

Alfian Sa'at, *Collected Plays Two. The Asian Boys Trilogy: Dreamplay, Landmarks, Happy Endings.* Singapore: Ethos Books 2010. 289 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-7041-6.

The cover design on Alfian Sa'at's second volume of collected plays (just like his first volume) represents a colour-coded tally of how many times particular words appear in the text. While the words tallied in the first volume were "Singapore, Home, Lah, Love, Money, Change, Memory and Lee Kuan Yew," the second volume highlights "Love, Dream, Sex, Happy, Family, God, Goddess and 377A." The only word in common across both volumes is "love." But while in the first volume it is only fourth in the tally, in the second volume it dominates. This is an important point to remember, given that he is writing about gay men living in Singapore. In a nation which refuses to decriminalise gay sex and which at an official level renders the gay community invisible and inaudible, Alfian's exploration of gay relationships – with loved ones, with society in general, with the nation – does a lot to create a presence and a voice. He does this in a way which focuses on humanity, love and a longing for change in society. Given the militantly anti-gay tone that can emerge from religious groups and from those in authority, a gay identity is often presented and perceived as an aberration at best, an abomination at worst. Alfian's often hilarious but deeply touching plays do much to stage gay identities which counter and challenge these monocular visions.

Dreamplay challenges Singapore's official response to expressions of gay identity by re-defining Singapore's geography and history. In this play, Alfian borrows from August Strindberg's *A Dream Play*: Agnes, a goddess, the daughter of Indra, comes down to earth to save mankind from destruction. In Alfian's play, however, she comes down to Singapore as a bewigged and beribboned beauty pageant contestant – unaware that the other contestants are in drag. The four drag queens are named after various housing estates in Singapore, depending on their physical characteristics. Miss Toa Payoh, for example, is a "mature estate. She is the most senior one," while Miss Katong (reclaimed land) has had the most plastic surgery. Miss Bedok is a victim of a faulty breast transplant which has left her breasts rather uneven, one higher than the other; the other drag queens call them "Bedok North and Bedok South." The last drag queen is called Miss Sengkang "because she always biSING when she kangKANG."¹ By staging drag, Alfian makes it visible. But by naming the drag queens after familiar Singaporean places, he metaphorically

¹ "Bising" means noisy, while "kangkang" refers to spread legs.

locates them within Singapore's "heartland,"² rather than leaving them at the margins to which they are otherwise relegated.

In another scene, Agnes is taken back in time to Singapore in the 19th century, where "Conditions are ripe for multiple homoerotic situations" (54). Two male migrant workers from China love each other, but are unable to come to terms with their feelings since their socio-cultural background offers no advice. They give in to pressure and to their own uncertainty about what to do, and marry women because "We are immigrants. We must learn to survive. Pain means nothing to us" (69). Alfian rewrites a national history which focused almost entirely on notions of hard work and sacrifice, to look at what that sacrifice might have meant to gay men. He inserts a layer of homosexuality into a rampantly male, heterosexual national myth.

While *Dreamplay* works through larger national and societal issues within a slightly abstract framework, *Landmarks* takes things to a more personal level. Alfian focuses on the delicate negotiations between friends, lovers and families as they try to find ways to deal with the complications in their relationships. *Katong Fugue* traces the painful relationship between a mother who wants to reach out to her son; while the son needs her, he wants her to "stay on the threshold" of his bedroom, where she will remain "innocent in the sun" (117). His sexuality complicates their relationship, even though each acknowledges that they need each other. *Supper at Maxwell* is a slightly bittersweet tale of two good friends, one of whom does not realise that the other one is actually in love with him. *Raffles City Rendezvous* looks at promiscuity in the gay community, but affirms the solidity of the relationship between the two characters. *California Dreaming* revolves around three circuit boys of varying levels of commitment to the circuit (one is "dedicated," one is "committed" and one is "reluctant" [133]). They are planning to go to a "Nation" party – an "alternative" queer party held on Sentosa Island, the day before Singapore's National Day. The two more committed party-goers, Eugene and Leon, see it simply as a fun occasion which at least makes a gesture towards acknowledging a gay presence in Singapore. The reluctant one, Jin Han, is disturbed that after all these years, this is the only acknowledgment that they will get. Eugene and Leon accept the fact that homosexuality is "illegal only if someone catches you doing it," but Jin Han objects to having to live "that kind of shadow existence." Leon tells him "National Day is tomorrow. We're having our day tonight" (137). While he sees it as "subversive," it is also possible to read it as a sign that gays are not part of the nation. Jin Han finally manages to bring them round to his point of view, suggesting a slowly growing awareness that tiny, strictly regulated portions of the national space are not enough. *The Kings of Ann Siang Hill* is an ironic tale of

² A term often used to refer to areas dominated by Housing Development Board flats. People who live there are "heartlanders," implying that they are the soul of Singapore.

changing values in the gay community over the years, while *Downstream, Delta* looks at the relationship between a straight man and his gay best friend who is slowly coming to terms with the fact that their relationship will always be platonic. *My Own Private Toa Payoh* delicately sketches out the love between two rent boys who manage, within the confines of their little Toa Payoh flat, to carve out their own private space. Finally *The Widow of Fort Road* deals with the incident in which an undercover policeman “solicited” a gay man in a public park, and subsequently arrested him – an event which was seen by many as entrapment. While some of these plays do deal with events and incidents of broader significance (the national rather than just the personal), Alfian approaches them all through fine, detailed observations of personal relationships. He presents a picture of gays as complex human beings, thus unsettling the nationally-propounded image of them as immoral, promiscuous, not adhering to Singapore’s “Asian Values” and therefore anti-national, etc.

The final play in the trilogy, *Happy Ending*, seems to be somewhat influenced by Luigi Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author*, in that a variety of characters enter into a dialogue with their creator. In Alfian’s play, however, the scenario is based on *Peculiar Chris*, Singapore’s first gay novel, by Johann S. Lee. Lee appears in the play as a character, Joe; he is writing the novel and is visited by his muse; he sometimes “becomes” his character, Chris, and interacts with the other characters in the novel, who sometimes step out of the frame of the novel to chat with Joe about what is happening in the novel. According to Lee, his novel originally ended tragically; Alfian, however, has changed the ending so that it points tentatively to a new relationship for Chris, whose first lover died of AIDS. He is making a point here – that there can and must be a future for gays in Singapore. In this collection he has used humour, ideological debate and intensely felt emotion to help open up a public space that is not shunted off to the margins.

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