

REVIEW

Play marks maturity of theatre

Do not go if you want to see just nudity

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LIFE!
By Hannah Pandian

Drama
OFF CENTRE
By The Necessary Stage
Drama Centre

IT WAS a quiet, stunned audience that left the Drama Centre on Wednesday night.

Off Centre whipped the viewer up from the moment it started, hurtling on a holographic swing between the beauty of a Van Gogh and the terror of an Edvard Munch scream.

Vinod and Saloma (Abdul Latiff Abdullah and Sakinah binte Dollah) are ex-mental patients.

Vinod, the son of a judge, is a straight A's Raffles Junior College alumnus with his own telephone, while Saloma is a vocational institute student whose highest hopes are the factory production line.

Vinod has severe depression and Saloma, schizophrenia, and their relationship becomes a study of love-against-the-odds, part of playwright Haresh Sharma's explicit intention to stress the love and support the mentally ill need.

The actors shift from characters Vinod and Saloma to narrators who argue with Vinod and Saloma and attempt to bring reason into their minds. This double discourse helps to fracture personas, and takes the exploration of schizophrenia to a deeper level.

This is followed up beautifully in the extended Class 95FM radio image, when Vinod and Saloma, embarrassed about dedicating too many songs to one another, use different names and accents each time.

Music creeps into spots that the script dares not blunder into. In 1990, an AIDS benefit video was made in which current pop stars gave old Cole Porter parlour lyrics a shocking sadness. Very much the same happens in *Off Centre*.

Elton John singing: "It's a little bit funny, this feeling inside" and Boyz II Men crooning: "Though we've come to the end of the road, yet I can't let go" hit you between the eyes with a twisted, tragic irony.

Sharma and director Alvin Tan have come far, taking you into a Malay working class home as unself-consciously as Vinod quotes Yeats' *Second Coming*: "Turning and turning in the widening gyre. The falcon cannot hear the falconer. Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold."

Abdul Latiff Abdullah handles his taxing role with tenacity while Sakina Dollah is a true gem, slipping from credible narrator to skirt-plucking schizophrenic without "star" Meryl Streep-type labourings.

Sharma's minority voice has become subtler. In *Glass Roots* (1992) gambolling Happies and Sneezies formed a maudlin, oppressed minority but here, though the characters are ethnic minorities, the point is not thrashed.

Off Centre pounds home the importance of social and familial support for the mentally ill – but not didactically. Saloma's individual needs are blotted out by the enormous shadow cast by her mother, while Vinod's individual needs billow and echo in the coldness of an unsympathetic family.

Common? Indeed, Vinod is a catcher in the rye: "The kiasu suicide is to collect rope, knives, guns, everything also must have," says Vinod. "And the slow suicide is to stay in Singapore." There is nothing insidious about this white-hot fury of an intelligent, unlucky man stuck as a cog in the wheel for the rest of his life.

In another scene, an army senior bullies Vinod; the scene crystallises a universal anger against bullies. To see the play as an indictment of national service, or any other authority would be unfortunate, pushing Singapore back several steps toward morality sketches and cardboard figures.

Off Centre marks a new maturity in Singapore theatre, addressing an audience prepared to be challenged. Though at moments, the taut dramatic line sags and the dialogue veers towards tedium, the gravity of the subject gives one endurance.

The nudity? If that is why you want to see *Off Centre*, sell your ticket to someone who respects the arts. Get a seat for *Sliver* instead.

**Off Centre
Review**

Off Centre is on at the Drama Centre At 8pm until Monday. Tickets at \$8, \$12 and \$15 are available at Victoria Theatre, Tangs, Centrepont and The Substation. Call 738-6355 for bookings.
