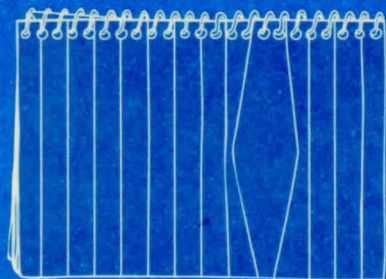


“The gravest and most compelling work of Tan’s career.”—*The Straits Times*

fear of writing



a play by
tan tam how

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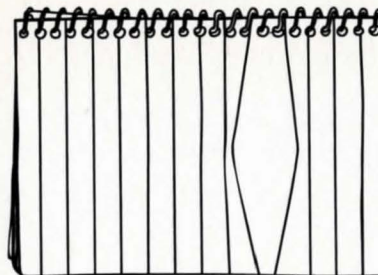
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Published in Singapore by
Epigram Books
www.epigrambooks.sg

Cover illustration by
Stephanie Wong

National Library Board, Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Tan, Tarn How.
Fear of writing : a play / by Tan Tarn How.
- Singapore : Epigram, 2012.
p. cm.
ISBN : 978-981-07-1452-9

1. Fathers and daughters - Drama. 2. Censorship - Drama. I. Title.

PR9570.S53
S822 -- dc22 OCN776768422

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First Edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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CONTENTS

| | |
|---------------------------------|-------|
| Introduction by C. J. W.-L. Wee | xi |
| Production Notes | xxi |
| Characters | xxiii |
| <hr/> | |
| ACT 1 | 1 |
| ACT 2 | 15 |
| ACT 3 | 71 |
| <hr/> | |
| Acknowledgements | 102 |
| About the Playwright | 103 |
| About the Publisher | 104 |

ARE WE ALL GUILTY?

ON READING TAN TARN HOW'S *FEAR OF WRITING*

Introduction by C. J. W.-L. Wee

On the website of a policy research institution, we are told that “Mr. Tan Tarn How is a Senior Research Fellow” and “[h]is research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy. [...] He was a journalist for nearly one and a half decades [...] and he] has also been a teacher and television scriptwriter and is an award-winning playwright. He graduated from Cambridge University.”

Given the above profile, we might well ask: is the play *Fear of Writing* then mainly about this Mr. Tan's difficulty in writing a new play after a gap of ten years? Is it about writer's block? And what is this fear of writing? Is Mr. Tan the same as the character in the play called the Writer who struggles over the question of whether, in the final analysis, his problem is more about a lack of his own bravery in writing what he wishes to be a “political” play than anything else? When Mr. Tan is mentioned directly in Act One, the Director tells us that after “Tarn How handed in the script[,] we, as required by law, sent it to the MDA—that's the Media Development Authority, I can see some of you [in the audience] don't know that. MDA, a.k.a. the official censor.”¹ The MDA usually returns a response to the company “[with] either yes or no [for the performance].”² And so, here is the rub for the Director: it is now the opening night “and we have not heard from them.”³ What is the theatre company to do?

So is the play, in the end, actually *about* this Mr. Tan who faces challenges first in writing a play and then in getting it approved for production, given what seem to be difficult legalities over public performances? Maybe—or maybe not. Or, perhaps, what is also pertinent is that the play becomes a very deliberate and even confusing *provocation*

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Fear of Writing was staged by Theatreworks in September 2011 at 72-13. It was directed by Ong Keng Sen and produced by Tay Tong, with lighting by Andy Lim and set and costumes by Myung Hee Cho. The role of actor was played by four persons. The cast was as follows:

| | |
|------------------|------------------|
| DIRECTOR & ACTOR | Tan Kheng Hua |
| PRODUCER & ACTOR | Janice Koh |
| ACTOR | Lok Meng Chue |
| ACTOR | Serene Chen |
| MDA OFFICIAL | Ling Poh Foong |
| ENSEMBLE | Dayah Rahim |
| | Faizal Abdullah |
| | Kong Yit Sim |
| | Karina Sindicich |
| | Pavan J. Singh |
| | Nicholas Tee |
| | Wilson Xin |
| | E-van Yeung |

CHARACTERS

DIRECTOR

PRODUCER

ACTOR

Writer, 60

Eric, 29

Returned Overseas Singaporean, 40s

National Day Parade Attendee, 50s

Singaporean Returning From Holiday, 20s

Academic, 30s

Expat, 40s

Stall Holder, 70s

Clown

Director, 40s

Lecturer

Newsreader

Uniquely Singapore Promoter, 20s

Cheong, 50s

Policeman, 50s

Confessor 1 and 2, 30s

MDA OFFICIAL

POLICE OFFICERS 1 AND 2

AUDIENCE MEMBERS 1 TO 8

ACT 1



ACT 1

The set consists not only of the stage, but also of the whole theatre as well as the front of house outside the theatre. In Act 3 of the play, there are several things going on at the same time, with the audience split between those inside the theatre and those outside.

House lights in the theatre do not go down before the play starts. Director enters, as if the play has not started and he is merely making an administrative announcement. He, and later, the other characters in this Act, speaks without polish, like he is ad-libbing, so the words given here are a general guide to what he should say.

1 DIRECTOR Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to
the play tonight. As you may know, this is only
my [first/second/etc] directing effort. It's been
a really great experience, working with the
5 crew, the set designer [name], lighting designer
[name], sound designer [name], costume
designer [name]—heh, guys, thanks a bunch.
And of course Tarn How, who has been really
receptive, I've heard lots of things about him
10 being very unwilling to change anything—
(*in mocking tone*) you know, “every darn word is
sacred”—(*back to normal tone*) that kind of thing.
But he has been surprisingly open to suggestions.
Maybe he's a bit scared and thought that for this
15 play a second opinion would be good. I have to
thank Theatreworks, most of all Keng Sen, who

1 has been extremely supportive and nurturing.
 I am really grateful for that. Of course, the best
 part is working with [name of Actor]. You know
 how difficult it is to carry a one-man show.
 5 Well, buddy, it's been an amazing journey.

But what am I doing, going on like an
 Oscars acceptance speech. As you know,
 Directors don't usually come before the audience
 before a play starts to thank the audience for
 their presence. I am only doing it because...
 10 well, something unexpected has happened.
 And it is really about this that I wish to talk
 about. It's a bit complicated but I'll try to
 explain it best I can.

15 It's all about licences to perform. The law
 requires theatre companies to get a licence if
 they want to put up a play. In order to get a
 licence, the script must be submitted. You
 might know that at one time, certain "trusted"
 20 companies such as Theatreworks were exempt
 from submitting scripts for vetting. I supposed
 they were impressed with our track record, or
 TWorks' record, and believed that we were
 not likely to create trouble. Or because the
 25 government gave so much money to the
 companies like Theatreworks, they thought
 that these companies were not likely to bite the
 hand that fed them. But even with this waiver,
 Theatreworks continued to send in the scripts
 30 for prior vetting. Why? Damn stupid, right?

1 Well, actually, the fact that we were not
 required to submit the script didn't mean
 that they couldn't still censor the play.
 They could come just before the play opened
 and say, heh, we've been hearing things about
 the play, and maybe we should have a look
 at it. They could then ask for cuts. Imagine a
 couple of days before the show started. It would
 be a disaster. Worse still, they could come on
 10 opening night, and just tell us, sorry, guys,
 we can't let you put on the show. Alternatively,
 they could come the day after one of their
 people had seen it—yes, they sometimes buy
 their own tickets, I suppose to check us out,
 15 haha—they could come to us and say, heh,
 I don't think you can continue doing it...
 So in a way, the freedom to not have to send
 in our scripts for prior approval was the
 freedom to hang ourselves with a different
 20 kind of rope.

But, that's history. Because some years ago,
 without many people, even theatre practitioners,
 knowing it, our government decided that even
 those formerly trusted companies had to submit
 their scripts for approval. In Singapore, this
 25 kind of thing is called "liberalisation of
 censorship". But seriously, when Tarn How
 handed in the script we, as required by law, sent
 it to the MDA—that's the Media Development
 Authority, I can see some of you don't know that.
 30

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

“Tan has always had an unerring knack as a playwright for picking up and challenging the political pulse.”—*The Straits Times*

“A scathing indictment. It analyses the very act of writing, and its limits.”—*Today*

The maestro of political plays is back and his latest offering in a decade, *Fear of Writing*, is a groundbreaking commentary on the political landscape of Singapore today.

In *Fear of Writing*, a playwright struggles with writer’s block, a director and producer bemoan their failure to get a government licence to stage their play, and a father writes to his daughter overseas. Seemingly disparate elements are woven together, while the line between art, performance and reality begin to blur dramatically as the play reaches its chilling conclusion.

Fear of Writing is a play that will haunt you while compelling you to decide where you stand on the issues of control and censorship.

It was first staged by Theatreworks in 2011 to critical acclaim.

 **Kinokuniya**

FEAR OF WRITING

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