

ROBERT YEO THE SINGAPORE TRILOGY

ARE YOU THERE, SINGAPORE? • ONE YEAR BACK HOME • CHANGI



INTRODUCTION BY NAH DOMINIC AND ADEEB FAZAH

ROBERT YEO has published poetry and a novel, staged plays, written essays on cultural policy and theatre, compiled anthologies on Singaporean literature and co-written books on the teaching of literature in secondary schools. In 1978, he attended the University of Iowa's International Writing Program and was a Fulbright Scholar in 1995. For more than a decade, starting in 1977, he was Chairman of the Drama Advisory Committee, which helped to develop theatre in Singapore, especially English-language theatre, and for this work he was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1991. His collection of poems *Leaving Home, Mother* was published in 1999 and his three connected plays were first published in 2001 as *The Singapore Trilogy*. In October 2009, his second libretto titled *Kannagi*, a short chamber piece based on an Indian epic poem, with John Sharpley as composer, was staged in Singapore's Sri Mariamman Temple. His first libretto, a full-length work titled *Fences*, also with John Sharpley as composer, was staged in August 2012. Yeo was awarded the S.E.A. Write Award in 2011.

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ROBERT YEO

THE SINGAPORE TRILOGY

Introduction by Nah Dominic and Adeeb Fazah



EPIGRAM

For Kirpal Singh
who has done more than anyone to advance my literary career

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“A Playwright’s Reality”, *The Straits Times*, 20 Nov 1980

“Not great, but...”, *The Straits Times*, 21 Nov 1980

“Local idiom brings play to life”, *New Nation*, 21 Nov 1980

“It would be better if script was allowed to speak for itself”, *The Straits Times*, 27 Nov 1997

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THE SINGAPORE TRILOGY: A REAPPRAISAL

Nah Dominic and Adeeb Fazah

Throughout his artistic career spanning nearly six decades, Robert Yeo has been a tireless advocate of local drama. Having served as chairperson of the then-Ministry of Culture's Drama Advisory Committee (1977–1991), receiving a Public Service Medal for “the promotion of drama” and shortly thereafter helming the Drama Review Committee (1992–1994), Yeo's long-standing artistic activism has been crucial in “help[ing] to identify and support emerging dramatists, which led to the development of a vibrant Singaporean theatre”.¹ Yet, in the forty-seven years since *Are You There, Singapore?* was first performed, the three plays from Yeo's seminal *Singapore Trilogy* have not only rarely enjoyed live restagings, but also faced difficulties in matters of publication and curriculum, even inciting anxious expressions of self-censorship and cautionary reflections of being associated with the play by its performers. This could partly be attributed to equal parts fear and wonder, which Catherine Diamond observed: “Because they ostensibly challenged the one-party rule, actors were initially wary of performing the roles, and audiences were impressed with their audacity.”²

Taken together, the three plays occupy a seminal place in Singapore's English-language theatre history for their path-clearing role in staging the predominantly taboo subject of Singaporean politics. In this reappraisal, we survey the reception history of the *Trilogy*, revealing an ambivalent tally of responses across previews and reviews of staged productions, as well as critical and media discussions of the published texts and past stagings. On one hand, the majority of acclaim for the *Trilogy* rests upon its candid and forthright portrayal of Singaporean

politics on stage, which encouraged artists to be more forthcoming in openly representing socio-political affairs. On the other hand, the majority of criticism focuses on the plays' problematic dramaturgy and composition, which presents inconsistencies and imbalances for readers and audiences when measured against expectations of social realist theatre. Given that critical opinion of the plays tends towards affirming their historical significance as pioneering political plays in Singaporean English-language theatre, while expressing doubt of their artistic merit, are the plays then worth restaging? Or is its relevance consigned to just the playtext in written form? We vouch for the *Trilogy's* continued relevance with a brief discussion of our key dramaturgical and directorial interventions in The Second Breakfast Company's March 2021 restaging of the *Trilogy*, where, in consultation with Yeo himself, the final script itself culminated in an unprecedented 3-in-1 adaptation of the plays—drawing from the original texts present in this volume.

Encounters with Censorship and Self-Censorship

The Singapore Trilogy is no stranger to facing issues of censorship and self-censorship. Yeo's track record with the censors for his playscripts has varied: perhaps the earliest record of appraising Yeo's openly political discussions on stage can be found in Tan Wang Joo's 1974 preview of *Are You There, Singapore?*, where she quipped that “the political references left the government censor's desk in the form they arrived—as did the play in whole”. Subsequently, Yeo's eighteen-month negotiation, in 1979 and 1980, with the Ministry of Culture to obtain a licence for *One Year Back Home's* staging has been well-documented—most extensively in Ban Kah Choon's interview with Yeo in the *Trilogy's* 2001 publication by Landmark Books, where

major excerpts of the correspondence are laid bare. However, the interrogation scenes of *Changi*—loosely based on Yeo’s old friend and ex-political detainee Michael Fernandez’s nine years of detention without trial from 1964 to 1973—would also pass through the censors without any request for revision.

The *Trilogy*’s provocative inclusion in the A-Level Theatre Studies and Drama curriculum as a set text in 2003 at Victoria Junior College was short-lived, only lasting for two years, the length of one junior college cycle. According to Yeo, Suchen Christine Lim shared that one of her last acts as curriculum officer in the Ministry of Education was to recommend *The Singapore Trilogy* as an A-Level text. While the text was studied, Yeo recalls giving a lecture on *The Singapore Trilogy* on 26 August 2003 to VJC students. What is certain is that Yeo has clearly “learned over the years the delicate balance an artist has to maintain in the political construct, [making] no apologies for having to submit selectively and in moderation to the power of authority”, as noted at the Malaysian book launch of *The Singapore Trilogy* in 2001 by Rosihan Zain.³ Indeed, K. K. Seet and Chitra Sankaran commend how “his forthright approach and refusal to bow down to decorum or cower before bureaucracy knocks the system in an unprecedented manner and sets a role model for others to emulate”.⁴

Yet Yeo’s difficulties in publishing his plays from the *Trilogy*, due to their explicit treatment of Singaporean politics, have not always come from Singaporean authorities; there has also been considerable reluctance from local publishers themselves (apart from Landmark Books and now Epigram Books). It took ten years for *One Year Back Home* to find itself in print—just in time for its first local restaging by TheatreWorks—courtesy of Solidarity Foundation, a publisher based in Manila. In 1992, Harry Aveling openly lamented in the Malaysian

broadsheet *New Straits Times* how “no Singapore publisher, however, has been willing to publish Singapore-born Robert Yeo’s latest play *One Year Back Home*”, strongly suggesting that this could be attributed to “Yeo’s play [dealing] openly with politics and [referring] to real people and real issues”.⁵ Thus, this republication of *The Singapore Trilogy* marks a significant milestone, which affirms the continued relevance of the *Trilogy* nearly five decades on.

Key Acclaim: Trailblazing, Non-partisan Treatment of Singapore Politics

First, the *Trilogy* is perhaps most lauded for its pioneering and sustained efforts to openly stage the deliberation and contestation of political ideologies between the dominant People’s Action Party and opposition perspectives. It is precisely for its illuminating portrayal of Singaporean politics that many critics and reviewers have unanimously affirmed the *Trilogy*’s historical place in the canon of Singapore English-language theatre as seminal plays of political theatre. In a 2002 review of Landmark Books’s publication, William Peterson posited that the first two plays “broke new ground in Singapore theatre” as they “were the first to deal openly and honestly with the country’s political environment under Lee Kuan Yew and the People’s Action Party (PAP)”.⁶ During her time as arts correspondent at *The Straits Times*, critic Corrie Tan endorsed *Are You There, Singapore?* as a classic local play, not only because “it was one of the earliest local political plays written in English”, but also because “the play marked one of the very few Singapore voices in the 1970s, after an initial burst of effort in the 1960s to create some sort of national theatre had simmered down to a lukewarm slow burn”.⁷ This is well corroborated by Suchen Christine Lim’s recent recount as an audience member

in that first 1974 production, where she reflected that “without our being conscious of it at the time, *Are You There, Singapore?* showed the audience the vast potential and importance of writing about our island and our experiences”, adding that “Robert Yeo’s plays gently pushed the boundaries at a time when Singapore was ruled by an iron hand during the seventies and eighties”.⁸ In their introduction to the Landmark Books publication, academics K. K. Seet and Chitra Sankaran attest that “[at] least in the Singapore English theatre, Yeo’s political dramas of the 1970s and early 1980s can be regarded as trailblazers”, noting that “Yeo also deserves commemoration and commendation for writing Singapore’s first overtly political plays and thereby clearing a path for other writers to follow”, such as Kuo Pao Kun’s English allegorical plays and Tan Tarn How’s satirical approaches to challenging the political status quo.⁹ Here, Peterson applauds Yeo’s bold staging of politically contentious practices—especially in *Changi*—where “by adding the television confession as a condition for his [Fernandez’s] release, Yeo has again inserted an actual practice used to rehabilitate dissidents...again chart[ing] new territory, taking on a subject that lies squarely outside the bounds of virtually all public debate”.¹⁰

Critic Daniel Teo has observed the uncanny and unusual circumstances that surround the production and reception of the second play, how Yeo “appears as a sort of maverick for portraying local politics so vividly in *One Year Back Home*, especially when the sequel was written just a few years after eminent dramatist Kuo Pao Kun was arrested for alleged Communist sentiments in his works”.¹¹ Given Kuo’s detention without trial, it is significant that Yeo’s plays have subsequently been acknowledged by politicians from the incumbent party for its explicit treatment of politics, even in 1980. When probed

about alternative approaches to address the gap of political awareness among younger voters by *The Sunday Times* midway through the 1980 general election campaign, then Secretary-General of NTUC and Minister in the Prime Minister’s Office, Mr Lim Chee Onn, opined that “there had to be books, written from a non-partisan standpoint, and, for the more discerning and sophisticated, perhaps plays...such as those by Robert Yeo, could fulfil a function”.¹² The timing of Mr Lim’s approval of Yeo cannot be underestimated: the 1980 elections were called barely one month after *One Year Back Home* was finally granted a license, following an eighteen-month impasse with the Ministry of Culture, and performed to sold-out audiences.

It is precisely this predominantly non-partisan treatment of political ideologies in the plays that has also drawn critical acclaim. Apart from attributing Yeo’s trailblazing influence to inspiring her own writing, as well as that of other politically-concerned artists, Ovidia Yu’s recollection as an audience member watching *One Year Back Home* in November 1980 noted that what “[Yeo] presented on stage was no anarchistic call to revolution, but a respectful, rational and intelligent take on how this society is not perfect because the people in it are human and therefore not perfect”.¹³ Thus, rather than a fiery rebel or political sycophant, Yeo is instead positioned closer to a loving critic of Singapore, as Mohammad Quayum asserts:

In a society where free speech and civil liberty are deemed contrary to Asian values [...], Yeo’s forthright criticism of the status quo and especially of the PAP (People’s Action Party—Singapore’s ruling party since 1959) regime is no doubt a bold act and sets a new milestone in Singapore theatre. However, Yeo’s criticism is constructive and backed by a vision, and it

emerges from his unqualified love for his nation. The focus of these plays is very much the present state of Singapore and its future possibilities as a nation.¹⁴

In fact, Yeo's conviction to advocate for the theatre's capacity to facilitate socio-political reflections can clearly be evinced in his own confident yet tactful provocations during John de Souza's 1980 preview for *One Year Back Home*:

I'm only using what I consider to be a legitimate channel in order to make certain points. And I think I have the artistic license to create characters without having to identify myself with any one of them.

The question is: is our society ready for this kind of close scrutiny through a play? Well, I'd like to think that Singapore is ready, but how can I find out until I actually try? How can you gauge material as sensitive until you try it?¹⁵

In particular, the *Trilogy* has been lauded for its simultaneous invoking and destabilising of binaries in political ideologies as fronted by Chye and Fernandez, one that both Mohammad Quayum and George Watt appreciate as not only disruptive of entrenched political stances, but also self-reflexive in its enactment of political differences that invites audiences to critically consider their own stance:

Fernandez's position with regard to the PAP policies is equally hybrid and ambiguous. [...] This intermixing, multilateral, dialogic approach of Yeo's protagonist baffles and unsettles

both sides of the binary that are pitched on rigid, fixed and unilateral positions.¹⁶

Yeo achieves this both through the absence of anything resembling authorial commentary and through his balanced presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of both Fernandez and Chye. We see each being sincere in his own way and empty headed and formulaic in turn, but we have no idea which individual Yeo supports more than the other.¹⁷

Even so, this endorsement of Yeo's equivocation is not shared by all. Lamenting a missed opportunity for nuanced progressions of political debate, Seet contests that Fernandez and Chye "make an unconvincing and polemically limited pair of candidates because they are too calculatedly polarised in their ideology...preventing sound political debate to merge in their crossfire".¹⁸ Previously, Seet and Sankaran also suggested that the implication of characters' individual identity and national identity may not be entirely provocative as claimed, for "despite the play's several inflammatory passages that contest the status quo of the play, it ultimately engenders an unproblematic closure that affirms the status quo".¹⁹ This criticism of Yeo condoning the status quo finds precedence in Fang Ke Hong's 1981 commentary of *One Year Back Home*, where she expresses her critical disappointment that "after the first wave of excitement at our very own 'political' play subsided, closer examination revealed that nothing controversial or politically new was really said".²⁰ Here, she remarks that Yeo has merely "[picked] up the existing arguments of opposition parties and pitched them against the seemingly impeccable logic and reason of the ruling party", and that ultimately, the play's ending, with

Gerald remaining in Singapore to work for the PAP, “views the present system as the best possible under existing circumstances”.²¹

Key Criticism: Imbalances and Inconsistencies in Dramaturgical Composition

However, most critical acclaim only extends as far as Yeo’s treatment of local politics and often stops short of commending the plays’ artistic merit—with *Changi* often the only exception and recognised as the best of the three plays. While Ronald D. Klein may endorse Yeo’s oeuvre in how it “embodies both the personal and political in a search for and articulation of national identity”²², critics have pointed out notable inconsistencies and imbalances of this duality within and across the plays. Although Yeo has sought to incorporate the personal with the political, it is unmistakable that the most prominent and recurring critique of the *Trilogy* concerns the dramaturgical composition and consequently its artistic merit. William Peterson’s reservations offer an insight for this seeming unease:

While there is much to be learned about Singapore’s post-independence political and social history merely by reading these plays, sometimes the political “debates” contained within the first two plays seem somewhat unnatural and forced for a drama that unfolds as strict realism.²³

Indeed, when measured against reader and audience expectations for encountering social realist theatre, the plays’ uneasy combination of elements from social realism and the “discussion play”, or the play of ideas, does result in noticeable inconsistencies. Distinguishing between the “problem play” and the “discussion play”, Chris Baldick

describes the former dramatic convention as one that “would bring to life some contemporary controversy of public importance—women’s rights, unemployment, penal reform, class privilege—in a vivid but responsibly accurate presentation”.²⁴ This is ostensibly where the living and common room sequences of the first two plays set expectations of a “vivid but responsibly accurate presentation”. Baldick then characterises how the “discussion play” in modern theatre was most notably developed by George Bernard Shaw, who “was not for realistic representation of social problems, but for the provocative and paradoxical discussion of ideas, interspersed with implausible comic interruptions and unmaskings”.²⁵ This recalls Le Blond’s and Yeo’s bemusement that *One Year Back Home*’s climax was met with laughter in its 1980 staging, where reviewer Wong Hsien Cheen noted that “the final scene when the Internal Security men came to arrest Fernandez was not greeted by the hushed unease of violated human liberties but unbridled laughter!”²⁶ This led Wong to “suspect that, quite inadvertently, Robert Yeo has written a successful political comedy”²⁷ where the return home from London, the search for a stable partner for Hua, the living room debates and the by-election fallout are ultimately let down by an unrealistic failed escape through secret tunnels, thus unwittingly amounting to “a negligible plot [that] serves as an excuse for a medley of extravagant debates, quarrels, and confessions that turn received opinions on their heads”.²⁸

Most prominently, critics and reviewers argue that in the *Trilogy*, the personal is merely the vehicle for the political. On one hand, Diamond and Leong identify a dialectical progression over the three plays, with the first play emphasising the personal, the second play foregrounding the political, and *Changi* being the synthesising thread that integrates both forces.²⁹ On the other hand, critics like Watt

rue how “Yeo repeatedly uses incompatible discourses which express themselves through the characters—it is almost as if the discourses use individuals rather than the other way around”.³⁰ Reviewer Goh Kian Chee also took issue with Gerald Tan’s decision to remain in Singapore with Hua “because their personal lives appear so irrelevant next to the political tangles and larger issues around Chye and Fernandez”.³¹ These reviews find resonance in Latrell’s observation that “both Reg and Chye are essentially mouthpieces for opposing points of view”.³² This concern with polarisation is reflected in Watt’s case that “throughout the *Trilogy* individuals representing centre and margin usually reduce and simplify the self and render the other as misled or dangerous”.³³ Conversely, this charge of polarisation is less prominent for the first play, where instead George Watt ponders the limitations and affordances of its scattered and disperse subject matter:

Are You There, Singapore? is too thematically diverse to be powerful theatre. The marginal experiences it tries to describe—geographic, cultural, sexual, social and political—are too fleetingly dealt with. The play also contains too many different personal perspectives, to the point that the audience might find it difficult to sense a dramatic centre. Of course, this could be seen to be the concern of the play, to capture the irregular waves of alternative thinking and behaviours which assaulted the eager expatriate post-adolescent in mid-60s London. There are so many forces coming to play that the characters seem only able to respond in a formulaic manner once a position is established and discourse adopted.³⁴

Amidst these criticisms, it is important to note that Yeo is not oblivious to these critical shortcomings. As early as Tan Wang Joo’s

1974 preview of *Are You There, Singapore?*, Yeo confirms Watt’s observations when he readily admits that apart from the issue of characters lacking development, “there are also issues and themes suggested and not followed through later”.³⁵

A second strand of criticism against Yeo’s writing concerns the inconsistent dramaturgical composition across the three plays. In his book review, Craig Latrell (2002) admits that “in truth, the plays are schematic and not very well written. While Yeo certainly shows progress in plot construction over the course of the trilogy, there are too many instances of clumsy dramaturgy—secret tunnels and lost letters suddenly materialise; passports conveniently fall on the floor; characters come and go for no apparent reason other than to score political points”.³⁶ This undoubtedly circles back to audiences’ and readers’ expectations of social realist theatre, where it is crucial for the playwright’s ability to establish a believability in their plot and character development that does not detract from the suspension of disbelief. After a rather scathing attack on the original works, Matthew Lyon pointed out in the 2021 ArtsEquator podcast reviewing The Second Breakfast Company’s restaging that “the playwright insists that [Chye and Fernandez] are friends but never gives any evidence”.³⁷ Perhaps the only hint of a backstory prior to London lies in Fernandez’s public mention of the two young men sharing dinners at Bugis Street in *Changi*, which does little to illuminate the core and origins of their friendship.

One character that remains ambivalently developed is that of Hua. Watt observes that “Yeo uses the role of Hua to give the middle ground flesh and blood. As a consequence, she inhabits a personal and political limbo” to both Chye’s and Fernandez’s political worlds.³⁸ Although Hua’s struggles against the social stigma of single motherhood

form the basis of key plot and subplot developments in the first two plays, Nazareth maintains that “the treatment of Hua’s involvement with lovers seems cursory”.³⁹ By the end of *Changi*, it becomes clear that the importance of her liminal political positionality affirms that her character’s “passion comes from politics” primarily.⁴⁰ This has the effect of Hua’s character arc running the risk of taking on symbolic resonances over significant concern of her female subjectivity as a single mother in society, where “Hua as a trope of woman-as-nation representing Singapore, is fairly obvious in the plays”, such that “Hua’s private experiences are meant to symbolise those of her nation”.⁴¹

Although Gracia Tay-Chee commended Yeo’s “handling of dialogue, situation, plot content and development” in reviewing *Are You There, Singapore?*, few agree with her admiration of the first play.⁴² While Yeo’s first two plays have been lauded for their staging of distinctly colloquial voices—mostly foregrounded by the supporting characters of Mr and Mrs Ang—criticisms of the dialogue’s impediment to character development persist. In particular, they point towards its tedium and cumbersome nature. Reviewers of *One Year Back Home*, Wong Hsien Cheen and Margaret Chan, both concur that the actors playing Fernandez and Chye (T. Sasitharan and Chia Chor Leong, respectively) worked very hard in performance “not to be swamped by all that debate”⁴³ and to resist the “hotchpotch of sterile views which reduced Fernandez and Chye to caricatures”⁴⁴. In the same 2021 ArtsEquator podcast review as Matthew Lyon, critic Naeem Kapadia asserts that despite its historical relevance, “the fact of the matter is that they are not strong plays, and it’s difficult for an audience member—especially one in 2021—to be invested in characters written in this way, speaking in this very awkward, forced, formal manner”.⁴⁵

Nonetheless, as Latrell has remarked earlier, most critics remain

affirmative in Yeo’s growth as a playwright over the course of the three plays. After noting how *Changi* provides “a more organic, structurally sound fashion, that reflects its own distinct rhythms while providing greater breathing room for his now familiar characters”, Peterson contends that “these three plays demonstrate the maturation of a playwright just as they reflect a distinctively Singaporean voice”.⁴⁶ Ong Sor Fern’s review of *Changi*’s 1997 stage debut affirms that “when compared to his efforts in the first two parts of the trilogy, [*Changi*] is his most three-dimensional and complex script so far”.⁴⁷ In the 2021 ArtsEquator podcast review, critics Nabilah Said, Matthew Lyon and Naeem Kapadia concur that *Changi* is the strongest play of the trilogy.

Even so, one overlooked aspect worthy of acclaim in Yeo’s *Trilogy* lies in his considered treatment of minor(ity) characters’ subjectivities. His choice of identifying Fernandez’s parents as being from Kerala is well-informed by the prominence of left-wing political ideology in the southern Indian state. Citing the character development of Mrs Fernandez (where her vulnerability and insularity are contrasted with her openness towards Chye and Hua at Mr Fernandez’s funeral, in spite of Chye’s implication in Fernandez’s detention) and Mr and Mrs Ang (where their initial conservative worldview towards Hua’s pregnancy out of wedlock gradually turns to acceptance and affection for their granddaughter Lisa), Seet and Sankaran celebrate how “by handling characters from different ethnic backgrounds with authenticity and sensitivity, Yeo not only allows his characters to retain their distinct ethnic identities, but demonstrates how the open sensibility they share enables them to accommodate differences without prejudice” such that “these kinds of subtle touches that gently hint at a dynamic, evolving Singapore society add greater realism to the unfolding events”.⁴⁸

**On Restaging and Adapting *The Singapore Trilogy*:
Considering Relevance and Dramaturgical Interventions**

Live restagings for any play from the *Trilogy* have been few and far between. Most recently, The Stage Club planned to restage *Are You There, Singapore?* in February 2020 as the opening show of their seventy-fifth anniversary, but production was unceremoniously derailed by the beginnings of the Covid-19 pandemic. A successful staging would have produced a significant moment by being the first-ever Singaporean play to be produced in The Stage Club's long history. Prior to this attempt, the only major restaging of *Are You There, Singapore?* was performed by StageIt, the student drama society at Singapore Management University in February 2015, directed by Tarun Satya Kumar. Yeo recounts that in their consultation with him, the organising committee sought to emphasise the personal and downplay the political component. *One Year Back Home* has fared better, having been given dramatic readings off-Broadway in New York City in 1985, and later revived at TheatreWorks' *The Retrospective: A Festival of Singapore Plays (1960-1990)* after its initial sold-out run ten years prior. Most recently, in 2019, students from National University of Singapore's Theatre Studies Theatre Lab devised three original performance responses to the *Trilogy*'s second instalment, as part of Centre 42's *The Vault: Gossip, Symphony & Other Matters*. Among the three performance responses, *What Matters* develops a sequel of sorts by portraying Lisa Ang (daughter of Ang Siew Hua) as a single woman of mixed parentage—now in her 50s—who is rising to prominence in politics.⁴⁹ As for *Changi*, following Elangovan's surrealist debut, which drew mixed reviews for its didactic loading of signs and symbolisms,⁵⁰ the *Trilogy*'s final instalment had its first and only major restaging, which toured Kuala Lumpur and Penang in 2003.

What could account for the dearth of restagings? Despite the plays' historical significance, it appears that the dramaturgical critiques of the *Trilogy* have put off directors from undertaking a revival, consigning the plays either to academic study or, at best, given play readings. Here, despite considered criticism elsewhere, George Watt emerges as perhaps the most fervent defender of Yeo's theatrical style:

Yeo's brand of simple realism is yet to be fully understood by critics or some directors who want to turn it into a post-modern exhibition. [...] At first, Yeo's plots seem so deceptively simple that directors find them uninspiring propositions for staging, but when the interplay of national concerns, personal development and personal rivalry are taken into account, the plays take on level upon level of ramification.⁵¹

As part of The Second Breakfast Company's (2BCo) initiative in reviving the Singapore canon and restaging older Singapore plays for a new generation of theatre audiences, Yeo's *Trilogy* would inevitably cross paths with us for consideration. In fact, the seeds were sown at Haque Centre of Acting & Creativity's inaugural Pioneer Passages series, which similarly aimed to unravel some of the best lesser-known works by prolific local playwrights. In December 2016, they presented dramatised excerpts from Yeo's plays—*The Eye of History*, *Second Chance* and *The Singapore Trilogy*—where 2BCo first met Yeo and initiated early conversations about a fuller restaging. In mid-2018, 2BCo decided to approach the restaging with the unprecedented adaptation of turning the *Trilogy* into a single production, and we were warned by Yeo that it would be “a mountain to climb”.⁵² Indeed, during our initial research and early discussions with Yeo, it became

apparent to us that dramaturgical interventions and directorial decisions would prove crucial in communicating what we felt was the *Trilogy's* relevance to present-day Singaporean audiences, while also accounting for its inconsistencies in dramatic composition.

Having observed Elangovan's surrealistic interpretation of *Changi*—with an emphasis on ritualist elements that combine Chinese opera, a professional snake charmer and the Indian martial arts of Silambam⁵³—we opted to largely retain the realist mode that Yeo envisioned in his written text. Using *Changi* as the narrative present, we anchored Fernandez's political odyssey as the plot's spine and his detention as the referential frame for audiences to encounter the first two plays as “past events” almost like flashbacks, to consider what led to his detention and if it was justified. We cut and created composites of characters to assemble a single two-hour play, redistributing and repurposing lines across characters, while anchoring the plot around Fernandez, Chye and Hua. We anticipated that audiences familiar with the original could be put off by long passages of dialogue; in fact, Naeem Kapadia would later note on the ArtsEquator podcast that our ambition managed to “take a very long set of plays and make it snappy, which I think to a large extent has been successful, because Robert Yeo's plays can be extremely tedious in terms of their dialogue to anyone who's experienced them”.⁵⁴

As a younger generation of artists approaching the *Trilogy*, we obviously did not live through the tumultuous period of early Singaporean politics, when Communist and leftist ideology, nationwide TV confessions and political detention were harsh realities. However, instead of updating the play's historical references, we sought to preserve them, instead focusing on streamlining the story of the personal and political, the public and private, to allow

the text to gather new resonances of truth with today's audiences. In 1990, Kirpal Singh argued the following:

There are many aspects to the play—and this makes it relevant even when some of its more immediate concerns (e.g., the chit-fund scandals, the total absence of an opposition member of Parliament, the long-hair issue) are “dated”. When a play is topical—and part of the paradox always is: To be very successful a play has to be topical, i.e., appeal to the audience's sense of the here-and-now—it guarantees its own short life. But *One Year Back Home* will outlive its datedness, because, I feel, it raises questions that do not, in themselves, become outdated, though their specific applications might.⁵⁵

Initially, we were worried that resisting the temptation to update and modernise contextual events of the plays might backfire, and audiences may dismissively consider them as insignificant or outdated. For instance, we knew that, despite the importance of the two families' circumstances, contemporary audiences and readers would likely not register the gravity of the chit fund scandal's consequences, given that the episode has not managed to feature in Singaporeans' historical consciousness. But we felt that to omit or update these events would be either pandering apologetically to modern sensibilities or anachronistically accounting for the motivations and circumstances of these characters. Ultimately, we trusted that the political resonances would emerge, much like Clarissa Oon's reflections after reading the texts in 2020, where she “found the plays, particularly the first two, flawed but also eerily prescient; there were lines that seemed straight out of the here and now”⁵⁶,

especially in both Chye and Fernandez's political observations.

In addressing the plays' inconsistent dramaturgy, we identified several plot holes and sought to plug them, grappling with several constraints of characterisation from the original text. Here, the imbalance between the personal and political resurfaced; apart from their teenage hangouts at Bugis Street, undergraduate companionship abroad in London and Fernandez's unrequited love for Hua, what else exactly binds Chye and Fernandez's friendship together? To this end, we attempted to reassign and repurpose lines from different characters to convey important contextual information: Hua's reading of *New Directions* in the second play would be brought forward to the initial meeting of Fernandez and Hua in London; Fernandez, instead of Richard, would now play a pivotal role in convincing Hua to keep her baby born out of wedlock; and Chye's signature records with Amnesty International would be dramatised early in London instead of merely announced by Fernandez in *Changi's* final scene. With Yeo's blessings, we removed certain inconsistencies (e.g., the escape tunnel in *One Year Back Home*), included a previously unpublished and unstaged scene from his early drafts of *Changi* (Lisa's birthday party with her grandparents), and even invited Robert to rewrite the ending in response to the outcome of the 2020 general elections (not published here). Elsewhere, we honoured his wishes by casting a Malayalam-speaking actress for Mrs Fernandez, while consulting his observations on how Chye had always been portrayed dominantly by actors, which led us to our decision to moderate our portrayal of the character through our casting and direction. We hoped that by precisely working within the plays' boundaries, we could still unravel a coherent journey for audiences familiar and unfamiliar with the plays.

Undoubtedly, *The Singapore Trilogy* has garnered a mixed

reception over the decades. In the three years that we worked on the *Trilogy*, we encountered many ambivalent responses from peers, colleagues, readers and audience members who often expressed varying degrees of embarrassment over the *Trilogy's* inconsistencies of dramatic composition and cumbersome dialogue, while also offering consolation by affirming the plays' historical significance as forerunners in Singapore English-language political theatre. Certainly, few would agree that the *Trilogy* should be overlooked in constructing the canon of Singapore English-language theatre. Yet we believe that one does not need to adopt a condescending or patronising view of the plays' shortcomings for failing to meet expectations of "good" social realist theatre. We draw inspiration from how Yeo himself has expressed his openness to (re)interpretations by other directors and artists, even if they may differ from his original vision, and our radical 3-in-1 adaptation is proof of the plays' malleability. Thus, we hope that this republication of the *Trilogy* by Epigram Books will invite current and future generations of theatremakers, artists and civic-conscious citizens to replay, restage, edit and extend the debates that this cast of characters began in the world of the late 1960s and early 1970s further into Singapore's future.

7 November 2021

NOTES

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On *The Singapore Trilogy*

“In his art, Yeo always adopts the role of the poet-observer, commenting on and making sense of what may otherwise remain unsaid. Though he has suffered criticism from the powers that be for inciting controversy, he is not a rabble-rouser. He is a patriot.”

– Rosihan Zain, *The New Straits Times*

“*The Singapore Trilogy* expresses both the commitment and scepticism that must engage questions and discussions of service to the nation, and nation-building. The catchphrase of National Education (launched in 1998) is: ‘Love your country; know your country; lead your country’. Yeo’s *Trilogy* dramatises it with intelligence, honesty and courage.”

– Leong Liew Geok, *The Straits Times*

“As one of the pioneering playwrights of Singapore, Robert has been a trailblazer for other playwrights who have come after him. The sheer gumption and audacity to be an artist in Singapore, especially in that era, is one I will always doff my hat to. I particularly appreciate that, in the context of the 70s, Robert did not shy from tackling the potential minefield of Singaporean politics.”

– Kamil Haque, Artistic Director, Haque Centre of Acting & Creativity

PLAYS

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