

CENTRE 42 PRESENTS

THE VAULT

# YEAST

An All-Female Adaptation of Elangovan's *Smegma*



Written by EUGINIA TAN  
Directed by AIDLI MOSBIT

1 & 2 JULY 2022, 8.00PM  
BLACK BOX @ 42 WATERLOO ST

## PRODUCTION CREDITS

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### **Playwright**

Euginia Tan

### **Director**

Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit

### **Cast**

Joanne Ng  
Neo Swee Lin  
Nessa Anwar  
Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai

### **Production Assistant**

Samzy Jo

### **Acknowledgements**

The playwright and the Centre 42 team would like to thank Elangovan for granting permission for the use of his text *Smegma*.

### **Presented by**



## PLAYWRIGHT'S MESSAGE

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When I mull on the roles for female Singaporean actors, there are very few accommodating women for the extent of violence in which they are capable of. Women can abuse, prey on and manipulate in horrifying ways. Is this horror difficult to demonstrate in theatre? Centre 42 has kindly granted the opportunity for me to explore this in *Yeast*, which was adapted from Elangovan's *Smegma*.

*Smegma*, to me, captured violence poetically and purposefully. The play framed its abusers with unflinching honesty. It was the perfect piece for me to try my hand at re-imagining violent women of all ages, ethnicities, appearances. Though we like to think that role models for violence shouldn't exist, they do. From the unassuming, neighbourly grandmother to a quiet smoker at a bus stop, every woman is capable of societal violence.

I think we are now forward enough in theatre-making whereby we can give room for various women of virulent natures to exist. I'd like to thank all the women who have come on board this project in never holding back: Kak Alin, Swee Lin, Nessa, Joanne and Sangeetha. They have offered worlds of unmerciful narratives, all the while remaining uncompromising to the tender nature of their craft and feminism.

## DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

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As someone who's always looking for new female voices and positions in theatre, I'm thoroughly pleased with the opportunity that Euginia and Centre 42 had offered me this time. What's most delightful is to be able to work on *Yeast*, Euginia's very womanly take and response to *Smegma*, Elangovan's very lyrical take on violence and similar perversions.

And being able to work with this amazing ensemble of Singapore's theatre darlings - Nessa, Swee Lin, Sangeetha and Joanne, is a pleasure that I will not want to miss. See them bring to life words that are - at times fleeting yet weighted, dangerous but sensuous, political and sadly true!

Thank you for being here and catching this dramatized reading. This is the genesis of something really good!



## SYNOPSIS

*Content Warning: Strong language, depictions of sexual violence, racial prejudices and suicide*

*Yeast* is an all female adaptation of the 2006 play *Smegma*, written by Elangovan. The play is a series of ten vignettes depicting imbalances of power dynamics, socio-economic paradoxes and moral dilemmas.

In *Yeast*, playwright Euginia Tan has edited and dissected the play to put women at the forefront of its violence, representing the aggression of the masses. How are women portrayed on stage as both perpetrators and victims, on an equal playing field? Are women roles given as much confrontational autonomy as male roles?

## ABOUT SMEGMA

*Smegma* was originally slated to be staged by Agni Kootthu (Theatre of Fire) on 5th to 6th August 2006 at the Guinness Theatre, The Substation, with support from the Arts Fund. The performance was given an Arts Entertainment License with RA18 (Restricted Artistic 18 years and above only) rating and advisory: "The play contains strong language and adult themes that may be objectionable to some members of the public" by the Media Content Division (Publications and Arts) of the Media Development Authority (MDA) on Tuesday 1 August 2006. The license was cancelled on Friday 4 August 2006. As a result, *Smegma* could not be staged.

To find out more about *Smegma*, please visit [bit.ly/thevaultyeast](http://bit.ly/thevaultyeast).



Poster for *Smeqma* (2006)

## INTERVIEW WITH EUGINIA TAN

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In the lead up to the presentation of *Yeast*, we had a chat with playwright Eugenia Tan to share her thoughts on working with a text of such a graphic nature, and adapting it for an all-female cast.



Eugenia with the team in rehearsal

### **1. What was your first reaction to the text of *Smegma* and how has that changed over the process of working on *Yeast*?**

I felt quite affronted the first time I read the text - I was thinking, how can anyone write this? It seemed so wrong and mindless, and how strongly I felt about it really intrigued me. So I did what any “sensible” person would do, which was immediately read it a second time. Just to provoke myself. And reading it this time, I started to feel that Elangovan knows what he’s talking about. If I were to look at the entire play as a chess game, he seems to know which moves to make to reach a certain check in the whole game.

The more I studied the play later on, I actually started to feel quite sentimental towards the characters, which I think very few people might feel about Elangovan’s characters. It’s quite hard to feel sympathetic or even empathetic towards them, since the situations he puts people in might feel so out there and far-fetched. But the more I look at the play, the more I believe that these situations do happen and can happen. It made me want to break out of whatever shelter I was in to look beyond my comfort zone. I think that was the beauty of writing this piece for me.



### 2. Were there any challenges at the start of working on *Yeast*?

Oh there were many. Initially I wanted to ask Aswani to direct the play reading. She gave very good insight about the text, although she didn't take it on eventually. She told me that instead of simply replacing the gender of the characters, I could think about it from new perspectives and situations that I am a little bit more familiar with as a woman.

Later on, I asked Nessa if she could direct it, but she didn't dare as well. I already knew that I wanted Nessa to perform though, because I worked with Nessa before. I remember hearing her read for the first time, portraying her character so full of defiance, and I knew the script of *Yeast* needed her to carry it. She recommended Alin to direct instead and I was very intimidated at first because I look up to Alin so much and see her as a veteran. I asked Nessa if she's sure Alin would take this on, since I'm quite a young playwright.



Nessa with other cast members in rehearsal

But Nessa said to just go for it, because Alin understands the language of Elangovan, through working with him before and studying his texts. Having a director who understands what intention the text carries was very important during the rehearsal process. It allowed Alin to give so much leeway to the characters to be as unflinching as they could be. So for every act of violence that these characters inflicted, she knew how to direct them in a way where the violence seemed justified, no matter how mindless it appeared to be.

## INTERVIEW WITH EUGINIA TAN

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### **3. In adapting the text of *Smegma* into *Yeast* with an all-female cast of characters, how was the process of finding the voices of these new characters?**

I have to credit a lot of it to Alin's direction. She did bring out a lot of nuances that the lines already hold. When these words are said out loud in rehearsal, it makes you think of who the character is and why the character would say something like that. For example, in one particular scene we had Swee Lin and Joanne playing against Nessa, and the voices would have been very different if it were Sangeetha and Joanne playing against Nessa. I think the energy that everyone bounced off each other also contributed a lot to the weight of the lines.

In making these lines malleable enough for the actors to play with, I had to read the play over and over and over again to see which parts could be taken out or swapped around. I also had to think of who could carry which roles.



From L-R: Cast members Sangeetha Dorai, Nessa Anwar, Neo Swee Lin and Joanne Ng in rehearsal

### **4. Given the visceral subject matters that *Smegma* addresses, how did you decompress from reading and working with the text?**

There was a lot of rereading, which sometimes could take almost the whole day, because the scene can be very painful to digest. Although these things are not happening to me, and I don't witness similar incidents happening in my everyday life, experiencing them on page by yourself in a quiet space can somehow feel a lot more insecure than when you are in a rehearsal room and everyone is reading the text together.

I did not really decompress, but I rode on the high of reading the play, and sometimes I might just suddenly crash after working on it and going through the text so many times. In some ways I think I taught myself to be somewhat desensitised, so I am able to watch the actors perform it. A lot of people are not going to be entirely receptive either, so I have to be ready to receive responses from the audience's perspective as well.

Taking on this work is also a challenge for me on that front, as I am a pretty passive and reserved person. It is a challenge to explore this text as someone who is so different from the original writer, choosing to adapt the original with a line of interrogation that is relevant to me. But, that is actually the fun part of adapting. I feel quite in awe of the theatre-making process after this experience because I see how diverse it is. And even though we have had so many restrictions and been told to hunker down so many times, I feel like we're all still pretty resilient. I am humbled to have had the opportunity to attempt working on this project.

To find out more about Euginia's research process, visit [bit.ly/thevaultyeast](https://bit.ly/thevaultyeast) to read her essay *Embarking on Yeast* (2022).



## BIOGRAPHIES

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### EUGINIA TAN

Euginia Tan is a multi-disciplinary writer. She has experience in various creative forms including poetry, prose and theatre. Her play-writing credits include *Holidays* (under mentorship of Joel Tan), *Tuition* (Twenty Something Theatre Festival), *Modest Travels* (produced by Tan Kheng Hua for Uniqlo), *Fortunes* (The Necessary Stage Playwrights' Cove), *The Rat Trap* (Gateway Theatre Artist-In-Residence). *The Rat Trap* was nominated at the 2022 Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards for Best Actor (Lim Kay Siu).



### AIDLI 'ALIN' MOSBIT

Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit has worked extensively with local companies like The Necessary Stage, Teater Kami, Wild Rice, Cake Theatre, Toy Factory, The Theatre Practice, Teater Ekamatra and Drama Box. Recipient of the Young Artist Award for Theatre in 2008, she played the leading role of Murni in the film *Sayang Disayang* (2013) which was Singapore's Official 2015 Oscar® Entry for Best Foreign Language Film. In 2016, she published her collection of Malay plays entitled *CHANTEK*, which was awarded the Hadiah Persuratan (Literary Award) 2017 by the Malay Language Council, Singapore.



### JOANNE NG

Joanne Ng wears many hats. She primarily was trained in apparel design and later on moved on to technical theatre as a stage manager, production manager and costumer. She started acting only because the actress for Elangovan's *Flush* could not perform, just a week before the performance. As the Stage Manager at the time, she knew the lines and stage directions, so Elangovan and her, took a leap of faith. She was later nominated for Best Actress for The Straits Times Life! Awards for that very role in 2006.

## BIOGRAPHIES

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### NEO SWEE LIN

Neo Swee Lin is an accomplished actor of the stage, television & film. Her theatre credits include *Nadirah*, *GRC*, *Hamlet*, *Romeo & Juliet*, *The Glass Menagerie*, *Half Lives*, *M. Butterfly*, *The Coffin is too Big for the Hole* and *No Parking on Odd Days*, *Emily of Emerald Hill*, *My Mother's Chest*, *Medea*, *Mama Looking for her Cat*, *The House of Bernada Alba*, *Cogito*, *Love Letters*, *Beauty World*, *Circle Mirror Transformation*, *Falling*, *Dark Room*, *Hotel*, *The Truth*, *Missing* & most recently *Devil's Cherry* at SIFA 2022.



### NESSA ANWAR

Nessa Anwar has written, acted, produced and directed for theatre, television and video. A journalist by day, Nessa first trained and worked as an actor. She graduated with a degree in Philosophy, and has studied playwriting, screenwriting and investigative writing. Her first full-length play, *Riders Know When It's Gonna Rain*, was staged under Checkpoint Theatre and WILD Rice, and her second full-length, *Rumah Dayak*, was the inaugural production of Rupa co.lab, a theatre collective which she co-founded.

## BIOGRAPHIES

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### REBEKAH SANGEETHA DORAI

Rebekah Sangeetha Dorai is a film, television, stage actor, VO artist, and singer. Between voice-acting for a new children's animated series *Puberteens* (Finding Pictures), and playing a police chief on television (Mediacorp Singapore), Rebekah is happy she received the opportunity to work on *Yeast* with a team she loves. She was recently seen in *Merdeka* (Wild Rice), *NDP* (Voiceover, 2021), *Occupation* (Checkpoint Theatre) and *Sylvia* (Pachyderm Theatre). Catch her next at the Singapore Night Festival (2022).



### SAMZY JO

Samzy is a freelance theatre director and a writer of plays (and most recently, screenwriting) who received formal training at East 15 Acting School (University of Essex, UK) and graduated with an MFA in Theatre Directing. She had directed/co-directed productions in United Kingdom, Italy, China, Japan and Singapore. She was an apprentice of The Royal Shakespeare Company's Honorary Associate Director, John Caird.



## ABOUT CENTRE 42

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### CENTRE 42

Centre 42 is a non-profit arts organisation with IPC status committed to the creation, documentation and promotion of text-based works for the Singapore stage. As a theatre development space and intermediary, we incubate original writings for the stage, support the development of artists and new works, and develop and maintain a functional archive documenting the histories and processes of Singapore theatre.

As a registered charity, Centre 42 relies on public contributions to keep going. If you're able to, please make a donation to support our work in Singapore theatre.

*The Vault* residency presented by Centre 42, safe-keeps Singaporean works dating back to our early theatre years. The platform does not merely document the past but manifests as contemporary responses to these works. The Centre invites artists and practitioners to respond critically and personally to canonical Singapore classics, lesser known pieces and rarities, reworks and adaptations, and cross-cultural and cross-genres works.



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