

Interrogating the Interrogators: Two Plays of Chong Tze Chien

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Esplanade Rehearsal Studio

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PART ONE

Tze Chien

So Shou Chen doesn't know that he's playing me?

Huzir

He does, he does. I think he's quite excited. Of course I'm quite cheeky lah, I get very handsome actors.

Tze Chien

Of course! Brendon Fernandez.

Huzir

Eh Shou Chen's also quite good looking!

Tze Chien

Yeah I know. But it's Brendon Fernandez here, come on! You can cast anyone else but you cast Brendon Fernandez! [LAUGHTER]

Huzir

Okay! So I want to talk to you about your plays *PIE* and *Charged*. And maybe we will start with *PIE* because chronologically it's the earlier one. Where were you in your theatrical career at that point?

Tze Chien

I wasn't a playwright then. I wouldn't consider myself a playwright. Actually playwriting was the last thing on my mind. I wrote *PIE* as a TheatreWorks Writer's Lab entry. And at that time I was in the army and I thought I needed to do so something just so that I could remember how to spell and think logically.

So I joined the Writer's Lab and by the end of this stint we handed in an assignment for dramatized reading. So then I thought it was a clever idea to just put three unrelated incidents on the Pan Island Expressway and put them together. And it was a thirty minute play. And that was that. So I shelved it.

And then in my NUS second year, that was when they announced that they launched the Singapore Dramatists Award, the very very first one. And at that

time I was, I already set my mind on being a full time freelance practitioner. I was looking into being an actor. I hated writing, I never enjoyed writing. So in school, whenever we're given essays, I hated those assignments and never liked and enjoyed writing.

But at that time in the second year, I was involved in Theatre Studies production and I was the assistant director. I got so sick of that production, that I needed some distraction. I think that is the best way to describe it. And so the competition came around and I decided to just pick it up and develop it to full length play. But more importantly, I think prior to that, half a year ago I was asked by the Necessary Stage to help them research on the Marxist Conspiracy as part of their play Galileo. And that was a jolt to my senses.

Huzir

The play Galileo?

Tze Chien

Galileo. And that was then that I knew anything about that Marxist conspiracy.

Huzir

You weren't aware about the headlines, the televised?

Tze Chien

No I wasn't aware. I mean it was 87' and I was possibly primary school or Sec One? And that year, all I remember about that year was the Swing Singapore. And how I wanted to go to that street party. And that year was all about that. I didn't realize the Marxist conspiracy was going on at that time. Because I was too young to register that part of history. So I was digging into the archives -- and the NUS library was great because you can access all these restricted materials, including the Friday Background special on the confessions that they made on TV. And Kenneth Liang was interviewing them.

Huzir

I remember watching that live. And it was just an extraordinary piece of theater.

Tze Chien

Yeah, I know. Exactly. And I was watching it, right, cos prior to that I already read Francis Seow's book. And everything about it that was going on behind it. And so, of course there's both sides of the story. As I was watching that, I think that was the wake up call for me. Because prior to that my idea of play

writing was just human expression and you just put a story out there and you try to be clever about it. At least that was what I thought play writing was all about. And after that I realized how powerful words could be. And how words could tell a story and twist the truth -- or not. There was when I decided to tackle that topic, that subject matter. I think in hindsight it was also self-reflective. Because I had a playwright in it, in PIE. I had written myself in. Even though it wasn't exactly me, but I thought I was put in a hot seat.

Huzir

Why did you feel that way?

Tze Chien

At that time, you see, I knew nothing about play writing. All I had was some experience in being an actor with The Necessary Stage and I observed quite a bit of the directing process. But a serious attempt to writing a full-length play, I think that was scary for me cause I wasn't sure how to work, to wrap my head around it. I decided to put an alter ego in the play and have him work out the play as I was trying to finish writing the play. I was trying to make a point. I wasn't sure what the point was. I knew it was about the Marxist Conspiracy and I knew I was disturbed. I knew that there's got to be a greater purpose in playwriting above and beyond human expression. But what I was trying to be and who I was as a playwright, I had no idea, I was just going on gut instinct.

Huzir

And did you discover, in the act of researching of writing, did you discover what the point was? Or the issue was?

Tze Chien

Only in the second and third draft. I submitted the first draft as a competition piece, it won, to my surprise. So the money was good, the recognition was good. But then Casey from Theatreworks then who was the associate artistic director there, sat me down and said, it's not guaranteed that we will stage this but I need to talk to you -- and this needs many many re-writes. So I remember sitting in his Theatreworks office and I think it was day, it was still day time. But when I left his office it was already night. We must have been in there for eight hours.

Huzir

So it was kind of an interrogation session?

Tze Chien

It was. It was almost. And he asked me everything about what I wanted to do, because at that time I was in my third year, I was about to graduate. I made up my mind to be a theatre practitioner and Casey interrogated me. "What

kind of an artist do you want to be?" "What's the point you're trying to make?" "I know exactly what you're telling me is this, but it's not showing in your script". And I had so many ideas as a theatre studies student at that time you know like, you think you have so many things to talk about about, to say, to convey, there is a point but it wasn't crystallized, it wasn't clearly articulated. Right into the first reading, after I finished the third draft, Nora, who was one of the actors in PIE, she confronted me, and said, because she played the role of the interrogator, and she said "Is there nothing more to this?"

Huzir

So in the third draft, was there already the structure of the playwright being interrogated?

Tze Chien

Yeap, it was already there.

Huzir

But it wasn't clear what it was about? The nature of the interrogation?

Tze Chien

The everything. What the whole Pan Island Expressway was.

Huzir

Even on the level of plot? As in, these unrelated incidents happen but the interrogator attempts to pin it on the playwright as though he engineered it?

Tze Chien

They knew all that, I mean on a narrative level they could understand it. But I think what they were more interested in was: this young punk, what is he trying to do with this?

Huzir

The character or the actual...?

Tze Chien

The actual Chong Tze Chien! I was like 25? 24? First full length play to be produced by Theatreworks. They knew nothing of me, I only knew Seng Onn at that time, and Serene. And they were very very curious, I mean I think they were trying to help me? But at the same time, being a young playwright at that time was quite intimidating? And trying to articulate everything that you wanted to say in one sentence to these actors. And some of these are veteran actors.

Huzir

There was obviously a confidence because there's an extraordinary act of mature story telling and conceptualization that, for your first play, feeling the vulnerability about being a playwright you then create a playwright character in a position of vulnerability. And his interrogation in a sense mirrors that which you were going through with your creative team, and I suppose ultimately the public.

Tze Chien

Nora basically just asked me a very very simple question. She asked me "Is there anything more to this character other than being an interrogator?" Because she said "As an actress I could play this but you're not giving me enough depth to play this". Because she was almost like a mouthpiece. And the role of the interrogator was essentially a mouthpiece. And it was nothing more than what was on the page. I solved it by giving them a relationship, giving them a history.

Huzir

The relationship meaning that she is the.....

Tze Chien

She's the guardian.

Huzir

The foster mother.

Tze Chien

Yeap, yeap.

Huzir

Does that, for you, sort of problematise or undercut the actual relationship between the interrogator and prisoner in a real situation of political detention?

Tze Chien

Someone asked me after the play, they said that this is incredible -- I think that was the word he used -- I can't believe that this would happen in real life in the ISD. My reply to him was that nothing in play making is about reality. It's all make believe, right? And in my defense I said, I wasn't really talking about the artist per se. I wasn't really interested in that. I was talking about the idea of myth making in Singapore. And that was the bigger point that I was

trying to make, which is the very fact that we love the stories that we tell and sometimes the truths that we tell could be fabricated. And that for me is Singapore, the very fact that we like to make up stories about ourselves, for better or for worse.

[Excerpts from Chong Tze Chien's *PIE* (1999) were read during the session at this point.]

PART TWO

Huzir

Now is a good time to move to CHARGED. We fast forward, how many years? Between PIE and...

Tze Chien

10? 12?

Huzir

Okay, and where were you at the time, in your career?

Tze Chien

I was more secure as playwright, obviously. By that time I had written 15 full length plays. Zizi approached me one day and asked me if I wanted to write for Teater Ekamatra?

Huzir

You were at that point, were you with Finger Players?

Tze Chien

I was already at Finger Players. PIE took me about two months to write; CHARGED took me about five days. By the time I already had a very natural writing process. So I would spend about half, at least half a year thinking about the draft and thinking them over in my head before I commit into paper. So the writing process was five days, five afternoon I think, and that was it. So there was clarity. And so by the time I knew who I was as a playwright, I knew what were the strengths and weaknesses of who I was as a playwright, as a person, as an artist and because of that I was already quite comfortable with my own writing process. So it was almost a breeze actually. And CHARGED was one of the easiest plays to write for me.

[Chong Tze Chien's *Charged* (2010) was read in full during the session at this point.

Charged by Chong Tze Chien is published by Epigram Books. It is available for sale through the Epigram e-shop and other major bookstores, or for loan from various branches of the National Library.]

PART THREE

Huzir

And what, in that play, did you see as the role of the interrogator?

Tze Chien

I didn't really see the interrogator actually. Surprisingly. The first few images that came into my head was the mothers.

Huzir

The mothers?

Tze Chien

And then followed by the soldiers, and the interrogator came as a convenient device, to kind of string everything together. So the interrogation took a back seat for me. The stories and the multiple perspectives kind of took on a life of its own. And the interrogator for me was, was just a convenient device to link all these different scenarios together. So unlike PIE who, in PIE he/she was the pivotal character, where in CHARGED it was the other way round.

Huzir

I don't know, I mean, another reading is that ultimately the interrogator in CHARGED is the one who faces the public and who engineers the final press conference with the two women. So unlike this faceless back room pseudo-ISR entity who just exists within the security apparatus, Victor in CHARGED becomes the public face of the authorities as well. And the ultimate myth-making becomes his, because the wayang -- to use the Malay term -- that he tells is generated by him selectively from the myth-making of the individual soldiers.

Tze Chien

Perhaps, but I think when I was writing it, I remember I was being more sympathetic. Towards the interrogator.

Huzir

Okay.

Tze Chien

I think it goes back to everything I've said about me being non-confrontational and that whenever I'm put in a position to fight, while I'm defending the position I tend to think about the other person at the other end of the table.

Huzir

Okay...

Tze Chien

My sympathies are with the interrogators. My sympathies are with the MDA. My sympathies are with NAC, my sympathies are with MCYY as everyone else.

Huzir

Okay....

Tze Chien

[laughs] So for me...

Huzir

So is it a masochistic trait?

Tze Chien

Maybe it is. Maybe.

Huzir

Or is it because you yourself would like to be in a position of the authority?

Tze Chien

No, I'm always more curious about what the other person's thinking.

Huzir

But then there's multiple others in this. You have all your different characters, and you've written very carefully from a different cultural and class perspective == and a different personal experience as well, which is in the context of the soldiers more important than their ethnic or socioeconomic background: just the stuff that people have gone through. But yet with these multiple points of view, the ultimate sympathy and power lies with the one who has the power.

Tze Chien

No but he doesn't, he doesn't have the power in this.

Huzir

How does he not have the power?

Tze Chien

Because he was working for someone else. He was a mouthpiece as well. He's a junior officer. I'm sure if this was to happen in real life, and this was how it's gonna unfold, he would probably be just the sidekick.

Huzir

So who has the ultimate power?

Tze Chien

Everyone.

Huzir

Everyone?

Tze Chien

See, we're all perpetuating the same thing, we're all perpetuating the same myth. Everything that we are today, we are products of our environment. We perpetuate the myth that we fight against.

Huzir

So what is the role of the individual responsibility in standing up for justice?

Tze Chien

That remains to be seen. I think that's what...

Huzir

Do you have an opinion on that?

Tze Chien

I do.

Huzir

What is your opinion?

Tze Chien

[laughs] Ultimately, I feel the political is social and personal.

Huzir

The political IS social and personal. Okay.

Tze Chien

And, we take on different positions at different times.

Huzir

Who is we? Artists or all of us?

Tze Chien

All of us. And while we may be able to fight for justice, we may not represent justice. We are all flawed in one way or another. So the positions that we take, they are true to the moment, but they're not absolute truths. And I think for society to move forward, as individuals, I think we need to be very aware that we are not right all the time. Even when we feel we that it's the most, even when we feel that, even when our behavior, our actions, our words seem to point to fighting for a greater cause but that fight is only right at that point of time.

Huzir

So it doesn't concern you whether Victor is right to cover up certain actions by the soldiers or to present a selective version of the truth?

Tze Chien

Because I think in his mind, I think he genuinely believed that he was doing the right thing. For the mothers, for the deceased, for the nation. And being in the position that he was, it's not convenient but it's the second best solution.

Huzir

So if we go back to your political social awakening when researching the Marxist Conspiracy and the Friday background TV show -- which is a televised piece of theater, of ritualised confession of guilt, of very carefully stage managed stories that reinforce the authorities' version of the story. And that awakening inspired PIE. Then you fast forward to Charged and you have Victor doing the same thing. But what appears to have changed with you is that now you think it's fine.

Tze Chien

It's not fine, it's not fine.

Huzir

Ah! Why is it not fine?

Tze Chien

It's not fine for whom though?

Huzir

Which is why I'm asking you: For whom is it not fine?

Tze Chien

Let's zoom in to the very very last scene where he had engineered their meeting between the two mothers. While he may have planted that, what actually happened in the two characters was something that went beyond, because at that time I was thinking, okay, was this silence engineered. That was one possible reading.

Huzir

In the sense that the mothers appear but don't say anything?

Tze Chien

Yeah. Or they were asked to perform or they were given a script each and they were asked to, but they dropped the script. If you asked me today what could have been an alternative ending, I wouldn't know what that would be actually. And if you ask me all of them are victims. There isn't an enemy per se.

Huzir

So why is it not fine? I wanna pick up on what you said.

Tze Chien

Because as I have said, if we were living in a different time and a different way so that Singapore as a nation's different, there wouldn't be a need for Charged to be written.

Huzir

Because of course the stage management of the press conference -- the final version of the story -- comes after the extraordinary outburst by Victor which is dehumanizing and offensive and racist in many ways.

Tze Chien

Why is that happening? That's the question I'm asking! Why do we have to resort to making these remarks to put our point across or even why is it even an issue? If a Malay or a Chinese soldier has slain a Malay soldier, why would

it be an issue? Why would this be called an honest piece of writing in Singapore? It saddens me a bit because for me this shouldn't be happening in the very very first place. It wouldn't be an issue, it would just be an accident in the army, case closed. But obviously, it blew up to something way bigger than it was.

Huzir

So what do you see as the role of the playwright in interrogating this state of affairs?

Tze Chien

Put it this way, it's not something new, whatever that was said in the script is not something that we have not heard of. But suddenly when you put it on paper and you present it, you present a mirror, you present a slice of life to the audience in something that they are familiar with, they are suddenly confronted and they feel as though this is not happening, as though this is some alien concept, and I think it is the power of theater which is the platform to reflect. But why? Why do we have to resort to this? If everything was fine we don't need theatre.

Huzir

See, you ask this question, but I think the play already suggests the answer: because these views are not just naturally held among the populace. They are part of an entrenched power structure. And by giving the most vile and offensive speech to the person who has the most power in this play, you are leading us to a quite natural reading that everyday casual racism or aggression on the part of the soldiers is a direct result of a system that is created and perpetuated by those in power. Like Victor. So the physical violence that Victor inflicts upon his interrogation subject, leads very seamlessly into a scrubbed, polished, made-up for the cameras display. And you are allowing us to understand that the surface beauty is underscored by quite systemic violence and racism.

Tze Chien

Which is Singapore.

Huzir

That's a great place to end I think. Thank you.

Tze Chien

Thank you.
