

CHONG TZE CHIEN FOUR PLAYS

CHARGED • POOP! • BETWEEN THE DEVIL AND THE
DEEP BLUE SEA • TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

INTRODUCTION BY DR. K. K. SEET

Multiple award-winning playwright CHONG TZE CHIEN has been the Company Director of The Finger Players since 2004. Some of his prize-winning scripts include *Pan Island Expressway* (Singapore Dramatist Award 1998), *Furthest North, Deepest South* (Best Production of the Year 2005) and *Charged* (Best Script at *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards 2011). Upon graduating from the National University of Singapore with a degree in Theatre Studies, he joined The Necessary Stage as a Playwright/Director from 2000 to 2004. He was awarded the Young Artist Award for theatre in 2006 by the National Arts Council for his contribution to the arts scene. In 2010, Chong Tze Chien represented Singapore at La Ma Ma—Playwright's Symposium in Italy, where he wrote *To Whom It May Concern*. In 2011, he helmed a cross-cultural project "The Book of Living and Dying" involving playwrights and actors from America, Italy and Singapore. The play had its world premiere during the Singapore Arts Festival 2012.

DR. K. K. SEET established the Theatre Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore in 1992. He has authored 13 books, published numerous academic papers and adjudicated many arts-related competitions, including *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards, where he is the longest standing judge, and the Singapore Literature Prize, for which he served as Chief Judge for many years. For his contributions to arts and culture, Dr. Seet was conferred the Special Recognition Award by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts in 2005. Dr. Seet now divides his time among his homes in Singapore, Thailand and the United Kingdom.

CHONG TZE CHIEN

FOUR PLAYS

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Six Plays by Tan Tarn How

FROM STAGE TO PRINT SERIES

Mimi Fan by Lim Chor Pee

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Model Citizens by Haresh Sharma

Fear of Writing by Tan Tarn How

Boom by Jean Tay

Everything But the Brain by Jean Tay

Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

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www.epigrambooks.sg

Cover design by Stefany
Playwright's photograph by Chong Tze Chien

National Library Board Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Chong, Tze Chien.
Four plays / Chong Tze Chien.
– Singapore : Epigram Books, 2011.
p. cm.
ISBN : 978-981-08-8495-6 (pbk.)

1. Singaporean drama (English) I. Title.

PR9570.S52
S822 -- dc22 OCN715505759

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First Edition
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To River

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LIVES OF QUIET DESPERATION: CHONG TZE CHIEN AND THE *PETIT RECIT*

Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

These four plays in Chong Tze Chien's latest collection were, in terms of their reception as stage productions, greeted with high praise, making Chong one of the most critically lauded and garlanded thespians of his generation. *To Whom It May Concern* was spawned of a residential fellowship at La Ma Ma in the Umbrian hill town of Spoleto in Italy. *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* garnered multiple nominations at *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards 2005 before earning Chong the Best Director accolade, debunking the myth that directors should stay away from their own writing. *Poop!* was a strong contender for Best Original Script in the 2010 *Life!* Theatre Awards, and was subsequently revived for a second sell-out run, while *Charged* strode away with the Best Original Script at the *Life!* Theatre Awards the following year, when Chong trounced his former playwriting mentor, Haresh Sharma, a fellow nominee in the same category.

Hence, the question that springs to mind when perusing the diversity of Chong Tze Chien's latest collection is: what precisely are the signature traits that hold them together as yet another definitive corpus of works? In other words, what exactly does a play about internet scam and Meet-the-People sessions (*To Whom It May Concern*) have in common with three independent but interconnected vignettes about dysfunctional families and HDB upgrading (*Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*), or an interrogation scenario involving fatal shootings, in an army camp, with racial overtones (*Charged*) or a domestic melodrama about a young girl dying of cancer (*Poop!*)?

Primarily, the dramatic arc in all these plays lies retrospectively, such that the plays examine the *aftermath* of a life-changing, character-

altering event instead of beginning conventionally in *medias res*, where the immediate past functions as a burden or an imposition on the present—whether materially or psychologically—and yet the narrative continues to unfold as it were, with plot and subplots moving inexorably towards a conclusion.

In *To Whom It May Concern*, Beck's fate, and to even the score, that of her sister too, are already sealed when the play begins and the focus is on the repercussions these have on Lily as she struggles with her new identity and the dynamic between the Minister and herself. In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, the catalytic event (be it the fatal accident of the parents in the first act, the incarceration of the errant daughter in the second act or the pilfering of company funds by the daughter in the third act) is over and done with, but what remains are the reactions of the characters affected and how the prospective estate upgrading might resolve the quandary they are trapped within in myriad ways. *Charged* revolves around the investigation after the shooting, when conflicting versions of the truth in the vein of Rashomon hint at conspiracy theories, whereas the lack of closure embodied in the overly simplistic final report suggests the expedience of politically-correct redressive measures. In *Poop!*, the eight-year-old girl's impending death is merely a pale echo of her father's suicide, which has already occurred prior to the tragic circumstances in the play, and where the impact of his suicide on the relationships between his mother, wife and child, as well as their respective coping mechanisms, form the linchpin of the dramatic action.

Just as Ibsen puts pivotal actions off stage, Chong relegates them to the past because he is less preoccupied with the usual histrionics and more interested in the spectrum of psychological response and its manifestation in characterisation or character interaction. In short, Chong is keen on exploring the implications of monumental events as refracted through

shifts in mindset, rather than the events per se.

While Thoreau asserts that the mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, Chong fleshes out this desperation, its muted resistance and silent cries in his characters' complex multi-dimensionality, crystallised in action, reaction or inaction. Ever the maestro of subtlety, or what semioticians call the autistic gesture, Chong arrows in on the emotional shifts that transpire in moments of epiphany or sudden insight.

Lily's sudden rise to unexpected power and consequent lapse as a result of her innate lack of understanding of political shenanigans (*To Whom It May Concern*) is mirrored by intricate psychological transitions. Even as she blindly ascribes to her misguided and misplaced sense of communitarian idealism, her acknowledgment of her change in status is eloquently conveyed by her rejoinder to the media when cornered: "Do you know who I am?" In the ambivalent finale, even Lily's agenda is called into question as the nebulous nature of her motivations are revealed in a flash. In Act Two of *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, the realisation by the mother of possible sexual chicanery on the part of her boyfriend, despite her sustained self-denial, is apparent when she decides on the spur of the moment to accede to the upgrading exercise so that her delinquent daughter can finally have her own room. That the grandmother of Act One is finally able to relinquish her hold on her grandson is invoked in the same subtle manner, through an interiorisation of impulse without high hysterics. Likewise, the father in Act Three, after discovering that the policeman he thought his family had inadvertently killed is in fact alive, regards it as a second chance at improving domestic ties and unexpectedly promises his daughter the money that he had earlier committed to either the estate upgrading or a vacation in Disneyland. *Poop!*, conversely, is interested in how a consecutive death in the family may in fact be therapeutic and mend the rift between Swee and her mother-in-law. In *Charged*, the procedure

of the interrogation brings to light that "hate doesn't go away even if one doesn't show it", that convenient conjectures cannot fully eclipse or mitigate the seemingly unrelated issues leading to the fatal confrontation.

Ultimately, what underpins the sense of quiet desperation is the constant myth-making, as defence mechanism, as means of survival or as aid to sanity. To help her grandchild accept her father's suicide, the grandmother in *Poop!* considers her dead son as integrated with the environment, fused with the elements and hence all pervasive: in the sewage system, in the murmur of the air-conditioning or in a fluttering plastic bag. The demons in *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* can be construed as phantasmagoric projections by protagonists who are unable to come to terms with their own nagging doubts, suspicions and anxieties. Inherently aware of what is amiss in their lives but unable to confront it, they invent demons that then serve to incarnate those self-same fears. In *Charged*, Chong pays homage to a strategy in his first award-winning play, *Pan Island Expressway*, where "the way to remember is through re-invention". Hence, the multi-perspective recreations of those scenes leading to the shooting stands as testament to the biases or prejudices of each individual witness. As a postmodern replay of Ionesco's *The Chairs*, in which absurdism gives way to the intrinsic performativity of every day life, *To Whom It May Concern* uses the empty chairs to enable Lily to inhabit, in turn, her different interlocutors. The solipsism of the isolated self is negated by the assumption of another's shoes, demonstrating alternative views and destabilising the monopoly of the protagonist as Lily functions as filtering consciousness for those with whom she engages.

As consummate playwright as well as ingenious director, Chong utilises the *mise en scene* to reinforce his points and concurrently showcase his sure grasp of theatricality. These plays realise their full visual potential on stage, in concrete, palpable terms. *Poop!* employs black-light theatre to

convey the notion of the late father as omnipresent: an isolated wrist here, a shiny pate there. But the prevalent darkness is also emblematic of the lack of enlightenment by the widow whose world is shrouded in the gloom of grief. In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, the audience is privy to the antics of both characters and puppets-as-demons, thereby putting the audience in the know, a device consolidated by the "invisible walls" of the HDB flats where intimate glimpses of private lives are offered. *To Whom It May Concern* has one actor vocalise and enact different roles through labels on empty chairs, again reiterating the performativity of everyday life where one is compelled to assume many roles. *Charged*, through the sequential re-tellings of what might have happened, entrusts the spectator with the final verdict. We may choose to side with any one of the characters or none at all, but our choice will implicate us by betraying our own biases and prejudices.

Ostensibly, Chong appears to show a morbid fascination with death in this collection. But this point bears clarification. *Poop!*, for instance, features two deaths in a family, and ends with the provocative line: "The truth about it is, sometimes in death, people heal". Moreover, though the dead father begs his wife for forgiveness, he never solicits any understanding of his suicide, and this subversive stance, viewed in tandem with the insight the audience is given of a man who has valiantly tried his hand at everything but is fundamentally hard-done by life, points to suicide not merely as the last but essentially the only recourse. The suicide therefore serves as its own justification, whatever the religions may prescribe, be it his mother's brand of Buddhism (which sees a suicide subject as being denied reincarnation and going straight to hell) or Christianity, which deems suicide a cardinal sin. Later, the young girl's death was what reconciled the two survivors. The grandmother's spin on the meaning of death also adds new twist to the concept of dust returning to dust with its

quasi-pantheistic splendour in becoming part of the ecological cycle.

In *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea*, the grandmother in Act One recognises death as the opportune point of relinquishment. By letting go, she is “letting life”, which she grants to her grandson, having learned a lesson from the inadvertent deaths of her own son and daughter-in-law. In Act Three, the daughter contemplating suicide on the window ledge is what prompted the truth to emerge about the cause behind the mother’s alleged infidelity.

In all instances, Chong eschews reductive moral judgements. His *weltanschauung* has too many shades for blanket statements premised on religious faith. Our faith teaches us not to question, but only if life were truly that simple and we have no qualms about letting dogma and didacticism cloud our appraisal as literary scholars alert to nuances. If indeed, as Sigmund Freud says, “a dream is a disguised fulfillment of a suppressed wish”, then Russell’s death in *Charged* may in fact be the representation of wish-fulfillment and the tragic outcome of a fraying sensibility. His demotion in the armed forces was the result of an impartial act of punishment that took on all manner of racist innuendos, which again prompts the reader-spectator to ask: is anything in life really that simple and straightforward? And in *To Whom It May Concern*, the symbolic power of empty chairs on stage makes us question if the “poor little man in the street”, with his problems dismissed in high-handed manner by the wielders of policy and power, is in fact more absent than alive, more invisible than indispensable.

Lest Chong be accused of possessing an agenda that is essentially *jenseitig* (privileging the other side of the grave), he should instead be read as expressing the dialectical relationship between two cultural paradigms that has, in Tim Blanning’s opinion, dominated our ethos in the past three centuries and continues to do so in the new millennium—the culture of

passion versus the culture of reason. While the centre of gravity within the context which Chong writes has been more firmly located in the culture of reason, characterised by qualities like the rational, secular, analytical, sceptical, empiricist and atomistic, and which may be traced back to the original Cartesian dictum which propounds the advocacy of systematic doubt (“to place our knowledge on foundations which are genuinely secure, we must doubt all our beliefs, retaining them only if they are absolutely indisputable”), such a contention would not have sat well with Chong’s plays, where Russell in *Charged* claims to have seen “things” in Pulau Tekong that prompted him to go AWOL and where the other soldiers think he is in fact “possessed” when he starts repeating himself, where the grandmother in Act One of *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea* catches the silhouette of the Goddess of Mercy at the denouement and realises it is her time to depart, and where the little girl in *Poop!*, out of her fervent belief that her father is literally *everywhere*, cautions her mother not to tread on the feet of spirits on the MRT.

Adopting a syncretic “both-and” rather than a binary “either-or” approach, Chong and the thaumaturgic appeal of his recent plays are closer to the essence of postmodernism in their underlying query of the contributions of Diderot and the great Enlightenment project with its grand narratives, rationalism and teleology. Belonging squarely with the passionate paradigm and focused on the *petit recit* of the humble individual, Chong reacts to this culture of reason with deftly subtle plays that question the obvious, lay bare our assumptions and demand our total receptivity to their idiosyncratic and whimsical power.

Dr. K. K. Seet, 2011

CHARGED

PRODUCTION NOTES

Charged was produced by Teater Ekamatra twice—in December 2010 and August 2011, at the Drama Centre. The play was directed by Zizi Azah, Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra. The following cast list is for both stagings unless otherwise indicated:

HAKIM	Yazid Jalil
RUSSELL	Tan Shou Chen
ZUBIR	Anwar Hadi
IMRAN	Hatta Said (1st staging)/ Farhan Kassim (2nd staging)
RAMESH	Gunalan Morgan
VICTOR	Rodney Oliveiro
MADAM ZURAIDAH	Aidli Alin Mosbit
MADAM GOH	Serene Chen

CHARACTERS

HAKIM	Army Corporal, male aged 20
RUSSELL	Army Corporal, male aged 20
ZUBIR	Army Corporal, male aged 20
IMRAN	Army Corporal, male aged 19
RAMESH	Army Sergeant, male aged 20
VICTOR	Army Officer, male in his early-30s
MADAM ZURAIDAH	Hakim's mother, woman in her late-40s
MADAM GOH	Russell's mother, woman in her mid-40s

SCENE 1 *In the dark, Zubir, Imran and Ramesh sing the following song in the background.*

ZUBIR, IMRAN & RAMESH *(singing)*
 Purple light
 In the valley
 There is where
 I want to be
 Infantry
 Close companion
 With my rifle and my buddy and me...

SOC¹
 Si bei jia lat²
 IPPT³
 Lagi⁴ worse
 Everyday
 Doing PT⁵
 With my rifle and my buddy and me...
Lights slowly reveal them standing around two corpses covered with bed sheets. Zubir, Imran and Ramesh are going about their daily business in the camp, e.g., cleaning their rifles and boots. Zubir is strumming the guitar, seemingly oblivious to the two corpses lying on the floor.

ZUBIR, IMRAN & RAMESH *(singing)*
 Booking in
 Took a shower
 Dropped my soap

1 Standard Obstacle Course
 2 si bei jia lat [*Hokkien*] very tedious
 3 Individual Physical Proficiency Test
 4 lagi worse [*Malay/English*] even worse
 5 Physical Training

Bent my knees
 Felt something up my arsehole
 With my rifle and my buddy and me...

Booking out
 To see my girlfriend
 Saw her with
 Another man
 Kill the man
 Beat my girlfriend
 With my rifle and my buddy and me...

Purple light
 At the warfront
 There is where
 My buddy die
 If I die
 would you bury me?
 With my rifle and my buddy and me...
Lights up on Lieutenant-Colonel Victor de Souza. Over and above the song, Victor speaks.

VICTOR On the second morning of Chinese New Year, February 19, 4.45am, two shots were fired at Sungei Gedong Camp. When the duty sergeant rushed to the SOC field where the shots were heard, he found two soldiers dead. Corporal Mohammad Akmal Hakim Yusof was shot in the head from the back. A few metres away from him lay Corporal Lim Sheng-yi Russell. The coroner suggests that Corporal Lim had knelt down, rested

his chin on the barrel of his gun and pulled the trigger; death by suicide, the coroner concludes in his assessment. The two shots fired triggered petitions and heated debates, shaking and dividing the nation along racial lines.

There is the sound of two gun shots. Lights off on the two corpses.

VICTOR This is LTC⁶ Victor de Souza, investigation officer, SAF⁷ Provost Unit. I have been assigned to this case, to interview all concerned parties and make my recommendations to MINDEF⁸ on the appropriate action to be taken with regard to this issue.

Lights up on two separate interrogation rooms.

Each room has a table and two chairs. Imran and Ramesh enter a room each.

IMRAN Corporal Imran Lukman, HQ⁹ company, Ops room.

RAMESH Sergeant Ramesh Damani, Charlie Company, CQ¹⁰.

BOTH Permission to sit, sir!

VICTOR Go ahead.

They sit. Zubir sings softly while strumming the guitar in the background.

ZUBIR *(singing)*

Training to be soldier

Fight for our land

Once in our life

Two years of our time

Have you ever wondered?

Why must we serve?

6 Lieutenant-Colonel

7 Singapore Armed Forces

8 Ministry of Defence

9 Headquarters

10 Company Quartermaster

Because we love our land

Because we love our land

And we want it to be free to be free yeah

Looking all around us

People everywhere

Children having fun

While we are holding guns

Have you ever wondered?

Why must we serve?

Because we love our land

Because we love our land

And we want it to be free to be free yeah

The following dialogue between Victor, Imran and Ramesh unfolds over and above the song.

Victor first interrogates Ramesh. Lights on Imran fade. Victor offers Ramesh a cigarette.

RAMESH I don't smoke. Thank you sir.

VICTOR Not 18 yet?

RAMESH 20. I am PES C¹¹. Severe asthma.

Victor gives him a cigarette and lighter.

VICTOR I'm not your MO¹². You can stop malingering.

RAMESH I am not, sir! I have to have a pump with me all the time! See? *(produces an asthma inhaler)*

VICTOR *(lights a cigarette)* I am in my eighth box.

You are only my second interviewee in the last 48 hours. I have another three tubes of Marlboros inside my bag.

RAMESH You mean I cannot book out tonight?

Victor pushes the cigarette and lighter closer to him.

VICTOR Tomorrow night...if you are lucky. If you don't

11 Physical Employment Status C

12 Medical Officer

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

On Charged

Winner of Best Script, 2011 *The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards*

“Chong Tze Chien’s script...is rock solid writing. (It) serves up an intimate understanding of the various complexities of race and the ways race intersects with other social divisions such as class. Chong does not treat his material with kid gloves and confronts difficult questions that are often buried below politically correct platitudes about race.”

– Adeline Chia, *The Straits Times*

“*Charged* does not disappoint. It tackles issues of race with brutal frankness and a refreshing lack of political correctness...The script is explosive yet sensitive and nuanced.”

– Kenneth Kwok, *The Flying Inkpot*

On Poop!

“*Poop!* is heartfelt, beguiling and magical.”

– Adeline Chia, *The Straits Times*

“Chong Tze Chien has crafted a piece which is whimsical and spell-binding, yet at the same time heart-breaking. *Poop!* presents a vision of mortality quite unlike anything you’ve seen. This is a work which will provoke you in unexpected ways.”

– Ho Rui An, *The Flying Inkpot*

On Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

“From the rag-tag denizens who trawl its corridors to the lonely, broken spirits of the folks within, Chong Tze Chien spins a triple-bill tapestry that is exquisite in its detail and cogent in its effect.”

– Sangeetha Madhavan, *The Business Times*

ISBN 978-981-08-8495-6



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