

“The message from the play was an eye-opener.”—*The Business Times*

those
who can't,
teach



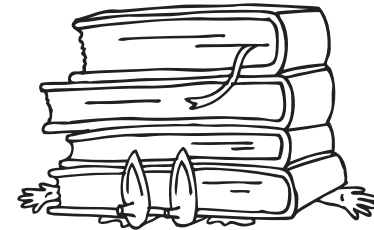
a play by
haresh sharma

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Discussion Questions
Included

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THOSE WHO CAN'T, TEACH: A PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN

Introduction by Alvin Tan

Those Who Can't, Teach is a play about the passion of one's calling. How do we appreciate dedication in an age of uncertainty – a world where there's an endless spiral of transitions, where change is the constant, and when we are so easily derailed by competing distractions? How can we be sure that we've made the right career choice or the right choices in life? And don't the stakes get higher when we realise we have only one life?

Mrs Phua Su Lin is a dedicated teacher, that rare educator keenly invested in the formation of her students; not only in their grades but what kind of human beings they could be. As much as the play is about the relationships between teachers and students, it is also a portrait of a woman as an educator.

And that is why, compared to the 1990 version, this revised, revamped, rewritten *Those Who Can't, Teach* has one actor playing Mrs Phua Su Lin and an ensemble taking on the roles of teachers, students and parents.

Hareh deftly crafts a charming tale revolving around Mrs Phua and her student Teck Liang. This teacher-pupil relationship easily represents many stories of a teacher's struggle with a difficult pupil; always hoping that he will turn over a new leaf. What does a teacher have but words, wisdom and persistence to turn him around? It is an age-old classic but told in contemporary context.

And most interestingly, Hareh employs a memory device to tell the tale. But memory played as the present tense. The past is played as present and we zoom to the future, experiencing it in small doses, with the adult Teck Liang visiting an aged Mrs Phua at a nursing home.

This structural device makes it possible for us to examine how precious the present is. How many possible moments of transformation exist

in the present and how often do we miss out on such opportunities to engender change?

Those Who Can't, Teach is also about visions and dreams. Visions are beliefs and convictions yet unrealised; faith is believing in that which is as yet non-existent. In the play, there are many competing visions. For example, Mrs Phua and Sabtu disagree on the ways in which education can prepare someone for life. Mrs Phua and Zach have different pedagogical approaches.

How one values process, or privileges it over product, can determine what kind of educator or learner one becomes. How one negotiates these positions and modalities will reveal one's openness, blind spots and how reflexive one is.

But nothing should get in the way of what is important to us. If we keep our focus, we will manifest our dreams in good time – whether it takes five to 10 years, or even if we have to pass the dream on to someone else, because one lifetime is not enough. It is often the journey and/or the ultimate outcome that makes the wait, in realising the dream, worth the while. It's the only way to fight against the oppressive onslaught of change – to be able to afford to dream and carry it to fruition.

Finally, *Those Who Can't, Teach* is about integrity. It is about Mrs Phua, who sticks to her beliefs about education. And despite all the odds she faces, she will never let go of what she ultimately believes – that these students are in your care for a few years of their lives and that you have to be that special person focusing on helping them shape their values and world views. Whatever happens after they leave is up to them and the world around them. But for those few years, you cannot let them down. Not even if your life is full of challenges. Not even if your own world is crumbling down.

Do we know what the price of dedication is today? That is the question I ask after encountering Mrs Phua Su Lin.

Alvin Tan, 2010

Artistic Director, The Necessary Stage

 PRODUCTION NOTES

Those Who Can't, Teach is a brand new version of the original play, which was performed by The Necessary Stage from 16 to 23 September 1990 as part of The Substation's opening. This new version was staged by The Necessary Stage from 19 to 21 May 2010 at the Drama Centre, as part of the Singapore Arts Festival. The play was directed by Alvin Tan; lighting design by Suven Chan; sound by Philip Tan; and set by Vincent Lim. The cast was as follows:

MRS PHUA SU LIN	Neo Swee Lin
ZACHARIAH LEE WONG	Rodney Oliveiro
ONG TECK LIANG	
HANA MANSUR	Siti Khalijah Zainal
CLARE WONG	
MRS ONG	
KAK	
LIM TIONG BOON	Ian Tan
RAYMOND TAN	
LAURENCE TAN	
MR ONG	
SABTU BIN KHAMIS	Najib Soiman
CIKGU ALI	
JALI BIN MOHD FARIZ	

CHARACTERS

MRS PHUA SU LIN	Teacher
ZACHARIAH LEE WONG	Teacher
HANA MANSUR	Teacher
LIM TIONG BOON	Teacher
CIKGU ALI	Teacher
SABTU BIN KHAMIS	Canteen operator
ONG TECK LIANG	Student
CLARE WONG	Student
RAYMOND TAN	Student
JALI BIN MOHD FARIZ	Student
LAURENCE TAN	Raymond's father
MR ONG	Teck Liang's father
MRS ONG	Teck Liang's mother
KAK	Jali's sister

PROLOGUE



 PROLOGUE

1 TECK *(voiceover)* I keep seeing this ad on TV. It talks
 about teachers. Thank you for teaching me.
 Thank you for changing my life. They all look
 happy. Have they always been this happy?
 5 Did they have a perfect childhood? A perfect
 school life? I was happy once. But I was young.
 The older you get, the more you remember.
 The younger you are, the more you forget.
 MPSS¹. The typical neighbourhood school
 10 with the typical Vision and Mission. Nurturing
 Young Minds. A Better Tomorrow. Empowering
 Students. Creating a Compassionate Society...
 Beautiful phrases. Strong convictions.
 Lofty ideals. In reality, these ideals are often
 15 forgotten, or replaced, by other ideals...
 CCA² Achievements, National Participation,
 Value-Added, Best Practice Award,
 Autonomous Status...
 The school. The teachers. The friends.
 20 The ideals. The realities. The memories.
 The memories...

25

1 Marine Parade Secondary School
 2 Co-Curricular Activity

ACT 1



SCENE 1:

*We hear the sounds of the start of a school day.
The school bell rings. Zach is in the staffroom with
Hana and Su Lin.*

1 ZACH Hey, Mrs Phua... Can I leave early today?
I don't have any class after recess.

 SU LIN Zach, I can't keep covering for you. The year has
just started. If Principal finds out...

5 ZACH He won't find out. Anyway, you're my HOD¹...
Tell him I'm (*pause*) doing research outside.
He walks away.

 SU LIN Zach! I did not say yes!

 HANA Just because Scholar² he thinks he can
10 do anything.

 SU LIN And I wanted Zach to show this new
teacher around.

 HANA Yah lah... He's good at this kind of things...
Showing pretty teachers around.

15 SU LIN It's a male teacher.

 HANA Male? There's a new male teacher?

 SU LIN You want to show him around?

 HANA Eh, no lah. So busy today. (*slight pause*)
What subject?

20 SU LIN PE³.

 HANA Ok lah, I don't mind. My Principles of
Accounting class only starts after recess.

 SU LIN His name is Lim. I have to go. Meeting my
Drama Club kids. They want to stage their
25 own play!

1 Head of Department

2 someone who is sponsored by the government to do his undergraduate
studies in exchange for several years of teaching service when he graduates

3 Physical Education

1 HANA My dance girls always want to choreograph their own. But cannot lah. When they do their own thing right, the movement always like that. (she demonstrates) But when I get the professional choreographer, the movement always like that. (she demonstrates)

5 Su Lin walks away. Lim enters. He looks at Hana.

HANA Nice right?

LIM Very nice. (slight pause) I'm Lim... The new PE teacher?

10 HANA Hello. I'm Farhana. But you can call me Hana. I'm your tour guide today! They walk away. Pause. Su Lin is on the phone.

SU LIN Where is she now? Can you pass the phone to her?... What do you mean she doesn't want to come out? Joy, don't cry! You know my mother... She's not well. She doesn't mean all the... Ok, ok... (slight pause) Hello? Ma? (in Cantonese) Why you go and do this kind of thing? You cannot anyhow swear at people!

15 I cannot afford to change another maid! Don't be so troublesome! Lim and Hana enter.

SU LIN (whispers) I kick you out! You want me to kick you out?... Good, then behave! Listen to Joy. We cannot lose her! (she hangs up) So, Lim, how's your first day?

LIM Can I be honest Mrs Phua? Having recently acquired my Diploma in Physical Education at NIE⁴, I find it disturbing that MPSS⁵ is far

30

4 National Institute of Education

5 Marine Parade Secondary School

1 behind the standards of schools internationally. But I will do my utmost to increase the students' level of fitness, improve their diet and create wellness, in mind and body.

5 Zach enters.

ZACH Ah! What do we have here? Fresh blood. Let me examine the specimen. Hmm... Fresh grad from School of Physical Education. Definitely not a scholar. I am Mr Zachariah Lee Wong. PSC⁶ Scholar. Overseas. Welcome to MPSS! Sabtu enters.

SABTU Hello! Sorry sorry... Here got sugar or not? I am new lah... At the canteen. Just come, want to cook and then alamak⁷, forget to bring sugar. I take three packet eh?

15 ZACH Take take... Take whatever you want. Eh, so what are you going to sell ah?

SABTU Monday I got mee siam⁸, soto⁹, roti john¹⁰... Tuesday, I got mee rebus¹¹, lontong¹², roti john... Wednesday, nasi goreng¹³ and roti john.

20 ZACH Got a lot of roti john ah...

SABTU My roti john best. I got secret recipe. My father teach me. My name Sabtu – Saturday. My father is Khamis – Thursday. (he goes to the computer) You can see my menu online. (slight pause) Eh, this computer must upgrade lah. Nowadays where got people use Pentium. Alamak, memory low...

25

6 Public Service Commission

7 alamak [Malay] exclamatory remark

8 mee siam [Malay] Malay spicy noodles in slightly sour gravy

9 soto [Malay] short form of mee soto, a Malay dish of noodles in yellow gravy

10 roti john [Malay] Indian fried bread with egg and minced meat

11 mee rebus [Malay] Malay spicy noodles in thick gravy

12 lontong [Malay] Malay spicy vegetable soup with compressed rice cakes

13 nasi goreng [Malay] Malay spicy fried rice

1 Virtual memory... very low! I defrag¹⁴...
 (slight pause) Defrag always very long.

LIM Do you adhere to food standards?

SABTU My food standard! Don't worry. Everything best.

5 Today I make prata¹⁵ and murtabak¹⁶.

LIM What about cholesterol? How many eggs do
 you use? According to nutritional guidelines...

SABTU My egg got no cholesterol. I got chicken,
 mutton, lembu... Sorry, cow. This one coffee
 10 ah? Sorry, sleepy lah. Yesterday, whole night
 I play Pet Society...
Su Lin has been on the phone.

SU LIN There's an urgent staff meeting. The new
 principal has some big announcement.

15 ZACH What's so urgent? School just started!

LIM But... It's my first day. What do I do?

SU LIN Do what students do. Smile, nod, pretend to
 take notes...

HANA And never volunteer for anything!

20

25

30

14 defragment
 15 prata [*Malay*] short form of roti prata, meaning an Indian flatbread
 16 murtabak [*Malay*] an Indian flatbread with meat stuffing

SCENE 2:

*School bell rings. The teachers are in the staffroom. Zach,
 Su Lin and Hana are busy working. Lim is pacing.*

1 LIM Sports Day is next week. I can't deal with it.
 Sports Day is next week. I can't deal with it.
 No! I'm going to be great. Yes, you will be.
 Embrace the challenge!

5 HANA Oi! People are trying to work!

LIM Why did the Principal put me in charge?
 When I was at NIE¹, we weren't taught how to
 plan Sports Day!
Lim exits.

10 ZACH Su Lin, I need the Lit² and Lang³ lesson plans and
 exam papers for the whole upper sec⁴ cohort.
 I told you about it last week.

SU LIN I'll get it done by Monday.

ZACH Monday?

15 SU LIN Zach, you're asking for an entire year's worth
 of lesson plans. I need time.

HANA She's trying ok?

ZACH I'm sorry, are you in my department?

HANA I'm sorry I'm not a Scholar⁵. I'm sorry I did not
 20 backstab my way to be Head of Department.

SU LIN Hana...

ZACH I did not ask for this ok? Principal gave me this
 position. MPSS⁶ is reaching the most important
 milestone of its entire school history... MOE⁷ is

1 National Institute of Education
 2 Literature
 3 Language
 4 secondary
 5 someone who is sponsored by the government to do his undergraduate
 studies in exchange for several years of teaching service when he graduates
 6 Marine Parade Secondary School
 7 Ministry of Education

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Haresh Sharma is the Resident Playwright of The Necessary Stage and co-Artistic Director of the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. To date, he has written more than 70 plays which have been staged in Singapore, Glasgow, Birmingham, London, Dublin, Cairo, Manila, Melbourne, Busan, Seoul, New Delhi, Hong Kong, Hungary, Romania and Tokyo.

Haresh has a Bachelor of Arts from the National University of Singapore as well as a Master of Arts in Playwriting from the University of Birmingham, obtained in 1994 on a Shell-NAC Scholarship. He has also been awarded fellowships and grants by the British Council and the United States Information Service, and was conferred the Young Artist Award in 1997.

In 2006, Haresh's play, *Off Centre*, was selected by the Ministry of Education to be an 'O' and 'N' Level Literature text in Singapore schools. In 2008, *Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature, Vol. 6* was published. Written by Professor David Birch and edited by Associate Professor Kirpal Singh, this volume presented an extensive investigation of Haresh's work over the past 20 years. A collection of Haresh's plays has also been translated into Mandarin and published under the title 哈里斯·沙玛剧作选. Haresh's award-winning plays, *Fundamentally Happy*, *Good People* and *Gemuk Girls* have also been published by The Necessary Stage in the collection entitled *Trilogy*.

ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Since its launch nearly a decade ago, Epigram Books has established itself as an imprint for exquisitely-designed and thought-provoking books. Our titles cover non-fiction – art and culture, travel and adventure, memoirs, history and heritage, and food and cookery – as well as fiction, including plays, poetry and children’s books.

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Fiction titles include *The Diary of Amos Lee: I Sit, I Write, I Flush!* and *The Diary of Amos Lee: Girls, Guts & Glory!* by Adeline Foo, *The Little Nightingale Who Can’t Sing* by Angie Featherstone and Stephanie Wong and *The Elephant and the Tree* by Jin Pyn. Epigram Books has also published *Boom* and *Everything but the Brain* by Jean Tay.

“The play throws up questions on the roles of parents, students and teachers, but does not collapse into an impotent tirade against society.

The script is joyous. The laughter is warmly wry, not caustic.”—*The Straits Times*.

“*Those Who Can’t, Teach* does much to do away with the stereotypes and fallacies of the teaching profession.”—*The Business Times*

Those Who Can’t, Teach turns the spotlight on the madcap lives of teachers and students in a typical secondary school in Singapore. As the teachers struggle daily to nurture and groom, the students prefer to hang out and “chillax”.

With upskirting and facebooking, griping and politicking, school takes on a whole new meaning as the colourful characters struggle to prove that those who *can*, teach.

Written by Singapore’s most prolific playwright Haresh Sharma, *Those Who Can’t, Teach* was first staged by The Necessary Stage in 1990 to critical acclaim. Twenty years later, Sharma revisits this classic to revitalise it for the Singapore Arts Festival 2010, transforming it into a powerful portrayal of the pressures and challenges facing teachers (and students) in schools in the 21st century.

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