

“...hitting you both at the level of gut and intellect.”—*Today*

model citizens



a play by
haresh sharma

E

model
citizens

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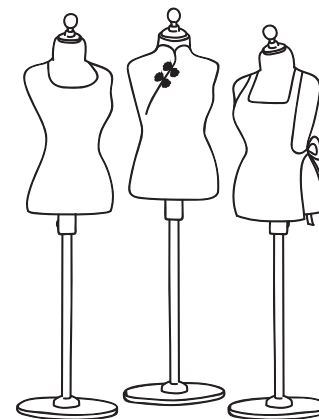
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model citizens



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*MODEL CITIZENS: CELEBRATING DIFFERENCE*Introduction by Alvin Tan

In the era of the global village, there seems to be more bigotry, intolerance and hatred than inclusiveness, understanding and compassion. What is really happening on the ground in our daily lives?

There are many factors responsible for ethnic tension and for people failing to co-exist or engage in meaningful interaction with one another.

Foremost, there is increased mobility today with more people travelling for work and leisure, and settling, temporarily or permanently, outside their birth land. Borders become less consequential as we intermingle and as countries compete to attract talent and skilled labour to remain ahead.

This dilution of borders is very well the result of imperative and pragmatic economic goals, but often, insufficient priority is given to the appreciation of different cultural sensibilities of day-to-day matters. Over time, ignorance and prejudice grow and eventually become entrenched in our understanding or perception of the 'other'.

In addition, with power, difference is often politicised rather than celebrated. Power often determines how values from a dominant culture may permeate the body politic and go on to shape sensibilities and perspectives, which, over time, may become institutionalised. As policies are formulated and implemented, one ethnic group may become privileged while another diminished in significance. This is because power works to preserve the status quo, and the traditional hierarchical structure is usually more accepted or preferred than concentric circles of multiple power centres (i.e. co-existence), minority groups frequently end up negotiating with the dominant.

The culture of hierarchical power must be challenged if we aspire to make way for spaces sympathetic to collaborative impulses, where different

cultural sensibilities exist more equitably and may therefore permute freely and fuse meaningfully.

For instance, although a country may claim to be meritocratic, the criteria or premise upon which merit is determined is not necessarily independent of cultural values. This is especially true if class is also perceived as a cultural category.

The danger is that instead of respecting differences or engaging with elements from other cultures to forge new identities and relations, we may develop cultural insecurities or a purist mindset, or both, which can lead to ethnocentric dispositions and discriminatory outcomes.

How then do we reflect on how governmental policies affect our lives? How should we construct our attitudes towards one another and towards the society we are in the process of becoming?

I believe one of the ways is to nurture spaces where the contestation of different cultural perspectives may take place. These spaces, which are already hosted by theatre, the arts, new media and civil society—where citizens are able to debate, discourse and discover issues and ideas without fear—should be encouraged to flourish. These spaces should not be regulated or policed, or anyone persecuted, as they are potential powerhouses for addressing present-day maladies.

We need to have faith, trust and respect. We need to subdue the paranoia that the worst-case scenario, such as social unrest, will come true. We need to stop nipping things in the bud. Instead, we should trust citizens to engage in non-violent, albeit passionate, debate and believe that conflict can inspire new insights. Difference is celebrated when we tap from our very own diversity to strengthen social cohesion organically. In this way we might re-imagine our destiny as a young nation making real progress.

At present, although some countries may appear cosmopolitan and multicultural, their environments are really more nationalist-oriented than intercultural. To move forward, we have to acknowledge the limitations

of yesterday's multiculturalism. Multiculturalism is a limited instrument in that it is merely a recognition of different cultures. On the other hand, interculturalism, which refers to the interaction of different cultures (sensibilities, beliefs or perspectives), encourages openness and the interplay of different cultural presences in an environment where relationships are governed by mutual respect, deep appreciation and even admiration.

In Singapore, intercultural outcomes would be similar to the hybridised Peranakan (Straits-born) and Eurasian cultures. Such possibilities starkly contrast what is found in Japan, where one cannot become Japanese; one can only be born Japanese. As nationality is not tied up with ethnicity, Singapore offers a space where citizens' identities remain fluid, heterogeneous and open.

On the other hand, nationalism if gone overboard can easily be evangelical in that it shows little or no respect for the beliefs of others. It is adequate perhaps only enough for residents to co-exist but not enough to intermingle. It can denigrate or negate other beliefs in favour of the one it propagates. The question is, is ultra-nationalism inevitable and immutable, and would it therefore always exist to enlarge the gap in human relations? Or are we capable of transcending the fault lines of nationality, race and religion with measured compassion and start building bridges?

How do we value purity? Is purity more or less important when we consider identity in today's world without borders? Is homogeneity a strength, a right or a choice, or are categories such as heterogeneity, diversity and hybridised more appropriate? Will fragmentation make for a better world or will it heighten the possibilities for more tension, quarrels, cultural unrest and wars?

When I think of the phrase 'model citizens', I am prompted to ask: What am I looking at? What citizenship are we addressing here? What is this reality we 'belong' to? Would there not be an array of modes and modulations when we take into account the rate and range of intercultural

interactions occurring in a world without borders? Indeed, how do we prepare ourselves to be citizens of contemporary realities? We have to quarrel to converge. We have to engage in conflict to synthesise. We have to debate to transcend.

These were the challenges we were constantly confronted with throughout the process of putting *Model Citizens*, the play, together. From our numerous improvisations, we eventually selected three characters from different historical and socio-cultural backgrounds for further development: an MP's wife (an ex-Nantah graduate), an Indonesian maid and her Peranakan employer—and a story slowly emerged.

The story also provided a framework that propelled the journeys of the three characters and their relationships. Haresh has skillfully crafted nuanced interactions of their respective worldviews in dynamic contestation and negotiation, such that an intercultural narrative—powerful, poignant, relevant and insightful—unfolds to an audience still new to the political potential of cross-cultural theatre that interrogates our contemporary realities.

As Mahatma Gandhi put it: “I do not want to foresee the future. I am concerned with taking care of the present. God has given me no control over the moment following.”

Model Citizens is a microcosm of people relating across cultures, an exploration of the politics of language, class and difference. It is imperative that we continue this struggle in full respect and appreciation of our present needs. It is urgent that we scrutinise how differences are confronted and facilitated.

Alvin Tan, 2012

Founder and Artistic Director, The Necessary Stage

PRODUCTION NOTES

Model Citizens was first performed by The Necessary Stage from 3 to 14 March 2010 at The Necessary Stage Black Box. It was restaged at the National Museum of Singapore Gallery Theatre from 11 to 15 January 2011 as part of the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. The play toured to Kuala Lumpur from 19 to 22 January 2011 at the KL Performing Arts Centre.

The play was directed by Alvin Tan; set design by Vincent Lim; lighting design by Lim Woan Wen; and multimedia design by Mohd Fadlin bin Mohd Saffri. Translations were provided by Goh Guat Kian, Siti Khalijah Zainal, Sammaria Simanjuntak, Wong Chee Meng, Peggy Ferroa, and Melissa Lim.

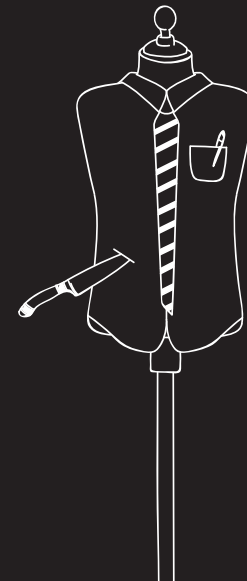
The cast was as follows:

MRS CHUA	Goh Guat Kian
MELLY	Siti Khalijah Zainal
WENDY	Karen Tan

CHARACTERS

MRS CHUA	MP's wife, 55
MELLY	Indonesian maid, 24
WENDY	Melly's employer, 45

ACT 1



ACT 1 : SCENE 1

Day 1

1 *Mrs Chua and Melly are together. Pause.*
Mrs Chua laughs.

MRS CHUA 我知道我不应该大声笑... 但是我刚从医院回来。
他因为药物的作用, 连话都说不清楚。我从来没有
5 看过他这个样子。
[I know I shouldn't be laughing... but I just
came from the hospital. He couldn't speak
properly because he was heavily medicated.
Never seen him like that before.]

10 *Pause. Mrs Chua laughs.*

MRS CHUA 你男朋友为什么想杀他?
[Why did your boyfriend want to kill him?]

MELLY Hah?

MRS CHUA You... talk Chinese?

15 MELLY ...

MRS CHUA You maid. Work maid.

MELLY Yes. I... Three years. Work here.

MRS CHUA Indo...

MELLY Yes. I Indonesia. Kamu bisa ngomong Bahasa
20 Indonesia ngak?
[Yes. I Indonesia. Do you speak Bahasa
Indonesia?]

MRS CHUA Hah? 哎呀! 怎么这样? 你听不懂我说什么。
我也听不懂你讲什么。真是鸡同鸭讲。
25 [Hah? Aiyoh, what is this? You don't
understand me. I don't understand you.
Like duck and chicken...]

1 MELLY My boyfriend... he jail.
 MRS CHUA Yes. Jail. He (*action of stabbing*) my husband.
 MELLY No! He never (*action of stabbing*) your husband.
 MRS CHUA My husband MP! Your boyfriend siow!
 5 Why he (*action of stabbing*) my husband?
 MELLY I don't know. (*pause*) Auntie tolong...
 MRS CHUA 我都不知道为什么会给你我的电话号码。看到你在法庭上... 那样的看着他... 那样的看着我... 你很年轻。你知道你有多年轻吗? 你知道男人... 对的, 男人会把你一生搞得乱七八糟? 所以我叫我的司机跟你谈谈看你 OK 吗。这件事并不是你的错。他所做的这些跟你没有关系。你明白吗? (停顿) 你怎么会明白? 你当然不会明白。连我都搞不懂我为什么要跟你说这些?
 15 [I don't know why I gave you my phone number. When I saw you in the court room... the way you looked at him, the way you looked at me... You are so young. Do you know how young you are? Do you know how men can turn your life upside down? That's why I asked my driver to talk to you. To see if you are okay. This is not your fault. What he did is not your fault. You understand? (*slight pause*) How can you understand? Of course you don't understand. Why am I even talking to you?
 20 *Pause.*
 MELLY My name Melly. Maaf, tapi saya ngak bisa ngomong bahasa Cina. Bahasa Inggeris saya juga tidak bagus. Saya beruntung karna Ma'am saya bisa ngomong bahasa Melayu. Saya suruh

30

1 dia ngomong sama kamu? Dia orangnya baik. Dia bagi saya off, beri saya bikin kerja lain. Saya telpon dia. Kamu ngomong dengannya OK? [My name Melly. I'm sorry but I cannot speak Chinese. Even my English is very bad. I'm very lucky because my Ma'am can speak Malay. I ask her to talk to you? She's very nice. She gives me time off, she lets me do other work. I call her. You talk to her okay?]
 5 *Melly takes out her mobile phone and makes a call.*
 MELLY Hello Ibu? Melly sini. Ibu bisa— [Hello Ibu? It's Melly. Can you—]
She hangs up. Pause.
 MRS CHUA Makan!
 MELLY Makan?
 MRS CHUA Makan. You want makan?
 MELLY I... I don't... makan babi.
 MRS CHUA No babi. I cook... mee.
 MELLY Mee goreng?
 MRS CHUA Mee sua.
 20 *Melly's phone rings. She answers. It is Wendy.*
 MELLY Hello? Ibu, Melly di rumah Mrs Chua. Tidak! Tidak... Melly telpon Mrs Chua karna—Ngak, Mrs Chua yang berikan Melly... Ibu bisa suruh Mrs Chua bantu?... Tapi dia di dalam jail dan Mrs Chua bisa— (*kepada Mrs Chua*) My boss... [Hello? Ibu, I'm at Mrs Chua's house. No! No... I called her because—No, she gave me... Can you ask her to help?... But he's in jail and she can— (*to Mrs Chua*) My boss...]
 30

1 *Mrs Chua takes Melly's handphone.*

MRS CHUA 哈罗? 是, 是我是蔡中进的太太... 没有, 没有问题。你不用道歉。谢谢, 谢谢。他还在医院, 不过他好多了... 还好啦, 她年轻... 她要我帮忙, 可是我什么都不能做。这已经是刑事案件了。

5 也许你叫她忘记那男人... 她很幸运有这样的

一份好工作, 还有你这样的好雇主... 不用客气, 真的, 没有问题。谢谢你的问候。

[Yes, I am Chua Chong Jin's wife... No need

10 to apologise. Thank you. He's getting better.

Still at the hospital... It's okay, she's young... She wants my help but I cannot do anything.

It's a court case now. Maybe you tell her to just

forget about him... just be grateful she has a

15 good job, a good employer like you... No, please,

it's really not a problem... Thank you for your kind wishes...]

Mrs Chua gives the phone to Melly. She goes to get some food.

MELLY 20 Yah... Iya... Tapi bagaimana jikalau dia tidak

bisa dilepaskan jail? ...Tapi mengapa? Dia kan isterinya. Dia bisa bantu. Dia bisa beritahu

suaminya, suruh suaminya bantu. Tanya saja sama dia, ngomong saja sama dia. Tolong... Dia kan

25 punya kuasa. Mereka pasti dengar katanya.

Melly sudah tiada apa-apa lagi untuk terus hidup. Tolong bantulah, tolong... ini untuk kehidupan

Melly, masa depan Melly. Dia—

[But what if he can't get out of jail?... But why?

30 She's his wife. She can help. She can ask her

1 husband to help. Just ask him, just speak with him. Please... He has the power. They'll listen to him. I have nothing else to live for. Please help, please...this is my life, my future. He's—]

5 *Melly keeps her phone. Pause.*

MRS CHUA You makan? Mee sua? No babi.

Pause. She gives a bowl of noodles to Melly, who eats.

MRS CHUA 我知道你很害怕。我知道你爱他, 你想念他。你要和他在一起。但是, 我是在保护你。

10 一切都会没事。不要想不开。来吃点东西。然后回家去... 好好的过日子。

[I know you're frightened. I know you love him. You miss him. You want to be with him. But I'm protecting you. Everything will be fine. Don't be sad. Have something to eat. Then you can go back home... and carry on with your life.]

15 *Pause. Mrs Chua laughs.*

MRS CHUA Thinking my husband...

20

25

30

ACT 1 : SCENE 2

Day 1

1 *Wendy is reading a saved online conversation between her son Tony (nick: angel) and an anonymous friend (nick: shishi).*

SHISHI Hey, fucker, what you doing? Long time no see you.

5 ANGEL I writing song.

SHISHI WTF!!! ROTFL!!!

ANGEL Nah beh... I writing song about Au Sang Suu Kyi.

Gonna sing at Speaker's corner.

SHISHI You kana tangkap damn go to jail sia.

10 ANGEL I fight injustice mah

SHISHI You blardy in love with her. She's your goddess. LOL.

ANGEL Wei! The Juntah are damn fuckers liow.

SHISHI Fren, you are fucking Sporean. Act like 1.

ANGEL F Spore.

15 SHISHI LOL Migrate lor.

Pause. Her phone rings. She answers.

WENDY Lu mo' apa¹, Margaret? I said I'm fine. You don't have to call every day just to check... What is that supposed to mean? I'll go back to work when I feel like it. What's it to you? Lu mo' gua buat apa? Nagis sampei mata jatoh?² (*slight pause*) No! Don't come... and don't you dare bring Ji Ee, Sa Ee and Ee Ee Bulat—Margaret, eh, tunggu, tunggu, I have another call. (*pause*) Hello?... Melly, I'm on the other line. (*pause*) What does the family want me to do? Invite everyone over and have a press conference?...

1 Bullshit, they want to show support. They just want to gossip. I don't care what they accuse me of. I have no time for them.

She hangs up. She continues reading.

5 ANGEL LOL!!! ROTFL!!!

SHISHI Wat so funny?

ANGEL My mum swearing at the Chinese workers next door.

She think I not at home. She say F them LOL!!!

SHISHI Crazy family. You at home and yr mum dun even noe.

10 My parents damn strict. That's why I internet at library.

ANGEL What library?

SHISHI Che! I donno you, you donno me. No need to ask.

ANGEL You my chat buddy mah.

SHISHI Yah, e-buddy LOL.

15 *Pause. She calls Melly.*

WENDY Apa pasal Melly?... siapa punya rumah? Lu gila ka?

Lu balek skarang!... Lu macam mana chari dia

punya rumah?... Tok sa, lu balek skarang...

Gua chakap sama dia.

20 [What is it Melly?... whose house? Are you crazy?

Leave right now!... How did you find her

house?... Never mind, come home now...

Pass the phone to her.]

Pause.

25 WENDY Hello? 你是MP的太太吗? 我的工人麻烦你,

真对不起。你的先生好吗... 我真的对不起。

OK, OK, 我告诉她。请原谅我。祝你的先生快点好起来。

[Hello? You are the MP's wife?... I am very

30 sorry about my maid... I hope your husband is

1 lu mo' apa [*Bahasa*] What do you want?

2 lu mo' gua buat apa? Nagis sampei mata jatoh? [*Bahasa*] What do you want me to do? Cry my eyes out?

 ABOUT THE PLAYWRIGHT

Haresh is Resident Playwright of The Necessary Stage and co-Artistic Director of the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. To date, he has written 100 plays. One of these, *Off Centre*, was selected by the Ministry of Education as a Literature text for 'N' and 'O' Levels, and republished by The Necessary Stage in 2006. In 2008, *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature, Vol. 6*, was published by Ethos Books. Written by Professor David Birch and edited by Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, it presents an extensive investigation of Haresh's work over the past 20 years. A collection of Haresh's plays was also translated into Mandarin and published as 哈里斯·沙玛剧作选 by Global Publishing. In 2012, Epigram Books reprinted *Those Who Can't, Teach*, which it first published in 2010.

Haresh was awarded Best Original Script for *Fundamentally Happy*, *Good People* and *Gemuk Girls* during the 2007, 2008 and 2009 *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards respectively. In 2010, the abovementioned plays were published by The Necessary Stage in the *Trilogy* collection. Most recently, two collections of short plays by Haresh, *Shorts 1* and *Shorts 2*, were published as well. In 2011, Haresh became the first non-American to be awarded the prestigious Goldberg Master Playwright by New York University's Tisch School of the Arts.

 ABOUT THE NECESSARY STAGE

Formed in 1987 by the current Artistic Director Alvin Tan, The Necessary Stage (TNS) is a non-profit theatre company with a charity status. Their mission is to create challenging, indigenous and innovative theatre that touches the heart and mind. TNS has been identified as one of the Major Arts Companies by the National Arts Council, and it is also the organiser and curator of the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

For its Main Season, TNS produces an average of two plays a year at the Black Box and other venues. The plays are original, mostly devised pieces created in a collaborative process involving research, improvisation (before scripting) and input from all members of the production.

The Necessary Stage shows its commitment to international exchange and networking through staging the company's plays abroad and inviting foreign works to be presented in Singapore, through dialogues, workshops and training opportunities, as well as through creative collaborations leading to interdisciplinary productions.

In addition, the TNS Theatre for Youth and Community branch actively engages young people, senior citizens and different communities in Singapore by conducting workshops and process-based drama programmes that focus on personal development.

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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“Model Citizens has both power and veracity. It pulsates with a seething, palpable rhythm of resistance.”—The Flying Inkpot

“Model Citizens is... one of their best—honest, direct and biting.”—Writers Connect

A man stabs an MP at a Meet the People Session. But this is not their story.

It is the story of the man's girlfriend, an Indonesian maid who wants to get married and become a Singaporean citizen. It is the story of the MP's wife, who tries to cope with her husband's injury and the media spotlight. It is the story of the maid's employer, who is also struggling with her own tragedy.

These three women may mean nothing to each other, but they need one another to survive. The maid, the MP's wife and the employer.

Are they model citizens?

Written by veteran Singaporean playwright Hareesh Sharma, *Model Citizens* won Best Director (Alvin Tan) and Best Actress (Siti Khalijah Zainal) at the 2011 *The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards*.

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