

THE STORYTELLER: MICHAEL CHIANG

BY DAVID FUHRMANN LIM

HE HAS A WIKIPEDIA PAGE WHICH HE THINKS MIGHT HAVE BEEN CREATED BY A NATIONAL BODY OR A CULT OF FANS. HE WROTE HIS FIRST PLAY, BEAUTY BOX, OVER A WEEKEND. HE'S OUR COUNTRY'S MOST PROLIFIC PLAYWRIGHT (DESPITE TAKING A 14-YEAR HIATUS TO, ERM, UPDATE OLD PLAYS BEING RESTAGED). WITH AT LEAST 10 STAGED PLAYS AND MUSICALS. HE'S NEVER HAD WRITER'S BLOCK - EVER (TOUCH WOOD). HE'S NEVER HAD WRITER'S BLOCK - EVER (TOUCH WOOD). HE'S NEVER HAD WRITER'S BLOCK - EVER (TOUCH WOOD). HE'S NEVER HAD WRITER'S BLOCK - EVER (TOUCH WOOD).



MICHAEL CHIANG – IN THE LOCAL PATOIS HE SO CHAMPIONS IN HIS PLAYS – WINS LOR.

THE 60-YEAR-OLD IS OUR MOST SUCCESSFUL PLAYWRIGHT (*BEAUTY WORLD* HAS PLAYED TO AN ESTIMATED 250,000 PEOPLE). HIS PLAYS REFLECT SINGAPOREAN FOIBLES AND DEAL WITH ISSUES LIKE CENSORSHIP, SEX-CHANGE, CULTURAL IDENTITY, CLASS WARS AND COMING OF AGE, WITH A DASH OF PATHOS AND HUMOUR. (YOU'LL FIND ALL THIS IN HIS LATEST TOME, *PLAY THINGS: THE COMPLETE WORKS 1984-2014*.) CHIANG NOW GIVES US A VERSION OF SINGAPORE HE'D LIKE TO SEE.

Laugh again at *Army Daze*, and cry at *Private Parts*. *Play Things: The Complete Works 1984-2014* (\$35.95) is out in bookstores.



Reclaim our cultural heritage

"I do feel nostalgic for dialects. I'm Hainanese, my mum was Cantonese. And, when my grandpa passed away, I never spoke Hainanese again. I feel there are certain things we're losing touch with; it's a bit of a shame. It's like, we get Hong Kong serials on television but the Cantonese has been dubbed over. The reality is that, in this age of streaming, downloads and DVD rentals, anyone can access dialects. I'm not saying we promote them, but we shouldn't suppress them.

"This might be the last stretch: If those in the next tier don't have grandparents who speak to them in dialect, I think they will lose out. We're using Mandarin, but we're losing dialect. I miss that, which is why writing *Beauty World* was nostalgic, because it reminded me of the old Hong Kong films my mum used to take me to. When I wrote *My Lonely Tarts*, I had a whole chunk of Cantonese in there; it reminded me of my childhood."

Grow the theatre art scene

"I think the art scene is actually quite vibrant, healthy, but it's expensive to put on a show. Ideally, there will be some sort of balance so that the younger people who want to get into arts, want to be heard, to create, will at least have a chance to find an audience. But venues are hard to come by; they are not cheap to rent.

"When they first announced the two integrated resorts, I thought, 'Oh wow, finally got more theatres'. It's so hard to book theatre space. You book 18 months in advance; if you haven't booked for next year, forget it.

"But almost no (local) shows go to the IRs. There are a lot of overseas shows like *The Lion King*, *Priscilla*, *Queen of The Desert* and *Jersey Boys*, which I find a bit of a shame. Tourists are committed to coming here, staying at the hotel; they've got the family in tow. If you have a proper showcase for local productions and Singapore-written shows, it's a good way to do a bit of selling of our talent. Instead, we're bringing in all the foreign shows. Why not *Chang & Eng*, *Beauty World*, instead of *Phantom*?

"If I were in Mumbai, I'd rather watch a local production of *The Tempest* than an imported version of *The Sound of Music* doing its Asian tour.

"There should be a mix. I'd say, at least one week a month, have something local and just make the process work: Find the most commercial local production so that it covers cost, and you create work for local theatre talent. It can be a showcase of Singapore singers, not just theatre shows. The same way, in Malaysia, there's a certain requirement – you must air a certain number of

Malay movies a year (the National Film Development Corporation of Malaysia has a Compulsory Screening Scheme for cinemas)... I would do that, set a quota. The IRs have got the cash to support local art, and they should make a conscious effort to support it, subsidise it. I feel there's a way to make the quota work – they can afford it!"

Improve relations with foreign workers

"It's not such a bad idea having a nice mix of people living with us. It's a matter of balance, maybe it's just a question of mutual respect, but it's become a bit muddy, or muddled. There are a lot of pretty decent foreign workers, but people tend to negatively stereotype them, no matter that these stereotypes are often inaccurate. So many of us are now fixated with finding fault with anyone who's not Singaporean, but where did we come from? My dad and my granddad are from China. I just feel that we, of all people, should be more empathetic.

"The whole us-versus-them thing is a bit too strong. Maybe we started off on the wrong foot, and it's going to take a lot to step back and realise that we can do better.

"Better living conditions is one thing that would help: a whole lot of people sharing one room – it's not pleasant. You have to imagine what it's like to be them: They move here for a few years for a job, they're working in the sun for seven days a week, and they go back to this small space. There are people looking at them strangely on the bus; it's not a very nice feeling.

"I don't know how to build a campaign of compassion, that would have been something I'd

"I DON'T KNOW HOW TO BUILD
A CAMPAIGN OF COMPASSION,
THAT'D HAVE BEEN SOMETHING I'D
LOVE TO DO. CAN WE HAVE
A BIT MORE COMPASSION,
A BIT MORE EMPATHY? LET'S GET
BACK TO BASICS, TO BEING
RESPECTFUL AND DECENT."

"WITH FOOD, WE ARE REALLY
ONE UP ON OTHER COUNTRIES.
IT'S NOT JUST THAT IT'S US,
BUT THAT WE HAVE THE BEST OF
ALL THE DIFFERENT CUISINES."

love to do. Can we have a bit more compassion, a bit more empathy? That's something I wish I could find a way to change. Let's get back to basics, to being respectful and decent."

Rethink our retail experience

"We definitely have too many identical malls, in the sense that the experiences are the same. The same brands everywhere, whether you go to Jurong, the northern or western parts. So, when I step into a mall, I'm thinking, why can't it be more like Bangkok or Japan? I just feel that (overseas) there's a certain pride in creating something special, so if you want to find this particular designer, this particular arts and crafts shop, you have to go all the way there to get it. I feel that's something we should do, create something with a bit more uniqueness, a bit more special, so that you don't feel you're getting the same thing."

Use food to attract tourists

"With food, we are really one up on other countries. It's not just that it's us, but that we have the best of all the different cuisines. It's so eclectic, with so many different things, you never get bored eating here. From the low-

end kopitiam noodles to the Marina Bay Sands Michelin-star-chef places. We've got great international food, it's just quite endless. Over the years, I've realised how special it is, but we also take it for granted.

"If only I could find a way to convince visitors – even if they don't like spicy food – that a particular food is mild enough for them, because I think people want to sample varied cuisines, and it's so accessible. Just go down to an HDB block and it has everything. I think it's unique." (No, he didn't say "uniquely Singaporean".)



Photography Frenchscar Lim Grooming Aaron Ng/Decorum, using Make Up For Ever