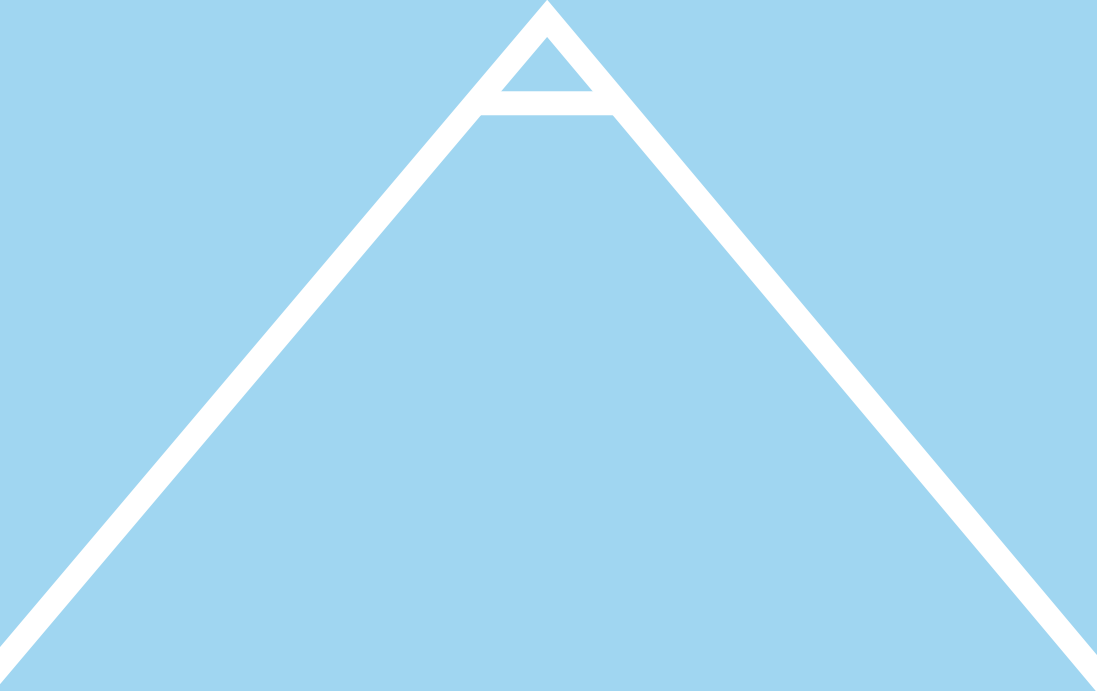


DESMOND SIM STUDENT PLAYS

DRUNKEN PRAWNS • MRT • PERFECTING PRATAS
THE CHAIR • SHRIMPS IN SPACE • TEOCHEW PORRIDGE
THE DURIAN MAN AND HIS DAUGHTERS



FOREWORD BY DR K. K. SEET

DESMOND SIM is an award-winning playwright, poet and writer. Almost all of his 30 plays to date have been performed in professional theatres in Singapore, Malaysia and the United States. He was TheatreWorks' first playwright-in-residence and has been the associate artistic director of ACTION Theatre since April 2004, running Singapore Theatre Oasis, an incubator programme for new and existing Singaporean playwrights. He has participated in the Shanghai Literary Festival and was awarded a Fulbright fellowship. Desmond has also co-written two movies: *Beautiful Boxer* and *The Wedding Game*. He is an acknowledged Peranakan painter who has held more than a dozen exhibitions on Peranakan figurative themes. Desmond also teaches playwriting, branding, marketing and communications at Temasek Polytechnic School of Design and Lasalle College of the Arts.

DR K. K. SEET established the Theatre Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore in 1992. He has authored 13 books, published numerous academic papers and adjudicated many arts-related competitions, including *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards, where he is the longest standing judge, and the Singapore Literature Prize, for which he served as chief judge for many years. For his contributions to arts and culture, Dr Seet was conferred the Special Recognition Award by the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts in 2005 and the Singapore Theatre Vanguard Award by the arts community of Singapore in 2012. Dr Seet now divides his time among his homes in Singapore, Thailand and the United Kingdom.

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Cover design by Stefany
Playwright's photograph by Ruth Soh

Published with the support of



National Library Board Singapore
Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Sim, Desmond, 1961-
Student plays / Desmond Sim ; foreword by Dr. K. K. Seet.
– Singapore : Epigram Books, 2013.

pages cm

ISBN : 978-981-07-5691-8 (paperback)
ISBN : 978-981-07-5692-5 (ebook)

I. Seet, K. K. II. Title.

PR9570.S53
S822 -- dc23 OCN834073068

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First Edition
10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To my mother Lilian Lim Swee Hiang,
who patiently drove us to the National Library every Saturday
so that we could borrow our four books every week,
planting the seeds of a love affair with stories for a lifetime.

And to my amazing teachers, Mr Peter Tan, Mr Don Whitby
and Dr Ban Kah Choon for introducing and opening up
the worlds of literature and imagination to a then young mind
thirsting and ready for the journey to come.

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CONTENTS

Foreword by Dr K. K. Seet	viii
<hr/>	
Drunken Prawns	1
MRT	23
Perfecting Pratas	37
The Chair	57
Shrimps in Space	91
Teochew Porridge	175
The Durian Man and His Daughters	213

A PLAYWRIGHT OF LYRICAL COMPASSION

Foreword by Dr K. K. Seet

The launch of a collection of short plays by Desmond Sim is an occasion for celebration. Not only because such a tome is clearly overdue, since Sim the Renaissance man had to steal time away from and juggle his multitude of pursuits—from writing poetry or screenplays and holding solo art exhibitions of his distinctive Peranakan paintings to conducting seminars in media and communication, among a host of other interests and specialisations—to collate his prolific output of plays into a representative corpus, but also on account of the indisputable fact that his short plays are much in demand by our secondary schools and junior colleges when they deliberate over the choice of a suitable dramatic text for an in-house arts festival or as their annual entry to the Singapore Youth Festival.

Sim's short plays are popular because they offer much food for thought despite being unabashedly accessible, life-affirming and possessing the “feel good” factor in oodles. Perhaps this is the winning formula for Sim, who probably holds the record for being Singapore's most garlanded playwright in terms of awards: his double victory at the NUS/Shell Short Play Competition over two decades ago with *Storyteller* and *Red Man, Green Man*, another top accolade at the first Hewlett-Packard/ACTION Theatre Ten-Minute Play Contest for *Drunken Prawns* and that lauded Best Original Script award at the 2002 DBS *Life!* Theatre Awards for *Autumn Tomyam*.

Sim's plays are intrinsically appealing because they are couched in an authentic Singaporean idiom with which we are all familiar and comfortable. Any one of his plays exemplifies the spectrum of registers and idiolects, such that every character is accurately and precisely

identifiable by demographic or psychographic. *Drunken Prawns* serves as a worthy illustration, with its dialect-spouting waitress and the tech-savvy children who are aware, unlike their father, that the correct term is “gigabyte” and not “gigglebyte”. Apart from the occasional humour and splashes of local colour generated from the vernacular intrusions, Sim's knack for capturing genuine speech patterns is testimony to his sharp ear.

Sim's plays pivot around very basic human drives and motivations, the kind that would occupy the upper rungs of Maslow's hierarchy of needs, what I shall here term the three C's: the compulsion to “connect” and “communicate”, further aligned to a parallel need to “consume” food, since the twin nodes of food and love are essential to human survival. Hence, one observes the prevalence of food in the titles of his plays. From *Drunken Prawns* to *Teochew Porridge, The Durian Man and His Daughters* to *Perfecting Pratas*, the metaphor of food looms large and serves to underpin the themes of these plays. Even the pejorative nickname of Lim Huat Bee in *Shrimps in Space* comes from the dried shrimp used in Asian cooking: *hay bee* in the Teochew dialect. I recall Sim once mentioning, on an adjudicating panel on which I served alongside him, that Asian families conduct a lot of bonding over the ritual of eating and around the dinner table, which may explain the galvanising impulse of his creativity. Moreover, in view of the Singaporean penchant for food, Sim's plays are routinely entrenched in our social context, rendering them effortlessly postcolonial. Nowhere is this more evident than in the saga of a family encapsulated in the leitmotif of *The Chair*, subtitled *A Peranakan Tapestry*.

Whether the imagery of food betokens the inter-generational rift that arises from differing outlooks (the doting father who spares no

expense in indulging his family with the most exquisite cuisine versus the ecologically and health-conscious daughter who finds drunken prawns inhumane), or the cultural disparity stemming from evolving mindsets (the durian man versus his overseas-educated daughter whose taste undergoes a shift after relocation), the dynamics of parent-child relationships are captured with an astuteness that is not short of compassion. Sim makes recurrent pleas for deeper understanding by putting oneself in the shoes of others or emphasising the multiplicity of perspectives. The estranged son in *Teochew Porridge*, for example, discovers belatedly from his father's hoard of press clippings that the undemonstrative and seemingly disapproving Chinese patriarch actually loves his offspring in no lesser, but merely different, a manner. In the same vein, Teochew porridge may appear to be a bland offering, but it remains a necessary staple and can be flavourful if eaten with different dishes. Likewise, the father and son in *Perfecting Pratas* have assumed that each has failed the other through too uncompromising an aspiration to perfection. The son thinks his father does not notice his appreciation while the father feels he has failed, in comparison to his late wife, to be the model parent. But even though the act of "consumption" may sometimes divide, it eventually reunites, rendering the denouement of Sim's plays highly affirmative.

In general, Sim casts a sympathetic eye on the foibles of human nature. His plays are spiritually uplifting because there are no characters who are inherently bad or villainous. His protagonists are never fatally flawed, though they may fumble or stumble in their frequently botched attempts at "connection" through an inability to "communicate". This is often the outcome of too severe a judgement on oneself or others, albeit this severe judgement is in turn the result of a desire for validation rather than self-aggrandisement. It takes Lim

Huat Bee of *Shrimps in Space* nearly half a lifetime to realise that he has been his own harshest jury, that he has in fact been held in high esteem all along by the friend he alternately envies and admires, Lam Hin Kong. In the same vein, it takes the chance encounter of two strangers in *MRT* to make each confront his or her own worst demon and gain reassurance from the other. Interestingly, too, both Rosa and Mike are overly hard on themselves (one blames herself for her grandson's fatal accident whereas the other inadvertently feels he is a failure by being made redundant at work) ironically because of their greater capacity for love and compassion.

Perhaps at this juncture, it is appropriate to introduce the fourth C in Sim's dramatic oeuvre: compassion. Incandescent in these short plays is an almost lyrical stress on compassion, which Sim repeatedly reminds us, requires so very little effort. Alter egos like Lim Huat Bee the nerd and Lam Hin Kong the jock can forge an enduring friendship over a cup of tau huay chwee. As Rosa tells Mike in *MRT*, "You can make the saddest woman in the world laugh with a piece of paper and a pool of urine". Maybe it is preferable, or indeed more judicious, as Sim has expressed in the prologue of another play, *Drift* (not in this collection), to be judged on the intent rather than the outcome of our actions since none of us is perfect. The enlightened soul recognises, like the reconciled pair in *Perfecting Pratas*, that perfection is not mandatory. After all, as succinctly summarised in one of the penultimate lines of *The Chair*, "it is the spirit...and not the thing that makes it special"—and this spirit aptly crystallises the lyrical compassion of Desmond Sim.

Dr K. K. Seet, 2013

DRUNKEN PRAWNS

AWARDS

Drunken Prawns won first prize in the 1993 Hewlett Packard/ACTION Theatre Ten-Minute Play Contest.

PRODUCTION NOTES

Drunken Prawns was first staged in Singapore by ACTION Theatre in December 1993. The production was directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham. The cast comprised Raymond Lim, Irene Lim, Cindy Sim, Tony Chow and Wendi Tan.

CHARACTERS

MR TAN	An administrative manager, aged 40
MRS TAN	A bank officer, aged 36
ANGIE TAN	A secondary one student in a top school in Singapore, aged 13
CONNIE TAN	A primary six student in a good school, aged 12
WAITRESS	In her forties

SCENE 1 *At rise, Mr Tan, Mrs Tan, Angie and Connie are seated on a sofa in the sitting room of their four-room HDB flat, intently watching a comedy on TV (imaginary one in the direction of the audience). They have a Tupperware container of sweet and sour snacks that they pass to each other and munch on as they watch TV. It is a picture of domestic bliss. As they watch, they sporadically burst out laughing.*

CONNIE Ha ha ha, he's so funny! *(looks in the Tupperware container)* Eh...no more sng buay¹ already? *(to Angie)* Jie², you never leave any for the rest of us!

ANGIE Shh...I can't hear...

CONNIE Ma, Jie always finishes up the good stuff before any of us get to eat it!

MRS TAN Angie, you've got to learn to share. I also like to eat the sng buay I buy, you know...

ANGIE Shh...Okay, okay...*(reacting to the TV)* Ha ha ha ha...

MR TAN *(looking dotingly at Angie)* I'll go buy a big bag of sng buay for all of us tomorrow.
The family burst out laughing in unison at the final scene of the show. The closing theme song of the comedy plays (this can be the theme of any current MediaCorp³ comedy series).

ANGIE Ha ha ha...She kena⁴ tricked in the end...so stupid!

MR TAN *(teasing)* Ya lah, next to you, everyone else is stupid...

ANGIE No, I think Einstein is very smart. And Stephen Hawking also.

MRS TAN Who?

ANGIE They are scientists who changed the way we see

1 Sour plums

2 [Mandarin] Elder sister

3 Media Corporation of Singapore Pte Ltd

4 [Malay] Denotes that something has happened

the universe.

MR TAN *(proudly teasing)* Right. And you are the third smartest after those two...is it?
Mrs Tan gets up. Mr Tan stretches. The two girls keep watching.

MRS TAN I'm getting us some coffee. Anyone wants some?

MR TAN I want...

CONNIE Me also!

ANGIE Coffee?
Mrs Tan rolls her eyes. She knows what's coming next.
(to Connie) Caffeine is really bad for you.

CONNIE No lah...who says?

ANGIE My health sciences teacher!

CONNIE *(doubtfully)* Really? Why is it bad?

ANGIE It stains your teeth...and it makes you pee...and...and...it stops you from sleeping.

MRS TAN *(dryly)* I'll remember to brush my teeth.

CONNIE So what if we got to pee? We all got to pee anyway what...

ANGIE *(smugly, using reverse psychology)* Never mind, you drink lah. Afterwards your hands cannot stop shaking, then we see how you can become a surgeon next time!

MR TAN What nonsense! I've been drinking coffee for 40 years...see! *(holds out an extremely steady hand)*
Steady as a rock!

ANGIE Drinking coffee for 40 years? But you're 40 years old tomorrow, Pa.

MR TAN Ya...so?

ANGIE You mean you've been drinking coffee since you were a baby?
Connie laughs.

MR TAN *(feeling caught)* I knock you on the head, then you know. You don't be a smart aleck with me ah...

ANGIE Hee hee!

MRS TAN *(with amused irony)* Ha. Like father, like daughter. Okay, okay, last order...

MR TAN *(deliberately)* Make mine a BIG mug...the thicker the coffee, the better!

MRS TAN Connie?
Angie's warning has had its effect on Connie, who looks unsure now.

CONNIE Ummm...

MR TAN Coward. It's just coffee lah!

MRS TAN *(not wanting to wait any more)* Okay. Horlicks for you then!
Mrs Tan exits.

ANGIE *(whispering)* Hey, Pa...Felicia found a stray kitten, but her parents won't let her keep it. Can I adopt it? If we don't, it will starve to death...very poor thing, you know...

CONNIE Yes, Pa...it's sooo cute. I saw it too!

MR TAN Your ma is allergic to pets.

ANGIE No, she's not...she doesn't get rashes or anything what...

MR TAN I mean she's allergic to the work she has to do when you girls lose interest in the pets, and then she has to do all the work!

ANGIE But we do feed the fish...when we remember to

do it...

MR TAN If we left it up to you two to take care of the aquarium, we'd have a tankful of dried-up ikan bilis⁵ by now!
Angie opens her mouth to speak, but Mr Tan pre-emptively empties her smart aleck comment.

I know...I know...guppies and ikan bilis are two different species. But all the same, you two have shown us that you are not responsible enough for a bigger pet. Topic closed.
The girls make guilty faces. They know that it's true. Angie, never one for defeat, decides to change the subject.

ANGIE Oh...look, Pa...look!
The girls are immediately distracted by an advertisement on TV.

CONNIE So cool...

MR TAN It's just a computer.

ANGIE It's the latest one! It's got the Core 2 Duo processor... and a four-gigabyte RAM...

MR TAN What's all this Duo Quad nonsense? We already have a computer!

ANGIE That old thing...it's a dinosaur, Pa.

MR TAN We only bought it three years ago!

CONNIE That's very old for a computer!

ANGIE Computers are like dogs. One year in its life is equal to seven normal years.

MR TAN It's a machine, not a dog. Your grandmother had a Singer sewing machine which she used for 40 years!

ANGIE *(exchanging incredulous looks with Connie)* Forty

years! You mean you expect us to use the same old computer for 40 years?

MR TAN Why not? If it still works...

ANGIE & CONNIE (*exasperated*) But, Pa...

MR TAN Hey, our PC was the best model in the shop. The salesman said so!

ANGIE Best means that it's the fastest...the most powerful. It's not any of these now...

MR TAN The best model means it should last a long, long time. Now, if my mother paid 80 dollars for her sewing machine and that lasted 40 years, and I paid 3,000 dollars for the PC, then the bloody computer should last 1,500 years!

ANGIE (*exasperated*) Even if it lasts that long, it has only 40 gigabytes of memory. How are we supposed to do anything with that?

CONNIE Ya, that's not enough memory for the new programs now!

MR TAN Then use the old programs. There's nothing wrong with old programs, if they still work. You don't have to buy a new version every time it comes out, you know?

ANGIE But surfing the Net is soooo slow with this old thing! I can't download anything with the memory we have now.

CONNIE (*brightly pointing to the TV screen*) The new ones they're advertising have 600 gigabytes!

MR TAN (*firmly*) Nope. You're both schoolgirls. Only need word processing and Powerpoint. You don't need 600 gig...giggle-bites!

ANGIE Huh? What did you say, Pa?

MR TAN (*repeating emphatically*) I said you don't need 600 giggle-bites.

CONNIE Gig-gle bites?

The two girls burst out laughing.

MR TAN What? What is so funny? You can say giggle-bytes, I cannot say, is it? Boh tua, boh soey⁶...so rude to your father!

The girls laugh even more. Mrs Tan comes in with some mugs on a tray.

MRS TAN What's the big joke?

MR TAN Ask your rude daughters...

MRS TAN (*to Mr Tan*) Ya, when they are well-behaved and win prizes in school, they become your daughters. Otherwise, they are mine...

CONNIE Pa called the computer memory GIG-GLE-bites...

MRS TAN (*to Mr Tan*) It's GIG-A-bytes lah. My bank's new computers all come with gigabyte memory...A gigabyte is 1,000 megabytes.

MR TAN (*grumpily*) Giggle-bites or GIGA-bytes, I'm not buying a new computer just because of some flashy new advertisement on TV!

ANGIE (*turning to Mrs Tan for support*) Ma...Pa wants us to use our old computer for 40 years before he will buy a new one...

MRS TAN (*amused*) Does he? (*teasingly*) My parents always told me to marry a thrifty man...

MR TAN (*triumphantly*) There...see? At least someone appreciates my good, solid values!

CONNIE (*to Angie*) It's no use. They are in the same gang...

6 [Hokkien] Literally "no big, no small". Used to admonish someone for not knowing his place.

ANGIE (*not giving up*) A faster computer means I can do my homework faster.

MRS TAN (*wryly*) You only write one or two assignments a week on the computer. I think, if you spent less time on the phone chatting, you would actually finish your essays a whole lot faster. Don't you think so?

CONNIE I told you...they are in the same gang.

ANGIE (*under her breath*) Ya...the dinosaur gang.

MRS TAN Ei! Your mother might be old, but she is not deaf, okay. Don't forget, I haven't signed your donation card for your school's conservation drive yet ah... Dinosaurs are known to be VERY stingy!

ANGIE Oops. (*with fake sweetness*) Sorry, Mummy d-e-a-r!

MRS TAN (*with mock irritation*) Pretend only...hmpf!
Angie sticks out her tongue. Mr Tan turns off the TV.

MR TAN Nothing but ads. Everything buy, buy, buy...Oh, wait, before I forget, (*to Mrs Tan*) did you remember to book the restaurant for tomorrow night's...

MRS TAN Yes. You've been celebrating your birthday there for so many years, they probably reserved a table for us even before I called.

CONNIE Pa...why don't we try somewhere else for a change? Always the same place!

MR TAN Why? The food there is no good?

CONNIE No, it's quite yummy...

MR TAN Good food and not expensive. So why change?

ANGIE But if we don't try elsewhere, we won't know if there are better places for the same price, right?

MR TAN (*with mock patience*) But it's my birthday. So I get to choose where I want to eat. And I say we eat at the

same old place. Is that okay with you two ladies?
The two girls look at each other with an expression that says that they give up because they know their father too well.

MR TAN Anyway, although we may be eating at the same old place tomorrow night...there will be a surprise dish for dinner.

CONNIE A surprise dish!

ANGIE What is it? Is it scorpions? I heard that scorpions can be fried and eaten crispy...and they are high in protein too...is it scorpion?

CONNIE I'll bet it's earthworms! They can make them into something like spaghetti...I saw that on TV.
Mr Tan shakes his head laughingly.

MR TAN I'm trying to surprise you, not make us vomit lah...

ANGIE Tell us!

MR TAN If I tell you, it won't be a surprise any more!

ANGIE (*to Mrs Tan*) You know what it is...tell us, Ma!

MRS TAN (*laughingly dragging out the suspense*) It's...um...you know what? Patience is a great virtue to have. You'll just have to learn to wait!

ANGIE & CONNIE Haiyaaaa...

SCENE 2 *A shorter version of the play can begin at this point.
The interior of a bustling Chinese restaurant.
The Tan family is midway through Mr Tan's birthday
dinner.*

MRS TAN Wah...that hot plate liver was really good ah?

MR TAN Ya. Shiok,⁷ man.

ANGIE Liver is very high in cholesterol, Pa. If you eat too much, you'll die of a heart attack or high blood pressure or other related diseases, you know.

MR TAN Cheh!⁸ It's my birthday. Don't say these suay⁹ things at the dinner table, can or not? You sound like a Ministry of Health advertisement. Anyway, you ate as much liver as the rest of us. So don't talk like you are so healthy or something.

Connie giggles.

ANGIE Ma said not to waste food, so I ate it. Next time let's just order fish, chicken and vegetables. My teacher said that white meat is...

MR TAN *(mildly irritated)* White meat, white meat...Next time we leave you at home to eat white porridge. Can't eat a meal without spoiling the fun, is it?

Angie turns away, hurt. She only meant to be helpful.

MRS TAN Aiya, don't start again lah, can or not, you two?

CONNIE I liked the liver, Pa. It was better than even Grandma's recipe!

MRS TAN And you don't pour oil on the fire!

CONNIE But all I said was...

MR TAN *(to Mrs Tan)* Ah...why are you scolding the obedient

one and protecting the argumentative one?

MRS TAN *(calmly)* I am not protecting anyone. I just don't want any of you to continue this because I just know how it will end again. You will be shouting, she will be crying and I will end up feeling bad for both of you. So I want it to stop now. Angie, enough of your cholesterol lesson. Next time, you don't want to eat, just don't eat.

ANGIE *(craftily)* I'm just trying to help you both live longer...

MRS TAN *(strictly)* Enough!

MR TAN *(grumpily)* Okay, okay...you all finish up. Don't waste good food. It's not cheap, you know. Here. You like fish, you have the best part. You eat one eyeball, I'll eat the other.

Mr Tan digs up an eyeball from the steamed fish.

He dumps the eyeball on Angie's plate as a peace offering.

ANGIE *(under her breath)* Yucks! *(to Mrs Tan)* Uh...Mummy can have it. Here, Ma...

MRS TAN No, you eat it, Angie. Daddy is trying to be nice by giving you his favourite part of the fish. You should eat it.

ANGIE But you like it better than me, so...

MR TAN *(blowing up)* Aiya, so difficult! I'll eat it lah!

He retrieves the eyeball from Angie's plate. The waitress comes to clear away an empty dish. Mr Tan decides to take out his irritation on her.

Oi...excuse me. We have one more dish not yet come. You want to serve it before we go home or you want us to come back for breakfast?

7 [Originally Malay] Denoting extreme pleasure or signifying the highest quality

8 [Singlish] Exclamation of disbelief or disapproval

9 [Hokkien] Catastrophic, calamitous

WAITRESS Lai liao lah, lai liao lah.¹⁰

MR TAN *(muttering to himself)* Lai liao, lai liao...Christmas also lai liao.

WAITRESS *(shouting in Hokkien to offstage as she goes off)* Oi! Charp jee hor eh hay, hoe beh?¹¹

MRS TAN Wah, so loud.
Waitress exits, then comes bustling in with a trolley on which are ingredients for drunken prawns and a soup pot on a portable stove.

WAITRESS Ah...neh! Hor liao. Hor liao.¹²

MR TAN *(visibly happy)* All right! The surprise dish...drunken prawns!

ANGIE Drunken prawns?

CONNIE How can the prawns get drunk? Do they force them to drink beer?

MR TAN You girls have never tried it before, right? They're the sweetest prawns you'll ever eat. You pour wine on the prawns and then they are boiled in soup stock—and the result is so shiok, it's almost as good as winning a mahjong game.
Angie is quite excited. She goes over to the trolley to look at the drunken prawns. Gingerly she lifts one corner of the lid, which covers the basin of prawns. She drops the lid in horror.

ANGIE Aiye! They moved! I saw them moving.

CONNIE Where...where...let me see.

MR TAN Of course lah. That's why they're so expensive!

ANGIE But...they're...alive!

MR TAN How else will we know that they're fresh?

ANGIE What are you going to do with them?

10 [Hokkien] It's coming, it's coming.

11 [Hokkien] Oi! Are the prawns for Number 12 ready?

12 [Hokkien] Ah...there, it's ready. It's ready.

MRS TAN *(sensing another scene coming on, very casually)*
Nothing lah. They just throw them around in some Chinese wine and boil them immediately. It's very quick.

ANGIE But the alcohol will burn them.

MR TAN Haiya, what nonsense. Alcohol is liquid—how to burn them? Anyway, it's very quick. They get very excited when they are drunk, and jump around a bit. That makes them more tasty!

ANGIE Of course lah. If I throw you in acid, you will also jump around what.

MR TAN You don't be rude with me, all right! You talk to your father like this, you are asking for a slap in public!

ANGIE They are not excited, you know...*(starts crying)* they jump because it's painful. They are suffering, you know!

MRS TAN Okay lah...okay lah, you two. Everyone in the restaurant is watching. Will you two stop making so much noise. Afterwards people think you are acting for MediaCorp or something. So much drama. It's only a bowl of prawns!

MR TAN You just tell her to shut up if she doesn't want to get it from me.

WAITRESS *(to Mrs Tan)* Aiya...lee eih gina beh hiao jiaq hay ah?¹³

MRS TAN Mmm see beh hiao jiaq. Ee kak gueh nerng sim. Mmm kum kwah ee eih hare see diao.¹⁴

WAITRESS *(to Angie)* Aiya, siao lian eih. Beh hiao kin lah. Jik eih kia dia lah. Meh meh ju oo tang jiaq liao.¹⁵

13 [Hokkien] Aiya...your daughter won't eat the prawns, is it?

14 [Hokkien] It's not that she won't eat. She's just too soft-hearted to see the prawns die.

15 [Hokkien] Aiya, little girl. Never mind lah. It is only a little while, soon you can eat them already.

Angie sullenly keeps quiet and refuses to answer.

MR TAN Mai chai ee! Nang sa gai nang jiaik ju hor!¹⁶ If she wants to be stubborn, she can watch us eat. Next time you don't come out to eat with us.

ANGIE I also don't want to eat with you, I—

MR TAN I told you to shut up!

ANGIE I'll stay at home and eat vegetables. Ma, from today onwards, you just cook vegetables only for me, okay!

MR TAN And who pays for your food, I ask you? You talk so big, who pays for your food?

MRS TAN Both of you...why are you quarrelling over prawns? Why do we always end up like this?

ANGIE *(to Mr Tan)* Don't worry. When I go out and work, I'll pay you back for all the food I've eaten.

MR TAN *(slams the table and stands up)* You dare answer me like that!

WAITRESS Hoe lah, hoe lah...mai ah nee jiang lai jiang kee lah. Aiya, towkay ah, lee jay sia lai. Gua thong ee eh hare korh ning nang jiaik lah.¹⁷

Mr Tan sits down. Angie turns away from him.

Ceremoniously, the waitress opens the lid and pours the wine into the basin of prawns. She slams the lid shut immediately as if the prawns are about to jump out. Then she opens the lid and looks at the prawns in dismay. She knocks at the side of the container, as if doing so will revive them.

CONNIE Pa...I thought you said the prawns would jump around? They're not jumping.

MRS TAN They must have died because the two of you spent so

16 [Hokkien] Don't care about her! The three of us will eat!

17 [Hokkien] All right lah, all right lah...don't shout this way and that way to each other. Aiya, towkay ah, you sit down and I'll do the prawns for you all to eat lah.

much time quarrelling.

The waitress picks up a dead prawn, as if trying to shake it to life. She closes the lid, shakes them around and tries to get them to move. She is very perturbed. Mr Tan's face grows dark and he is very angry.

ANGIE *(to Mr Tan, triumphantly)* Good. I'm glad they're already dead. You can't torture them now because they're already dead!

MR TAN You shaddap!¹⁸ Because of your nonsense, we've paid for very expensive dead prawns which should have been alive. If we wanted dead prawns, we could have saved a lot of money, you know! You think money is so easy to earn, is it?

ANGIE I never asked to eat live prawns. I never asked you to spend so much money on my food!

MR TAN Well, you're lucky you've got parents who want to spoil you. You think I got all these things when I was young? I only got to eat prawns on Chinese New Year, you know. *(sarcastically)* I don't know what's the big problem with you. You think the prawns got souls, is it?

ANGIE Don't talk about souls, okay...if you can stand to see God's creatures suffer like that, I don't want to talk about your soul, okay!

MR TAN *(getting up threateningly and dragging Angie by one arm)* Don't you dare use religion against me! I've—had—enough—from—you!

ANGIE Owww...

WAITRESS *(bobbing up and down with basin of prawns in hand,*

18 [Singlish] Shut up

not knowing what to do) Aiyoh! Aiyoh!

MRS TAN Okay...okay...enough! No...don't...

ANGIE You can hit me but I won't eat your bloody prawns, okay!

MR TAN You...

Mr Tan lifts his hand, as if to strike Angie.

ANGIE *(simultaneously)* Ahhh!

CONNIE Pa, no!

MRS TAN Stop it!

WAITRESS Aiyoh!

Mr Tan accidentally hits the bowl that the waitress is carrying. The waitress drops the basin of prawns with a clatter. All the prawns spill onto the floor. Mr Tan is jolted from his anger and lets go of Angie. For the first time he notices the other diners (the audience) looking at him. Angie rubs her wrist and sobs, looking at the waitress apologetically picking up the prawns. Waitress exits.

MR TAN I...you people...I'm going out to smoke. You all eat! I don't want to see a single prawn left over when I get back.

Mr Tan exits to the front of the stage. He takes out a cigarette but forgets to light it. He is deep in thought.

CONNIE Ange...go and say sorry. Go, Ange...

ANGIE *(tearfully to Mrs Tan)* Why is he like that? He's so unreasonable, Ma. Why does he always have to shout at me?

MRS TAN Why do you have to answer back? Would it kill you not to answer back for once?

Beat.

Why do you always put me in this position?

ANGIE You go, Ma. You are good at this.

MRS TAN You are grown up enough to speak up for prawns. You go and speak for yourself now.

ANGIE *(trying to rally sibling support)* Con...you come with me?

Connie is torn between conflicting loyalties.

MRS TAN The problem is between the two of you. Connie can't help.

Beat.

Go...

Angie goes out to speak to Mr Tan. When she sees him, Angie stops at a distance, and then proceeds cautiously.

ANGIE Pa.

Pause.

Pa...come back in...please.

MR TAN I haven't finished my cigarette.

ANGIE Cigarettes aren't g—

Angie stops herself from being so preachy. Mr Tan puts the cigarette back in the box. It is unlit anyway.

I...I'm sorry, Pa.

There is no response from Mr Tan.

I said I'm sorry, Pa.

Still no response from Mr Tan.

Look, what do you want me to say? I'll say whatever you want.

MR TAN You are growing up so quickly. Too fast.

ANGIE Ya, Pa.

MR TAN And your pa is becoming very old-fashioned and awful...right? Like your grandpa was awful to me.

ANGIE No, Pa...

MR TAN Look, Angie. Pa is not going to stop eating what he likes just because you feel sorry for prawns, okay?

ANGIE But, Pa...

MR TAN No, you listen. Things are beginning to change too fast for your ma and I. All these constant changes in your school syllabuses, worrying about your schools, your results...then we have our own grown-up worries too...GST increases, Electronic Road Pricing, plus any other new official schemes or policies, world financial crises, terrorists, wars, disasters—and then now you and your sister with all that conservation nonsense...

ANGIE It's not nonsense!

MR TAN Okay, wrong word. All that conservation stuff then... it's all too fast...and too much! You know what I mean?

ANGIE But you've got to keep up, Pa!

MR TAN You think I don't want to?

Beat.

I can't, Angie. Pa and Ma are slowing down. You're growing up, so you've got to understand us a bit more. Be a bit more patient.

ANGIE But I don't want to eat drunken prawns.

MR TAN Okay, but don't force us not to eat them. It's not fair. And that goes for a bit of cholesterol here and a bit of sugar and salt there. You have your whole life ahead of you. Pa and Ma have less than half of

theirs left.

ANGIE Pa...don't talk about these suay things, can or not.

MR TAN *(suppressing a smile)* You sound almost like me.

ANGIE No, I do not!

MR TAN *(forcing himself to look serious)* Of course you don't.

Pause.

(with a small, reconciliatory smile) Come, let's go in.

Mr Tan and Angie start walking back to the table and a much-relieved Mrs Tan and Connie.

ANGIE Let's order orh nee¹⁹. It's got lots of sugar and lard and everything bad. Just for tonight, I'll make a sacrifice and eat it. Just for your sake, Pa!

MR TAN *(sitting down)* Ya, sure...for my sake. It's your favourite dessert anyway!

ANGIE No, it's not! It's so unhealthy. You should see what it does to your arteries and...

MR TAN Aiya...just eat lah, just eat lah! Tomorrow we'll all go and exercise...

Lights fade to black.

On *Drunken Prawns*

Winner of the First Prize in the 1993 Hewlett Packard/ACTION Theatre
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ISBN-13: 978-981-07-5691-8



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