

Style and Politics in Alfian Sa'at's Collected Plays

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Alfian Sa'at, *Collected Plays One: The Optic Trilogy, Fugitives, Homesick, sex.violence. blood.gore*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. 329 pages. ISBN 9789810860653.

Alfian Sa'at, *Collected Plays Two: The Asian Boys Trilogy: Dreamplay, Landmarks, Happy Endings*. Singapore: Ethos Books, 2010. 289 pages. ISBN 9789810870416.

Alfian Sa'at won the 2001 Singapore Golden Point Award for Poetry and the Singapore National Arts Council Young Artist Award for Literature in the same year, also for his poetry. Since then, he has become better known for his plays. Both collections of plays from 1999 to 2007, are respectively framed by two very useful critical introductions and forewords which help the non-Singaporean reader locate his writing intellectually and politically, not only in the Singaporean context but also global environment. C.J.Wee Wan-ling's introduction to *Collected Plays One* contextualizes the plays within a Singaporean socio-cultural environment, while Lim Eng Beng's introduction to *Collected Plays Two* succinctly illuminates Alfian's cultural and sexual politics.

Alfian experiments with and uses a commendable range of styles in his theatre writing – some more successfully than others. *Collected Plays Two*, organized around his *The Asian Boys Trilogy*, is the more coherent, offering a more cogent profile of the writer's politics and craft. *Collected Plays One*, comprising two self-authored and two co-authored plays, while not lacking in a variety of styles, is more disjointed and diverse. Of the two self-authored plays, *Optic Trilogy* is the stronger and indeed, the strongest piece in this collection. More a play in three parts than a trilogy, *Optic Trilogy* exhibits an intimate structural affinity with Arthur Schnitzler's *La Ronde*. The central conceit of two characters in each installment played by the same actors, is dramaturgically effective and exemplifies the recurring metaphors of sight & site, light & sound, serving as a discursive device for Alfian to discuss issues of alienation and human relationships. The dialogue in *Optic Trilogy* is sparse and elliptical, reminiscent of Pinter's *The Homecoming*. But *Homesick*, by comparison,

is predictable in its structural linearity and story-telling. The stereotyped characters and their incessant pontifications seriously undermine any credible discussions of home & belonging. *Fugitives*, dramaturged & translated into Mandarin by Ng How Wee, is the more character-driven of the two co-authored pieces and demonstrates Alfian's sensitivity to Singaporean parlance and its embedded social politics. *sex. violence. blood. gore.*, co-written with Chong Tze Chien, is playful and provocative structurally and politically. Although it certainly displays an Ortonesque sensibility in its treatment of social morality, the parody and affectations in this piece do not quite possess the wit and audacity found in Orton.

There is a clear trajectory across the trilogy in *Collected Plays Two* in terms of textual/intertextual negotiations and political rhetoric/posturing. *Dreamplay* begins with lines borrowed from Strindberg's *A Dream Play*, but through use of Asian mythology and references to popular culture to discuss sexual politics, re-invents Strindberg's idea of a Goddess descending on Earth to save humanity. The play also uses episodic refractions of historical events to construct an inclusive alternate history that engages social minorities in Singapore such as homosexuals. The episodic structure of *Dreamplay* is repeated in *Landmark* through vignettes held together by Singapore place names, Alfian building his collection of playlets around locations in Singapore associated with gay activities. The strongest of the trilogy, *Landmarks*, continues *Dreamplay*'s use of references to popular culture (evident in some of the titles). Instead of the talking heads in *Dreamplay*, he attempts to create fleshed-out characters with credible psychological depth and motivation. There is a conscious move from the postmodern bricolage of *Dreamplay* to a more stable realist mode. *Landmark* is decidedly more urban and rooted in a cosmopolitan reality. It is reminiscent of a short story collection by Haruki Murakami in structure and depictions of urban humanity. *Katong Fugue* stands out as the most lyrical and poetic vignette in *Landmarks* while *The Widows of Fort Road* is the most unequivocal and effective in its gay political advocacy. The realism of *Landmarks* is further consolidated in *Happy Endings*. The naturalism of *Happy Endings* is apparent from its linear and causal structure to the psychological make up of its characters. In this third installment, Alfian spring boards off a Singaporean gay novel by Johann S Lee entitled *Peculiar Chris*. Part 1 of *Happy Endings* is a dramatization of *Peculiar Chris*; Part 2 is Alfian's continuation of the story. By introducing a new framing device comprising conversations between a writer and his muse that re-contextualizes *Happy Endings*, Alfian has created a play that is not a mere adaptation. But structurally, it is the least adventurous of the three and its political tone the most reconciliatory, the politics becoming noticeably less strident and the dramaturgy more markedly conventional with the progress of the trilogy.

These two collections of plays enable the reader to identify more clearly Alfian's politics than his style. His pro-gay stance is clearly foregrounded in *Collected Plays Two* while (as he has done in his poetry) *Collected Plays One* is

critical of racial profiling and stereotyping in Singapore. Although Alfian has yet to establish his defining style as a playwright – his latest works see him dabbling in Melodrama (*Nadirah*) and experimenting with Verbatim Theatre (*Cooling Off Day*) – his plays, with their outspoken examination of political and social taboos, continue to be provocative.