Cheryl Robson and Aubrey Mellor, eds. *Southeast Asian Plays*. Twickenham, UK: Aurora Metro Publications, 2016. 348 pp. ISBN 978-1-906582-86-9.

Southeast Asia can boast of a long and rich history of performance, both classical or traditional, and contemporary. There are threads of commonality among these various traditions – so many traditional performance modes have their roots, for example, in the Ramayana. Even contemporary performances share ties, with collaborative work being done by theatre practitioners across Asia. Often, however, access to these contemporary plays is limited, because of the difficulties inherent in publishing works which are more likely to have a small, niche audience at best. As a Malaysian, I have in the past got access to unpublished playscripts based on my acquaintance with the playwright. But work being done in other parts of Southeast Asia, particularly in countries which do not necessarily have a long tradition of English-language writing (Cambodia, Vietnam, Thailand, for example), has for a long time been somewhat out of my reach. Indeed, I will go further and admit to basic ignorance about who the main theatre practitioners in Southeast Asia are, beyond my fairly limited borders of Malaysia and Singapore.

For this reason, the editors of this anthology are to be congratulated. They have chosen eight plays: two from Singapore, and one each from the Philippines, Thailand, Malaysia, Vietnam, Cambodia and Indonesia. The inclusion of a broader range of countries is useful in opening up borders. It is also commendable that they have not limited themselves to plays written in English: two of the plays ("Frangipani" by Chhon Sina from Cambodia, and "Piknik" by Joned Suryatmoko from Indonesia, are published here in translation). Singapore is represented by "Plunge" (Jean Tay) and "Nadirah" (Alfian Sa'at). The other plays are "An Evening at the Opera" by Floy Quintos (Philippines); "The Night of the Minotaur" by Tew Bunnag (Thailand); "Tarap Man" by Ann Lee (Malaysia); and "Dark Race" by Nguyen Dang Chuong (Vietnam). Another interesting point is that the editors have not necessarily confined themselves to selecting the best-known representatives from each country. While Alfian Sa'at is a very well-known writer and therefore perhaps an unsurprising choice for inclusion, Malaysia's Ann Lee has been chosen despite not being as established as Jit Murad or Huzir Sulaiman. These kinds of editorial choices are significant for opening up spaces to voices which are otherwise heard less often.

Looking at Aubrey Mellor's Introduction, however, some questions do come to mind. I would agree with his assertion that while traditional Asian theatre can be fascinating, it can also seem (to a contemporary audience not educated in its nuances and vocabulary) "very foreign and alienating" (8), and that it is therefore "the contemporary that brings us together" (8). All the issues brought up in these eight plays – religion, politics, economics, sex work, corruption – are issues that

are unquestionably contemporary. Furthermore, their relevance is not confined to just one or two of the countries here, but are part of what we might call, with sad irony, a shared culture. Given this interest in what makes these plays Southeast Asian in relevant and contemporary ways, I wonder why the editors have "selected plays with direct appeal to Western audiences" (8). *What* is it about these plays that seems to give them that more "Western" appeal? But more importantly, why is it so important for the plays to appeal to the West? Is this for the sake of helping the authors find "directors and actors to inhabit their characters" from outside the narrow borders of their own countries? Should we not instead insist that Western directors and actors confront what they do not know and do not understand about the East, that they learn from this awareness of their own ignorance?

Another point with which I would take issue is Mellor's statement that "Theatre taste was not obviously influenced by colonisers" (13). In Malaysia and Singapore, theatre taste was very strongly influenced by British tastes. Early Malaysian groups such as MATG made a conscious decision to turn away from British and European forms, to deliberately create plays using local stories, local actors and directors, indigenous forms of music etc. In the 1980s, the Five Arts Centre also made a deliberate, concerted effort to use traditional art forms in the creation of a contemporary, distinctly Malaysian performance vocabulary. They did this in a theatrical environment which at the time still focused heavily on Shakespeare and Shaw.

These quibbles aside, this remains a valuable anthology. Despite the differences in the kinds of characters depicted, and the issues grappled with, there is a sense in which all of us share similar concerns. In "Plunge," for example, Jean Tay sets her play in Singapore but focuses on political and social unrest in Indonesia. These issues are filtered through the news reports read by Singaporean newscaster Isabel, but as she continues to read, she becomes more aware of the humanity behind the words she reads. Tay creates a kind of parallel dialogue, with Isabel reading the horrific news report ("A total of 499 people were killed in the Indonesian capital"), while a male Chorus reflects on how it starts to affect her:

> MAN C: You taste their blood in your own mouth.
> MAN A: You think these are nightmares. These are shadows.
> MAN B: You start to hear the voice of a young woman.
> MAN C: To see a face that looks like your own. (41)

Isabel continues to feel more and more connected to the Indonesian situation – a point underlined by the way in which Tay intersperses the news reports with more direct narration from Indonesian student Ina. Ina is played by the same actress who plays Isabel, further emphasising the need to create connections across borders. The connection with Ina perhaps spurs Isabel to understand that

the struggle is hers as well, in Singapore, and that ultimately she must realise that "You will fight until you have no more body left" (55). In terms of staging this play, however, I am not sure how well the overlapping dialogue would work. In one instance, Tay's stage directions say that "*Only the people closest to [Isabel] may be able to hear her. The rest may only hear her muttering to herself*" (47). This does not really matter for the *reader*, who has access to all the dialogue. But the words are important, and if they cannot be heard by the whole audience, what is the point?

Floy Quintos' "An Evening at the Opera" somewhat overturned my expectations – I assumed that I would sympathise with the wife of the corrupt politician (a crass man with multiple mistresses), who in her loneliness seems to be haunted by the ghost of her mother. But by the end of the play I came away with the realisation that all three characters (mother, wife and husband) are equally appalling; they are nasty, manipulative and very much part of a hopelessly corrupt system. The wife at the end confronts her own corruption, stating that "I'm rotten too, Mamang, deep inside" (78), but instead of walking away from it all, as her mother urges her to, she slaps her mother in the face and calmly carries on with her plan to go the opera. Despite her awareness, life goes on unchanged.

"The Night of the Minotaur," by Tew Bunnag, is unusual in that it is set in ancient Crete, and uses the story of the Minotaur as its plot base. There is no attempt to "localise" it or to draw obvious connections with Thai society or politics. However, the playwright uses a chorus of young men and women, who have been affected by social and economic chaos, to bring out issues which clearly relate to socio-economic issues not just in Thailand but all of Southeast Asia. They, and the old woman who nurtured the Minotaur, complain that "'decent' life has given up on us," that their families "are struggling to keep up with their debts" while "those who rule, they live like gods" (89). We find out that the whole Minotaur myth is built upon a lie, as well as on the oppression of an innocent individual; eventually the Minotaur problem is "solved" with falsified evidence, Theseus is hailed as a hero despite not having done anything and the people of Crete never realise the truth. Again, as with Quintos' play, there is a sense of the deep unlikelihood of corruption ever being acknowledged and rooted out.

The majority of Malaysian plays are set in Peninsular Malaysia – Ann Lee's "Tarap Man," however, is set in East Malaysia, and engages with many of the points of difference between the two halves of the country, in particular the uneasy relationship which has almost led to Sabah being "a different country" (126). Lee deals with journalists, in particular the more experienced, prickly and cynical Aashi, and her relationship with the younger Cornelia. Aashi wants to cover difficult, hard-hitting stories (the death of "migrant workers in Malaysian camps," for example (120), but instead finds herself being steered towards "almond jelly" stories that, like the jelly, go down well and don't taste of anything (121). In particular, she wants to cover the story of a man (the Tarap Man of the title) who may have been wrongfully imprisoned. She is unsuccessful in the end,

and we are left with a picture of the man, still in his jail cell, having found a way to simply live in his confined space. Again, there is no resolution, no happy ending.

The contribution from Vietnam, "Dark Race," is populated by thoroughly corrupt, despicable individuals without a shred of conscience or ethics. A series of hopefuls vying for a top Ministry position attempt to bribe those in power – rich businessmen, highly-placed appointees – to ensure that they will be picked for the position. It literally comes down to how much they can pay – and one desperate candidate even throws in his attractive wife as part of the offer. She, far from being a hapless victim, eventually dumps him in favour of the rich man to whom she has been "given." One potential candidate is dismissed by the competition as being "competent but poor" (195) – his skills will not get him anywhere, because he just cannot afford to "play the game" (195). The only honourable character in the play is Tran Tien, but the playwright does not really allow the character to develop. Generally, the characters are rather two-dimensional, as the writer focuses on exposing their convoluted shenanigans – but perhaps that very two-dimensionality serves to underline the sameness in behaviour across the whole spectrum of the population. However this play, unlike several in the anthology, does present the possibility of change.

Chhon Sina's play "Frangipani" looks at the claustrophobically limited lives of Cambodia's underclass, such as sex workers and garbage pickers, and the way in which their circumstances are likely to keep them trapped in this cycle. Sex worker Naphan, for example, was raped by her father – who also raped her mother before they got married. Violence and control pass down from one generation to the next. Eventually, Naphan goes back to her mother, who offers her a space of comfort. But that possibly positive end is undermined by the last words of the play – the garbage picker, Samnang, asks the audience "I'm 16 years old. Am I lucky like my name?" (242). Unfortunately, we realise that the answer is "no." The play is affecting, and Chhon does a good job of expressing the crowdedness and utter lack of privacy faced by the inhabitants of the slum where the main characters live.

"Piknik" by Joned Suryatmoko also looks at the lives of the less privileged, and the ways in which they are trapped by their circumstances and their socio-economic environment. Echoing the sense of claustrophobia and limited borders present in "Frangipani," Joned creates a stage space which physically recreates that sense of limitation – the three main characters interact entirely within the space of a toilet on the lobby floor of a luxurious Bali hotel. The conversation between the three main characters (two are maintenance workers or cleaning staff at the hotel, the third is a former staff member who now runs a travel and tour agency) turns into a game of "he said/he said," with the rather naïve young Wid becoming disillusioned by both of the older men, to whom he had been looking for advice. The author plays with his audience, taking us down unexpected turns

in terms of character development, but he leaves us with the sobering reflection that Wid is finally left to make a decision between two bad choices.

The final play is "Nadirah" by Singaporean poet and playwright Alfian Sa'at, perhaps the most internationally recognised of the writers anthologised here. It deals with the interface between the public and the private, exploring how personal experiences of religion clash with state impositions. The central character is Nadirah, whose Singaporean Chinese mother converted to Islam to marry her Malay Malaysian father. Nadirah and her now-divorced mother presently live in Singapore. Nadirah has to learn how to negotiate the complex terrain of personal religious belief, confronting hard truths about where her mother stands in relation to her adopted religion, and what this is likely to do to their relationship. While the play does not unambiguously present a happy ending, it does hint at a resolution which involves compromise and understanding, taking the mother-daughter relationship to a different level.

All in all the plays are interesting for the ways in which they grapple with key concerns in their respective societies. I would suggest that the book needs more thorough editing – for example, where different languages are used (e.g. in "An Evening at the Opera" and "Tarap Man") there needs to be more consistency in how the translations are dealt with. In Quintos' play, translations sometimes appear in footnotes, and sometimes within the text. In Lee's play, a couple of the translations are actually inaccurate (on page 144, *masuk* is translated as "cooked" [*masak*] rather than as "inserted"; on page 132, Cornelia says "Coba ulang dalam BM bah," which means "try repeating that in BM, mate," but which is translated as "Yes but, what about a reference in Malay?"). However, it is undeniable that, overall, the editors have done an excellent job of opening up our chances of reading and learning about plays from all over Southeast Asia.

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