

“Yeo’s best work.”—KK Seet, *Asiaweek*

the eye of history



a play by
robert yeo

the eye
of history

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 PREFACE BY THE AUTHOR

Of all my plays, I have the happiest memory of the writing process of *The Eye of History*.

I must have begun in the early 1980s, around the time when Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was talking about his successor and the new generation that would lead Singapore into the future. On 6 December 1989, as part of the diamond jubilee (1929–1989) of the Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences at the National University of Singapore, I read from an excerpt of the play on the university campus. This reading was part of the multilingual celebration of Singaporean writers called *Voices of Singapore*; there was another reading the following day.

Accompanying the reading was a programme that printed poems and prose, and the excerpt I read from became eventually Act Two of *The Eye of History*. I had intended it to be a one-act play but during a three-month sabbatical in May 1990 at the University of Sydney, the idea of enlarging it into a three-act affair entered my mind. The result was the addition of new material, what is now found in Act One and Act Three; this was written rather quickly over two days, 15 and 21 May 1990, during weekends in a private home in the delightful neighbourhood of Rozelle, New South Wales. Writing quickly means that my pen flowed fluently, prompted by having absorbed fully the ideas therein, and it was a sign of a kind of inspiration for me. Usually, as in this case, there was little revision.

• • •

There are several pleasures to be derived from writing for the stage; I will mention two of the most obvious. The first is to see characters and situations I've written fully realised on stage; "full" is, of course, relative, but as actors perform my words, I become aware that although I provide the cues, much

of what happens are interpretations, modifications and additions to my original concepts—and I am frequently left very pleasantly surprised.

The second is how the bare script I have written can be changed sometimes beyond recognition by the director, perhaps the most important of the many interpreters in the collaborative venture from page to stage. KK Seet told me of how he planned to stage the show, and I met his set and lighting designers and media consultant, who explained to me what they had in mind. But I could not have imagined the transformations that were wrought by technical night and subsequently on opening night. Tan Beng Kiang's set design, ably enhanced by Thio Lay Hoon's lighting, magically created the home of the great 19th century writer Munshi Abdullah, and then transported the audience into Singapore in the early eighties. The statue scene was another highlight; as I wrote it, the Raffles statue was to be assembled on the ground and mounted from the base up, but the director suspended the statue from the rafters and gradually lowered it onto its base. Visually and dramatically, it was a great improvement on my original idea.

The actors also added to and subtracted from the script. Lines and scenes that did not work were removed or changed, inspired improvisations during rehearsals were added, and I was asked to write a different ending to the play. All these point to the process of playmaking in which the script is not regarded as one hundred per cent sacrosanct, but something that is changeable and capable of being remade by the fecund meeting of minds.

I was immensely pleased with the outcome and proud to be associated with all who worked on the project.

• • •

The play was staged at the Victoria Theatre from 9–12 January 1992, and attracted considerable publicity, not only from the in-house magazine of the National University of Singapore Society but also from the local press

and *Asiaweek*. *The Straits Times* provided two reviews, one called “Playing LKY”, which featured an interview with Leslie Koh (who played Lee Kuan Yew) and another with Jek Kian Jin (who provided the computerised visuals in the play). *The Business Times* carried a review entitled “Eyepopping History”. *The New Paper* also got into the act with a review called “When LKY met Raffles”. *Vantage*, a local magazine, put photographs of the two major cast members, Leslie Koh and Christopher Townsend, on the cover of its January 1992 issue and made the forthcoming production its lead story, “Back to the Future”, with over eight pages and four stylish photographs.

Asiaweek, in its 19 June 1992 issue, gave the play a full one-page review in its Books section entitled “Journey into Singapore's Soul”. It contained an interview with me detailing my poems and plays before *The Eye of History*, problems with the censors, and short interviews with director KK Seet and poet and literary critic Kirpal Singh.

• • •

I kept a diary in the lead-up to opening night, which is now published for the first time. Hopefully, if the play enjoys subsequent stagings, directors and players might find the diary useful.

8 Jan – Technical Rehearsal

Went to VT at 4.30pm. Entered theatre in darkness, heard a female voice and asked “Who are you?” “Beng Kiang.” “Hi!” “Be careful when you go onstage. There is a ladder there.” Went upstage to see the set being assembled. The actors were there and crew. In the stalls, halfway, were the lights people, trying out positions. Crew were moving things onstage.

Got hungry—met Brian and we decided to go out to Boat Quay for a meal. He had noodles and I had yong tau foo. Returned in ½ hr, at about 6.30pm.

KK “threw a bomb” and said LKY’s table was too small, asked if I could look into getting a bigger one. The table had begun to look small after the set was assembled.

Technical continued. Met Michele and Pat who were deputising for Pat Liu. Also Azman(?) who sat with Michele. Leonard was busy clicking away.

Brian tried out the bush jacket and trousers, which Mrs Hiscock had delivered to NIE at 12.30pm earlier. Found the jacket fine but the trousers loose, and so he’ll use a safety pin.

Sat next to Yoke Peng near the lights. She was positive, quietly enjoying herself, reading a book and newspapers. To my left, Caroline and her crew from SBC.

The technical went on. I went onstage to look at the Raffles statue. It was a good replica except that it was short, i.e. Raffles had a shorter neck and legs and altogether he looked stocky. The base was short, but had to be if the workmen were to handle the statue coming down from the flybars onto the base. (Looking back, for reasons of authenticity, the base could be taller, closer to the original.)

Got hungry at 9.00pm and left to get some noodles and stayed until nearly 11pm. Told KK goodbye and left.

9 Jan – Opening Night

Went to Censorship Review Committee Meeting, 10am to 12noon. Went to Actuus to look for the LKY table and found nothing suitable. Rang Dawn at TheatreWorks tried but could not help; she suggested Salvation Army at Middle Rd which I did not think suitable. Tried Gilbert Hu at NIE and he had nothing—except the Director’s table. Worried about this and at about 6.30 rang KK at VT to tell him.

Went to VT around 7.25pm, parked back of VT and went in by door through unloading bay. Back stage was in darkness. Walked right through to back stage left and wished KK well. He seemed a little nervous. Wished

Chris and Les well and then went to lobby to greet friends. Saw Pin Foo and Lay Yong and chatted with them briefly. Entered theatre in darkness as performance had already begun, my watch being slow. Heard Abd’s voiceover and grabbed the “best” seat, about third row from front.

My impression was that the theatre was not full, but had between 70–90% of house.

Performance went on without hitch. I was impressed by the set and visuals, especially the projection of old Singapore and a boat that moved. I had a vague idea of what KK wanted to do but not what I saw unfolding. The visuals were most effective during change of scenes, offering audience scenes of old to modern Singapore, from Abd’s to workmen. For the workmen scene or just before, the visual was of Singapore River with tall buildings behind.

Robert Yeo
2016

MESSAGE FROM THE 1992 PROGRAMME BOOKLET

I have been the producer of all my plays and the National University of Singapore Society has been my partner in these enterprises. I wrote this message in the programme for the 1992 performance of The Eye of History, which I now reprint because it remains relevant today.

When I first began on this play early in the eighties, it was an attempt to answer an enigmatic question: if Sir Stamford Raffles met Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, what would they say to each other?

Even before the question is answered at the level of dialogue, for many, perhaps the dramatic form which such a meeting demands will come to mind first. It cannot be realistic, of course, it has to be fantasy, and since it involves a historical character like Raffles, it becomes a historical fantasy. This, then, is my chosen description of the play, my fourth.

The very idea that two of the principal makers of modern Singapore should meet seems an intriguing one. I believe in a good idea—and I hope my audience will agree with me that this is a good one—because it provides a pedestal for much imagining.

A large part of the imagining will include time shifts as Raffles emerges from the past to discuss the past, the present and the future with Mr Lee Kuan Yew. Audiences acquainted with my earlier plays, which were realistic ones with chronological plotting, will realize that the play they have come to see represents a fairly radical departure from previous practice. Time is fused on this occasion. The past is the vista of Raffles and the tireless chronicler of the period around 1819, Munshi Abdullah, author of the fascinating *Hikayat Abdullah*; it moves to the middle years of this century when British scholar AH Hill began work on the latest translation of the *Hikayat*, and on to 1981 when the famous meeting between Raffles and Lee takes place.

The centrepiece, or what will undoubtedly be seen as the centrepiece of the play, is their first meeting on 5 July 1981. Why that date? Those who know their early history of Singapore will need no reminder that Raffles was born on 5 July 1781; those who do not might welcome a timely reminder. 1981 was therefore chosen because it was the 200th anniversary of Raffles's birth, and he appears before the Prime Minister bristling to know why his birthday has gone uncelebrated. 1981 was also the year when political succession, especially the phasing out of the old guard and the entry of young leaders, was first discussed.

So, among other things, my audience can expect a short history lesson, but delivered in a humorous way without detracting from the seriousness of what is said. I use the words “say” and “said” to draw attention to the fact that dialogue, with minimal movement, is an important aspect of the play. I want to create a tableau effect to facilitate the suspension of disbelief. Towards this effect, the director KK Seet and the designer Tan Beng Kiang have worked. I have had glimpses of how they will physically transform the play and enhance it visually, and I look forward eagerly to the opening night.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I dedicate this book to KK Seet.

I am grateful to Oxford University Press for permission to quote from the annotated translation of the *Hikayat Abdullah* by AH Hill, Oxford Asia Paperbacks, 1970, pp. 29–30. I have used Abdullah's own words in the Hill translation to retain the flavour of his speech, and this is indicated by inverted commas at the opening and closing of the speeches. The same too applies to Hill's interjection in Act One, Scene 3.

The text quoted in Act Two is from *Social and Economic History of Modern Singapore* by Tan Keng Kang, Longman Singapore [for] Curriculum Development Institute of Singapore, 1984. The keen-eyed observer will notice that this publication is actually three years after the fantastical meeting between Sir Stamford Raffles and Lee Kuan Yew in that scene, and therefore Raffles could not have found the book at METRO or any other shop in Singapore in 1981. However, in the interests of preserving the original material, and in keeping in mind the “historical fantasy” nature of this play, this anachronistic reference remains as is.

Act Two was published in the programme of *Voices of Singapore*, presented by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, National University of Singapore, edited by Anne Pakir, 1990, pp. 70–81. An excerpt was published in *TUMASIK: Contemporary Writing in Singapore*, edited by Alvin Pang, Autumn Hill Books, International Writing Program at the University of Iowa and National Arts Council of Singapore, 2009, pp. 215–224. Another excerpt was published in *KULIT*, Volume 2, edited by Dennis Yeo, Vivienne Chua and Elaine Lim, Pearson Education, 2014, pp. 88–97.

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PRODUCTION NOTES

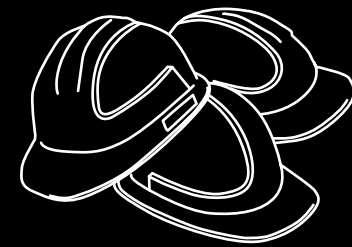
The Eye of History was staged by the National University of Singapore Society from 9 to 12 January 1992 at the Victoria Theatre. The play was directed by KK Seet and produced by Robert Yeo, with set design by Tan Beng Kiang and lighting design by Thio Lay Hoon. Music was composed by Robert Luse. The cast was as follows, in order of appearance:

MUNSHI ABDULLAH	T. Sasitharan
MALAY WORKMAN	Mas Indra Mashor
INDIAN WORKMAN	K. Thulasidass
CHINESE WORKMAN	Johnny Low
DE SOUZA	Jailani Abu Bakar
AH HILL	Brian Merrick
LEE KUAN YEW	Leslie Koh
PENG	Simon Kevin Lim
STAMFORD RAFFLES	Christopher Townsend
A SERVING MAID	Cheryl Tang

CHARACTERS

ABDULLAH BIN ABDUL KADIR	Author of the <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i> (aka Munshi Abdullah)
LEE KUAN YEW	Prime Minister of Singapore, 1959–1990
SIR STAMFORD RAFFLES	Founder of Singapore
AH HILL	Translator of the <i>Hikayat Abdullah</i>
PENG	Principal Private Secretary of the Prime Minister
DE SOUZA	Eurasian supervisor of workmen
MALAY WORKMAN	
INDIAN WORKMAN	
CHINESE WORKMAN	
A SERVING MAID	

ACT 1



ACT 1 : SCENE 1

Enter Abdullah bin Abdul bin Kadir, dressed in baju and sarong, and wearing a songkok. He is of medium build and height, and dark-skinned because of his Arab and Tamil origins. He enters in front of the curtain and crosses over to a roll-top writing desk of the Baba variety. Abdullah steps over to the desk, rolls up the cover and goes through a sheaf of papers in Jawi handwriting. He sits down on a chair, dips a pen in an inkwell and makes a correction. Then he turns to address the audience, whilst occasionally looking at his papers.

1

ABDULLAH

Sometime later a rumour was heard in Malacca that the English were going to attack Java. Two or three months after we heard this news, Mr Raffles and his wife suddenly came to Malacca, with an English copying clerk named Mr Merlin and a Malay clerk named Ibrahim, a half-Indian from Penang. Mr Raffles took a house in Bandar Hilir on an estate owned by the Chinese Kapitan's son, whose name was Baba Cheng Lan. He brought with him many objects of European workmanship, things displayed in cabinets, pistols, costly satin materials and gold and silver headings, and many other objects intended as presents for Malay royalty.

10

15

One day, Ibrahim the Malay writer came to my house and sat talking about how Mr Raffles was looking for copyists whose handwriting

1 was good, and how he wanted to buy old
 Malay letters and texts. He said that those who
 had any should take them to Mr Raffles' house
 at Bandar Hilir. One of my uncles, named
 5 Ismail Lebai, had very good handwriting, and
 he and his younger brother Mohammed were
 both taken on as copyists. The next day,
 Ibrahim came again and asked for a specimen
 of my handwriting. After I had written one, he
 10 took it to Mr Raffles, and the same afternoon
 one of his attendants came to summon me. So I
 went along, and Mr Raffles said to me: "Copy
 these letters into a book." Now, working there
 was a Malacca-born friend of mine named
 15 Tambi Ahmad bin Nina Merikan. There was
 all manner of work done—some wrote letters,
 others wrote about the idioms of the Malay
 language, its poetry and so on. Each of us had
 his own task.

20 *He turns around to his desk and takes up his pen to
 make corrections.*

ABDULLAH "In the name of Allah, the Merciful and the
 compassionate.

25 "It happened that on about the twenty-
 second day of October 1840 a friend of mine,
 an Englishman of whom I was fond, urged me
 strongly to give an account of my life history
 and the events of my life. He suggested that I
 should write my autobiography in Malay. But
 30 in truth, my heart felt sad and my limbs heavy

1 as I thought of my dear friend's wish. For all
 the important events of my life now belonged
 to my past.

5 "I felt the more embarrassed, too, when I
 remembered that I am indeed an ignorant man,
 lacking in wisdom and understanding of the art
 of letters and inexperienced in the ways of
 authorship...

10 "Moreover I am diffident about my own
 powers because I have heard and seen so many
 people proclaim their own cleverness, with
 such boastful talk that folk really think them
 clever. But it is so much idle nonsense. For if
 anyone asks them to undertake a work of
 15 composition requiring knowledge of the
 meanings of words, the emptiness of their
 claims is at once discovered. All their assumed
 cleverness is not a result of learning but an
 incoherent hotchpotch of information that they
 have picked up from all over the place. But
 again, so many people are as helpless as a
 goldsmith without his touchstone...

20 "All this is especially true nowadays.
 Since Singapore has become a settlement,
 grasshoppers have become eagles, bedbugs
 tortoises, and earthworms serpents. These
 strange happenings have their origins in
 material wealth and position. The most
 ignorant and lowly person is considered well-
 25 bred if he is but possessed of wealth. If he is
 30

1 clever and well-bred but not wealthy, people
despise him.

“The types of people I have just sketched
and the lives they lead I will use to illustrate my
5 own circumstances. As for me, I was born of a
lowly station and have lived in poverty. I am
lacking in knowledge and experience. I am not
an expert in writing and have no talent save that
Allah has granted to me. I am never unconscious
10 of my own shortcomings and weaknesses.

“When I had reached this stage in my
thoughts, suddenly it was as if someone had
startled me from my reverie and said to me; ‘If
you are lowly, go and ask the mighty. If you are
15 poor, go ask the rich. And if you lack
knowledge and understanding, ask Allah who
has promised that to all who ask of Him it shall
be given.’ So if it pleases Him to bestow his
faith upon me with all my heart, I pray for the
20 help of Allah the Most High (who for all its
breadth has spread above us unsupported of the
canopy of the sky) that he will fulfil the wish of
my dear friend. And even if I be totally unfitted
to undertake the work, yet I do hope that he
25 will be with me in this humble task. There was
all manner of work done; some copied stories.”

CURTAIN

ACT 1 : SCENE 2 (1969)

*On the right bank of the Singapore River beside the
Parliament House, where Raffles was supposed to
have landed. Workmen assemble to put up his white
polymarble statue on the spot. It is a Sunday morning,
about 9am. In the foreground are railings alongside the
river (with the river positioned to the audience's
location); the background, therefore, shows the back of
the Parliament House and the old Immigration building.*

*Enter the three workmen, identifiable as Chinese,
Malay and Indian Tamil, with a sextant, toolkits, pails,
spades, brooms, etc. They gather in front of the railings.*

1	MALAY	(looking down at the river) Aiyah, the water so dirty, why he want to come here ah?
	INDIAN	Goondu you, when he came, water not like this, very clean, got fish.
5	MALAY	Got pirates too, hah hah, Malay pirates, like this. (grimaces as if he has a knife between his teeth and points to his red sash; they all laugh)
	CHINESE	Sure ah? (pronounces 'sure' as a shortened form of 'sewer') No tongkang men.
10	MALAY	No lah, you Chinese come here later, we here first.
	INDIAN	Hey you don't gasak buta. You didn't learn history in school ah? When he first came, Malay here, Chinese here, Indians—
	MALAY	(puts on an Indian accent) Indians also here dah.
15	INDIAN	Sure dah.
	CHINESE	Who come first?
	MALAY	Why worry lah, we all come before him what.

1 CHINESE Okay, okay. Now, we better start work. (*points to a spot where the statue is to be mounted*) Down here ah?

5 INDIAN Measure first. (*looks around the river and the two buildings on either side of him*) Where sextant?

MALAY No need lah, de Souza (*pronounces it as "susah"*) measure already yesterday with sextant. He say he dig a little hole and draw chalk around it.

10 CHINESE Wait, wait, I sweep first. (*takes the broom and starts to sweep the leaves, some of which fly into the direction of the river*)

INDIAN Hey, hold on lah, don't sweep into the river, okay. River dirty already. Use this. (*hands him a dustpan made from a metal kerosine box cut into two*)

15 CHINESE What? You frighten kena fine ah? Don't worry lah, today is Sunday, policeman not around.

INDIAN Not that. Show respect for him. (*indicates with his thumb pointing to the wings*) So don't sweep lah, pick up leaves with your hand.

20 *The Indian workman bends down to pick up the leaves and deposits them into the dustpan. The Chinese workman does the same.*

MALAY There, the chalk, there. (*points*) And the hole here. *The other two look at where he is pointing.*

25 CHINESE Okay.

INDIAN Let's put it up.

MALAY Wait, wait.

INDIAN Wait for what? This is the right spot.

MALAY I know this is the right spot. Very good place ah? See (*points to the left direction of the river's*

1 *mouth*) down there he can see the boat come, and down there (*points to the right in the direction of Canning Rise*) the bukit.

CHINESE Bukit down there? Bukit is "hill" right?

5 MALAY Right.

CHINESE Then why you say "down there"?

MALAY Oh, sorry, I mean up there lah.

INDIAN Up there where got hill?

MALAY Up there lah, Fort Canning. Wah, don't know your geography. Canning Rise. What's the meaning of rise? Means go up, right?

10 INDIAN Oh, smart guy. You teach me geography and I teach you history.

CHINESE Hey, what you two talking about? Come, we start now, de Susah coming already. (*exits*) *The other two workmen follow him into the wings and reappear, all three of them pushing a big rectangular object wrapped up in a white sack-like substance commonly used in construction sites, mounted in a crate with wheels.*

20 CHINESE Careful ah. *They all push carefully, grunting occasionally, moving the big object to the centre of the stage. They then proceed to unwrap it, gradually revealing the base of the Raffles statue about ten feet in height, with a square base of five feet, topped by another square of four feet, and topped by a round two-foot base for the feet of the Raffles figure. They unload it horizontally on the ground. Two more workmen join them; with ropes, they raise the base to a vertical*

25

30

1 *position. They move it about to position it accurately, with the English inscription on the lowest base facing the audience.*

CHINESE I think like this all right.

5 INDIAN Okay.

MALAY Yah.

They all look up and down approvingly.

CHINESE I think we can put cement now.

INDIAN Hey, got words, man. See what it says. *(bends to read)*

10 MALAY Yes, this side also got. Malay words.

CHINESE This side too, in Chinese.

INDIAN What does it say?

CHINESE Sorry lah, in Chinese. I can't read Chinese.

15 INDIAN Susah lah you, Chinese can't read Chinese.

CHINESE You think you what so clever ah? Here got curly, curly words, must be Tamil. Okay you read, smart guy.

INDIAN Sorry lah, I can't read Tamil.

20 CHINESE So who's the smart guy? Tamil can't read Tamil.

INDIAN What's so bad about that? Singapore don't have Speak Tamil Campaign. If got, sure I can speak Tamil. But Singapore got Speak Mandarin Campaign what, so you better learn okay?

25 MALAY Hey you two, come, here got Malay words, I read to you. No need Speak Malay Campaign.

INDIAN Okay, shoot.

MALAY *(reads)* "Di tapak yang bersejarah ini Sir Thomas Stamford Raffles mula mendarat di Singapura pada 28 haribulan Januari 1819 dan

30

1 dengan daya pangamatan dan kecerdasan yang tinggi telah mengubah kendukan Singapura dari sebuah kampung nelayan terpanchil menjadi sebuah pelabuhan besar dan kota metropolis moden."

5 CHINESE Oh this is the statue of Raffles ah?

INDIAN You mean you donno?

CHINESE No, I think—

INDIAN You think what?

10 CHINESE I think statue of Lee Kuan Yew.

INDIAN Joker you.

CHINESE I think, next to Parliament House, sure his statue what? *(pause)* Anyway what the Malay words say?

MALAY Don't worry lah. The other side got English words. *(all three go to the side with the English words on it, one third of the way up the base)* Lucky in Singapore now everything got four sides, but donno how long. Hey, we all read together, okay?

15 CHINESE Sure lah.

20 INDIAN Shoot.

MALAY Tembak lah.

INDIAN What did you say?

MALAY You say "shoot" right?

INDIAN Right.

25 MALAY Shoot in Malay is "tembak".

INDIAN *(slightly puzzled)* Oh, okay.

CHINESE Okay, ready to tembak.

MALAY Ready.

INDIAN Ready.

30 *They all read in chorus with reasonable unison.*

1 ALL “On this historic site, Sir Thomas Stamford
 Raffles first landed in Singapore on 28th
 January 1819 and with genius and perception
 changed the destiny of Singapore from an
 5 obscure fishing village to a great seaport and
 modern metropolis.”

CURTAIN

ACT 1 : SCENE 3

Same location, one day later. It is 9am. The base is not yet topped with the figure of Raffles, but the whole is still under wraps, tied lightly with ropes. The three workmen appear with two long aluminium ladders.

1	INDIAN	De Susah coming in today to look at the whole thing.
	CHINESE	When he come?
	INDIAN	<i>(looks at his watch)</i> Anytime now.
5	MALAY	We better see first, make sure everything okay. His name is Susah, you know.
		<i>The Malay and Indian workmen climb up to the top of the wrapped object to untie it. The Chinese workman looks on. The head of Raffles appears first, and then the rest of the statue, as well as the base.</i>
10		<i>Both men come down their ladders. They all look up.</i>
	MALAY	Look quite nice.
	INDIAN	The way he stand, really lawah. See if I can stand like him. <i>(tries to strike up the Raffles pose; they all laugh)</i>
15	MALAY	You don't lawah lah. Let me try. <i>(tries but his legs are too close together)</i>
	CHINESE	Wait wait, don't move. <i>(goes to the Malay workman and parts his legs)</i> Your leg must open, like this. <i>(demonstrates and provides a reasonably close resemblance to the statue; indicates with a raising of his chin)</i> See up there. <i>(the other two look up)</i>
20		You both try.
		<i>The Indian tries but folds his arms the wrong way,</i>

1 exposing his right hand instead of the left.

MALAY Salah lah. Your hands the wrong way lah. Like
this. (*moves the arms of the Indian workman until he
gets the right arm folded*)

5 CHINESE Like that stylo, lah. We all try before de Susah
come.
*All three of them strike the pose correctly and smile
and laugh broadly, enjoying themselves.
Enter de Souza at this point.*

10 DE SOUZA Sir Stamford Raffles, I presume.
All three of them break of their poses and laugh.

INDIAN Hi, Mr de Susah—I mean sorry, Mr de Souza.
The other two nod.

DE SOUZA Having fun, I see.

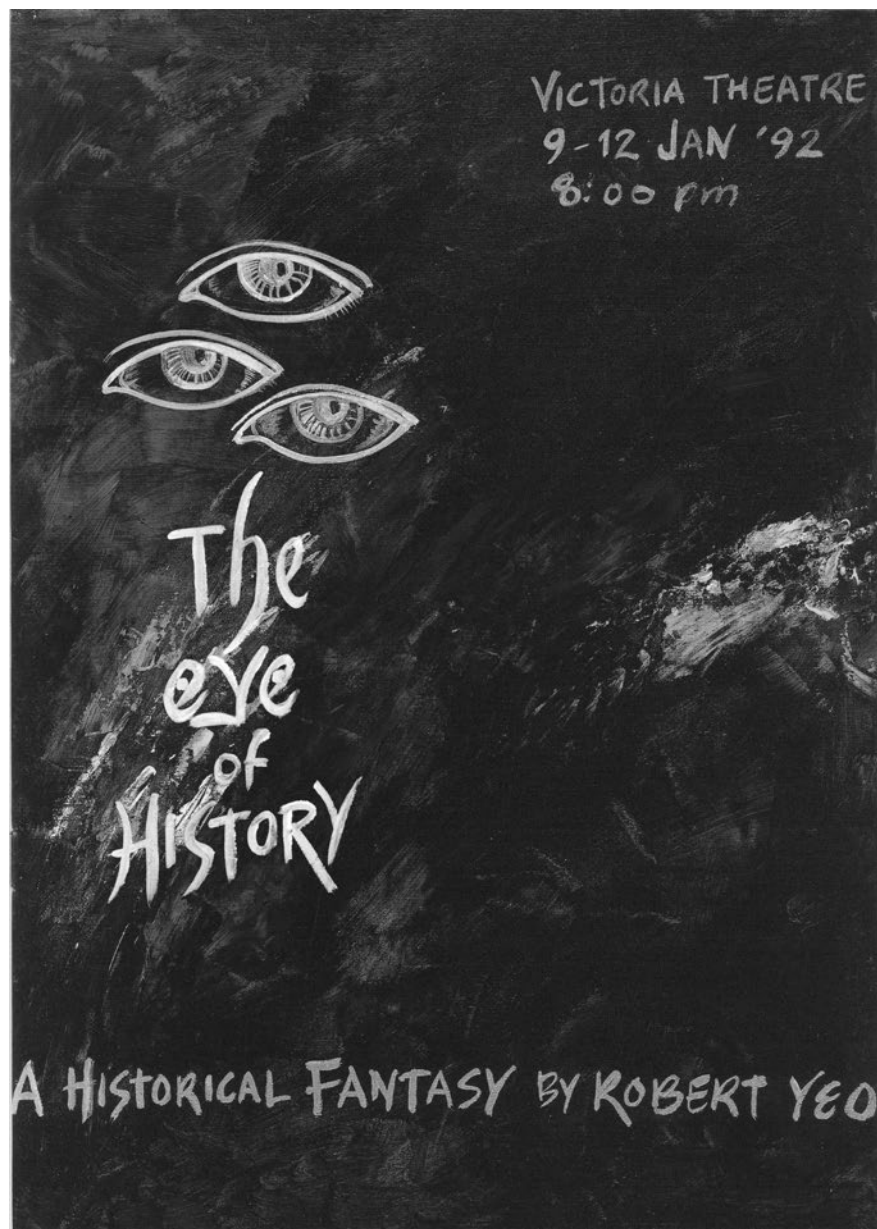
15 MALAY Little bit, lah, Encik de Souza. (*indicates the statue*)
But you see, the work finish, we have some fun.
*De Souza looks up. Then he inspects the base, walking
around. He points to the plaques with the inscription.*

DE SOUZA There are some cement stains here. You better
20 clean it up.
*He kicks gently against the base and seems satisfied.
Next, he goes up the ladder and gives the statue a
good once-over. Comes down and goes up the other
ladder and does the same.*

25 INDIAN Okay, Mr de Souza?
*De Souza does not reply but comes down. The
workmen look at him anxiously.*

DE SOUZA Everything is okay, except for one thing. (*the
three men look at one another*) The statue...
30 (*deliberately pauses, looking at the three men; they*

¹ look back at him with eyes wide) The statue, you goondus, is facing the wrong way.
The three workmen look at one another with incredulous eyes.



Programme cover, National University of Singapore Society

ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Robert Yeo has been described as “the most Singaporean of Singaporean writers”. He has written five volumes of poetry and five plays, dealing with issues ranging from political detention in Singapore to the Vietnam War and the Great Marriage Debate. He has also written a novel, a memoir and essays on cultural policy and theatre, compiled anthologies of Singaporean Literature, and co-written books on the teaching of Literature for secondary schools. In 1978, he attended the University of Iowa’s International Writing Program, and in 1995 was a Fulbright Scholar. From 1977 to 1994, he chaired two drama committees, the Drama Advisory Committee and the Drama Review Committee, which helped to develop English-language theatre in Singapore, and in recognition of his service, he was awarded the Public Service Medal in 1991.

His triptych of connected plays—*Are You There, Singapore?*, *One Year Back Home* and *Changi*—was collected in 2001 as *The Singapore Trilogy*. In October 2009, his libretto for opera titled *Kannagi*, a short chamber piece based on an Indian epic poem, was staged in Singapore’s Sri Mariamman Temple with John Sharpley as composer. Another libretto, a full-length opera titled *Fences* (also with John Sharpley) was staged in August 2012.

In 2011, Yeo was awarded the SEA Write Award, and he published his memoir, *Routes 1940–75*. Epigram Books re-released his 1986 novel *The Adventures of Holden Heng* in 2011, and published his career-spanning retrospective poetry collection *The Best of Robert Yeo* in 2012. Currently, he teaches creative writing at Singapore Management University and mentors for NAC’s Mentor Access Project.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

EPIGRAM BOOKS (epigrambooks.sg) is an independent publisher based in Singapore, established in 2011.

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