

**TRANSCRIPT  
OF**

***THE WEIGHT OF SILK ON SKIN (2015): POST SHOW DIALOGUE***

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay  
as part of *The Studios: fifty* season (2015)  
10 April 2015 at Esplanade Theatre Studio

With playwright Huzir Sulaiman, director Tracie Pang and actor Adrian Pang  
Hosted by Fezhah Maznan

Transcribed by Vanessa Teo

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Notice:

This document is transcribed from a video recording of the event.  
Minor edits have been made for length and clarity. Some coarse language was used during this dialogue.

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*The Weight of Silk on Skin* is written by Huzir Sulaiman.  
It premiered in 2011, as a Man Singapore Theatre Festival Commission and Festival Opening Production .

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**Fezhah Maznan (FM):** My name is Fezhah and I'll be moderating today's post-show talk. I'm sure that all of you have thoughts, comments, feedback that you would like to share with us but before we do that, before we open to the floor, maybe I would like to invite Huzir to share with us your impressions of tonight's performance.

**Huzir Sulaiman (HS):** No, I'm... I'm still emotional...

**FM:** Okay, all right. Maybe I'll ask Tracie. So, the first staging of (*The*) *Weight of Silk on Skin* was done in 2011. What was the challenge for you to restage something that is so recent in the theatre audience's mind?

**Tracie Pang (TP):** To be honest, it was always going to be a challenge not just because it was recent but because I've actually never directed a show where (it's actually a) restaging. So whenever I've done a piece, there wasn't anything to compare it to. [audience laughter] So that was always going to be the challenge. There was this momentous production, produced by Ivan<sup>1</sup> that had such wonderful reviews and nominations, awards. So I kind of live a little bit in fear, how are you going to live up... you know, there's big shoes to fill. And I think for me, I had to make it my own, take my own direction with it, choose the moments and the characterisations of this—our John. To make him—our personal view of his history.

[Audience applause as Adrian Pang enters]

(...)

**Audience 1 (A1):** I was a little fearful coming in here today because I've done a very long day yesterday and a very long day today so I was really quite exhausted. And it was just beautiful. The set, the writing was just so delicious. It was just so engaging and beautifully played. Fabulous, fabulous! Thank you.

[applause]

**FM:** Thank you.

**Audience 2 (A2):** Hi, congratulations Huzir, Tracie, Adrian. I truly enjoyed myself, I was asking myself should I stand up? And I didn't because I was embarrassed. I mean, I really appreciated the play and the acting. I enjoyed so much your art, Adrian, you know, your voice, I loved it. That was beautiful.

**AP:** [in a higher register] Thank you.

[audience laughter]

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<sup>1</sup> Ivan Heng, founding artistic director of Wild Rice, a theatre company in Singapore. He was the Artistic Director of the Man Singapore Theatre Festival 2011, where *The Weight of Silk on Skin* premiered.

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**A2:** There are so many questions that come into my mind. How much (of the performance) is Tracie, how much is you...

**AP:** Just quickly jumping in there, Tracie held my hand through the whole process, because I found it really tough going, to be honest, through the entire process. We had a chat about this on the very first day in rehearsals and I voiced my—not just concerns, but my terror at the whole undertaking to Huzir. And he said, “Well, good luck.”

[audience laughter]

He offered some kind of advice [laughs], but I relied totally on Tracie through the whole rehearsal process to just really guide me and push me a long way. Totally, totally.

**A2:** I can imagine. I can imagine it is a play you could be totally lost in. I would say, for God’s sake, tell me where to move, where to go. Because that was the thing, I sort of tried to ask myself and for a good while... and I don’t think she has come through yet... whether Anna *lived*.

And it’s just that much of you and your vanity and whatever the heck that you wanted to cling on to—clinging onto with such desperation. We want to feel that we could love in a great way. And I wondered at what moment, especially at the part where you were going to decide that you were going to talk to Anna, you were going to meet her, you were going to talk to her at the valet stand... What happened if she’s fat, old, and... [audience laughter]

When I first saw you walking around, and strutting around, I said “Oh my God, that play has to be done by a man in his prime, oozing sex, testosterone and what the heck...”

**AP:** Who’s that person?

**A2:** Like you, dear.

[audience laughter]

And then towards the end, I said no, I want to see this play done by an old, fat, dried up [audience laughter]... I want to see him come, if I may say, juicy and alive as he’s talking and, well, masturbating himself mentally, there. It was intriguing and I still will go in and ask... [laughs] Ooh, did she live in your brain, Adrian Pang? I’m sorry I’m cruel, did she live? Did Anna have flesh, as you did her?

[audience laughter]

**AP:** Yes, I mean, uhm, I suppose it was a case of having to create this, this, this... And make tangible, for myself, this figure of Anna, who’s been kind of almost like a ghost in my life, and has been for the last 25 years. She’s, yeah, literally, corny as it may sound, she’s been haunting me for 25 years and she’s that one, she’s that one salvation that I let slip by for the last 25 years and because I’ve let her slip out of my hands. I’ve just been spiralling down into this endless, bottomless well of... of *this*, you know. Just surrounding myself with physical

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things, when this slightly ethereal presence has been floating in my...

And I think we mix in the same circles as well, back in Singapore, and so I can never really get rid of that. It's almost haunting. Not just haunting, kind of taunting me for 25 years. So I think she was a very real, very real presence. I guess... [To Huzir] Do you want to jump in there? [Huzir shakes his head and hand] Please, please, please? Please *lah!*

[audience laughter, Huzir takes the mic]

**HS:** Well, I think the interesting thing that I found over the years in the response to this play is that there's a very clear gender divide between what people think happens after John speaks to her (Anna) at the valet desk that night. The men will mostly go, "Yeah maybe ah, maybe got chance, ah."

And the women will be like, "Nooooo. She's never going to get back together with him."

[audience laughter]

And that kind of question and that sort of unknowability in what's going to happen, I think, is the thing that propels it. Because, all of us, as men, we're both realists, but there's also a tremendous sense of idealism which shades into self-delusion.

[slight audience laughter]

But you know, so much of human civilisation has been a product of men and their delusions. That, I think, is not something that we can ignore. I think that it's something we need to look at and take seriously. So now that I'm holding the microphone here, can I just say thank you to both Adrian and Tracie, and to Esplanade for doing this, because it takes me awhile to come out of it. It's a very, very, very personal play. It's not about me but about the things that are emotionally resonant with my own life. About three or four of my very close male friends who have unwittingly been part of the composition of John Au Yong and I think, while part of it operates, I'd like to think, as a critique of male privilege, as class privilege, or, of the way we look at it, it's also a love story. It's also about the tragedy of how close we all come to tragedy, with the prospect of being alone. And so for me, this play was a very powerful and frightening "what if".

For me, it was an alternate reality, you know. If I had been unable to find my Anna, and not mess that up. I'm glad I met my wife, Claire, at a later stage in my life, because if I think about my series of experiences prior to it, to Claire, I probably would have messed it up in the way that John messed it up. It's that kind of gratitude, that, "Oh my God! I could have easily been him!"

What if I made the same kind of mistake and my great love had gotten away? That's something I think that all of us who are happy now or have no happiness or hope to find happiness, that goes to the tragedy. That potential for tragedy is always hanging there. I know, of course, because Adrian and Tracie have both marriage and a very involved and

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dedicated working partnership and I was very happy that it was something they could bring to it. So thank you, to both of you, for that.

[audience applause]

**FM:** Anyone else? Yes.

**Audience 3 (A3):** Hey guys, thank you, really nicely done. Could you tell us what you were afraid of in the beginning before you started and how you contrived to get over it, and then whether or not you think you succeeded in getting over this?

**HS:** Good luck to that.

**AP:** Uhm, oh God, where do I start? I think even from the first few paragraphs, I felt... I don't like this guy. And the more I read, the more I disliked him. And from my first reading of it, I found it difficult to then detach myself from my first instinct, the first time I read it.

I thought, well, just give him a chance, because once I'd read the entire play and when it got to the final part, it came as a big surprise, actually, that Huzir had crafted it such that... It's a sucker punch, right at the very end, and it was something I didn't expect.

But still, I had to reconcile myself with this asshole from the first page and I thought, God, I really don't like this man. I just don't like the way he talks about women, I don't like the way he treats sex, and I had very little affinity for his obsessions. So there were all these kinds of hurdles and mental blocks for me to kind of fight against somehow, and I voiced these concerns to Huzir from the first day.

This is a weird kind of first time for me to experience that kind of a feeling. I've played pedophiles before, and weirdly, there was a way in somehow somehow. [audience laughter] Oh, don't. *Don't*, you know.

This man, and I know people like him, who are like him, and I'm just finding it really really difficult to enter his mind. And so, that's why I said I relied so much on Tracie to kind of open it up and hack it and deconstruct him. To find a reason why he is like that, and to just not get sidetracked by all the veneer of it. That's why there's that scene when he—after the revenge fuck with Yumi, that was like a big turning point for him, I think. From then onwards, his life was just, okay, you know what, it's just about the physical, and he had kind of shed anything that had any kind of semblance of feeling. Because of the shred of it that he kept inside him.

So yeah, I had to just kind of deconstruct him and put him back together again into a form where I could do this tonight. I still don't particularly like him, I still don't think he'd be on my Facebook list [chuckles] but still, you know, it was an interesting, interesting process. Tracie, I think you want to...

**TP:** I think it was, for us, it was just finding... I mean, yes, he has a veneer, which most women would find unlikeable. The way he talks about women, and objectifies them, and puts down their intellect, even. It had a very strong unlikeability about it, and trying to understand

where that came from as an intelligent man in a first world country. Why is this man like that?

We also tried to look at what you couldn't see, what was probably not necessarily there on the first read. And that was finding that this man is intensely lonely and that he has surrounded himself by everything that creates a barrier, or a shell, a veneer, so that people don't really see the pain that's going on inside. And these 25 years of loneliness and not actually feeling for somebody anymore, not in the way that he felt for Anna.

I think the pain that he went through in that breakup was probably so hard that he never wanted to go through that again. I think deconstructing John and creating that image suddenly changed the way we looked at him. I think that was a big stepping stone in breaking the back of the character, and getting inside the mind of the character so we could breathe some life into him and not just what we saw. Maybe people that Adrian knew at school and didn't get on with and you know, felt "That's not me". And that's not the people that I surround myself with, and I don't know them, so it was actually trying to find a way in and get to know this character more, and understand him more. I think that was a really important and hard journey to make.

**FM:** Yes, we have time for one more impression, response, question...

**Audience 4 (A4):** The point in the play which I felt was like an epiphany, was exactly the point that Tracie has just discussed. How we get to realise that this man is so lonely and that all these silky, shiny objects he surrounds himself with, which we have reflected in the set, are, as Huzir says in the script, his strategy for survival, a survival mechanism, and somehow the three of you pulled that for me, right to the forefront. That, for me, is the heart of the whole play. Of course, he's pulled that together, as you said, the survival mechanism, to protect himself against this broil that he was dealt with. And you can see through the whole play how he's armouring himself bit by bit, with his final outfit. I enjoyed this very, very much. It was like watching a very beautifully crafted piece of work, and the sheer pleasure that comes from watching a piece in which everything fits together, fits from the three of you each crafting it so beautifully. Thank for a very nice evening.

[audience applause]

**Audience 5 (A5):** The set – is it black and shiny because it's black and shiny, or because it's reflective and dark?

**TP:** It's black and shiny.

[audience laughter]

Actually it's my very first time working with Wai Yin, the set designer, and I gave her some ideas of what I wanted with the set. I wanted to create something that was quite intimate, that would fit into the space knowing that the (previous staging) had been quite grand in its vastness and its openness on stage. I wanted to go in a very different direction and kind of go into his inside and try to bring us in there. It was in trying to create this perfect surface,

this kind of showroom surface, which is kind of how he shows himself to the world. It was really kind of going from that basis to create the set design.

**Audience 6 (A6):** Hi, anyway, just, really wonderful job, I really enjoyed it. Something that I'm wondering, which I think would change the way I view John entirely, is to understand from both the writer's perspective and the director and actor's perspective. Who is he talking to? Because if there's an audience, it makes me suspect that, you know, he may be putting on another veneer for us. Or is he talking to himself, I guess when you're writing this or directing this, who is he playing to?

[audience laughter]

**HS:** I think as with any way of looking at a play, it admits multiple interpretations. I mean, I have an idea in my head, I'm not sure if I'm necessarily one to limit anyone's enjoyment by saying it because it kind of closes off possibilities. I'm with the kind of—my literature education was what was fashionable then, which was the author's intention doesn't matter, so, it doesn't really matter what I think, it's more of what people make of it.

**TP:** I guess for myself, I'm kind of like Huzir. So in that way, it is multi-layered. There isn't any one person or group of people, I feel, that it was talking to. I think there is a shift, as the play starts to—being in a private space, to actually engaging with the people that are in the room. I think in total reality, he's in his private space. This is his private space. I think we made a very personal decision in the beginning when he's actually—there are lines about him talking to a woman, that I felt that if he actually said that to a woman who was actually in the room, it would just be so rude and horrible. I just couldn't bear him as a man, you know. So then I felt that, yes, it's something that is going on in his head, that he would like to say out loud, but maybe he, being the well-brought-up gentleman that he is, he wouldn't actually say it to her face. Maybe we introduced the concept of the phone and him kind of responding to her in the way he wanted to but actually probably wouldn't say it to her face. That may not be Huzir's intention, but that was the choice that we made.

**HS:** Wait ah, I've been waiting five years for this. [audience laughter] I'm just getting started in the sense that I think the larger thing which I think Tracie and Adrian found and they unpacked really well was the idea that masculinity is a performance, gender is a performance, privilege is a performance. All the choices that we make in our day-to-day living are in some conscious or unconscious ways performances. So there was that sort of metatheatre of social life going on as part of Adrian's performance, which I appreciate very deeply, because of course he brings his tremendous craft as an actor to it as well.

So the comedy is well thought through and it's just there and I think when we were talking, my only concern was that we go to his place of vulnerability and we see that. Between Tracie and Adrian, they've done it very masterfully, to the point where it may or may not come as a sucker punch. I would like to think that you are led to it, but at the end, it certainly worked on me and it's very strange because I should know what's happening. I should be able to resist this, I should know what's going to happen.

**FM:** [to Adrian] Do you have anything to add?

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**AP:** What they said.

[audience laughter]

**TP:** I think, just as a final note, I think it's been a wonderful privilege to get to work with such a wordsmith. It's wonderful to have this kind of work to delve into, and like Adrian said, it was easy. But, you know, we need to pick the hard things in life and make them easy. It makes us as artists work harder and I want to thank Huzir for making Adrian and I work really hard because it's been a tough journey but I think at the end of the day, we have created something that I think is quite beautiful. I think that the hard work that the writing has put us through has been worthwhile. So thank you for continuing to do this work.

**HS:** Thank you for your hard work. Thank you all.

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