TRANSCRIPT
OF

BEGINNING AND BECOMING
Identity and Language in the Theatre, 1960s – 1980s

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Hosted by Clarissa Oon
Featuring actress Margaret Chan, and playwrights Robert Yeo and Michael Chiang

Transcribed by Vanessa Teo

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Clarissa Oon (CO): I can think of no better trio to share what Singapore's theatre scene was like from the 60s to the 80s than our three speakers today. I'll start by introducing Robert. Robert Yeo is best known as the author of a trilogy of political plays, which includes 1974's *Are You There, Singapore?*, the subject of a dramatised reading this evening at the Esplanade Recital Studio along with works by other pioneer playwrights, Lim Chor Pee and Goh Poh Seng. Robert is also a poet and novelist and currently teaches creative writing at SMU. Perhaps what is less well known now is that he was also the chairman of the drama advisory committee, which was the precursor of the NAC which advised the culture ministry on how to promote theatre in the days before the 1990s.

Beside him, Michael Chiang is both a successful playwright and a media veteran who has parlayed his ability to connect with the ordinary Joe as well as his ear for authentic Singlish dialogue into popular comedies and musicals that continue to be restaged today, including 1987's *Army Daze*, 1988's *Beauty World*, and the bittersweet comedy *Private Parts*[1]. He also wrote the screenplay for the new film, *Our Sister Mambo*[2], a romantic comedy about the heyday of Cathay films in the 50s and 60s, which is slated for release in July.

Beside (Michael Chiang) is Margaret Chan, currently Associate Professor of Theatre and Performance Studies at SMU, but is best known in popular imagination as the first actress in Singapore who played the titular Peranakan matriarch of Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill*[3]. The one-woman play has been staged more than 500 times – I didn't know that. Margaret performed it in 1986 at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and this month alone, there are two productions of *Emily* – one currently running at the Esplanade Theatre Studio and another in France, a French translation by a French playwright. Margaret will next be seen in a *bangsawan*[4] opera in Malay directed by pioneer Malay director Nadiputra.

I'll just start by asking each of them how they got their start in the theatre. Maybe we'll start with you, Robert: how did you start in theatre and what was the scene like at that time?

Robert Yeo (RY): To answer your first question, how I got started in theatre, I've said it many times. It was an accident. When I came back from studies in London in 1968, I was writing poems at that time, but there was, and I didn't know it yet, a play waiting to be written. Buzzing in my head around 1968, '69, were vivid scenes of friends of mine, students in the University of London, in the Institute of Education, people I acted with. The thought was so vivid, that I felt poetry couldn't do justice to what I wanted to convey and before I knew it, I had put words to paper, and it was going to turn out to be a play that eventually was to be called *Are You There, Singapore?*

If you look at a title like that, you can see that it must be a play about Singapore students largely in London, post '65 London, after Singapore had been ejected from Malaysia. And the students there were very proud to be Singaporeans, but at the same time anxious as to whether or not the small country under Lee Kuan Yew would survive.

[1] Premiered in 1992.
[2] Cinematic release in 2015.
[3] Premiered in 1984. Margaret Chan performed as the titular character in 1985, 1986, 1993 and 2012.
[4] A form of Malay music theatre, usually with dance accompaniment.

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That's how I came to write the play *Are You There, Singapore?*. The students were asking: how're you doing? Are you there? Are you surviving? And so on and so forth. That is the first part of my—I wrote a play, I showed it to somebody, he liked it, and I completed the play. And I was looking for someone to direct it, and I couldn't find anybody.

I went away to Bangkok in December 1970, returned two years later. I had completely forgotten that I had written this play, and then a good friend of mine, George Thomson[5], while clearing his apartment, found my play and sent me the script.

When I read the script, I was amazed. You mean I had written this full-length play? I couldn't believe it. Then, I took it to a friend of mine called Prem Kumar[6] who was with the Experimental Theatre Club. He liked it and he staged the play in 1974. And as they say, the rest is history. If George Thomson had not found that manuscript while clearing his home, if he had not posted it to me, I don't know if I would have had a career in Theatre.

But that's my story. As for the 60s, maybe I'll come back to it later when you want me to talk about the 60s. Maybe I should just say very briefly that in the 60s, I was a student interested in the theatre and I had seen the two plays of Lim Chor Pee and the three plays of Goh Poh Seng, and from about 1962 to 1966, two playwrights wrote five plays in about five years and that is a record. After that, nothing happened until 1974, nearly nine years later. Singapore theatre had a good start, but it could not sustain itself because Lim Chor Pee did not want to write anymore. He had a law career that he had to maintain and he found himself, after writing the play, having to do *everything else*. He had to find a cast, take care of direction, take care of rehearsals, tickets, publicity, and he had a growing family, so after two plays, he said sorry, career comes first. Goh Poh Seng, tremendously active person. I think he stopped writing plays because he went on to do other things. He wrote poetry, he wrote novels, so on and so forth. After his third play, he did not write anymore. If they had gone on to write, I think Singapore theatre in English would have had a tremendous start. So I will stop there, and perhaps pass the mic to either Michael or Margaret.

CO: Let's go to Margaret. Margaret was also in the Experimental Theatre Club, which at that time, I think, was the leading amateur theatre company and the scene was very much an amateur theatre scene with everybody just doing everything. So Margaret, how did you get your start in theatre, were you an accidental actress?

Margaret Chan (Margaret): Oh no, I think the first time I ever was an actress, actually, the first time I was ever on a stage was at the age of 4. I was in the Singapore Chinese Swimming Club talentime, which was a big thing. The Singapore Chinese Swimming Club was *the* big thing in the Chinese social scene. I remember, as a little girl, climbing up on one of those chairs that folded and, because I was so short, I stood there and I sang Nat King Cole's *If I Give My Heart to You*. Not *London Bridge* or something, you know, at 4-years-old.

[5] George G Thomson (deceased) was the director of the Political Study Centre at the University of Singapore (1960 – 1969) and Deputy Secretary for Foreign Affairs (1969 – 1971).
[6] Prem Kumar was the president of the Experimental Theatre Club for the University of Singapore Society.

No one coached me, I just used to sing, and so my parents just said ok lah, and they just put me there and I sang, and I won first prize. I didn't even know what first prize was. The next year, I went and sang Johnnie Ray's *Walking in the Rain*. Again, no one coached me, I wanted to sing *Autumn Leaves*. What happened was the radio was always on, and what happened was the music would go [into one ear and out of the other] and some of it would get stuck in there, and I would just sing! I never was conscious of performing, you see, at 4 and 5!

So when I went into kindergarten with my big voice, which was obviously there, they said "Ok, we need Santa Claus. There's a Santa Claus," so I was Santa Claus. From there, I was a ham, I said alright whenever there were any plays, and then it just sort of naturally went on with the university. I was just telling Clarissa that the University of Singapore Society's drama section, which was the other group, we were essentially the same people. There were three or four people. There was Prem (Kumar), myself, and because of Prem, his brother, Murugan[7], and then because of me, my poor husband, John, who knew zero about theatre but had to do lights, had to do sound, and eventually had become president of Experimental Theatre Club!

[laughs]

So we'd always say, okay, we perform this one for this ETC (Experimental Theatre Club), and then we perform this one for the university, and then next one for ETC, and we just did that and it was all this wonderful...I don't—you know, this lovely, lovely... We were just talking between the two of us, the fact that you forgot your own play [gesturing to Robert], and somebody had to find your play and then, "Oh *pochot! Mati!*[8]*",* I got arrowed the play. I sort of gave birth to it, without even realising it or being very self-conscious about doing it. That was about it, you sort of just did it. There was no point when someone just [gasped] and went "I'm going to do great art" or something. None of it. We just went on, and we did it. I think that was an incredible spontaneity. It was like that.

CO: From the 70s, we go on to the 80s, and to Michael. And Michael, tell us how did you get started in theatre?

Michael Chiang (Michael): Quite accidental. I was a journalist with *The Sunday Times* and I used to do an occasional humour column. I got this call from a total stranger, who says "We've been reading your column, and we were wondering, would you like to try writing a play, a short play about Singapore?"

I said "I don't write plays," but they said, "Oh, we're collating new scripts. Do you want to join us this weekend?" Out of curiosity, I turned up, and they were trying to find scripts for a production called *Bumboat*, which was going to be staged in '84, so this was back in '83.

[7] Damodaran Murugan.
[8] A colloquial Malay or Peranakan exclamation translating to "Oh no!"

I turned up at this house in Whitley Road, I remember the place, and there's a bunch of people I've never met in my life, sitting there and reading through five, six scripts. I'm sitting there listening to them, in all maybe half our scripts, and then they said to me, "Do you think you can write something? We've been getting a lot of scripts, but they're all pretty heavy scripts about life in Singapore and everything's pretty depressing, everyone wants to commit suicide, they want to leave the country."

They said, this is for the Arts Festival, we can't have every script sounding like that. "We want something light-hearted or humorous, so we thought maybe you could do it."

So I said, "Hm, okay, I'll give it a go."

So just like that, I went back and wrote it in one weekend, this thing called *Beauty Box*[9], which is about a beauty pageant trying to find Singapore's shopping queen. I thought, this is quite funny, why not write that? So it's called *Beauty Box*, and it's about five contestants, each one representing a different shopping centre in Singapore. There was Miss People's Park, Miss Centrepoint, Miss Far East Plaza, and they'll all come together, take part, and it's a completely silly play. I just did it for fun and I submitted it. And they packed off 60 scripts and sent it to New York, because the co-director was based in New York. A few months later, they called me and said, "Guess what! We've selected *Beauty Box* and it's going to be one of the five plays performed at the Arts Festival!" And I thought, you've got to be kidding me, because I didn't do it. You know, it wasn't meant to be *performed*, I just did it because it was like an open challenge. "Can you do it?" Yes.

So I come for rehearsals and I meet this bunch of theatre people whom I've never met, again, and they read my script and everyone's on the floor laughing, and I'm sitting there thinking, oh this is quite easy [laughs].

And that's how it started. That's how the first play started. It was a thirty minute play, and went on to be performed at the World Trade Centre, I got *horrible* reviews. *The Straits Times* hated it, *Singapore Monitor* hated it. I was almost in tears, but I didn't break down. I thought okay, I am never writing another play in my entire life. Thirty years on, I'm still writing.

[laughter]

CO: So from those beginnings, each of the three of them has come to be indelibly associated with one or two particular plays. Robert is known as the author of perhaps our first political plays: *Are You There, Singapore?* and then *One Year Back Home*, in which one of the lead characters is detained without trial for making an inflammatory speech during an election. So, just want to ask each of you about the iconic plays that you are associated with. Robert, maybe you can tell us about what moved you to write about politics in the theatre at a time when it might not have been very auspicious to do so.

[9] Premiered in 1984.

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RY: I had written about politics in *Are You There, Singapore?* in 1974, because, as I said earlier, if you were a student in London in '66, in '67, in '68, you cannot help but be engulfed in politics. Two things: Singapore was trying to establish itself as an independent state, and secondly, there was the Vietnam War raging and the students were demonstrating against the American presence. So, you were just caught up in politics and I did write about politics not in a central sort of way in *Are You There, Singapore?*.

And when I came home in the 70s, I suppose politics in Singapore got pretty interesting. One of the things that really got me thinking and moved me emotionally was that I had friends in university who were left-leaning, who were not red, who were possibly *pink.* Pink, of course, I associated with something else, but I'm using the colour pink to suggest that they were left without being pro-Communist, or without being Communist. They were activists, they spoke up, and they were taken in! And some of my friends spent time in prison in Changi, varying from a couple of years to 8 years! I think that was what probably moved me, and I guess I would say that the act of writing *One Year Back Home* was unconsciously political because when I brought back the two characters, Chye, who was a PAP person, and his friend, Fernandez, who represented the Workers' Party. The moment they started to debate, I felt that… they took over, and I had sort of, what it… lost control. Lost control in the sense that what I wanted to say just came out spontaneously, and it became *One Year Back Home*. And because it came out spontaneously and reasonably easily, I didn't want to put a stop to it, just let it go. So there were probably quite a lot—a lot of long sad speeches and I thought, this was going to be boring.

Then I said, they were saying the sort of things that you would not hear anybody saying on stage. And I thought, that would get through very well. I mean, you imagine, someone like me, in the late '70s standing up and creating a member of the opposition. Let me give you an instance.

He stands up [Robert Yeo stood up] and he's making an election speech and he says, "P-A-P? Another 'ism' – I call it PAP-ism! What has PAP-ism done for you? It has given us SIA, it has given us great housing, it has given us the world's number 3 port, but it has not given us some of the other things that we deserve. PAP-ism, is just another -ism!"

So I made my characters say things like that, you know, and I thought, well, if I can get a licence to perform this speech is going to be quite sensational. I could go on, but I think I'll just stop there to tell you that when I wrote *One Year Back Home*, the characters took over, and I really cannot understand the creative process. But if you ever find yourself in a position where the characters take over, don't stop.

CO: Robert will tell us more about his encounters with censorship later. Margaret, I would like to know about your first meeting with *Emily*[10]. I'm just curious, when you first read the script, what were the things that went through your mind? Did you know that one day this would be one of our most restaged local plays?

[10] Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill*.

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Margaret: No, *Emily* came to me in a brown envelope. Before that, Max[11] had said, "Look, Margaret," I'm on the phone, "I'm going to send you a script that I want you to do."

So I said ok, opened it, read it, through one reading, and I picked up the phone and I said to Max, "Ok, I'm it, I'm in."

Max, apparently, when *he* read it, he said, "Look, I'm going to do this, and the only person I want to do it is Margaret Chan."

What got me a little bit peeved, and I'm still a little peeved, because this is exactly what came out in the review of Karen[12]'s performance last night, that Leow Puay Tin in Malaysia did it first, because we Singaporeans balked at doing the play, being so difficult. I don't know about Max, but it choked me, because for goodness sakes, I was from the science stream and know nothing about English language theatre, but Robert Yeo found the script and Robert liked it, and sent it to Max, and Max sent it to me, and *bingo* it was done, that was it!

Recently, AWARE actually wrote to me and said, "This is a tremendous feminist play, what do you think about it?" I said to them, when I chose to do *Emily*, it was good drama. The structure was good, the language is good, the ideas were good, the character is strong, gave you range, and all that, and definitely she told a woman's story. But, I didn't do it to tell t*he woman's* story. It was a damn good play, you know, and you grab chances like that. It doesn't make the play any less important that it just spoke of feminism or something like this: I loved it being so incestuous, here I'm sitting next to Robert, and he and I are the two old farts, by the way, grand old farts of theatre, we really are the relics, and you find that it is so incestuous, and so beautiful in the incest that we created, the dreams and hopes of a tiny little voice, and I think that's beautiful.

So then, you know, we did the play. And it was terrific. The first few times that I did it, did you know that the whole audience would cry? People would really cry, really bawl, tears would flow and all, and the energy was incredible. When I did it again at Victoria Theatre, I think a few people cried, and you ask yourself *why?* It was a different time, it was a time, when we first did it in the '80s, maybe we did feel more empathy, and we could feel for the woman. Bounce that against, what we were doing then, maybe forming the nation or I don't know what, and now we're it, we're successful and the story of the woman is nice and quaint.

You should have been there, if you were there in the '80s, the audience really moved. It was incredible. It was like speaking at a rally, you know. You had that thing.

CO: I remember that you performed Emily a few times in the last decade as well. So, how different was the reception?

Margaret: Yeah, like I said, there's this idea that people said that's damn good stuff, yeah? What a fantastic play, what a character, what a thing, this woman really made it come alive,

[11] Max Le Blond. Singapore theatre director.
[12] Karen Tan. Singapore actress who performed as the titular Emily in *Emily of Emerald Hill*, presented as part of Esplanade's *The Studios: fifty* season (2015).

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golly, you remind me of my grandma, gee, you remind me of my mother. So they had empathy. At that time in the 1980s, people cried, you could actually feel the energy go through, it was quite incredible, and I do think we're a sentimental old bunch of people at that time.

RY: May I just come in to say – because Margaret can't say this – it's because of your acting, Margaret!

[laughter]

Margaret: No la! So sweet, you incestuous lah. You SMU also, *sekali* say bad thing *mati*[13]. [laughter]

CO: Maybe because at that time, there were very few original plays, very few original creative products that spoke to people, that people connected with as compared to now?

Margaret: I don't think I can speak for the audience, but I don't think we were very self-conscious or at least certainly *I* was not very conscious about going to theatre. *Aiyo*, this angmoh theatre. I never thought that, I just did theatre, and the voice of theatre spoke to me. I did Edith Piaf[14], I was Edith Piaf by the way, and the reason why I was asked to be Edith Piaf was because I couldn't sing for nuts. They had the first actress that they cast for Edith Piaf, she was a great singer, had a beautiful voice and it was a trained voice. This is the truth. And Piaf never sang with a trained voice, so they wanted to find someone who could sing but got no trained voice like that, so I was it. I said to Siauw Chong[15], one of the early directors of TheatreWorks, I said, "Eh Siauw Chong, I'm Chinese you know, not French," and I've got hair that long [gestures to lower back] and so black. He said no, just go do that. So I went and I was Edith Piaf with my long curly hair and absolutely Chinese, performing completely as a French woman.

Siauw Chong said to me one of the most beautiful things, he said to me, "Margaret, I'm interested in the essence of the woman," and that was just the most beautiful thing. Who the hell cares if I'm yellow, or if I have long black hair, I was Piaf. It was beautiful that way.

So I don't think I went with any incredible self-consciousness that [gasp] theatre is Singaporean. I don't think so.

CO: I guess that is the on-hindsight part, right?

Margaret: Yes, yes. I think what is beautiful is coming through here is this incredible unselfconsciousness. All of us did our theatre with a tremendous innocence. With a

[13] "You SMU also, *sekali* say bad thing *mati*" is a phrase carrying Singlish expressions, which translates to "We work for the same organization, we might get into trouble for saying the wrong thing."
Both Margaret Chan and Robert Yeo teach at Singapore Management University (SMU).
[14] Margaret Chan acted in TheatreWorks' staging of Pam Gem's *Piaf* (1988).
[15] Lim Siauw Chong. Theatre director, and co-founder & first Artistic Director of TheatreWorks.

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tremendous embrace, I thought. None of us had proper drama training. I never had a day of drama acting classes or anything. I think that the fact that it was so incredibly unselfconscious is so beautiful. It's this innocence with these lovely works, and maybe awful works also, and it's beautiful.

CO: So going on to Michael and to A*rmy Daze*[16]. Interestingly, I read that you didn't have to serve National Service[17], but you chose to. He was at that time, Malaysian, but he chose to, right? How fortuitous that he did, because out of that came *Army Daze*. What inspired you to write *Army Daze*, and what was the reception like?

Michael: That play was written out of reluctance [laughs]. The first one was accidental, the second one was reluctance, because I'd written the book first, and it was a best seller, but that was in '85. And Siauw Chong, the same director who directed Margaret in Piaf, kept telling me, "Michael you need to write a play about Army Daze."

I said, "Mmm, not interested," but he keeps asking me year after year, saying "you *really* should write it." I said it just will not work, but he said to just try it.

So, okay, reluctantly, I sat down and said, if I'm going to translate this book, which is a sort of one man's perspective on National Service, how would I do it? So I thought ok, let's do the PC[18] thing, have one Chinese boy, Indian boy, Malay boy, Eurasian boy, just put them altogether and put them through BMT[19] and see what happens. So that's kind of how it started.

Because they were serving the first three months, it was universal enough, and so everyone who walked into the theatre understood exactly all the references, all the jargon, all the situations. So on hindsight, I guess, it's kind of hard to battle this one, because the audience is already with you. I just had to tell that story, which had a protagonist, Malcolm Png, who was a typical mummy's boy, middle class, a bit like me I guess, went to ACS, went to Bukit Timah, terrified of the army, never left home for—so I just used that voice and it just translated onto page, and it was like a sitcom. We sold out every show, and because I used a little dose of Singlish and I think that at that point, not many people expected that. So the *ah beng*[20] speaks in his typical *ah beng* style, Johari speaks in the typical Malay household style, and the Indian boy and his girlfriend run around the tree. So you know, it's all the clichés, but I had fun doing it, and the audience had fun, and I thought ok, just do it once and that's it, but it kept coming back, kept coming back, and finally became a movie. So yeah, it's one of those things that I never foresaw. So maybe I volunteered to do NS for a reason? [laughs]

[16] Premiered in 1987.
[17] A period of compulsory service in uniformed services for male citizens and second generation permanent residents in Singapore.
[18] Colloquial abbreviation for "politically correct".
[19] Abbreviation for Basic Military Training. BMT is an instituted, mandatory military training programme for Singaporean males of age conducted at the beginning of their National Service term.
[20] Singlish term referring to a stereotypical representation of an uneducated male ruffian, belonging to a "lower class" in society, especially of Chinese ethnicity.

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CO: And what about *Beauty World* which was the year after that, right, the musical *Beauty World*. How was that born?

Michael: Uhm... I bumped into Dick[21] after a show, and he said, "The Arts Festival has commissioned me to do a play next year, a musical." And I had *just* finished *Army Daze* and he said, "I want you to write it."

So I said, what do you have in mind? And he said, "I just know that the title has to be *Beauty World*."

I said, okay, sounds cool, why not. We then sat down, and we kind of had a rough idea. I grew up with a lot of black and white Cantonese movies back home in Muar, and my mother would bring me to a lot of these movies, so I said, can I do a '60s story and name all the characters after all the movie stars from the'60s? So I named the character Chan Po Ju, Chan Po Chuan, and I named the boyfriend Wang Fei Hong, and it kind of started from there.

It was like a tribute to all the movies I grew up with, and to me, it's just a typical black and white story. This little girl from Batu Pahat[22] comes over, a bit like me, coming from Muar to Singapore, finding this big town and trying to find her way navigating through life in a big city, except I put her into the cabaret, that's the difference. Because he wanted Jacintha[23] to sing, I scripted the pen pal in there, so she's actually a subplot, but she sang all the best songs because she had the best voice. It's one of those you make do with what you have kind of productions, that's how it happened.

CO: I guess being pioneers, prime movers, people who started doing all this first before there was any of it, you would invariably bump up against certain kinds of issues at a time when the government was not really ready for the arts, did not really have a funding body, did not really have a framework for licensing the arts the way they do now. So, Robert, I understand that it took 18 months before *One Year Back Home* finally got its licence, and you had to make an appeal all the way up to the Culture Minister. Can you tell us about the journey?

RY: Well, I submitted *One Year Back Home*... And in Singapore in those days, if you want to have a play produced, you need a licence. The Public Entertainment Licensing Unit would issue it and we call it PELU. PELU was a part of the CID, Criminal Investigation Department, and therefore part of the police. So you ask yourself, how come plays have to be licensed by the police?

It goes back to something following a British habit that a play is a live thing and when you do a play, there is a chance that people may riot, and the only people who can control them would be the police. Therefore, the police would be the people to issue the license. After I had written that play and submitted it to get a license, I had to submit it to the police. The first

[21] Dick Lee. Singapore singer & songwriter. Composer & Lyricist for *Beauty World* (1988).
[22] A town in Johor State in Peninsula Malaysia
[23] Jacintha Abisheganaden. Singapore actress & singer.

round was... I'm trying to remember the process... was the Ministry of Culture, and then it would be read by a bureaucrat, and bureaucrats, at that time, were not trained to understand theatre. I mean, look at my script. It could be a pro-Communist document! And if I mention the Workers' Party and my characters mention Marx and Lenin and talk about Lim Chin Siong, Lee Siew Choh, members of the opposition, the Workers' Party, the bureaucrats are going to get really worried and say, "Who's this guy? Is he putting pro-Communist thoughts into the mouths of his characters?" And of course, my application for a licence was rejected.

But then, I kept asking. By the time I had submitted my application I was also chairman of the Drama Advisory Committee, and it was the job of the Drama Advisory Committee to promote Singaporean drama. So I found myself in a very difficult position: telling the bureaucrats, the censorship people, please produce Robert Yeo's play. Why? Because if you want Singaporean drama to progress, you've got to have Singaporean playwrights, Singaporean plays! If you want theatre to progress, you must allow him to take on a subject that may make the government uncomfortable. But he *must* be able to set his agenda.

So I was telling these things to the bureaucrats, but they were not listening because the bureaucrat is looking over his shoulder to his superior officer, and the superior officer is thinking of the deputy secretary, permanent secretary, and the permanent secretary is thinking about the minister. You get what I mean? You've got all these things to cross! So what I did was to patiently... And someone who helped me and I must acknowledge him – he was deputy secretary of the Ministry of Culture, Michael Loke, he patiently sent my appeals up and up and up, until finally—I put in the application in '79, and sometime in 1980, my letter of appeal went up to the Acting Minister for Culture, who then was Ong Teng Cheong, who later became president. Ong Teng Cheong looked my appeal, read at the play, knew that I was chair of the drama advisory committee, advising his ministry, and then he said to Michael, why, it was 1980, an election year, why is Robert Yeo writing about politics in an election year?

I said, "Michael, please tell the minister I put in the application last year, you know."

And then, to cut a long story short, Ong Teng Cheong gave me the licence to perform *One Year Back Home*. And I guess, that broke, for me, the censorship barrier. I was going to have other battles, but that was the battle I fought and, luckily for me, won. I think it probably allowed other plays on sensitive subjects to be performed. And as long as I was the chair of the drama advisory committee, and if these sensitive plays, like Michael Chiang's *Private Parts*, came along, I would say, let it go, let it go. Let open all doors, open spaces.

That's it, really. I'm sure Michael, Margaret, will have other stories of censorship to tell.

CO: Do you have any? [gesturing to Margaret]

Margaret: Yeah, I do have. I was in Robert's Drama Advisory Committee, and I'm still guilty, if you know what I mean. I'm partly the bureaucrat, I don't think we in the advisory committees have got any power—"advisory", but I am, for looking at some plays, you can't imagine how appalling how some of the plays are and you get people who deliberately write

plays so that they can be banned so that you can boast to everybody—I don't mean Robert, please, that they are the most censored playwright in the whole of Singapore because Singapore people are anal, don't know what, bureaucrats, and all that stuff, because the play itself has absolutely no dramatic merit. It's incredible, I got so fed up, I said, "Show the play to the members of the public, you'll be horrified and *appalled* by the things that people write."

If you write about *somebody* who is a Catholic priest and says, "I'll take your cum as the eucharist," you tell me what the heck that is, stuff like that. *Beautiful, dramatic, exciting* stuff like that.

At that time, when perhaps the play formed, *One Year Back Home*, in the mind of Robert, I'll tell you how an ordinary Singaporean felt; that was me. In 1959—I went to school 1957, I was 9 years old when the PAP was coming in, when there was all this sabre-rattling about the left-wing and Lim Yew Hock, then right-wing, and David Marshall and all that. The adults were in ferment. I am a Singaporean pioneer, and if you want to know what a Singaporean pioneer is, here's one. I was a little shitty listening to it all. You must understand that at that time, children were like coffee tables, not like dining tables. You have to be there, but like "okay I see you but you shut up," but there was this tiny little girl with her ears like that listening in to all the adults worry like hell about the Communists coming in. Do you know what I did as a little girl? I was in the Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, and in those days, we had these great big black telephones and in the whole of the convent you only had one telephone. Reverend Mother probably had one on her desk, and there was another one that we were allowed to go and use if there was an emergency. You had to go up a spiral staircase, it's still there in CHIJMES, you would go up that route and go, "Can I please use the phone?"

Nobody does that, you know. It's like that red button that they do and then boom the nuclear war goes on. So I went there with a friend called Denyse Tessensohn who gave me support and up I went. I said, "I need to make a phone call, it's very important."

They looked at me and said "Okay, make the phone call."

And I picked up the phone and dialled Qantas. Don't ask me what was in my numb skull head, but I rang up Qantas Airways and I said to them, "Please, how much would it be for me to fly my family out of Singapore to go to Australia or something? I don't have much money, but we're willing to sit on the floor. You don't have to give us a chair," I said very seriously. I remember that guy laughing like mad at the other end of the phone, and I couldn't figure it out. "Why are you laughing? I'm so worried for my family."

Of course, the fella laughed and I put down the phone and I went off. That was it. I never consulted a single adult, I never consulted anybody else. That was my funny little girl's brain, who at 4 years old sang *If I Give My Heart to You* by Nat King Cole. There was something it came off and sort of like entered this little brain. If I ever told my parents that, I think they would have whacked me one, I don't know. But you see, you must understand what I'm trying to tell you is the *currents*, the *energy* of the time, and as someone said it was PAP-ism, dear God, you know, dear God!

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I'll ask you to please have mercy on the bureaucrat and please don't think that all Singaporean civil servants are like *dungus*[24] or something like that, anal or... why do you think that? It was a different time. It was a time of fire, of people dying, fighting for the things that they believed in. Why do you do that?

It was incredible, I remembered my black and white maid used to frighten me by saying "you know, they're coming!" And of course I didn't know, what, because I was really young, sitting near the *galas*[25] where all the clothes were hanging, going "oh my God, the Communists are going to come and kill me!" I didn't know what it was. So that was tremendously the energy of that.

But of course, some of the bureaucrats were a bit dimwitty, I suppose. I did *Emily of Emerald Hill* and it went like a bomb, and I was named newsmaker of the year in *The Straits Times*, and it really was. It hit such a nerve. Someone said – oh, Dhanabalan[26], the Minister for Culture, came in and said, "Margaret, this is terrific, this has to be produced on television." Max and I said, uhhhhhh... But this is not—this is a stage play, and we were well aware that we were dramatists, so if you want it for television, then it has to be reshot, rewritten, redirected and reshot. So, we reluctantly dragged ourselves, reluctantly, you must remember, because there was no money ah, so we went to the Singapore Broadcasting Centre, and Max and I sat in front of the producer who just said, "No, no, no, we've got no time, you just do it, and we'll have three cameras going around you and find the money to pay for the slot." Max and I were just these bloody old beggars with no money like that and then one slot was like $50,000 or something silly like that. Max and I looked at each other and were like, "Huh?!"

We didn't want to go do that, we were told to do it as "national service"! So we said, forget it.

And I don't know if any of you knew that I did *Emily* when I was seven months pregnant – that's pretty serious stuff, but I didn't think it, to me, pregnancy was like me a little bit fatter. Max was really concerned, but after I finished *Emily*, boom, I gave birth. And then the next thing I know, Commonwealth Arts Festival says, "Hey Margaret, you got to go to Commonwealth!"

I was like, huh? My baby was just born, I'm breastfeeding my baby! But they [nagged] and said you got to fly the national flag, "Okay lah!"

So I went! Paid my own money for my own husband and all that to come because it was a baby! Became damn sick from rushing all over, that I had to take antibiotics and my baby rejected my breast. I was only a 20-something-year-old mother, you don't know anything like that. And since then, I never forgot, in Edinburgh, feeding the baby in the bath, or trying to, and he bit me until I nearly... That was the end of breastfeeding. We scoured Edinburgh for

[24] A Malay word translating to "idiots".
[25] Bamboo poles used to hang clothings to dry.
[26] S. Dhanabalan. Singapore's Minister for Culture (1981 – 1984) and Minister of Community Development (1984 – 1986).

milk, special milk that would support the baby, and came back haggard and all that. The next thing you know, Edinburgh Festival…

"The *great* Edinburgh Festival, know, Margaret. You have to do it!"

I said, "I don't want to do it!"

"You *have* to do it!"

"I don't... okay, do it."
So you must understand that all these little stories, I don't want that to just come across as nursing it, but this was your theatre. This was your theatre. This was people like Robert, myself – nothing planned, and I think it's beautiful, that.

So, imagine that!

CO: You've got this sense of theatre as national service, also theatre as somehow some kind of a trouble-making force when there were larger battles to be fought. So now, Michael, how was it like towards the later half of the '80s and '90s when you were trying to stage *Private Parts*? What was the theatre environment like?

Michael: Again, for me, I don't think I'm very normal, because I had a full time job…

Margaret: We were all abnormal.

Michael: I was working at SPH, so I had a 9-to-5 job and playwriting was really just a hobby. If it worked, fine, but if it didn't work, then I would just move on. Everything I tossed out or worked on depended on how much time I had and who asked me to write, because by then, I had become part of the whole TheatreWorks community. So, Keng Sen[27] said, back in '92, we've had a slot for Arts Festival, can you write a piece? And I said sure! I had no idea I was writing *Private Parts*, I just happened to come up with the title because it was very funny. As usual, I'm a bit warped. So there was a funny title, let's just go with it. I had no idea what the script was, so, the title came first. I just thought, wouldn't it be funny to call it Michael Chiang's *Private Parts*? Hahaha, it's one of those stupid indulgent jokes that went too far.

Then, the press conference came, and it was quite early on and the Arts Fest had expected to see the script before—I hadn't written it. So, Keng Sen said, "How?" I just said, "No lah, we just do the press conference lah, we'll wing it!" [laughter]

So, the press conference came, and they said, "So, what's the play about?" So I said, "Well, just wait and see."

And that was it. I never told them what the story was about.
And then I panicked and then I started writing it.

[27] Ong Keng Sen. Singapore theatre director, and current Artistic Director of TheatreWorks.

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By the time it was finished, because it was so late, we'd already sold tickets, so they *had* to approve it. I sent out the script, and it didn't occur to me as a sensitive topic. I just thought, why not?

CO: It's about transsexuals, right?

Michael: It didn't start out that way. I just had this idea to do something about Bugis—Bugis Street, because they had just closed it and were about to reopen it. I just thought, they can't make up their minds about whether they're going to allow Bugis Street or not, so that was the starting point. So I thought, let's make a comedy about it, but it kind of told its own story. It started as a talk show about Bugis Street, and then it became what it became. So we submitted the script and I didn't think it was sensitive at all, and then they performed the script and all. But, after it opened, everybody looked at us and said, "Wow, you've broken new ground."

And I said, "We have?"

[laughter]

I think only on hindsight that I realised that okay, we talk about things that nobody else talks about. So yeah, but it never dawned on me that it was a controversial play, a taboo subject, I just wrote it because it felt like it needed to be written. I didn't really have any run-ins with censorship. It could be because I'm a journalist, I'm a bit more aware of where the minefields and the markers are, I don't know, I'm not really sure, yeah.

CO: Okay, now I'm going to open this to the floor. Does anyone have any questions for any of our speakers?

[slight pause]

Margaret: Well, can I say something if nobody wants to say something?

CO: Yeah, or I'll ask you a question [laughs]

What about Singlish? Were there any controversies or debates about the use of local speak, local slang in the plays at the time?

Margaret: Well, Max Le Blond won the Cultural Medallion because he was the first to take many of these western plays, including... hang on, what's the one that became Nurse Angamuthu's…

CO: *Nurse Angamuthu's Romance*[28], right?

[28] Performed in 1981. Directed by Max Le Blond, based on Peter Nichol's *National Health.*

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Margaret: Yeah, it was from a very famous English play.

CO: *The Threepenny Opera*?

Margaret: No, no, no – that was *Samseng and the Chettiar's Daughter*[29], which I was in, as I was in *Beauty World*. *General Hospital*[30], I think it was. He took all these big… and he changed it all into Singlish, and people thought he broke a completely new barrier by having the vernacular, by imposing the vernacular, and I think it truly is so.

Drama has to be well-written. If you are a superb actor, but you don't have a good play, you're not going to succeed. That said, you can fight like mad, but you're going to have a hard time. But with a superb vehicle like *Emily*, you can go, you can give everything you've got and push it. Max took good writing.

Our writing was still very nascent. If you listened to these voices, you can hear... as I said, it was just scant. So you wouldn't talk about a nationalism, it was this spirit, this mind, that was going on, but none of us were tutored, so we didn't produce very good writing, I felt. To use other people's superb plays and put it in vernacular, I think that was very necessary, because it is when you read, the voice that you read is actually the voice in your head. So Max did that, then the next thing was *Emily*. If you read Stella[31]'s *Emily* as it stands, it was written in very good English, because nobody wrote in Singlish and I'm glad she did that, because now she makes a good living with the play being taught to younger people and you can't do that if you were all full of *Baba*[32] thing. But, I am Peranakan—I am very Hokkien on my father's side, I say that with pride, remembering my father, so I'm looking at this and going "this is just not happening." So it was partly me because I was Peranakan, but Max completely agreed. We just went and put in all the *baba* language that is in *Emily*. And that says nothing less about Stella, it's just that the voice has to come through, the local vernacular.

So I'm saying, if you write poetry… so, I felt that if you write theatre—theatre is very frightening, there are very few governments that completely support a theatre company. You can have the dance company, but you don't have that same power as an orator. An orator is a very frightening person, because that person really can move you. It was necessary, I feel. The poetry, you can write really good stuff like Edwin—Edwin Thumboo's writing, I really enjoy. But Lit[33], that lives in the book. It lives in a text that will live way beyond you, and people can read and say "Oh my God, that mind, and that particular time!"

But in theatre, the writer has more of a problem, and the actor has more of a problem. It's the problem, and the strength, because we use a medium, a vehicle, and the vehicle is to the popular audience. So not only do we speak the consciousness of the time, we speak in

[29] Performed in 1982. Directed by Max Le Blond, based on John Gay's *Beggar Man Opera*.
[30] *Nurse Angamuthu's Romance* was based on Peter Nichol's *National Health*, recalled within this conversation as *General Hospital*.
[31] Stella Kon. Singapore playwright. Author of *Emily of Emerald Hill*.
[32] Colloquial slang for "Peranakan".
[33] Abbreviated from Literature.

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the voice of the time, in the particular vehicle, medium, that the time could understand. Like, I felt that in Michael's *Army Daze* which I did in the movie version—so it's very incestuous, you see [laughs]. You actually have the vehicle of the comedy of these bumbling fools, each with their own politically... You know, it was a very caricatured thing, but then the caricature, there were actually strengths and ideas that were going through. You have to have this vehicle that goes through, so it makes it very much more challenging, and very much more dangerous. If you could. If it could.

As I said, it was this idea of reaching out. And to—therefore, it's a lovely little bit to get them to speak out what they're saying. It all seems so incredible, accidental, but I think that therein lies the nascent nationalism. If you want to call it, what is nationalism? Nationalism, a nation is passé, yes? The—you know, boundaries of politics or whatever it is. It is the... Spirit of the people, the voice of the people, and somehow, because of our luck, we are in this particular medium that allows our voice to be heard a little louder than a most interesting person next to me. I'm admiring this lady's shoes. She's got one red shoe and one black shoe and I said, gee, she was in such a spirit there, and you know, I want to hear her!

And… you were all there, we were the lucky ones that had our big mouths loud enough, that's all.

Audience 1 (A1): Hi, thanks for the sharing, I just wanted to ask, or rather, get some insight on what the three of you might think about. In terms of right now, this forum is about identity and language in theatre, but what I want to ask is what is your opinion about, you know, we're getting increasingly globalised, I'm a Singaporean, I was born and raised here, I do dabble here and there in music and the arts, whatever, but the thing is, what I find difficult to see is how is this moving forward, going to this globalised world that we live in, you know, capitalism, top dollar wins, biggest advertising spots, things like that. How are we going to cut through as a bunch of people, as Singaporeans? How is money versus art, you know, government support versus advertising dollar? How do you feel that's going to...

CO: You're asking how is this going to connect with people.

A1: Yeah, you know, my generation—I don't have a question, it's just a feeling. The people around me, my friends, my peers, the young people younger than I am. We want to hear more about local music, local arts, things like that, we are open to that. But it's *very hard* to find them because we're constantly flooded by international media, and they have top budgets, big money to be spent. We can't even hear ourselves much on the radio, you know. Let's say some of you are sharing names that I am familiar with, but I don't know their work. You know, Edwin Thumboo... I've heard their names at school, things like that, but I don't know very much, and I'm quite ashamed to say so actually. So just some comments la, you know, moving forward, what do you think might happen, what can be done, what needs to be done, you know, should there be some kind of quota system? You know, I don't know. I just want to hear your thoughts.

CO: Anything, anyone?

Michael: Mmm...

A1: Thanks.

Michael: Actually, I do believe in a quota system. I was just asked, two days ago, actually, for... By a London journalist who was doing a piece about Singapore arts for *Destination*, the travel magazine, and he wanted my thoughts about the arts scene and, going forward, what I'd like to see. So I said exactly the same thing: I think there should be a quota system where the media agencies, SPH, MediaCorp, should set aside a certain amount of space every year and give that space to the arts companies, to the local talent and just say "this is for you guys to use for your productions," as a way of subsidising, if they can't fully support. Ad space, publicity, awareness for productions. I mean, to me, in an ideal world, if you guys are making enough money off the bigger corporations, can you do a bit of national service, do a bit of nurturing to promote? Because right now, apart from journalists, who do the reviews and who do the write-ups, there's actually no real space where we can promote a show. It really depends on how much space there is in a week, in the papers, how much air time there is on Channel 5 or Channel 8 programme, but it would be nice to... In the same way that Malaysia forces a certain quota. They need to show a certain number of locally made films in the cinemas, they need to play a certain amount of Malaysian music on radio, and maybe that's a good way to start. I think all the developing countries do that. In Bhutan all the cinemas show local films, they don't play foreign films. But here, we do get drowned out by the big shows that come out. By the big Hollywood blockbusters, by the Taylor Swifts and your Coldplays, so you know, it would be nice going forward to say, "Okay, let's make a point and push this into more promise."

Because I'm also doing a magazine now called *The A List* for Arts Council, and I do listings every fortnight and realise there's a *lot* happening out there. There's a lot which just go under the radar, none of us knew about, and it's actually good quality stuff. It's not rubbish, it's not amateurish stuff, it's actually good, quality work. But if you don't look for it, you won't find it. Or if you don't bother to look, it's completely invisible.

CO: Any other questions?

Margaret: Could I respond to that?

You are in a tremendous quandary – I remembered when I was in England, doing my PhD, we had this meeting with a whole lot of artists there. The way they spoke shocked me as a typical, pragmatic Singaporean. They were arguing that the government had a job to fund them, and they spoke it with such self-entitlement that I [gawking expression]. I remembered being aghast. Now, this wasn't too long ago, it was just about 2000. So you do get that kind.

Where do you make enough material to... It's just hegemony, you know, the Western culture is a hegemony. It enters your brain, everybody thinks that way. So... I've lived it. I've never allowed it to get into my way of making, but it definitely is a struggle, whether you need it. As I said, I chose to become a professor after one year earning $140 a month, because what you did was come to what money you've got for your production, you're going to be a

professional actress, and then you divide it by 12, and you find, "$140 a month and I'm an ordinary middle-class Singaporean and that [tut tut tut] cannot be lah!"

So you give up and you get a decent job. So where do you go from there? How do you promote? Is it against this great voice? Do you have this problem of chauvinism, therefore? Singaporeans, give us our damned stage, or do we go out there and fight our own battle? You get this half and half. So Clarissa, who comes from the press—I gave her a little bit of a hard time just now, said, "ok you've performed *Emily*, and maybe we've had enough of *Emily*? Do we retire it, or not?"

Even if you read today's review, why are you thinking that? Nobody talked about retiring William Shakespeare! Why do you have this thing—why do you say that, "Oh, that person does it, she's a one-act wonder, can't do anything else but stupid old Emily, you know."

Pearlly Chua. Today's papers also said, she's doing her 200th *Emily*. Is she doing *Emily* to earn a living? But what's wrong in doing *Emily* to earn a living? And do we say, "Oh my God, that woman can't do damn shit nothing, and she's really flogging this horse to make money?" And what's wrong in that?

Somewhere, we need to get out of this thing of that something that Singaporeans can't be, you know, that you can't support them, you musn't support them, in the sense that "they can't do any damned thing."

Why not? If it's the only thing that we've done, you know, like *Army Daze*.

"How many times you going to hear *Army Daze*? Please lah!"

"Only one musical in the whole wide world: *Beauty World*. Ok lah, bring lah."

I'm not giving you a complete answer, but you know what I mean? We are here in these wonderful, wonderful pioneering days. So you're going to have to suffer a little bit. Pioneers have fun, but they—sorry, I interrupted you.

Audience 2 (A2): Okay. I… actually, I know Robert since 1982, and both Robert and Margaret actually mentioned about how they actually entered into... let's say, for Robert, into writing plays and Margaret for playing the role spontaneously. So, from your point of view, do you think that something like a play or drama, whatever, it has to be in you and not so much of nurturing? To me…

Margaret: You were going to write a play?

A2: No, I can't. I admire you, because I think I remember in the '80s, I saw you on stage and I was very moved. I had tears, actually! So I would like to ask both of you, since now, we have a lot of companies or schools that actually nurture writers and actors. How do you see this kind of trend going to help Singapore in terms of producing the next generation of theatre playwrights or actors/actresses? This is a question to the two of you, and for Michael,

I actually was quite interested to know more about your National Service, because how long did it take for you to decide to become a Singaporean after you served your National Service, and why it takes that long or that short, because I actually know someone who did National Service, but he decided not to be a Singaporean.

CO: So nature or nurture, for the arts, and Michael's National Service [laughter] – maybe Michael?

Michael: I do my questions first uh? [laughs]

Uhm, again, I don't control my life lah ah, some things are predestined and planned for me. I came here at the age of 11, and schooled here for seven years, so when I finished A levels, my brother, who's my guardian, said to me, "You can either go to university now, or you can go and do National Service with the rest of your classmates, but you do know that we may become citizens, and they may, at the age of 28, call you for NS. So, do you want to do it at 18, or ten years later?"

It's almost like a threat right?

Margaret: So sweet. Your brother is so smart.

Michael: So I said, ok, might as well just go in with my friends, and so I volunteered just to be in the same batch as them, so I went. I felt like the most stupid person in the school, because everybody thought it was a joke, they all were trying to find ways to get out, and this idiot next to them telling them "Oh I'm going to sign three years, you know," because there's only a 3-year contract, there wasn't a 2-and-a-half year contract. So I signed three years, everybody offered themselves, and said, "Why don't you take my place?" [laughter] Everyone. I was like the standing joke in school. No one had ever volunteered. I was the only person that stood out in the whole of NS, "This is the guy that didn't need to be here, who's here with us."

So I served for three years, because the logic then was that if you stayed for 10 years, you qualified to be a Singaporean citizen. So at the end of my National Service, I put in my application, only to be told, this is true, "You've served seven years on a students' pass, three years in NS, sorry, but your seven years doesn't count. This is a students' pass, you weren't living or working here. So, but if you signed on for another seven years in the army, we'll give it to you now."

But, for that reason alone, I didn't get my citizenship, so I waited. I just went to work, and one day they just wrote to me and said "Dear Michael Chiang, would you like to take up Singapore citizenship?" And so that's when I took it up, in about 1992? So... Again I didn't plan it, it just happened.

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Margaret: I don't know... I'm a Pollyanna[34]. I am also a government stoolie[35]. That's what they think of the people in SMU, you know, *ang moh*[36] stoolie. [laughs] I want to laugh! I mean, if you think about that, it is so much to me, this forming of the new young Singapore. The forming of the new nation, finding its feet, saying that a great Singaporean play should go on TV and say, "Ok lah, bring the money lah." It's so funny and I'm so privileged to be a part of it, I think. And there *is* actually a Singaporeaness and a lot of it is this delightful fumbling around that is almost epitomised in *Army Daze* and in *Beauty World*—oh I loved it, *Beauty World*, my husband thinks that it is the greatest part of his life, also, doing theatre together.

I say that now with fondness, and I don't mean to, uh... I mean, to see the spontaneity, for example, when we altogether as people, mourned a great person, you know, an essence of your soul, something, there is this wonderful spirit. And this whole spirit includes, you know, the young man says, you can't expect people to owe you a living, you've got to be brave. If you've got to feed your stupid mouth, then never mind lah, you do something, maybe you do the theatre a little bit not so *atas*[37], you know. I mean [gasp] I'm prostituting myself, I've got to do a more popular theatre. But it's part of it, you know, it's part of it. I don't feel that it's wrong to use a popular voice. Yes, sometimes it crimps on your art.

I think Robert is the obviously national, but also very strong voice of awakening the Singaporean in him. But, you ask him if he earned a living from that play, and the poor man has to wait how many years for his play to be restaged and all that. But there's nothing wrong. You were a popular medium, and you accept that. And I've had to work very hard, never had a chance to earn a living as a theatre person, struggling, but I think therein lies the wonderful joy that is doing the arts.

I think, even right now, we're not being supported—I'm sorry, you know, there's the big news for when W!ld Rice[38] gets their government subsidy cut because they were don't-know-what, politically incorrect. Yes, they make a lot of noise about that, but actually they have to go and get more! The money comes from commercial sponsors and all that. You've got to get your begging bowl. And if you've got your begging bowl, you can't also be very *atas* and arty-farty and all that, nobody wants you. So somewhere, and it's in the somewhere, of finding and still doing theatre, I think lies in the beauty [points to self] for this woman, of what theatre is. You know what I mean, I don't wait for it to be served to me on a platter. I don't wait for people to tell me that "you better not" or "she's an iconic"…
"She's a relic, look after her!"
It's nice, but if you don't, then okay lor, never mind!

CO: Hang on, did we answer your question? [laughs] Whether an artist is... You must have it in you, or you know, must be trained. Whether the fact that we're having more arts education now can produce more artists?

[34] An optimist. After a character created by American writer Eleanor Porter (1868 – 1920).
[35] An informant for the authority. Literally translates to stool pigeon, a bird traditionally used for decoys
[36] Colloquial Singapore expression, referring, primarily, to Caucasians.
[37] Singlish term which translates to "ostentatious".
[38] A prominent Singapore theatre company.

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Margaret: Oh, no, we don't have more arts education.

CO: But like, in university, in schools?

Margaret: Despite my name, and this great shadow hanging over me, you know, professor of theatre and performance studies, I don't get a chance to do that. You know, small little elective in theatre, small little—do every damned thing in the world. I'm an anthropologist, my research is in spirit medium cults, you know…

CO: Sorry, Robert wants to say something.

RY: Yeah, yeah... (Audience 2) has got a good question as to nature versus nurture. I'm a great believer in nurturing, because it's like this, and Margaret has described me as a nationalist: I am. If nationalism is old fashioned, then I'm old-fashioned.

Why? Because if you have a new country, and I've written cultural articles about it, you have a new country, you must have new arts. You cannot depend on the traditional arts, because the traditional arts came originally from China, from India, from elsewhere, and they were things that our forefathers brought with them. In the early years of the establishment of the Ministry of Culture following Singapore's independence, the Ministry of Culture used to stage this *Aneka Ragam Rakyat*, where they would put the traditional cultural dance, Malay traditional dance, Chinese opera, Indian song, and read it as an example of an amalgam of Singapore's culture. That's fine, that's conservation, but you need creation. You need new arts to answer to a new country.

So, I believe in nurturing and I give you one example of nurturing which I think has been successful. Margaret, you might remember that when we were in the Drama Advisory Committee, we had the drama festivals and we had grants given out to drama companies. We would say to these drama companies, in one year, you are required to do six plays, of which three must be locally written. If you cannot do these three plays, you don't get money for it. And, it worked, because Michael has told you, for instance, that the companies would then go to somebody like him, reluctant though he may be, and say, "Can you write a play?"

And it worked, because the company that is used to doing a foreign play or adapting it, would go to a Singaporean who might have possibilities, and ask, "Can you write a play?"

And I think that succeeded, because we went on to stage quite a number of drama festivals and you might remember that Shell, at one stage, had a theatre in the city, and they had lunchtime theatre, 45-minute theatre, and quite a number of these plays were written by Singaporeans, for the stage. So, yes, I am a great believer in nurturing, and we lost a very

great man last week[39] and Singapore really was a product of his nurturing, wasn't it? So, I end on that note.

Margaret: Can I sort of just jump in. And now that you know about nurturing, I remember ACTION Theatre, you know, Ekachai[40], who now produces sexy things like the, what, the *Thai Boxer* [sic][41] or something like that in Thailand. They had a premise on Waterloo Street. They had the ACTION theatre—it was the action theatre, right? We would stage plays in their nice little theatre upstairs, which I didn't act in, I can't remember which one. But at the bottom of the stage on the ground floor, on the corridor, on the grass or whatever you call it, the courtyard, it was called the theatre of the unknown, or something like that. And it was so wonderful! It had all these frightened young people coming, can't write for nuts, can't act for nuts, desperately going through their places, and then you get old people like me who are famous, you know, sitting there and watching them and then they get all more nervous, panties all in a twist, and it was just so beautiful.

I wonder whether they would have... You would have to be a little bit more merciful if had more chauvinism in us to say, "Ah, Singaporean ah, let's blast them, instead of stamping them, let's blast this Singapore fellow, blast him high," that kind of a thing. Can we love and embrace our little fumbling miserable theatre? Because from there, they really do grow. Okay, I am a professor and I am also a mother hen. So you see them in what they are, in their lovely, youthful, foolishness, and bad acting or something like that, and you feel the joy in them.

CO: Can I have a last question from someone from the floor? Yes.

Audience 3 (A3): Hello, hi, I'm not from the theatre, but I'm from the visual arts. I am interested in knowing about... In the process of sculpting the identity of local plays, how did you negotiate the process or the whole, you know... What was it like? Were there instances of Singaporeans looking down on Singaporean culture? I'm sure in the beginning of any pioneering work, there is always that "the west is better" especially since you guys are English speaking and some of you probably were overseas-trained, how do you negotiate this terrain? On the one hand, you were creating something new; on the other hand, your teachers were... probably had their own kind of thing going on. You had the Chinese theatre...

Michael: Actually, I think I was spared of that, I never had an issue with that at all. I was also reviewing theatre when I was working for SPH, so I was watching all of the stuff that came from overseas. British Playhouse, dinner playhouse at Hilton, sit down there and get your five-course dinner and then the show starts, you know, that was the kind of theatre scene that I was used to.

[39] Robert Yeo was referring to the passing of Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew, on 23 March 2015. The week of 23 to 29 March was declared as a Period of National Mourning, which took place a week before this forum.
[40] Ekachai Uekrongtham. Thai theatre and film director.
[41] Margaret Chan was referring to *Beautiful Boxer*, a film directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham in 2003.

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And then, I started writing, I thought, "Okay, I'm going to write the way I understand it." So I write about Singaporeans. I make them talk the way I talk, I make them talk the way my friends talk, and I said, "See what happens."

It wasn't a very common occurrence then, but luckily, TheatreWorks[42], which was the company I was working with, they were quite brave, and said, "No, let's see what happens," and put it on and not everyone liked it. The critics hated it. They just thought it was quite... I played up stereotypes, it's caricature, it was very cardboard characters, they didn't like the plot, everything they didn't like, but it sold out every show, so at the end of it I thought, "I don't care about the critics anymore, as long as there're people who come in, they pay the however many dollars for the tickets, they have a good time, they tell their friends to come. That's been my own approach. If I can write for my Singaporean audience and they come in and they feel that this connects with them, it's good enough for me. It took a long time before I got one positive review from the papers, it took a long time. So I had to live with a lot of very negative reviews. So all the clippings that I cut, all those *kena hantam*[43] ones. But yeah, I figured. They didn't compare me with the rest, they just felt maybe it wasn't good enough, maybe it was too local, but they didn't bother me.

RY: In the earliest, like I've told you, I had forgotten that I had written a play, but I took it to Singaporean directors, and they weren't interested. It didn't occur to me I will never take it to a company like The Stage Club[44] because I associate them with the foreign thing, you know. So yes, when I was starting up, there was a lot of disbelief that Singaporeans can write a full length play, you know. And because the other thing was censorship.

I remember taking *One Year Back Home* after I had written it to a theatre company and the company said they were going to produce it, if you take out all the references to the PAP. [laughs] You know, it's that kind of thing, that sort of fear. We had to negotiate that. I said, absolutely no, things like that. So we had to do that kind of negotiation, and we did face discrimination. I'm sure all that is behind us.

Margaret: I think there is a certain amount of self-consciousness that "Eh, am I just rooting for this because it's Singaporean? It's so embarrassing, you shouldn't do that?" I think that has a little element of it. That's maybe why you always got put down, Michael. There is some element.

I think there should be a pride to celebrate the things that we do, and celebrate because it's Singaporean. But still, as a person who does theatre, I'm very demanding. You've got you reach also the standard that has been set there. Just because you're Singaporean, doesn't mean you shouldn't write a good play, or you shouldn't act well enough. So you've got young writers battling a huge culture that had hundreds of years before you, developing—I'm talking about English language theatre, pushing, and being so mature, until they are of an incredible standard, and you are just beginning here. So you must know that you're going to

[42] A Singapore theatre company founded in 1985.
[43] Singlish term which translates to "critical".
[44] A Singapore theatre company founded in 1945. The company was established by members of the expatriate community in Singapore.

be gushed and awkward, frightened, and be judged at that level, so that people say "not good enough" and we don't want to produce it, because we've got this other, incredible play.

But as I said, to me, I'm an optimist. To me, those battles are those I would take on. As an actress, now these two are writers, they create that very essence, the person that carries that spirit out there and makes it seem alive. As Stella said, you know, "I write only the words in the book, and that person gives it flesh and blood."

As the person who gives it flesh and blood, why is it that Emily is so iconic? Why is Emily so iconic? You see it on stage! Like this "I'll crush you like a cockroach" thingy[45]. It's something that you just got to think of. You've got to hit that level, you've got to capture the moment, the consciousness of the people. And if you, my lord—she talked to me, sure, one fellow that crushed you like a cockroach, that kind of a thing. You want that. That's me, I'm the actress, right, that's my job. Their job is to write it in the first place. Yeah, I don't know whether that answers your question.

CO: Okay, oh oh okay, quick one.

Audience 4 (A4): So, my question is, going back to the title, it says "Identity and Language". I just want to ask about what part you think language plays in the formation of identity. So just some context about, like, me, I'm a university student and I'm in England studying European history, and for the first time in my life, I'm feeling the gaze of the colonial other. I go to school, and people say "Oh, you speak very good English!" Okay, so do you, thanks.

And then, they ask me, "So did you go to international school?" I'm like no, I studied in Singapore. So I was wondering whether you've felt any kind of ambiguity writing English-language theatre, because the very fact that you're writing in the English language sets you against a tradition of English and American theatre. I guess the great national example of this is Lee Kuan Yew, who only started learning Chinese when he was 30. I don't know about your generation, maybe you grew up in a Chinese speaking home, but even I who barely spoke Mandarin when I was learning languages, for the first time, I'm feeling that English is no longer... It's becoming ambiguous as a medium of communication. I was wondering if you had any similar processes when you were starting out in the arts world? Thank you.

CO: Robert?

Michael: I think, for me, English was the first choice of writing for me. I spoke English at home because my father was a schoolteacher, I only spoke dialect with my mom, but otherwise I spoke English all the time at home. So when it came to writing, it was natural that all my texts were in English. I was watching a lot of plays, even before I started writing. I was involved with drama groups in school, but always backstage. I was the one who was always

[45] "I'll crush you like a cockroach" is a memorable catchphrase from Margaret Chan's matriarch character in *Masters of the Sea*, a Singapore television drama (1994).

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drawing the curtain [laughs] and never went on stage and never went near a script, but I was just fascinated with the idea of theatre.

So when it came to writing, I thought okay, I'll write the way my mind works, which is in English, but I just wanted to capture all those flavours and the nuances of the people around me. I wrote what I thought were Singaporean characters, lah, whether it's a Miss People's Park, whether it's Johari, I just felt that they spoke like my friends, so I made sure that the cadence, the speech patterns were authentic. That, to me, is important, as long as I got the tone right, the way they spoke right, and the value system right, I felt the characters were quite real to me. So even though they would put in funny situations, the responses to me were quite real. So, I never felt like it was a stumbling block, whether the English made me feel less connected to the characters or where I was writing, not for me lah.

CO: Robert, maybe you want to wrap up?

RY: When I started writing in the '60s and published my first book in 1971 and I started writing poetry, there was consciousness about the fact that I was using a language that was not my own. If you write poetry, you think about images, you know, you think about metaphors, you think about those kinds of things, allusions, and then you think about Shakespeare's line, for instance, "To be or not to be?"

Do we speak like that, you know? We don't. We speak our English and then of course I was a literature student and we went through a phase where critics talked about a Commonwealth literature. In other words, people in the Commonwealth who write English, who are not English. And that is good because it validates our writing enough that we want to talk about post-colonial literature. And after awhile, I just lost that consciousness because like Michael, I had no language in which to write it, you know. My first language was actually *Baba* Malay because I am Peranakan, when I went to school at six, and after that English became the dominant language. So in a sense, I had no choice, and if you had no choice, then you better forget about all this self consciousness that you're using some other people's language. So no, I don't worry about all that.

Margaret: Please allow me to jump in. I came from that same community that Lee Kuan Yew came. He was Harry Lee before he was Lee Kuan Yew, so we all spoke English in my family. That was our lingua franca. But it was so unconscious because I could rattle off Malay and *Baba* with all my mother's aunties and all that, so you spoke *Baba* with them, and then when I went on my father's side, and I spoke with my grandma and all that, we all spoke in Hokkien. That kind of level of Hokkien, not all the *atas* Hokkien that I now meet. So it was identity unconscious, but actually very, very much, English was it.

And I think that became very self conscious. We burned this thing unnecessarily, like Phua Chu Kang[46] had to go to English school, English training. When I began *Masters of the*

[46] Phua Chu Kang is the titular character of a Singapore primetime television sitcom, *Phua Chu Kang Pte Ltd*, that ran from 1997 – 2007 over 8 seasons. The character is a contractor, and is portrayed as an unrefined and uneducated ruffian.

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Sea[47], it was the first English language drama on TV, it's just that I'm a relic, we had to speak very good English. So I got around with that by saying that the matriach character that I created, she was incredibly rich, and for the incredibly rich, the Peranakans called themselves Straits Chinese British. I speak with this *ang moh* accent, but it is entirely me because I came up from the convent and I was trained like that and if I speak in the slang, I am actually going in to it. So I got away with that by believing that she was trained in English. So she spoke [in accent] tremendously crisp received pronunciation, which I thought was extremely the character, but of course people were like, "Yeah lah it's a bit like *ang moh*".

Then I was told from the media, "You may use *judicious* Malay words." So she spoke received pronounciation, but every now and then she would say *mendiam*[48], or something like that. And then the next thing you know, it was—okay, I landed up speaking Singlish! It's the same character! You're actually the consciousness of the voice, so when good old Gurmit[49] acted as Phua Chu Kang and he was in and he made himself. I remember when he was dressing up the character, he came with me and said look, you see, and showed me the fingernail. He was trying to form this character. He was very much Hokkien contractor, so he would have spoken this garbled English, or whatever you'd call it, but then he'd have to go for English training. Spoken English training.

CO: I think we will know we have arrived when that question need no longer be asked. We will arrive when we are no longer asked why are we writing in English. Anyway, I thank you all very much for participating in this forum and please join me in giving a round of applause to our speakers.

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[47] First telecast in 1994.
[48] Malay word which translates to "shut up".
[49] Gurmit Singh. Singapore actor.