

Hot Off The Press

Corrie Tan



ECLIPSE

By Haresh Sharma

The Necessary Stage/Paperback/63 pages/\$16/
BooksActually, Books Kinokuniya, The Necessary Stage/
★★★★☆

BEST OF

By Haresh Sharma

The Necessary Stage/Paperback/64 pages/\$16/
BooksActually, Books Kinokuniya, The Necessary Stage/
★★★★☆

The monodrama has been a key dramatic form in the development of contemporary Singapore theatre. It is quite the unlikely draw: A single person talking for an hour or two might easily descend into the pits of self-indulgence, but Singaporean playwrights and directors, from Kuo Pao Kun (*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*) to Oliver Chong (*Roots*), have skilfully avoided the extremes of stasis and over-acting to create intimate, powerful environments, where the one-man show can flourish.

One can draw a line from the acerbic elderly 'bibik' of Stella Kon's 1984 *Emily Of Emerald Hill* to the unnamed protagonist of Sharma's *Best Of* nearly 30 years later, a confiding, charmingly snarky young Malay woman who wants to get a divorce but cannot. Kon and Sharma's plays cast their eye on a strong, confident woman hemmed in by society's dictates.

Why the focus on this single-voiced form now? This year, The Necessary Stage has published as texts two monodramas by Haresh Sharma. One is the aforementioned *Best Of*, published in May, in which the audience is offered a glimpse of one woman's tumultuous emotional interior as she makes her way to visit a cousin in prison. Along the way, one realises that this visit is not quite what it seems, while learning more about her family and matters of divorce among the Malay-Muslim community in Singapore.

Then there is *Eclipse*, launched last month, in which a young Singaporean man suddenly feels compelled to bring his late father's ashes back to his hometown of Hyderabad, Pakistan. The older man had left Pakistan on Aug 15, 1947, the fateful day India and Pakistan were unceremoniously divided and families were ripped from the places they had been rooted in their entire lives.

Sharma's plays, regardless of specificity, are remarkably well-travelled. *Best Of* was translated into Italian and performed in Italy by Arianna Scommegna at the Tramedautore Festival last month, and was incredibly well-received in its tours of Malaysia in June last year and January this year. *Eclipse* was first staged by Scotland's 7:84 Theatre Company in 2007, before opening in Singapore a year later at the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, both versions starring the Pakistani-Glaswegian actor Umar Ahmed.

What makes the plays so universal, I think, is that they are anchored in good, old-fashioned storytelling, the way one might have gathered round a fire to hear a tale passed down through the generations. *Best Of* is the stronger play here, as *Eclipse* sometimes feels splintered and tangential. In *Eclipse*, the stories of each of the three men – son, father and grandfather – flit busily from one to the next. While this links the three markedly different generations, and the remarkable physical and emotional journeys they each take, it also means that the play is distracted by each detour. The playwright seems to scramble to reframe their narratives within the context of the Partition, bringing up issues of racial and religious tolerance with what sometimes feels like a heavy hand.

But both monodramas' characters are written with great compassion and wit. *Best Of* sparkles and sings with tenderness and humour. Sharma takes his nameless woman on several detours – roads travelled for a purpose, leading back to a larger arc reflecting on her fragile identity as a moderate Muslim woman in a secular Singapore. In her speech, one learns about the

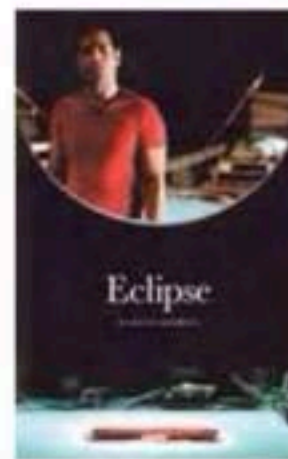
Haresh Sharma's monodramas *Eclipse* and *Best Of* are anchored in good, old-fashioned storytelling, while *Play Things* is a compilation of Michael Chiang's works which have captured the imagination of Singaporeans



PHOTOS: ST FILE, THE NECESSARY STAGE



Each work in *Play Things: The Complete Works 1984-2014* has Michael Chiang's (above) signature clever dialogue, and *Eclipse* and *Best Of* by Haresh Sharma (far left) have flawed narrators who draw readers in.



bonds one makes and breaks in the short time one is on earth.

While I did not have the chance to watch *Eclipse*, *Best Of* gleams with the same warmth on the page that is so wonderfully amplified on the stage.

Both plays open up their unreliable narrators to great scrutiny. Each is flawed and bruised. Each carries with them a compelling emotional nakedness, inviting you in without imposing their burdens on you. There is a sense of communal empathy: With the

audience present, these characters can finally come to terms with their struggles and find some sort of peace.

If you like these, read: *Roots* by Oliver Chong (2014, \$25, The Finger Players), a touching monodrama about a Singaporean man who travels back to his ancestral home in China to unearth a mysterious family secret.

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PLAY THINGS: THE COMPLETE WORKS 1984-2014

By Michael Chiang

Really Good Books/Hardcover/396 pages/\$39.94/
Books Kinokuniya/★★★★☆

Theatre tends to have a short lifespan. A play is performed for a few nights, it closes, another takes its place and that brief affair recedes from immediate memory. Theatre's 'liveness' gives it enormous power but unlike literature, music, film and visual art, it is not often recorded concretely or regularly documented. Sometimes, a script is all we have to reconstruct the experience.

In this sense, Michael Chiang's new self-published collection of 10 plays is a gem, adding to the increasing number of plays that Singaporean playwrights have, thankfully, started to publish in recent years – due in no small part to theatre companies' in-house publishing arms, or the likes of local publisher Epigram Books.

From *Beauty Box* (1984) to *High Class* (2013), Chiang stands out as one of the few playwrights who have managed to capture the hearts of generations of Singaporeans en masse. He found his way into the embrace of the mainstream with the fluffily campy but deeply likeable *Army Daze* (an experience accessible to every Singaporean) and *Beauty World* (a nostalgic return to the cabaret and 1960s Cantonese melodrama) – both of which gained huge followings through film or TV adaptations. This is balanced with solid critical acclaim for *Private Parts*, which dug into the marginalised world of transsexuals with compassion and humour.

There is a pleasant continuity to Chiang's oeuvre, each play stamped with his signature clever dialogue, rich in "with-it" punchlines that have broad appeal. He is unabashed in his appropriation of himself: Shorter plays sometimes seem to have been expanded to create longer ones – *Love & Belachan* (1985), about a couple's first encounter, feels like a precursor to the mistaken-identities romance of *Mixed Signals* (1989, in which a woman undergoes plastic surgery after a TV set falls on her). *High Class*, with its tai-tai reality TV show format, feels like a fleshed-out *Beauty Box*, which parades the finalists of *Miss Singapore Shopping Centre*.

A reading of all 10 plays also reveals a favourite toolkit of dramatic devices, such as: *The Intricate Plot Twist & Sudden Reveal* (*Beauty Box*, *Beauty World*, *Mixed Signals*, *High Class*), *The Musings On Romantic Relationships* (*Love & Belachan*, *Mixed Signals*, *My Lonely Tarts*), *The Variety Show Rebooted* (*Beauty Box*, *Private Parts*, *Heaven II*, *High Class*) and *The Many Wry Digs At Current Affairs* (every play, essentially).

But for all these unified themes and techniques, Chiang's collection is also inventively eclectic in terms of character and content. Censorship, moral high ground, business deals, family secrets, army routines, romance – Chiang has tackled them all, while demonstrating a keen ear for the Singapore patois and a sense of what will make the man in the street laugh.

Play Things' family jewel is undoubtedly *Private Parts*. Its main character Mirabella, a vivacious trans woman and queen of the smutty pun, would have been pleased. The characters are earthy, fleshed out, terribly funny and wrestle with very weighty issues of acceptance and abandonment in ways that never feel forced: If your girlfriend was formerly a man, would you still marry her? If your boyfriend's genitals had to be rebuilt after an accident, would you stick by him?

What strikes me most about Chiang's writing is that he is especially attuned to the Singapore idea of "face", the image we present to the world and how Singaporeans react when this "face" is undermined or in danger of destruction. Whether it's TV show host Warren (*Private Parts*) guarding the reconstructive surgery of his private parts, Ruby/Vanda (*Mixed Signals*) undergoing a massive surgical transformation, or the hapless recruit Malcolm (*Army Daze*) developing a 'thicker skin' as he completes Basic Military Training, Chiang's characters wrestle with the all-consuming concept of adjusting their self-image and how they are viewed.

Look here, he seems to say, it's okay to laugh at yourself, to peel off that 'face' beneath the make-up and glitzy hairdo. This is who you are and you do not have to be ashamed of it. Under that soulless, gleaming Singaporean exterior is a country pulsing with many flaws, but also with great heart.

If you liked this, read: *Cooling Off Day* by Alfian Sa'at (Ethos Books, \$19.26, Books Kinokuniya), Singapore's 2011 General Election told, with wit and tenderness, through the words of its own people.