boom

a play by
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E
EPIGRAM

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INTRODUCTION

In 1997, I wrote a play, titled *Plunge*, about the Asian Economic Crisis and the impact that the stock market crash had on the lives of ordinary individuals in Asia. While workshopping the play during my residency at the Royal Court Theatre in London in 2007, I was asked to think about how to update this decade-old play. Half-jokingly, I suggested writing a sequel, titled *Boom*, seeing how soaring property prices were starting to impact ordinary Singaporeans' lives at that time. Indeed, I had even begun to wonder whether progress and prosperity could really be as destructive a force as an economic meltdown.

In particular, the property market boom in 2007 threw the spotlight on the phenomenon known as the en bloc sale (or the collective sale) in Singapore. This was basically the process by which a group of owners could come together to jointly sell their property, and thus command a higher price than if they were to sell their units individually. During this period, a large number of older condominium estates came to be sold en bloc to property developers for redevelopment, reaping large windfalls for many owners. Under the law, as long as a majority of at least 80 per cent of owners in these older estates (i.e. greater than ten years old) were agreeable to the sale, the en bloc sale could proceed. Unfortunately, this also meant that there was a small but increasingly vocal minority of owners who objected to the sales, but had to sell their homes against their will. Their plight has been vividly documented in numerous media reports which have described the destructive impact of such collective sales, and how they turned friendly neighbours into bitter enemies.

Divisive as it may have been, the debate surrounding en bloc sales is merely one facet of a larger issue – namely, the question of how to hang on to our history and heritage in the face of redevelopment, even as iconic buildings fall victim to the wrecking ball. For this play, I wanted to put a

face to some of the quieter tragedies that might go unnoticed during the inexorable march of progress. I also wanted to explore the tension between the aspirations of the younger generation of Singaporeans, and the desire to hang on to the past and memories, as embodied by these old buildings.

Even the dead have not been spared in the relentless onslaught of progress and land redevelopment. Since 1998, the government has limited the burial period for all graves to fifteen years, in view of the limited land available for cemeteries. This has resulted in the mass exhumation of a large number of graves, during which time the remains have been either cremated and placed in columbariums, or reburied according to the deceased's religious requirements. In any case, this mandatory "relocation" of the dead has led to some uncanny parallels between en bloc sales and exhumations, which I have enjoyed exploring in this play.

I would like to thank the Royal Court Theatre in London for their encouragement in developing *Boom*, as well as Gaurav Kripalani, Tracie Pang and the rest of the team at the Singapore Repertory Theatre for their support in shaping the script and first bringing it to the stage. Last but not least, I would like to thank God, who has made all of this possible, and my long-suffering family for their unconditional love and support.

JEAN TAY, 2009

PRODUCTION NOTES

Boom was first produced in Singapore by the Singapore Repertory Theatre on 18 September 2008. The production was directed by Tracie Pang; costume design also by Tracie Pang, set design by Wong Chee Wai, lighting by Yo Shao Ann, and sound by Darren Ng. The cast was as follows:

BOON	Sebastian Tan
MOTHER	Fanny Kee
JEREMIAH	Chua En Lai
CORPSE	Zachary Ho
YOUNG FATHER ┐	Brendon Fernandez
AGENT 1	
COLLEAGUE	
MALE NEIGHBOUR ┘	
YOUNG MOTHER ┐	Chermaine Ang
AGENT 2	
DIRECTOR	
FEMALE NEIGHBOUR ┘	

CHARACTERS

BOON	A property agent. Male in his mid to late twenties.
MOTHER	Boon's mother. Female in her sixties.
JEREMIAH	A civil servant. Male in his thirties.
CORPSE	Male in his forties.
YOUNG FATHER	Male in his forties.
AGENT 1	Male in his forties.
COLLEAGUE	Male in his forties.
MALE NEIGHBOUR	Male in his forties.
YOUNG MOTHER	Female in her thirties.
AGENT 2	Female in her thirties.
DIRECTOR	Female in her thirties.
FEMALE NEIGHBOUR	Female in her thirties.

PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

Lights up on a cemetery. We see a headstone, standing in the silence. The sound of construction begins, booming so loudly, even the ground shudders. One of the headstones topples over amidst the booming. As we watch, a hand slowly emerges from the grave, and puts the headstone upright again. The booming fades away. Lights fade.

ACT 1

SCENE 1:

THE SHOWFLAT

Boon, an enthusiastic property agent, bursts forth triumphantly, leading a chorus of property agents in their long-sleeved shirts and ties.

1	BOON	Ladies and gentlemen, welcome! To Heaven!
	AGENT 1	Paradise.
	AGENT 2	Eden.
	BOON	Your Dream Home!
5	AGENT 1	Luxurious Living!
	AGENT 2	Spacious Layout!
	BOON	Designer Decor!
	AGENT 1	En Bloc Potential!
	AGENT 2	Guaranteed Returns!
10	BOON	Bring Cheque!
	AGENT 1	Must View!
	AGENT 2	Highest Offer Secures!
	BOON	Facing North!
	AGENT 1	South!
15	AGENT 2	East!
	BOON	But Never West!
	AGENT 1	Panoramic View of the City!
	AGENT 2	Of the Sea!
	BOON	Of Greenery!
20	AGENT 1	Of the Swimming Pool!
	AGENT 2	Of Other People's Swimming Pool!
	BOON	Other People's Living Rooms!
	AGENT 1	Other People's Backyards!
	AGENT 2	And Other People's Dirty Laundry.

1   *Boon looks doubtfully at them, but forges on.*

BOON   Prime Location! Near Orchard.

AGENT 1   Near Amenities.

AGENT 2   Near Good School.

5   BOON   Near MRT.

AGENT 1   Near Future MRT.

AGENT 2   Near Future Casino.

AGENT 1   Near Gambling Den.

AGENT 2   Porn Shops.

10   AGENT 1   Funeral Parlours.

AGENT 2   Cemeteries.

BOON   *(uncertainly)* Oi! Hello!… Cemeteries?

AGENT 2   Yah what… Peaceful and green.

BOON   Porn shops? Gambling den?

15   AGENT 1   Exciting nightlife.

BOON   What?

AGENT 2   Oi, oi, oi… How long have you been
        selling property?

BOON   Well, I…

20   AGENT 1   Do you even know how to?

BOON   I think so…

AGENT 1   I tell you, ah, the trick is Imagination. You see,
        you're not selling a flat. You're not selling a condo,
        a terrace house, a semi-D[1], good-class bungalow,

25   a mansion on a hill. No. You are selling a
        Lifestyle. That is, a style of life that they do not
        yet possess, but are on the cusp of attaining.

BOON   *(stumbling)* Cupsps?

AGENT 2   That's right, cusp. Use words like that, that they

30   don't understand, but that smell of high-class

---

1   semi-detached house

aircon air, which they long to breathe.

AGENT 1   And embellish.

BOON   Embellish?

AGENT 1   Ah… When you show them the window that can

5   see that super ugly tree. Don't just say, look,
        a tree. Let them imagine, being woken up in
        the morning, by the gentle chirping of… Of…

AGENT 2   Orioles.

AGENT 1   Ah! Very good… Orioles in the tree. Don't just

10   say, you can fit a double bed in this room.
        Let them see themselves in that king-sized bed,
        wah… Snuggled under a goose-feather duvet,
        gently roused by the sunlight seeping in
        between the leaves of that super hou kua[2] tree,

15   and the soft warbling of the birds.

AGENT 2   Orioles…

AGENT 1   Ah… Orioles, that perch obligingly on those
        branches, without shitting on any of your walls,
        or your new BMW 7 Series.

20   BOON   I don't know, man…

AGENT 2   If the park is a sweaty 15 minute walk away, then
        please… Make use of it! Let them imagine their
        children happily climbing trees, and cycling
        bicycles around the park.

25   BOON   But…

AGENT 2   Never mind if actually, the poor gin na[3] is going
        to spend most of his time locked up in that
        pathetic excuse of a study, doing 10-year series[4].

AGENT 1   Tell them about those "good" schools within 2 km,

30   and their imagination will fill in the gaps, with

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2   hou kua [*Hokkien*] good-looking
3   gin na [*Hokkien*] child
4   a compilation of past years' examination papers

obedient children who win scholarships to
Cambridge, UK and Cambridge, Massachusetts.

AGENT 2   Life will be perfect once they move into their
dream home.

AGENT 1   There will be no more arguments, no more
tantrums with that panoramic seaview.

AGENT 2   No quarrel that cannot be solved by A1 designer
decor and a private lift lobby.

AGENT 1   No betrayal that cannot be overcome by infinity
lap pools…

AGENT 2   Jacuzzi pools…

AGENT 1   Children's fun pools…

AGENT 2   Koi ponds…

AGENT 1   Your most powerful tool is their own desires.
So use them. Tempt them. The more unattainable
the vision, the more their hearts will desire it.

AGENT 2   It's the details that will make them bite.

AGENT 1   Why not? You offer them paradise on earth.
All they need to do is…

ALL   *(together)* Bring that cheque.

SCENE 2:
MOVING OUT

*Mother's cluttered ground floor flat. In pride of place
is a whole shelf full of tacky souvenir figurines.*
*She bustles around, laying out the table, while Boon
moves speculatively through the living room, examining
the furnishings with a critical eye. He picks up a dusty
figurine and makes a face, then puts it down again.*

BOON   Actually, not that bad. Old, but not that bad.
But you really got to clean up this place a bit.
Get a new paint job and polish the floor…
I know a good guy who can get it done for
under 2K[1]. And then maybe change the kitchen
cabinets too. But please clear away this rubbish.
I tell you, buyers can't stand a place that's got so
many old memories. And tolong[2] lah… Throw
away these hideous statues. Jing pai kua[3], leh.

MOTHER   Eh eh… Le gah wah bang lok keh[4].

BOON   I'm just trying to…

MOTHER   Put that down. You know how hard it is to find
these nowadays?

BOON   How I know. Where did you get this from?

MOTHER   That one? Malacca. September 1974.
Honeymoon, hor.

BOON   And this one?

He picks up another statue.

MOTHER   Penang. July 1978.

BOON   Aiyoh… Got anything from this century or not?
Everything here is from donkey years ago.

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1   two thousand dollars
2   tolong [*Malay*] please
3   jing pai kua [*Hokkien*] very ugly
4   le gah wah bang lok keh [*Hokkien*] you put that down

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jean Tay graduated in 1997 with a double-degree in creative writing and economics from Brown University, USA. For her fiction, she was awarded the Weston Prize for Fiction from Brown, as well as the 1st and 3rd prizes for the National Arts Council's Golden Point Short Story competition in 1995 and 2001 respectively.

Jean's previous staged plays include *Water from the Well* (1998), *The Knot* (1999), *Hopper's Women* (co-written with Cindy Koh, 2000), *Plunge* (2000) and *Everything but the Brain* (2005, 2007). Jean has also written the books for the musicals *The Admiral's Odyssey* (2005) and *Man of Letters* (2006). Since 2006, Jean has been attached to the Singapore Repertory Theatre as resident playwright.

In 2000, *The Knot* was awarded 1st prize for Action Theatre's 10-minute Play Competition and was selected as a finalist for the Actors Theatre of Louisville's 10-minute Play Contest. In addition, *Hopper's Women* and *Everything but the Brain* were nominated for Best Original Script for the Life! Theatre Awards in 2001 and 2006 respectively. *Everything but the Brain* won Best Original Script in 2006.

In July 2007, Jean was selected to attend the prestigious month-long International Playwriting Residency organised by the Royal Court Theatre in London, where the concept for the play *Boom* was first developed. It was subsequently produced by the Singapore Repertory Theatre in September 2008. *Boom* was nominated for Best Original Script for *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards in 2009.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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Fiction titles include *The Diary of Amos Lee: I Sit, I Write, I Flush!* and *The Diary of Amos Lee: Girls, Guts & Glory!* by Adeline Foo, *The Little Nightingale Who Can't Sing* by Angie Featherstone and Stephanie Wong and *The Elephant and the Tree* by Jin Pyn. Epigram Books has also published *Everything but the Brain* by Jean Tay and *Those Who Can't, Teach* by Haresh Sharma.

"Jean Tay is one of the most gifted playwrights
I have come across in years."—*Gaurav Kripalani,*
Artistic Director, Singapore Repertory Theatre

Welcome to the surreal world of *Boom*,
where civil servants wake the dead, corpses
are terrified of cremation, old women are
besieged in their own homes, and Ah Bengs
still dream of being Superman. *Boom* tells the
story of an elderly woman and her property
agent son in Singapore, who are struggling
over the potential en bloc sale of their home.
Their destinies become interwoven with that
of an idealistic civil servant, Jeremiah, who is
facing the greatest challenge of his career—
persuading a reluctant corpse to yield its
memories. *Boom* is a quirky yet poignant
tale about the relocation of both dead and
living, and how personal stories get left
behind in the inexorable march of progress.

Written by economist-turned-playwright
Jean Tay, *Boom* was conceptualised at the
Royal Court Theatre in London in 2007,
and developed and staged by the Singapore
Repertory Theatre in September 2008.
It was nominated for Best Original Script
for *The Straits Times' Life!* Theatre Awards
in 2009 and is now an 'O' and 'N' Level
Literature text in Singapore schools.