

11/08/2000

Bard's relevance in the Internet age

Mazlan Nordin

ONCE presented at the Sultan Idris Training College - later renamed Universiti Perguruan Sultan Idris - in Tanjong Malim was a play by Shakespeare translated into Malay. Also in the audience were primary school pupils, including this scribe, from the nearby Sekolah Latihan.

So it was that we listened to Hamlet's soliloquy "To be, or not to be. That is the question." And there was Lady Macbeth, described as Shakespeare's most infamous female.

Some years later at the Malay College Kuala Kangsar (MCKK) Shakespeare's play, Julius Caesar was presented. Always remembered was the scene when Caesar was stabbed by his friend Brutus, and he cried "Et tu, Brute?"

All this was before the war. Presentation of the bard's plays ceased some time after independence.

Rather surprising was a reference to Brutus during a spirited debate in an Umno general assembly many years ago.

It came from Annuar Musa, a young delegate from Kelantan (much later Datuk and appointed Minister for Rural Development). Who's Brutus? Who's Cassius, another Umno delegate was heard to ask.

Commenting on the Roman politician's character was party president Datuk Seri Dr. Mahathir Mohamad in his winding up address.

Welcomed, therefore, in these days of the mighty Internet is the thrust to cultivate the interest in literature and instil a love for reading of books. One such is as in the 15-week English literature Workshop now being conducted by this newspaper and especially directed to students. It is meant:

- \* To get students thinking more creatively, imaginatively, critically, to expand their world-view and help them give subjective responses to events that surround them.

- \* To give students the vocabulary to express their thoughts and feelings.

By the end of the period students will be able to compose their own poems, write short stories and plan their essays. They should be able also to end up with a vocabulary of at least 2,500 more words.

The teachers have been carefully selected for their ability to establish and for their interest in literature.

It has been said, though, in this context that many teachers don't read much outside their favourite magazines.

Question: how then could the love for literature be imparted to students? Could this be because most are trained in teaching English as a second language and have no background in reading literature?

It is not just about Shakespeare but also about other writers being viewed through the window of books. Quote: "We learn of Greece through Thucydides and Herodotus, of Russia through Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, of France through Balzac and Proust. When a foreigner sees Britain, he sees with the eye of Shakespeare, Austen, Dickens, Trollope, Joyce."

To which will be added the works of Naguib Mahfouz, the Egyptian Nobel Prize winner, Pramody Ananta Toer, Indonesian novelist, and Nobel Prize winner-in-waiting, or V.S. Naipaul.

Not many in this country speak or read French, but there is the translation of Marcel Proust's 17-volume Remembrance of Things Past, often praised by English writers. Which this scribe has yet to read. Shame!

A good read is one which has won the prestigious Booker Prize, founded

in 1969. After 25 years, Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* which won in 1981 was chosen the best of the lot, the "Booker of Bookers", in 1993. His reputation plummeted however, after he wrote *Satanic Verses*.

In 1997 the higher-selling quality paper in London, *Sunday Telegraph* asked 12 eminent and famously well-read people to choose their 10 favourite works. Among them: novelist Doris Lessing, Historian of ideas Isiah Berlin, playwright Harold Pinter and author Germaine Greer. Only one chose Rushdie.

All of which goes to show that one does not write a bestseller everytime. There are other lessons for writers themselves, a few guilty of hubris.

There is the lesson also from Homer's *Iliad*, described as the first work of Western literature with its tale of myth and reality. As a historian puts it later: "*Iliad* tells what had happened in the past, but it also embodied the values of the present."

A quote from a urban parent goes to the heart of Literature Workshop now being conducted: "There is a place for literature so we will never lose sight of the qualities we want to shape our lives. All the things that make us human, that teach us the values of love, forgiveness, compassion, sharing, harmony and all the moral things which our forefathers held dear to their hearts. These are taught through literature and these are the qualities we should carry forward to the next century and beyond." Amen.

(END)