

# Bard casts a spell in Anwar cell

Shakespeare let the former Malaysian politician fly free from the four walls around him, reports **Helen Musa**

**W**HEN former Malaysian deputy prime minister Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim faces the World Shakespeare Congress this morning in Brisbane, he will do so not as a literary scholar, but as a human being.

Anwar has flown in for the summit, at which experts like author David Malouf, theatre director Gale Edwards and the University of Pennsylvania's Professor Ania Loomba have been airing their views on the Bard of Avon since Sunday.

One academic, the University of Queensland's Dr Rob Pensalfini, has even had young male prisoners at Borallon Correctional Centre learning and performing scenes from Shakespeare, whose work he says is an antidote to violence.

Anwar's presence at the congress has surprised many. This, after all, is the ambitious political leader, long expected to succeed the former Malaysian Prime Minister Dr Mahathir Mohamed in the country's top job but, rather in the manner of Peter Costello, so long sidelined that a once cordial relationship turned sour.

In what many commentators have depicted as a set-up, after Anwar led a demonstration in Kuala Lumpur in 1998, he was jailed under sodomy and corruption charges. He was eventually freed in 2004 by the country's new Prime Minister, Abdullah Badawi.

Anwar now travels the world lecturing on Islam and democratic institutions, as he will do tomorrow at the Great Hall in Parliament House as the guest of the ANU Centre for Democratic Institutions. He is a visiting professor in the School of Foreign Service at Washington DC's Georgetown University, where he still has one semester to go lecturing on the differences between South-east Asian and Middle Eastern Islam. Ironically, and this must irk the now retired Mahathir, he is also a consultant to the World Bank on governance and accountability.

"Is Shakespeare still relevant?" — that's the title of a round table discussion at the congress hosted by Phillip Adams. Well, to Dato Seri Anwar, he plainly is.

I caught up with Anwar by phone on Monday. He was in Kuala Lumpur, having just returned from Doha in Qatar.

"I am in debt to Shakespeare, because I was able to fly away from that small constraint of those four walls during incarceration, to become this major spectator of this classic work of that great genius," he says.

Anwar makes no bones about the fact that he is a relative newcomer to Shakespeare, and no literary expert. Congress convenor Professor Richard Fotheringham managed to persuade Anwar to participate because his own Shakespeare story was a genuine one, not a set up, and because he had a personal story of redemption to tell. "I'm no Shapiro," he tells me, referring to the scholar James Shapiro, author of *A Year in the Life of William Shakespeare*.

I asked Australia's most celebrated Shakespeare actor and the founding director of the Bell Shakespeare Company, John Bell, whether he credited that Anwar was saved by Shakespeare. Bell is sorry to be missing Anwar's speech and has sent *Romeo and Juliet* to Brisbane, but he's busy rehearsing the role of Prospero.

While Bell is coming from a different angle, having never experienced to the same extent the oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely, the law's delay or the insolence of office, Bell says, "Absolutely, it happened to me."

To the young Bell, the initial impact of Shakespeare on his life was aesthetic, based on the "extraordinary phenomenon of Shakespeare" to conjure up, even in broad daylight, a mythic landscape.

Bell speculates that it was just such a totality of experience that helped Anwar while he was behind bars.

"Yes, it can take you out of yours, it's spiritually uplifting," Bell says. And while it can have a philosophical or humanitarian application, Bell says, to him it's more an experience. "With me it's a substitute for religion."

That is clearly not the case for Anwar, who has balanced his reading of the Shakespearean canon with his reading of the Holy Koran.

Anwar now argues that Shakespeare was by no means areligious, as many like Bell have claimed.

"He did focus on the question of religion,"



**BEEN THERE:** Actor John Bell says he empathises with Anwar's sense of salvation.

Anwar says. "Not in the narrow confines of worship, but more in the sense of having a universal message.

"There is a right attitude in many of his main characters," Anwar goes on. "I sense that."

In *Hamlet*, for instance, the prince must consider the consequences of acting. The unrighteous king tries to pray but cannot.

For six months, he tells me, during what he now dismisses as "all the hoo-ha, hoo-ha", Anwar was not given clearance to read anything other than the Koran. That he did, reaping the benefits of the ethical and

philosophical elements in the holy book that devout Muslims do in a time of crisis. But then his counsel won him the right to read some other literature.

Immediately he asked for the Riverside edition of *The Complete Works of Shakespeare*. Leather bound and "looking classical", Anwar told me, it was considered a safe book for the incarcerated leader to read.

By the time he was released in September 2004, when the Malaysian Federal Court overturned the sodomy conviction, he had read the main Shakespearean canon four times over.

To Anwar, Shakespeare, first and foremost, gave him the kind of ethical and spiritual guidance that you might find in the scriptures. Describing him as "a great genius", Anwar rejects the view of Shakespeare as essentially a phenomenon of the west. "I see Shakespeare as a major figure of international and humanitarian dimension", he says — and one speaking out against tyranny.

"In the solitude of my prison cell ... Shakespeare appeared to me as a brilliant genius of all times and for all cultures."

It was Shakespeare's acute moral sensibility that first captured Anwar's imagination. Citing T. S. Eliot's concept of the objective correlative — an image or metaphor arousing emotional responses in the reader — Anwar says that in *Hamlet*, his favourite Shakespearean play, the contrast between evil and good is stark and unmistakable.

It's small matter that learned scholars have found moral ambiguity in *Hamlet*. To Anwar, the sensitive, brooding Danish prince represents nobility and right-



mindedness. By contrast, while Anwar very much admires *Macbeth* the play, the main character doesn't much appeal to him, though there were times during his prison solitude when he could relate to the spectre of the dagger hanging in the air before the Scottish king. "You start imagining things", he says.

Other moments in Shakespeare with special resonance for Anwar include the brilliance of Mark Antony in addressing a fickle-minded crowd in *Julius Caesar* — something he knows all too well — and the verses of lamentation in many of the great plays.

You might expect Anwar to have picked up a thing or two from that quintessential politician Richard III, but he relegates the play to the second rank among Shakespeare's works. Apart from *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *Julius Caesar*, Anwar also favours *King Lear*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

Prospero's farewell speech in *The Tempest*, he said, encapsulates a theme of reconciliation that he now espouses. He doesn't feel cynical, he says, even after his experiences.

But like Prospero, he is ready for a different stage of his life. Such is the brilliant genius of Shakespeare, Anwar even finds in the speech hints of reconciliation between east (the island) and west (the world Prospero left behind but must return to).

As for bitterness, Anwar prefers, like Coleridge (another favourite writer) to think of "the great ocean of truth . . . all undiscovered before me".

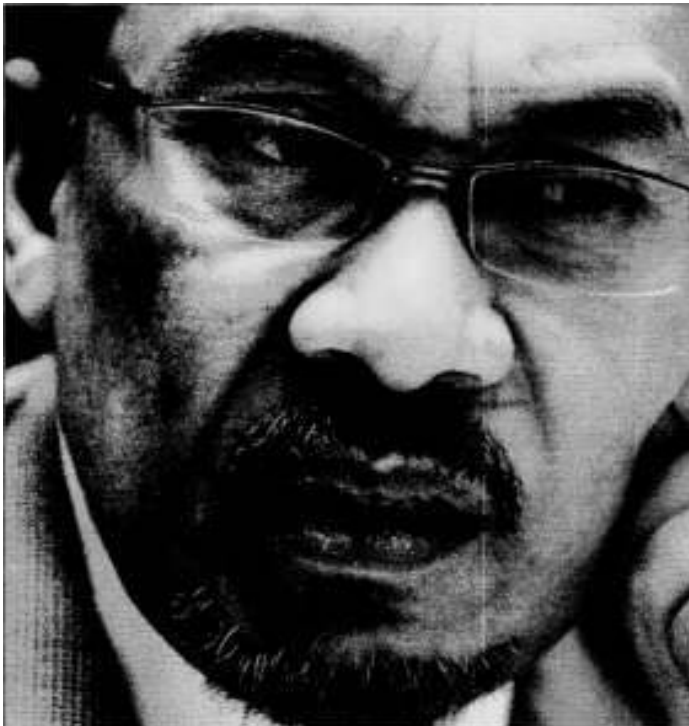
When the World Shakespeare Congress in Brisbane asked him to talk, Anwar first declined. "I'm no scholar, I talk on politics and development," he told the organisers.

That's all right, they said, we want you to give us a reflection of your own experience.

When he does just that today, Anwar could do worse than quote from Prospero's farewell: "Now my charms are all overthrown/And what strength I have is mine own/As you from crimes would pardoned be, /Let your indulgence set me free."

■ Dato Seri Anwar Ibrahim's talk on *Islam and Democracy* is at the Great Hall, Parliament House, tomorrow, at 4pm. All are welcome.

■ The VIII World Shakespeare Congress runs until Friday at the Brisbane City Hall. Visit [www.shakespeare2006.net](http://www.shakespeare2006.net)



SAFE READ: Anwar read the Shakespearean



canon four times over in jail