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# Bee-ing writers

By SHARMILLA GANESAN entertainment@thestar.com.my



Art imitate s life: Ariff Faisal plays Abraham in The Bee Project, a sitespecific performance staged at The Bee cafe at Solaris Dutamas by performing arts company TerryandTheCuz and Australiabased The Rubix Cube.

**A uniquely-staged theatre performance deconstructs the writing process with loads of wacky humour.**

We're seated in a cafe, enjoying our dinner and chatting when one particular conversation becomes irresistibly louder.

Two women, one a rich Datin and the other, her husband's secretary, seem to be planning a party for the Datuk. Soon, though, we realise there's more to this than meets the eye – the wife is, in fact, confronting the sexy secretary about the latter's affair with her husband.

The conversation quickly turns nasty as the secretary taunts the Datin about stealing her husband away, and she in turn, declares all-out war: "It's on, b\*\*\*\*!" the Datin yells before storming out.

"Wait, wait, wait," interjects a guy seated mysteriously in a corner, to another beside him. "Datin Saras is a classy lady; she would never do that. I think we need to re-write the end of that scene."

And so, the scene is "re-written", and we see the Datin and secretary play out a few possible ways the scene could end, each funnier than the last.

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Showdown between Jerrica Lai (left) who plays Datuk Jackson Mo's secretary Charity Ho, and Sandra Sodhy who plays his ex-wife Datin Saras, in *The Bee Project*.

This was our introduction to *The Bee Project*, a site-specific performance staged recently at The Bee cafe in Solaris Dutamas, Kuala Lumpur. A collaboration between performing arts company TerryandTheCuz and Australia-based The Rubix Cube, the production's concept was decidedly meta: it was a show ostensibly based on the process of developing TerryandTheCuz's previous production, *Klue,Doh!* (staged last year).

Played to perfection by Terence Conrad and The Cuz (as he prefers to be known), the two writers orchestrating the proceedings were hilarious yet familiar: one wanted bullets, bosoms and bottoms in their magnum opus, while the other wanted art, heart and subtexts (though he wasn't averse to poaching famous lines from Hollywood blockbusters either).

And so, ideas, characters and scenes literally came to life and evolved around us as the two scribes bickered while coming up with (and discarding) idea after idea.

The plot, a fluid concept in this production, would be familiar to those who caught *Klue,Doh!* last year: business tycoon Datuk Jackson Mo has been murdered just before his wedding to his secretary Charity Ho (Jerrica Lai), and everyone in the house has good reason to have done the deed, including his ex-wife Datin Saras (Sandra Sodhy), brother-in-law Alan (Clarence Kuna), son Abraham (Ariff Faisal) and maid Gangbang (Shirin Jauhari).

What happened, however, was not as important as how it happened, as the story got written and re-written with increasing wackiness, genre-hopping from Tarantino-esque mayhem to musical numbers to action blockbuster bombast. It was a seemingly-simple concept that concealed some clever ideas; besides laying bare the pains and processes of writing, the show also shrewdly poked fun at the very genres it mashed up, while critiquing the inherent commercialism of most art.

A big part of *The Bee Project's* appeal was its staging. Having the show happen around its audience was a clever way of breaking the fourth wall, creating a sense of intimacy and making us feel a part of the shenanigans. There was a spontaneous feel, thanks to us not quite knowing where to look for what might happen next.

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An outstanding performance by Terence Conrad (left) and The Cuz (as he prefers to be known) as the writers in *The Bee Project*.

Co-director and co-writer Martin Blum handled the difficulties of such a staging expertly, and the technical crew, particularly sound designer Rob Stewart, should be credited for their excellent work as well.

I did feel, though, that capitalising on the cafe setting (and fly-on-the-wall opportunities) even more would have been to the show's advantage – after the first few scenes, the sense of a specific place was somewhat lost. Furthermore, the show occasionally operated on the assumption that everyone would have watched *Klue, Doh!*, and so several self-referential jokes went over some heads.

It was obvious from the audience's reaction, though, that *The Bee Project's* premise alone had made the show a success. That said, the real strength of the production was that, even once the central conceit was exposed, it remained equally captivating. This was thanks to the show's irresistibly broad and bawdy sense of humour, which kept everyone in stitches the entire way through.

The cast deserved kudos for taking on several challenges: performing right in the midst of the audience, embodying the various genres and styles the script explored, and delivering humour by the spades. While their chemistry took a while to warm up, once it did, there was no stopping them.

It was the interactions between Terence and The Cuz, however, that really gave the show its edge. Their natural delivery and frat-boy humour, coupled with some brilliant witticisms, were totally reminiscent of what a real conversation between two young(ish?) male writers would be like, and framed the action very well. (My personal favourite line of the night: "Sex and murder go together like bak kut teh and you char kuay!")

In the end, *The Bee Project's* biggest success may in fact be uniting the two extremes that these two "writers" represent: the merging of high-concept staging and subtexts with a wicked sense of fun and accessibility.

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