

Kee Thuan Chye, *Swordfish + Concubine*. Malaysia: Gerakbudaya, 2018. 139 pp. ISBN 978-983-2344-98-8.



Kee Thuan Chye's career as a political playwright began with the staging of *1984, Here and Now* (staged in Kuala Lumpur in 1985), which took George Orwell's *1984* as a springboard for ideas about racial and political oppression in Malaysia. Since then, he has written *The Big Purge* and *We Could **** You, Mr Birch*, both of which continue to address what Kee sees as Malaysia's most pressing socio-political problems. He has, over the years, moved from the rather strident tone used in *1984, Here and Now*, to a more humorous but still critical tone. This combination of humour and socio-political critique is bountifully evident in his latest play, *Swordfish + Concubine*, performed in Kuala Lumpur in November 2017, and finally published in 2018.

Kee situates the action of the play in the past, but uses history/myth to target some of the current, hot-button socio-political issues in Malaysia. The main plot is taken from the *Sejarah Melayu* (Malay Annals), focusing on the young boy Hang Nadim who saves Singapore from being attacked by a plague of swordfish. Some leaders become jealous of the boy's obvious cleverness and start to worry that

because of his intelligence, he might eventually grow up to overthrow them. Predictably, the boy is put to death, to avoid that possibility.

Kee takes this basic story and adds the fictitious story of Nurhalisa, a virtuous and public-minded young maiden who agrees to become the concubine of the Sultan in order to save the lives of two villagers, and then to influence the Sultan to work for the betterment of the people. Unfortunately, jealousy and insecurity among the other courtiers mean that she, too, is put to death. The two stories combined paint a picture of a society peopled with both leaders and followers who are selfish, self-serving and generally unfit for purpose.

The myths and histories are used to focus the attention of readers and audience members on Malaysia's contemporary leaders at the time of writing, to get people to question their leadership.

Kee delves back into the founding myths of Malaya, starting the play with the appearance of Sri Tri Buana, "descendant of Alexander the Great" from the heavens and his ascension to the throne (1). Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun come to an agreement which, logically, should ensure unwavering loyalty towards the rulers, as well as good governance for the people. Demang Lebar Daun asks that his people "will always be treated well" – they will be punished if they offend, but "they shall never be disgraced." Sri Tri Buana in his turn demands that "Your descendants shall never be disloyal to my descendants, even if my descendants oppress them and behave in an evil manner" (3). This seemingly lopsided demand for unquestioning loyalty to the ruler is balanced by the understanding that a good leader will never disgrace his people – and if they do "the kingdom will be destroyed" (6). This, essentially, is what we see happening over the course of the play – by the end, weakened by bad choices, infighting, mistrust and betrayal, Singapura falls to the Majapahit invaders. However, as is often the case in Kee's plays, some of the worst miscreants are shown to not just survive, but thrive. But Kee does not allow the play to end on this note – rather, he suggests that the Covenant between Sri Tri Buana and Demang Lebar Daun "has been screwing up the mind" and asks, "so, why not pull it out from the mind and chuck it away?... It's time for the people to rock, yo!" (136). Finally, the play ends with the ensemble declaring that "It's time to rock, yo, and move to your own beat!" (137).

The play is funny and lively, with a kind of manic, fast-paced energy that comes through much better in performance than it does on the page. Kee is very good at completely undermining the kind of noble, heroic rhetoric associated with the characters in the Malay Annals. When Dendang exhorts his warriors to fight with the clarion call "Are you ready?," they respond "Not sure" and "It's time for tea break" (10). Dendang attempts to rally the warriors with the pseudo-Shakespearean line, "Once more on to the beach, dear friends!"; a reluctant warrior declares that "I'd rather lose my testi-," upon which a swordfish promptly spears him "where it hurts" (10-11). The half-heartedness of the warriors, as well

as their general incompetence (one warrior in the November 2017 performance in Kuala Lumpur was stabbed in the neck by a clumsy and unaware fellow-warrior) were hilarious to watch on stage. However, he balances the jokes with moments of poignant dignity, such as when Nurhalisa, falsely accused of trying to kill the Sultan, finds that one of the witnesses against her is the very person for whom she initially sacrificed herself, to save her from being executed. Among the main characters, only Hang Nadim and Nurhalisa manage to maintain their dignity and integrity. Rapeah betrays Nurhalisa. Ranjuna betrays the kingdom to the Majapahit. Tun Perpatih Segalar betrays everyone for the sake of the money he has been channelling from “the sovereign wealth fund... to his own coffers” (59). But this litany of greed and betrayal is drowned out by the almost anthemic rap with which Kee ends the play. The ensemble – the ordinary people – declare their determination to move to their own beat.

The message is particularly apposite considering the momentous events of May 9th, 2018, when for the first time since Independence in 1957, the incumbent party lost at a General Election and was replaced by the Opposition. This was the moment when the Malaysian people decided to break with what seemed to be a longstanding Covenant with the former ruling coalition – perhaps because they, the people, had been disgraced by rampant corruption and cronyism. The final version of the script, which Kee affirms as “the best form the play can take,” was published in 2018, before the elections. Nonetheless it seems to capture the *zeitgeist* of people wanting to rid themselves of the old covenants and ways of thinking, preferring instead to move to their own beat.

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