



THIS IS MY FAMILY:

NEW SINGAPORE PLAYS VOLUME 2

Edited and with an Introduction by Lucas Ho

CHECKPOINT
THEATRE

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10

INTRODUCTION

By Lucas Ho

13

**THE UNTITLED
FUNERAL PLAY**

by Luke Vijay
Somasundram

43

**FOR BETTER
OR FOR WORSE**

by Faith Ng

117

**MAGGIE AND
MILLY AND
MOLLY AND MAY**

by Leonard Augustine Choo

155

#UNICORNMOMENT

by Oon Shu An

193

FAMILY OUTING

by Joel Tan

253

**RECALLING
MOTHER**

by Claire Wong
and Noorlinah Mohamed

280 **ABOUT THE
PLAYWRIGHTS**

282 **ABOUT
THE EDITOR**

283 **ABOUT
CHECKPOINT
THEATRE**

INTRODUCTION

BY LUCAS HO

A play begins life as a blueprint, laid out carefully and in solitude by the playwright, and upon it do other practitioners – directors, actors, set designers, costumers – build a living, breathing theatrical piece. It is within that three-dimensional space of a live performance where the playwright's words are performed and received and interpreted. And when the audience's applause has died down, when the curtains have fallen and when every last prop and set piece have been removed from the stage, the power and the purpose of the play can sometimes be diminished. But such is the ephemeral nature of any given performance.

Publishing any play, to put it into print for the public, is therefore not simply an afterthought. It is a means of memorialising the theatrical experience, where audiences and readers both old and new are led into contemplation (again) about the craft and the ideas that gave rise to the theatrical enterprise, and to perhaps relive the experience of watching it.

The six plays gathered in this collection all deserve this textual resumption. They were all either produced or mentored by Checkpoint Theatre, and all of them closely interrogate the ways in which conventional family structures can impinge upon personal beliefs and desire. As orthodox ideas about family in Singapore – about what it is and what it should be – are being publicly contested, the plays in this anthology prove that such contestation is necessary and vital.

Luke Vijay Somasundram's *The Untitled Funeral Play* is set in the most sombre of family gatherings – the death of a patriarch – but the proceedings are far from austere. An Indian man, along with his Chinese wife, attempt to bury his father, but with the introduction of the resolutely traditional brother of the deceased, the extremely superstitious mother of his daughter-in-law, and a tardy undertaker, Somasundram nimbly forges an uproarious farce of mistaken identity, talking at cross purposes, and bureaucracy-induced frustration. This is a comedy that, despite its lightness of touch and rapid-fire repartee, is still solidly grounded in the racial and religious mélange which is distinctly and unmistakably that of a Singaporean family.

This true-to-life examination of family is further continued in *For Better or For Worse*. Across scenes that alternate between the present and the past, Faith Ng fashions a portrait of a marriage of over 20 years that is at once affectionate and haunting. The inexorable accretion of private wounds and repressed pain is what gives this play its visceral power. Ng excels in wedging open the spaces that lie between what is said and unsaid, through her considered deployment of Singlish, Hokkien and Teochew in ways that are crude and tender, especially in how a husband and a wife inevitably hurt and help each other.

The crude and the tender find similar conjunction and juxtaposition in *Maggie and Milly and Molly and May*, where four gay men separately arrive at a cliff to commit suicide at the same time. The title alludes to an E. E. Cummings poem that is, among other things, about how our individual experiences could actually have more in common with those of others around us than we previously thought. Leonard Augustine Choo economically evokes an entire typology of homosexuality before proceeding to deflate and subvert conventional notions of how gay men are rejected by their families and by themselves. Over the course of the play, by turns hilarious and heartfelt, all four of them come to reaffirm to one another the necessity of living on in the face of societal and familial rejection.

The first of two devised plays gathered in this collection, *#UnicornMoment* is Oon Shu An's debut play, in which she also performs all the roles. Oon interviewed many of the people who made an impact on her life, and spent just as many hours improvising on the rehearsal floor so as to piece together a script that is both a daring examination of her singular life and a serious contemplation upon a quarter-life crisis befalling a Gen-Y Singaporean. Her performance was supplemented by a series of YouTube videos; however, her multiple selves and guises come to be refracted largely through those who have been present in her life the longest – her family, and through the journey of the play we witness Oon's quiet resistance to drifting apart from them.

A more permanent separation is at the heart of Joel Tan's *Family Outing*. Joseph has died but returns as a spectral presence to his family, and witnesses his gay lover out him to them. Tan possesses a sharp ear for the rhythms of Singaporean speech, and exhibits an acute awareness of the myriad ways in which it can subtly and sharply convey love and hate – between brothers, between lovers, and between mother and child. He finds both levity and dread in quotidian family habits, and the play's structural intricacy gives rise to a moving portrait of a how a family must grapple with truths that have been long ignored and suppressed.

Finally, in *Recalling Mother*, the second devised play in this anthology, a conversation between friends gives way to a wide-ranging and lyrical exploration of two mother-daughter relationships. As experienced actresses and directors, Claire Wong and Noorlinah Mohamed worked together to explore the points of convergence and divergence between themselves and their respective mothers. The text moves gracefully between the corporeal, the private, the painful and the idiosyncratic, and what emerges is an elegantly crafted and deeply affecting tapestry of maternal love – how it is given, how it is spurned, and how it is ultimately cherished.

In the face of a growing recognition of the complexity, diversity and multiplicity of family, these artistic responses offer honesty and humility, resisting any easy answers. These plays speak for themselves, but it is a greater testament to their theatrical and literary worth that they also speak *for* us. In spite of their diversity of style and tone, each play fearlessly and unflinchingly probes the tenuous yet vital connections we have between those we have come to call family.

Many thanks are in order. My gratitude goes to Sherilyn Ng, who shouldered much of the production and administrative burden, as well as tirelessly working on the entire manuscript through each round of editing; to Clarilyn Khoo and Sabrina Sng, who helped transcribe performance texts; to Phan Ming Yen, Alvin Lim and Julius Foo for translation of dialects; to Karanina Suryadinata and Jerusha Tan for their indefatigable production work; and to Huzir Sulaiman and Claire Wong, for their peerless advice.

Lucas Ho
Associate Artist, Checkpoint Theatre
August 2014, Singapore

THE UNTITLED FUNERAL PLAY

LUKE VIJAY SOMASUNDRAM

**PRODUCTION
HISTORY**

The Untitled Funeral Play was first produced by Take Off Productions, as part of *Living Rooms*. It opened on 4 August 2012 at The Arts House Play Den, with the following cast:

Arthur/Indran	Adam Amil Sharif
Emily	Yap Yi Kai
Karan	Vinesh Nagrani
Florence	Amanda Aw Yong
Undertaker	Daryl Yam

Directed by Hazel Ho

CHARACTERS

ARTHUR/INDRAN: late twenties, Indian.
EMILY: late twenties, Chinese.
KARAN: late forties, Indian.
FLORENCE: late sixties, Chinese.
UNDERTAKER: early twenties.

ARTHUR and EMILY are seated on a couch.

EMILY He's dead.

ARTHUR Yes... hence funeral.

EMILY Oh...? No! I'm sorry! I meant, he's late.

ARTHUR Same thing.

EMILY No! The undertaker. I'm talking about the undertaker. He's late. And I meant, he's dead, as in, I'm going to kill... him... for being late. Um. Probably not the best choice of words.

ARTHUR No.

EMILY I thought they were supposed to be on call 24/7.

ARTHUR Maybe he didn't take the hearse with the siren.

EMILY Spirit Funeral Services! What kind of name is that anyway? I'm going to write to the MP¹. No, the paper! That way everyone will know how... how... jolly shoddy this company is.

ARTHUR You should consider a career switch to journalism.

EMILY I'll leave it anonymous so they don't exact retribution.

ARTHUR Right, of course. Everyone knows how vindictive funeral homes are. Cross them and they won't put you six feet under.

EMILY Arthur!

ARTHUR For goodness' sake, Em, it's not like Dad is going to get up and walk away.

Beat.

EMILY I'm sorry... I had four cups of coffee today.

ARTHUR Didn't notice.

¹ Member of Parliament.

EMILY There's just too much to do. We haven't even done the dishes from last night. What if –

ARTHUR On the one day you let the dishes slide, your mother spontaneously materialises in our kitchen.

EMILY It could happen. Remember that 'Intro to the Quantum Mechanics' class we took in –

ARTHUR ... Four cups of coffee you said?

He reaches for her cup.

EMILY (*protectively pulling her cup away*) I can't help it. This whole business is too... messy. You know, for ours, we should just plan the whole thing in advance.

ARTHUR For our... funeral?

EMILY It's always good to be prepared.

ARTHUR It's... oddly sweet that you assumed that we would die at the same time... At least I think it's sweet.

Beat.

ARTHUR Emily...

EMILY Oh, okay, fine. It's a stupid idea. Happy? I don't even know why I said it. I guess the thing I hate the most about funerals is that they are so disorganised. They're so hard to manage.

Beat.

ARTHUR I hate the fact I can't think of anything to say. Everything feels like a bad line from a movie.

EMILY Watch fewer movies.

ARTHUR Ha.

EMILY But that's fine too. I mean, maybe things become cliché because they are true. They don't have to lose their meaning.

ARTHUR That sounds like a cliché.

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This is My Family: New Singapore Plays Volume 2 features six plays which were either produced or mentored by Checkpoint Theatre, and showcases vital artistic responses to the increasingly diversified notions of family.

These plays examine with care, intelligence, and honesty the joys and the pains of family: the papered-over cracks of a twenty-year marriage, the enduring ties between a parent and a child, the forging of bonds between those not bound by blood.

This anthology of acclaimed plays includes Faith Ng's *For Better or for Worse*, which was nominated for Best Original Script in *The Straits Times* Life! Theatre Awards, Joel Tan's *Family Outing*, and *Recalling Mother* by Claire Wong and Noorlinah Mohamed. It is a testament to the varied output that Checkpoint Theatre has ushered to the stage in recent years, and celebrates the new and original writing that is crucial for Singapore theatre today.

The *New Singapore Plays* series underlines Checkpoint Theatre's commitment to nurturing young playwrights, and to developing original Singaporean work for the stage. These plays serve as a record of powerful new work and as a valuable resource for students and makers of theatre everywhere.

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