JOHAN JAAFFAR

THESE ARE MY PLAYS



Translated and Introduced by SOLEHAH ISHAK



About Johan Jaaffar

Johan writes short stories, novels, stage plays, television plays and plays for children. He also writes critical and theoretical essays, poems and reviews... but in the creative world, he is primarily known as a dramatist: playwright, director and actor.

Until now, Johan has written more than thirty stage plays, but only seven are extant and they are compiled in this anthology.

He came into the limelight when his first play "My City Oh My City", which he himself directed was staged in 1975 during the Malam Berbunga Sajak (A Night of Poetry), organized by KESUMA, the Artistic and Cultural Association of University Malaya. The play was staged at the Experimental Theatre of University Malaya. He next wrote "The Princess", the play which empowered Johan as a playwright. He later wrote "Surrender", "Someone", "The Player" and "Asiah Samiah". He was also very active in the Kumpulan Anak Alam and the Badan Budaya of Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP).

He has been regarded as one of the pioneers of the absurd/abstract plays together with Noordin Hassan, Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan and Mana Sikana.

In the 1960's, Johan grew up in the midst of the *bangsawan* the Malay Opera world. He was also active in the sandiwara theatre group of his *kampung/v*illage of Sungai Balang Besar, Muar, Johor. These were the experiences which enhanced his interests and helped shaped his proclivities for the arts.

Johan was also responsible for adapting novels to the stage. These include Anwar Rithwan's *The Last Days of an Artist*, A. Samad Said's *Salina* and A. Samad Ismail's short story "Rumah Kedai di Jalan Seladang". He has also acted in several plays: in "The Corpse" and in *Di Mana Bulan Selalu Retak*, where he was directed by Hatta Azad Khan; in *Pelayaran Inderapura II* and The Opera House, he was directed by Zakaria Ariffin. Johan also acted in *Musuh Rakyat* which was directed by Mutapha Noor. He acted again in the *The Opera House* and *Zaman Gerhana* both of which were directed by Othman Zainuddin.

A prolific writer, Johan has also written plays for children which have been compiled in an anthology *Arah Ke Mana*, published by Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka. He also writes plays for television using *continue to back flap*

For

all

theatre

enthusiasts

and

activists





Translated and Introduced by SOLEHAH ISHAK





Kuala Lumpur 2014 This book **THESE ARE MY PLAYS JOHAN JAAFFAR** is a correct translation of the book *Drama Pentas Johan Jaaffar* published by Balang Rimbun Sdn. Bhd.

Published by:

INSTITUT TERJEMAHAN & BUKU MALAYSIA BERHAD

(Company No.: 276206-D) Wisma ITBM, No. 2, Jalan 2/27E Seksyen 10, Wangsa Maju 53300 Kuala Lumpur Malaysia

Tel.: 603-4145 1800 Fax: 603-4142 0753

E-mail: publishing@itbm.com.my Website: www.itbm.com.my

First Published in 2014

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National Library of Malaysia

Cataloging-in-Publication Data

These are my plays Johan Jaaffar / Translated and introduced by Solehah Ishak ISBN 978-967-430-430-0

1. Theatre--Malaysia. 2. Malay drama. I. Solehah Ishak.

II. Title: Translation of: Drama Pentas Johan Jaaffar.

792.09595

Printed in Malaysia by: Visual Print Sdn. Bhd. No. 47, 47-1, Jalan Damai Raya 1 Alam Damai, Cheras 56000 Kuala Lumpur















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My gratitude to painter
extraordinaire Mazlan Noor (Along)
who designed the pages and
provided sketches for the plays

– Johan Jaaffar

Good Heart, Beautiful Manners The plays in this collection are not arranged according to the dates when they were written or published. Except for "Pasrah/Surrender", the rest of the plays have been published in magazines or anthologies. "Asiah Samiah" was published serially in Dewan Sastera from October 2001 until February 2002. "Angin Kering/Dry Wind", "Dia/Someone" and "Sang Puteri/Princess" were published in the anthology of Angin Kering (DBP) in 1981. Before they were published in book form, "Angin Kering/Dry Wind" and "Sang Puteri/Princess" were

published in the monthly magazine of *Dewan Sastera* in March and December of 1976. "Sang Puteri/Princess" was published by Sarjana Enterprise in 1982 and "Pemain/The Player" was published by Oen Industries

in 1987.

Introduction

Johan Jaaffar's Alterities The early school years

READING Johan Jaaffar's plays and seeing his theatre productions would give readers/audiences the opportunity to delve into the many continuums of this "third generation" Malay playwright, the generation after the bangsawan, sandiwara and the realistic sitting room plays of the drama moden period. Johan Jaaffar is a playwright belonging to the Malay absurd-abstract-"absurd-ala-Malaysia"-surrealist, experimental decade of the 1970's. Although the playwright's mark of dramatic activity and creativity emerged in the 1970's, Johan was already actively involved in drama activities even as a young primary school student, at the Sekolah Rendah Perserian Semerah, Johor in the early 1960's. Then he not only watched sandiwara plays but helped whenever he could or was needed. This continued into secondary and later his high school years at the Sekolah Tinggi Muar where Johan would be in charge of writing scripts, choosing the actors and was responsible for directing the school's dramatic presentation. In these early years Johan derived his ideas and inspirations from Malay literary canons like the Sejarah Melayu /The Malay Annals and the Hikayat Hang Tuah amongst others.

The university years

As an undergraduate at the University of Malaya from 1974-1977, Johan Jaaffar became even more actively involved in the writing and production of plays. He was an active member of KESUMA (Kumpulan Kesenian University Malaya), the Cultural Group of University Malaya. In 1975, KESUMA staged Johan's "Kotaku Oh Kotaku"/("My City Oh My City") at the University's Experimental Theatre. Johan not only wrote the script but was responsible for directing the theatre production. In 1976, KESUMA staged yet another of Johan's play, Angin Kering/Dry Wind, again at the same venue.

Johan Jaaffar, Dinsman, Hatta Azad Khan together with a few other theatre people, form the Third Generation of Malay Theatre activists. This Third Generation started their theatre activities in the university campus, especially in the post May 13, 1969 decade, a date noted for the racial riots which sundered the nation. The racial riots led to the introduction of the New Economic Policy and also the Rukun Negara (National Principles) amongst others. It is within this decade of turmoils, uncertainties, of racial harmony gone awry, that this Third Generation of playwrights experimented with the absurd, avant-garde plays. Johan wrote *Angin Kering*, *Dia* and *Sang Puteri*, his trilogy of absurd/experimental plays. The Third Generation Playwrights deliberately left behind the familiar, realistic sitting room plays of the 1960's.

It was also a post May 13, 1969 decade marked by the pioneering play of *Bukan Lalang ditiup Angin*, written by Noordin Hassan as a signifier of May 13, 1969 aimed primarily at his Malay readers/audience. The experimental decade of the 1970's was marked also by Dinsman's *Bukan Bunuh Diril* "It's Not Suicide" (1974), and Hatta Azad Khan's "Mayat"/"Corpse" (1976). This Third Generation of playwrights not only experimented with the craft of playwrighting but also in the choice of "stories" told or untold. They dared to experiment with the aim of exposing their society to be scrutinized. They were also a group of highly educated dramatists, familiar with and perhaps influenced by western writers.

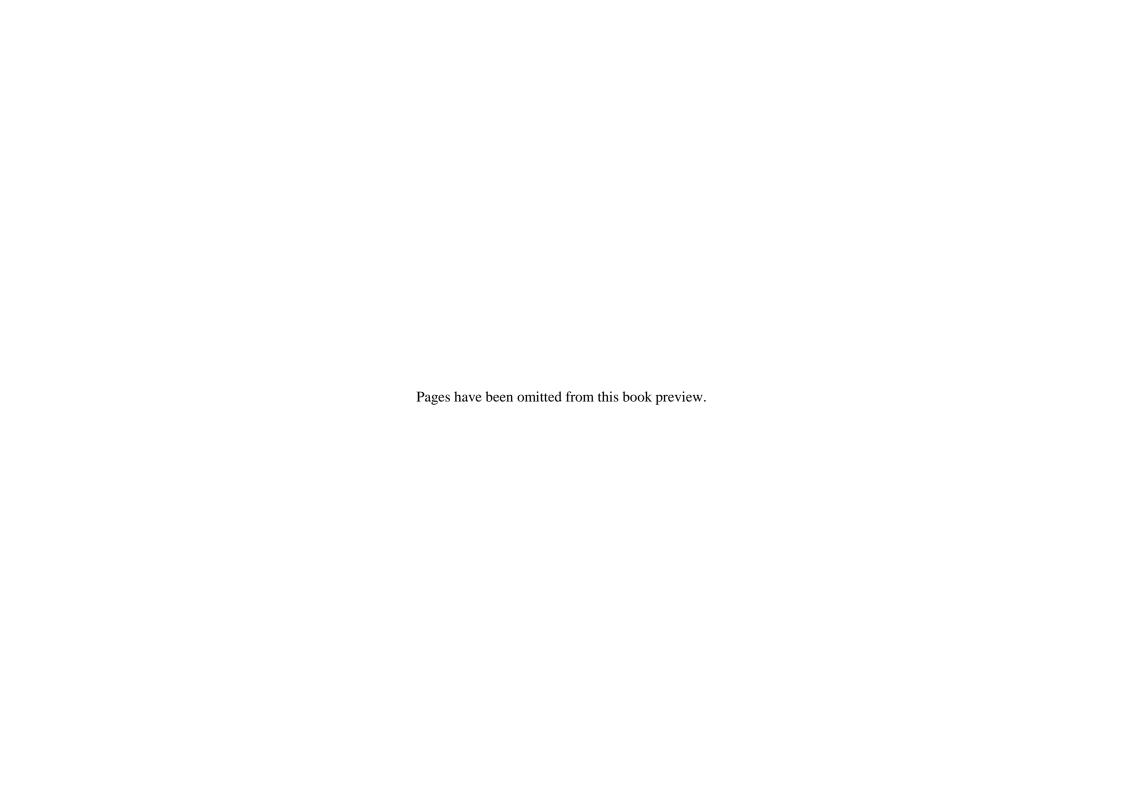
The working years

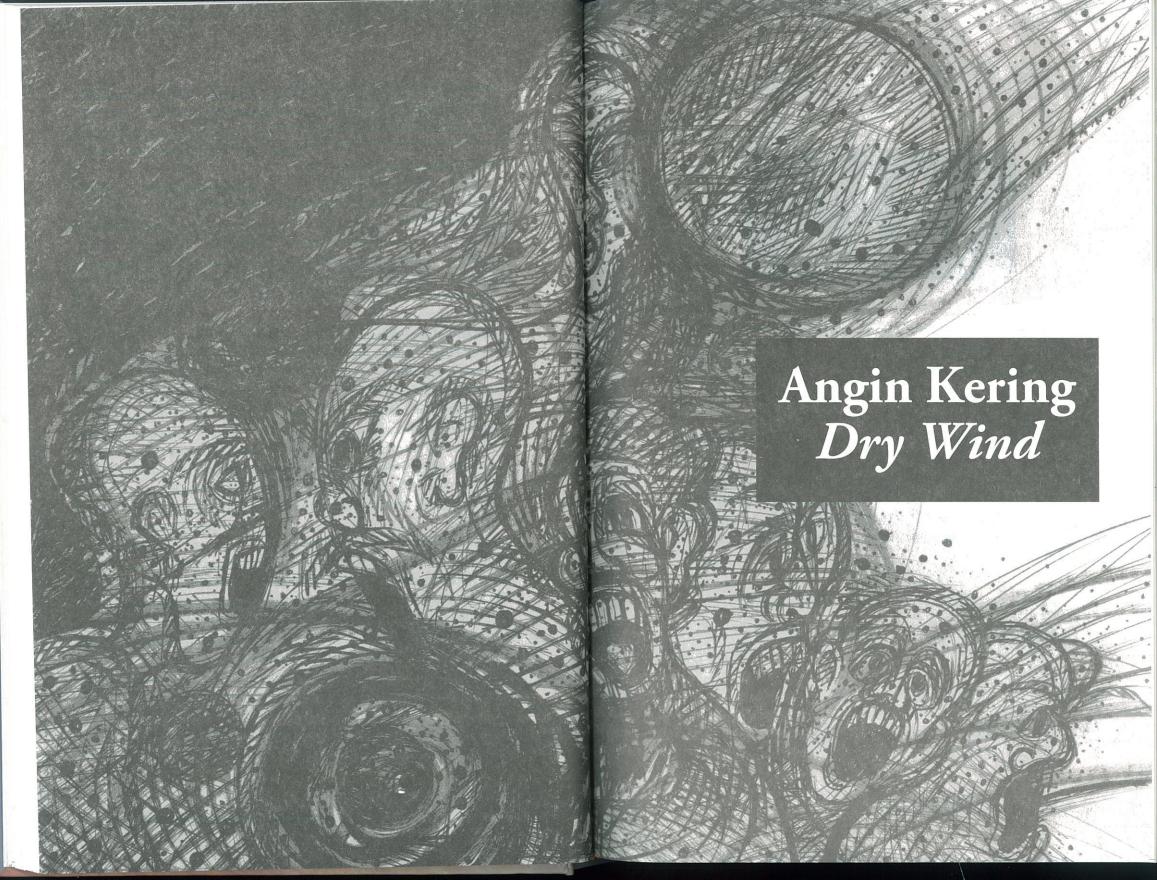
Johan's foray into "official" employment was at the Dewan Bahasa dan Pustaka (DBP). It is not my intention to delineate Johan's career path but it is important to note that at DBP, Johan was surrounded by other literary figures, or important columnists, who helped spurred the growth and shaped the Malay literary scene. These included the influential columnist of the 1970's-1980's Datuk Mohd. Noor Azam and writers like Baha Zain, Anwar Ridhwan, Dinsman, Sutung Umar R.S. and Othman Haji Zainuddin amongst others. Johan was also close to Malay writers of the older generation like Keris Mas, Usman Awang, Pak Sako, Arena Wati, Samad Said and Abdullah Hussein.

At DBP, Johan also had the then auditorium of Balai Budaya (now the Balai Tun Syed Nasir) at his disposal. It was here that Johan continued to hone and develop his theatre making activities. Besides the writers and the readily available auditorium at DBP, Johan was also deeply engaged with a group of theatre performance arts practitioners at Anak Alam, comprising a group of writers and artists who openly declared their innate freedom to be creative and experimental. These include Malaysia's renowned artist Latiff Mohiddin, other writerspoets-performers like Mustafa Haji Ibrahim, Ghafar Ibrahim, Khalid Salleh, Muhammad Abdullah and Pyan Habib.

Based on their guiding principle of their innate freedom to create and experiment, members of Anak Alam, produced absurd plays, voicing their anger, protests and anti-establishment attitudes. Johan Jaaffar could be said to have met his artistic spaces and interspaces under the roof of Anak Alam, whose hallmark had been the need and the right to produce creative, experimental works as they deemed fit.

As stated earlier, this introduction is not concerned with the trajectories of Johan Jaaffar's various careers. They are mentioned only to situate him as an important playwright. Johan has moved from DBP to work as Chief Editor of the Utusan Group of Publishers, became in his own words, a farmer for a while to now heads one of Malaysia's paramount multi-platform company, Media Prima Berhad.





Angin Kering Dry Wind

This play has been staged several times by:

- a. Kumpulan Kesenian, University Malaya (KESUMA) at the Experimental Theatre, University Malaya, in 1976.
- b. Kumpulan Anak Alam, at the Experimental Theatre, University Malaya, in 1977.
- c. The undergraduates of University Sains Malaysia, at the USM campus in 1978, and
- d. The students of the then Institute Technology MARA (ITM), Shah Alam, (now the University Technology MARA, UiTM); at the British Council Auditorium in April 1979, in conjunction with the 25thaniversary of the Malay Studies Department, University Malaya.

Place : Anywhere

Time : Anytime

Characters: 1. PATANI/Farmer

2. MATANI, Farmer's wife

3. NEIGHBOUR

4. Mahakaya, the ALL WEALTHY

5. Isteri / WIFE

6. Hamba / SLAVE

7. Si Jelita / BEAUTIFUL

8. Mahatahu / ALL-KNOWING

9. Suara-Suara / VOICES

So Begins The First Story

ONE

PATANI: Wind! Wind!

MATANI: Ouch! It's so painful!

PATANI: Wind! No more winds a blowing! No more winds blowing! The wind is dead!

MATANI: Look at the dust! Look at the parched, dried earth! Parched! Likewise the leaves are all dried up and parched! Everything's so suffocating! So uncomfortable!

PATANI: The wind is dead!

MATANI: The birds have also stopped singing! The clouds are also reluctant to move! Look! Look at the sky without clouds! Feel the sun, hot on one's head! It's heat burning hot! It's heat killing all.

(All-Knowing enters)

ALL-KNOWING: The winds are on strike! The winds have stopped blowing!

PATANI: The winds are on strike?

MATANI: The winds have stopped blowing? ALL-KNOWING: That's how nature wants it! PATANI: But the clouds are no longer moving!

MATANI: The heat will burn!

PATANI: There will be no rain!

MATANI: I'll die because of the sun's heat!

PATANI: The earth will crack! MATANI: My skin too will crack!

PATANI: All will die! MATANI: I will die too!

ALL-KNOWING: That, too, is divine power! That, too, is what nature wants.

PATANI: Divine power?

ALL-KNOWING: We only fulfill what's been fated!

PATANI: Why's the wind not blowing?

ALL-KNOWING: On strike! The winds are on strike! And all will go on strike. It is the wind which has started it all!

PATANI: All will also die!

ALL-KNOWING: All! You, you! I, too will die!

PATANI: You, too?

ALL-KNOWING: I. too!

PATANI: How do you know?

ALL-KNOWING: Because I am Mahatahu, the all-knowing!

PATANI: Who're you?

ALL-KNOWING: I myself don't know who I am! I know things that I should not know, and do not know what I should really know! Until I myself don't really know who I am!

PATANI: Are you Prophet Khaidir, who is brought down when mankind is in difficulties?

ALL-KNOWING: No! Not a prophet, no!

PATANI: Or are you the devil who's pulling me to hell?

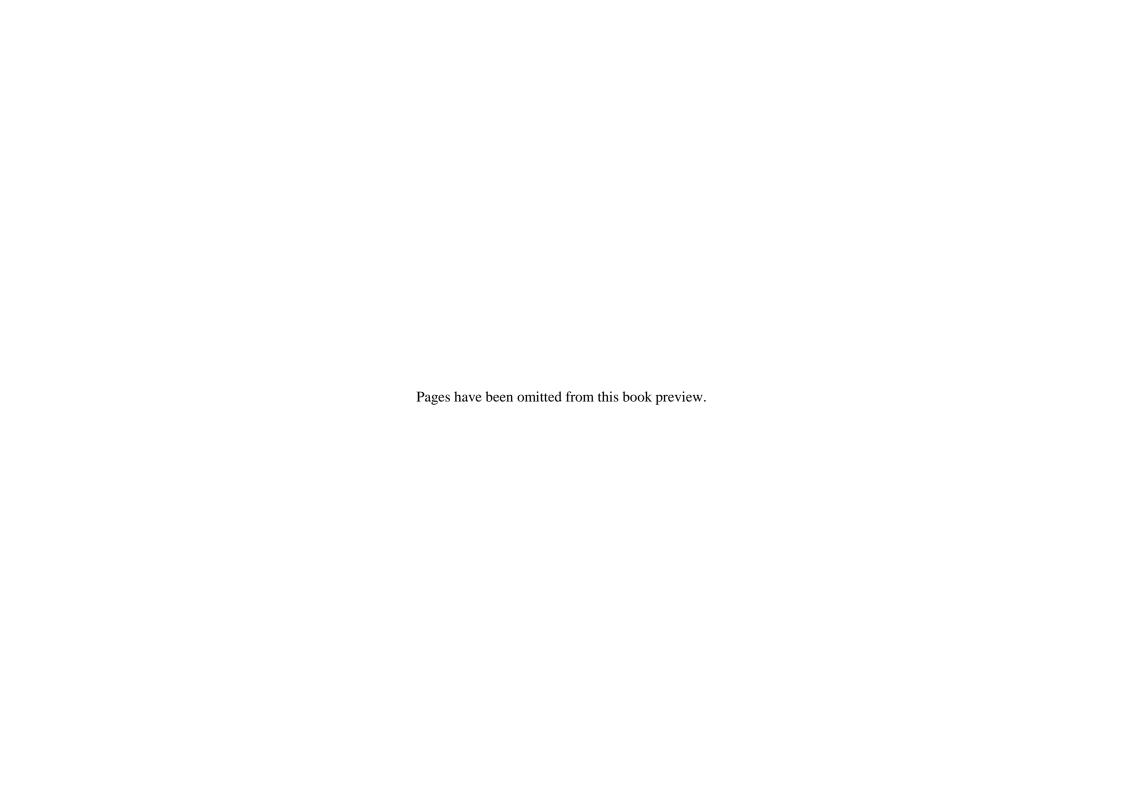
ALL-KNOWING: Not that either! I am me, who's not me! Don't you ask! Lest your questions will increase more vagueness, whereas it is not vagueness that you want!

PATANI: Right! It's the wind that I want!

ALL-KNOWING: The winds are on strike! I've already told you that! The winds have stopped blowing! Only the dust remains! Dry and parched! Like the Sahara desert!

PATANI: What will happen to us?

ALL-KNOWING: Imagine yourself in the middle of the parched Sahara desert! Its sand burning! Its heat burning! And you're



JOHAN JAAFFAR

These are my plays...

This anthology of stage plays is really very personal in nature. This is my gift to the world of theatre and the arts world in general. I give these seven plays for public consumption, including for those who know me in the non-literary world.

I wrote in all sorts of genre – from novels (three of which have been published), three children's novels, short stories which have been compiled in an anthology, two collection of plays for youths, besides poems; but I am better known as a dramatist – whether as a playwright, a director or an actor. I also wrote plays for television (an anthology has been published) besides writing scripts for sitcoms including the very popular TV3 series of *Pi Mai Pi Tang Tu* (Going Nowhere).

I am indebted to the arts. I am indebted to my artiste friends who had been with me from the first moment I was introduced to the world of the arts, including those who are directly involved in the company, Media Prima Berhad, of which I am now the Chairman.

I have gone through many eras – from the era of the *bangsawan* and *sandiwara* to the realistic theatre period, the absurd theatre period, and God knows what the eras or isms. My introduction to the world of theatre began when I was just 10 years old, I "wrote" plays when I was just in primary school. From the many scripts which I wrote, the seven published in this anthology, might not even be the best. But, at the very least, these seven plays are (i) closest to my heart; (ii) they have been much discussed and analyzed, and most importantly, (iii) this is what I could do for now.

In his review of "The Princess" which was staged on the 20th and 21st October, 1979 at the Experimental Theatre of University Malaya, Dinsman wrote in the *Dewan Budaya* (December 1979).

"For those who have followed the development of Johan Jaaffar since 'My City Oh My City' in 1975, they must surely agree that with 'The Princess', Johan has finally found the form of theatre which he had been searching for and experimented with."

These plays are really the manifestations from a very long search, all of which have been interesting, but exhausting nevertheless.

That search actually has not ended.

- JOHAN JAAFFAR





