

ROBERT YEO

THE SINGAPORE TRILOGY

ARE YOU THERE, SINGAPORE? • ONE YEAR BACK HOME • CHANGI



INTRODUCTION BY NAH DOMINIC AND ADEEB FAZAH

ROBERT YEO has published poetry and a novel, staged plays, written essays on cultural policy and theatre, compiled anthologies on Singaporean literature and co-written books on the teaching of literature in secondary schools. In 1978, he attended the University of Iowa's International Writing Program and was a Fulbright Scholar in 1995. For more than a decade, starting in 1977, he was Chairman of the Drama Advisory Committee, which helped to develop theatre in Singapore, especially English-language theatre, and for this work he was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1991. His collection of poems *Leaving Home, Mother* was published in 1999 and his three connected plays were first published in 2001 as *The Singapore Trilogy*. In October 2009, his second libretto titled *Kannagi*, a short chamber piece based on an Indian epic poem, with John Sharpley as composer, was staged in Singapore's Sri Mariamman Temple. His first libretto, a full-length work titled *Fences*, also with John Sharpley as composer, was staged in August 2012. Yeo was awarded the S'E.A. Write Award in 2011.

NAH DOMINIC is currently a PhD candidate at the English Language and Literature Academic Group, National Institute of Education, examining receptive and resistant student responses to ethically oriented literature pedagogies in Singaporean secondary schools. He served as Company Dramaturg of The Second Breakfast Company from 2020 to 2021, after his first foray into dramaturgy working on Goh Poh Seng's *The Moon Is Less Bright* in 2018. He was also invited by Asian Dramaturgs' Network as a rapporteur at the 2018 ADN Lab in Yogyakarta, Indonesia and served as co-editor for *ADN Re/View* (2021) vols. 1 to 3.

ADEEB FAZAH is Artistic Director of The Second Breakfast Company. He has directed shows ranging from Singaporean classics like Goh Poh Seng's *The Moon Is Less Bright*, to original works like *The Essential Playlist*. He has also had a hand in the founding of Adeeb & Shai, Impromptu Meetings, STRIKE! Digital Festival, and In the Round: a network of early career theatre directors. In 2017, he directed *Last of Their Generation* under Bhumi Collective, which premiered at the Edinburgh Fringe. He is also a drama educator and a committee member of the Singapore Drama Educators Association.

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"A Playwright's Reality", *The Straits Times*, 20 Nov 1980

"Not great, but...", *The Straits Times*, 21 Nov 1980

"Local idiom brings play to life", *New Nation*, 21 Nov 1980

"It would be better if script was allowed to speak for itself", *The Straits Times*, 27 Nov 1997

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author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead,
events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

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For Kirpal Singh
who has done more than anyone to advance my literary career

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THE SINGAPORE TRILOGY: A REAPPRAISAL

Nah Dominic and Adeeb Fazah

Throughout his artistic career spanning nearly six decades, Robert Yeo has been a tireless advocate of local drama. Having served as chairperson of the then-Ministry of Culture's Drama Advisory Committee (1977–1991), receiving a Public Service Medal for “the promotion of drama” and shortly thereafter helming the Drama Review Committee (1992–1994), Yeo's long-standing artistic activism has been crucial in “help[ing] to identify and support emerging dramatists, which led to the development of a vibrant Singaporean theatre”.¹ Yet, in the forty-seven years since *Are You There, Singapore?* was first performed, the three plays from Yeo's seminal *Singapore Trilogy* have not only rarely enjoyed live restagings, but also faced difficulties in matters of publication and curriculum, even inciting anxious expressions of self-censorship and cautionary reflections of being associated with the play by its performers. This could partly be attributed to equal parts fear and wonder, which Catherine Diamond observed: “Because they ostensibly challenged the one-party rule, actors were initially wary of performing the roles, and audiences were impressed with their audacity.”²

Taken together, the three plays occupy a seminal place in Singapore's English-language theatre history for their path-clearing role in staging the predominantly taboo subject of Singaporean politics. In this reappraisal, we survey the reception history of the *Trilogy*, revealing an ambivalent tally of responses across previews and reviews of staged productions, as well as critical and media discussions of the published texts and past stagings. On one hand, the majority of acclaim for the *Trilogy* rests upon its candid and forthright portrayal of Singaporean

politics on stage, which encouraged artists to be more forthcoming in openly representing socio-political affairs. On the other hand, the majority of criticism focuses on the plays' problematic dramaturgy and composition, which presents inconsistencies and imbalances for readers and audiences when measured against expectations of social realist theatre. Given that critical opinion of the plays tends towards affirming their historical significance as pioneering political plays in Singaporean English-language theatre, while expressing doubt of their artistic merit, are the plays then worth restaging? Or is its relevance consigned to just the playtext in written form? We vouch for the *Trilogy*'s continued relevance with a brief discussion of our key dramaturgical and directorial interventions in The Second Breakfast Company's March 2021 restaging of the *Trilogy*, where, in consultation with Yeo himself, the final script itself culminated in an unprecedented 3-in-1 adaptation of the plays—drawing from the original texts present in this volume.

Encounters with Censorship and Self-Censorship

The Singapore Trilogy is no stranger to facing issues of censorship and self-censorship. Yeo's track record with the censors for his playscripts has varied: perhaps the earliest record of appraising Yeo's openly political discussions on stage can be found in Tan Wang Joo's 1974 preview of *Are You There, Singapore?*, where she quipped that “the political references left the government censor's desk in the form they arrived—as did the play in whole”. Subsequently, Yeo's eighteen-month negotiation, in 1979 and 1980, with the Ministry of Culture to obtain a licence for *One Year Back Home*'s staging has been well-documented—most extensively in Ban Kah Choon's interview with Yeo in the *Trilogy*'s 2001 publication by Landmark Books, where

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

FROM STAGE TO PAGE THE SINGAPORE TRILOGY IN PERFORMANCE AND PUBLICATION

Robert Yeo

Plays have two lives, on stage and on the page. It is an intriguing relationship. In a sense, the page comes first, as the play has to be initially written, then shown to a director. Three things could then happen: the director stages it as it is largely written, he may ask for a few changes, or he may impose his directorial stamp on the performance (usually with the author's grudging consent).

Over the long years that my plays have been staged, from 1974 to 2021, I have learnt to accept "process", that my play as written will be changed, whatever the degree. This means accepting that the play, once it leaves my hand, will be interpreted.

The Performance of *Are You There, Singapore?* in 1974

Prem Kumar, who directed my first play, staged in the historic Cultural Centre from 24 to 26 July 1974, was a medical doctor who loved the theatre. He had directed many Western plays for a few theatre companies, the last I watched being Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*.

My impression of him was that he had a confidence about him that was cocky, and he was only interested in staging Western plays. English-language theatre in Singapore at that time, after the plays of Lim Chor Pee and Goh Poh Seng in the first half of the sixties, was dominated by the staging of Anglo-American plays by expatriate English amateur companies and a few local ones. The last local play was Goh Poh Seng's *The Elder Brother* in 1966, and nothing

significant had happened since then. So, it was a bold step to approach Prem to direct a play about Singaporeans by a Singaporean. When I showed him the script I had written in 1969 and had nearly forgotten about, I was delighted when he said he liked it and would stage it. Serendipitously, he had been looking for a local play, and I came along at the right time!

Next, I made another bold move. I approached the University of Singapore Society (later renamed the National University of Singapore Society), the graduate body of which both Prem and I were members, for financing. The society had a history of productions of only Western plays, and when I said to the management committee, "I am going to stage a Singaporean play for the first time," the committee was enthusiastic and agreed to provide me with a budget.

I then formed a production committee of friends, and we had regular meetings to support the cast during the rehearsal period. We took care of booking the venue, providing spaces in the Society's premises for rehearsals, publicity, programmes, tickets, guests, etc., leaving Prem to do the artistic task of directing, undistracted by mundane but necessary concerns. I became the de facto executive producer, with financial help from the Society.

It worked. Publicity was tremendous, most certainly because it had been nearly a decade since the previous Singaporean play. Both *The Straits Times* and the afternoon daily *The New Nation* gave prominence to the pre-play activities. The pro-arts *New Nation* entertainment critic wrote in the 21 July 1974 edition: "Big effort to make the play a success," accompanied by a rehearsal photo. That same day, *The Sunday Times* gave the play a full page; Tan Wang Joo's piece was titled "How Towkays' darlings live in London," with two photos, one of me, and the other a rehearsal picture.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

ARE YOU THERE,
SINGAPORE?

"For a first play, Robert Yeo is to be congratulated on his handling of dialogue, situation, plot content and development. What is most important—it moves!"

—Gracia Tay-Chee, *The Straits Times*, 1974

"It is about the best-attended play I've seen and it all went off like a shot... It has many good things going for it. One is the playwright's natural sense of drama."

—Violet Oon, *The New Nation*, 1974

PRODUCTION NOTES

Are You There, Singapore? was first performed on 24 July 1974, at the Cultural Centre, presented by the University of Singapore Society. This production was directed by Prem Kumar. The cast was as follows, in order of appearance:

ANG SIEW HUA	<i>Esther Leong</i>
ANG SIEW CHYE	<i>Lim Kay Tong</i>
RICHARD LIM	<i>Raymond Ong</i>
SALLY TAN	<i>Wrisney Tan</i>
GIORGIO	<i>Jamshid Medora</i>
MARCELLO	<i>Wee Soo Cheang</i>
SARAH AITKENS	<i>Susan Nairn</i>
REGINALD FERNANDEZ	<i>Gulam Husain</i>

CHARACTERS

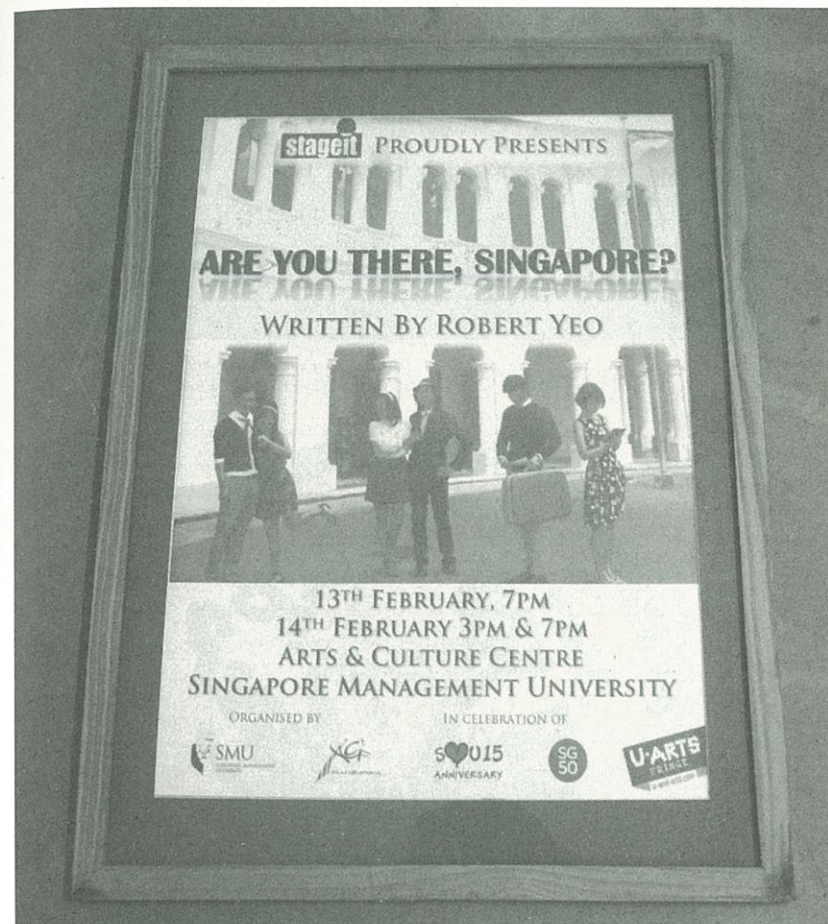
ANG SIEW HUA	First-year undergraduate at the London School of Economics
ANG SIEW CHYE	Her brother, undergraduate
RICHARD LIM	Postgraduate student
SALLY TAN	Undergraduate
GIORGIO	Italian, second-year undergraduate at the London School of Economics
MARCELLO	Giorgio's friend
SARAH AITKENS	Richard's girlfriend
REGINALD FERNANDEZ	Undergraduate
ANOTHER VOICE	In Act 1, Scene 2
JOHN	to be played by the same person
MR ANG	Parents of Chye and Hua
MRS ANG	



Rehearsal photo of Esther Leong as Hua and Raymond Ong as Richard (middle and right). Looking on in concern is Lim Kay Tong as Chye (left). Courtesy of the University of Singapore Society.



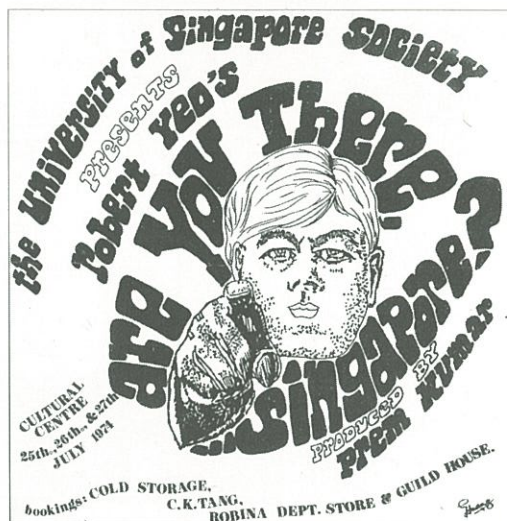
Rehearsal photo of Chye and Hua at the moment when he learns about her pregnancy. Courtesy of the University of Singapore Society.



Poster of the production by Stage It, the theatre club of Singapore Management University, in the Arts and Culture Centre, 13–14 February 2015, the year celebrating fifty years of Singapore's independence. Tarun Satyakumar directed. Courtesy of Stage It.



Rehearsal scene of *Hua, hurt*, on the couch. Ryan Tay Jun Hurng as Chye, Nicole Dominique Kee Xia Yi as Hua and Goh Ee Hua as Sally, in the 2015 staging by Stage It. Courtesy of Stage It.



Poster of *Are You There, Singapore?* designed by Peter Huang. The play was staged in the historic Cultural Centre at Canning Rise, 25–27 July 1974, and played to packed houses. On 26 Jul 1974, Gracia Tay-Chee (theatre critic of *The Straits Times*) praised it in "S'pore play packed with imagination" and Violet Oon (arts critic of *New Nation*) hailed it in "Bob's play goes off like a shot". Courtesy of the National University of Singapore Society.

UNIVERSITY OF SINGAPORE SOCIETY

STATEMENT OF INCOME AND EXPENDITURE FOR PLAY "ARE YOU THERE SINGAPORE?" SHOWN ON 24TH, 25TH, 26TH & 27TH JULY 1974.

INCOME

Sale of tickets	\$2,807.00
Proceeds from advertisements after deducting) commissions and agency charges of \$4,440.50)	5,109.50
Sale of programs	441.00
	<u>\$8,357.50</u>

EXPENDITURE

Licence	20.00
Cultural Centre Rental	693.80
Commission for sale of tickets on \$530.00	5.50
Printing :-	
Tickets & programs	\$1,192.60
Posters & handbills	270.00
	<u>1,462.60</u>
Stationary and stamps	35.00
Photographs	31.80
Stage :-	
Set	\$380.00
Wallpaper and labour	150.00
Make-up materials	65.90
Miscellaneous	29.90
	<u>625.80</u>
Wardrobe :-	
Materials	\$117.80
Tailoring	210.00
	<u>327.80</u>
Transport	174.20
Refreshments	82.10
Party	150.00
	<u>\$3,609.40</u>
Add :- Excess of Income over Expenditure	4,748.10
	<u>\$8,357.50</u>

Chang Kian Lan

.....
DR. CHANG KIAW LAN
BUSINESS MANAGER
DRAMA SUB-COMMITTEE

To the best of my knowledge and information available, I certify that the above statement of Income and Expenditure is correctly drawn up.

Raphael Leong
.....
RAPHAEL LEONG SAI MOOI
(HONORARY AUDITOR)

22nd October 1974.

Statement of income and expenditure for the play *Are You There, Singapore?* in July 1974. The then University of Singapore, which has financially backed all Yeo's plays, made an excess of income over expenditure of \$4,478.10. Courtesy of the National University of Singapore Society.

ACT 1

SCENE 1 *London, late sixties. It is early November and the lights appear on the small sitting-cum-bedroom of Chye and Hua. On the left of stage, a small bed belonging to Chye. On the right, a convertible settee. In the centre, a small table with two bowls, four plates and chopsticks. A bookshelf with some books stands behind the settee. Back left is the passageway to the kitchen, and back right is the door. Standing against the wall is a big black-and-white photo of Trafalgar Square about three-and-a-half feet by three feet in size. As the play opens, we hear softly but distinctly the Beatles song "I Wanna Hold Your Hand" from the transistor radio on the bookshelf. Hua, miniskirted, is sitting on her brother's bed, looking impatient, glancing at her watch. Chye is reading a magazine.*

HUA What time did you tell him, Chye?

CHYE About seven-ish. It's okay, Hua. Five past only now. *(Hua goes to the kitchen, then emerges. Longish pause.)* Do you think it's worth the while, Hua? Coming all the way? Try and forget him.

HUA It's not so easy. I'll try just once...and anyway, I haven't come here just to see him again.

CHYE That's what you say. This is just like you, eh, Hua? Always acting on impulse. In the last six months, do you know, he's not once really asked about you? All he says, if he knows I'm writing home, is, "Give my

regards to Hua." That's what it is, Hua. Regards only. *(switches off radio)* And last week— *(knock on door)* Well, here he is! *(Goes to door, opens it. Enter Richard Lim.)* Regards in person. Hi, how's the regarder?

RICHARD Re—what?

CHYE Regarder. You specialise in regarding people and things. You don't want to get too involved if you can help it. You want to regard—from a safe distance.

CHYE Teasing you lah. How's everything?

RICHARD Okay, except in the stomach. Must be the rhubarbs I fired last night. Bloody Pembroke Hall food. Rhubarbs, rhubarbs...three times a week. How to survive in London?

CHYE Don't joke lah. You'll survive, all right. Anyway, what, you think the English girls will give in so easily?

RICHARD Not quite, not quite... *(hands overcoat to Chye)*

CHYE You mean, no. So try again, man. That's what you're here for, eh?

RICHARD Surely. *(sees Hua, turns to her)* Hello, Hua.

HUA Hi. What happened last week? We were expecting you.

RICHARD I'm sorry about that, Hua...after all your cooking. I told Chye—

CHYE Oh, I told her. She knows.

RICHARD Really, Hua—

HUA *(sweetly)* It's okay, Richard. But this time you must finish the food—you know what?

RICHARD What?

HUA Your favourite. Fish curry the way you like it, hot and sour.

RICHARD Yum, yum, lead the way, lead the way! (*They all trail into the kitchen. Richard re-emerges, carrying a pot, followed by Chye with another pot, which they both place on the table respectively.*) Hot, hot curry. Whew! You don't know how lucky you are, enjoying homecooking. I'm going to use my hands.

CHYE Naturally lah.

RICHARD Shaddap, man! I mean the curry lah. You're lucky about food, but don't take it too much for granted.

CHYE What luck! What about you staying in the hall and all those English birds. Not to mention Continental and Commonwealth ones. Every night international cuisine!

RICHARD Come on, man. Give me a chance. This is only the start of my second year here—

CHYE And isn't one year enough? To...to, as you say, test the permissive society? I say, this is London lah, not Singapore. Just to quote you. (*Hua emerges with the rice. She dishes out to the men, Richard first.*)

HUA You must eat. Specially cooked, you know. (*Smiles sweetly at Richard. Gives helping to her brother and then herself. They all sit down, Richard and Hua on settee.*)

RICHARD So, how has the term begun, Hua?

HUA Getting more interesting day by day. You know, the demonstration is this Sunday. And we're all meeting at the school in the morning.

RICHARD Well, it's good to see you getting into the thick of things—after only two months here. Since when?

HUA What do you mean, since when? Since...

since recently!

RICHARD Must be very recent. Are you marching with them?

HUA I think so, but do you think I ought to?

RICHARD Why not? If you haven't been to a demonstration, it's interesting, surely!

HUA But I've been to one!

RICHARD Which one?

HUA The one against the Greek junta.

RICHARD What, were you there? How come I didn't see you?

HUA I saw you.

RICHARD I don't believe you.

HUA You were with a blonde girl with blue miniskirt.

RICHARD (*smiles*) Yah, that's right.

HUA What's her name, Richard?

RICHARD Sarah. You must meet her, Hua. She's very friendly, you know, very, very...

CHYE Of course... All your birds are ve-ry ve-ry, and mini mini in their resistance. Testing, testing...

RICHARD Don't listen to your brother.

HUA But I think he's right. (*Chye and Hua exchange knowing glances.*) Anyway, are you going?

RICHARD Going? (*pause*) Oh, you mean the Sunday march. Yes, of course. I don't think the English students have many grievances. I mean, if you compare them to American, French or German students. But the fact is, they are young people, young spirits revolting against old values. You know, ageing gods like de Gaulle and LBJ. So I think the students are doing something worthwhile. (*pause*) Besides, they are demonstrating against Vietnam. I think we've

got a stake there, somehow.

HUA I suppose so. (*spots Richard's empty plate*) More?

RICHARD Yes, please. Must be your curry.

HUA Wait. I'll get some warm rice. (*goes into kitchen*)

RICHARD Chye, you're too much, man. Do you have to talk like that in front of Hua? All those insinuations?

CHYE She knows lah. She knows about your new ways. She even knows you are going to a pot session tonight with some bird. Tottenham Court Road.

RICHARD I got invited. My first time to try it, should be interesting.

CHYE I don't know. (*Hua emerges with a pot.*)

HUA Here we are. (*goes over to Richard and dishes out rice*)

CHYE Yes, Hua, give him the pot, not just more rice. This is London, man. (*Richard looks remonstratingly at Chye.*)

HUA Pot? Pot? What do you mean?

CHYE Pot lah. Not the pot you're carrying. I mean. Hashish, marijuana. For dreaming of white birds, even if you can't have them. Not for the moment, at any rate. (*Hua looks at Richard, puzzled.*)

RICHARD What your beloved brother means, Hua, is that I'm going to a smoking session.

HUA Are you? Tonight?

RICHARD That's right.

HUA And you are going to... (*Hua looks at him incredulously.*)

RICHARD Of course I am. Oh, come on, Hua, don't look at me like that. I'm not going to be a drug addict just because I go there. I'm just curious to know what

it's all about. I'm sure I'm going to dislike it, but I've got to know what it tastes like.

CHYE Know, know! Why are you so damn concerned about knowing, eh? You can judge for yourself, all this unnatural stimulation—for teenagers, man.

RICHARD I agree, sure. Artificial titillation is correct. That's why I know I'm going to dislike it, but I want to be sure, that's all. But as long as you know what you're doing and are disciplined enough, I don't see the harm. My grandfather was an opium addict. He used to take me to his smoking sessions and I used to watch amazed as he smoked himself away. Oh, I can still remember the smell of the opium burning. He was—

HUA How could you even... (*in a mumbling voice*)

RICHARD I beg your pardon? Hua, one swig isn't going to make me a swinger. (*Hua turns away, silent for a while.*)

HUA Even then. How can you be sure you won't make it a habit?

RICHARD Habit? Not likely. Hua, thanks for your concern, but I know enough of myself. I think I know what can be tried and what cannot.

CHYE Sure, try, try. Whole life of experiment!

RICHARD Why not? Life is sometimes an experiment. And in this place you get a chance to experiment with things you cannot do at home. I don't mean just going to a pot session, we've had opium back home for more than a century. I mean values, values which ought to be tested. Tested, surely. Not by doing something silly like swimming the

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

On *The Singapore Trilogy*

"In his art, Yeo always adopts the role of the poet-observer, commenting on and making sense of what may otherwise remain unsaid. Though he has suffered criticism from the powers that be for inciting controversy, he is not a rabble-rouser. He is a patriot."

— Rosihan Zain, *The New Straits Times*

"*The Singapore Trilogy* expresses both the commitment and scepticism that must engage questions and discussions of service to the nation, and nation-building. The catchphrase of National Education (launched in 1998) is: 'Love your country; know your country; lead your country'. Yeo's *Trilogy* dramatises it with intelligence, honesty and courage."

— Leong Liew Geok, *The Straits Times*

"As one of the pioneering playwrights of Singapore, Robert has been a trailblazer for other playwrights who have come after him. The sheer gumption and audacity to be an artist in Singapore, especially in that era, is one I will always doff my hat to. I particularly appreciate that, in the context of the 70s, Robert did not shy from tackling the potential minefield of Singaporean politics."

— Kamil Haque, Artistic Director, Haque Centre of Acting & Creativity

PLAYS

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