

Salleh's Delightful Cameo

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Back in 1992 I had the chance to play a supporting role in the play *Macbeth* that was directed by Kee Thuan Chye and written by someone named The Brad or The Bard. I pretty much sucked at it, which is why I am no longer an actor but merely a beauty influencer.

Another cast member was Salleh Ben Joned, who had one scene as Lady Macbeth's doctor. I was familiar with his *As I Please* column that was running in the *NST* at that time. So I took the fanboy opportunity to hang out with him during the months-long rehearsals and before the show itself, which was at MATIC for about two weeks.

I remember one incident in particular, when we and the late Johan Abdullah @ John Bagley (of the *Johan's Bag of Marbles* column) were having a meal at the MATIC canteen.

Salleh said, "I'm enjoying this more than I thought I would."

Johan nodded in agreement.

I said, "Yeah the rehearsals are quite fun."

And Salleh said, "But it needs more cili api." Then he called out to the canteen staff, "Dik, ada cili api tak dik? Aku akan matiiii kalau takde cili apiiii!"

So that's when I realised he was talking about the food rather than the process of the play.

Salleh's column was witty and learned; he poked fun at things which needed to be poked fun at; it was life-affirming, taboo-defying, and took pleasure in the word. I always looked forward to it, and even looked through the *NST* archives (this was before the Internet ya, kawan-kawan) to read his occasional early pieces which included movie reviews. There was one about a Rahim Razali flick, where the review took the form of a conversation between three people at the Coliseum Bar — including a drunk who happened to wander into the iconic location. Sometimes, the drunk made the most prescient points.

The incident I want to relate happened during one of those hangout sessions leading up to the staging of *Macbeth*.

He gleefully told me that he had been browsing in a Bangsar bookshop when he bumped into a Malay Intellectual (let's call him MI) who was making a name for himself in the political arena (by being associated with a particular politician lah). And MI had asked what Salleh was up to.

Salleh had told him: "Oh I'll be acting in *Macbeth*."

MI asked what role he was playing.

And Salleh said, "Oh, nothing, just a cameo."

And MI said: "Ohh! Cameo, I like him. Yes, Cameo. Haha."

The reason Salleh recounted this gleefully is that, based on that exchange, MI not only thought that Cameo was the name of a character, but was pretending to be more familiar with *Macbeth* than he actually was.

In the following decades, MI became quite prominent in the think-tank scene. But every time I saw his name in the media, I would think of this anecdote — and smirk.

MI and people like him became quite successful; there were others like him in the fields of journalism, academia, and so on. Salleh, on the other hand, never took centre-stage. In fact, when he passed away it was obvious that many younger readers (except those few interested in poetry) were unfamiliar with him. That's because he did not have much of an output in the past two decades — he would say he embraced the "lazy Malay" stereotype.

But that's OK. People who take the trouble to read his work (the only way to know a writer, anyway) would still find things that are fresh, relatable, insightful and very fun.

So he was never a Sasterawan Negara — in fact, he once had a name-card made with the title Angkasawan Negara, and this was way before the handsome doctor (not the one in *Macbeth* lah) went to space. There are no murals with his face. No faculties, roads or buildings named after him.

But he wouldn't care about any of that! Perhaps his role in the Malaysian literary scene was as a delightful cameo. He may not have taken up much time or space on the stage, but you surely remember him! What more could a writer ask for?