

OVIDIA YU

EIGHT PLAYS

THE WOMAN IN A TREE ON THE HILL • THREE FAT VIRGINS
PLAYING MOTHERS • LOVE CALLS • BREASTISSUES
LIFE CHOICES • THE SILENCE OF THE KITTENS
HITTING (ON) WOMEN



INTRODUCTION BY DR. K. K. SEET

OVIDIA YU has written over thirty plays including *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*, the only Singapore play to win an Edinburgh Fringe First. In her writing she uses humour and storytelling to address the changing roles and identities of Singaporeans, on the principle that without entertainment there can be no engagement. Ovidia Yu received the National Arts Council Young Artist Award (Drama and Fiction), the Singapore Youth Award (Arts and Culture), and the Japanese Chamber of Commerce and Industry Singapore Foundation Award for outstanding contribution to the development of arts.

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.

OVIDIA YU

EIGHT PLAYS

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Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

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OVIDIA YU EIGHT PLAYS

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For Dr. K. K. Seet
whose support, encouragement and inspiration
shaped this book along with much of Singapore theatre

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A FEMALE COUNTER-CANON: OVIDIA YU AND THE POLITICS OF GENDER

Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

Ovidia Yu is that rare breed of Singapore writer in at least two ways. In terms of versatility, she shares certain qualities with her literary predecessor, Goh Poh Seng, who has demonstrated aptitude and craft across a spectrum of genres.

Yu was barely out of her teens when she burst, nova-like, on the scene with her short story *A Dream of China* which won the Asiaweek short story contest in 1984. She has remained one of the youngest winners in Asiaweek's hallowed hall of fame. Yu then proved her mettle in screen writing when she dramatised her script *Round and Round the Dining Table* for television. Two novels, *Mouse Marathon* and *Ms. Moorthy Investigates*, followed, proving that Yu could sustain a narrative, be it a satire about the rat race or a whimsical detective drama about a schoolteacher turned sleuth. A string of musicals evinced her ability to provide book and lyrics for a composer, whether it was a big budget corporate extravaganza like the Singapore General Hospital's *Everyday Brings Its Miracles* or TheatreWorks' *Haunted*, with an all-star cast which endeavoured to put Singapore's sitcom personalities, jazz divas and Dimsum Dollies all on one platform.

In between all this, she wrote many plays, some inspired, others commissioned, some (like her contributions to the book, *Mistress*) anthologised, others (like *The Woman in a Tree on the Hill*) showcased to great acclaim and rapturous reception at the Edinburgh Festival.

Yet the prolific Yu is also a rare specimen in another way. As Singapore's first truly feminist writer and unabashed chronicler of all things female, she has no literary precedent as such within the

Singapore theatrical canon where she has earned a berth.

The pioneers of Singapore theatre: from Lim Chor Pee and Goh Poh Seng in the 1960s to Robert Yeo in the 1970s and Kuo Pao Kun writing in English in the 1980s were all male. While Stella Kon made waves with her monologue, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, the degree to which her female protagonist both mimics and resists her patriarchal oppressors in a manner which makes her both threat to and co-conspirator with those who "othered" her, renders her text problematic in terms of both its ideological positioning and its body politic. How is Emily Gan inscribed as a site for feminist resistance? To what degree does she symbolise emasculation, the assimilation of patriarchal strategies in order to wield power in a turf predetermined by men?

Yu is in many respects a true original in not suffering the anxiety of influence that would beset any male writer within a particular literary genealogy, who, in Harold Bloom's conceptualisation of literary psychohistory, would necessarily need to invalidate his literary forefather in a kind of Oedipal struggle before he can take his place within the canon. In this regard, one detects the tensions and anxieties, the unconscious efforts to affirm or deny the achievements of Kuo in the works of Yu's male peers, Haresh Sharma and Tan Tarn How.

Yu, conversely, does not even betray vestiges of what Gilbert and Gubar would have called the anxiety of authorship, in fearing that the attempt at self-creation as a precursor might conflict with her own gender definition, that she cannot beget art without isolating herself. In fact, Yu spawns a separate female subculture that surfaces ostensibly in the works of her contemporaries like Eleanor Wong and Eng Wee Leng, with its distinctive concerns, timbre and inflections. Instead of questioning her place within the literary trajectory, Yu's plays

grapple with issues that trouble her as a woman writing about women. They exemplify what Judith Butler has articulated in *Undoing Gender* as the difficulty in distinguishing "the life of gender from the life of desire" primarily because "social norms that constitute our existence carry desires that do not originate with our individual personhood", an issue made even "more complex by the fact that the viability of our personhood is fundamentally dependent on these social norms".

Whether Yu's texts are to be considered a subgenre of the Singapore dramatic canon to be approached gynocritically depends a great deal on the inclusionary criteria for canonisation or the very constitutive basis of the canon, which is entrenched in a liberal humanist tradition that privileges the individual agency of the author who is then venerated for universal values and authenticity of vision. This schism in fact articulates two strands of feminist thinking, the Anglo-American with its emphasis on criticism and the French with an emphasis on theory.

The latter, exemplified by the likes of Cixous, Kristeva and Irigaray, draws from theories of psychoanalysis and deconstruction to unveil the middle class, male values underpinning bourgeois, humanist critical practices. As Cora Kaplan puts it, since "the acting of writing and the romantic ideologies of individual agency and power are tightly bound together", a woman's subordinate, even marginalised position within culture makes her "less able to embrace or be held by romantic individualism".

In a sense, Yu attempts to express this marginalised position of women outside of male ideological constitution and patriarchal symbolisation via a discourse that addresses notions of subjectivity, language and sexuality. The key concept here is femininity, not necessarily tied to biology though arbitrarily linked to women, and to

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

THE WOMAN IN A TREE
ON THE HILL

PRODUCTION NOTES

The Woman in a Tree on the Hill was staged by TheatreWorks as part of its Theatre Carnival On the Hill season in April 1992. The play was directed by Ong Keng Sen and the stage manager was Maria Gotoking. The cast was as follows:

WOMAN	Rosita Ng
NARRATOR	Melvyn Chew

Woman is sitting in a tree throughout; preferably a highly stylised 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 before this water came was 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, canst 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!

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

On The Woman in a Tree on the Hill

Winner of the Edinburgh Fringe First Award and
the Scottish Daily Express New Names of 1993 Award

"This production's strength is...in the details.
Touching and very brilliant."

– Jeremy Samuel, *The Flying Inkpot*

"A quality production."

– *The Business Times*

On Three Fat Virgins

"Ovidia Yu's light and witty comedy is (juxtaposed with) dark
undercurrents of frustration, claustrophobia
and hopelessness..."

– Kenneth Kwok, *The Flying Inkpot*

On Hitting (On) Women

Winner of Best Script, 2008 *The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards*

"Hitting (On) Women is a well-crafted play that gives
an intimate examination of the knotted, entangled lives
of two women."

– *The Business Times*

"Timely...and well-played."

– Richard Chua, *Theatre Asia*

On The Silence of the Kittens

"...a really strong script."

– Kenneth Kwok, *The Flying Inkpot*

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