Obituary: Jit Murad (1960-2022)

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In 1994, I was in a local production of *Romeo and Juliet*, and some of us were sitting around backstage between shows, just chatting. I mentioned that the first time I was reviewed as an actor, the reviewer had declared that I didn't know how to use my face. Jit Murad, our Benvolio, interjected, with languid scorn for the reviewer, "Well, you wouldn't use it to put out a campfire." We all collapsed in hysterics at this casually surreal comment. But as I got to know Jit better, I came to realise that the comment was emblematic not only of his quick, sharp wit, but also of his kindness. He used that wit to make us laugh, and to undercut the significance of the comment (which had, truth be told, inflicted a bit of a wound on my shaky ego).

He could turn his wit against himself, too: in the same production, he recounted how Zahim Al-Bakri, as Romeo, had received most of the attention of the younger women in the audience. But one day, one female audience member had asked for Jit's autograph. As he stood there considering what words of wisdom to share, she suddenly said "Oh, Zahim's free!", grabbed her autograph book from Jit's hand, and made a beeline for Romeo.

Any conversation with Jit left me amazed at his quick wit and his talent for telling entertaining stories. This mix of trenchant, often self-deprecating, humour and deep concern for others was always on display with Jit. In casual conversation he could toss out jokes aplenty, and in the next breath, quietly ask how someone else in the group was feeling. His Facebook feed was full of pictures old and new with friends, their families, their pets. And every picture was captioned with a light but meaningful statement about what these people/pets meant to him. Always, there was a declaration of love and joy.

And then, on 12 February 2022, a friend shared with me the sad news of Jit's passing. He was just 62 when he succumbed to a cardiac arrest. He had been battling illness, and had for a long time been laid low by pernicious anaemia. On Facebook, he often mentioned the serious falls which resulted from his condition and the dizziness which accompanied it. But despite all that he had to go through because of his illness and (later) Covid-induced isolation, and despite the

devastation he felt at the death, a few years earlier, of his long-term partner, he remained a funny, puckish presence on Facebook. This combination of surface lightness masking thoughtful depth, and even pain, comes through in his dramatic work as well.

Jit's full name was Aziz Mirzan Murad – the name "Jit" arose out of a younger sibling's mispronunciation of "Aziz", and it stuck. He went to university in the United States, getting a bachelor's degree in sociology, and a master's in art history. His experiences there found their way into one of his best-known plays, *Gold Rain and Hailstones* (1993). *Spilt Gravy on Rice* (2002) was perhaps his second most popular and well-known play — it has since been made into a film, directed by Zahim Albakri, released on 9 June 2022. He also authored a musical (*The Storyteller*, 1996), and shorter plays such as *Malam Konsert* (2003) and *Visits* (1993). He was a founding member of the Instant Cafe Theatre Company (formed in 1989), where he was actively involved in developing characters and skits, as well as in performing in these skits. While Instant Cafe quickly became known for its focus on political and social satire, Jit's contributions often took a deeper look at how ordinary people fit into the Malaysian social framework. Indeed, *Spilt Gravy on Rice* began life as a series of sketches of a group of rather stereotyped young people, played for laughs. But Jit then went on to build on that, to take a probing look into the idea of who is Malaysian, who belongs, and who will "inherit the house". Recognising Jit's talent, his fellow Instant Cafe founders realised that he needed a framework which would support and nurture his writing. From this, Dramalab was born in 1993. Initially created to encourage Jit to write something that Instant Cafe would then stage, Dramalab grew into a significant platform for new Malaysian playwrights.

Jit's work as a Malaysian playwright is in many ways *sui generis*. Most of our playwrights are to a large extent focused on the idea of what it means to be Malaysian, but each has a distinct approach. K.S. Maniam's plays, for example, are sombre in tone. Kee Thuan Chye's plays have more of a comedic element, but without Jit's elegant lightness of touch. The writer with whom he can most closely be compared is, perhaps, Huzir Sulaiman. Both have a gift for wit and wordplay. But Huzir's wit is sharper and more acerbic. Jit's work is bright, sparkling — much like the work of Oscar Wilde, whom he once played in a local production of *Gross Indecency: The Three Trials of Oscar Wilde* (2001). And so much of what Jit writes is rooted in the personal, the private, the

individual, unlike the broader socio-political critique we experience in Huzir's *Atomic Jaya* and *Election Day*.

Jit's desire to always look more deeply into what it is to be a Malaysian sprang in part from his childhood. He celebrated his mixed heritage, citing Malay, Indian, and English ancestry via his grandparents. Once, he declared that he was one-quarter Malayali.[1] When someone asked "which quarter", he wordlessly indicated the upper-left quadrant of his body. By highlighting this admixture of cultures and ethnicities, he quietly questioned Malaysia's long-standing desire to neatly label everyone as one thing, and one thing only.

Ultimately, that was what Jit wrote about — Malaysians. The "Malaysian-ness" of his characters is shown particularly well through their dialogue — not just in terms of what was said, but also *how* it was said. The dialogue in his plays is smart and erudite, but believable. As an actor himself, Jit knew how to craft lines which, despite their "cleverness", were eminently real and speakable. He had a remarkable talent for reflecting how Malaysians actually speak — from those comfortable with standard English, to those who speak English at a lower level, or those who find themselves casually, unthinkingly slipping from one language to another and back again. I recall, for example, the taxi driver in *Gold Rain and Hailstones* who pronounces "Monte Carlo Villas" as "Money Kwai Lo Villas"[2] (71) — a believable mispronunciation which also takes a sly dig at rampant development and gentrification in Malaysia. In the same play, when the upper-class mothers of the main characters chat, they slip easily and fluently between English and Malay, declaring, for e.g., that "Datin Ramlah was almost nervous breakdown risaukan dia"[3] (44). Jit's talent for writing in this way reflects his own comfort with the numerous languages and registers of language available to Malaysians.

His genius for handling language reflected his awareness of how complex Malaysian identities can be — an idea which permeated so many of his plays. In *Spilt Gravy on Rice*, the patriarch, Bapak, has five children, each with a different mother. They are a hugely disparate group, arguing over who will inherit the house when Bapak passes away; the question is not resolved to the satisfaction of all the siblings, and Jit does not try for any pat endings. Rather, he leaves the ending uncertain - reflecting the uncertainty of Malaysians wondering who they are and where they belong in Malaysia's complex social framework.

Jit treats all his characters with fondness — even the less likeable ones. Man and Amy, in *Gold Rain and Hailstones*, are self-centred and somewhat self-absorbed. But Jit shows us why they behave as they do. In *Spilt Gravy on Rice*, Zakaria is a ne'er-do-well, Darwis is a tad embittered, and takes that bitterness out on the performers he reviews, Kalsom is a pretentious "artist", Zaiton is a society mum who is always too busy for her children (her constant refrain is "Mummy cannot"), and Husni is living a lie. The characters began as stereotypes for a sketch show, and even as the play developed, they retained something of that two-dimensional flavour. But Jit's innate kindness extends to these characters — we laugh with and at them, but none arouse our hostility. All are flawed. But we understand them.

We understand them because we *are* them. In *Gold Rain*, Amy realises that "Being a clumsy mutant here is more significant than being merely an exotic hybrid somewhere else" (120). As we watch the play, we realise that in some way, we are all clumsy mutants trying to "be" in Malaysia. But the line also reflects Jit himself — in so many ways, he didn't really "fit" any of the moulds created by Malaysia's institutional framework. He could, perhaps, have had an easier time of it being "an exotic hybrid somewhere else". But he did not take that route. As a founder member of the Instant Cafe Theatre Company, and as an acclaimed dramatist in his own right, he chose to use his considerable talent to explore what it means to be a Malaysian in Malaysia.

As I write this, I feel tears welling up again. Jit's passing is an immense loss to Malaysia — not just because there will be no more sparklingly funny new plays to enjoy, but also because we need his clear-eyed vision of what Malaysia is, and what we need to do to make it better. We need people who can see and express the complexity at the heart of this nation. For now, let us bid Jit a sad, fond farewell, and read and reread his work, and learn from it.

Notes

[1] The term "Malayali" refers to an ethnolinguistic community which has its origins in the southern Indian state of Kerala. In Malaysia, this group is subsumed within the larger "Indian" ethnic group.
[2] "Kwai Lo" is a Cantonese term referring to white people.
[3] This translates as "Datin Ramlah almost had a nervous breakdown worrying about her".

Works Cited

Jit Murad. *Jit Murad Plays*. Petaling Jaya, Malaysia: Matahari Books, 2017.