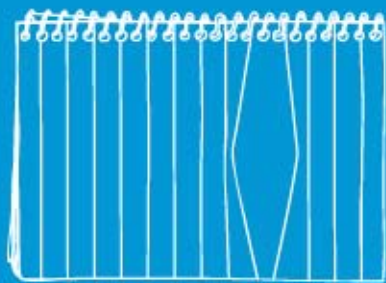


“The gravest and most compelling work of Tan’s career.”—*The Straits Times*

# fear of writing



a play by  
tan tern hoo

fear  
of writing

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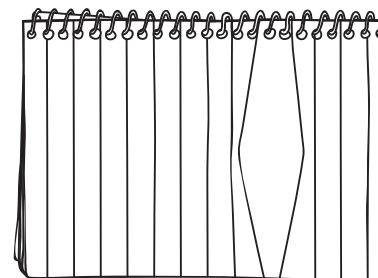
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fear  
of writing



a play by  
tan tarn how



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For  
LC, MJ and MW  
as always

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ARE WE ALL GUILTY?

ON READING TAN TARN HOW'S *FEAR OF WRITING*

Introduction by C. J. W.-L. Wee

---

On the website of a policy research institution, we are told that “Mr. Tan Tarn How is a Senior Research Fellow” and “[h]is research areas are in arts and cultural policy and media and Internet policy. [...] He was a journalist for nearly one and a half decades [...] and he] has also been a teacher and television scriptwriter and is an award-winning playwright. He graduated from Cambridge University.”

Given the above profile, we might well ask: is the play *Fear of Writing* then mainly about this Mr. Tan's difficulty in writing a new play after a gap of ten years? Is it about writer's block? And what is this fear of writing? Is Mr. Tan the same as the character in the play called the Writer who struggles over the question of whether, in the final analysis, his problem is more about a lack of his own bravery in writing what he wishes to be a “political” play than anything else? When Mr. Tan is mentioned directly in Act One, the Director tells us that after “Tarn How handed in the script[,] we, as required by law, sent it to the MDA—that's the Media Development Authority, I can see some of you [in the audience] don't know that. MDA, a.k.a. the official censor.”<sup>1</sup> The MDA usually returns a response to the company “[with] either yes or no [for the performance].”<sup>2</sup> And so, here is the rub for the Director: it is now the opening night “and we have not heard from them.”<sup>3</sup> What is the theatre company to do?

So is the play, in the end, actually *about* this Mr. Tan who faces challenges first in writing a play and then in getting it approved for production, given what seem to be difficult legalities over public performances? Maybe—or maybe not. Or, perhaps, what is also pertinent is that the play becomes a very deliberate and even confusing *provocation*

---

—given the varied and dizzying levels of “reality” and “fictionality” embedded in the play’s multi-media format—for the audience to think about what “writing” actually signifies in Singapore for those who pay attention to expression in the context of the difficult legalities mentioned.

*Fear of Writing* starts off in Act One with the Director speaking of the intricacies involved in staging “sensitive” plays. Act Two proceeds to the performance of the “actual” play itself, in which in place of a plot, we are offered a series of reflections by a diverse host of characters—the Writer, an ordinary Singaporean named Eric, an Expat, a Uniquely Singaporean Promoter, among others—which relate to what can be called the “trancelike moods of contemporary consumer culture”<sup>4</sup> that envelopes Singapore and makes it hard to dream of other visions of Life in the city-state. Finally, in Act Three, the entire play is disrupted by an MDA Official who applies one set of the very legalities over public performance that the Director first brought to the audience’s attention—and so, the final act closes the circle started in Act One. The play may well be about Mr. Tan, but he also may desire others to share in his challenges in writing.

The two key terms of the title dominate the play. First, the question of *writing*. This term becomes an expansive metaphor for literary writing, for critical, self-reflexive expression, and for the link between imaginative writing and its ability to articulate social and political realities. The play queries whether the literal and abstract space for articulation exists in the city-state of Singapore, in the wake of talk of the liberalisation of expression heard since the 2000s. We are then moved on to reflect upon the role of writing for ordinary persons in the city-state. There also appears to be an implicit question as to whether the culturally literate, niche audience who see serious or “high-brow” plays (such as *Fear of Writing*) are in any way transformed by art—or is it all just so much consumerist entertainment?

Second, the question of *fear*. Is the fear of writing a fear about the *intrinsic* difficulty of writing itself in a society where criticality has a limited

scope to function, and therefore, as a consequence, has only a limited purchase? The play modulates towards a concern with *fear and* writing, rather than only fear *of* writing, and how we might confront this fear.

In Act Two, scene 20, the Writer tells his daughter, who is studying overseas, that he has recently read a book on Lu Xun (1881-1936)<sup>5</sup>. He stumbles across a famous autobiographical text written by this major modernist Chinese writer on the possible role of literature in the very formation of a self-reflexive and free national culture, and on why Lu Xun had given up studying medicine in Japan:

I happened to see in a newsreel a Chinese who was about to be decapitated (by the Japanese) for serving as a (Russian) spy. I felt then that China had to promote a new literature before anything else. Before the term was over I had left for Tokyo, because after this film I felt that medical science was not so important after all. The people of a weak and backward country, however strong and healthy they may be, can only serve to be made examples of, or to witness such futile spectacles; and it doesn’t really matter how many of them die of illness. The most important thing, therefore, was to change their spirit, and since at that time I felt that literature was the best means to this end, I determined to promote a literary movement.<sup>6</sup>

The writer enquires of his daughter: “Do you think Lu Xun was too hopeful about the might of the pen? I thought I will dash this off to you in lieu of nothing to report, especially on the playwriting front.”<sup>7</sup> The lofty reflection on writing is offset, in general, by a deliberately deleterious form of self-undercutting relating to the Writer’s failure to write—lofty thoughts, it seems, may have to take the place of present artistic failings; but yet, the high-minded hope in the transformative capacity of artistic culture never quite fades in the play, though the “real” (and maybe the failed) role of art in the city-state is also almost scathingly critiqued at times.

The Returned Overseas Singaporean tells the audience of himself:



“Four years as a programmer in Silicon Valley. [...] They asked me to swap my Singapore passport for an American one. I didn’t have to think too hard about it. When you come down to it, there’s no better place than here. I came back. I mean, too much freedom isn’t really that good. [...] I live in a luxury condo in Nassim Road. I drive a Lexus LS.”<sup>8</sup>

On a less cosmopolitan, financially exalted level, the more socially humble National Day Parade Attendee from the heartland of public housing estates says:

“I mean ah the government so good to us, every few years give us Singapore Shares, economic restructuring shares, rebates this and that, ah, where got other government in other country do this, I ask you, you tell me lah.”<sup>9</sup>

The humanistic capacity of art to transform—what is that to either of them? Why should we not take the word of these positive-sounding Singaporeans on freedom and on what is truly Real to be definitive, rather than take the Writer’s word on Singapore? The implied reply in the play is that such Singaporeans may ignore or even be unaware of certain aspects of Singapore life—presumably because of the informal social compact between the ruling party and the people on economic development and freedom. Well then, in terms of art’s regenerative capacity, what of the artistically oriented Singaporeans who are aware of the history of the costs paid for rapid development? Is *their* consciousness transformed by art? The Writer and the play seem sceptical.

Those who have paid the cost include Chia Thye Poh, older artists like the late Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002)—“jailed without trial for four years and seven months. [...] He was just one among hundreds arrested in 1976 and 1977”<sup>10</sup>—and younger artists affected by the controversy over performance art in 1994.<sup>11</sup> This is old news of course—“that’s history too”<sup>12</sup>, the Writer says, *double entendre* intended. The language that he uses to ask why there is fear in the present sounds like phrases taken from the

darker days of the Cold War: “What can they do to you? What did you do wrong? [...] Am I scared?”<sup>13</sup> Thus, another question the play asks seems to be: how much have things changed, fundamentally, in the now-globalised Singapore from the past?<sup>14</sup> From the Writer’s perspective, the presence of fear stands for a failure of the “spiritual”:

Later, when I left the place because of circumstances outside my control, I thought of the nature of imperfection. There is first the imperfection of the material, and it seems to me these can be tolerated. [...] Then there is the imperfection of the spiritual. And it seems to me that such imperfections, no matter how small are intolerable. That is, we would be less than human if we see these imperfections and do nothing about them.<sup>15</sup>

The Writer savages himself: he sees spiritual imperfection, but he can’t even manage to write his play...

Speaking of the “material”, *Fear of Writing* suggests that that dimension of life, in its own way, is rather perfect. The material framework of daily life is manifested in the play not only in what various positive-sounding characters say, but more viscerally in a series of videos projected on a regular basis in *Fear of Writing* entitled the “Circus of Dreams”. The stage directions inform us that the first of the series offers images of Singapore as a “developed city”<sup>16</sup>; the second of the series is about “the glory of shopping and material possessions, intercut with people singing and dancing”<sup>17</sup> to “The Song of Things”: “Hermes gap mango nike l-v gucci [...] / Iphone ipod igood icon ipad imad / Iwant iwant iwant iwant.”<sup>18</sup> The bright dream of being materially entranced does dim, though, and by the third version of the video series, the previous images of materialist *jouissance* “are interspersed with brief, almost subliminal pictures of the protests of [the Singapore opposition politician] Chee Soon Juan and police action against him, [...] and other political activities”<sup>19</sup>. Materialism’s joys come with a set of costs to be paid by some, at least, it would seem.

The character who most bluntly and indeed angrily states why

“writing” is difficult is the Uniquely Singapore Promoter, who in Act Two, scene 25, says:

Recently they amended the Films Act again. [...] In this wonderful country of ours, there used to be a difference between someone committing a crime and the person who films that act. Hence it used to be that if you participated in an illegal assembly, you would be arrested, while the person who filmed you using his video camera would not have been deemed to have committed an offence. Under the new amendments, it is illegal to film illegal activities. That is, if you take a video of someone breaking the law, you are also breaking the law. The mainstream media hailed the changes to the law as liberalisation. Uniquely Singapore!<sup>20</sup>

This is but one legality that stands in the way of writing, but it is a representative example.

The ordinary Singaporean Eric is one who learns to dream beyond the dreams of consumerist joy: he has encountered the unnamed Chee Soon Juan selling his books, and buys a copy of *Dare to Dream*<sup>21</sup>. In time, this book, an inability to comprehend Chee’s way of living and an increasing if vague discomfort with life puncture Eric’s daily existence, and he sees his self split. He gets up one evening and talks to himself: “Are there rooms of things that I could have known but don’t? [...] Whose responsibility was it to have shown me these rooms?”<sup>22</sup> Eric appears to grasp—hesitantly—in his disquietude that maybe he should be trying to “write” in some manner; but there is no further development here beyond this disturbed stirring of self-reflexivity.

*Fear of Writing* in Act Three appears, in particular, to turn on those who may enjoy art primarily as either entertainment or as voyeuristic bystanders gawping at the mess that art finds itself in; that is, they experience some pleasure in art, but remain detached from it. The MDA Official who has swept into the theatre offers the audience legal knowledge of their “actual” participation in offending art, regardless of the intent to remain detached:

All right, then. (*to audience*) Well, ladies and gentlemen, normally you would just be witnesses, because if this is an unlicensed performance and it is the duty of the theatre company to get the licence and if they don’t get one and they don’t tell you about that, then you wouldn’t know that an offence is being committed when the performance is being staged. You would not really be party to the offence. But in this case, according to what (*indicates Producer*) she’s said, you knew that this performance is not licensed, and you had a chance to not see it, you could get your refund and leave, but you didn’t. Instead you consciously and willingly chose to stay back to watch it, to be part of this unlicensed show... that means, that you are not just witnesses but party to an offence. But maybe there is really nothing wrong being done here tonight. So our taking down your particulars is just a precaution, just in case.<sup>23</sup>

The play proceeds, in the latter half, to enquire as to the state of the Homeland in which there is fear of writing. The Writer in Act Two, scene 46, wonders aloud about an “almost imperceptible”<sup>24</sup> odour in the air that he seemed alone in detecting in the beautiful place in which he lived. Where is the source? He then sees that others appear to notice it too. But what of those who do not detect it: “Were they the lucky ones to not notice the reality? [...] I, of course, was otherwise so comfortable that I didn’t think of leaving.”<sup>25</sup>

Later, in scene 50, the Writer morosely tells his daughter that there’s no point to art: “Makes no difference.”<sup>26</sup> But then it comes out: “All that big talk. But in the end, I am no different from the rest. Simple fact is, I don’t want to lose my job.”<sup>27</sup> Fear and writing go together—and the “big talk” of art and the reformation of national culture cannot hide the Writer’s individual failure. Are we *all* guilty, though, of not writing (or responding to writing)—or at least of irresponsibly being unaware of Reality? Not just the Writer, but also the audience, the well-off Singaporean, the intellectual or academic who practises self-censorship, and anyone who seems somnambulant in the materialistic dreamscape of the city-state?

A central danger that comes to the fore in *Fear of Writing* is, if the

Writer (or anyone else) quiescens—quiets himself, stills himself—is this an entry into a stage of genuine quietude or quietness, or is it, instead, a form of quietus—a release of the hold of life, a form of living that is a variety of self-extinction? The description of the sixth of the “Circus of Dreams” videos becomes almost violently direct as a response to this question: “We hear water sounds, sleep sounds, and indistinct, broken up voices. We see indistinct images of people, and of violence, terror. [...] But everything is low-key, hardly discernible. There are no words”<sup>28</sup>. The play attempts to force the audience and the reader to take a stand on what it presents.

*Fear of Writing* was premiered at TheatreWorks’ home at in Singapore at 72-13 Mohamed Sultan Road on 1 September 2011. This Introduction concludes by offering for the reader’s consideration director Ong Keng Sen’s reflection on the play that appeared in the programme:

[*Fear of Writing*] brought me pouring over legislation, reminiscent of my law school days. Discovering how little space there is when one adds up all the laws of Singapore. Discovering how potential violence in law enforcement activities may not be checked or balanced in Singapore life. Discovering how an image or a video on your mobile phone can bring you a \$20,000 fine or 12 months jail, or both. [...]

I believe that art and theatre always bring us to the struggle of the singular human being, that this is still of value even though conformist societies tell us that s/he is a minority who should not even register against the majority’s voice. For the singular human being will one day infect another human being and another and another. [...]

I believe that theatre has not failed if we look at the ancient roots of Greek Theatre (the ancestor of a play like Tarn How’s); how theatre still remained in all urgent periods as the resistance to power. [...]

Perhaps this time in Singapore today is just not an urgent period.

But only time will tell [...].

C. J. W.-L. Wee

Associate Professor, English, Nanyang Technological University

#### NOTES

- 1 Tan Tarn How, *Fear of Writing*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2012, pp. 5-6.
- 2 Ibid, p.7.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia*, Columbia University Press, New York, 2006, p. 3.
- 5 Lu Xun was the author of short stories such as *The True Story of Ah Q* (published in instalments from 1921 to 1922); he was also an essayist, a translator of literature and a literary editor. He became the titular head of the Chinese League of the Left-Wing Writers in Shanghai in the 1930s.
- 6 Tan Tarn How, *Fear of Writing*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2012, pp. 38-39.
- 7 Ibid, p. 39.
- 8 Ibid, p. 19.
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid, p. 41.
- 11 See C. J. W.-L. Wee, “Culture, the Arts and the Global City”, *Management of Success: Singapore Revisited*, ed. Terence Chong, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, 2010, pp.492-93 and footnote 9, p.501.
- 12 Tan Tarn How, *Fear of Writing*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2012, p. 41.
- 13 Ibid.
- 14 The distinguished diplomat, Professor Tommy Koh, who was the founding chairman of Singapore’s National Arts Council (serving as the chairman from 1991-96), offers an alternative view of the past in relation to the present: “I have recently completed reading Koh Tai Ann’s *Reviewing Singapore* [a special issue of *Moving Worlds: A Journal of Transcultural Writing*, vol. 10, no. 1 (2010)] and Robert Yeo’s excellent memoirs, *Routes [Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-75]* (Singapore: Ethos Books, 2011)]. Both Tai Ann’s volume of essays and Robert’s book remind their readers of some of the mistakes which the government committed in the 1950s and 1960s, such as the attack on Professor D.J. Enright and the campaign against ‘Yellow Culture’. Robert Yeo also reminded us that, not so long ago, playwrights like him were heavily censored. In order to obtain permission for their plays to be performed, they had to swallow their pride and integrity and excise words and sentences which, when viewed from the perspective of contemporary Singapore, were totally harmless. Although Singapore has undergone a paradigm change, the unhappy legacy of the past lives on and probably accounts for the pervasive feeling of distrust among many in the arts community towards the government. We should remember the past but we should not be imprisoned by it” (Foreword, *Commentary*, vol. 21 [2012], special issue on “A Portrait of the Arts in Singapore”, ed. Angelia Poon: p.4).
- 15 Tan Tarn How, *Fear of Writing*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2012, pp.61-62.
- 16 Ibid, p.22.
- 17 Ibid, p.27.
- 18 Ibid, p.28.
- 19 Ibid, p.32.
- 20 Ibid, pp.42-43.
- 21 This seems to be a reference to Chee Soon Juan’s *Dare to Change: An Alternative Vision of Singapore*, Singapore Democratic Party, Singapore, 1994.
- 22 Tan Tarn How, *Fear of Writing*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2012, p.44.
- 23 Ibid, pp.80-81.
- 24 Ibid, p.59.
- 25 Ibid, p.61.
- 26 Ibid, p.64.
- 27 Ibid, p.65.
- 28 Ibid, p.64.

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PRODUCTION NOTES

*Fear of Writing* was staged by Theatreworks in September 2011 at 72-13. It was directed by Ong Keng Sen and produced by Tay Tong, with lighting by Andy Lim and set and costumes by Myung Hee Cho. The role of actor was played by four persons. The cast was as follows:

---

DIRECTOR & ACTOR	Tan Kheng Hua
PRODUCER & ACTOR	Janice Koh
ACTOR	Lok Meng Chue
ACTOR	Serene Chen
MDA OFFICIAL	Ling Poh Foong
ENSEMBLE	Dayah Rahim
	Faizal Abdullah
	Kong Yit Sim
	Karina Sindicich
	Pavan J. Singh
	Nicholas Tee
	Wilson Xin
	E-van Yeung

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CHARACTERS

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DIRECTOR

PRODUCER

ACTOR

Writer, 60

Eric, 29

Returned Overseas Singaporean, 40s

National Day Parade Attendee, 50s

Singaporean Returning From Holiday, 20s

Academic, 30s

Expat, 40s

Stall Holder, 70s

Clown

Director, 40s

Lecturer

Newsreader

Uniquely Singapore Promoter, 20s

Cheong, 50s

Policeman, 50s

Confessor 1 and 2, 30s

MDA OFFICIAL

POLICE OFFICERS 1 AND 2

AUDIENCE MEMBERS 1 TO 8

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# ACT 1



## ACT 1

*The set consists not only of the stage, but also of the whole theatre as well as the front of house outside the theatre. In Act 3 of the play, there are several things going on at the same time, with the audience split between those inside the theatre and those outside.*

*House lights in the theatre do not go down before the play starts. Director enters, as if the play has not started and he is merely making an administrative announcement. He, and later, the other characters in this Act, speaks without polish, like he is ad-libbing, so the words given here are a general guide to what he should say.*

---

1                   DIRECTOR   Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming to  
the play tonight. As you may know, this is only  
my [first/second/etc] directing effort. It's been  
a really great experience, working with the  
5                   crew, the set designer [name], lighting designer  
[name], sound designer [name], costume  
designer [name]—heh, guys, thanks a bunch.  
And of course Tarn How, who has been really  
receptive, I've heard lots of things about him  
10                   being very unwilling to change anything—  
*(in mocking tone)* you know, “every darn word is  
sacred”—*(back to normal tone)* that kind of thing.  
But he has been surprisingly open to suggestions.  
Maybe he's a bit scared and thought that for this  
15                   play a second opinion would be good. I have to  
thank Theatreworks, most of all Keng Sen, who

---

1 has been extremely supportive and nurturing.  
 I am really grateful for that. Of course, the best  
 part is working with [name of Actor]. You know  
 how difficult it is to carry a one-man show.

5 Well, buddy, it's been an amazing journey.

But what am I doing, going on like an  
 Oscars acceptance speech. As you know,  
 Directors don't usually come before the audience  
 before a play starts to thank the audience for  
 their presence. I am only doing it because...  
 10 well, something unexpected has happened.  
 And it is really about this that I wish to talk  
 about. It's a bit complicated but I'll try to  
 explain it best I can.

15 It's all about licences to perform. The law  
 requires theatre companies to get a licence if  
 they want to put up a play. In order to get a  
 licence, the script must be submitted. You  
 might know that at one time, certain "trusted"  
 20 companies such as Theatreworks were exempt  
 from submitting scripts for vetting. I supposed  
 they were impressed with our track record, or  
 TWorks' record, and believed that we were  
 not likely to create trouble. Or because the  
 25 government gave so much money to the  
 companies like Theatreworks, they thought  
 that these companies were not likely to bite the  
 hand that fed them. But even with this waiver,  
 Theatreworks continued to send in the scripts  
 30 for prior vetting. Why? Damn stupid, right?

1 Well, actually, the fact that we were not  
 required to submit the script didn't mean  
 that they couldn't still censor the play.  
 They could come just before the play opened  
 and say, heh, we've been hearing things about  
 5 the play, and maybe we should have a look  
 at it. They could then ask for cuts. Imagine a  
 couple of days before the show started. It would  
 be a disaster. Worse still, they could come on  
 opening night, and just tell us, sorry, guys,  
 10 we can't let you put on the show. Alternatively,  
 they could come the day after one of their  
 people had seen it—yes, they sometimes buy  
 their own tickets, I suppose to check us out,  
 15 haha—they could come to us and say, heh,  
 I don't think you can continue doing it...  
 So in a way, the freedom to not have to send  
 in our scripts for prior approval was the  
 freedom to hang ourselves with a different  
 20 kind of rope.

But, that's history. Because some years ago,  
 without many people, even theatre practitioners,  
 knowing it, our government decided that even  
 those formerly trusted companies had to submit  
 their scripts for approval. In Singapore, this  
 25 kind of thing is called "liberalisation of  
 censorship". But seriously, when Tarn How  
 handed in the script we, as required by law, sent  
 it to the MDA—that's the Media Development  
 Authority, I can see some of you don't know that.  
 30



1 MDA, a.k.a. the official censor. That's when  
the fun usually starts.

Take, for example, what happened a few  
years ago with the play *251*, about Singapore's  
most famous RGS girl, the porn star Annabel  
Chong. After reading the script, they asked the  
director: "Er, you have a lesbian kiss, how long  
is that scene?" The director said, "Oh, fifteen  
seconds. No? Ten seconds then, no, okay make  
it five, no?" Eventually our friendly MDA  
official said, "Okay, tell you what, why don't  
we also turn down the lights so people can't  
really see what's happening except in silhouette."  
Why not, after all, theatre is about the audience  
using their imagination, isn't it? You know less  
is more, that kind of thing.

Another time, they objected to a short play  
about a taxi driver going on about how bad  
the Christians are. As every good Singaporean  
knows, there are no bad Christians in this  
lovely multi-racial, multi-religious country of  
ours. There are bad people, there are Christians,  
and there are bad people who also happen to be  
Christians, but there are no bad Christians.  
Then another time, there was a play which  
started with the words "In the beginning was  
the body..." and MDA said, "No, no, you can't  
say that because it is an insult to the holy  
book." God bless them, MDA, they are such  
sensitive people.

1 PRODUCER *(from the wing)* Heh, [director's name], time...

DIRECTOR *(towards wing)* Time? *(to audience)* Oh, okay  
that's [Producer's name] telling me to shut up  
and hurry up. Back to the present then. Now,  
MDA has always come back to us, to TWorks,  
on time, either yes or no.

—————  
*If it is opening night, the following dialogue ensues.*

DIRECTOR So we always get a final answer by opening  
10 night. Except tonight is opening night—  
and we have not heard from them. So—  
*(Producer comes in)* Heh, [Producer's name].

PRODUCER We are cancelling the show.

.....  
*If it is the second or subsequent night, the following  
dialogue ensues.*

DIRECTOR Well, opening night came—that was  
[yesterday/insert number of days ago]—and  
we still hadn't heard from them. So, *(Producer  
comes in)* this was what we did [last night/in the  
20 nights since opening night]. Heh, [Producer's  
name].

PRODUCER We cancelled the show. And we are cancelling  
it tonight too.

—————  
PRODUCER But we've sort of come up with a workaround.  
We refund you the ticket price, plus booking  
fee. There will be no show. But we are holding  
a private party. Invitation only.

30 DIRECTOR Not bad, right.

1 PRODUCER The beauty is that we don't need a licence for a private party, a private party by invitation only.

DIRECTOR So you are all invited to our private party!

5 PRODUCER They can't cancel a private party, because there is no licence to revoke.

DIRECTOR But those who want to leave—

PRODUCER —can do so. You will get your money back since there is no show. But those who want to attend our party, our private party, and still want your money back, that is fine too. We cannot charge for a private party. It's illegal.

DIRECTOR But if people want to donate their ticket money to us...

15 PRODUCER This donation is purely voluntary. So those who are in generous mood and don't want a refund, we would be most grateful to you. At least it will help defray the cost of this show, I mean, this party. If there are any questions...  
*(waits for response from audience)*

20

[The following includes possible questions from the audience and the answers to be provided.]

25 QUESTION Is this what you did in the previous nights?

PRODUCER Yes.

.....

QUESTION Were there any problems?

DIRECTOR Not at all, everything went like a charm.

30

1 QUESTION And you still haven't heard from them?

PRODUCER No. So, we are guessing they don't mind.

DIRECTOR Heh, don't be so worried. Nothing happened last night.

5

.....

QUESTION Why do you think they have not given you the licence?

PRODUCER We really don't know.

DIRECTOR I won't worry too much about it. With this private party thing, we should be safe.

10

.....

QUESTION Have the censors been in communication with you?

PRODUCER The MDA? Not officially. They haven't disapproved it.

15

DIRECTOR But they don't want to be seen as approving it either. "See no evil"? Anyway you all are a niche audience, haha. So, I guess we are safe.

PRODUCER [Artistic Director's name] and [General Manager's name] think that's probably what's happening.

20

.....

QUESTION How controversial is the play?

PRODUCER Well, it's a political play. And you know anything political in this country cannot be but controversial.

25

DIRECTOR But heh, they have allowed political plays for years, what, more than one-and-a-half decades? *The Lady of Soul And Her Ultimate "S" Machine, Undercover.* Then all the Eleanor Wong and

30

1 Russell Heng works. Been there done that.  
So don't worry, it is safe.

AUDIENCE MEMBER 1  
5 DIRECTOR Has this private party thing been done before?  
Good question, and the answer is yes. Not too  
long ago there was a performance art show  
involving Lee Wen and Lynn Lu and a Japanese  
guy—forgot his name!—going completely naked.  
It was held by Soobin at its Ubi warehouse.  
10 The organisers knew that they were unlikely to  
get a permit for a public performance so they  
held it as a “private party by invitation only”,  
even though the “invitation” was sent out to a  
lot of people. No one complained. Neat, right?  
15 AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 So it is legal?  
DIRECTOR As we said, it's been done before.  
PRODUCER And as we also said, if you don't feel  
comfortable about staying, you can get your  
money back.  
20 DIRECTOR Don't worry, they are very relaxed these days.  
They don't like to crack down on anyone,  
you know, otherwise it gets into the press,  
especially the foreign press. Bad for our image  
as a “global city of the arts”.  
25 AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 How about the SDP<sup>1</sup> event?  
AUDIENCE MEMBER 2 What SDP event?  
AUDIENCE MEMBER 1 Well, the SDP held this private party where  
they showed this film. I think it was about  
Lee Kuan Yew. The police came and seized the  
30 DVD. It was in the papers. How about that?

1 DIRECTOR This is a private party, that's a political party.  
We are just a theatre company. They are doing  
“real life”, we are doing “art”. Totally different.  
*Audience Member 3 raises a hand.*  
5 PRODUCER (*points to him*) Go ahead.  
AUDIENCE MEMBER 3 Actually I read about the SDP thing in the  
blogs, which also posted videos of the “raid”.  
The police came, but the SDP refused to let  
them in. It was in some hotel. Anyway, they  
10 argued that it was a private event by invitation  
only, so they did not need a permit. The police  
waited until the film finished screening, then  
they seized the DVD.  
15 DIRECTOR Anyway, we should start. It's running late  
already, and the show lasts a full hour.  
PRODUCER So, to recap, it's two choices really. Leave, or stay  
for our reconstituted private party. After the  
show, those who want a refund can claim back  
their money outside. Any other questions?  
20 (*if no questions*) Okay, those who wish to leave  
now, please do... (*to those going*) We are sorry  
to see you go, but thank you for coming.  
Apologies for everything. You can collect your  
refund outside.  
25 DIRECTOR Thank you—and sorry for everything.  
We will leave the theatre door open—it's a  
very heavy door here—so that it is possible  
for anyone to leave at any time during the  
private party.  
30 PRODUCER (*to the rest*) Please give us a few minutes.

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## ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Tan Tarn How, senior research fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies, Singapore, graduated in 1982 from Peterhouse College, University of Cambridge with B. A. Honours in the Natural Sciences Tripos. He also has a Diploma in Education from Singapore's Institute of Education. After teaching, he joined *The Straits Times* and from 1987-1996 was a political reporter, op-ed writer, arts deputy editor, and foreign correspondent in Hong Kong and Beijing.

He left to be head scriptwriter for television drama and comedy at MediaCorp for about two years before returning to the newspaper in 1999 to be its science and technology editor, political correspondent and deputy news editor until 2005.

He has also been the associate artistic director of the drama company TheatreWorks, leading workshops for budding playwrights. His earlier plays have been published as *Six Plays* by Epigram Books.

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An independent publisher based in Singapore, Epigram Books is known for putting together well-designed and thought-provoking titles. Epigram Books began as a division of the award-winning design firm, Epigram, but registered as a separate entity in July 2011 in order to strengthen its focus on championing local writing.

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“Tan has always had an unerring knack as a playwright for picking up and challenging the political pulse.”—*The Straits Times*

“A scathing indictment. It analyses the very act of writing, and its limits.”—*Today*

The maestro of political plays is back and his latest offering in a decade, *Fear of Writing*, is a groundbreaking commentary on the political landscape of Singapore today.

In *Fear of Writing*, a playwright struggles with writer's block, a director and producer bemoan their failure to get a government licence to stage their play, and a father writes to his daughter overseas. Seemingly disparate elements are woven together, while the line between art, performance and reality begin to blur dramatically as the play reaches its chilling conclusion.

*Fear of Writing* is a play that will haunt you while compelling you to decide where you stand on the issues of control and censorship.

It was first staged by Theatreworks in 2011 to critical acclaim.

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