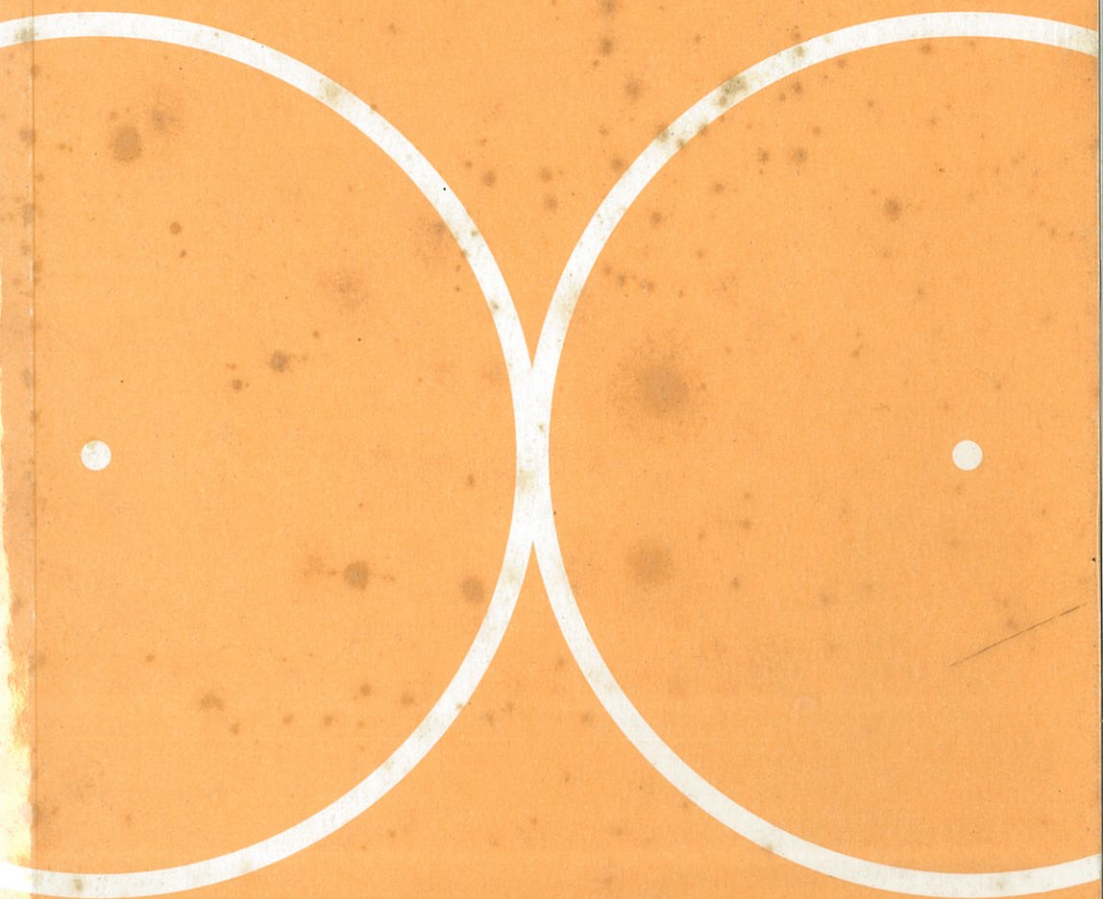


# TAN TARN HOW SIX PLAYS

HOME • THE LADY OF SOUL AND HER ULTIMATE "S" MACHINE  
UNDERCOVER • SIX OF THE BEST  
THE FIRST EMPEROR'S LAST DAYS • MACHINE



INTRODUCTION BY DR. K. K. SEET



TAN TARN HOW, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, graduated in 1982 from Peterhouse College, University of Cambridge with B. A. Honours in the Natural Sciences Tripos. He also has a Diploma in Education from Singapore's Institute of Education. After teaching, he joined *The Straits Times* and from 1987-1996 was a political reporter, op-ed writer, arts deputy editor, and foreign correspondent in Hong Kong and Beijing. He left to be head scriptwriter for television drama and comedy at MediaCorp for about two years before returning to the newspaper in 1999 to be its science and technology editor, political correspondent and deputy news editor until 2005. He has also been the associate artistic director of the drama company TheatreWorks, leading workshops for budding playwrights. Besides the six full-length plays in this volume, Tan has also written a short play, *In Praise of the Dentist*.

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 on 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.



# TAN TARN HOW

## SIX PLAYS

Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

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For MJ, LC and J  
and  
in memory of MW.



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## TAN TARN HOW: THE PLAYWRIGHT AS SOCIAL COMMENTATOR EXTRAORDINAIRE

Introduction by Dr. K. K. Seet

Tan Tarn How can be succinctly described as a playwright of the public life and a raconteur of social history in the way he captures the zeitgeist with the exactitude and incisiveness of a political analyst. This can be attributed to a spillover from his full-time occupation, initially as a journalist with the political desk of *The Straits Times* and eventually as a senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies where the ambit of his duties encompasses studies of policy issues on the social rubric. His days in political journalism and active involvement in the media (he also had a short spell as a scriptwriter in MediaCorp television) make him particularly well informed about the subjects he deals with and his subsequent research on policy matters provides both an insider's look as well as a larger perspective.

The bulk of Tan's plays are thus ostensibly inspired by historical events. If Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* may be said to herald a new literary genre called "the nonfiction novel" where the objective criteria of journalistic reportage is yoked to literary devices like narrative tone, rhetorical style, dramatic structure and the development of psychologically vivid characters, Tan's plays similarly occupy the terrain of "fictive realism or docudrama", like *Crimewatch* on television, but infinitely refined by the sophistication of philosophical reflection and satirical treatment.

*The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine* was written shortly after the inception of the National Arts Council to spearhead the promotion of the arts in Singapore, following many appeals by both public and parliament to inject culture into a parvenu society. *Undercover* gives a metadramatic spin to the Marxist conspiracy of 1987 when founding members of the local theatre company The Third Stage were arrested for allegedly subversive activity. *The First Emperor's Last Days* emerged at a point when many a biography of Singapore leaders were being researched and chronicled by journalists, some of whom Tan would have known personally during his days at the political desk



of *The Straits Times*. *Six of the Best* draws its originating impulse from the indictment of American teenager Michael Fay for vandalism, an event that sparked much discussion and brouhaha in the international press. Even *Home* can be said to have been seeded in the context of an aging society with scant provisions for the elderly, while *Machine*, as privately divulged by the playwright himself, was spawned of a midlife crisis he personally underwent, when issues of fidelity and the dynamic between the sexes rose to the fore as a result of flagging endorphins, marital stagnancy and the andropause. With the exception of the last play, therefore, the rest are premised on momentous occasions that have generated much controversy. These plays therefore serve to encourage further constructive debate in retrospect, where time confers the necessary detachment to prevent visceral involvement that clouds the rational and impartial.

If renowned historian E. H. Carr defines history as "a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialectic between the present and the past", then Tan engages in a parallel dialogue with historical events as a revisionist who sites his plays within a notion of history less as trajectory than as a concatenation of forces against which their thematic matrix may be counterpointed for deconstructive intent. By setting the dramatic present within the context of a historical event, however covert the references, Tan attempts to understand the present from the past with the hindsight of critical distance. He also extends the dialogue to include his audience which is provoked to undertake a similar exchange. Through identification with characters envisaged as the products of particular historical forces, the audience is inspired to re-think the situations being dramatised as invested, informed onlookers.

Yet Tan does not trade in the real in the Aristotelian sense of strong empathetic reaction leading to catharsis, but instead conjures up a kind of heightened realism in his spatially ambivalent *mise-en-scène*, deliberate anachronisms and conflagration of historical minutiae. Hence, Tan uses familiar structures as a bridge into the dramatic experience of the conventional audience, then disorients this same audience by subverting forms and overturning expectations.

Unlike Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, Tan does not strive to distance his audience through defamiliarisation but rather involves them in a basic familiarity before provoking them into analysing the differences in the surprising nature of his tropes and images.

The prologue of *The Lady of Soul and her Ultimate "S" Machine*, set in a Nations Boutique uses the econ-speak of the retail trade, and framed within the shopaholicism, corporatisation and materialistic ethos of the average Singaporean, strikes an all too familiar chord. Except in this instance, the capital gains, the trade-in value, the appreciation and amortisation apply not to your usual consumer merchandise but to nations and their human rights track records. The burlesque sequences that punctuate the solemn, sober proceedings of bureaucracy in which Chris and Les resort to rap and vaudeville, put a parodic twist on corporate presentations and pitches at board meetings. The committees and subcommittees that ceaselessly self-propagate to oversee the most banal and hairsplitting of semantic equivocations in a policy paper are merely the hyperbolic equivalents of what actually occurs at a more mundane level, but are no less mind-boggling and symptomatic of a pervasive culture of relinquishing responsibility by pushing the buck.

*The First Emperor's Last Days* intensifies this schism between the familiar and the disturbing with its homage to a kind of Pinteresque landscape, a basement in an unknown building where a seemingly random group of archivists is assembled to write the biography of the First Emperor in his purportedly final days. The set reconciles the iconic with the symbolic. Despite its everyday configuration of work-desks and computers, the room seems to "grow smaller as the play progresses", so the stage directions inform us. The ceiling soars to an unseen height and takes on ominous undertones that signify the existence of some obscure, oppressive authority presiding over the characters, the unseen Big Brother monitoring and controlling their every move with an eagle eye. This is further made manifest by the fact that all correspondence as well as all daily needs, from meals, and laundry to requests for medicine, are conveyed and delivered by means of a dumb waiter that assumes centre stage as in that eponymous Pinter play. Where and to whom this dumb waiter reaches is never made explicit, in the same way



Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



HOME



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## PRODUCTION NOTES

*Home* was first produced in Singapore by TheatreWorks in April 1992. The production was directed by Lee Yew Moon. The cast was as follows:

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TANG	Benjamin Ng
ALEX	Charlie Giang
GOH	Wong Siew Lyn

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## CHARACTERS

TANG	A 67-year-old inmate in the old folks' home.
ALEX	A 63-year-old new inmate in the old folks' home.
GOH	A 50-year-old cleaner and tea lady at the old folks' home.

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A room in an old folks' home. There is not a trace of decoration. There are two beds, one on each side. The one on stage left is for Tang and the other one is for Alex. Upstage, at the head of each bed, is a wardrobe. Between the wardrobes is a study table, facing a window, with one chair. On the table, placed nearer to Tang's side of the room, is an old-fashioned radio from 15 years ago, a tall glass with a set of fork and spoon, a bottle of Sloans and Chinese medicated oil, and two Tupperware boxes of half-finished biscuits. At stage left, near to the foot of Alex's bed, is a door leading to the corridor. Another door, at stage right, leads to the toilet.

## ACT 1

SCENE 1 When the curtains rise, Tang is packing his previous roommate's things from the wardrobe into a cardboard box placed on the bed. He picks up various things, and those that he decides to throw away, he puts inside the box. He takes out the following:  
A book: flips through to see if there's anything in between the pages, finds nothing; throws. A single sock: searches for matching side, finds nothing; throws. A wire clothes hanger: he bends it back into shape, goes to his own wardrobe and hangs it up. A man's brief: he tests the waistband but the elasticity is gone; throws. A very old box of tea bags: looks for expiry date and finds none; throws. A belt: either too long or too short, depending on Tang's size; throws. Another book: throws without looking. A battery: tries it on his own radio—battery still works; puts on his desk. And, lastly, lining paper for wardrobe shelf: takes it out and looks at reverse side which is a calendar picture of a young movie star; tries to see if it looks nice pasted on the inside door of his own wardrobe; decides no; throws. Near the end of this, Goh enters with broom, dustpan, mop and bucket, but keeps quiet as she observes Tang.

GOH Lin Tai<sup>1</sup>.  
Tang turns around, surprised. Goh comes in and starts to sweep.

GOH Hong Kong screen goddess, 1960s. "Love Without End", "Eternally Yours", "How Can I Forget You?" and her best film "Roses are Red, Violets are Blue".

TANG Lin Tai.

GOH I was a teenager then. I watched every one of her movies three times and my mother thought I was mad. I dreamed of growing up like her. Just like thousands of other girls. When she killed herself, I cried for a week. And I stopped going to the movies for a year. (*thinks*) To be young again. To fall in love again. (*looks at Tang, but he shows no response*) 1960s. Remember rock and roll? That's what I call nice music—with melodies—and real dancing—with steps. Not what the kids do nowadays, no tune, no steps, just any old how. How much we danced! I bet you I can still do a triple turn. (*does a turn with broom as partner*) If I have the right partner, that is. (*she waits for response from him, but he says nothing*) I won a medal at a competition in Dukes Hotel with my boyfriend of that time you know. He cut a good figure, that man, he did. And guess what happened? I married him. Those were the days, eh, Tang?  
Tang looks out of the window. Goh looks at Tang intently. She sweeps round his legs.  
I suppose they were for some of us. (*rhetorically*) Got up on the wrong side of bed again, old man? Move.  
Tang steps aside absent-mindedly for the broom.  
Goh finishes sweeping, gathers dust into the dustpan, and goes into the toilet to flush the dirt down. She comes in again.

TANG Did you go to his funeral?

GOH Course I did.

TANG How many people?

GOH Seven. And that includes matron, Mr. Loh and me. His four sons went, but not the son's wives or their children. It

1 a famous Chinese film actress in the 1950s and 1960s



was a sorry affair as funerals go, and I have been to lots of funerals after working here for so long. Before you really get to know them, pop they go. You know something strange about funerals, Tang? The sadder everyone is, the less sad the funeral is. Only if everyone is gloomy will it be considered a success. (*notices box and peers inside*) What's this? I thought they came and took away everything?

TANG Almost.

*Goh shakes box.*

GOH Can't say they left much for you to keep, did they? Not that you would want to. People say it's bad luck to keep the things of the dead. You know what? They say the person who keeps a dead man's things will be the next to go. *Tang looks at his wardrobe, thinking about the clothes hanger.* But I don't believe any of that superstitious rubbish. *Tang looks relieved for a while. Goes to bed, lies down, looking forlorn. Goh goes into toilet with a pail for water, and starts to mop the floor.*

*In the following, Goh tries to elicit some response from him.*

GOH Heh, cheer up! Don't tell me you miss him?

TANG Him!?

GOH Of course not. Would surprise me if you do. You two never got on, did you? Of course, he is a grumpy old man. Like you, only he was about ten times grumpier. Not a tiny bit of niceness in him. Seven people at his funeral. Can't say he was Mr. Popular, eh? Seven miserable people. Old man, how about putting on the radio?

*Tang switches on radio. Waltz music.*

GOH They are playing the waltz! Heh, want to dance?

TANG No thanks.

GOH Don't worry, matron is out so she won't catch us. Come on.

TANG I can't dance.

*He lies down and closes his eyes.*

GOH Can't dance! Pity. Some day I will have to teach you. (*holds up mop*) Never mind, I've got my regular partner.

*Goh waltzes round the room with mop. As she gets into the rhythm she starts to close her eyes.*

GOH Your new roommate is coming in, isn't he?

*Alex appears at the door. Neither Goh nor Tang notices him.*

TANG Yes.

*Tang turns to face the wall.*

GOH I hope he is not another old grouch. One a room is enough, as far as I'm concerned. This is fun! Know anything about him?

TANG No.

GOH I heard from Mr. Loh that this one's actually quite rich. Maybe he can dance. Well, anything beats a mop, for sure, though I think you might come close, by the looks of you. What I would give for a good shake of this body! (*dances*) You know why he wants to come here instead of live in his own house?

TANG No.

GOH If he's rich he should have his own house, shouldn't he? This place is for poor old buggers like you, no place to go and wanted by no one.

*Tang snorts—it's an old routine between the two and he doesn't even have to reply.*

GOH Probably chucked out by his children. Probably the same old story. Poor, old rich fart.

ALEX (*knocks softly*) Er, excuse me.

*Goh stops in her tracks. Tang sits up.*

GOH Whoooo! You shocked me.

ALEX Sorry.

GOH Who are you?

ALEX I'm new here.

GOH I can see that. You looking for something?

ALEX This is my first day here. Mr. Loh was too busy to show me the way. He told me the last room, and this looked like the last one. But I think I must have got it wrong. There are already two of you here...

GOH I don't live here!



Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

On *The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine*

"... the most important thing about Tan Tarn How's play is its marking of a watershed in Singapore theatre: it is arguably the first English play to present the country critically and artistically, without hiding behind coy allegory."

– Hannah Pandian, *The Straits Times*

On *Undercover*

Joint winner of the 1996 National Book Development Council Drama Award

"The play, a farce about the goings-on in an internal security department, takes Singapore theatre into uncharted territory."

– Koh Buck Song, *The Straits Times*

On *Six of the Best*

"*Six of the Best*, in dealing with such an explosive topic, will hopefully get under the skin to the heart of racism in Singapore."

– Phua Mei Pin, *The Straits Times*

On *The First Emperor's Last Days*

Winner of Hong Kong's 1999 Best Top 10 Productions of the Year Award

"With *The First Emperor's Last Days*, playwright Tan Tarn How continues to stake out a unique place for himself in Singapore theatre, as a creator of topical, political plays."

– Cherian George, *The Straits Times*

On *Machine*

Winner of Best Script, 2003 Life! Theatre Awards

"Tan's sensitivity and genius is obvious throughout: the dialogue is light but loaded. In the exchanges, there are just the right doses of surprise to compliment, of feigned ignorance to encourage and of coyness to intrigue, as both the man and woman manoeuvre expertly towards their ultimate goal—the bed, after which the relationship ceases to be."

– Suhaila Sulaiman, *The Straits Times*

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