

Winner for Best Original Script,  
*The Straits Times' Life! Theatre Awards, 2006*

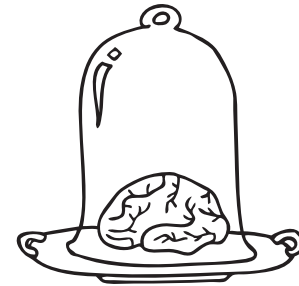
everything  
but the  
brain



a play by  
jean tay

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## INTRODUCTION

It all began, once upon a time, when my husband tried to explain the theory of relativity to me, using the metaphor of three bears on a train. Having happily abandoned my Physics textbooks after my ‘A’ levels, I never would have imagined that I would ever attempt a play about Einstein’s theory of relativity. Yet I was fascinated by the incongruous yet completely fascinating image of bears negotiating the speed of light, and the blurring of the line between Physics and fairytales. At the same time, the idea of being physically able to turn back time, as long as one could move fast enough, seemed like something out of Star Trek or the Twilight Zone, not a Physics textbook. But just imagine, what if that could be the solution for someone who was watching their loved one aging and dying before his eyes. To me, it was a no-brainer – if running at the speed of light was what it took to keep your loved one from death, then running at the speed of light was what you would do. So while I thoroughly enjoyed writing about the bears and the Physics, I believe that *Everything but the Brain* is fundamentally about the love and desperation of a daughter who does everything she can to keep her father alive, to the point of attempting to slow down time itself.

My journey in writing *Everything but the Brain* began in 2001, at the Playwrights’ Cove, under the mentorship of Haresh Sharma. It took another three years and numerous rewrites before the play made it to the stage, thanks to Action Theatre, but it was well worth the wait. I was extremely blessed to have found the perfect director and collaborator in the late Krishen Jit, whose vision for the play, and whose affinity for those mischievous bears, brought *Everything but the Brain* to life. His singular vision was fully realised by the dedicated cast who fleshed the characters out so beautifully and memorably.

In writing this play and watching it onstage, I have been reminded afresh of my parents and their unconditional love and support for me

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through the years. There is no doubt that some of my father's dry wit found its way into Elaine's father. I also have to thank my long-suffering husband, whose attempts to interest me in the theory of relativity first sowed the seed of an unconventional metaphor for an unconventional play. I am very grateful to Haresh and the writers from Playwrights' Cove for their generous feedback and encouragement through those early drafts, and to Ekachai Uekrongtham and Action Theatre for taking a chance on an untested play about relativity. But most of all, I would like to dedicate *Everything but the Brain* to Krishen, who believed in this play, and who is dearly missed.

Jean Tay, 2010

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MODALITIES OF TIME IN *EVERYTHING BUT THE BRAIN*

Commentary by Dr K K Seet

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*"...though the title of the play foregrounds the brain, the crux of the drama ultimately apotheosizes the heart and its capacity for love."*

Henry David Thoreau once said, "Time is but the stream I go a-fishing in." This observation can well be applied to Jean Tay's *Everything but the Brain*, where she mines the quarry of time for both its dramatic possibilities and figurative references. Metaphorically, the play is framed within the fairytale conventions of "once upon a time" and "happily ever after", tapping on the transcendent power of the fairytale to universalise the intimate domestic scenario of a daughter caring for her ailing father. A central trope is the theory of relativity, borrowed from the realm of Physics, thus allowing the script to harness elements from science to advance its central artistic impulse, where the idea of manipulating time and speed in relation to light and space serves to negotiate with acts of remembering and ideas of memory and subjective realities.

Also integral to the *leitmotif* of time is its dramatisations in tandem with the semiotics of theatre. Tay incorporates all the different modalities of time on stage to create a provocative mixture. These transactions among plot time, story time, chronological time, historical time and performance time operate on a mobile axis that constantly shifts or stalls even as time is dramatically represented through flashbacks, foreshortenings, stasis, reversals or fast-forwards.

First and foremost, the audience is introduced to the notion that time and timelessness occur concurrently. A three-member Brechtian chorus, which functions in a variety of roles both complementary and contrapuntal, pluralistic and paradoxical, expound on this notion, while being alternately

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within and outside the temporal plane of the unfolding drama. Plot time, related to what the Russian formalists call *sjuzet*, is constantly brandished before the audience by a choral member who first announces that the play “will end in exactly 10 months and 29 days” before periodically intruding with reminders of expiring months in the trajectory of time’s passage, e.g., “Next stop, April,” or “August, eight months down.” Another choral member alerts the audience to performance time – “From your perspective, this play will take only one hour and 26 minutes.” The third choral member invokes the notion of story time, a function of the *fabula* – “If you treat this [play] as a story of Elaine’s life, then [it] will take you through 36 years, plus or minus a few major and very many minor events.”

As the audience is repeatedly made aware of passing minutes and seconds, such as when Elaine struggles to get her father to hospital within the crucial three-hour window period after the stroke has occurred, the relentlessly brutal forward march of chronological time is intoned in no uncertain terms. Amid all this dynamic interplay of time, which engenders much of the dramatic arcs of suspense, the audience never relinquishes its hold on historical time as it realises unambiguously that the beginning of the play is already its end – at the very start, Elaine nostalgically recaptures the year she took leave from work to nurse her father, a past encapsulated in the dramatic present of the play.

While the juxtapositions of the various concepts of time seemingly reinforce its transient, ephemeral nature, particularly at the denouement of the play where time is literally running out in more ways than one, the collapsing of past and present in the addled brain of Elaine’s father ends up affirming time’s ability to endure in the repository of memory which never gets totally erased. Fragments from the past resurface at epiphanic moments to elucidate the present. And the brain, as the locus of all this memory (and even abortive acts of remembering) serves as an emblem of the eternal. Nevertheless, Tay suggests that what the memory chooses to retain is still

determined by its emotional reverberations, in the classic case of the heart triumphing over the head once again. Even a humble Tupperware lunchbox containing the vestiges of Elaine’s childhood (her milk teeth, her first Physics test paper) is a synecdoche of her mother’s unspoken love for her. Therefore, though the title of the play foregrounds the brain, the crux of the drama ultimately apotheosizes the heart and its capacity for love. Even the vignette involving the handsome doctor Sam, with its comically cruel twist on the Sleeping Beauty legend, is one more permutation of love’s navigation through the treacherous waters of the river of time.

In general, the issue of time conjures up the grand scale, the long view, the epic scope, for while we colloquially speak of killing time, in the cosmic scheme of things, it is time that kills us. This is a play that, despite showing how time in fact kills the female protagonist’s father, at the end, ends up perpetuating a sense that “happily ever after” can exist. Thoreau once posed this assertion, “As if you can kill time without injuring eternity.” With this insightful, multifaceted work, Jean Tay has managed to achieve just that.

Dr K K Seet, 2010

Dr K K Seet established the Theatre Studies programme at the National University of Singapore and is affectionately known as “Singapore’s Most Glamorous Academic”.



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PRODUCTION NOTES

*Everything but the Brain* was first produced in Singapore by Action Theatre on 27 January 2005. The production was directed by Krishen Jit. The cast was as follows:

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ELAINE	Pam Oei
FATHER	Gerald Chew
SAM	Brendon Fernandez
CHORUS	A Filomar Tariao
	B Koh Chieng Mun
	C Chermaine Ang

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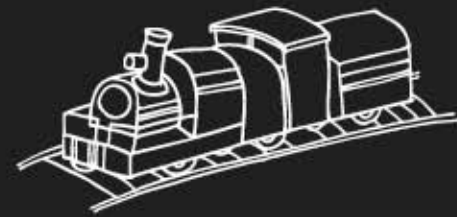
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## CHARACTERS

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- ELAINE An unmarried 36-year-old Physics teacher.
- FATHER Mr Lim Chong Boon, a 66-year-old retired Physics professor.
- SAM An eligible young doctor in his late twenties.
- CHORUS Three bears/nurses/clocks/other assorted characters comprising:
- A A middle-aged male.
  - B A middle-aged female.
  - C A younger female.
-

# ACT 1



## SCENE 1:

## INTRODUCTION – ONCE UPON A TIME

*Lights come on. Elaine is standing on stage.*

---

1 ELAINE Once upon a time. That's how the fairy tales  
always begin. Before the kings, before the  
Prince Charmings, even before the beautiful  
princess. Before all that, there is a Time, once  
5 upon which the tale begins. The choice of that  
time is critically important. It determines how  
the story will unfold, and whether it will find  
its way to happily ever after.

10 But this is not a fairy tale. I'm no princess.  
I'm a secondary school Physics teacher. Thirty-  
six this year, but still looking for Prince  
Charming. My students call me Miss Lim, but  
you can call me Elaine.

15 *Spotlight on Father in a corner, reading.*  
That's my father. Lim Chong Boon. Retired  
professor of Physics. Sixty-six years old and a  
pain in the neck. I should know. It's been just  
the two of us for the last 30 years.

20 As far as fairy tales go, he's no king.  
Although he is a tyrant some times.  
*Spotlight on an empty space.*  
As for Prince Charming, let's just say we're still  
waiting for him to put in an appearance.  
*Lights go up on Chorus.*

25 But standing in for the moment are these  
three bears.

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1 A That's us.  
 B We prefer the term "chorus".  
 C We're not always bears.  
 A Sometimes we're nurses.  
 5 B Or students...  
 C Or time-keepers...  
 A Our job is to narrate...  
 B And sometimes commentate...  
 C Very occasionally even irritate... I mean,  
 10 participate...  
 ELAINE Because what is a fairy tale without bears,  
 after all? Now that you've met the cast, let me  
 introduce you to the point in time where the  
 story starts. Where my life takes a detour,  
 15 of sorts. You see, I've just decided to take a year  
 off work. Because this is the year that it takes  
 my father to die. Or, to be more precise,  
 the 10 months and 28 days it takes him to die.  
 A In other words, this play will end in exactly  
 20 10 months and 29 days.  
 B But, if you count the flashbacks, and treat this as a  
 story of Elaine's life, then this play will take  
 you through 36 years, plus or minus a few  
 major and very many minor events.  
 25 C Of course, this is only relative. From your  
 perspective, this play will only take one hour  
 and 26 minutes.  
 A All these things are possible because time is not  
 constant in this play.  
 30 B Time bends itself backwards...

1 C ... And forwards...  
 B To fit itself into the story.  
 A Time speeds up.  
 B Slows down.  
 5 C Stands still.  
 A Collapses.  
 B Because this is a play about Time.  
 A About Physics.  
 B About stroke attacks.  
 10 C A play about Elaine and her father.  
 A *(to Elaine)* You have one hour and 25 minutes left.  
 ELAINE By the end of that time, this play will be over.  
 My father will be dead.  
 A One hour 24 minutes and 48 seconds.  
 15 ELAINE Let's not waste anymore time, then. This is where  
 we begin our journey. All aboard? *(Chorus nods)*  
 Good... Once upon a time...  
*Lights change.*

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25

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SCENE 2:

JANUARY – STROKE ONE

*The Lims' living room. Elaine is marking worksheets and Father is reading a book.*

- 1 A Once upon a time, there was a middle-aged girl called Elaine, who lived with her 66-year-old father.
- B There was a blood clot.
- 5 C The date was 15 January 2004.
- A Now Elaine's father was a brilliant Physics professor.
- C Elaine, who had followed his footsteps only halfway, was a not-so-brilliant secondary school Physics teacher.
- 10 B Now this blood clot loved to go a-travelling.
- C This particular night. Elaine is marking Physics worksheets.
- A Elaine's father is reading a book.
- 15 B The blood clot travels through a vast network of veins and arteries. Until it arrives at an artery that brings blood to the brain.
- A Elaine's father puts his book down. He is feeling slightly uncomfortable, although he has no idea why.
- 20 B The artery is clogged with layers of fatty deposit and cholesterol. And the blood clot cannot pass through.
- A The feeling passes, it is probably nothing. Elaine's father returns to his book.
- 25

- 1 C Elaine continues to scrawl across papers with her red felt pen.
- B So it's stuck there, in that artery. All dressed up and no place to go.
- 5 A The feeling of weakness returns. There is a pain in his head.
- B And that's how it happens. A Transient Ischemic Attack. Also known as a minor stroke.
- A There is a darkness around the edges of his eyes.
- 10 B Symptoms include sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes. Sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg.
- Father's book clatters to the floor. Elaine looks up for the first time.*
- 15 ELAINE Pa, you alright?
- A There is a pain in his skull. Perhaps it is his skull, he doesn't know he doesn't care. It's just there.
- B Sudden, severe headache with no known cause.
- 20 C Elaine is concerned.
- ELAINE What's wrong, Pa?
- B Pa is having a stroke.
- A It's terrible. He thinks that he's going to die, maybe. Too much pain.
- 25 B There's a thrombus clogging up his artery.
- C Elaine, the silly girl, is still clueless.
- ELAINE *(finally gets up and goes over to him)* Are you okay? Do you need to lie down or something? Is it your migraine... You want Panadol!<sup>1</sup>
- 30 *Father shakes his head painfully.*

1                   What is it... Your heart? Your stomach?

                  B     All wrong. It's his brain.

ELAINE       What is it, Pa? You're starting to scare me...

                  C     Time to call an ambulance, Elaine.

5               ELAINE    You know what... I think I'm going to call you  
                  an ambulance. *(on the phone)* Hi... I think my  
                  father... I think something's wrong with my  
                  father. I don't know what... Maybe a heart  
                  attack or something... Can you send an  
10               ambulance over at once?

                  B     Not a heart attack. A stroke, you silly woman.

ELAINE       No... I don't know what's wrong with him.  
                  If I did, I wouldn't have to call you, would I?  
                  Just come now, please.

15               B     *(exhaustedly)* Transient Ischemic Attack.

ELAINE       Okay, thank you. *(she puts down the phone and  
                  returns to her father)* Pa, how are you now?

                  A     Someone is talking to him. He tries to open his  
                  eyes, but he can't. Yet he senses the familiarity  
20               of her shape. He's not dying. Not yet anyway.  
                  *(to B)* You ready?  
                  *B nods. They heave Father up onto the bed and  
                  wheel him away.*  
                  Elaine puts her face in her hands.

25               C     Time passes.  
                  *A strides confidently across the stage in a white jacket.  
                  Elaine looks up eagerly. A ignores her completely  
                  and strides off the stage. Elaine's shoulders slump  
                  in disappointment.*

30               C     Time crawls by.

SCENE 3:

ELAINE FIRST MEETS DOCTOR

*Sam enters the stage. Elaine doesn't notice him, she is dozing off. He approaches her hesitantly, hovering over her shoulder for a while before he taps on it.*

1                   SAM     Excuse me... Mrs Elaine Lim?

ELAINE       No... I mean, Yes... I mean not Mrs Elaine Lim.  
                  Miss. Sorry I must've dozed off or something.  
                  I... *(she turns and sees him for the first time,  
                  and is dumbstruck)*

5                   C     Time stands still...

                  SAM     Sorry to keep you waiting so long.

ELAINE       Is my father all right?

                  SAM     Your father just suffered from a stroke.

10               C     And time collapses...

ELAINE       My father... A stroke?  
                  But he's so... He's always been so healthy.

                  SAM     I'm sorry, I wasn't being precise. It's actually a  
                  transient ischemic attack.

15               ELAINE    In English, please.

                  SAM     A T.I.A. It's sort of a mini-stroke. Not as serious as  
                  a full-blown stroke. The symptoms usually pass  
                  after a few days. It sometimes happens when a  
                  blood clot blocks an artery bringing blood to  
20               the brain.

ELAINE       But he's okay now...

                  SAM     We need to keep him under observation for a  
                  couple more days. But his condition is stable.

1 You can see him now, if you'd like to.

ELAINE Thank you.

SAM I'll leave you two alone.  
*He brings her to Father, who is lying on the bed, then leaves.*

5 ELAINE Hi Pa. *(tenderly, as though to one in a coma)*  
How you feeling now? You scared me so badly.  
Don't do that again, okay?

FATHER You think I wanted to?

10 ELAINE *(stunned to hear him speak)* You mean you can talk?

FATHER Of course I can talk.

ELAINE I thought you were...

FATHER Dead?

ELAINE No... Just, weak... You should be resting.

15 You shouldn't be talking.

FATHER I'm perfectly fine.

ELAINE You had a stroke.

FATHER A mini-stroke. I heard the doctor.  
Go ask the nurse when we can go home.

20 ELAINE The doctor said you should probably...

FATHER I know what he said. I'm not stupid.

ELAINE But he...

FATHER Just go ask...

ELAINE Pa!

25 FATHER Elaine!

ELAINE But the doctor...

FATHER *(suddenly switches tactic)* Why so shy? You like  
him, is it?

ELAINE Excuse me?

30 FATHER Him... Dr What's-His-Name.

1 ELAINE Not now, Pa.

FATHER Then when? You're 36 years old already.

ELAINE Will you stop that?

FATHER Too handsome for you, is it?

5 ELAINE You're sick!

FATHER Hello?  
*She storms out of his room. Lights change.*

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#### 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 Weston Prize for Fiction from Brown, as well as the 1st and 3rd prizes for NAC's Golden Point Short Story competition in 1995 and 2001 respectively.

Plays produced include *Water from the Well* (1998), *The Knot* (1999), *Hopper's Women* (co-written with Cindy Koh, 2000), *Plunge* (2000), *Everything but the Brain* (2005, 2007) and *Boom* (2008). 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 selected as a finalist for the Actors Theatre of Louisville's 10-minute Play Contest. She has been nominated three times for Best Original Script for the *Life!* Theatre Awards, and won for the play *Everything but the Brain* in 2006. In July 2007, she 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, and has since been selected by the Ministry of Education as a recommended 'O' and 'N' level literature text. Her plays have also been performed in the US, UK and Italy.

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## 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 *Boom* by Jean Tay and *Those Who Can’t, Teach* by Haresh Sharma.

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“Jean’s adroit handling of themes, from the origins of genius to gene heritage and the tyranny of Time, makes *Everything but the Brain* one of the best things seen on stage here in a while.”—*The Straits Times*

“One of the more thoughtfully constructed original shows to come out of Singapore in recent times.”—*The Business Times*

What do Physics, three bears and a stroke have in common? Take a journey with Elaine, a middle-aged Physics teacher, as she explains the theory of relativity using the metaphor of three bears and a train, and devises a plan to turn back time and save her ailing father from physical deterioration.

Written by gifted playwright Jean Tay, *Everything but the Brain*, a poignant tale that speaks of family relationships, Physics and death, was first developed at the Playwrights’ Cove at The Necessary Stage in 2001 and staged by Action Theatre in 2005. It won Best Original Script in *The Straits Times’ Life! Theatre Awards* in 2006.

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