

NUS-SHELL SHORT PLAYS SERIES

PRIZE WINNING PLAYS

Volume IV 1990

Edited by
Robert Yeo



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Prize Winning Plays Volume IV, 1990

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NUS-Shell Short Plays Series

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1989 SHORT PLAY COMPETITION WINNERS

- Second Prize:** The Crown of Man
Susana Wong and
Chu Lik Ren
- Third Prize:** The Trial
Geraldine Kan Yuen Kuan
- Third Prize:** Mistress
Ovidia Yu
- Merit Prizes:** A Daughter's Story
Lim Wee Teck
- Vintage Love
Ngin Chiang Meng
- Old Woman's Dying
Old Woman's Dead
Desmond Sim Kim Jin
- Special Prizes:** Cops and Robbers
Frederick Lim Cherng Hui and
Richard Lim Cherng Yih
- Solitaire
Loon Seong Yun, Robin
- Sister Man
Ovidia Yu

NOTE: No first prize was awarded this year.

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Credits

The Short-Play Competition, 1989, was jointly organized by the Shell Companies in Singapore and the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore (NUS). Members of the Organizing Committee were Professor Edwin Thumboo, Dean, Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences (Chairman), Mr Chu Tee Seng, Public Affairs Manager, Mr Tan Chek Sian, Manager, Media and Committee Relations of Shell, Mrs Christine Chen, Assistant Registrar in the Dean's Office, and Mrs Annette Chia, Administrative Assistant.

The committee is grateful to Dr Tay Eng Soon, Senior Minister of State (Education), for consenting to be our Guest-of-Honour. Dr Tay's deep interest in the Arts, including creative writing, has been a source of constant encouragement.

Judges for the Competition were Dr Lee Tzu Pheng, Department of English Language and Literature, NUS, Mr T Sasitharan, The Straits Times and Mr Robert Yeo, English Studies Department, Institute of Education.

The manuscript for this volume was typed by Mdm Kamariah Sumshuddin and Ms Junie Yeo.

The Editor

INTRODUCTION

These seven plays are among the best of the forty-two entries received for the 1989 NUS-Shell Short Play Competition. The judges do not think that the plays, on the whole, are of a standard comparable to those submitted for the previous years, which resulted in there being no first-prize award this year; all the same, they are still sufficiently impressed by the bold and sustained exploration of contemporary themes which have not often been expressed in Singaporean writing. The judges are also pleased to find among the prize-winners authors who have either won prizes or entered previous competitions as this shows continued interest in the Competition as a discoverer of dramatic talent.

To return to the treatment of topical themes, 'The Crown of Man' provides an insight into crusading by a Christian group on campus. Written by Susana Wong and Chu Lik Ren, both students, it shows first-hand knowledge of and is at the same time a searing critique of proselytising among university students. Wong and Chu come out strongly in favour of free choice over religious dogma. Equally topical and bold is 'Solitaire' about a yuppie torn between her regular boy friend and a gay whose apartment she shares. While the central character is Nicole, the revealing feature for me is what appears to be the convincing language of Leslie the gay. The two plays which won the joint third prizes are contrasting in theme and approach. 'Mistress' by Ovidia Yu, a winner in a previous competition, addresses the subject of marital infidelity in realistic language and in an up-to-date way involving a private investigator employed by the wife; 'The Trial' on the other hand, presents a fictional country controlled by a government with a secret police that keeps its people under surveillance.

There are three merit prizes and the best of these, to my mind, is the poignant 'A Daughter's Story' by Lim Wee Teck in which the problem Siew Fen has with her nagging mother is played out against the background of the return to Singapore to her Aunt Lucy, her mother's sister; Aunt Lucy, younger-looking and certainly younger in attitude, is sharply differentiated from that of her sister. On the other hand, Desmond Sim tackles a perennial subject, filial ingratitude, by cleverly counterpointing mahjong scenes with those involving the dying old auntie and her predatory nieces, their husbands and children, who try to prise from the old woman the secret of where she has stashed away her money. Like Ovidia Yu, Sim shows excellent command of aspects of Singapore English, especially

Singlish. The third merit prizewinner is 'Vintage Love' by Ngin Chiang Meng, and it is about a platonic affair conducted over thirty years by a pair of elderly married persons. The situation strikes me as rather improbable and the dialogue is rather bookish but it is very commendable that the author's confidence in working out his idea sustains him through the writing.

One feature that characterizes these plays and indeed most of those entered for this year's competition is that the authors display a tendency for writing that appeals more to the ear than to the eye. At its best, there is verbal dexterity, as its worst, a lack of visual imagination that indicates that the lesson of Kuo Pao Kun of Practice Theatre Ensemble about the need to cultivate a theatre that fuses both the verbal and visual is not learned. It may well be that the writers for the competition and those represented in this collection wish to pursue a more traditional method. If that is the case, then their writing is the poorer because of it. Indeed the plays here have academic features; quite often the dialogue sounds written rather than spoken, the result of young writers who are more used to studying plays in books rather than under spotlights.

The stage must provide the next, and more definitive, valuation of success. These plays, not withstanding their ability in winning prizes in competitions and perhaps because of the reservations expressed, must await reworking and workshopping in most cases, to test if they will succeed on stage. The Shell Friday lunchtime Programme continues to provide the stage. There are, in this volume, ample opportunities for drama groups to discover how and which of these plays will flourish as theatre.

Robert Yeo

*Centre for Advanced Studies
Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences
National University of Singapore
December 1989*

THE CROWN OF MAN

A Short Play in Three Acts

SUSANA WONG
&
CHU LIK REN

CHARACTERS: NICHOLAS, *an undergraduate*
MARY, *Nicholas' friend in church*
BROTHER MARK, *the preacher*
HOCK MENG, *Nicholas' housemate*
GEORGE, *Mary's husband*

ACT I

The interior of a chapel with a pulpit in front and two rows of chairs with their backs towards the audience. A piano is located to the left of the pulpit and a cross is hung behind it. A preacher is standing behind the pulpit, a lady pianist plays the piano, and the congregation is singing the final chorus of a hymn.

CHORUS: *Make me a blessing, make me a blessing,
Out of my life may Jesus shine;
Make me a blessing, O Saviour, I pray,
Make me a blessing to someone today.*

PREACHER: Christians should bear in mind that there are two crowns laid up for them. One is the crown of life, which every regenerated child of god has been entitled to receive. But the second one, the crown of righteousness, is less freely bestowed. The crown of righteousness will only be given to those who completes the Christian race in an exemplary manner. The former pertains to our faith and the latter rewards our deed. *(Pause)* I will end by reading to you this portion of the scriptures: What is the profit, my brothers, if anyone says he has faith, but does not have works? Can that faith save him? If a brother or sister is without clothing and lacks daily food, and anyone of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled', yet you do not give them the necessities of the body, what is the profit? Even so, faith, if it does not have works, is dead in itself. So then, let us not neglect the duties delineated for us by our conscience. We owe it to our fellowmen, not just a rational testimony of our beliefs but much more, the gift of love and of practical concern. Let us close with a prayer: Father in heaven, we thank You for the commission You have placed upon us, that we should be faithful witnesses of what we have seen and received from You. We pray that You would dictate our daily conduct so that we can strike the healthy balance between theory and practice, between the spiritual and the physical. According to Your word, we ask that You meet our material needs so that we can glorify Your will on earth, even as it is accom-

plished in heaven. We pray this in the name of Your blessed Son. Amen. Brothers and sisters, we end this morning's service here.

Exit the preacher and pew members. One of them, NICHOLAS, stays behind and moves up to MARY, the pianist.

MARY: Hi, Nick! How've you been? I haven't seen you for quite a while now. Have you been busy on campus?

NICHOLAS: Mary, I've something to tell you.

MARY: You usually do, Nick. And what new ideas do you have this time?

NICHOLAS: Mary, I'm in love.

MARY: What!? W-well, that's wonderful, Nick. Who's the girl? Is she a sister in the church? How did it happen? Oh, you must tell me all about it, Nick.

*They move away from the piano to the pew.
Mary sits. Nick remains standing.*

NICHOLAS: I don't know... I mean, it all happened so suddenly... Remember that girl who came to our gospel meeting a couple of weeks ago? The one who came with her family? They sat behind me. Anyway, her name is Amelia Yen. She was back here for a holiday from London U where she has just finished her second year in Law. *(Pause)* She was a tough case, at first. For the gospel, I mean. Spoke to her after the meeting but she was extremely argumentative. Something to do with her line of study, I suppose. Fortunately, her father is a brother in our midst and he was supportive of my preaching...though it puzzled me that he allowed his daughter to go unsaved for so long. But you can imagine the situation; there I was talking about the mystery of human life while all she wanted to hear of was my opinions about the political detainees of Argentina and South Africa! Obviously, you would not

be wrong to conclude that our first encounter wasn't very promising. *(NICK sits down.)* Yet, strangely enough, it wasn't just frictional sparks that flew then. She had such a fiery glint in her eyes that was not unattractive. And she was all passion, you know, almost as if she really did care for those nameless blighters in forgotten dungeons. Isn't it exotic that a Singaporean should espouse a cause half the world away from here? I'm almost certain that the walls of this chapel have not seen the likes of her before....

MARY: Oo...you'll be surprised, Nick. So, her heart wasn't open towards the gospel then?

NICHOLAS: Not on that occasion, no. Too much time was spent explaining that Sin is the cause of all our present miseries... I did not proceed further than pointing the finger back at her. 'What about **you?**', I asked her. 'Who are you? Are **you** just? Do **you** not need salvation?' Her family had to leave after that, but not before we exchanged phone numbers, which was a good thing because neither of us was through with our stand then, even though I could sense that my questions disturbed her. So, I called her up and invited her down to the campus and we strolled along the scenic Kent Ridge Road. You know the one I mean?

MARY: Yes, that lonely lay-by with the marvellous view towards the sea. George and I used to go up there when we were in NUS. It's a nice place to walk and talk, yes?

NICHOLAS: Yes. We talked about many things that afternoon. Martin Luther King, Mahatma Gandhi, women's rights, nuclear disarmament...

MARY: ...Lech Walesa...

NICHOLAS: That's right! How did you know?

MARY: Intuition, I guess. And does she like dancing as well?

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

