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boom



a play by jean tay

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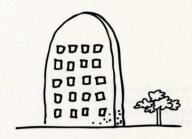
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boom



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PREFACE

In 1997, I wrote a play, titled *Plunge*, about the Asian Economic Crisis and the impact that the stock market crash had on the lives of ordinary individuals in Asia. While workshopping the play during my residency at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2007, I was asked to think about how to update this decade-old play. Half-jokingly, I suggested writing a sequel, titled *Boom*, seeing how soaring property prices were starting to impact ordinary Singaporeans' lives at that time. Indeed, I had even begun to wonder whether progress and prosperity could really be as destructive a force as an economic meltdown.

In particular, the property market boom in 2007 threw the spotlight on the phenomenon known as the en bloc sale (or the collective sale) in Singapore. This is basically the process by which a group of owners can come together to jointly sell their property, and thus command a higher price than if they were to sell their units individually. During this period, a large number of older condominium estates came to be sold en bloc to property developers for redevelopment, reaping large windfalls for many owners. Under the law, as long as a majority of at least 80 per cent of owners in these older estates (i.e. greater than 10 years old) were agreeable to the sale, the en bloc sale could proceed. Unfortunately, this also meant that there was a small but increasingly vocal minority of owners who objected to the sales, but had to sell their homes against their will. Their plight has been vividly documented in numerous media reports which have described the destructive impact of such collective sales, and how they have turned friendly neighbours into bitter enemies.

Divisive as it may have been, the debate surrounding en bloc sales is merely one facet of a larger issue—namely, the question of how to hang on to our history and heritage in the face of redevelopment, even as iconic buildings fall victim to the wrecking ball. For this play, I wanted to put a

face to some of the quieter tragedies that might go unnoticed during the inexorable march of progress. I also wanted to explore the tension between the aspirations of the younger generation of Singaporeans, and the desire to hang on to the past and memories, as embodied by these old buildings.

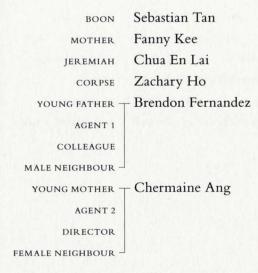
Even the dead have not been spared in the relentless onslaught of progress and land redevelopment. Since 1998, the government has limited the burial period for all graves to 15 years, in view of the limited land available for cemeteries. This has resulted in the mass exhumation of a large number of graves, during which time the remains have been either cremated and placed in columbariums, or reburied according to the deceased's religious requirements. In any case, this mandatory "relocation" of the dead has led to some uncanny parallels between en bloc sales and exhumations, which I have enjoyed exploring in this play.

I would like to thank the Royal Court Theatre in London for their encouragement in developing *Boom*, as well as Gaurav Kripalani, Tracie Pang and the rest of the team at the Singapore Repertory Theatre for their support in shaping the script and first bringing it to the stage. Last but not least, I would like to thank God, who has made all of this possible, and my long-suffering family for their unconditional love and support.

JEAN TAY, 2009

PRODUCTION NOTES

Boom was first produced in Singapore by the Singapore Repertory Theatre on 18 September 2008. The production was directed by Tracie Pang; costume design was also by Tracie Pang; set design was by Wong Chee Wai; lighting was by Yo Shao Ann and sound was by Darren Ng. The cast was as follows:



CHARACTERS

BOON A property agent, male in his mid- to late twenties

MOTHER Boon's mother, female in her sixties

JEREMIAH A civil servant, male in his thirties

CORPSE Male in his forties

YOUNG FATHER Male in his forties

AGENT 1 Male in his forties

COLLEAGUE Male in his forties

MALE NEIGHBOUR Male in his forties

YOUNG MOTHER Female in her thirties

AGENT 2 Female in her thirties

DIRECTOR Female in her thirties

FEMALE NEIGHBOUR Female in her thirties

PROLOGUE



PROLOGUE

Lights up on a cemetery. We see a headstone, standing in the silence. The sound of construction begins, booming so loudly, even the ground shudders. One of the headstones topples over amidst the booming. As we watch, a hand slowly emerges from the grave, and sets the headstone upright again. The booming fades away. Lights fade.

ACT 1

Moderation

ACT 1 : SCENE 1

14

SCENE 1:

THE SHOW FLAT

Boon, an enthusiastic property agent, bursts forth triumphantly, leading a chorus of property agents in their long-sleeved shirts and ties.

1	BOON	Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! To heaven!
	AGENT 1	Paradise.
	AGENT 2	Eden.
	BOON	Your dream home!
5	AGENT 1	Luxurious living!
	AGENT 2	Spacious layout!
	BOON	Designer decor!
	AGENT 1	En bloc potential!
	AGENT 2	Guaranteed returns!
10	BOON	Bring cheque!
	AGENT 1	Must view!
	AGENT 2	Highest offer secures!
	BOON	Facing north!
	AGENT 1	South!
15	AGENT 2	East!
	BOON	But never west!
	AGENT 1	Panoramic view of the city!
	AGENT 2	Of the sea!
	BOON	Of greenery!
20	AGENT 1	Of the swimming pool!
	AGENT 2	Of other people's swimming pools!
	BOON	Other people's living rooms!
	AGENT 1	Other people's backyards!
	AGENT 2	And other people's dirty laundry.

1		Boon looks doubtfully at them, but forges on.
	BOON	Prime location! Near Orchard.
	AGENT 1	Near amenities.
	AGENT 2	Near good school.
5	BOON	Near MRT ¹ .
	AGENT 1	Near future MRT.
	AGENT 2	Near future casino.
	AGENT 1	Near gambling den.
	AGENT 2	Porn shops.
10	AGENT 1	Funeral parlours.
	AGENT 2	Cemeteries.
	BOON	(uncertainly) Oi! Hello! Cemeteries?
	AGENT 2	Yah whatPeaceful and green.
	BOON	Porn shops? Gambling den?
15	AGENT 1	Exciting nightlife.
	BOON	What?
	AGENT 2	Oi, oi, oiHow long have you been
		selling property?
	BOON	Well, I
20	AGENT 1	Do you even know how to?
	BOON	I think so
	AGENT 1	I tell you ah, the trick is imagination. You see,
		you're not selling a flat. You're not selling a condo,
		a terrace house, a semi-D2, good-class bungalow,
25		a mansion on a hill. No. You are selling a
		lifestyle. That is, a style of life that they do not
		yet possess, but are on the cusp of attaining.
	BOON	(stumbling) Cupsps?
	AGENT 2	That's right, cusp. Use words like that, that they
30		don't understand, but that smell of high-class

	air-con air, which they long to breathe.
AGENT 1	And embellish.
BOON	Embellish?
AGENT 1	AhWhen you show them the window from which
	they can see that super ugly tree, don't just say,
	look, a tree. Let them imagine being woken up
	in the morning, by the gentle chirping ofof
AGENT 2	Orioles.
AGENT 1	Ah! Very goodOrioles in the tree. Don't just
	say, you can fit a double bed in this room.
	Let them see themselves in that king-sized bed,
	wahsnuggled under a goose-feather duvet,
	gently roused by the sunlight seeping in
	between the leaves of that super hou kua ³ tree,
	and the soft warbling of the birds.
AGENT 2	Orioles
AGENT 1	AhOrioles, that perch obligingly on those
	branches, without shitting on any of your walls,
	or your new BMW 7 Series.
BOON	I don't know, man
AGENT 2	If the park is a sweaty 15-minute walk away, then
	pleasemake use of it! Let them imagine their
	children happily climbing trees, and cycling
	around the park.
BOON	But
AGENT 2	Never mind if actually, the poor gin na ⁴ is going
	to spend most of his time locked up in that
	pathetic excuse of a study, doing 10-year series ⁵ .
AGENT 1	Tell them about those "good" schools within 2 km,
	and their imagination will fill in the gaps with
	AGENT 1 AGENT 2 AGENT 1 AGENT 2 AGENT 1 BOON AGENT 2

Mass Rapid Transit

semi-detached house

hou kua [Hokkien] good-looking

gin na [Hokkien] child

⁵ a compilation of past years' examination papers



"Jean Tay is one of the most gifted playwrights I have come across in years." - Gaurav Kripalani, Artistic Director, Singapore Repertory Theatre

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Welcome to the surreal world of Boom, where civil servants wake the dead, corpses are terrified of cremation, old women are besieged in their own homes, and ah bengs still dream of being Superman. Boom tells the story of an elderly woman and her propertyagent son, who are struggling over the potential

en bloc sale of their home in Singapore. Their destinies become intertwined with that of an idealistic civil servant, Jeremiah, who is facing the greatest challenge of his careerpersuading a reluctant corpse to yield its memories. Boom is a quirky yet poignant tale about the relocation of both the dead and

the living, and how personal stories get left

behind in the inexorable march of progress.

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Written by economist-turned-playwright Jean Tay, Boom was conceptualised at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2007, and developed and first staged by the Singapore Repertory Theatre in September 2008. It was nominated for Best Original Script at The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards in 2009 and has been selected as an 'O'- and 'N'-Level literature text in Singaporean schools.



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