

“Extremely well-written.”—*The Straits Times*

# mimi fan



a play by  
lim chor pee

mimi fan

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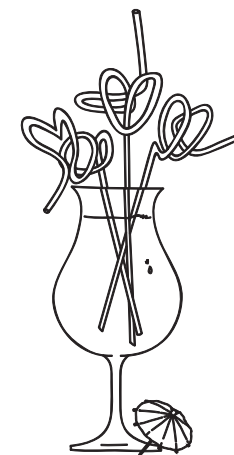
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mimi fan



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lim chor pee



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## INTRODUCTION

It is possible to trace the origins of Singapore theatre in English in the two plays Lim Chor Pee wrote and staged in the early 1960s. They are *Mimi Fan* in July 1962 and *A White Rose at Midnight* in 1964.

At the time he wrote these plays and had them produced, Lim was seething with what must be described as anti-colonialist fervour. Singapore became a nation in August 1965 after its separation from Malaysia. He probably did not know that this was to happen but Lim had already written and published an article in a local magazine in 1964, in which the prescient sentence is found, “A national theatre cannot hope to survive if it keeps staging foreign plays.” The title of the article was provocative—*Is Drama Non-existent in Singapore?*<sup>1</sup> Another article entitled *Drama and the University*<sup>2</sup> was published in April of the same year.

As the preceding paragraphs briefly indicate, Lim was a pioneer in two significant ways: he wrote plays and, at the same time, published articles that showed why they should be written. He was both an advocate for theatre theory and a practitioner who showed the way. And he did this in two short years, from 1962 to 1964. And then he stopped writing completely and went to his law practice for which he had been educated in Cambridge University.

It does not matter which came first: the thinking about writing plays or the writing itself. In his first article, *Is Drama Non-existent in Singapore?*, Lim Chor Pee wrote:

One of the factors that has retarded the establishment of an English-speaking theatre in this country is that almost every play that is produced here is one superficial piece of Western drawing room drama. After a while, it gets very boring because theatre is essentially a reflection of truth and not the false and unattainable dreams of the Western middle-class.

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Therefore, whatever Western play that is staged is either lost, or failed to be appreciated, for those plays reflected a glory that is past or imagined. I refer particularly to the Victorian and Edwardian drawing-room drama, which, so we are told, was how the Englishmen lived. Did they? We are not so sure. To put it simply, they just do not concern us.

...The amateur theatre anywhere in the world is the place where the future professional theatre begins. And there can be no proper theatre unless there are playwrights.<sup>3</sup>

The last sentence is a very clear call for a country to have its own writers.

Singapore attained self-governing status in 1959 and Lim was saying that a new country needed to have its own playwrights. He said this in response to the fact that the English language scene was dominated by amateur theatre groups led by expatriates, mostly British. They staged largely English plays and the occasional American play, whose cast was mostly white people, and if Asians had roles, they were peripheral and small.

In his second article, titled *Drama and the University*, Lim criticised university groups for producing Western plays (some of which the students had studied) even though the cast was predominantly Asian. Lim wanted to write plays that were local and recognisable in terms of theme, cast and speech. The identity adjective he used was Malaysian. And this he did, on the whole, successfully in *Mimi Fan* and *A White Rose at Midnight*.

Given Lim's education, it is not surprising that he created very credible middle-class characters and speech. In *Mimi Fan*, Chan Fei-Loong, the disillusioned former student in London, Sheila Rani, Baram and Tony Maxwell are all convincingly presented. This excerpt<sup>4</sup> demonstrates what I mean:

TONY            You've grown up, that's all, old chap. How do you like Mimi?  
FEI-LOONG    Very much. Quite a girl, that one.

TONY            Terrific, old chap. Here comes Baram. Hello, Baram.  
Meet Fei-Loong.  
FEI-LOONG & BARAM    How do you do?  
FEI-LOONG    What will you have?  
BARAM        Brandy water, please. First time here?  
FEI-LOONG    Yes.  
TONY            Baram spends all his leisure hours here. It's his second home.  
BARAM        Very funny, Tony! Not for long though, I am getting married soon.  
TONY            What do you know, Fei-Loong? After more than 30 years of blissful bachelorhood, this chap here is letting the side down. Bad show, old chap. Let's drown your sorrow with another stengah. Stengah, boy. (*beckons to waiter*)  
FEI-LOONG    Who to?  
BARAM        She's the purest and sweetest lady you have ever come across.  
TONY            Must be quite a change for you.  
BARAM        Don't be impertinent, Tony. She is a very respectable lady, a school teacher.  
TONY            My God. You certainly need one.

The various speech features of Tony Maxwell, the English bar-frequenter ("Bad show old chap. Let's drown your sorry with another stengah. Stengah, boy."), the localisms of Baram ("Very funny, Tony!") and the tired cynicism of Fei-Loong are all in character and sound authentic.

The plot has a satisfying twist at the end which catches the audience pleasantly by surprise. Victor Doggett, *The Straits Times* critic, wrote that it was "a balanced and extremely well-written story..."<sup>5</sup>

What Lim had written was the well-constructed, standard, three-act play. In doing this, he did not appear to have done anything revolutionary. He had put new wine in old bottles—he had poured Singapore content into a traditional three-act mould in which dialogue was dominant.

In the post-colonial situation of the early sixties, that was revolutionary enough because, on a step-by-step basis, first the content is replaced and later, there can be a more comprehensive replacement of the imperial baggage in order to present a truly national and “new” kind of play. Lim Chor Pee was the first to dream the Singapore play and give it its initial shape.

If we look down the road into the future of the Singaporean theatre in English, and we can do so by hindsight, the “new” play would be written in the 1980s by playwrights like Stella Kon, Kuo Pao Kun, Haresh Sharma and the deconstructive productions of Ong Keng Sen.

Robert Yeo, 2012

#### NOTES

- 1 Lim Chor Pee, *Is Drama Non-existent in Singapore?*, *Tumasek*, 1 January 1964, p. 42.
  - 2 Lim Chor Pee, *Drama and the University*, *Tumasek*, 2 April 1964, p. 49.
  - 3 Robert Yeo, *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-1975*, Ethos Books, Singapore, 2011, p. 141.
  - 4 Lim Chor Pee, *Mimi Fan*, Epigram Books, Singapore, 2012, pp. 18-19.
  - 5 Robert Yeo, *Routes: A Singaporean Memoir 1940-1975*, Ethos Books, Singapore, 2011, p. 140.
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PRODUCTION NOTES

*Mimi Fan* was performed by the Experimental Theatre Club from 19 to 21 July 1962 at the Cultural Centre Theatre. It was re-staged by TheatreWorks in 1990 as part of a festival called *The Retrospectives*. In 1962, the play was produced by Ronald Bloom and Khoo Hin Hiong; the stage manager was Chan Yee Wing; the lighting manager was Maureen Lim and the sound manager was Chan Kok Keen. The cast was as follows:

---

MIMI FAN	Annie Chin
CHAN FEI-LOONG	Lim Teong Qwee
SHEILA RANI	Leaena Chelliah
TONY MAXWELL	Ronald Bloom
BARAM	Kiru Joseph
MR. TAN	Teoh Jin Hong
ANNIE	Major Ho
WAITER	Ong Thiam Kim

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CHARACTERS

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MIMI FAN	Female, 19 years old
CHAN FEI-LOONG	Male, 27 years old
SHEILA RANI	Female in her twenties
TONY MAXWELL	Male in his thirties
BARAM	Male in his thirties
MR. TAN	Male in his forties
ANNIE	Female, a contemporary of Mimi Fan
WAITER	Male in his twenties

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ACT 1



## ACT 1

## A NIGHTCLUB IN THE CITY

*A common nightclub in the city. Lights are low. The band is offstage left of centre. Faint coloured lights appear against the plain backdrop so that from time to time, the shadows of dancers form a silhouette on it. Little tables with cheap looking chairs stand around. On the right there is a long bar. When the curtains rise, various couples are dancing to the loud blare of the band. Others sit around talking—a cosmopolitan crowd of teenagers and adults.*

*At the bar, Chan Fei-Loong and Tony Maxwell watch the dancing. When the music stops, they cheer loudly together with the rest. Both have had a few drinks.*

---

1	TONY	Jolly good, chaps! Lagi satu kali. Lagi satu stengah <sup>1</sup> .
	FEI-LOONG	Wonderful! I say, Tony, where did you learn all that Malay from?
	TONY	In the army, old boy. I spent two years chasing
5		Chin Peng and his cronies around the Thai border. Good luck to that joker. Let's drink to him...
	TONY & FEI-LOONG	To Chin Peng.
		<i>They drink. The music begins again. It is a dreamy tune. Three couples dance aimlessly in the background. The rest of the people in the nightclub carry on their quiet conversations.</i>
10		
	FEI-LOONG	Shot any?
	TONY	Oh no, the only character I came across saw
15		me first. Still got his Japanese bullet inside my

---

1 lagi satu kali. Lagi satu stengah. [*Malay*] one more time. One more stengah (half a peg of whisky).

1 shoulder blade. Must be pretty rusty by now  
with so much whisky inside.

FEI-LOONG What happened to him?

TONY Who?

5 FEI-LOONG The fellow who shot you.

TONY He didn't live long. The next I saw of him was  
from a stretcher. I was lying on it, writhing in  
pain and hoping for Kingdom come when I saw  
the poor fellow's body slung across a tree  
10 branch being carried past me. I said to him,  
"You bastard." He didn't reply. He just stared at  
me with his gold teeth. There were enough  
bullet holes in that body for the bees to build  
a hive. *(pause)* So endeth the lesson for the  
15 evening. Amen. *(he drinks)*

FEI-LOONG And so begineth the morality of the world.  
The fittest man lives. Still, there is a little hope  
left in this *(lifting his glass)*—the hope of the  
disillusioned and the stupid. *(both drink)* Once  
20 I dreamt that everyone in the world lost his  
memory completely. The entire population on  
earth had to start again in search of itself.

TONY You ought to write a book, old boy. A Malayan  
1984<sup>2</sup>.

25 FEI-LOONG Imagine that each and everyone of us is stripped  
of all pretensions, all hatred and avarice. Like a  
newborn babe, the man smiles as he discovers  
each new thing in life. He is innocent of all  
acrimonies and heartburns. It would then  
30 be like...

1 TONY Nothing on earth. You are only thinking of  
Adam and Eve. Ah... But don't forget the  
temptation of the flesh—

FEI-LOONG For heaven's sake, Tony, this seems to be the  
only one thing you think about.

5 TONY It's the beginning and the end of all things.  
Didn't your parents allow you to read Freud?

FEI-LOONG My parents didn't live long enough to tell me  
about the birds and the bees. They died during  
10 the war. Bombed by the Japanese.

TONY I'm sorry.

FEI-LOONG Then I was brought up by my uncle. A good man,  
but very old fashioned. He belongs to the old  
school of thought. He was quite fond of me,  
15 but he brought me up in a very abstract sort of  
manner—there was no communication of  
emotions. Love, happiness, appreciation and all  
expressions of emotion were taken for granted.  
So I grew up finding out life for myself.

20 TONY I know for sure my uncle would have sent me to a  
boys' home if the German bombs had got our  
home in Coventry. You know, you Chinese are  
very clannish people. My predecessor in the  
office allowed the Chief Clerk to introduce  
25 some staff into the office and we now have his  
two nephews, one cousin twice removed and  
one niece of his sister-in-law. I seem to be the  
only outsider.

FEI-LOONG I know. The more fortunate is supposed to  
30 help the less fortunate members of the family.

1 But in practice it doesn't always happen that  
 way. I was lucky enough to be brought up by  
 my uncle and sent to university in England.  
 But mark you, a great deal of obligations go with  
 5 this. I am expected to return like a glorified  
 mandarin and serve the family concern, loyally  
 and faithfully. I must bring credit to the family  
 and of course make plenty of money.

TONY Who doesn't want to make money? All my life  
 I've wanted to make money.

FEI-LOONG No wonder Napoleon said that England was a  
 nation of shopkeepers. But not to worry, the  
 Chinese are the same. To money. *(he raises his glass)*

TONY To money. *(they drink)*

15 FEI-LOONG Sometimes I wish the world is like this glass that  
 I can hold between my palms so that I can  
 squeeze the vulgarity out of it. The only thing  
 that matters to us at this moment is this glass  
 of firewater and the only thing that matters to  
 20 the rest of the masses outside is what's on at  
 the cinema.

TONY My dear Fei-Loong, we ALL try to escape.  
 Only that some of us manage to get away and  
 some don't.

25 FEI-LOONG Escape to where? On Christmas night, I went to  
 bed with carols of glad tidings and goodwill to  
 all men ringing in my ears, and the new day  
 I woke up to read of the worst ill-will in the  
 newspaper—the South African black man is  
 30 still a second-class citizen in his own country.

1 But you, my dear Tony, you're an Englishman.  
 Let's drink to all Englishmen. *(they drink)* Ah,  
 yes, England, forever England—the land of hope  
 and glory, she feels that the Suez Canal is some  
 5 dirty old drain by Piccadilly Circus and she can  
 do what she likes with it. All men are equal but  
 the English are more equal than others.

TONY But don't forget, old boy. Without England,  
 you wouldn't be here talking to me like you do.

10 FEI-LOONG And I'm not ungrateful for that.

TONY Say what you like. There'll always be an England.

FEI-LOONG Ah England—I remember during one vacation  
 I taught English History to a class organised  
 by the Workers Educational Association—  
 15 I happen to have read history in college. Before  
 that they thought we dined by shooting wild  
 animals. Imagine how I surprised those  
 innocent people. But this episode reminds me  
 of my contemporaries in school. They all  
 20 knew about William the Conqueror and  
 could write little essays about the beautiful  
 mountains of Scotland without having seen  
 them, but they knew nothing about their  
 own country. And then just because we could  
 write essays about the beautiful mountains of  
 Scotland, we were told that we were a class by  
 ourselves—the English-educated. We began to  
 elevate ourselves to an elite and we despised all  
 those not so privilegedly educated as we were.  
 30 What is worse, all our values got mixed up—

1 some are borrowed, and some are improvised,  
and some came ready-made from American  
films. The cinema is our national institution—  
you know, like the TV and the bingo sessions  
5 in your England today.

TONY There's nothing like going to the cinema in  
Singapore. The other day I saw a terrific film  
—can't remember the name now—it was one of  
those war epics. From their warships the marines  
10 came charging up the shores accompanied by  
their battle hymns. Flame throwers, sten guns,  
machine guns, bazookas prattled... Tat tat,  
bing, bang whoom. Every ten seconds a few  
people got shot or bombed. The enemy was  
15 killed, the audience cheered and yelled, taking  
great delight in what was going on. Quite an  
experience for one who's still got a bullet inside  
his shoulder blade.

FEI-LOONG And how easily we forget that was what  
20 happened to us during the Japanese Occupation  
period, when a husband, a brother or a father  
suddenly was taken away in the middle of the  
night and never came back again. The enemy  
is now gone and our past too is buried in the  
sands of time. Since then we have been in  
25 search of a soul.

TONY Are you looking for one?

FEI-LOONG How could I find it, my dear Tony? We are all  
too busy trying to acquire status symbols. It's a  
30 rat race, I tell you. A bloody rat race this is.

1 You know what my headmaster told me when  
I informed him that I was going to read  
history in the university? He said, "Fei-Loong,  
my boy don't waste your time with arts and all  
5 that literary muck you've been playing around  
with. You ought to be a doctor or a lawyer.  
Look at them today, all the biggest houses  
in town are owned by doctors and lawyers."  
Best understatement I'd ever heard. Do you live  
10 in a big house too, Tony?

TONY I do indeed. The firm pays for it of course.  
Lounge and three bedrooms, all air-conditioned.  
Big garden. Two servants and a gardener. A car  
with a chauffeur. They even pay my income tax.  
15 What else does one want?

FEI-LOONG Good question. But tell me, why did you bring  
me to this shady joint? I thought you would  
be frequenting some posh places.

TONY I come here every night. This place has a  
20 mystical attraction of its own. Plenty of skirts.  
Very good stuff.

WAITER: *(to Tony)* Another drink, sir?

TONY No, thank you.

FEI-LOONG See what I mean. He calls you "sir" because  
25 your skin is white. But not me because his skin  
is the same as mine. If I may say so, my dear  
Tony, if anything, my birth and position are  
more fortunate than yours.

TONY Quite true, quite true.

30 FEI-LOONG It's a sickness. We call this the local mentality.

1 Before I came back from England I told  
myself one day I would change all this sickness.  
Then I discovered that I too am becoming sick  
inside. No, we must first grow up ourselves.  
5 We must learn the hard way and find our  
own identity.

*Mimi comes out on the other side and sits at a table  
with some men.*

TONY There's Mimi over there. Stay here a while,  
10 I'll see if I can pilot her over here.

FEI-LOONG All right.

*Tony moves over to where Mimi sits and joins the  
table. A middle-aged Chinese businessman  
approaches Fei-Loong.*

MR. TAN Ah, if it isn't Mr. Chan Fei-Loong.

FEI-LOONG Oh hello, Mr. Tan. How are you? Nice to see  
you again. How is business?

MR. TAN Oh, so-so you know. How is your uncle  
getting on?

FEI-LOONG Very well, thank you. He's getting on in years  
20 you know. He only comes to the office once in  
a while. He leaves most of the day to day  
business to his two sons.

MR. TAN What about you?

FEI-LOONG I'm only a passenger in the office. Trading is  
25 not really up my street. I know next to nothing  
about economics or trade for that matter.

MR. TAN I hear you look after the Indonesian side of  
the business.

FEI-LOONG Well, sort of, you know, I have to do something.

1 MR. TAN Don't be so modest. I hear that the Indonesian  
side is picking up because you've got the  
official okay.

FEI-LOONG Coming on slowly.

5 MR. TAN That is good. Very good. But my business is bad.  
Very bad. Before I used to have a very good  
business in cigarettes and all sorts. You know,  
used to bring in thousands of cartons of  
cigarettes, opium and even gold. No one knows  
10 and so no duty. Nowadays the authorities are too  
strict. Too strict. So I have to go into proper  
business, and I find I have to pay income tax.  
How can, man?

FEI-LOONG I pay tax too, so why shouldn't you?

15 MR. TAN Can't lah, Mr. Chan. I have too many obligations.  
I am supporting two wives and eleven children  
you know. Aiya, life is hard. But anyway,  
let's not talk about my miseries. Actually, I have  
a proposition to make to you.

20 FEI-LOONG Oh.

MR. TAN You see, I've got some Indonesian money  
which I want to bring out here. I think you are  
the best person to help me now that you have  
the connections. I'll give you ten per cent  
commission.

25 FEI-LOONG You're mad.

MR. TAN I'll make it twenty-five per cent.

FEI-LOONG The answer is no. It will still be no even if you  
give me the whole lot.

30 MR. TAN Why are you like that?



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 ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Lim Chor Pee was a pioneer Singapore playwright writing in English in the early 1960s, part of a circle of writers and theatre practitioners finding their voice as Singapore gained independence.

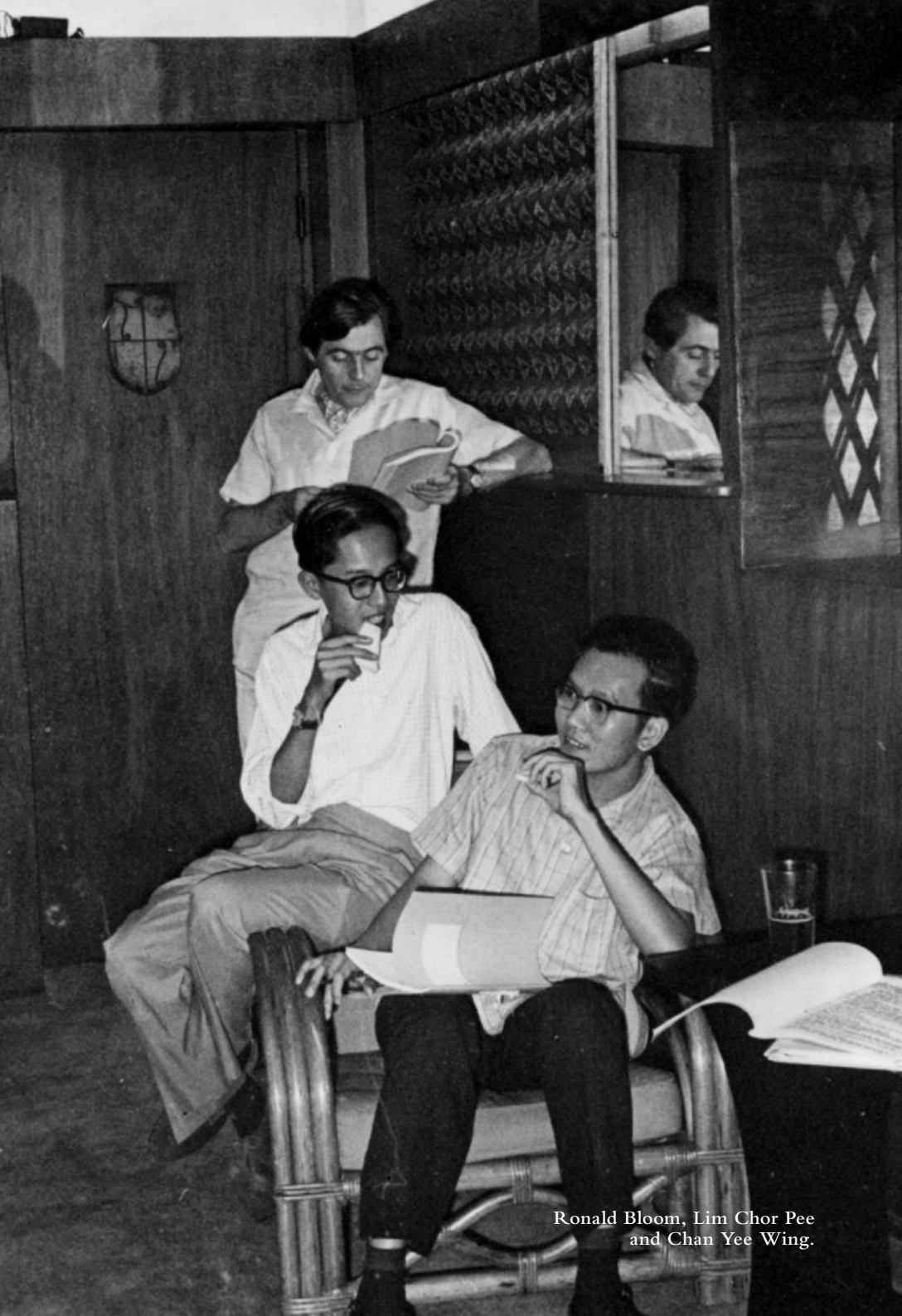
Born in Penang in 1936, he attended the Penang Free School and in 1955, he set sail for England where he read law at St. John's College, Cambridge University. Upon graduation in 1958, he moved to London to sit for the English Bar exams. He came to Singapore in 1959 joining the Singapore Legal Service and later established himself in private practice where he spent the rest of his career.

He was the founder president of the Experimental Theatre Club (ETC), which, together with like-minded friends, he set up in 1961 to foster the growth of English language Malayan theatre in a time when the local theatre scene was dominated by expatriates and Western plays. As well as producing plays for ETC, he began to write. The following year his first play *Mimi Fan* was staged by ETC at the Cultural Centre Theatre at Fort Canning. His second play *A White Rose at Midnight* was staged in 1964.

He contributed articles on the development of local theatre to *Tumasek*, a literary journal. He also served as a member of its editorial advisory board. Started by poet and novelist Dr. Goh Poh Seng in 1964, *Tumasek* aimed to provide a platform to nurture local writers and counted Edwin Thumboo and Robert Yeo among its contributors.

Lim practised law for over 40 years until he passed away in December 2006.

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Ronald Bloom, Lim Chor Pee  
and Chan Yee Wing.

## ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

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.

Epigram Books publishes all manner of fiction—novels, short stories, plays, children’s books and some poetry. We have published works by Singapore literary pioneers Goh Poh Seng, Stella Kon, Lloyd Fernando and Robert Yeo. Other prominent Singapore authors include playwrights Tan Tarn How, Ovidia Yu, Chong Tze Chien, Jean Tay and Haresh Sharma; and award-winning Singapore children’s authors Adeline Foo and SherMay Loh, who is an international Moonbeam Children’s Award winner.

Epigram Books also reflects Singapore’s mad obsession with food by publishing both recipe books and food guides. In 2012, Epigram Books started the Wee Editions imprint to support local designers, photographers and artists through a unique series of compact coffee table books.

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“[A] well-constructed play.”—*The Malay Mail*

“The dialogue is vibrant and meaningful. [Lim Chor Pee]... has something original to say to [his] audience...”—*The Straits Times*

The swinging 1960s. A nightclub in Singapore.  
A one night stand that turns into true love.  
Or not?

In *Mimi Fan*, Singapore playwright Lim Chor Pee weaves together a haunting tale about love, escapism and broken hearts searching for healing. Through the story of a teenage bar girl, Mimi Fan, whose destiny clashes with Chan Fei-Loong, an English-educated overseas Singaporean who has returned home to work, Lim brings to the fore some undeniable and searing truths: true love requires courage, it can be painful, and it can haunt you, despite your best efforts to ignore it.

Written by Singapore's pioneer playwright Lim Chor Pee in 1962, *Mimi Fan* is considered Singapore's first English-language play written by a local. It was first staged by the Experimental Theatre Club in 1962 and then restaged by Theatreworks in 1990.

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