Winner of The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards 2018 for Production of the Year, Best Original Script and Best Lighting

Dragonflies Stephanie Street

"Compassionate, hopeful and exquisitely acted."

—The Straits Times





Dragonflies

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Dragonflies A Play by Stephanie Street



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This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

First edition, February 2020.

For Shanta, Alan, Vishie, Midhin, Julien, Asha and Sachin—my home

Give me your tired, your poor,
Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free,
The wretched refuse of your teeming shore.
Send these, the homeless, tempest-tossed to me,
I lift my lamp beside the golden door!

–Emma Lazarus

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Note that there are a number of languages used throughout the play. In the prologue and final scene, Hindi is used; Margaret speaks in Hokkien through Acts 1 and 2; the Immigration officials use Malay in 2.1; Leslie and Anna speak to each other in Mandarin in 2.2; and in the final scene, Hindi and Bengali are used. Transliterations are given in the text in bold, with the English denoted parenthetically after each line.

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AUTHOR'S PREFACE

I was pregnant with my second child when I started writing this play. As someone who's never had a satisfactory answer to the question, "Where are you from?", I've always been preoccupied with the complexities inbuilt into the notion of "home": what is it, where is it, why is it? These questions acquire a particular, sharp urgency when thinking about making a home for your children.

My adult life has played out in the UK, and having been educated and working in England has shaped my view of society; my kids and my husband are Europeans and we yearn for our summers swimming in an Alpine lake; my father is British, and he and I adore ruminating over the cricket scores; my beloved mother and sister are in Singapore and my skin is happiest in its humid heat—the deepest parts of my soul stir to the sound of Hindi film music and the aroma of satay, prata and chicken rice. All these influences are equally important to and inextricably mixed in me. So I have immense fear that I might be living through a moment in time, like Leslie Chen in the play, in which I might be forced to make an irreversible choice as to where I get to call "my home".

We are at a significant moment in the history of our species. Divide and rule has been exercised on an epic scale in recent political history and we now live its legacy. All over the world we see governments, media, markets, working to disconnect us from our human instincts of empathy and collectivity.

As we head further into this new millennium, the touch paper that will really ignite things irreversibly is the clear and present ecological threat to our planet; the climate crisis is no longer a bogeyman to frighten children with. Future generations are being held hostage by the short-term profits of a few. As our ecosystem starts to bend and buckle in the heat of global warming, as lands become uninhabitable and we need to retreat to higher ground, we are only going to be forced to accept living closer together.

Or forced to kill one another. I hope with every fibre of my being that we do the former.

My research for this play led me to an extraordinary aid worker who has run the gamut of European refugee camps—she spoke to me about the displaced people she encounters and what drove her to leave her home in the UK to help with the humanitarian crisis in Europe. As I listened to her, I was reminded of our instinct to feel for and want to help one another. But we have recently been fed a rich diet of fear and suspicion, and the default human position now is to fight and not connect.

This is where theatre can do what no other art form can. In a theatre, we tell small stories sitting shoulder to shoulder with complete strangers in the dark; we watch a live and ephemeral event—it's a direct act of empathy. While we absolutely need our politicians to hear the science and rise to the steep challenges we face, theatre's small moments of human sharing also have a part to play.

Above all, a play should ask questions and not deliver answers; among the big questions to ask, the one I wanted to ask with *Dragonflies* borrows from Darwin: how do we, how *can* we, look after those we love and at the same time safeguard the future of our species?

My son is now three and he looks at me and the world with that simple contentment that only little children know, but my seven-year-old daughter is already full of questions about why someone might want to build a wall to separate countries, or want to stop all the immigrants coming in. And my heart breaks for the future that could lie ahead for them.

The British MP Jo Cox, who was murdered in her constituency in 2016 by a white extremist, said that there is more that unites us than divides us. That is the story that we need to keep telling our children and that is ultimately the story I have tried to tell here.

Stephanie Street December 2019

PRODUCERS' MESSAGE

"Why do we let people from shithole countries come here?" said US President Trump in January 2018, during a meeting to discuss immigrants arriving from places like Haiti, El Salvador and Africa.

The fact is that people from many countries that Trump would call "shitholes" have had to face a whole lot of shit—political turmoil, abject poverty and the most unforgiving of Mother Nature's punishments. Yet they are braver, stronger, more dignified and have more human decency than Trump can fathom. They have a genuine pride and love for their "shithole" countries, beyond anything that Trump—or for that matter, many of us complaining about "first world" problems—could ever comprehend.

Dragonflies is set in a not-too-distant future, where our entire world has become a "shithole": run and overrun by xenophobic, paranoid, protectionist demagogues; where immigrants integral to their host nations' well-being are treated like third-class aliens; where millions are displaced from their homes because of racial and religious persecution, terrorism and civil war; and where countries able to offer sanctuary are instead burning bridges and building walls. A planet self-destructing in a global warming pressure cooker we created... Did we say "not-too-distant future"? Hell, it's happening now.

But *Dragonflies* also fires a flare into the dark, reminding us that when all seems lost, we owe it to ourselves and to our children to cling on to this elusive thing called Hope, reclaim our fragile humanity, reach out to someone else who is also lost and, together, fight like hell to find our way home. As Stephen Hawking once said: "If you're in a black hole, don't give up. There's a way out."

When Pangdemonium commissioned playwright Stephanie Street to create a piece of theatre for us to stage, we knew that we wanted to tell a story that had an immediacy, an urgency and a potency that would resonate

with everyone in a way that was at once disturbing, provocative and real. We wanted to address themes that affect us all, but which most of us would rather not even think about. In a world that is rapidly self-destructing and becoming increasingly divided, we wanted to create a piece of work that would make people face up to some hard truths, question ourselves and one another, and hopefully inspire us all to make a bit of a change for the better. And also be an awesome theatrical experience.

While *Dragonflies* grapples with some overwhelming global issues, at its heart it is a story about family and our shared human experience, and reminds us all of how precious life is, and how fragile our shithole of a world is.

At the end of the day, it is a shithole worth fighting to save.

Adrian & Tracie Pang
Artistic Directors
Pangdemonium Theatre Company

PRODUCTION NOTES

Dragonflies was commissioned by the 2017 Singapore International Festival of Arts and first staged at Victoria Theatre by Pangdemonium from 24-26 Aug 2017. It was then updated (including the creation of the character of DMITRI) and restaged at Victoria Theatre from 18 May -3 Jun 2018. The play was nominated for eight The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards 2018, and won for Production of the Year, Best Original Script and Best Lighting. The original cast and crew was as follows:

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Adrian Pang
     LESLIE CHEN
                 Tan Keng Hua
          SARITA
   ANNABEL CHEN
                   Victoria Mintey
         SANDRA
                  - Shrey Barghava
          SALEEM
            ASIF
                  Selma Alkaff
         MAXINE
                   Fanny Kee
 MARGARET CHEN
                  Daniel Jenkins
           CLIVE
                  - Thomas Pang
          BOBBY
      SOON BENG
          PETER -
    RAMREICHAN -
         MYLENE — Frances Lee
          AGNES -
                  Tracie Pang
       DIRECTOR
                   Kwok Wai Yin
        DESIGNER
                  James Tan
LIGHTING DESIGNER
                  Jing Ng
 SOUND DESIGNER
                  Sunitha Nayar
  STAGE DESIGNER
```

CHARACTERS

Originally from Singapore, although he has LESLIE CHEN lived in the UK for 30 years. In his early 50s. A volunteer midwife from North East India. SARITA Mid 50s. The vision of Leslie's late wife. SANDRA Branch manager at Nationwide in Poole. SALEEM KHAN Late 20s. Leslie's best friend. A high street solicitor. CLIVE CUNNINGHAM Early 50s. Leslie's step-daughter and daughter to his late MAXINE WILSON wife, Sandra. 17 years old. Leslie's mother, Singaporean Chinese. MARGARET CHEN Early 70s. A young unemployed woman from Dorset. MYLENE Late 20s. An NHS nurse, Mid 20s BOBBY GOMEZ Immigration officer, Singaporean. Late 30s. LIM SOON BENG Leslie's sister, lives in Singapore. Mid 50s. ANNABEL CHEN Annabel's live-in helper. From the Philippines. AGNES Early 30s. Singaporean MRT worker. Early 30s. PETER WONG From Bangladesh, working on construction ASIF AHEMD site. Late 20s. A Russian expatriate. Mid 50s. DMITRI A plantation owner from NE India displaced by RAMREICHAN

floods. Late 30s.

Prologue

PROLOGUE

A refugee settlement in Kolkata, sometime in the near future. Bare sunlight. Leslie, in shorts and a T-shirt, sits on a crate outside a small tent. He fiddles with a ring on a necklace around his neck.

The deep low groans of a woman in the final stage of labour come from inside the tent.

It's...like some kind of sorcery, isn't it? The miracle of new life. Makes me think how you must've been, when she was...How much I wish I'd been there.

He peers in the direction of the tent.

I don't know why I'm... I mean, she's strong...
as twenty oxes... Oxen? You know that.
I know that. But, I'll be honest...it scares...the
living fucking daylights... Seeing her like that.
It's—

A huge groan.

Jesus Christ...

He calls into the tent.

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Shub theek hai na? (Is everything okay?)

Sarita comes out quickly, gives him a big thumbs up.

Theek hai. Sab theek hai. (Very good. Very good.)

LESLIE Good. Good!

Sarita goes back in.

I wish you were here...

He kisses the ring and tucks it away under his shirt.

LESLIE It's time.

Act 1 Deluge

ACT 1 : SCENE 1

SCENE 1

Holy Trinity Church, West Lulworth, Dorset, England. Leslie, awkward in a dark suit, stands behind a lectern.

LESLIE

I'm... (clears his throat) I'm very touched...and I know Max is too...that so many of you have come from so far...through this...frankly, shitty weather... (turning to an unseen priest watching from the altar) Sorry, Father. This awful weather... to be here and remember... (a long, fragile beat) our Sandra.

Of course it would have been totally different...if this had happened...the other way round...if that was me... (looks to the unseen coffin) She'd have laid on vats of coffee and biscuits, and...and, you know, wellies and those huge golfing umbrellas for you all to get in from the car park, instead of... (he stands out from the lectern to reveal shoes and the bottom of his trousers sodden with wet mud)

Most of you know she was my Anthropology tutor... (smiles) I know, right? Here I am in my muddy pants and you're thinking, "HOW?!" Which is what I have thought...every day for the last fifteen years. She used to say that it's our capacity for generosity...towards each other that's allowed us to become the dominant species on the planet.

And the things she gave me... (a long beat, he struggles to keep his composure) The gift of

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DRAGONFLIES ACT 1 : SCENE 2

a daughter. To have allowed me to be a part of your life, Max... And the most inspiring conversations I have ever had. She taught me what I know about the world. Literally. (beat)

My dear mum said at our wedding...all those years ago, it wouldn't be easy for us.

Coming from opposite ends of the planet, being a blended family... You were right, Ma, it hasn't. Been easy...

I looked out at the rain shitting down this morning and I thought...of course. Our ecosphere knows it: this is... (there isn't a word enough) I have lost my reason for living.

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Something else you said, Ma... We like a proverb, and this one went something like, "An ancient red thread connects those who are destined. It may stretch or tangle but it will never break." Right now, all I can see all around me are knots and tangles...

		SCENE 2 A private room at Nationwide Building Society in Poole. Leslie sits alone, a small binder in front of him, closed. He looks like a small, lost child. Saleem enters with a bundle of papers. Leslie sits up.
1	SALEEM	Great. So Here isthe death certificate. And
		your marriage certificate.
		He hands them over.
_	LESLIE	Do you need a copy of this as well? What is it?
5	SALEEM	Her will.
	LESLIE SALEEM	Not at the minute. Sowe should have all your
	SALEEM	details on file. (he starts drilling into his keyboard,
		staring into the screen as he talks) I say, should
10		Our systems have been on a go-slow since all
10		this rain. You'd think that's the point of
		technology, right?
		He finally looks to Leslie, who's just looking at the
		papers in his hand. A moment.
15	LESLIE	Right.
	SALEEM	To not have to, you know, stop everything
		because of"weather". Ridiculous. (back to his
		computer) Did you drive?
	LESLIE	Yeah.
20	SALEEM	Complete nightmare this morning. Tree on the
		road or something, that's what they were
		saying?
	LESLIE	I think so.
	SALEEM	Of course I didn't see any trees, but
		·

10 DRAGONFLIES ACT 1 : SCENE 2 11

1		Anything for an excuse, right? Too much rain,	1	SALEEM	Sorry, just bear with me one second. (into the phone)
		not enough rain, wrong kind of rain			Hi, Deborah Sure2078643RQ12F. And the
		A beat. Saleem turns back to the computer.			customer is 90880907 (taps a few keys) Soit's a
		A moment. Then:			transfer of leasehold interest, but Mm-hmmm,
5	SALEEM	Ah great. Here we go (reading through the	5		exactly (he looks briefly to Leslie, concerned, then covers
		information) Socan you please confirm the			it with a smile) Sure. Okay. Thanks, Deborah. Bye.
		address for me?			He hangs up and takes a small breath.
	LESLIE	Rose Cottage, High Cliff, West Lulworth,		SALEEM	Okay, so the issue we're looking at here is
		BH20 7JQ.			yourright. To be sole owner.
10	SALEEM	Great. And your date of birth?	10	LESLIE	Right?
	LESLIE	7th May 1969.		SALEEM	Specifically as a foreign-bornperson.
	SALEEM	Great, great. And finally, justlook into here.		LESLIE	Okay
		Leslie looks into a tiny camera, which flashes red.		SALEEM	Were you aware the laws have changed? With
	SALEEM	(beat, and then at the screen) Rightokay			regards to foreigners owning property.
15		Sorry, did you have your passport with you?	15	LESLIE	But my wife's British. I have indefinite leave
	LESLIE	Yeah.			to remain.
		He hands it over. Saleem flicks through it.		SALEEM	Sure. Of course. But your late wife After the
	SALEEM	Great Singapore Okay What's that like?			2020 Great Britain Land Ownership Act—and
	LESLIE	Clean. Organised. Good for food, not so great			I'm no expert, I have to say, but my colleague's
20		foranarchists.	20		just confirmed—it's now the case that non-
	SALEEM	Okay And no chewing gum, right?			British citizens are no longer entitled to own
	LESLIE	Something like that.			property. In the UK.
	SALEEM	Great. So do you mind just talking me through		LESLIE	Right, okay, but we'remarried and, and it's
		how you managed to purchase the property?			set out in her will.
25	LESLIE	Is that? Sorry, I thought you had the	25	SALEEM	Of course.
		documentation. The mortgage was in my wife's		LESLIE	That's precisely why we drew up a will.
		name and the deposit came from me. It's all set		SALEEM	Of course. But unfortunately that is the
		out in her will. The transfer. Of ownership.			standingin the law.
		He hands over a document from his binder. Saleem			A beat. The rain drills down outside.
30		scans through it briefly and then picks up the phone.	30	LESLIE	So, you're saying the willdoesn't apply?

12 DRAGONFLIES ACT 1 : SCENE 2 13

1	SALEEM	I'm sorry, I can't comment on that, but I can	1	SALEEM	Unfortunately while your step-daughter is still
		say that the Land Authority won't allow the			a minor—
		leasehold to be transferred into your name.		LESLIE	Our daughter won't be a minor in a year.
	LESLIE	So what do we do?		SALEEM	Your daughter, my apologies. But unfortunately,
5	SALEEM	There's not a great deal I can do, I'm afraid. It	5		now the death has been registered, we will need
		is ultimately an issue of the law—			to inform the Land Authority of the change in
	LESLIE	Right.			ownership status.
	SALEEM	(cont'd) as stipulated by the Land Authority. I		LESLIE	So I can't own my own house. And neither can
		mean, there's talk of it everywhere, isn't there?			my daughter?
10		Housing crisis I really am sorry.	10	SALEEM	That is correct.
	LESLIE	So what happens to my house?		LESLIE	Fucking hell.
	SALEEM	Well, I can only really speak for the outstanding		SALEEM	I'mvery sorry.
		debt and we'd need you to settle the mortgage.		LESLIE	So you keep saying.
		I'm assuming your late wife had insurance.		SALEEM	Would you like a glass of water?
15	LESLIE	Yeah.	15		A beat. More rain.
	SALEEM	So once the executor of your late wife's will		LESLIE	I could become British. Is that the solution?
		MrClive Edward Cunningham? Once he's		SALEEM	I'm not really qualified to say but
		managed the outstanding debt As I say, I'm		LESLIE	No. No, of course not. You are qualified to
		no expert but—			take my house away, though. And to say you're
20	LESLIE	I'm asking your opinion. Does the property	20		sorry, even though I seriously doubt that you
		pass to our daughter?			are. Actually sorry. But no, you can't convey an
	SALEEM	(looking through the will) MissM. Wilson?			opinionbeyond what your computer says.
		Yourstep-daughter?			Or Deborah.
	LESLIE	She's legally my daughter. We went through		SALEEM	I can appreciate this must be a difficult time for
25		the whole legal process years Twelve, twelve	25		you, Mr Chen.
		years ago.		LESLIE	Can you?
	SALEEM	How old is she?		SALEEM	I'm trying to help.
	LESLIE	Seventeen, and that's what my wife set out in		LESLIE	Are you? Are you really?
		her will. That it would come to me while I'm		SALEEM	Okay, you want my opinion, then, no. You can't
30		alive, then pass on to Maxine.	30		become British. They're kicking people out,

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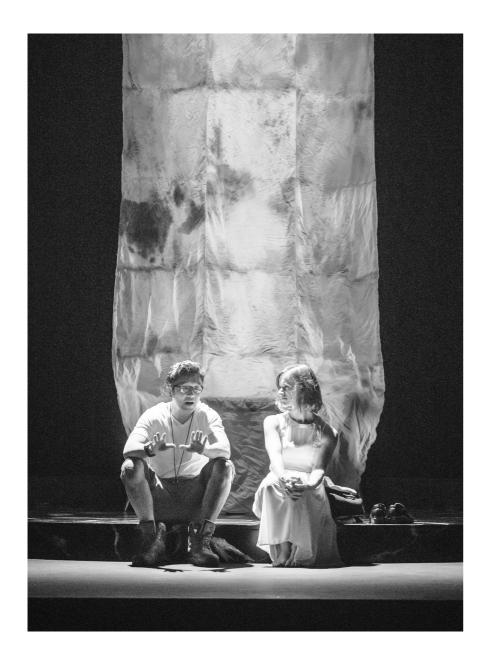
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AN HISTORIC PRODUCTION















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ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Stephanie Street is an actor, writer and director born and raised in Singapore. She read English Literature at Jesus College, Cambridge before training to be an actor on the Nick Hytner scholarship at LAMDA. Her eighteen-year career as an actor has spanned the UK's major theatres and TV channels. Theatre credits include James Graham's *Quiz* in the West End, and *Behind the Beautiful Forevers* and *Nightwatchman* for the National Theatre, the latter earning her a Whatsonstage nomination for Best Solo Performance.

Stephanie is currently the Resident Playwright at Pangdemonium Theatre Company and a columnist for *The Stage*, the world's oldest theatre publication. She is on the Board of Chichester Festival Theatre and cofounded and chairs The Act for Change Project, a campaign for representative diversity in the UK performing arts. Her other plays (produced in the UK) include *Sisters* (Sheffield Crucible), *Wuthering Heights* (Ambassadors Theatre) and *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* (Finborough, Yard Theatre and Summerhall; nominated for the Carol Tambor Best of Edinburgh Award).

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

EPIGRAM BOOKS (epigrambooks.sg) is an independent publisher based in Singapore, established in 2011. We firmly believe in consistently producing new writing of exceeding quality; this commitment can be found in our novels, poetry collections, playscripts and short story collections by notable writers such as Cyril Wong, Boey Kim Cheng, Tan Tarn How, O Thiam Chin, Jean Tay and Mohamed Latiff Mohamed, as well as new voices such as Amanda Lee Koe (winner of the 2014 Singapore Literature Prize for Fiction), Nuraliah Norasid, Jeremy Tiang, Balli Kaur Jaswal and Daryl Qilin Yam. The *Best New Singaporean Short Stories* biennial anthology series was started in 2013 to gather the best Singaporean short fiction being produced today, and the annual Epigram Books Fiction Prize was established in 2015 to promote contemporary novels and reward excellence in Singaporean literature.

We are also dedicated to children's literature, with bestselling and award-winning middle grade series such as *Sherlock Sam*, *The Diary of Amos Lee*, and *Danger Dan*. Our picture books include the *Bo Bo and Cha Cha* and *Sam*, *Sebbie and Di-Di-Di* series, as well as Hedwig Anuar Award winner *Where's Grandma?*, Royal Commonwealth Society Essay Competition winner *The Rock and the Bird*, and former President SR Nathan's *The Crane and the Crab*.

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"A dynamic and fresh look on current affairs that aims to enrich, surprise and stimulate its audience. But overall, the message of *Dragonflies* is simple: build bridges, not walls."—*Pride Kindness*

The year is 2021 and climate change is wreaking havoc across the globe. Donald Trump has been re-elected US President for a second term. Brexit is in full effect and causing chaos all over Europe. In the wake of escalating wars in the Middle East, famine in West Africa, and relentless terrorist attacks by radical extremists, the UK—and many nations around the world—has enforced a ban on all immigration.

With the coastline around him and life as he knows it crumbling to dust, Leslie Chen is forced to abandon his home in England and move his family back to his birthplace, Singapore. Confronting a country that is a world apart from the one he knew as a child, he is now made to question the meaning of home. As the crises and conflicts escalate, one thing is certain, come hell or high water, and possibly both, he must protect his family.

Dragonflies is the story of a family fighting for survival in a hostile world, looking for somewhere to call home, and something that might look like hope.

