

Theatre Life!

A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000) A History of English-

Theatre Life!



Editor Ong Sor Fern
Copy editor Winnifred Wong
Art direction Lee Shin Kee

Designed and produced by Ethos Books, an imprint Pagesetters Services Private Limited.
Printed by National Photo Engravers.



Singapore Press Holdings, 2001

Singapore Press Holdings
82, Genting Lane,
News Centre
Singapore 349567

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without prior permission of the publisher.

ISBN 981-04-3705-6

Theatre Life!:

A History of English-language Theatre in
Singapore through *The Straits Times* (1958-2000)

Clarissa Oon



Singapore
Press
Holdings

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

iv

All photographs in this book are from *The Straits Times* Library and *The Straits Times* Picture Desk unless otherwise stated.

This book would not have been possible without the help of the following:

Singapore Press Holdings for their sponsorship of this book,

the book's editors, Life!s Ong Sor Fern and Ethos Books' Winnifred Wong, for fighting fires and making this book a coherent reality,

my editors at Life!, Richard Lim, Sumiko Tan and Wong Ah Yoke, for reading and proof-reading the chapters, David Birch, who came in as consultant to the project, and Tisa Ng, for writing the introduction,

The Straits Times' photographer James Croucher for taking most of the new photographs for this book,

All those who were interviewed for the book. In particular, Alex Abisheganaden and Robert Yeo shared their knowledge on the earlier decades of theatre history. Geoffrey Abisheganaden, Clive Sharenguivel, Lim Chor Pee, Liew Chin Choy, Associate Professor Bernard Tan, Robert Liew, Danny Tan, The Stage Club and the National Arts Council supplied valuable old photographs, programmes, essays and other documents,

Times House librarians for putting up so efficiently and smilingly with my queries,

Life! interns Fiona Chan and Davina Chua for their help with the research and writing,

my family, friends and colleagues for their support,

God, for sustaining me through the writing.

CONTENTS

A Word from the Publisher	<i>vii</i>
Introduction by Tisa Ng	<i>ix</i>
The 1950s	18
The 1960s	38
The 1970s	58
The 1980s	96
The 1990s	134
Bibliography	174
About the Writer	176

A WORD FROM THE PUBLISHER

2001 — the start of a new millennium — will see an important milestone in the progress of theatrical arts in Singapore. The publication of *Theatre Life!: A History of English Language Theatre in Singapore through The Straits Times (1958-2000)*, is a significant contribution to Singapore theatre, society and culture.

Singapore Press Holdings (SPH) is proud to sponsor the first publication of this special book written in true journalistic style, especially appealing to the widening audience and participants of local English drama. Providing a comprehensive and insightful account of events and personalities, it sets the stage for a new surge of creative energies in the development of Singapore theatre.

Working hand-in-hand with the professional *Straits Times Life!* team on this project, we are honoured to share their vision of showcasing and recognising the commitment and progress of the Singapore theatre community.

With a nation endeavouring to fulfill the standards of an international arts hub and Renaissance City, SPH plays its part as a sponsor and supporter of literary programmes. These include the NAC-SPH Golden Point Award for short story writing and poetry, the Singapore Writers' Festival, the Singapore Young Dramatists Award and TheatreWorks' Writers' Lab to nurture playwriting talents.

A long-standing Distinguished Patron of the Arts, SPH as corporate citizen is also involved in educational initiatives towards wildlife and nature conservation, cultural activities in the promotion of language literacy, school sports for youths, and other charitable efforts aimed at fostering a stronger sense of community spirit and ties.

INTRODUCTION

TISA NG

An appreciation of one's own history is a function of maturity.

In youth, when we are discovering the world around us and are interested mainly in testing ourselves and stretching our abilities, the focus tends to be on action and on getting things done. As a nation that is still young, we have short memories in Singapore. We lack an awareness of our own history, and do not appreciate the value of understanding it. We are constantly rushing to complete the next project, secure the next contract, deliver on the next deadline and make the next profit. Naturally, this is not conducive for reflecting on the past and analysing how we have got here from there. If we look back at all, it is usually only in the context of planning for the next upcoming event: how to make it bigger, better, and even more effective or more impactful.

In the rush towards new achievements and greater success, or simply preoccupied by the struggle to survive, we do not have time to dwell on what has gone before. The desire to understand our past, and to tease out the strands that have become woven into the fabric of our present, remains nascent. Intellectual curiosity and academic understanding are qualities that we have yet to learn to cherish. It is possible that we will not, until we see pragmatic justification for the time and effort, or reach an understanding of the significance of these qualities as we mature as a community. Until this happens, we are likely to remain ignorant of many aspects of our short history.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



The Stage Club's
production of
Oscar Wilde's *The
Importance of
Being Earnest* in
December 1948.

Whenever a new British army officer came to town,

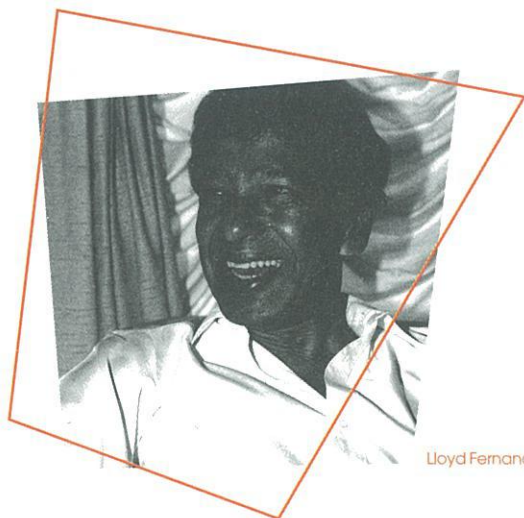
The Straits Times used to print his resume so colonial society would know how his hockey-playing skills or love of theatre could be deployed. If he was theatre-mad, the officer would find himself shanghaied by a civilian drama group like The Stage Club or servicemen groups like the Changi Theatre Club, Seletar Theatre Club and the Naval Base Drama Group.

It was amateur drama in the best of British tradition. According to the *Free Press*, during the officer's off-duty hours, he would be painting sets, making costumes or spouting lines from Oscar Wilde. These activities usually took place with much enthusiasm and spirit in a clubhouse setting. Alcohol and a good deal of merry-making often followed afterwards.

In the 1950s, Singapore English drama was essentially British drama. Apart from the British expatriate groups, the circle of English drama enthusiasts was small, for the simple reason that not many Singaporeans were fluent in English to begin with. Before self-government in 1959 led to the increasing standardisation of education, each ethnic community had its own school system, with its own medium of instruction.¹ In 1950, for example, only 39.6% of schools aided by public funds and 33.5% of private schools used English as a medium of instruction.² There were also few English-educated university graduates. In 1955, the University of Malaya (founded in 1949 in Singapore) had only 424 Singaporean students, compared to the 350 students in the Chinese-medium Nanyang

¹ Gopinathan, 1991: 268

² *Colony of Singapore Annual Report*, 1950: 71



Lloyd Fernando

SCRIPT: GROUNDBREAKING PLAY

Staged by the university's undergraduate drama society at the Cultural Centre (the Drama Centre today) on 2-3 October 1958, *Strangers at the Gates* took nearly a month to get clearance from the Criminal Investigation Department (CID). According to a *Straits Times*' report on 24 September 1958, the play's subject matter of university students who wish to express political views was deemed objectionable in the light of the Preservation of Public Security Ordinance and the Emergency Regulations.

Plays also had to be vetted by the police before they could be staged, a procedure which is passed down to the present day in the form of a license to be obtained from the police's Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU).

Fernando, a Malaysian and retired professor of English, who suffered a stroke in 1997, could not be

interviewed during the research for this book.

However, Singaporean poet Professor Edwin Thumboo who saw the play as a fellow-undergraduate told *Theatre Life!*: "I liked it. It was a bit raw here and there, but most importantly, it was by one of us."

HISTORY: CAMPUS DRAMA

Fernando was active in the undergraduate drama group known as the University of Malaya Dramatic Society. After Singapore's separation from Malaysia in 1965, it was renamed the University of Singapore Drama Society, and in 1980, became the Varsity Playhouse.

Another drama group, but for graduates of the university, was the University of Malaya Society, which, post separation, became the University of Singapore Society. Today, it is known as the National University of Singapore Society and it still stages plays occasionally.

1950

The first Youth Drama and Music Festival organised by the Singapore Teachers' Union.
Singapore Arts Theatre founded by Donald Moore.

1952

FEB: Traditional Asian dramas in English at Raffles Society festival.

1955

Malayan adaptation of Moliere play.

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

50s 60s 70s 80s 90s