

A Bold Play That Goes To The HEART Of The Matter

A Review by Isaac Tan

Mata Hati
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The spirited imagination of the human mind often leads us to push boundaries and construct alternative scenarios as part of our cognitive endeavours. When the need to explore the “what ifs” of society meets the endless possibilities that theatre could provide, we get a play that is daring, insightful and chillingly honest. Mata Hati, the latest offering by Dr. Robin Loon (Assistant Professor from the English Language and Literature (Theatre Studies) Department), poses a simple question: What if a well respected Malay politician in Singapore gets embroiled in a sex scandal?

With all the hype that one had experienced in the General and Presidential elections, it is understandable that one would expect the play to be tiresome. Mata Hati is anything but tiresome. In the course of raising questions about gender roles, sex, race and politics (which makes it deliciously taboo), the trajectory of the play brings us closer to uncovering Amir’s (the Malay politician) humanity; his aspirations and beliefs. The various confrontations and interactions between Amir and the other characters, which ranged from his daughter to his subordinates and close friend, reveals various facets of Amir’s personality and thoughts as we sympathise with his struggles to rise up through the political ranks while being shocked at his audacity in engaging in sexual escapades even during a holiday with his own family.

As Amir continues to unravel, we are being led into a paradox of having an initial illusion that we are getting closer to knowing him but one would soon realise that Amir becomes an increasingly complex character as he gradually reveals some of his motives. Though some would say that it was an overly ambitious script that did not dwell enough on the various issues, I personally feel that it is an interesting reflection of how the externalities of politics and the internalities of one's beliefs and aspirations are so intertwined that it is hard to differentiate between them.

As for the cast, they certainly tackled the rather complicated script well. Johari Aziz nailed the character of Amir with his measured performance despite of the episodic scenes which sometimes demand an abrupt change of intensity in terms of emotional quality. Eleanor Tan brought about much tension to the play as Mrs. Rebecca Tan, the civil servant posted to assist Amir, as she taunts him about the end of his career and brushes him off in the name of bureaucratic necessity. Eleanor played it viciously well so much so that it compelled an audience member to say "I hate you, Mrs. Tan" during the post-show dialogue. Anwar Hadi gave a credible performance as Amir's close friend. The strong chemistry between Amir and his character resulted in a great performance as their interactions gave the audience an insight into who Amir was before rising to prominence as a politician.

Tan Shou Chen did not pale in comparison as the much abused assistant while Isabella Chiam, who plays a journalist interviewing Amir (who also happens to be a Chinese immigrant), does show that prejudice is not only limited to people of a different race. And Shaza Ishak, playing Amir's daughter, rails against her father for being irresponsible and paternalism as a whole. While the exchanges between father and daughter are poignant, Shaza could have reined in her outburst slightly as as part of it was lost on the audience.

Unlike the typical storyline in which a complex character gradually unravels upon confrontation and retrospection, Mata Hati bucks the trend as it ends with Amir being incredibly distraught but still managing to hold it together and not revealing the innermost reasons for his actions. With no resolution in sight, what new light does this play contribute to our national discourse about race, politics, sexuality and gender? Truth be told, nothing much as it voices out what has been said or should have been said. Yet, its biggest takeaway is that while our society has several problems that need to be addressed, in the grand scheme of things, it all boils down to what we truly believe and stand for which would influence the political and social dynamics of our society. It is only after a harsh and honest self-reflection that we could attempt to address the bigger issues that affect our society.

True to its title, Mata Hati certainly gives insight into the heart of the matter with regards to the questions it raises.

Intrigued by what I saw, I wrote to Dr. Loon to find out more about his inspiration for the play to which he graciously gave this email interview.

1. What inspired you to write this play?

RL: After watching CHARGED last Dec, I spoke to the director of the play who is also the Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra, Zizi Azah, about how I would like to follow on from CHARGED and NADIRAH with a piece on Sex and the Malay Politician. Zizi was enthusiastic about the premise and the idea and we decided on the collaboration. Another reason is that I really like the courage and commitment Teater Ekamatra has shown in the past 2 years and would like to be part of it.

2. What were some of the challenges you faced in writing this play?

RL: The biggest challenge is to reach back into history and create a character who is a unique product of a specific time. I conducted thorough research with the help of my research assistant, former TS grad Muhd Ridzal, and tried to piece together a climate of the times. I was also very aware of the problems and responsibilities of a Chinese writer writing a play about a Malay Politician but as I forged on, with a lot of chat with Zizi, I found many of those problems to be more pre-emptive than real.

3. What were some of the insights you have gained in writing and researching for this play?

RL: I discovered a different perspective on race relations after ploughing the research in relation to power and politics. Race relations in Singapore is even more complicated when it is enmeshed with realpolitik. The play is a conjecture created from the classic 'what if' scenario backed by the research.

4. Mata Hati raises several political and social questions about our society. In your opinion, what is at the heart of this play?

RL: While I do not want to essentialise anything about humanity, the core of the play is actually about the corrosive nature of power and how that problematises race relations in Singapore.

5. As a professor, you have mentored several batches of students that would form the ranks of a new breed of professionals in the theatre industry. What are your hopes for the local theatre industry in years to come?

RL: My biggest hope is that we will be able to talk about issues that matter to us in an open, frank and creative way. And this means that the authorities need to trust that the artists will deal with the issues in a responsible manner. I hope that the Arts will become far less regulated.

6. Finally, are there any pearls of wisdom that you could impart to aspiring writers or actors?

RL: Three words: train, research, practice.