



PLAYFUL PHOENIX:

Women Write For The Singapore Stage

Edited By Chin Woon Ping

A TheatreWorks Publication

Sponsored by Singapore Press Holdings

The anthology, *Playful Phoenix: Women Write for the Singapore Stage*
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Individual plays

The Woman in a Tree on the Hill © Ovidia Yu

Ordinary Woman © Dana Lam

Wills and Secession © Eleanor Wong

Family © Leow Puay Tin

Quiet The Gorilla © Tan Mei Ching

Diary of a Madwoman © Chin Woon Ping

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TheatreWorks (S) Ltd

Fort Canning Centre

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FOREWORD

During the last four years, Theatreworks Writers' Laboratory has contributed to Singapore's theatre scene by helping to nurture a number of playwrights and providing the impetus to many to begin writing. In this regard, the Laboratory is a success. Singapore Press Holdings is happy to contribute to the development of creativity and Singapore writing.

This anthology is the first of plays written by women to be published by the Writers' Laboratory. It showcases the talent in our women writers, provides an insight into the psyche of women writers, and reveals their concerns as well as their perspectives on life in Singapore.

As in the earlier two compendia, this third one highlights plays that have enjoyed good reviews. It also contains plays yet to be staged, which we are confident will be popular and make their mark in Singapore theatre.

We hope that this book will inspire other budding writers and provide entertainment to one and all.

Denis Tay Koon Tek

Chief Operating Officer

Singapore Press Holdings

FOREWORD

The Singapore Press Holdings has been a supporter and firm believer in Singapore play-writing. They have sponsored the TheatreWorks Writers' Laboratory for the last four years. There is no denying that the Singapore play-writing scene has been enriched by such enthusiasm and we hope that the belief and the support in the programme will continue.

This is the third compendium of Writers' Lab plays published by TheatreWorks. We have decided on an anthology of women's writings to specially focus on these talented playwrights and their insights and concerns. It is also the first time that such an anthology has been published in Singapore. The plays are topical and relevant, yet divergent and varied in their treatment.

We believe that the plays have immediacy and will make their mark in Singapore play-writing.

Tay Tong

General Manager

TheatreWorks (Singapore) Ltd.

INTRODUCTION

This collection is the first of its kind in Singapore to feature women dramatists. Written in English for an English-speaking audience, the plays grapple with the limitations and resources of English-language theatre (ranging from its Anglo-American sources to emergent international forms) by attempting to deconstruct and infuse it with local, multicultural, multi-dialectal idioms and forms. They join a growing body of Anglophone Southeast Asian theatrical works struggling to cultivate a local identity and audience. At the same time, in their focus on women's identity and agency, they break new ground by highlighting the complex dynamics of gender, family and sexuality.

The title invokes the phoenix as a popular symbol of the female principle, suggesting not only the resourcefulness and receptivity of Yin, but also its lighter side, namely, its capacity for flight and transcendence. However, the phoenix may also be understood to be androgynous in traditional Chinese iconography. The ideograms for its name, *feng huang*, for instance incorporate both male and female components. This ambiguity heightens the title's intended pun on the word, "playful", suggesting, on the one hand, theatricality (being full of plays) and, on the other hand, levity (being full of play). It serves, I hope, to de-essentialise notions of gender and women's identity. The playful phoenix remains, then, an ambiguous symbol to break down gender polarities and to present women's identity as fluid and shifting. This spirit of malleability and changeability (also to be found in the popular

figure of Sun Wu Gong, the Monkey) pervades all of the works in this volume.

Not coincidentally, at least two plays deal directly with the thematics of sisterhood. In both Eleanor Wong's and Tan Mei Ching's plays, sisters meet after a separation imposed by contemporary diasporic realities to recognise their differences and bonds. Both plays call up the buried resentments and hostilities families hide and which erupt at moments of crisis. Wong's play pits the sisters, Ellen and Grace, against each other as they sort out the remnants of their deceased mother's estate. While Ellen imagines her lesbianism to be the source of their animosities, it becomes clear that these originate from a deeper sense of betrayal and abandonment on both sisters' part. Only when this fact is acknowledged can they be reconciled. Ultimately, the idea of sisterhood is stretched to accommodate a broader, higher, notion of love and loyalty, one which accepts imperfections of body and will and the idea of a flawed God. Tan's play, similarly, finds — in her own whimsical, elliptical manner — a way to show how sisters can fail to perceive each other's needs, but somehow, through sheer persistence and a willingness to appear foolish and vulnerable, manage to embrace each other.

Leow Puay Tin's play explores women's vulnerabilities and strengths through a multi-generational saga of work and sacrifice. In her play, we are reminded of women's crucial roles not only in the sustenance of pioneering families but also in the building of modern societies in Singapore and elsewhere. As in Wong's, Tan's and other plays, she shows how family relationships evolve ambiguously to bolster and galvanise energies, and, at the same time, to entrap and stifle women.

Dana Lam's, Ovidia Yu's and Chin Woon Ping's plays can also be said to explore ideas of sisterhood. The mode these playwrights choose is less realistic, more poetic perhaps than the other plays, but they share with the latter a similar impulse to explore feminine space and to plumb the depths of female experience and emotion. Lam's dense, cryptic lines revolve around questions of identity and memory ("How to begin?"). They ask questions posed implicitly by all the other plays — what women search for, why they suffer, how they prevail. "I'm looking for the moon," says one of her Women. Yu's Woman climbs up a tree to find herself - a symbol, perhaps, of women's need for space and transcendence. In giving a voice to Noah's wife, the prototype of women behind the scenes in masculinist narratives, she recalls all women from time immemorial who cleaned, cooked, minded the animals and held up half the sky but were written out of the history books. Yu invokes the figure of Nu Wa as an archetypal creator in Chinese mythology and places her in a configuration of modern and premodern feminist characters challenging patriarchal domination. Chin's Madwoman, a female counterpart to Lu Xun's Madman, tells us her journey is not over and she will never arrive.

The original idea and impetus for this book came from Ong Keng Sen, Artistic Director of TheatreWorks, who invited me to edit the collection. To him goes much credit for encouraging and supporting the work of the playwrights in this volume, many of whose plays he has directed and continues to produce. His energy and vision have made it possible for new, exciting voices to be heard on the Singaporean stage. Tay Tong, Michele Lim, Mok Wai Yin, Felicia Chan and Geraldine Koh worked indefatigably against a very tight deadline to help push this project to completion. All

the folks at TheatreWorks deserve much appreciation for making the Singaporean stage a receptive and dynamic space for women.

Chin Woon Ping

Singapore, 1996

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Ovidia Yu

THE WOMAN IN A TREE ON THE HILL

for Neda Miranda Blazevic

Dramatised reading at the TheatreWorks Lab Report 3

3 January 1992 at the Black Box

Featuring Jacintha Abisheganaden and Gerald Chew

Directed by Ovidia Yu

Premiered at the TheatreWorks *Theatre Carnival on the Hill* in
its 1991/92 Season

15 - 26 April 1992 at Fort Canning Centre

Featuring Melvin Chew and Rosita Ng

Directed by Ong Keng Sen

Winner of the Festival First Award at the 1993 Edinburgh
Arts Festival

THE WOMAN IN A TREE ON THE HILL

OVIDIA YU

Ovidia Yu started writing while in Methodist Girls' School. Her first stage piece was performed while she was in Anglo-Chinese Junior College, and she has been writing ever since.

Her plays have been performed by TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, Action Theatre, Arts and Acts, Music & Movement, WOW International and Wayang-Wayang Theatre Company in Singapore, Hong Kong, Kuala Lumpur, Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Recent performances include *Hokkien Mee*, *3 Fat Virgins* and *Playing Mothers*. She is currently working on *Every Day Brings its Miracles* for Singapore General Hospital and *So Pai Seb* for the Peranakan Association.

Characters

WOMAN

NARRATOR

The Woman in a Tree on the Hill © 1996 Ovidia Yu

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THE WOMAN IN A TREE ON THE HILL

for Neda Miranda Blazevic

(WOMAN is sitting in a tree throughout; preferably a highly stylized tree. In the first performance, she appeared on top of a paint-splattered step-ladder. When NU WA speaks, the faint sound of a Chinese flute is heard behind her words.)

WOMAN: I can hardly tell any more whether the waters are going up or coming down. It's so hard to tell. All this grey water and grey sky with no beginning and no end. Sometimes I think that all I can remember from before this water came is a dream. A child's dream of blue skies and green grass and dry earth...

NARRATOR: Wife! Wife! Where art thou, my wife?

WOMAN: I'm up here, Noah! Hanging out the laundry on the boom!

NARRATOR: Wife, Wife, cans't thou see any sign of our winged messenger?

WOMAN: Sorry, Noah. Not a cheep. Looks like your bird's flown the coop good and proper.

By the way, dear, I have some bad news...the mountain lions somehow got out of their pen on C Deck and got up onto B Deck with the ungulates and before anyone knew what was happening...

NARRATOR: Wife, Wife, do not spare me the worst...

WOMAN: They killed the female unicorn. They ate her. All except her horn and four hoofs.

NARRATOR: Wife, Wife, what a calamity... and what became of the male unicorn?

WOMAN: Well, he's upset, naturally. He's got a few scratches here and there, poor creature... and his horn is a little chipped at the tip but he'll live.

NARRATOR: *(To audience)* As anyone can tell you, a male unicorn without a female unicorn is no use when it comes to multiplying and filling the earth. *(Back to wife)* Wife, wife, I charge thee, turn it upon a spit and we and all our house will feast this night...

WOMAN: *(To audience)* And you know who's going to have to do the dirty work, don't you? Yours truly...it's me that's going to have to clonk it on its pretty head and put a bolt through its pretty ear...and me that's going to have to carve through its flesh and hack through its bones...head, neck, best end of neck, sirloin, topside, tenderloin, forequarter, shin...Oh, Birdie, you're back, are you? Poor Birdie, how tired you are. Your little wings are shaking, you can hardly stand. I wish the old man wouldn't keep sending you out, poor Birdie...

NARRATOR: *(To audience)* Through the ages it has always been

a Woman's lot to be weary and to comfort the weary. *(To WOMAN)* Nora, you're always too tired...

WOMAN: But Paul, I'm always so busy, Paul. There's always so much to be done...if only you didn't always throw your shirts onto the floor after you've tried them on and decided not to wear them...

NARRATOR: Nora, I resent the way you always manage to imply that I don't pull my weight around the house. You always do that. You never give me any credit for all the work I put in to support us in our standard of living!

WOMAN: Paul, I never meant to imply—

NARRATOR: I'm sorry, Nora. I've tried to make this marriage work, God knows I've tried. Even though my mother always said that no good would come out of marrying a girl without a university degree, I tried—

WOMAN: Paul, Paul, what are you saying?

NARRATOR: If you just listened to me instead of bleating off in a hundred different directions you would know what I'm trying to say.

WOMAN: But Paul, I'm not sure if you—

NARRATOR: Nora, I'm sorry.

But we both know that this is over.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

Reviews

Eleanor Wong's WILLS AND SECESSION :

"...this is an identifiable, thought-provoking play that will touch men and women alike with a universal question. In Eleanor's words : 'What they will walk away with is maybe the question: What is a family?'"

Theresa Tan, ETC, September 8-22, 1995

Ovidia Yu's THE WOMAN IN A TREE ON THE HILL :

"There's something in a woman that needs a tree. A beautiful and irresistible piece."

Joy Hendry, The Scotsman, August, 1993

Leow Puay Tin's FAMILY :

"...it is ...one of the most original, demanding — in the best sense of the word — and vibrant plays that I have seen, either in this region or in the 10 years I spent abroad as a student."

Alina Rastam, New Straits Times, March 16, 1996

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