

NUS-SHELL SHORT PLAYS SERIES

PRIZE WINNING PLAYS

VOLUME VI 1992

Beyond the Footlights
New Play Scripts in Singapore Theatre

Edited by
Thiru Kandiah



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*(With a critical Introduction by the Editor
and an Essay on Kuo Pao Kun's plays by K.K. Seet)*

Edited by
Thiru Kandiah



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Prize Winning Plays Volume VI, 1992

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NUS-SHELL SHORT PLAYS SERIES

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CREDITS

The Short Play Competition, 1992 was jointly organized by the Shell Companies in Singapore and the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore. Representing the University on the Organizing Committee were Associate Professor Ban Kah Choon, Head, Department of English Language and Literature, Dr Thiru Kandiah and Dr Seet Khiam Keong. Ms Loong Li Tyng, Head, Community Relations, Public Affairs Department represented the Shell Companies in Singapore.

The Organizers are grateful to Dr Catherine Lim for consenting to be Guest-of-Honour at the prize giving ceremony and for giving away the prizes.

The judges at the Competition were Sister Dolores Healy, I.J.S., Principal of I.J. Speech and Drama Centre, Mr Ong Keng Sen, Artistic Director, Theatreworks (Singapore) Ltd and Dr Thiru Kandiah, Department of English Language and Literature.

The manuscript of this volume was typed by Mrs Fatimah Bte Ahmad.

PREFACE (1)

Over the last eight years of Shell's sponsorship of the NUS-Shell Short Play Competition, we have seen rapid changes in the local theatre scene. The theatre audience has not only grown in size but also in sophistication and we see a shift of interest from expatriate theatre to local theatre.

The emergence of local theatre groups and their promotion of Singaporean expression through their plays bode well for the future of the Singaporean play. It was with such an objective of contributing to local theatre that Shell embarked on this Short Play Competition in 1986.

We are pleased that the scheme has served as a channel to encourage new and budding writers to contribute to the local drama scene. Even more noteworthy are that the writers' contributions did not stop with their prize-winning entries as they continue to come up with new works and that many of the prize-winning plays have been successfully staged. We are confident that the pool of locally-written plays will continue to grow with this heightened awareness and interest.

With this final volume, we would like to thank the staff of the Department of English Language and Literature, National University of Singapore, for having helped to make the scheme such a success. The team's dedication and commitment in implementing the project have contributed most significantly to the success of the Competition all these years.

As a sponsor of the arts in Singapore, Shell will continue to do its part to contribute to areas of the arts where there are new and emerging needs.

Jimmy Quah
Public Affairs Manager
Shell Companies in Singapore

**1992 SHORT PLAY COMPETITION
PRIZE WINNERS**

First Prize:	<i>Water Ghosts</i> Tan Mei Ching
Second Prize:	<i>Somebody</i> Fong Fatt Weng
Third Prize:	<i>Modern Art</i> Tham Li Mei, Claire
Merit Prizes: (in alphabetical order)	<i>Outside</i> Gan Fee Ying, Lesley
	<i>Good Hakka Girls Grow Up to Be Good Nurses</i> Paul Rozario
	<i>Gold Sandals and Cowboys</i> Tan Li Keng, Kaylene
Special Prizes: (in alphabetical order)	<i>The Shadow Master</i> Su Pow Yuk, Elizabeth
	<i>Just Drive</i> Tong Weng Kian, Kelvin

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INTRODUCTION

Audience and Form: Singaporean Plays in English

Thiru Kandiah

Department of English Language and Literature
National University of Singapore

The Current State of the Singaporean Theatre

Creative Ferment

Over the last several years, the English theatre scene in Singapore has maintained a state of invigorating creative ferment. A mere glance at the popular English Press, which gives excellent coverage to a wide range of the theatre-related activity that is taking place and which in fact appears to provide one of the most significant of the forums for the discussion of that activity, will immediately indicate that a great deal that is exciting is going on on the ground. Whole crops of playwrights, actors, directors, technical hands and such individual practitioners of the art, as well as theatre groups, schools, official institutions and entrepreneurs, among various other people and institutions, may clearly be seen from the reports in the Press to be participating with energetic purposiveness in the writing, production, presentation, promotion and discussion of plays. 60 new productions were put on in 1991 alone (*Straits Times*, 28 February 1992), several of them daringly experimental in their themes and techniques, sponsorship of theatre groups is going up (*Straits Times*, 31 December 1993), there is "more money for actors, more opportunities and more international contact building" (*Straits Times*, 28 April 1994), some of the best work in the Asian and western worlds is made available to Singaporeans through the biennial Arts Festival and the recently inaugurated Festival of Asian Performing Arts, the Singapore Arts Centre is in the process of being constructed in the hope that it will help make the country the "regional hub for entertainment and the arts" (*Straits Times*, 28 February 1992), and the Government has declared its intention to make Singapore a "global centre of the arts" by 1999 (*Asia Magazine*, 7-9 May 1993).

Characteristically for Singapore, this is not all action and no thought. Backing all of this activity up is a solid body of self-conscious and self-reflexive thinking, ranging wide in its concerns, interests and conceptualizations of the endeavour from the point of view of themes, methods, aims, target audiences, measurements of success and so on, and sophisticatedly probing all of these various matters in pleasing depth.

One of the best recent public manifestations of this was the *Art vs. Art* Conference held at the Guinness Theatre in September 1993, which bore heady witness to the range, depth and vitality of the thought that informs the practice. Over two whole days of intense talk, discussion and debate, practising artistes (not just dramatists), critics, media personalities, academics, administrators, interested members of the public and others came together at this Conference to explore with extraordinary concentration and a profound shared commitment the whole gamut of the preoccupations that energise their world of creative activity and, by extension, a large and significant part of their existence.

Among the many issues that frequently and differently raised themselves were: the inter-relationship of the individual artiste, society and the state; artistic freedom/integrity and artistic constraints/responsibility; aesthetics and social and political reality; popular taste and serious artistic concerns; homogenization and diversity; fragmentation and integration; continuity/tradition and modernity/innovation; the interaction between the traditions of Singapore and other traditions; the disjunction between what is happening at the influential centres of cultural thought in the west and what is going on at this particular historical moment in time at this particular historical place that modern Singapore is; and so on. Underlying and inspiring these various cogitations and bringing them dynamically and coherently together was the earnest search for a collective consciousness and identity and a means of expressing it. This was a consciousness and identity which needed to be uniquely Singaporean; at the same time, it needed, too, to represent the entire region and manifest an out-reaching universal validity.

All of this would appear to give more than sufficient cause for satisfaction, if not heady optimism or even self-congratulation and celebration. And, indeed, its positive dimension has not gone unacknowledged, with, for instance, media reports seeing in some of the work done a "maturity of theatre" (*Straits Times*, 3 September,

1993) resulting from the "leap that Singapore theatre has made from the plays written some twenty years or more ago" (*Straits Times*, 19 June, 1993), among other good things.

Notes of Doubt

At the same time, there is heard again and again in discussions both of individual offerings on stage as well as of the activity they represent as a whole a not-so-comforting note of uncertainty and unachievement. What is significant is that this comes through not just in the sceptical or negative remarks which every now and then receive expression but even in the responses which are essentially positive and supportive of the theatre scene.

Consider, for instance, the related negative questions "Are there too many deviant plays?" and "What's wrong with these young people?", which were asked in the Press not too long ago (*Straits Times*, 2 August 1992). Both of these questions received reassuringly sophisticated discussion even as they were raised. Not so reassuring, though, were some of the interpretations of and the conclusions drawn in the process from the tendency that the questions drew attention to. To some, it represented an "exasperating deflection of the serious into the trivial" (*Straits Times*, 1 April 1993), while to others "the problem (was) quality not content" (*Straits Times*, 2 August 1992). Neither of these remarks is too easy to come to terms with as representing just the kind of welcome difference of opinion that any such activity, if it has vibrancy, could be expected to generate. Rather, such comments reflect more fundamental questionings of what is going on and its significance, the kind of questionings that lead in fact to such not-so-comforting claims as the following: that there is "a shortage of well-written plays" (*Straits Times*, 9 April 1993); and that the arts in general in Singapore are "staggering under an 'amateur glass ceiling'", raising the question whether they are "worth supporting in the first place" (*Straits Times*, 5 March 1993). In fact, it is very often mentioned in a concessive kind of tone that the theatre is still in a developmental stage, questions are raised as to whether Singapore theatre is "all style and no substance" (*Straits Times*, 28 April 1994) and newspaper reports over the last couple of years have sometimes even ventured some rather reluctant references to the "cultural desert", which all of the plenteous germinations of the past few years ought by now to have decisively buried under them.

The paradox that has been emerging from this account is that, however much is going on, there seems to persist in the consciousness of even the committed a sense that too little that matters is in fact happening. Beneath the satisfying recognition of the rich heterogeneity and vital life of the theatre scene, there lurks a certain disturbing sense of unrealisation, the unrealisation of a theatre that has yet quite some way to go before it can be considered to have arrived.

Understanding the Paradox – General Issues

Audience, Content/Message and Form/Medium

The paradox needs to be addressed, and preferably in terms of basic general principles by reference to which the range of apparently distinct issues raised during discussions of Singaporean plays might usefully be understood. The ways in which these discussions are carried out seem to indicate, though often perhaps not too overtly, that the most promising point of entry into the task is likely to be through an exploration of the inescapable interaction between the dramatic activity going on on stage and the audience for whom it is taking place. In any event, if, as Synge reminded us a long time ago, drama is the most collaborative of the arts, and it is from its audience that it most immediately derives its nurture and sustenance, such an exploration is certain to help concerned people search out in specific terms and comprehend the issues that most urgently cry out for attention.

Indeed, this is the tack that an important series of related critical articles which appeared in the *Straits Times* of 28 February 1992 and in the months following chose to follow in attempting to explain “(w)hat’s happened to theatre”. The audience neglect that was resulting in “half empty houses” at many serious dramatic performances (*Straits Times*, 28 February 1992) was attributed in these articles to inattention to two inextricably interrelated sets of issues which any recognition of the essential collaborative role of the audience would make basic, namely content and form – or to use another familiar nomenclature, the message and the medium. As regards content/message, the theatre was felt to be “high on angst and low on humour and plot”, making it “arty” and “inaccessible” even to “intelligent” people, many of whom remained “frustrated by theatre they cannot understand and are alienated by” (*Straits Times*, 28 February 1992). (The situation regarding audience numbers may

or may not have changed since then, but the problem regarding the lack of the kind of audience support needed seems, if the report in the *Straits Times* of 28 April, 1994 is correct, not to have gone away, while the basic issues raised two years earlier still appear very much to give cause for concern.)

As might be expected, inevitably associated with such problems of content were problems of form/medium. The restless experimentation that this kind of content seemed to have made necessary was seen as driving playwrights to a “cheap tricks theatre” using “artificial and contrived” devices which were “not rich enough” to convey messages of a concrete kind to the audience (*Straits Times*, 9 April 1993). In addition, it was also seen sometimes as lacking an understanding of theatre conventions (*Straits Times*, 22 October 1993).

The Response of Artistes

The response of artistes in general to much of this kind of criticism is worth taking a careful look at. It is recognised that artistes must “try to make some sense of what we are doing – to audiences out there” (*Straits Times*, 6 March 1992). This reflects a laudable recognition that artistes do not work in a vacuum, that they belong in a community from out of which they derive essential sustenance, and that this community is most immediately represented by an audience whose responses to the content and form of artistic products, based as these responses are on the realities of their experience within the life of the community, cannot be simply set aside.

However, in a way that is surprisingly contrary to the normal practice, there is not always a correspondingly clear-minded acknowledgement by artistes of the implications in *praxis* of this recognition. In place of seeking out a satisfying artistic response to the reservations of the audience, the blame for the theatre problems that these reservations define is in effect shifted to the audience and by extension the community they represent: “we have a shortage of people interested in theatre” (*Straits Times*, 6 March 1992).

This amounts, in fact, to what looks very much like an evasion, an evasion which is made possible only by an over-simplification of what the criticisms imply. It grossly distorts these criticisms, for instance, to interpret them as simply making a call for plain, undemanding offerings that are within easy reach of the

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GOLD SANDALS & COWBOYS

a long poem
a short love story
a monologue

Tan Li Keng, Kaylene

CHARACTERS: VIRGINIA
PHILIP (*although his name is never mentioned*)

(Stage Directions:

- *must be staged in an intimate theatre*
- *there must be lots of blue light, which increases and decreases in intensity according to the scenes*
- *possibly the use of music and sound effects*
- *possibly some balletic movements*
- *she talks to herself mostly, but sometimes she addresses Philip directly*
- *this play lies somewhere between a fantasy and a sordid love affair*
- *must not be done in the form of a poetry recital*)

VIRGINIA: Here's a list of men I'd like to meet:
Robert Deniro Batman
Dali and Kublai Khan
John Lennon Gorbachev Fred Astaire
Jim Morrison Jesus Ringo Starr
Peter Pan Clint Eastwood and Jimmy Dean
Moschino Andy Warhol Lord Byron
And Ronald Reagan....

I don't want a He-man
I don't adore a fascist
I don't want an astronaut
or a nuclear physicist.
I want a Marlboro Man.
Like the one in the ad. A real Cowboy.
Every girl loves a cowboy.

The weatherman said that it would be an average,
ordinary not so sunny day.
But it wasn't.
The sun shone now and again and
it was rather cloudy with occasional rain.
It wasn't an average-ordinary day because
I found my Marlboro Man
and he found me.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



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