2011)

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Philip, Susan. Review of *The Amok of Mat Solo* by Salleh ben Joned. Kuala Lumpur: Silverfish Books, 2011. ISBN 978-983-3221-32-5. 112 pages.

This is a biting, scornful play that at the same time manages to communicate deep pain, bewilderment, and a quite profound sense of isolation. The title itself – *The Amok of Mat Solo* – underlines this. The protagonist, Dr Muhammad Awang bin Hitam, is known as Mat Solo, the nickname pointing to his essential alone-ness within his society. He runs amok, driven to it by the corruption and cynicism with which he is confronted at every turn. That is, essentially, the plot of this play. Mat Solo is on the edge, unable to find satisfaction or comfort in his job as an academic, or his relationships, or in the kampung life to which he retreats. As the anger, disillusionment and betrayal pile up on him, he is finally pushed over the edge into a stylised bloodbath.

There is nothing comfortable or comforting about this play. One of the things that makes this play difficult is that it is peopled by a cast of characters without redeeming qualities. There are the half-deaf academic Prof Dr Takdir Al-Atas, and academic-turned-businessman-turned-politician Datuk Seri Hj Muhammad Tuah; both men purport to champion Malay rights and culture. Salleh mocks Prof Takdir's "non-language": "Kognitif disonansi memmanifestasikan satu realiti yang merefleksikan tensyion dan konflik" (p. 29). At the same time, on the screen we see the slogan "Bahasa Jiwa Bangsa", an idea directly undercut by the "non-language" which Mat Solo mockingly mimics. Muhammad Tuah, meanwhile, is a fervent spokesperson for the New Economic Policy and Malay rights. As he speaks, slogans are projected on the screen, which undercut his polemic by either casting doubt on his sincerity, or commenting ironically on his words. These two men are, apparently, the leaders of society, looked up to by others; but Salleh paints them as hypocritical and (in the case of Tuah) greedy. This poverty of leadership is reflected in the village-level leadership of Mat Tahu and Mat Lebih, both of whom are eager to criticise Mat Solo.

The women, particularly Mat Solo's current wife and his former lover (a white woman, somewhat absorbed in hippie culture), are also quite appalling. Neither character is given a name – the wife is referred to as 'Mat Solo's Wife', and the lover is the 'White Woman.' This is rather reductive, given that the male characters have quite significant names. The politician, for example, is called 'Tuah', which could mean 'lucky', but could also refer to Hang Tuah; this creates a parallel association between Mat Solo and Hang Jebat (who also ran amok and went on a killing spree, before being ultimately killed by Tuah, who remained blindly loyal to the King). Both of the unnamed women, however, apparently exist only in terms of their relationship with Mat Solo, and both are presented as two-dimensional and shallow, thus representing the shallowness of Solo's society. The Wife is "in pursuit of the ultimate Bumigeois dream" (p. 7), reflected in her negligees, women's magazines, and incessant TV watching. Meanwhile, the White Woman is looking for an exoticised Oriental encounter, and is unhappy that she is instead in a country which appears to be "an obscene parody of the bourgeois West" (p. 42). The only somewhat positive relationship he has is with Rina (a half-Indian, half-Chinese student of his), who eschews both the westernised aesthetic of the Wife, and the studied hippie vibe of the White Woman. She seems more in tune with Mat Solo's thoughts, but is hounded out because of their 'sinful' relationship. Salleh shows his opposition to this response to the relationship by having Mat Lebih articulate it in his ridiculously stereotyped 'bad' English: he says they were "Doing sinpul ting in pasting month" (p. 85). I must admit, however, to finding their love affair quite problematic. I question the ethics of a professor engaging in intimacy with a student, given the inherent power imbalance between the two. While this is not the point Salleh is making, it affects my response as a reader, thus rendering even this somewhat positive interaction questionable.

If we are on Mat Solo's side, it is primarily because it is clear that everyone else is awful. We understand why he despises them – and by extension the society that they so easily inhabit. Salleh does not take the easy route of making Mat Solo likeable to get his audience on side. Solo is stubborn, violent, and self-absorbed. But he is also the only person who seems able to see the problems in his society. Being ultimately unable to get out of this society, he is driven to amok.

Salleh's very sparse set reflects the inevitability of Mat Solo's fate. The stage directions indicate that the set should be minimalist and flexible. Beyond that, there is no indication of what the set pieces (if any) should include. He is, however, very clear about there being "a magnified TV screen (on which will be projected slogans, newspaper headlines, shadows, images, a huge kris and the sun)" (p. 9). The focus on the TV screen and what gets projected on it suggests some influence from Brecht, with Salleh using the slogans and headlines to comment obliquely on the socio-political situation.

The kris, however, is the dramatic and emotional centre of the projections. It must always be there, "blurred in the opening scenes" (p. 9), but getting progressively clearer as the play goes on, and ending up sharply in focus. There is an allusion to that other famous theatrical dagger, which, as Macbeth says, has "on its blade and dudgeon gouts of blood." The growing visual sharpness of the dagger echoes the onslaught of Mat Solo's amok, as he gradually descends from an edgy, unfocused anger to full, murderous madness. But ironically, the madness culminates in a defiant, arrogant clarity, mirroring the clarity of the dagger on the screen. He invites his own death with a taunting thrust of his naked pelvis, refusing – to the very end – to adhere to normative values and social mores.

While the play was published in 2011, it was clearly written much earlier than that. However, the issues of greed, corruption and hypocrisy that Salleh raises remain painfully relevant today. It would be interesting to see a theatre company attempt to stage this play in the 21st century, as it remains challenging in both staging technique and content.