

NUS-SHELL SHORT PLAYS SERIES

# PRIZE WINNING PLAYS

VOLUME 1 1986

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# PRIZE WINNING PLAYS



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### NUS-Shell Short Plays Series

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## 1986 Short-Play Competition – Winners

- Joint First Prizes – “Two’s Company or Peter’s Passionate Pursuit”  
Eleanor Wong Siew Yin
- “Ash and Shadowless”  
Chua Tze Wei
- Third Prize – “A Lowellian Drama – ‘Tramps Like Us’”  
Kelvin Tan Yew Leong
- Merit Prizes – “Till Death Do Us Part”  
Rosalind Jeyamoney Gurupatham
- “Reunion Dinner”  
Daniel Koh Choon Guan
- “The Amah – A Portrait in Black and White”  
Christine Lim Su Chen/Ophelia Ooi
- “Dubiously Yours”  
Basil Pereira
- “In Praise of the Dentist”  
Tan Tarn How/Cheam Li Chang
- Special Prizes – “Father and Son”  
Christopher Koh Liat Boon
- “Nutmet Hill Stockade”  
Lim Thean Soo
- “The Eye of History”  
Robert Yeo Cheng Chuan

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## Introduction

The first Short-Play Competition, organized in 1986 under the joint auspices of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore and Shell Companies in Singapore met with excellent response. A total of 56 entries were received, and the entrants ranged from students in junior colleges to retired government servants, representing diverse educational, social and cultural backgrounds. A total of 11 entries were awarded prizes. At the prize presentation ceremony held at the Shell Auditorium on 15 August 1986, Professor Edwin Thumboo, Dean of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, noted:

In a special sense the achievements of a nation remain less than complete if the Arts do not thrive in a manner commensurate to those achievements. The Arts are a special and sensitive index to the quality of life. There are of course special circumstances which apply in the founding years of a Nation, when constructive energies are devoted to the creation of economic, financial, educational, social, political and other infra-structures directed sharply towards the betterment of material life. And yet that life can only gain its fuller expression were it accompanied by an interest in the Arts.

It was the specific aim of the Short-Play Competition to contribute to the growth of interest in the Arts, and in particular the art of drama, by encouraging dramatic writing, particularly of short plays, in order to build a pool of short plays in English with a view to staging them in our theatres. And it is encouraging testimony to the growing interest in Singaporean writing for the stage that, of the 11 prize-winning entries, more than half have already been given their first performances.

The six plays brought together in this volume represent a selection of the prize-winning talents that emerged in the competition. It is not the intention of the editor to provide the work offered here with a lengthy and learned introduction. What the Singaporean dramatist needs, at this point in the development of the Singapore theatre is not a scholarly disquisition. The dramatist needs to be produced. For



it is only through the production process, through practical exposure to and experience of the translation of the words on the page to a physical, concrete, enacted, performed reality, that the novice or apprentice learns the trade, discovers why this scene works while the other one doesn't, learns why a favourite speech, which looked so pretty on the printed page balloons into rhetoric when spoken by an actor.

Suffice it to say that each of the plays offered here is challenging and, finally, eminently produceable. Taken as a group, they demonstrate a wide range of thematic interests, and an adventurous willingness to explore the possibilities of diverse dramatic forms. Chua Tze Wei and Kelvin Tan, in *Ash and Shadowless* and *'Tramps like Us'* respectively, both make interesting deployments of a non-naturalistic, Symbolist mode, while Daniel Koh's hilarious *Reunion Dinner* provides an energetic vindication of the continuing vitality of the principles of fourth-wall Realism. *The Amah*, by Christine Lim and Ophelia Ooi, documents the life and tribulations of a young amah after she arrives in Singapore from China by setting up a series of juxtapositions between past and present. Tan Tarn How and Cheam Li Chang's *In Praise of the Dentist* is a deceptive piece of work, appearing rather slight at first reading; with careful workshopping, however, it is a theatrical piece capable of being played successfully either as farce or as an unsettling depiction of a protagonist on the edge of breakdown. Finally, Eleanor Wong's *Two's Company, or, Peter's Passionate Pursuit* is a superbly written and controlled serio-comic as well as futuristic allegory which celebrates the triumph of individualism over some suspiciously Singaporean rigidities.

It should be stressed in conclusion that each of the plays here presented would reap much benefit from the sustained attention and commitment of a workshop production. This would enable the playwright to tighten, re-structure, consolidate and improve the work for the stage. Some of the works here have in fact already had the experience of being adapted for their first productions. The texts made available here, however, are the full texts of the original entries. This broadens, rather than constricts the range of options available to the playwright to whom, finally, the selection of a 'final' version must always belong.

## ASH AND SHADOWLESS

Chua Tze Wei

CHARACTERS: HENRY  
MAN  
KATHRYN  
ANOTHER MAN  
WALKERS (ABOUT 10)

That they should burn you  
And I on another journey;  
That the heat of your dying  
Was not for me —  
Who knew you like a son —  
Is surely the cry of a crow  
Leaving me no superstition  
But a stare at your bones,  
Ash and shadowless.

— "Cremation": *Edwin Thumboo*



*Music (Erik Satie's Gnoissiennes)*

*A wooden bench in a public place, nothing else visible. It is night. MAN, in black, is sitting on the bench in the radius of light of an overhanging street lamp. He is reading a newspaper. After a while he puts it aside and stares ahead. Music fades. Night sounds are heard. HENRY enters from right. He sees MAN.*

HENRY: Hello .. (pause) ...hello?

*MAN stares ahead.*

HENRY: Can you help me please? (Pause) I am lost.

*MAN stares ahead. Long pause.*

MAN: (Continues staring ahead) You are dead.

HENRY: Excuse me. Did you say something?

MAN: (Turning to HENRY, slowly) You are dead.

HENRY: (Slightly surprised) Dead?

MAN: (Staring ahead) Yes. You are dead.

HENRY: (Laughing suddenly) Ha, ha. (Pause) Why am I dead? Can you tell me?

MAN: You are dead.

HENRY: Don't tell me ...(to himself) My god! This must be a robbery. (Raising his arms in surrender) Don't shoot, don't shoot! I give up. Take all my money but don't harm me.

MAN: (Staring ahead) I am not robbing you.

HENRY: Not me? (Puts down his hands and looks around him) Then who are you talking to?

*MAN stares ahead. Long pause. HENRY goes up to examine MAN closely, from different angles.*

HENRY: Were you talking to me?

MAN: Yes.

HENRY: And you said that I am dead.

MAN: Yes.



HENRY: But why do you say that I am dead?

MAN: *(Solemn)* Don't you know?

HENRY: *(Surprised)* How should I know? But then I am not dead. *(Pinches himself on the arm)* See, I am not dead. So obviously you must be wrong. You must be mad!

MAN: I am not mad. *(Turning to HENRY)* But you are dead.

HENRY: *(Getting angry)* Stop it, stop it! Why do you keep saying that I'm dead when I know I am not. *(Pause)* I would not be talking to you now if I were dead, would I?

MAN: I am dead too.

HENRY: *(Backing away)* You are mad. *(Turning away; to himself)* I'd better go away.

MAN: *(Looks at HENRY)* Stop! *(Pause; HENRY turns around)* Don't you want to know why you are dead?

HENRY: *(Challenging)* Yes! I do want to know why I am dead. Give me ten good reasons why I am dead. *(Moves closer)*

MAN: I know your mother.

HENRY: *(Surprised)* You know my mother? Are you sure?

MAN: Yes. I know your mother. I don't know where she lives and where she goes, but that does not matter. What matters is that I know her thoughts.

HENRY: *(Sitting on the bench beside MAN; in a mocking tone)* Yes, please go on. Tell me what my mother's thoughts are, if she has any in the first place.

MAN: She has many thoughts. *(Standing up and walking forward)* Many, many thoughts. *(Abstractly)* Some very clear, some very lazy. Some very hazy. Some very happy, and some very sad.

HENRY: *(Mocking)* Some very silly and some very petty.

MAN: *(Turning to HENRY; in a stern manner)* You are not listening.

HENRY: *(Flippant)* Yes, yes, She has many many thoughts. Some very clear, very hazy, very happy, very sad. Very good. So what?

MAN: *(Staring ahead)* She knows that you are dead.

HENRY: *(Sitting up straight; mocking)* Very good. Tell me how can she know that I am dead when I am not? In fact, I just saw her last week.

MAN: But you were already dead then. You have been dead for a long time.

HENRY: *(Getting angry)* Dead for a long time? Dead for a long time indeed! Then why am I not rotting? Why isn't there the stench of death?

MAN moves to one side.

MAN: There are many things you do not know.

HENRY: Well, for one I know that I saw my mother only last week and she knows that I am still alive. Satisfied?

MAN: But did she talk to you?

HENRY: What do you mean? Of course she talked to me. How can she not talk to me? She was certainly not angry with me for any particular reason.

MAN: Since you are so certain that she talked to you, tell me, what exactly did she tell you?

HENRY: Oh, the usual things. Nothing in particular. You know, about the family and the flat and all that jazz.

MAN: Are you sure she was talking to you?

HENRY: Yes. Indirectly at any rate. She was talking to me, my wife Kathryn and to my kids all at the same time.

MAN: But none of the questions were directed at you alone?

HENRY: *(Thinking hard)* Come to think of it, yes. *(Rising from the bench)* But why should she ask things about me only? She always talks to all of us at once. She is very good at that. Talking to many people all at once.

MAN: But she did not ask you how your business was. She always asked you that.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



