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Dr Who indeed

By Shannon Teoh

FOR three decades, Lat has captured the lighter side of Dr M. His spot-on observations have now been compiled into Dr. Who?!, which, says SHANNON TEOH, sums up the essence of the cartoonist and the former premier.

THE gentle irony of Dr. Who?! is vintage Lat - who, after all, would not recognise the former prime minister?

But in yet another masterstroke, Datuk Mohd Nor Khalid's cover illustration has captured the essence of Tun Dr Mahathir Mohamad as an ordinary citizen.

It shows a scene at a local market, where a bunch of shoppers can scarcely believe that Dr Mahathir himself is choosing vegetables just behind them.

The tagline, Capturing the life and times of a Leader in cartoons... refers to the former prime minister; however, it might just as well refer to the cartoonist himself - a "leader in cartoons".

Lat's work has always been an incisive commentary on the times with regards to Malaysian life.

From the Scenes of Malaysian Life series published in the New Straits Times that usually focuses on current sociopolitical moods, to his nostalgic and evocative comic novel, Kampung Boy, his vast body of work never fails to provide insights into our community.

Coincidentally, for the past three decades or so, Dr Mahathir's role in politics - mainly as prime minister - has made him an inescapable part of Malaysian life.

And so this biographical work by the beloved cartoonist, on arguably the most famous Malaysian premier, invariably covers a much wider spectrum.

Dr. Who?! is for the most part chronological, beginning with Dr M as a funky Education Minister with a memorable pair of sideburns, and rounding up with his retirement from politics.

Visually, one can see that Lat's caricatures of Dr Mahathir have become progressively more economical in line.

In the early days, Lat struggled with the stern lips, eyebrows and hair. But he eventually settled on the glasses and nose, the two features which are unmistakably Dr Mahathir.

The use of the recognisable combined with the bizarre allows for Lat's take on Dr Mahathir - and local politics by extension - to be critical but always light-hearted.

In one such cartoon, Dr Mahathir et al are seen visiting parliamentary constituents and helping with household chores in an effort to secure votes: a scene that's ridiculous to the point of side-splitting humour, but not without some sense of truth.

At the height of the Constitutional Amendment issue in 1988, Lat drew a cartoon depicting the then prime minister's gardener giving him advice on the real situation in Malaysia.

That piece in particular is a vivid illustration of how Lat has never shied away from juxtaposing the plebeian with the highest office in Government.

It can be said, however, that in the case of Dr Mahathir, this is not so difficult. His policies, ranging from "Look East" to the famous punch-card, have constantly served as a reminder to the higher-ups to retain a self-honesty that is synonymous with the average Malaysian.

And while his over-achieving attitude was apparent for all to see, his

everyday mannerisms made him seem less superhuman.

News on TV always had him practically slouching in his chair and sporting a "kampung" accent and vocab. This was Dr Mahathir as Everyman, and so, he has become a shoe-in for a supporting role in random jokes on Malaysia.

Oftentimes, Lat appears to incorporate Dr Mahathir into a cartoon rather than making him the centrepiece. The effect is that of the good doctor being in the wrong place at the wrong time.

One of the cartoons on the then tallest flagpole in the world, which stands in Merdeka Square in Kuala Lumpur, has him seeking treatment for a stiff neck from admiring it. That two-panel cartoon uses just under 20 words - verbose by Lat's standards. He is a firm believer of brevity being the soul of wit and some of the cartoons use no words at all.

At just under 150 pages, one wonders if the word count manages to even double that of this article.

Lat has been throughout his career, an ambassador of Malaysian art, Dr Mahathir, an ambassador of the Malaysian people.

Dr. Who?! is a poetic culmination of both their lives.

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