

Shorts 2

by

HARESH SHARMA

1. Land

2. Sea

3. Koan

4. Lizard

5. Rosnah

6. untitled women number one

7. untitled cow number one

8. godeatgod

CONTINUED FROM COVER

and an intercultural journey (*Rosnah*), to an allegorical journey (*Koan*) and a socially-engaged postmodern intermedia/cultural work (*godeatgod*), Sharma, with his collaborators, has brought some of the finest contemporary and exploratory theatrical forms to the stage with indelible results.

In exploring a range of genres and mixing some of them, Sharma's creative restlessness showed he wasn't satisfied to stay within his comfort zone. Working with different directors who had a variety of aesthetic tastes and visions helped him develop a voracious appetite for newness and innovation. There are, after all, from this collection, three monologues (*Koan*, *Rosnah* and *untitled cow number one*), two duologues (*Sea* and *untitled women number one*), two three-hander plays (*Land* and *Lizard*) and one play (*godeatgod*) with an ensemble of five (including the playwright).

All the works in *Shorts 2*, except for *Koan*, have undergone the classic TNS (The Necessary Stage) restaging. *Rosnah*, *untitled women*, *godeatgod* and *Land* have all been revisited and reworked, undergoing recasting. When our home shifted to the Marine Parade Community Building, the *untitled* plays, and *godeatgod* were staged at our Black Box, marking our presence and making exploratory works accessible to heartland residents.

Rosnah and *Lizard* premiered as a 'community' performance at the Tampines Regional Library and was later restaged at a theatre conference in Melbourne and a theatre festival in the Philippines. The *untitled* plays, *Koan*, *Lizard*, *Rosnah* and *godeatgod* have had international stagings in Delhi, Macau, Busan, Melbourne, the

Philippines, Hong Kong, Hungary, Romania and Glasgow. *Koan*, however, has never been staged in Singapore as a public performance. But the fact that Sharma's works have traversed community to international audiences surely marks him as a playwright in touch with the pulse of his times; being inspired by what is on the ground and possessing the intuitive vision and talent to make relevant and transmit the socio-cultural rhythms and themes of Singaporean lives to those unfamiliar with them.

Rosnah has two important journeys that fuelled its creation. Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit (the original actress), Sharma and I were involved in a series of workshops in Glasgow for a Singapore-Scotland collaboration that never materialised. During that period, Sharma and I were pursuing our masters at the University of Birmingham, spending our longest time away from home. Many observations of self and the notion of 'others' marked our lives, generating fresh material for a play. Alin's daily diary recordings of her journey away from home also contributed to the cauldron of ideas. The second journey was to create and transmit an innovative work dealing with multiple perspectives and contradictions to an audience that included those from the community heartlands and foreigners.

godeatgod, a response to 9/11, became our most internationally toured work to date, playing at Sziget Festival in Hungary, Sibiu International Festival in Romania, Hong Kong Fringe and Glasgow. We composed and premiered it with a Singaporean cast but decided to cast a Japanese and a Filipino actor for our international tour.

godeatgod examines how convictions and beliefs have many aspects. When are convictions and beliefs related to faith and when do they fuel terrorism? It also examines the role of socially-engaged art. As god is put in the dock, allegedly for the deaths of the many who

have died in his name, actors were questioned by the playwright about acting in a play concerning socio-political causes. One actor questions the worth of socially-engaged theatre: that instead of squandering \$50,000 to stage such a play, why not give the money directly to the poor?

There are three historical-ideological tragedies in *godeatgod*; the assassination of Benigno Aquino Jr (1983), the Tiananmen Square massacre (1989) and the Bali bombing (2002), all inspired by convictions, and a fictional story of a wife with a terminally-ill husband. As she has made him her 'god', her identity is now destabilised and uncertain because of his impending death. *godeatgod* explores identity and convictions by superimposing personal, social, political and spiritual stories, resulting in a contemplative work that is at once postmodern yet accessible and challenging.

As with *godeatgod*, Sharma's writing continues to put forth critical questions about progress. Is there real progress in the global village? Is material progress attained at the expense of spirituality and compassion? What are we searching for with material progress and why is this nature of progress so essential to our concept of survival?

For Singaporeans, the importance of material progress often goes unquestioned, perhaps because we have bought into the notion of belonging to a country with no raw materials. We must not risk losing out when competing with our resource-rich neighbours. For some of us, material advancement is a priority, fast becoming our second nature and part of the national psyche.

In *Land* and *Lizard*, we experience, through satire and black humour, how human beings brought up in Singapore's socio-economic environment are thwarted by a sustained programme of greed,

ambition and control that have crept into our homes and personal dreams. Our discipline as such is not borne out of passion but out of pragmatic rationalism that prioritises material goals above all else. The search for fulfilment through alternative routes and choices are seldom encouraged, and life options look limited as if the rules are made before we are born and we are here just to execute the pre-determined goals.

Koan, juxtaposing two journeys of two women in search of their identities and destinies, throws up questions on mortality and what life is for. The multimedia shows an interview with an elderly woman recounting her mother and husband's deaths and her own near-death experience, and the moment she discovers her son is gay. "I had to choose. If I chose to not accept him, I will lose someone I love. There is no new thing under the sun. He is, after all, my son." This real-life account saw her coming to grips and learning how to let go of the old to attain the new when what is at stake is someone she dearly loves. The other journey shows the 'live' performer on stage, in a parallel world, learning that she has to stop searching and start finding. *Koan*, in many ways, exemplifies the Singapore that is waiting for its rebirth into adulthood.

The other works in *Shorts 2* dwell on status and power deeply etched in the psyches of characters in want of spiritual renewal. These works are relatively more universally located but nevertheless reflect the conditions of the times, especially how the characters and relationships are portrayed, and very much (especially for the *untitled* plays) explore form as content.

Whether subconsciously or consciously, Sharma has cradled and penned the salient thoughts and sensibilities of a Singapore in engagement with the world as it grows up, straddling the 20th and the 21st centuries. They are presented here in this precious and insightful collection.

Alvin Tan
Founder & Artistic Director,
The Necessary Stage

Dedicated to all the actors who helped create these
plays and who breathed life into the characters.

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Shorts 2

Some thoughts on the plays.

Putting together this collection has brought back many memories of these plays and the processes of creating them.

Some of the plays are connected in style or theme and some even have similar texts.

Sea, which features two sisters on a boat trip, has one sister talking about her dying husband. In *godeatgod*, I developed this character and she became the main focus of the play's narrative. This 'character' appeared again in *untitled cow number one*, as a widowed cow lamenting the loss of her husband.

Land and *Rosnah* have had many incarnations. *Land* was originally called *Three Years in the Life and Death of Land* – a short piece staged in 1993 as a lunchtime performance at Shell Theatre. However, when The Necessary Stage was commissioned to stage a performance for the 1994 Singapore Arts Festival, we decided to rework the play, while keeping the title. Eventually, *Three Years in the Life and Death of Land* became the title of our two-and-a-half-hour play, while *Land* became the official title of this short play.

Rosnah was initially devised by director Alvin Tan and actor Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit in 1995 when I was studying at the University of Birmingham. They sent me transcripts of their improvisations which I moulded into a monologue. The play had several stagings between 1995–1997, each time with a revised script, but always staying true to who *Rosnah* is and what she represents.

Some of these plays also had very strong treatments from the directors I was working with – Alvin Tan, Kok Heng Leun and Jeff Chen. In *Koan*, Alvin incorporated a multimedia thread that ran parallel to my written narrative. The multimedia featured an interview with an elderly woman recounting her life experiences and offered a poignant juxtaposition to the 'live' performance.

Heng Leun directed *Lizard* where he cross-dressed the actors, and *Sea* where he played up the sexual and animalistic aspects of the two sisters. *Sea* has never been restaged and remains till today one of my most personal plays.

The *untitled* series was my collaboration with Jeff Chen, who was a resident director with The Necessary Stage for a few years in the early 2000s. It was a refreshing collaboration because I was not part of the rehearsal process. His directorial treatment was never 'safe' or predictable and always powerful.

godeatgod was originally performed in 2002 and later reworked and restaged. It remains one of The Necessary Stage's most toured works internationally, having been performed in Scotland, Hong Kong, Romania and Hungary. It was challenging editing the script for this collection because the production featured not just the written text but also multimedia and music.

While I hold dear the memories behind these plays – the process, the production, the actors and directors, the restagings and tours – I am excited by their re-emergence in this collection and their potential to create new memories.

Haresh Sharma

6 August 2011

Land

A plot of land transforms from a cemetery to a condominium site.

In the process, three stories are presented where ancestors are worshipped, ghosts are unearthed and a mobile phone becomes a murder weapon.

LAND**PRODUCTION HISTORY****FIRST STAGING**

[Originally called '3 Years in the Life and Death of Land' (Abridged)],
Shell (Singapore), Friday Lunchtime Cultural Programme, Shell
Theatrette, November 1993

CAST

Hossan Leong, Rajesh Krishnamuti, Geraldine Wee

DIRECTOR

Kok Heng Leun

SECOND STAGING

Moving Home Stories: Land and Sea, The Substation Guinness
Theatre, November 1997

CAST

Low Kah Wei, Mohd Fita Helmi, Sim Pern Yiau

DIRECTOR

Alvin Tan

PRODUCTION MANAGER

Clarisse Ng

ASSISTANT PRODUCTION MANAGER

Sia Ang

STAGE MANAGERS

Koh Hui Moi and Pok Fee Furn

SET DESIGN

Sia Ang

LIGHTING DESIGN

Yo Shao Ann

SLIDE PHOTOGRAPHER

Zelda Tatiana Ng

LAND

CHARACTERS

LUCY / SHUI MEI / JEANNIE

RAVI / AKRAM / MUTHU

PA / LIM / BOY

SETTING: A PLOT OF LAND

I. YEAR ONE

WHEN LIGHTS COME ON, VOICES ARE HEARD OFF-STAGE.

RAVI, LUCY AND PA ARE WALKING IN.

RAVI You didn't bring it.

LUCY I thought you were supposed to bring

RAVI Aiyah, you ah!

LUCY How come you know so much?

RAVI I told you. I did a paper in Qing Ming¹ for my sociology project in NUS.²

PA Shhh!

LUCY [Softer] Never mind. No need to bring so many things.

1 *Qing Ming* — A traditional Chinese festival where graves of the departed are tended to and visited

2 *NUS* — National University of Singapore

PA Shhh! See. So many weeds. One year only, still so many weeds.

LUCY Pa, I told you to pay that man to clear...

PA No! Nobody is allowed to touch your mother's grave, except family. And now him...

RAVI Don't worry Ah Pa. I know what to do.

PA You don't talk. Whatever I tell you to do, you do.

PA TALKS TO THE GRAVE FOR A WHILE AS HE CLEARS THE WEEDS. RAVI AND LUCY TAKE THINGS OUT FROM A PLASTIC BAG — OFF, FAN, EVIAN WATER ETC.

LUCY Eh, Pa hasn't said anything about the relocation.

RAVI He was very quiet when we told him about the letter. You talk to him lah. This is the last time we can come here you know. They're going to start clearing up in a few months.

LUCY But he'll blame me again and—

RAVI —Then! You expect him to listen—

LUCY —OK, OK. [Slight pause] Pa...

PA Hmm...

LUCY About the letter...

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



*"Like divine signs glimpsed by the
faithful, godeatgod is most rewarding
for its subtle touches."*

— The Straits Times

*"... a play that spoke truth to power
with both directness and subtlety."*

— The Philippine Daily Inquirer on *Lizard*

Following the successful launch of *Shorts 1*, The Necessary Stage presents *Shorts 2*, the second installment of short plays by award-winning Singapore playwright Hareesh Sharma.

This collection of 8 plays includes some of Sharma's best and most popular early works, including *godeatgod* which has been performed to rave reviews both locally and internationally. 5 other plays, *untitled women number one*, *untitled cow number one*, *Koan*, *Lizard* and *Rosnah* have also been performed at international festivals and venues.

For 6 of the 8 plays, this will be their first appearance in print.

The collection also contains an introduction by Alvin Tan, Founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage.