DREAMING SINGAPORE:
THE SINGAPOREAN ALTERNATIVE THEATRE
AS A VEHICLE FOR SOCIO-POLITICAL ACTIVISM

Charmaine Cecilia Fernandez

BA (Hons)/PostGradDipEd

DISCIPLINE OF ENGLISH AND CULTURAL STUDIES
School of Humanities

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Abstract

This thesis contends that the Singaporean alternative theatre functions as a crucial vehicle for socio-political activism in the Singaporean climate of extensive social and political control. Specifically, I argue that portrayals of the marginalised figure contribute positively to the articulation of a more variegated and complex Singaporean identity than that sanctioned by the Singaporean State. To this end, this thesis performs close readings of the textual and performative strategies of six Singaporean plays staged from 2000 to 2011, namely, *The Asian Boys Trilogy* by Alfian Sa’at in collaboration with Ivan Heng of W!LD RICE and *Trilogy* by Haresh Sharma in collaboration with Alvin Tan of The Necessary Stage.

Chapter 1 examines the queer camp dramaturgies in the 2000 and 2013 productions of *Dreamplay: Asian Boys Vol. 1* by Alfian Sa’at, and evaluates the productions’ attempts to ‘re-member’ the figure of the Singaporean gay man within the history of Singapore. Chapter 2 considers the postmodern staging of Alfian Sa’at’s *Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2*, and focuses on the reinscription of the Singaporean spatial imaginary in relation to the Singaporean gay man. Chapter 3 analyses the staging of *Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3* by Alfian Sa’at, which I argue achieves the writing of the gay subject-in-process within the Singaporean social imagination. Chapter 4 examines the mode of inquiry encouraged by the staging of *Fundamentally Happy* by Haresh Sharma, which I argue explores the traumatising impact of hegemonic forces in the private sphere. In Chapter 5, the portrayal of prevalent racial and religious tensions in the staging of Haresh Sharma’s *Good People* is examined to demonstrate how the play casts political solidarity as a subversive act in the Singaporean context. The staging of *Gemuk Girls* by Haresh Sharma is analysed in Chapter 6, where I argue that the production performs a political intervention in Singapore’s dominant historical narrative.

In the chapters that follow, the plays’ principal themes of alternative sexual preferences, violence and traumatic experiences in the domestic sphere,
and the anxiety suffered in fulfilling State expectations are explored. I draw on relevant aspects of theories relating to political theatre studies and queer studies to determine how the post-millennial works in question respond to the identitarian scripts promulgated by the Singaporean State, despite its rhetoric of liberalisation. In this way, this thesis extends the extant scholarship of the intersections of politics and the arts in the Singaporean alternative theatre, which is here shown to engage in an oppositional socio-political discourse.
Acknowledgements

I’ve heard it said that upon completion of a Herculean task, one looks back in retrospect and finds that it was not so difficult after all. This has not been the case with me. The thesis journey has been about surmounting my very own personal “cop in the head” regarding my writing and critical thought, and it has had indelible effects. It is only at this point in my candidature that I can fully appreciate how far I’ve come as a writer and scholar from when the idea of *Dreaming Singapore* was in its nascent stages.

I would like to express my heartfelt gratitude to the kind and generous teams at The Necessary Stage and W!LD RICE theatre companies in Singapore. You rock. Thank you for allowing me access to your archives and granting me limited copyright to use the images that have been analysed in this thesis. To Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma, thank you for the time you spared for our interviews.

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“If it’s meant to be, it is up to me” (Colton).
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... i  
Acknowledgements .......................................................................................................................... iii  
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................................. v  
Table of Figures ................................................................................................................................. x  
Introduction ......................................................................................................................................... 1  
  The Singaporean Alternative Theatre as a Vehicle for Socio-Political Activism ......................... 1  
    Motivations: Otherness and Belonging ....................................................................................... 1  
  Definitions and Methodology: Performance as Ideological Transaction and Cultural Intervention ........................................... 3  
  Narrating the Nation: The “Pedagogy” of the Singaporean State .............................................. 6  
  Literature Review ......................................................................................................................... 11  
  Main Contentions and the Thesis Structure ............................................................................... 14  

Chapter 1 ......................................................................................................................................... 19  
  (Re)claiming History in Alfian Sa’at’s Dreamplay ................................................................... 19  
    It’s In to be Out: The Socio-Political Context of Dreamplay ............................................. 19  
    Rhetorical Conventions: Staging Dreamplay (2000; 2013) ............................................. 24  
    Authenticating Conventions: Allusion to A Dream Play .................................................. 26  
    Missionary Positions: Synopses of A Dream Play and Dreamplay ................................ 29  
    A Magic Carpet Ride: Overview of the Camp Aesthetic in Dreamplay ............................ 31  
    The Politics of Looking: Establishing the Visual Field of the Gay Figure in Singapore ....................................................................................................................... 33  
    Re-Membered Temporalities: Queering Singaporean History ......................................... 41  
    I Will Survive: Reappropriating and Reinscribing Popular Cultural (Asian) Artefacts as Sites of Identification ....................................................................................................................... 49  
    Staging Dreamplay: Destabilising Spectator Positions ..................................................... 55  
    The Species of the Wild(e) Effeminate Gay Man: Historicising The Bugis
Table of Contents

Street “Ah Qua” and “Orchard Road Queen” .......................................................... 56
“So where can we find these gay men?” (Agnes.4.39): Localising Gayness in Singapore .......................................................... 63
Agnes as the “nanny” State: Subjugating the Gay Figure ................................. 66
Agnes as Diva: Affirming the Dynamic Subjectivity of the Gay Figure .......... 69
Conclusion: “You have to let people be gay in the way that’s best for them” (Dyer III) .......................................................... 74

Chapter 2 ................................................................................................................. 78
The (Re)inscription of Place in Alfian Sa’at’s Landmarks ................................ 78
“We know where they are.” (PM H.L. Lee): The Socio-Political Context of Landmarks (2004) .......................................................... 78
Authenticating Conventions: The Nation-space As Referent .................... 87
Rhetorical Conventions: Postmodern Elements in Landmarks (2004) ....... 88
A Queer Tour: Mapping the Gay Body onto the Nation ................................ 89
The Alienation of the Gay Figure from Home: Staging the “Space-off” ......... 97
“I’d be safe and warm if I was in L.A.”: Imbricating the Singaporean Gay Figure on the National Imaginary .............................................. 100
The Gay Nuclear Family: Queering the National Ideology ...................... 104
Demystified Heartlands: (Re)inscribing (an Always Already) Queer Space 109
In memoriam Tanjung Rhu, 1993: (Re)inscribing the Memory of the Gay Figure in Singapore .......................................................... 113
Conclusion: Reinscribing Singapore as “Home” ............................................. 120

Chapter 3 ................................................................................................................. 121
A (Re)imagined Future in Alfian Sa’at’s Happy Endings .............................. 121
In Service of Public Morality: The Socio-Political Context of Happy Endings .................................................................................. 121
The Intertexts: Synopses of Peculiar Chris, Maurice and Happy Endings... 128
Rhetorical Conventions: Dialogism and Intertextuality in HE (2007) ........135
In Conversation: Establishing the Dialogic Intent of HE (2007) ............140
Authenticating Conventions: Alfian’s Dismissal and Ongoing Public Debates in Singapore................................................................. 144
“Homosexuals can change”: Portraying the Right in Ken Widjaya .......... 150
Becoming Other in Happy Endings: Crossing the Threshold ..............152
The Dialogised Anagnorisis: Performing Transposition......................156
Conclusion: The “Textasy” of Happy Endings ..................................158
Chapter 4 .......................................................................................... 161
Mimetic Violence and Victimisation in Haresh Sharma’s Fundamentally Happy ............................................................ 161
Four Million Smiles and Singapore’s “Happy Multiculturalism”: The Socio-Political Context of Fundamentally Happy .................. 161
Ambivalent Homecomings: Introduction to Fundamentally Happy ...... 166
Rhetorical Conventions: Disrupting the Theatrical Illusion .............. 168
Authenticating Conventions: Mimicking Dominant Racial Portrayals ......170
Individual Success and the Singaporean Family: Interrogating Singaporean Happiness .................................................................178
Explorations of Memory: Collapsing Time and “Working Through” ........183
Memory as a Dynamic Process: Making the Case for Inquiry and Introspection.............................................................................. 190
Violence, Agency and Victimisation in the Singaporean Household ...... 196
Conclusion: Troubling the Meaning of Happiness ..............................205
Chapter 5 .......................................................................................... 206
Morality and The Docile Body in Haresh Sharma’s Good People .......... 206
The Spectacular Hanging of Shanmugam Murugesu and Van Tuong Nguyen: The Socio-Political Context of Good People ................206
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>A Play on Differences: Introduction to Good People</td>
<td>213</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticating Conventions: Staging an Answer to the UN Moratorium on</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>the Death Penalty</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rhetorical Conventions: Initiating Spectator Engagement</td>
<td>217</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Production of Docile Bodies by the State: Establishing the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Spectator’s Horizon of Expectations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Oppressive Effects: Arresting the Disciplinary Codes of the State</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Price of Economic Pragmatism: Dissociating Goodness from Economic</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Prosperity</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Moral Certitude versus Religious and Legal Rectitude: Portraying</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Internal Complexity</td>
<td>237</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Supervisors perpetually supervised” (Foucault Discipline and Punish</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>177): Portraying Racial/Religious Tension in Singapore</td>
<td>240</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Faceless Gaze of the Panoptic State and the Display of the</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>“Recalcitrant” Body</td>
<td>245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disharmonious Negotiations: Testing the Vulnerability of Racial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Heterogeneity</td>
<td>250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Staged Debate: Arguments For and Against The Death Penalty</td>
<td>251</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion: Reinstating the “Theatrical representation of pain” (</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Foucault Discipline and Punish 14)</td>
<td>253</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Chapter 6</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Politics, Family and the Singaporean Minority Woman in Haresh Sharma’s</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Gemuk Girls</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Other(ed) Singaporean Family: Introduction to Gemuk Girls</td>
<td>261</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticating Conventions I: TNS and the ISA</td>
<td>263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Authenticating Conventions II: The Singapore Story and Operation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Coldstore</td>
<td>265</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Rhetorical Conventions: Historicising Performance</td>
<td>272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Title</td>
<td>Page</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Multilingual Anxieties: Re-enacting Merger's Linguistic Displacement</td>
<td>276</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Portrait of a Political Detainee: Staging the Kernel of Trauma in the National Imaginary</td>
<td>280</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Significance of Access to Personal History: Making a Difference</td>
<td>287</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Traumatic Impact of Historiographical Erasure: Letting Go</td>
<td>292</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Tea Party: Staging a Political Intervention</td>
<td>295</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Confrontational Politics: Imagining a Future Singapore</td>
<td>297</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion: Dreaming of “Transformative Possibilities” (A. Tan)</td>
<td>300</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>301</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dreaming Singapore</td>
<td>301</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Festivals: The Socio-Political Context of Singapore in 2016</td>
<td>301</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tethering: The Singaporean Imaginary as a Performative Work-in-Process in 2016</td>
<td>304</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Further Threads</td>
<td>306</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>307</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Figures

Figure 1-1: Postcards as part of the publicity for Dreamplay 2000. (Loh and Tan) 35
Figure 1-2: Cast List in Programme Booklet for Dreamplay 2000. (Loh and Tan). 36
Figure 1-3: Main publicity poster for Dreamplay 2000. (Loh and Tan) ............... 37
Figure 1-4: Main publicity poster for Dreamplay 2013. (W!LD RICE “Dreamplay
2013 Publicity Collaterals”) ............................................................................. 38
Figure 1-5: Programme Booklet for ALFIAN SA’AT—IN THE SPOTLIGHT. (W!LD
RICE 2013) ........................................................................................................ 39
Figure 1-6: National flag of the Republic of Singapore since 1959. (Singapore
Government) ................................................................................................. 39
Figure 1-7: Dreamplay 2013 still of Agnes reaffirming the gay men in “Agnes Meets
the Disciples”. (W!LD RICE Ltd.) ................................................................. 72
Figure 2-1: Programme for Landmarks. (A. Lim, C. and Yap (photography)) ...... 92
Figure 2-2: Photo still of prelude to “The Kings of Ann Siang Hill”. (C. Yap
“Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2. By Alfian Sa’at. Dir. Ivan Heng”) ............ 105
Figure 2-3: Aloysius (left) and Meng (right) in “My Own Private Toa Payoh”. (C.
Yap “Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2. By Alfian Sa’at. Dir. Ivan Heng”) .... 111
Figure 3-1: Back and Front Cover. Happy Endings Programme Booklet.
(W!LDRICE Ltd) ........................................................................................... 142
Figure 3-2: “Footnotes.” Happy Endings Programme Booklet. (W!LDRICE Ltd). 142
Figure 3-3: Koey Foo (left) who plays the adult Nick, and Galvin Yeo (right) who
plays the teenaged Nicholas. HE Programme Booklet. Photo plates.
(W!LDRICE Ltd) ........................................................................................... 145
Figure 3-4: Muse enters the presentational space in 1. Prologue. ..................... 152
Figure 3-5: Lt. Samuel Lye enters the presentational space through his yellow
door (stage left) in 1.10. ............................................................................. 152
Figure 4-1: Habiba (left) and Eric (right). Happy (2006) publicity collaterals (i).
(The Necessary Stage “Happy Publicity Collaterals”) .............................. 173
Figure 4-2: Habiba (left) and Eric (right). Happy (2006) publicity Collaterals (ii).
(The Necessary Stage “Happy Publicity Collaterals”) .............................. 173
Figure 4-3: Mise en scène. Habiba (left) and Eric (right) sing a children's rhyme downstage (I.i.i). Happy (2006). (The Necessary Stage “Fundamentally Happy. By Haresh Sharma. Dir. Alvin Tan”) ........................................178
Figure 5-1: Programme booklet entries in the “Reading List” for People (2007). (The Necessary Stage “People Publicity Collaterals”) ................................................. 218
Figure 5-2: Publicity Flyer for People (2007), featuring the protagonist, Miguel. Singapore: TNS, 2007. ........................................................................................................... 219
Figure 5-3: Cover of Programme Booklet for People (2007), featuring the protagonist, Radha. Singapore: TNS, 2007. ................................................................. 219
Figure 5-4: Inside-front cover of Programme Booklet for People (2007), featuring the protagonist, Yati. Singapore: TNS, 2007. ................................................................. 219
Figure 5-5: Yati (left) and Radha (right) get acquainted (I.i.65-66) in People (2007). (The Necessary Stage “Good People. By Haresh Sharma. Dir. Alvin Tan”) ................................................................. 223
Figure 5-6: Still of Act II, scene iii. Yati (stage right), Miguel (centrestage) and Radha (stage left). People (2007). (The Necessary Stage “Good People. By Haresh Sharma. Dir. Alvin Tan”) ................................................................. 241
Figure 6-1: Back and front cover of programme booklet for Gemuk (2008). (valuablemembersofsociety and Ming—Surround) ......................................................... 273
Figure 6-2: Still of Marzuki in detention in Act I. Gemuk (2008). (The Necessary Stage Ltd.) .............................................................................................................. 284
Figure 6-3: Marzuki loses grasp of reality. Gemuk (2008). (The Necessary Stage Ltd.) .............................................................................................................. 285
Figure 6-4: Stills of Juliana (left) and Kartini (right) in Act I (i) and Act II (ii).Gemuk (2008). (The Necessary Stage Ltd.) ................................................................. 289
Figure 6-5: Still of Juliana (left) at a protest rally as Marzuki (right) looks on. Gemuk (2008). (The Necessary Stage Ltd.) ................................................................. 292
Figure 6-6: Still of the family reunion slash break-up in Act III. Gemuk (2008). (The Necessary Stage Ltd.) ................................................................. 296
Introduction

The Singaporean Alternative Theatre as a Vehicle for Socio-Political Activism

[If we throw our Government front benchers, our back benchers, our technocrats, systems engineers, entrepreneurs, skilled workers, civil servants and managers into the ocean, there will not be any Singapore. But throw all arty-crafty reality-dodgers into the ocean, and you might get some literary and spiritual realism. (Devan Nair Budget 1983, qtd. in Hyland 137)

Motivations: Otherness and Belonging

A week after I received my Australian citizenship in August 2014, my housemate and I went to our local supermarket for the week’s groceries. The person at the checkout counter greeted us with enthusiasm, and the three of us made the usual cheery small talk as we scanned and bagged our items. Then she asked us: “Where are you from?” Perhaps it was the tone in which she asked the question, which had become familiar to me, that conditioned my response, but I remained silent while my housemate answered. She posed the question to me a second time. When still I did not move to answer, my housemate, who must have thought I had not heard, said:

HOUSEMATE: [excitedly] She’s from here. She’s Australian now.
CHECKOUT: But you’re not REALLY Australian.
PERSON: Where are you actually from?
[Pause]
CHARMAINE: ... [smiles]

I believe she bore me no malice, yet her ostensibly innocuous curiosity hung heavily in the air during the trek back to the car. Why did I remain silent? I was still feeling the euphoria generated by my Citizenship Ceremony and the unconditional acceptance of good friends who had taken pains to organise a meaningful celebration for me. To me, I am “Australian”. But I wondered how I
might perform my belonging moving forward, when I am so visually, aurally and culturally distinctive to (at least in that person’s estimation) what constitutes an “Australian”.

I had been faced with a similar incredulity in Singapore, the country of my birth and where I spent the first 30 years of my life. Surely I knew how to be “Singaporean”. Yet, to many there, I was often deemed not really “Singaporean” because I did not “sound like one”. At other times, given the priority accorded to racial identifiers in Singapore—where it is often impossible to proceed in an interaction unless the races of all interlocutors are known—I was not really “Singaporean-Eurasian” because I did not “look like one”. A typical conversation-starter in a taxi, for example, would proceed as follows:

SINGAPOREAN: Where are you from?
CHARMAINE: [smiles] Uncle, I’m from Singapore!
SINGAPOREAN: [slowly] Wah, your English very power. What are you?
CHARMAINE: I’m an English teacher.
CHARMAINE: [Pause] I’m Eurasian.¹
SINGAPOREAN: That’s why lah, you speak very atas.² [bemused] But you don’t look Eurasian, leh. Half Malay? Half Indian?
CHARMAINE: [Pause] I’m part Filipino, part Portuguese, some Dutch, Ceylonese...part other things.
SINGAPOREAN: [Laughs, more at ease] Filipino! Ah, I see! Going shopping today?

Such exchanges almost always succeeded in arousing feelings of alienation within me, if only for a short while. Additionally, my disagreement with the positions that were available to me in Singapore rendered me “stubborn”, “argumentative”, “outspoken”, “Western-influenced”—I was often told I did not “act” like a

¹ In the Singaporean racial paradigm that will be elucidated in this thesis, Eurasians are officially categorised as “Others”.
² “Atas” is a Malay idiom that describes an “[a]rrogant, snobbish” person (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 278), often including connotations of the upper class.
Singaporean. But I was Singaporean, and arguably, I still consider myself to be “Singaporean”. The work that this thesis performs is deeply related to these feelings of otherness and belonging in relation to the national imaginary.

The discussion that follows focuses on Singapore, where merely highlighting institutionalised othering practices could attract the ire of the State. Repudiating a position of silence, I ask: Do marginalised Others have space to express and identify with alternative subjectivities in the Singaporean context? How are these identities configured in such a space? Are attempts to suggest a more complex Singaporean identity politically efficacious? In my analysis of the textual and performative strategies of six Singaporean plays staged from 2000 to 2011, namely, *The Asian Boys Trilogy* by Alfian Sa’at (in collaboration with Ivan Heng of W!LD RICE) and *Trilogy* by Haresh Sharma (in collaboration with Alvin Tan of The Necessary Stage, “TNS”), I argue that the space in which these questions may be answered is that of *oppositional performance*.

**Definitions and Methodology: Performance as Ideological Transaction and Cultural Intervention**

Richard Schechner defines performance as including:

> The whole constellation of events...that take place in/among performers and audience from the time the first spectator enters the field of performance—the precinct where the theatre takes place—to the time the last spectator leaves. (qtd. in Kershaw 22)

Taking Schechner’s view, Baz Kershaw formulates an analytical methodology where performance efficacy may be analysed in social and political terms. In particular, Kershaw is interested in the performance efficacy of “oppositional performance” in “alternative theatre” (6-8). Raymond Williams describes oppositional performances in the following way:

> [T]hey represent sharp and even violent breaks with received and traditional practice (a dissidence or revolt rather than a literal avant garde); and yet...they become
(in way separable from the facts of their dilution and commercial exploitation) the dominant culture of a succeeding...period. (qtd. in Kershaw 6)

Kershaw further clarifies that when viewed in light of Williams’ definition, oppositional performances work to intervene in their contemporaneous socio-political milieu (6). For Kershaw, oppositional performances engage in an “ideological transaction” that includes the performers and spectators within a socio-political context (23).

Arguably, the microcosmic impact that oppositional performances achieve might consequently effect actual, long-term changes in that community’s macrocosmic historical context (3). Kershaw relies on the dynamic interaction of “rhetorical [and] authenticating conventions” as set out by Elizabeth Burns to elucidate the reading praxis of audiences in his methodology. Burns defines “rhetorical conventions” as follows:

Between actors and spectators there is an implicit agreement that the actors will be allowed to conjure up a fictitious world. ...This agreement underwrites the devices of exposition that enable the audience to understand the play. These [rhetorical] conventions [...] are the means by which the audience is persuaded to accept characters and situations whose validity is ephemeral and bound to the theatre. (qtd. in Kershaw 25)

Accordingly, Kershaw explains that these “rhetorical conventions” are essential in the success of a performance’s ideological stance to be accepted—or rejected—by the audience (26). On the other hand, “authenticating conventions”
of the play is drawn. Their function is, therefore, to authenticate the play. (Burns, qtd. in Kershaw 26)

In other words, the ability of the audience to find meaning in any performance lies in the extent of the relevance of the performance to their lived, real-world experiences. It follows that performance efficacy is determined by a production’s capacity to carefully establish a dynamic dialectic between the two conventions in Kershaw’s methodology (28). In this way, such works perform a “cultural intervention” that “uncover[s] [...] the hegemony of the status quo” (255). It is this “theatre of social engagement” (5) with which my research is concerned. Suitably, I adopt Kershaw’s framework as the overarching scaffold on which I conduct the analyses of the plays discussed in this study.

The performative space of alternative theatre, with its focus on processual praxis—encompassing strategies such as multi-layered sign systems, spatial-temporal displacement, contentious representations of identities and their subsequent que(e)rying and epistemic deconstruction—has played a crucial role in driving the social and political imagination of postcolonial peoples. Significantly, Kershaw’s culturally interventionist oppositional performance is akin to Homi Bhabha’s designation of the “performative”—a force operating in tandem with the “pedagogical” to create a liminal space within which the national culture is negotiated. While the “pedagogical” refers to that which homogenises and reifies the identity of the community, the “performative” is that community’s generation of excess beyond the confines of previous and current identititarian imaginings in order to introduce the “‘in-between’” (Bhabha “Dissemination” 211-212).

I contend that the works of Haresh Sharma and Alfian Sa’at in the Singaporean alternative theatre have played a pivotal role in staging what Jacqueline Lo regards as “a defence against the monologic forces of hegemonic nationalism” (3) through the invocation of this “‘in-between’”. As such, those theatrical productions that support or complement the existing social order (e.g. Michael Chiang’s Beauty World and Ming Wong’s Chang and Eng—The Musical), autoexoticise Singaporean theatre for export as “New Asia” (e.g. Ong Keng Sen’s
Lear) or stage renowned plays that do not acknowledge the Singaporean context (e.g. Stephen Clark's *Forbidden City: Portrait of an Empress* and the *Shakespeare in the Park* repertory of the Singapore Repertory Theatre) are not the focus of my discussion. Specifically, this thesis concentrates on Singaporean alternative or fringe theatre working “between the shreds and patches of cultural signification and the certainties of a nationalist pedagogy” (Bhabha “Dissemination” 204). In using the terms “alternative” and “fringe”, I do not limit the criteria for such works to their application of experimental or avant garde dramaturgies. Rather, in the Singaporean context, I refer to “alternative” and “fringe” works as analogous to Kershaw’s *oppositional* performances, which interrogate existing social and political structures, broach distinctively local concerns in a local parlance and inhabit and perform that disjunctive space in the idea of Singapore. In this “performative” space, identities that are marginalised in relation to the national imaginary can be realised.

**Narrating the Nation: The “Pedagogy” of the Singaporean State**

As the introductory quote by ex-President Devan Nair when defending the 1983 National Budget suggests, the national consciousness in post-independence Singapore has been largely “pedagogical”, to use Bhabha’s paradigm. Since its rise to power in 1959, the People’s Action Party (PAP)—the dominant party, now synonymous with the country’s government—has fastidiously promulgated a national character founded upon the tenets of country, community, meritocracy, racial harmony and family before self, with the ultimate goal of economic progress in the international arena. The virtually unencumbered economic boon that Singapore has enjoyed since its independence in 1965 continues to be touted by the State as a model of “Asian” economic success, based on a synergistic pairing of economic planning and sound, “traditional Asian values”. According to Francis Fukuyama, Singapore’s economic model is driven not by the forces of a free market, but by a “paternalistic authoritarianism” where State
interventionism by a one-party government has factored largely in the country achieving such a powerful global economic position (60-61).³

The State’s pragmatic paradigm has won international accolades as a viable model for national economic development. It has also invited criticism for its callous—though arguably strategic—dismissal of the arts as an important investment in the formation of Singapore’s national identity. In his observation of the situation prior to the burgeoning of the Singaporean English-Language theatre, Simon Elegant writes: “Deserved or not, the Republic [of Singapore] has the reputation of being a cultural and artistic wasteland” (“Unleashing” 46). These criticisms were addressed to an extent by the recommendations made in the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts in 1989 (T.C. Ong et al.).

Responding to these recommendations of what came to be known as the Renaissance City Report, the State acknowledged the importance of the development of the arts in Singapore. In his letter to the Council, then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong said that

[w]e have reached a stage in our economic and national development when we should devote greater attention and resources to culture and the arts in Singapore. Culture and the arts add to the vitality of a nation and enhance the quality of life. [...] Your Council has recommended that we should develop Singapore into an International Centre for the Arts where the best talents from all over the world could perform, work or conduct business, and where works of art could be sold or bought. (“Letter to Ong Teng Cheong” qtd. in T.C. Ong et al. iv-v)

Goh clearly expresses the State’s interest in the economic value of devoting resources to the development of the arts in Singapore, with a specific view towards positioning the country in relation to global economies of scale. The paternalistic State’s political intervention in the development of the arts for

³ For studies of Singapore’s State-driven economic model, see “The East Asian Miracle” (Page); “The Developmental State” (Huff); “State Intervention” (Yeung); and “The Financial Crisis” (Pang).
economic progress is in keeping with its previous and continued manufacture of the national consciousness. As Linda Lim observes, Singapore’s form of State capitalism has been buttressed by the extensive political and social control of a populace willing to surrender many civil liberties in exchange for the benefits of economic prosperity (760). Such control has been maintained through economic, social and cultural policies via an onslaught of State-run campaigns and media releases that permeate both the public and domestic spheres. The State’s relevant policies and examples of State propaganda will be introduced throughout this thesis in the analyses of the plays that will be shown to engage with them. In the words of Lee Kuan Yew, the architect of Singaporean political independence, leader of the PAP and the Republic’s Prime Minister until 1990:

I am often accused of interfering in the private lives of citizens. Yet, if I did not, had not I done that, we wouldn’t be here today. And I say without the slightest remorse, that we wouldn’t be here, we would not have made economic progress, if we had not intervened on very personal matters—who your neighbour is, how you live, the noise you make, how you spit, or what language you use. We decide what is right. Never mind what the people think. That’s another problem. (K.Y. Lee “PM’s NDR 1986”)

Crucial to the interests of this thesis, Lee’s rhetoric not only blatantly exposes the State’s imposition of a predetermined set of values and ideology on the country’s citizenry, but also underscores the silencing of alternative expressions of Singaporean identity in its imposition of hegemonic nationalism.

Elsewhere, in promoting Singapore’s brand of “Asian Values” in 1994, Lee maintained, “[a]s long as leaders take care of their people, they [the people] will obey their leaders” (qtd. in Peerenboom 42, 188). Here, Lee adheres to what David Brown has deemed the neo-Confucianism that informs Singapore’s national ideology (qtd. in Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 22). This ideology was packaged as Singapore’s “Shared Values”:
Introduction: The Singaporean Alternative Theatre as a Vehicle for Socio-Political Activism

1. Nation before community and society above self.
2. Family as the basic unit of society.
3. Community support and respect for the individual.
5. Racial and religious harmony.

The \textit{Shared Values White Paper} (adopted by the House in the Parliament of Singapore on 15 Jan. 1991) was primarily formulated to solve the alleged encroachment of “Western values”. To understand this rationale, David Birch’s account of the Singaporean State’s “discourse of crisis” is elucidating. According to Birch, the State strategically pits the tenuous fabric of the Singaporean nation against endless manifestations of internal and external threats to maintain ideological control (Birch “Staging Crises” 75). In Birch’s view, while the “discourse of crisis” has certainly been used to foreclose alternative political discourse, the thriving, fifty-one-year-old nation (as at 2016) is, in fact, in a vulnerable geographical and economic position.

Geographically, the island of Singapore is a small land mass at the tip of the Malaysian Peninsula of merely 710 square kilometres, bounded by Brunei and the Indonesian Archipelago. In addition to its limited land availability, Singapore has no natural resources necessary for primary industry in contrast to its mineral-rich neighbours. Furthermore, its smaller, multi-cultural, multi-racial and multi-religious populace is set against the comparatively more homogenous body politic in neighbouring countries. Given these limitations and real vulnerabilities, the PAP has focused primarily on the economic development of the country and the unification of a culturally diverse populace, positioning the people as the country’s only natural resource.

That said, however, the “Shared Values” rhetoric is part of the construction of what the PAP asserts is a distinctly Singaporean cultural and historical narrative (Peterson \textit{Theater and the Politics of Culture} 2-3), which, as Birch argues, has nonetheless been nurtured by a culture of fear and anxiety. Spectres that threaten the Singaporean people’s common bond have included the regional and global communist threat prior to Singaporean independence; the
erosion of Singaporean diversity by a homogenising “Malay Malaya” instead of a “Malaysian Malaya” following decolonisation from the British and Singapore’s Merger with the Federation of Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia (Frost and Balasingamchow 418-420); the encroachment of “Western decadence” with its inevitable “exuberance of democracy lead[ing] to undisciplined and disorderly conditions” (Lee Kuan Yew 1992 qtd. in Neher 961); 4 and disease epidemics such as SARS (Powers and Xiao), to name but a few. The PAP’s “discourse of crisis” and the country’s positive economic returns have sanctioned the paternalistic control of the State, with its imposition of a monolithic set of ideals epitomised by the State’s “Shared Values”.

Reflecting on Singapore’s immediate post-independence socio-cultural context, the late Kuo Pao Kun, one of Singapore’s most renowned dramatists and arts activists, stated that Singaporeans were “psychologically unprepared” to face the major social, political and even spatial upheavals that accompanied the nation’s political independence (qtd. in Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 34-35). Extrapolating from Kuo’s assertion, I would argue that an adverse consequence of the circumvention of alternative expressions of Singaporean identity is that the Singaporean subject may only (mis)recognise themselves in the reflection of Singapore’s economic glory won by the State. The Singaporean subject thus experiences a dislocation of personal history, and potentially a lack of subjective control. This displacement is exacerbated if the subject’s lived reality lies outside the narrow delimiters of the State-approved national identity. Furthermore, strict regulations and punishments are imposed upon public—and even private—discourse to foreclose political activism and criticism. In Singapore, “[n]early all print and broadcast media outlets, internet service providers, and cable television services” are State-owned or controlled (Freedom House), and the Internal Security Act legalises indefinite detention without trial for any activities the State arbitrarily deems seditious, including criticising the actions of the State.

4 Throughout this thesis, I borrow William Peterson’s application of the term “Western decadence” to describe the cultural relativism inherent in the Singaporean State’s “Asian values” rhetoric (Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 5).
This extensive social and political control in the formation of Singaporean national consciousness reminds us of Edward Said’s caution of the hegemonic narration of the nation by the State, and its critical prevention of the formation of alternative and contending narratives (*Culture and Imperialism* xii). Said argues that a “rapid step [...] from national consciousness to political and social consciousness” must be taken, overriding “needs based on identitarian (i.e., nationalist) consciousness” (273). Within the Singaporean context, I argue then that oppositional performance has played an important role in engaging not merely with the nationalist consciousness, but more importantly for the purposes of this thesis, with a range of Singaporean identities, thereby increasing individual autonomy in subject formation. In this way, oppositional performances contribute to the development of Singapore’s social consciousness.

**Literature Review**

On 24-25 July 1974, *Are You There, Singapore?* by Robert Yeo (dir. Prem Kumar), was first staged. *One Year Back Home* (dir. Max Le Blond) followed on 20-22 November 1980. With the staging of *Changi* (dir. Kaylene Tan) on 4 September 1996, Yeo’s three plays would come to be known as *The Singapore Trilogy*. According to K.K. Seet and Chitra Sankaran in their introduction to the recently published play-scripts,

> while externally the [trilogy's] narrative harnesses the idea of a new, emerging Singapore unified by common socio-economic goals, internally it wrestles with themes of political power and opposition, belonging and alienation, order and licence. [...] [The] plays seem to affirm yet challenge the concept of nationhood. (Seet and Sankaran 15)

Arguably, Yeo’s trilogy influenced the then nascent Singaporean English Language theatre with its nuanced inaugural treatment of “the polemics of a newly emergent postcolonial society” (18). Yeo’s trilogy is thus apropos as an entry point for the concerns of my thesis, which intends to elucidate the
movement from nationalist to social consciousness attempted by the plays studied herein.

Encouraged by the State’s expanding interest in promoting Singapore as a “Renaissance City”, the cultural hub of Asia, recent works like the Interlogue: Studies in Singapore Literature series (Birch; Klein; Nazareth; Singh; Watt) and volumes 1 and 2 of Sharing Borders: Studies in Contemporary Singaporean-Malaysian Literature (Gwee; Quayum and Wong) have sought to analyse the proliferation of post-independence literature in English in Singapore. This has included surveys of the phases of Singaporean English language theatre since the country gained independence in 1965. Jacqueline Lo in Staging Nation and William Peterson in Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore have similarly added to this field in their analyses of the intersection of politics and theatre in the Singaporean plays of the 1980s and 1990s respectively. Building upon the invaluable work done by Lo and Peterson, I confine my field of study to the period of Singaporean alternative theatre in English from the year 2000 to 2011. This period is especially pertinent as it coincides with the implementation of the Renaissance City Plan in 2000, and the supposed liberalisation of censorship regulations in 2003.5

The Interlogue series dedicates one volume to a general discussion of Singaporean English Language Theatre (Singh Interlogue Vol. 3: Drama) and two volumes to the works of two influential Singaporean playwrights, Robert Yeo (Watt) and Haresh Sharma (Birch Interlogue Vol. 6). Birch conducts a comprehensive critical exploration of Sharma’s body of work, especially with Artistic Director Alvin Tan since the formation of TNS in 1987. The principal motivation of Sharma with TNS in the specific context of Singapore is successfully drawn out in Birch’s work. In Sharma’s words:

I’m concerned about how we tend to marginalise the little people. We’re not telling people to overthrow the government, but rather, to stop being so high handed and look around you. Ask yourselves: we may be an incredibly efficient, well-ordered society, but at what

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5 For an extended discussion of the impact of censorship liberalisation by the State, see “Meditating the Liberalisation of Singapore Theatre” (Chong).
According to Birch, Sharma has consistently “engage[d] with the marginalised” through a “distinctively Singaporean” theatre (244). This important study ends with a brief note on the staging of Fundamentally Happy in 2006, the first play in Sharma’s Trilogy that my research examines.

Significantly, in his later contribution to the Sharing Borders anthology, Birch also comments on the work of Sharma’s protégé, Alfian Sa’at, and argues that Alfian has “redefined” Sharma’s interest in uncovering and highlighting everyday oppressions “into a politics of resistance” (“Writing an Alt. Ethic” 138-139). Importantly, Birch acknowledges The Asian Boys Trilogy as exemplary of Alfian’s “strategy of ‘queering authority’” (143). While I concur with Birch’s concession that both Sharma and Alfian engage in oppositional performance (148), as I will show in my analyses of the works of both playwrights, it is not so much that Sharma is comparably “more constrained” (139) as that markedly different devising and dramaturgical strategies are deployed in the staging of each playwright’s works. Crucially, Birch concludes by asking whether Sharma’s and Alfian’s “alternative ethic is being seriously heard”, given the observation of the State’s “appropriation of opposition into mainstream rhetoric” (148).

In their key texts, Peterson and Lo have discussed the extent to which the Singaporean English language theatre has interrogated State boundaries. The authors generally observe, however, that the Singaporean English language theatre remains a product of hegemonic control through its continued dependence on State funding and legislation. However, as K.K. Seet argues in Sharing Borders, the latest phase of Singaporean English language theatre can be characterised by oppositional performances that “embar[k] on a discourse of the margin” (“Disassembling” 193). Seet further contends that this alternative theatre has better utilised its creative potential to express alternative perspectives that performatively destabilise State-approved notions of the Singaporean experience.

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6 Sa’at is a patronymic. Following this convention, Alfian bin Sa’at will hereinafter be referred to by his given name, Alfian.
Introduction: The Singaporean Alternative Theatre as a Vehicle for Socio-Political Activism

(193). Echoing Birch, Seet describes Singaporean theatre in English as actively facilitating a negotiation of the contradictions that exist between imposed, perceived and lived Singaporean realities (193).

Main Contentions and the Thesis Structure

I argue that the selected works of both Sharma and Alfian are politically efficacious in Kershaw’s sense, where “efficacy” is gauged by the possible impact any particular performance might have on a community’s moral, social and political beliefs (Kershaw 3). Bearing in mind the interplay of the “pedagogical” and the “performative” in narrating the “nation-space” (Bhabha “Dissemination” 212), I explore whether the Singaporean oppositional performances in question have ultimately increased the individual agency of Singaporeans to forge a multifaceted and fluid social imagining of themselves as constitutive of the nation. As such, my analysis presupposes the theatre as a discursive space that, in Bertolt Brecht’s view, “employs and encourages those thoughts and feelings which help transform the [historical] field [of human relations]” (qtd. in Willett 190) within the Singaporean context.

To this end, in the chapters that follow, I investigate whether the selected plays facilitate the articulation of a range of Singaporean identities that have been elided in State discourse and relegated to the spatial, temporal and imaginary margin of the hegemonic national consciousness. Of particular interest to this thesis is the portrayal of characters dealing with often conflicting identities in tense social relationships, and themes that remain taboo in the wider socio-political Singaporean context. These themes are principally alternative sexualities, the trauma of victims of systemic and domestic violence, and the anxiety felt in achieving State goals that are not aligned with lived realities. Central to answering these questions is, firstly, an analysis of the portrayal of the marginalised figure, and the recuperation of his or her personal history, and thus, individual agency. Secondly, the implicit assertion of the interrogative mode of passive acquiescence to external controls will be carefully explored in the plays under investigation.
Given these contentious themes and aims of the plays discussed to articulate marginalised identities in opposition to the Singaporean State, I have chiefly used post-structuralist theorists whose works are concerned with similar concepts. These are, namely, Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva, Mikhail Bakhtin, René Girard and Michel Foucault. Notably, it has been necessary to contextualise these crucial, but arguably Western-oriented, theories to enable their application to the plays that deal with the unique Singaporean postcolonial setting of inward-facing Asian identitarian scripts and outward-facing global economic pursuits, which are further explicated in this thesis. The theoretical approaches found in this thesis are, therefore, recombined and/or reconfigured in my analyses to achieve the study’s objectives and proceed within Kershaw’s overarching framework.

It is useful to think of this thesis as proceeding in two “Acts”. Each “Act” has three “scenes”. Each “scene” stages a detailed examination of the performance text in tandem with the play-script of the play in question. Following Kershaw’s methodology, “scenes” will first set out the relevant socio-political contexts in which the plays under examination were staged as an introduction to the arguments advanced therein.

The first “Act” analyses *The Asian Boys Trilogy* written by Alfian Sa’at, the resident playwright of W!LD RICE. These plays, namely, *Dreamplay: Asian Boys Vol. 1*, *Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2* and *Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3*, portray and re-present the marginalised figure of the Singaporean gay man in different temporal, spatial and social contexts.

Chapter 1 focuses on *Dreamplay*, which was first staged in 2000 (dir. J. Chen) and then restaged in 2013 (dir. I. Heng). Given the meaningful lapse of a decade between its first and second staging, I will analyse both productions to demonstrate the continued relevance of the plays in this thesis to contemporary Singapore. This chapter evaluates both productions’ attempts to re-member the figure of the Singaporean gay man within the history of Singapore, and comments on the play’s utilisation of the marginalised Singaporean woman to question the silencing of the gay man in the official national narrative.
In Chapter 2, I consider the significance of the portrayal and intersection of public and private spaces for the marginalised figure within the Singaporean national consciousness in Alfian Sa’at’s *Landmarks*. Staged in 2004, *Landmarks* is a series of vignettes portraying the gay man within the public spaces from which he is denied participation and the private spaces he inhabits that would otherwise be presumed non-existent in the Singaporean landscape. This second play and analysis takes up *Dreamplay*’s introduction of the varied relationships and tensions that occur between gay men as part of the spatial imaginary of Singapore.

Chapter 3 analyses Alfian Sa’at’s *Happy Endings*, a play that dramatizes and then extrapolates the narrative of the first Singaporean gay novel, *Peculiar Chris* written by Johann S. Lee in 1992. Here, I focus on the power afforded to the marginalised gay figure by literature, and argue that the play achieves the writing of the gay subject-in-process within the Singaporean social imagination.

In my second “Act”, I analyse *Trilogy*, a triptych written by Haresh Sharma, the resident playwright of TNS and the most prolific playwright in Singapore. This triptych includes the plays, *Fundamentally Happy, Good People* and *Gemuk Girls*. Each of these plays was conceived in a decentralised, collaborative devising process that has become the hallmark of the theatre company. Four distinct phases characterise the plays of TNS:

1. a ‘pre-writing phase’, where director and playwright workshop with actors and solicit material from them;
2. a ‘writing phase’, where the playwright, typically Sharma, using the material gathered from the first phase plus any other resources, writes a draft;
3. next is the ‘reading and re-writing phase’, where director, playwright and cast workshop the draft; and finally
4. the ‘rehearsal phase’, where director and cast fine-tune the play. (W.C. Lee “Imaginary Fronts” 221-222)
Learning from their theatre praxis, Sharma and Tan have since added a vital community immersion element as part of phase 1, where the co-creators and their ensemble visit the relevant spaces and conduct interviews with Singaporeans whose narratives then inspire the creation of the characters in the final production (222-223).

Arguably, Sharma and Tan’s devising process reduces the distance between social reality and on-stage representation via the increased involvement of marginalised social actors in the Singaporean context. In this light, Seet’s contention that the plays in Trilogy are more aligned to the arguments expressed by Antonin Artaud, although somewhat specific in respect of Artaud’s wide-ranging theories, is fitting. Seet explains that Artaud construes the fundamental relationship between the theatre and the spectator as one which demolishes the masks and lies that separate us from a true knowledge of ourselves and the meaning of life. (“Haresh Sharma and the Architectonics of Humanism” v)

This idea of theatre’s interrogation of truth is expanded upon in Chapter 4, which examines Fundamentally Happy. This chapter explores how a mode of inquiry is encouraged by the play’s staging and serves to expose the amnesias and displaced histories that are the consequence of hegemonic forces. It focuses on the effects of memory, forgetting and the loss of individual agency stemming from the trauma of alleged child sexual abuse.

In Chapter 5, I will consider the effects of the fear and anxiety nurtured by the State on the relationships of racially and religiously diverse minorities in Good People as they struggle with their moral, religious and legal beliefs. This chapter expands on racial and religious tensions that remain prevalent between different communities in Singapore despite the State’s homogenising banner of multicultural, multiracial harmony.

Chapter 6 analyses Gemuk Girls, the last play in Sharma’s Trilogy. This chapter argues that this play performs a political intervention in the Singaporean
historical narrative by dramatizing the impact of political detention on a political 
detainee and the consequent effects of this on his family. As well, this chapter 
considers the position of the Malay-Muslim woman and her public and private 
relationships.

Finally, in the Conclusion, I return to the questions that the thesis initially 
set out to answer: Does the Singaporean alternative theatre effectively articulate a 
range of elided Singaporean identities? More importantly, have the representative 
oppositional performances in my study encouraged social critique as Birch and 
Seet have suggested? In concluding this thesis, I will also provide a selective 
survey of more recent politically charged Singaporean plays that continue to 
provide a performative space for the formation and agency of the Singaporean 
subject.

Given that I concur with Seet’s particularisation of *Asian Boys Volume I* as 
“groundbreaking” in the establishment of the Singaporean alternative theatre 
(Seet “Disassembling” 183-184), it is therefore apt that my discussion begins with 
Alfian’s work.
Chapter 1

(Re)claiming History in Alfian Sa’at’s Dreamplay

“So let it evolve, and in time the population will understand that some people are born that way...We are born this way and they are born that way, but they are like you and me.” (PM Goh Chok Tong, qtd. in Elegant “Lion in Winter”, 2003)

Camp taste is a kind of love, love for human nature. It relishes, rather than judges, the little triumphs and awkward intensities of ‘character’. (Sontag)

It’s In to be Out: The Socio-Political Context of Dreamplay

In a country renowned for its neoliberal, authoritarian, conservative government policies, at the turn of the millennium, the Singaporean gay man nonetheless enjoyed an unprecedented increase in visibility in the public sphere as an alternative cultural trope. Eager to recover from its draconian image with the international community in order to attract foreign investors to the country and reap the benefits of participation in the “pink-dollar economy” (Khoo 222; K.P. Tan “Sexing up S’pore” 418), the Singaporean State appropriated the figure of the professional, affluent gay man as its fabulous, queer poster child in its re-imagination of Singapore as “New Asia” by 2003.⁷ That the previously closeted gay man had been unleashed onto the streets of Singapore with such pomp and splendour, including as main characters in Singaporean plays, aroused the attention of the international media. A now oft-cited article in TIME magazine then announced, “It’s In to be Out” in Singapore (Price). What fuelled the excitement generated from this apparent liberalisation of the State between the years 2000 and 2005 was the well-known fact of the institutional persecution of the Singaporean gay man, sensationalised in the local media in the preceding decade. It had not always been fashionable to be “out” in Singapore; in fact the gay figure is not present anywhere in the country’s official historical record. At

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⁷ “Pink dollar” is a term increasingly used by reporters to refer to, firstly, the circulation of money spent by gay tourists who would now be more likely to come to a more seemingly welcoming Singapore, and, secondly, to the spending power and financially lucrative potential of Singapore’s professional, creative gay citizens.
various times in the past, however, this figure had made several onstage appearances in Singaporean theatre.

William Peterson identifies 1990 as the year marking the first sudden increase of onstage representations of sexual minorities in Singapore despite the State’s stated conservatism (“Sexual Minorities” 63). Citing a then recent police raid of an unofficial “gay night” at Zouk, a popular disco, Peterson notes: “Clearly, gay is not good in Singapore” (62). Nevertheless, Peterson explores the perceived shift in government policy coincident with the promise of a “kinder, gentler, and more consultative” approach by the country’s new Prime Minister (PM), Goh Chok Tong, that might have encouraged this initial unprecedented rise in plays with queer themes (K.P. Tan Resistance xv). Significantly, however, Peterson observes that during this period, the apparent permissibility of theatrical representations of sexual minorities was limited to transvestism and transsexuality, serving “largely as substitutes for the honest depiction of gay male relationships” (“Sexual Minorities” 69). Peterson’s use of the term “honest” tellingly emphasises the absence of a rubric of authenticity that privileged a range of homosexual interactions in the Singaporean context at the time. The Singaporean State’s position on the prevailing attitudes towards overt theatrical depictions of homosexuality is articulated in a 1992 speech addressed to theatre practitioners by the then incumbent Senior Minister of Education, Tay Eng Soon. Tay warned:

Ours is still a traditional society which values what is private and personal and is not comfortable with public

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8 Among the plays that Peterson includes in his study are Ovidia Yu’s Imagine (1991); five staged readings and eight fully-realised productions of eleven plays with gay, lesbian, or transvestite characters or themes in 1992; the most popular of these—Russel Heng’s Lest the Demons Get to Me and Michael Chiang’s Private Parts—focused on the plight of transsexuals; Eleanor Wong’s Mergers and Accusations (1993); and finally, Joseph Ng’s Brother Cane and Shannon Tham’s Performance Art protest of the State censors and the sensationalist reporting of a State-owned tabloid, The New Paper, at the Artists’ General Assembly, a week-long performance event, held at the 5th Passage Gallery in Parkway Parade, Singapore, in 1993/1994. For a revised and updated version of this study, see Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 129-160. The Artists Village and Brother Cane (1993) were documented by Ray Langenbach, who provides brief descriptions and video stills on The Ray Langenbach Archive of Performance Art (“Performance Art in S’pore”).

9 Goh Chok Tong took the helm as Secretary General of the People’s Action Party (PAP) from Lee Kuan Yew in 1990 and was the PM of Singapore until 2004, before handing the reins of leadership over to the current PM, Lee Hsien Loong, Lee Kuan Yew’s son.
and explicit discussion of sexuality and what it considers as deviant values. By all means, let our “cultural desert” bloom. But please let the blossoms be beautiful and wholesome and not to be prickly pears or weeds! (qtd. in R. Lim 8)

Following the State’s swift disavowal and legal repercussions of the infamous 5th Passage Artists Limited and Artists Village Artists’ General Assembly in the last week of 1993 and New Year’s Day in 1994, including an implicit ban on Performance Art through the exclusion of the form from qualifying for State funding, however, there was a dearth of theatrical representations of sexual minorities in Singapore in the period leading up to the 2000 production of Asian Boys Vol. 1.10 This was in stark contrast to the proliferation of queer plays in the early 1990s. In addition to correctly predicting the theatrical return to the closet resulting from the punitive State reaction to Brother Cane (J. Ng), Peterson concludes that

plays featuring transvestites who use the codes of gay males may continue to provide the only acceptable and legal means for gay men to speak their piece in the foreseeable future. (“Sexual Minorities” 71)

Indeed, two decades after Peterson’s 1994 study, the need for theatrical representations of sexual minorities still remains a pertinent one, the theatre in Singapore being one of the only available fora for civil discourse and, to an extent, oppositional political commentary within the milieu of sustained State prohibition of homosexual practices between men.

Sections 377 and 377A of the Penal Code of Singapore codify the illegality of male homosexuality as follows:

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10 References to the dramatic text will hereafter be to Dreamplay, appended with scene and page numbers as they are printed in the play-script. Where I discuss staging elements of the performance texts only, I refer to the dates they were staged in 2000 and 2013 respectively. Dreamplay 2000 mounted by TNS and directed by Jeff Chen is distinguished from Dreamplay 2013 mounted by W!LD RICE and directed by Ivan Heng. Video-recording of Dreamplay 2000 is courtesy of TNS. Author present at Dreamplay 2013 staging on 11 July 2013.
Section 377—Unnatural Sex: Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animals, shall be punished with imprisonment for life, or with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 10 years, and shall also be liable to fine. (qtd. in P.L. Lim)

Section 377A—Outrages on Decency: Any male person who, in public or private, commits, or abets the commission of, or procures or attempts to procure the commission by any male person of, any act of gross indecency with another male person, shall be punished with imprisonment for a term which may extend to 2 years.

These laws are remnants of Singapore’s British colonial legacy and are aptly described by Shawna Tang as the “legal encoding of the postcolonial state’s anxiety towards homosexuality” (89), which is clearly demonstrated in the repeal of Section 377 by the Penal Code (Amendment) Act in October 2007.11 Subsequently, “anal and oral sex if done in private between a consenting adult heterosexual couple” was decriminalised (Singapore Government Consultation Paper 2), and a new Section 377 addressing “Sexual Penetration of a Corpse” replaced it. Notably, Section 377A stood. The effect of this was that oral and anal sex only between homosexual men was clearly defined as criminal by the State. In Tang’s view, this anxiety is made explicit in former Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng’s dismissive comment at the 1993 World Human Rights Conference in Vienna where he said, “Homosexual rights are a Western issue, and are not relevant at this conference” (qtd. in Berry 5).12

Evidently, the State’s avowal of the conservative values of the majority is curiously aligned with its propagation of “Asian values” (Barr “LKY and the ‘Asian Values’ Debate” 311-313), formalised in its “Shared Values” ideology.13 Tang argues

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11 §377, which originally criminalised oral and anal penetration regardless of consent and sex of the parties involved was still in force when The Asian Boys Trilogy was first staged (2000, 2004, 2007).
12 Wong’s comment was in answer to a question posed to him by one of the other delegates at the World Human Rights Conference. The full text of Wong’s speech illustrates the “Asian Values" rhetoric disseminated by the State at the time. See Wong “The Real World of Human Rights”.
13 The binary of morally superior “Asian values” against “Western decadence” as a measure of
that the State’s prohibitive rhetoric against homosexuality inevitably aligns the gay community with perceived “Western”—in this case, Wildean—“decadence” in opposition to the ‘good’, “Asian”, “Shared Values” claimed by the State as being integral to Singaporean national identity. According to Tang, this simplistic binary has led to “homosexual bodies [being] naturalised as bearers of moral degeneracy in the West” in State discourse (89). She asserts, however, that

Despite the explicit legal and social censures of lesbian and gay subjects in Singapore, they have not been as much banished out of the postcolonial state’s imagined nation [...], as they have been subalternised at the sidelines of society. (89)

That the gay figure is not completely “banished” is evident in the State’s guarded tolerance of plays with queer themes. It is my contention, then, that the staging of *The Asian Boys Trilogy* plays, beginning with *Asian Boys Vol. 1* (dir. J. Chen), was crucial in voicing the marginalised gay subaltern that Tang describes, once and, to an extent, is still silenced by State censure, as noted by Peterson (“Sexual Minorities” 71). Peterson recounts the withdrawal of State funding when in 1988, artists refused to accede to censors’ recommendations to reformulate the sympathetic portrayals of the gay characters in their plays (62-63). Writing much later in 2001, Peterson maintains that by 1995, arbitrary censorship restrictions and the consecutive State censures of Performance Art in 1993, and then Forum Theatre, following the allegations of Marxism against TNS practitioners in 1994, had caused theatre practitioners to practice self-censorship, “afraid to even publicly discuss culture” (*Theater and the Politics of Culture* 50). Therefore, situated within this historical context, as Eng-Beng Lim claims in his introduction to *The Asian Boys Trilogy, Dreamplay* “was in many ways a production that marked Singapore’s tentative foray into a new, queer millennium” (“Queering S’pore” 12), and, I would argue, increased the possibility of creating substantial ideological control, including the State’s national ideology that reifies a set of universal values shared by Singaporeans, is discussed in the introductory chapter and elsewhere in this thesis.

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14 As I will further explore below, Oscar Wilde’s nineteenth-century public trials and punishment for being homosexual are commonly accepted as resulting in the modern inscription of degeneracy onto the homosexual body (Cleto “Queering the Camp” 13, *passim*).
opportunities for then and future representations of sexual minorities in Singapore.

The queer camp theatrical strategy used by Dreamplay as “a clandestine key to break into culture”, to adopt Fabio Cleto’s assertion (“Queering the Camp” 7-8), is thus apropos for the first play of its kind to openly explore male homosexual themes in Singapore.15 As it challenges the taboo of homosexuality by representing gay male characters with varied subjectivities, appearing throughout a reimagined Singaporean history, Dreamplay has “rightly earned its place as one of the pioneering works in Singaporean queer theatre” (“Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”).

This chapter first introduces the play’s significant allusions to A Dream Play by August Strindberg (1849-1912), which I argue easily lends to its queer camp theatrical strategy. Secondly, I use the collaterals and staging of the two productions of Dreamplay (2000; 2013) to comment on the camp intent, and thus, political efficacy of the productions in the Singaporean context. Thirdly, as part of this thesis’ exploration of the portrayal of the marginalised figure of the minority woman in Singapore, I investigate the portrayal of Agnes in the 2013 production, the only biologically female body on stage. Scenes of the play in both productions will be considered throughout this chapter to explore the productions’ attempts to re-member the figure of the Singaporean gay man within the history of Singapore.

Rhetorical Conventions: Staging Dreamplay (2000; 2013)

Dreamplay was written by Singaporean playwright, Alfian Sa’at, for Singaporean audiences in 2000 (Asian Boys Trilogy 27-107). Directed by Jeff Chen, Dreamplay

15 I acknowledge the association between “queer” and “camp” is subject to ongoing academic debate. Whereas Moe Meyer asserts that “Camp is solely a queer (and/or sometimes gay and lesbian) discourse” (Meyer 1), Fabio Cleto, on the other hand, argues that Meyer’s binary position undermines the “transgressiveness of camp” (Cleto “Queering the Camp” 20). In Cleto’s estimation, “camp [...] doesn’t exclude”, but “presupposes—an element of perception, and decoding of the self and the world as stage, and of failure of intentions” (26). In my application of the terms “camp” and “queer”, I adopt Cleto’s emphasis on the performative excess and discursivity (33) that “camp” and “queer” share. Aptly for my discussion, Cleto concedes if “camp is” something, it is the crisis of identity, of depth, and of gravity” (34), thus maintaining an ambiguous, open-ended and processual definition of “camp”.

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Chapter 1: (Re)claiming History in Alfian Sa‘at’s *Dreamplay*

(2000) was first mounted by TNS at the company’s black box performance space in Marine Parade, the symbolic “heartland” of Singapore. The Marine Parade Community Centre where TNS is housed is one of the many public spaces designated for the conduct of social and cultural activities for 80 per cent of the population, that is, the “heartlanders”. In contrast, *Dreamplay’s* (2013) revival staging by W!LD RICE was at the LASALLE College of the Arts campus located within the Central Business District (CBD) in Singapore; this time directed by renowned theatre practitioner and Artistic Director of W!LD RICE, Ivan Heng. At the interactive conversation session, “Talkback Thursday”, after one of the performances during the run, Heng explained that he had specifically chosen to restage the show at this central venue because he felt the need to no longer “hide in black boxes”—an apt double entendre that also defies the injunction to remain in the closet placed on the gay figure in Singapore.16 Crucially, both Marine Parade and the LASALLE city campus serve as the symbolic hubs from which the State derives and disseminates its national binary ideology: cosmopolitan/heartlander, Western/Asian, deviant/conservative, minority/majority. Whereas the “cosmopolitans” are socially mobile, financially solvent and mainly “use Singapore as a base to operate in the region”, the State defines the majority as follows:

[T]he heartlanders, make their living within the country. Their orientation and interests are local rather than international. Their skills are not marketable beyond Singapore. They speak Singlish. [...] Heartlanders play a major role in maintaining our core values and our social stability. They are the core of our society. (C.T. Goh “PM’s NDR 1999”)

The two venues therefore represent the emblematic nexus of the Singaporean audience and bring the issues faced by the margin to the centre of the Singaporean stage. In so doing, the productions challenge the State’s concession to permit the exploration of homosexual themes because it is only consumed by a

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16 I paraphrase Heng’s comment here, which is from my annotation of the session that I attended at the Flexible Performance Space, LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore, 11 July 2013, where *Dreamplay* (2013) was staged.
highly-educated “niche” audience (Singapore Government CRC 2003 14, 30, 40-43).

In the Dreamplay (2013) program, Heng informs the audience that a series of fora were organised as part of the FEST!VITIES segment of W!LD RICE’s 2013 theatre festival. The topic of one of these “Art & Life Sessions” was “Chasing Elusive Rainbows”, specifically “[i]n conjunction with the play” (“Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”). This free, public forum sought to

track the various gains and setbacks experienced by the LGBT community in Singapore, from Pink Dot to 377A[,] [and] asks how far the community has come, and whether Singapore will ever be ready to embrace it [the LGBT community]. (“Chasing Elusive Rainbows Forum” FEST!VITIES: The Art & Life Sessions “Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”)

Boldly addressing the audience, Heng further states: “Theatre is the most collaborative of artforms, [sic] and the ultimate and most crucial of collaborations is between the artist and his audience” (“Dear Audience “Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”). In step with the play’s queer themes, the rhetorical conventions adopted by Dreamplay (2013) metaphorically and literally reclaim a discursive space from within the dominant order, to engage contentiously with existing authenticating conventions, and more importantly, with the Singaporean spectator.

Authenticating Conventions: Allusion to A Dream Play

One of the most obvious ways in which Dreamplay authenticates itself as a noteworthy text is the play’s allusion to the heteronormative dramatic text, August Strindberg’s A Dream Play, written in 1901. Surveying the notes that the Swedish playwright made as he crafted his play, Walter Johnson concludes that

17 According to Heng, “The goal of W!LD RICE’s In The Spotlight series is to provide audiences with a representative survey of a Singaporean playwright’s body of work” (“Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”). As part of the company’s 2013 festival, revivals of Alfian Sa’at’s The Optic Trilogy, Dreamplay: Asian Boys Vol. I and Cooling-Off Day were staged, in addition to the premiere of Cook a Pot of Curry.
Strindberg’s purpose was [...] to interpret human life on a new basis: [...] primarily through what memory, imagination, the dream experience in its various forms, and the unconscious have to say about it when they are not controlled by consciousness or [...] by a censor that insists on controls represented by reasoning and logic. (“Intro. to A Dream Play” 5-6)

However, neither the form of the “well-made play” (Cardwell) nor the existing naturalistic theatrical conventions advocated by Émile Zola, of which even Strindberg was a proponent, having experimented with naturalism in a number of his earlier plays, including Miss Julie, were suited to Strindberg’s purpose. As Johnson observes, Strindberg wanted to explore the inner landscape of the psyche theatrically.

The playwright expounds on his innovative form in “An Explanatory Note” that prefaces A Dream Play, writing that in

the disconnected but apparently logical form of a dream[,] [e]verything can happen; everything is possible and likely. [...] [O]n an insignificant basis of reality the imagination spins and weaves new patterns. (Strindberg A Dream Play 19)

Accordingly, the non-linear temporal acceleration and duplication and spatial discontinuity of A Dream Play’s dreamscape facilitated Strindberg’s goal to question the prevailing basis of theatrical representation in a synthesis of both his beliefs in the materialist underpinnings of naturalism and the spirituality of symbolism (Zarrilli et al. 363). As Per Stounbjerg notes, the playwright “tried to invalidate tradition by disturbing the order of representation and describing the world as strange” (54), which I would argue is similar to what Alfian does in The Asian Boys Trilogy. In Strindberg’s dream, “characters split, double, multiply, dissolve, condense, disperse, and converge”, thereby emphasising his view of identity as constituted by the dynamic confluence of internal and external relations (Strindberg A Dream Play 19). In writing A Dream Play, Strindberg prompted a shift in attitudes towards representation through an innovative
Chapter 1: (Re)claiming History in Alfian Sa’at’s Dreamplay

theatrical form. Consequently, as Eszter Szalczer claims, “Strindberg is credited with creating the modern ego-drama and is hailed as the forerunner of theatrical expressionism” (83), being the first dramatist to explore the role of the subconscious by writing a play that imitated the form of a dream just two years after Sigmund Freud’s pivotal The Interpretation of Dreams (1913) (Szalczer 104).

Therefore, Dreamplay’s allusion to Strindberg’s A Dream Play firstly lends Alfian’s play its form of an illusory dream quest. Presenting itself as remaining in the realm of fantasy, Dreamplay mitigates the possible conservative censure that had followed the State’s punitive measures against Shannon Tham and Josef Ng six years before for engaging in the political (artistic) discourse of homosexual themes in their Performance Art. Secondly, the allusion is Bloomsian to the extent that it positions Dreamplay as being numbered amongst renowned (Western) literary works—a work of ‘serious’ literature—and yet asserts its independence as a work of note even through its titular orthographical difference. More significantly, as I will discuss further below, the Bloomsian struggle implied by Dreamplay’s allusion to a Western heteronormative text such as A Dream Play is also analogous to that between the playwright and the Singaporean State. In this sense, through Dreamplay, Alfian reappropriates the means and terms by which the Singaporean gay figure(s) is expressed, in contention with the stock gay stereotypes disseminated to the Singaporean public from the West that the play suggests could be harmful. Similar to what Strindberg set out to do (“Intro. to A Dream Play” 5-6), Alfian strives to delve beneath the materialist representations and present the more complex, emotional, psychological and identititarian struggles that contribute to the experience of being a gay man in Singapore. Suited to Alfian’s purpose is A Dream Play’s theatrical expressionism (Rugg 15; Szalczer 83), a style that “aimed to express emotion non-naturalistically, in violent protest against the perceived bourgeois repression of naturalism”, featuring works that are “concerned with

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18 In The Anxiety of Influence, Harold Bloom describes the poetic creative process as an Oedipal nexus wherein the young poet seeks to align his or her work with a greater poet who had come before and with whom he or she identifies, and yet harbours a desire to stand apart from in order to be a poet in his or her own right. This latter, subconscious desire, Bloom theorises, leads to a wilful misinterpretation of a prior poet’s work by the fledgling poet. The struggle that ensues characterises the process by which poetry is produced. Since Bloom’s work, critics have extrapolated this position to apply to other literary forms as well.
human conflict [and] challenge taboos (particularly sexual taboos)” (Allain and Harvie 152).

**Missionary Positions: Synopses of *A Dream Play* and *Dreamplay***

Johnson reads Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* as exemplary of modern pessimism, in that it explores the struggle of the Everyman not just for survival, but also to fulfil his own selfish desires (“Intro. to *A Dream Play*”). In Strindberg’s play, Indra’s Daughter falls to Earth to “see and hear” the suffering of people, so as to report to her Father whether “their complaints and laments are justified” (Prologue.21). To accomplish her mission, Daughter observes and then engages with people she meets, who remain in awe of her celestial presence despite their endless suffering. With a Lawyer, an Officer and a Poet as her guides, Daughter visits seven locations in a series of short scenes in cyclical progression, each scene melding seamlessly into the next. After playing and abandoning the role of wife and mother, and having affirmed that “human beings are to be pitied” (I.27-28, 37-38, II.53, 59, III.79), she returns to her Father, Indra, having promised to “bear [the people’s] complaints to the throne” (III.86).

In his study of Strindberg’s personal correspondence, Szalczer has found that the playwright had written the role of Indra’s Daughter to be played by his wife, Harriet Bosse, expressing his hope that “in the role of his saviour, [she] would reconcile him ‘with the world through woman’” (94). This corroborates Johnson’s claim that Strindberg had made the central Christ-figure in his play a woman because he “saw in woman [...] the one possibility for the individual man’s fulfilment and completion” (“Intro. to *A Dream Play*” 10). Johnson surmises that in addition to “Strindberg’s great interest in oriental [...] religions”, his “infatuation with Harriet Bosse who, he thought, looked oriental”, explains Strindberg’s Vedic conceptualisation of Daughter (“Notes on *a Dream Play*” 87).

Significantly in *Dreamplay*, Alfian recasts Strindberg’s orientalist conception of Indra’s Daughter in the distinctly localised role of a middle-aged “fag hag” named Agnes,¹⁹ played by a woman from a minority race in Singapore—Nora Samosir, a Singaporean actress of Indonesian descent in *Dreamplay* (2000),

¹⁹ The term “fag hag” is an often derogatory term used to describe a heterosexual woman who associates mostly with homosexual men.
and Jo Kukathas, a Malaysian actress of Sri Lankan descent in *Dreamplay* (2013). A minority Agnes could, as a parody of Strindberg’s character, be read as a device that reconciles *Sri Lankan gay* men with *visibility* in Singapore. In a mocking gesture to Daughter’s (Christian, heteronormative) reconnaissance mission, Agnes is on a mission to “save mankind from extinction” (*Dreamplay* One.29, Four.38) because “[t]hey are destroying each other” (One.30) with “unnatural desire [that] lead[s] to unnatural suffering” (Five.51). She meets Boy, a nameless gay character described in the dramatic text as “20s male, impish, [and] sarcastic” (Four.38). She then forces Boy to be her guide on her quest to find gay men and purge them of their suffering because during her descent, she notices that “there’s no happiness in them” (One.28). In ten scenes, the characters—and the spectator of the play—visit six sites over two centuries in Singapore’s historical landscape, which are resignified for their queer potential in *Dreamplay*. These temporal sites include contemporary Singapore over the preceding decade in “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.41-54), “Agnes Visits the Interrogation Room” (Eight.85-93) and “Agnes Meets the Disciples” (Nine.94-99); war-torn Singapore as Syonan-To in “Agnes Visits the Japanese Occupation” (Seven.70-85); and nineteenth-century Singapore as Nanyang in “Agnes and The Sexual Awakening” (Six.54-70). In each of these locations, Agnes and Boy play multiple roles as they engage with a myriad of queer lives, described by E.-B. Lim as a “repris[al] of gay abjection and gay hope” (“Glocalqueering” 394).

With the intent of writing a play that begins a “dialogue” (“*Dreamplay* 2000 Publicity Collaterals”)—presumably, between the multiple, complex identities of the marginalised gay figure and the Singaporean spectator—Alfian fittingly appropriates and queers Strindberg’s dreamscape journey, with a view towards creating a space for the portrayal of and identification with non-heteronormative subjectivities in Singapore. However, while Johnson claims that Strindberg’s play merely “synthesises human experience instead of analysing human beings and their experience” (“Intro. to A *Dream Play* 14), I argue that Alfian’s dream goes a step further, facilitated by its queer camp theatrical staging.
A Magic Carpet Ride: Overview of the Camp Aesthetic in *Dreamplay*

Enumerating the points of consensus on queer camp style, David Bergman writes:

> [...] Camp exists in tension with popular culture, commercial culture, or consumerist culture. [...] The person who can recognise camp, who sees things as campy, or who can camp is a person outside the cultural mainstream. [...] Camp is affiliated with homosexual culture, or at least with a self-conscious eroticism that throws into question the naturalisation of desire. (4-5)\(^{20}\)

The camp is thus a marginalised figure who “rediscover[s] history’s waste” (Ross 13) and reinscribes it with performative excess as a “survivalist strategy” (Cleto “Queering the Camp” 8). This strategy clearly supports Alfian’s aims in *The Asian Boys Trilogy*. Additionally, Caryl Flinn’s acknowledgement of “camp’s capacity to ridicule”, thus offering “a means of displacing the social, psychic, and historical anxiety of its subject’s disempowerment onto objects and icons othered” (442), further clarifies the intended effects of the queer camp theatrical strategy of *Dreamplay*. That is to say, the play envisions “new patterns” (Strindberg *A Dream Play* 19) that reveal the ambivalence and instability of identity that can then be made available to the multifaceted, marginalised gay figure in Singapore.

One of the ways in which Alfian cathects the subaltern’s burden of stigma is by queering heteronormative cultural artefacts to expose their fundamental instability and inherent constructedness. In addition to Strindberg’s *A Dream Play*, these reinscribed artefacts include religious and popular iconography, and even a popular song from the soundtrack of Disney’s production of *Aladdin* (Menken and Rice). Most importantly, popular Western gay archetypes implied by State discourse were deployed in the publicity collaterals as part of the staging of *Dreamplay* (2000). The images shown below (Figure 1-1) were printed on postcards and distributed in public spaces, such as cafes and theatres, as part of the publicity for *Dreamplay* (2000). These

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\(^{20}\) Appropriate to the representational excess of camp, the word itself is polysemous: the performer of Camp or camp(ing) subject (noun) is described as camp (adjective) and is a camp (noun).
collaterals touted the play as “Filth for the Eyes, Food for the Soul” and invited the spectator to “tune-in to this f***ked-up dream of a lifetime” (“Dreamplay 2000 Publicity Collaterals”). Describing the collaterals for Dreamplay (2000), E.-B. Lim writes:

[T]he play’s publicity shots transpose Frenchman Pierre et Gilles’s highly stylised and homoerotic fantasy photo-art into Singaporean versions of a sailor boy, S & M bondage boy, mermaid, and diva goddess. (“Glocalqueering” 395)\(^\text{21}\)

Furthermore, the “Asian Boys” figured in the publicity postcards comprise the cast ensemble of Dreamplay (2000) who are similarly presented in the program booklet with fetishizing labels like “Scrotum Slave”, “Amber Aqua”, “Willy Whipper”, “Bunny Bond”, “Fairy Ferry” and “Dildo Divinity” (Figure 1-2). Finally, instead of being provided with a synopsis of the play, the potential spectator is provocatively invited to

[t]ake a happy ride through the glorious holes to experience style, phallic monsters, stardust, and macho goddesses. Like characters in a wet dream, the six-strong ensemble will play out your fantasies under the showers, at the pubs, on the net, and in the buses—funny, thought-provoking, heart-wrenching and always haunting. (“Dreamplay 2000 Publicity Collaterals”)

The passage openly addresses both gay and straight potential spectators, the latter of whom might not have access to in-group knowledge of the references to the pleasure of anonymous sex at clandestine “glor[y] holes” and other popular locations for gay cruising in Singapore. In this way, the production subverts


\(^{22}\) “Aqua” alludes to the local term “ah qua”. First used to describe the Bugis Street transvestites/transsexuals, it became the catchall pejorative referring to all gay men (see discussion below).
heteronormative expectations of spectator-address by locating the gay spectator in an unusually central position.

Additionally, explicit in this invitation is the spectator’s desire—again, both gay and straight—to consume the sex(uality) promised by the featured gay icons, thereby queering the State’s claim of the ostensible Singaporean majority’s prevailing subordination and vilification of the gay figure. According to E.-B. Lim, the eroticised and fetishised depictions of gay men—the “Asian Boys” of the play—recall the “racialized fetishes of an older white male for the diminutive and effeminized Asian male”, always already positioning the gay man as subjugated Other in these visual and categorical depictions (389). Notably, Lim further argues that “the Asian boy is already imbricated in the state’s use of Asia as cultural capital”, noting that critics have said that “New Asia has [...] been constructed in part by the idea of ‘queer Asia’” (389-390). Building on Lim’s analysis, I contend that in its collaterals, Dreamplay (2000) also participates in the pink economy and idyll of “New Asia” adopted by the State. By investing in the creation of an expectation of a visual spectacle of “Asian Boys”, Dreamplay (2000) appropriates the State’s investment in the creation of Singapore as the nexus of “New Asia” for global consumption. The 2000 production’s publicity collaterals then effectively parody the State’s assertion of Singapore as “the ‘heart of Asia’[,] fusing ‘Occidental and Oriental influences’” by inscribing Singapore’s “exotic interculturalism [onto] the bodies of its transcultural Asian boys” derided in State discourse (389-390). In this mimetic construction, firstly, the State is aligned with the colonial white male and is confronted with its eroticisation and prohibition of the sexual transgressions of the gay male body. Secondly, the collaterals emphasise the spectator’s complicit role in constructing while simultaneously consuming the objectified and vacuous image of the Singaporean gay man for visual pleasure and economic gain.

**The Politics of Looking: Establishing the Visual Field of the Gay Figure in Singapore**

While the 2000 production’s collaterals subvert State discourse, the collaterals for the 2013 production, on the other hand, transgress proscribed gay visibility.
Dreamplay (2013) adopts different rhetorical conventions in positioning the spectator of the play, with a similar—though not identical—political intent. The “Asian Boys” are figured in miniature in the foreground of Figure 1-4. From left to right, they are dressed in costumes that respectively parody a local, aged diva, Anita Sarawak; a Japanese Kempetai soldier from the Second World War holding a sword, readily recognisable by Singaporeans as alluding to the Japanese Occupation of Singapore; a muscular man holding a volleyball and clad in swimming trunks printed with the colours, crescent moon and stars of the national flag of Singapore; and a man in tight, leather clothing, the only figure redolent of popular Western portrayals of gayness. Another figure, whose ‘pigtail’ renders him recognisable as a nineteenth-century Chinese immigrant to Singapore, or a “coolie”, is depicted as lying on his side in front of the other men in the foreground. His position parodies the repose of those “coolies” who smoked opium to alleviate their isolation from mainland China.23

These gay men are figured in seductive poses, maintaining both sideways and direct gazes at the spectator. The pictorial composition conveys the characters’ differing access to power explored in the play and an awareness of what Laura Mulvey saw in the filmic context as being “subject[ed] […] to [the] controlling and curious gaze of the spectator” (“Visual Pleasure” 8). While they clearly submit to being icons for voyeuristic pleasure, their confrontational and localised portrayal suggests multiple, non-homogenised ways of performing gay. This figuration can be argued to destabilise “the active/looking, passive/looked-at split in terms of sexual difference and the power of the male Symbolic” that Mulvey identifies (“Visual Pleasure” 24). In this case, the dynamic of power that inheres in the relationship between the Singaporean gay figure and the Singaporean (homophobic) State is underscored. The voyeuristic and narcissistic pleasure derived from gazing at the spectacle of the submissive (gay) Other by the dominant (heterosexual) gaze is thus disrupted. Taking its place is the construction of a gaze suggestive of an adamantly local, homosexual

23 See, for example, Warren Rickshaw Coolie; T.H. Ong and Isralowitz Substance Use in Singapore: Illegal Drugs, Inhalants and Alcohol 40-43; and Trocki Opium and Empire.
Figure 1-1: Postcards as part of the publicity for Dreamplay 2000. (Loh and Tan)
SCROTUM SLAVE

Shaffiq Idra Akhath

By day, Shaffiq moonlights as a student. By night, this nocturnal animal pursues his nude 25-year-old body in references to the green-eyed envy of his elder classmates. You might have seen Shaffiq parade circulating during a crew and assistant stage manager, carrying his weight and responding to a range of characters, from the bargain basement to the highbrow. On being impressed with the work of his tongue, he hosted a Malay programme on Prime TV, which he died as his 'most enriching experience'. Asian Boys Ltd! trims the ruddy Virgin Theatre performance.

AMBER AQUA

Peter Sau

Peter is a much sought after actor. Effectively bilingual, he straddles both the English and Mandarin theatre circuits with ease. Some of his illustrious productions include ‘The Necessary Stage’ (The Necessary Stage), ‘Cowboy’ (Toy Factory Theatre Ensembles), A Millionaire’s Night (Rediff Theatre) and ‘The Dino’ (Chinese Theatre). As part of Theatre (The Necessary Stage), he performed in Tali which kick-started him to the movie fringe festival in October 2000. Asian Boys Ltd! is Peter’s swansong as he retires Practice Performing Arts School’s Theatre and Research Programme next year for a speaking good time!

WILLY WHIPPERS

Mark Richmond

Atting an impressive height of 6’1” when fully erect, the heady-eyed Mark has been forcing his acting craft since 1992. A self-proclaimed lover of sizes, the Eurasian actor has been seen on both the small and big screen. Most recently, he starred in an Eric Khoo-produced film, ‘Dream About Lisa’. In his two years with the Televison Corporation of Singapore, he appeared in programmes such as ‘999 Nine’, ‘Under One Roof’ and ‘The Necessary Stage’. Mark is known for his stage appearances in ‘The Necessary Stage’, ‘Tea Time at 6:30’ (1993) and ‘The Strait (2000).

BUNNY BOND

Benjamin Heng

Benjamin was trained in classical music from a young age. During his days of rest from glamour, he plucks the strings of his electric guitar, refining tunes of passion. His hot tour of music is now the epitome of young churl in the theatre world. He was in Action Film’s ‘Joo & Al’ (1999) playing the role of a nonplausible in his version of a ‘boyish’ character. Asian Boys Ltd! makes Benjamin’s first time with ‘The Necessary Stage’.

FAIRY FERRY

Hossain Leong

Hossain was a part of Hong Kong’s television industry. He studied in London and is now a full-time actor. He has performed in various plays and musicals, including ‘The Necessary Stage’, ‘The Faery’ (The Necessary Stage) and ‘The Virgin’ (The Necessary Stage). He is known for his unique style and energy on stage. Asian Boys Ltd! marks his second appearance in ‘The Necessary Stage’.

DILDO DIVINITY

Nora Sansoir

Nora is an accomplished performer in her field, much sourced as the Queen by insiders. She has pleased the stage in many TheatreWorks productions such as ‘Over The Horizon’, ‘Six Degrees of Separation’ and ‘The Necessary Stage’. Nora is known for her distinct style and energy on stage. She is associated with ‘The Necessary Stage’, ‘The Virgin’ (The Necessary Stage) and ‘The Virgin’ (The Necessary Stage) and ‘The Virgin’ (The Necessary Stage). Asian Boys Ltd! marks Nora’s third appearance in ‘The Necessary Stage’.

Figure 1-2: Cast List in Programme Booklet for Dreamplay 2000. (Loh and Tan)
identification that confronts the State's heteronormative position and displacement of local homosexual identification onto derided Western gay stereotypes.

This dialectic is reprised especially in “Agnes Visits the Japanese Occupation” (Seven.70-85), which incorporates the popular “yaoi” form used in slash fiction. Mark McHarry defines “yaoi” as follows:

Yaoi describes homoerotic works created by fans [...] of young male characters in Japanese manga (comics) and anime (animation). (183) [...] “Yaoi” is an acronym for “yamanashi ochinashi iminashi”, meaning “no climax, no point, no meaning”. (193)
Figure 1-4: Main publicity poster for Dreamplay 2013. (W!LD RICE “Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”)
As McHarry suggests, the form of yaoi invests in the politics of looking. He further notes that “seeing is vital to yaoi’s purpose of expressing erotic desire. Seeing is [...] important to many gay-identified males who cruise other males for sex” (191)—a visual activity portrayed in this scene:

BOON: You had that dao look.\footnote{“Dao” (adj.) is a Singlish expression glossed as “arrogant” (Alfian Sa’at \textit{Asian Boys Trilogy} 281).} I didn’t know how to read your face.

WING: I wasn’t wearing my spectacles.

[Pause]

BOON: So...you couldn’t really see me.

WING: Not really. Anyway it was dark.
Having been elided from heteronormative cultural artefacts and “subalternised” by the State (Tang 89), the gaze—comprised of seeing and being seen—is important for the gay figure, not just for visibility but also as a way to autonomously express subjectivity. In this scene, the characters move across the stage space, either while maintaining eye contact or looking at the other character while he looks away (*Dreamplay* 2013).

Notably, in the traverse stage set-up for *Dreamplay* (2013), the audience was split on both sides of the performance space. Facing one another, they could see one another’s reactions at every point in the play. In this way, Heng effectively mimicked the panoptic State apparatus in making the audience aware of their visibility to others, perhaps creating a reflexive desire to retreat into the shadows. Firstly, this strategy engages the spectator with the marginalised gay figure in the play on an intimate level, and produces the experience of the similar prohibitive (in)visibility of the gay figure. Secondly, and more importantly, rather than ensuring adherence to State-sanctioned scripts, the panoptic visibility of this staging subversively urges the meaning-making practice concomitant with the queer themes and characters in the play. Consequently, the gaze of the audience moves with the bodies on stage and with the characters’ shifting gaze, an interaction that is augmented by the awareness of the gaze of the audience on the other side of the traverse stage. The performance thus creates a shifting, dynamic gaze that provisionally restores the equilibrium of power between the seer and the seen, rather than the fixed, unequal gaze that prevents autonomous exchange. As such, alternative sites of identification, from which to see and be seen are made available to the spectator.
To this end, a range of subjectivities are introduced in *Dreamplay*, including drag queens (Three.31), tentative teenagers (Five.42), aggressive, muscular gay men (Five.45), gay men past their prime (Five.48), homoerotic manual labourers (Six.55), gay men in the military (Seven.72), theatre practitioners and playwrights (Eight.87) and even gay men who only wish to be “straight” (Nine.94-97). In contrast to mainstream narratives that invariably elide representations of gay men, the few “straight” characters in *Dreamplay*—indeed, in all three plays that constitute *The Asian Boys Trilogy*—play small and/or supporting roles around the development of gay characters. As such, the traditional, axiomatic reading position of the dominant order which presupposes, even in the global (Western) media-saturated Singaporean context, an “ideal spectator” who is “white[-washed], middle-class, heterosexual, and male” (Dolan 1; Bennett 40), remains significantly absent. Following on from this, with its validating address of several subjectivities of the Singaporean gay spectator, I argue that *Dreamplay* disrupts the illusion of a homogenised collective with a set of “Shared Values” assumed by the State, and creates a space for the otherwise marginalised gay figure to be constitutive of the Singaporean audience. This endeavour reclaims (queer) time within Singaporean history.

**Re-Membered Temporalities: Queering Singaporean History**

It could certainly be argued that one of *Dreamplay’s* functions as part of *The Asian Boys Trilogy* is as a critique of the dislocation of the gay figure from Singaporean history. Drawing on, and arguably queering Michel Foucault’s *The History of Sexuality* (also in three volumes), Alfian’s queer genealogy begins in “Agnes and the Sexual Awakening” (Six.54-70). In this scene, Boy takes Agnes to the beginnings of Singapore to meet characters popularised by State-sponsored historical documentaries, exhibitions and local operas:

**BOY:** 19th century Singapore. Conditions are ripe for multiple homoerotic situations. In the rubber plantations, the wharves, the godowns, the men are barebodied,
sweaty and horny. There are few women around. Most of them, like the ah mah’s [sic] and the samsui women, have taken a vow of celibacy. The dormant sperm volcano is about to erupt any time soon. (Six.54-55)

Often celebrated by mainstream cultural artefacts as “unsung heroes” on whose backs the nation was built, the Chinese migrant labourers found themselves in a new British colony where many of the “samsui women” chose not to marry, vowing to support their families back home instead (V.Q.R. Koh). Aaron Ho asserts that in such a situation, “men, regardless of their sexuality, had sex with other men. […] But such a history,” he continues, “has been erased” (30). Dreamplay addresses this erasure in its queering of the Singaporean historical narrative.

In Dreamplay (2013), a collage of images taken from mainstream historical documentaries and State exhibitions is flashed onto one of the screens that frame the traverse stage. This projection has the effect of first fragmenting the hegemonic narrative, which then recedes into the background, while the queered migrants and their desires are brought to the fore in “Agnes and the Sexual Awakening” (Six.54-70). The scene revolves around Ah Hock and Ah Seng, immigrants to the thriving colonial entrepôt of Singapore in the Nanyang, a trading and migration region that extends from the south-eastern tip of mainland China to Singapore. Ah Hock and Ah Seng are “coolies” who, having emigrated to escape the poverty and political instability in Manchu China, are hired to perform hard manual labour for a living in Singapore, including rickshaw-pulling, plantation and construction work (Warren; Thulaja). While sharing hardship and close quarters, Ah Hock and Ah Seng experience same-sex desire. Although Ah Hock expresses a reluctance to give in to this desire because of his traditional Chinese belief in procreation as the main purpose of a heterosexual marital

25 “Ah mah” is glossed as “live-in domestic helper”; “samsui women” refer to “Chinese female immigrants […] in search of industrial and construction jobs” (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 280).
partnership, Ah Seng, on the other hand, openly pursues the fulfilment of his homosexual desires in response to Ah Fah:

**AH FAH:** You smelly rickshaw coolie original lao chiau\(^{26}\) macho mary! [...] You drag that rickshaw all over town picking up men. And when you run, purposely shake your bon bons!

**AH SENG:** Chao\(^{27}\) samsui woman oldest recorded fag hag in Singapore’s history! At least I get more action than you. [...] (Six.62)

Ah Fah and Ah Mui are both samsui women who, unlike their historical counterparts, are subversively portrayed as entraping the “coolies” into heterosexual marriage. By revealing the artifice of the courtship between Ah Mui and Ah Hock, the unquestioned sanctity of the marital union is thereby undermined.

Additionally, in the above exchange, the labels that Ah Fah and Ah Seng use in their banter recall contemporary labels applied to archetypes in the Singaporean queer community. These are similar to the labels the Japanese Kempetai officers employ in “Agnes Visits the Japanese Occupation” earlier discussed:

**LT:** You pervert. You faggot. You bagero
*[and other Japanese expletives.]*

**SGT:** You 100% Pure Gay. Sailor Moon!
Dear Daniel! Yaoi! Bishonen\(^{28}\)
(Seven.81)

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\(^{26}\) “Lao chiau” translates from the Mandarin as “old bird” or “old penis”.

\(^{27}\) “Chao” translates from the Mandarin as “malodorous”.

\(^{28}\) “Sailor Moon” and “Dear Daniel” are popular Japanese brand names whose products are appealing for being cute. “Bishonen” is glossed as “beautiful boy” (Alfian Sa’at *Asian Boys Trilogy* 282). The Japanese officer admonishing the gay men in this scene is here spewing forth a meaningless string of words. This portrayal successfully undermines the officer’s authority in relation to the gay figure.
A further discussion of Scene Seven will follow shortly, but it suffices to say here that tellingly, the Kempetai officers use a string of contemporary Japanese (Asian) commercial labels to refer to the gay men they accost, instead of the prevailing Western queer labels. Similarly, in Scene Six, Ah Fah and Ah Seng’s banter not only parodies the naturalising and confining labels placed on the Singaporean gay figure by the dominant order, but it also suggests alternative subject positions available to the local queer community, rather than merely that of the effeminate man or Western male “butch” (Six.54).

When Agnes asks how homosexuality “can be inherited by future generations [since] [g]ay men don’t have children”, the queering of Foucault’s genealogy is made clear when Boy answers:

BOY: Agnes, when a man makes love to another man, something happens in the atmosphere.

[...] The temperature rises slightly. That’s all. But ripples are sent out through history. (Six.55)

Alfian arguably echoes Foucault here, in his study of the nineteenth-century emergence of the “homosexual as a species” (Foucault HoS: vl 43) and the theory of “degenerescence” that viewed sexual perversion as hereditary (118). Through its parody, the claim that homosexuality is a “Western issue” (Tay, qtd. in Berry 5) is rejected with the figuration of the “homosexual as a species” as being part of Singapore’s inheritance from its beginnings as a colonial entrepôt.

Although Ah Hock continues to think of China as his homeland, repeatedly reminding Ah Seng that “[w]e are Chinese” (Six.57, 59), Ah Seng advises him to “[f]orget about China already” because “[y]ou are in Singapore now” (Six.58). The reiteration of “[w]e are Chinese” here parodies the homogenising “shared”, “Asian” (Confucian) values propagated by the State and subverts the ideology’s original intent. Rather than happiness, the assertion of “Asian” values in Dreamplay leads to alienation and dislocation. Having been disowned by his family in China because of his homosexuality (Six.57), Ah Seng is
hopeful to make a home in Singapore when he tells Ah Mui: “Yes, we are immigrants. That is why we are free to make new values” (Six.66). However, the pursuit and consummation of his same-sex desire with Ah Hock is interrupted—and simultaneously, the concomitant feelings for Singapore as his home—when the “coolies” are forced into marriage and, subsequently, procreation with the samsui women.

In both productions, the song, “I Will Survive”, popularised by diva Gloria Gaynor, is parodied to show Ah Seng’s response to the imposition of traditional Chinese (“Asian”) values. The result of this is the resignation of his hope for the happiness that he had sought in migrating to Singapore, conveyed by Agnes at the end of the scene:

AGNES: Ah Hock and Ah Seng are married. And the fruits of their unhappiness will be passed on to their sons, and their son’s sons. (Six.70)

In other words, Ah Seng’s portrayal conveys that the denial of the gay man’s pursuit of his same-sex desire by the prescriptive values (that is, heteronormative, reproductive, Confucian) imposed by the State is tantamount to a denial of all Singaporeans’ happiness and identification with Singapore as home, not just that of the gay man in Singapore’s origins. In Dreamplay (2000), Ah Seng recites verses from Gaynor’s song morosely, while melancholic ‘Chinese’ music is played. In Dreamplay (2013), on the other hand, Ah Seng’s recitation is further camped by his performance of “Chinese Wayang” gestures and Wushu stances with every line, eliciting laughter from the audience. The differing performances of this scene suggest that Dreamplay’s (2000) staging seems to melancholically accept the struggle of the marginalised figure, while Dreamplay’s (2013) staging is

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29 Chinese street opera is colloquially referred to as “Chinese Wayang” in Singapore, a form that continues to thrive in the “heartlands”. The open-air performances on make-shift stages are attended by many residents in the public housing estates and establish a sense of community through shared Chinese culture and historical continuity. “Wushu” is a sport and exhibition form derived from Chinese martial arts. The laughter from the audience at this juncture in Dreamplay (2013) is based on my personal observation as part of the audience of the performance on 11 July 2013.
a more defiant, transgressive response. Ah Seng’s paradoxically humorous yet melancholic performance of grace, harmony, celebration and combat encompasses the camp strategy of incongruity that is called upon to “define a positive homosexual identity” (“Role Models” 105) for the Singaporean gay figure in Dreamplay (2013).

The creation of this positive identity within the queer community in order to overcome obstacles to survival seems to be a recurrent theme throughout Dreamplay; it is particularly significant in “Agnes Visits the Japanese Occupation” (Seven.70-85). As discussed above, the mimicry of the shifting gaze in the yaoi form facilitates the means by which gay men may signal their desire to each other and bond in their recognised commonality, even during “a time of hardship” (Seven.71). Arguably with more regularity than a reiteration of Singapore’s migrant origins alluded to in “Agnes and the Sexual Awakening” (Six.54-70), the Singaporean State repeatedly affirms the Japanese Occupation as formative of the modern nation. In fact, the Total Defence strategy that rallies the people of Singapore together under the aegis of protecting their home country is unambiguously linked to this historical event: Total Defence Day is on 15 February, which commemorates the fall of Singapore to the Japanese invading forces during World War Two. 30

Even in the country’s Total Defence philosophy and mobilisation, however, the gay figure is marked as abject. In Singapore, all male citizens are required to serve in the military, National Service (NS), for two years. As part of the medical examination in the conscription process, the men must declare if they “suffer” from homosexuality, which is still classified in Singapore as a psychosocial disorder. The medical code that classifies homosexuality in Singapore is category 302 of the 9th revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-9). The ICD is used by the World Health Organisation (WHO) in the classification of diseases and in managing the deployment of their resources. The system has been adopted by Singapore for the same healthcare management and disease control purposes. ICD-9, published in 1978, is outdated, and the

30 See E.H.C. Tan “Total Defence”; Singapore Civil Defence Force What is Total Defence; and Total Defence Online.
WHO currently adopts ICD-10, published in 1992. Importantly, homosexuality was removed as a psychosexual disorder from the ICD in 1990, and category 302 is no longer found in the ICD-10. However, the category remains an important part of the assessment of the medical fitness of NS men in Singapore. For the purposes of Dreamplay, it is important to note that these men are marked as sexual deviants and are assigned different, less physically demanding duties from the rest of the contingent. Hence, viewed in terms of the Total Defence philosophy, the men classified under category 302 are implicitly considered more as liabilities to the State than fit to serve the Singaporean nation. They are effectively deemed inferior participants in the nation-building project.

The “Force 302” of which Boon is part is thus a parody of both the State’s nationalist rhetoric and, I would argue, a Foucauldian manoeuvre:

BOON: We call ourselves Force 302. It is made up of soldiers who fight out of love. Not for the country, not for a flag. But for each other. It is the most effective army. Dying for your country is meaningless. A country cannot die. But if you did because you don’t want someone you love to die, then it is noble. It is patriotism of the highest order. (Seven.80)

Boon describes the fraternity of the Force 302 soldiers in terms that suggest the emotional and intimate bonds that exist between men in the military as put forward by Foucault in the interview, “Friendship is a Way of Life” (Martin). Foucault’s description of the stereotype where “two young men [meeting] each other on the street, seduce[e] each other with a glance, [put] their hands on each other’s ass, and [hook] up fifteen minutes later” (qtd. in Martin 10) is reprised in this scene. Importantly, the scene then radically portrays the “affection, tenderness, friendship, fidelity, camaraderie, and companionship” that Foucault criticises for being absent in normative images of homosexual relationships,

31 The conscription process and the detrimental identitarian effects on men classified under 302 following their medical NS declaration is described in Peculiar Chris (J.S. Lee PC), which will be explored in my analysis of Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3 (Alfian Sa’at).
especially in the military (qtd. in Martin 10). The affection that is portrayed queers the discourse of (heterosexual) masculinity in the military and demonstrate the necessity of male homosocial friendship and “love” as a means of wartime survival and military success (Neill 158-160).

Again responding to the erasure of homosexuals in the military and the history of Singapore, Alfian re-members the gay figure as a resistance fighter in the Japanese Occupation who has made significant contributions to the formation of modern Singapore. Moreover, the scene is even more radical for its queering of the State’s vilification of the totalitarian occupiers by drawing a parallel between the Japanese Kempetai officers and the modern State that disseminates heteronormative codes and proscribes alternative subjectivities. In a related parallel, Boon’s bond with Wing is destroyed because the Kempetai had recruited the former as a spy in the resistance, symbolic of the enforced alienation and prejudice experienced by gay men in Singapore as a result of being marked as deviant. Boon dreams, perhaps like the playwright, that:

BOON: We will convince the Japanese one day that not everyone wants to live like them. Not everyone wants to worship the sun. Some of us might want to look at the stars. One day we will get ourselves registered. We will hold forums. We will hold hands in the streets and walk so tall there will be stardust in our hair. (Seven.80)

The analogy drawn in this scene between the Japanese Kempetai and the State is clarified in the reference to the State’s circumscription of the fledgling queer group in Singapore, People Like Us (PLU), that was denied registration as a society by the Registrar of Societies when it declared its intention to address homosexual issues in Singapore in 1997 (R.H.K. Heng 88-90; Joseph Lo and Huang). Boon also makes pointed reference to PLU in his conversation with Mdm Zaiton below:

32 My emphasis.
MDM ZAITON: Don’t you think then the Japanese would keep an eye out for people like you? [...] 
BOON: ‘People like us’. I like that. It sounds very sad. Because people don’t. (Seven.80)

The playwright’s analogy is revealing of the agonistic effects of the totalitarian authority of the State on the marginal gay figure in Singapore. As resistance fighters, however, Boon and Wing are portrayed not just as gay men, but, importantly, also as Singaporeans who fought against the invading Japanese, so critical in the official narrative of Singaporean history. The Singaporean spectator in the audience is being invited to empathise with the gay men on stage and consider a more inclusive community of “people like us [Singaporeans]”.

I Will Survive: Reappropriating and Reinscribing Popular Cultural (Asian) Artefacts as Sites of Identification

The Singaporean spectator is further interpellated by Dreamplay (2000; 2013) with the systematic resignification of the figure of the gay man by distinctly Asian and Singaporean popular cultural references. Homi Bhabha makes the case that such reinscriptions and reinterpretations of cultural artefacts—which he reads as arbitrary signs of the dominant order—are constitutive of an imperative model through which marginalised Others claim their “historical and ethical right to signify” their marginalised existence (“Freedom’s Basis” 49). Convincingly, in the queering of State discourse in each scene, Dreamplay’s gay men are portrayed as quasi-agentic subjects with individual desires, part of a community engaged in a struggle for survival, not unlike the characters in Strindberg’s A Dream Play. The non-linear, circular dramatic structure establishes a retrospective-prospective, kaleidoscopic lens through which the marginalised gay figure in Singaporean society finds visibility and is made visible to the spectator through (re)membrance. It is only in participating in the production of meaning during the play’s performance, however, that the spectator might be confronted with the indeterminacy of cultural artefacts that perpetuate stereotyping identitarian
scripts. In this way, these scripts circulated by globally permeable Western queer culture conceded to, and, therefore, circulated by the State as a necessary part of its neoliberal re-branding of Singapore, are destabilised. I contend that Alfian accomplishes this when he first denaturalises the State’s alignment of Singaporean gay men with “Western moral degeneracy” (Tang 89) and thereafter relocations them within the Singaporean context with a local argot. By employing what Jonathan Dollimore construes as “the mode of camp which undermines the categories which exclude it […] through parody and mimicry” (224), Alfian effectively

negotiates some of the lived contradictions of subordination, simultaneously refashioning as a weapon of attack an oppressive identity inherited as subordination, and hollowing out dominant formations responsible for that identity in the first instance. (Dollimore 224)

As suggested by the collaterals of Dreamplay (2000; 2013) and by the State narrative that adheres to the maintenance of purportedly “Asian values” in contradistinction to its commitment to advancing its neoliberal, globalising agenda, there is a lack of nuanced portrayals of non-heteronormative sexualities in Singaporean cultural artefacts. “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.41-54) best highlights the destructive effects of such non-signification. Located in contemporary Singapore, the characters bear alienating and anonymising labels which mimic the reductive stereotyping of gay men into archetypes in Western gay culture: Bi-Boy, Muscle Boy, Old Boy and Lonely Boy. Each of these characters delivers soliloquies that illuminate their different motivations for coming to the gay pub. Significantly, their soliloquies also reveal the various prejudices they have faced—as abject in relation to the heteronormative order and from within the gay community in Singapore as well—that have subsequently reified their (negative) identities.

Lonely Boy is a “teenage male” whom Agnes further describes as “lost” (Five. 42). In Dreamplay (2000; 2013), the character is portrayed as a timid, yet hopeful boy when he is first introduced, saying, “It’s my first time here. […] When
I reach home tonight, I will write down in my diary[,]” presumably about the experience of his initial foray into the gay community in Singapore (Five.42). His closed and hunched posture suggests nervous discomfort and displays his apprehension in the darkened pub that may be read as a spatial metaphor for the marginalised gay community (Dreamplay 2000; 2013). Without any other representations or legitimate support structures available to him in Singapore, Lonely Boy’s only recourse is to the internet where he has read about the pub depicted in the scene.

Ultimately, however, his hopeful attempt to “know who [his] brothers were” results in a lesson of the need for physical self-discipline in order to be accepted, not by the State, but, rather, by the gay community itself (Five.42). He learns:

LONELY BOY: That I must get a tan. That I should start working out. That I will become a gym-rat disco-bunny with a snake in my pants. No more ugly duckling with chicken legs. That my one desire is to walk here one day with a tight pink T-shirt with the word ‘Gorgeous’ glittering on it. (Five.42)

Notably, Lonely Boy’s reductive conclusion has been reached without engagement in any dialogue with the other men in the pub who roam the stage space, save Boy and Agnes. From an alienated vantage point, Lonely Boy learns through observation that he needs to perform gayness akin to the fetishised images of Western representations of gayness discussed above. This suggests a commentary by the playwright on the individual and community fragmentation that inevitably occurs in adopting a performance of gayness that does not consider the local context, but rather inherits the desire to police and control gay performativity.

One of the indices of the Singaporean local context portrayed in this scene is the set of enduring racial and ethnic stereotypes deployed for intra- and inter-ethnic identification. Built into the State’s multiracial, multicultural rhetoric and
policies ostensibly in place to manage simmering racial tensions of a heterogeneous populace is the inevitability of categorical organisation along racial lines first drawn by British colonialists (D.P.S. Goh “From Colonial Pluralism”; Hirschman).\textsuperscript{33} Of the different ethnicities in Singapore officially categorised as Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO), the group categorised as Malays are overrepresented in the lower socio-economic strata of the nation (Mutalib \textit{S’pore Malays}; Said-Sirhan 222; Barr and Low 162). However, averse to the provision of welfare, the Singaporean State emphasises a meritocratic paradigm that has obfuscated the systemic and historical disadvantages recently found to contribute to what Mutalib has dubbed “the Malay plight” (“Minority Dilemma” II57; \textit{S’pore Malays} 4-6; see also V. Chua and Ng 480-481). Not surprisingly, the persistent stereotype of “the lazy [Malay] native” is inherited from colonial times (Alatas 83, 149, \textit{passim}) and was unabashedly supported by Lee Kuan Yew (Barr and Skrbiš I0-II; Barr and Low I63). Since independence, this racial stereotype has been driven by the cultural deficit theory (Rahim 247), which assigns blame to the members of this ethnic minority whose comparably lower socio-economic status is caused by their “indolence” and “feebleness of intellect” (Alatas 47, 49), which are born of their culture and inheres in their genetic makeup (Rahim 51). Furthermore, in his analysis of the treatise promoting change to “the Malay character” written by the leaders of the ruling political party in Malaysia in 1971, \textit{Revolusi Mental} (gloss: Mental Revolution), Alatas demonstrates how the negative stereotype had not merely been internalised by many of the Straits Malays (I68-I69). It had also been expanded to include an extended list of absurd negative traits that nonetheless “governed the vast majority of Malays” (I70).\textsuperscript{34} Consequently, the Malay ethnic minority is doubly marginalised, first through historical and systemic disadvantages that mark members of this community as unsuccessful in Singapore, and then through a cultivated self-loathing.

\textsuperscript{33} These simmering racial tensions are further explored in my analysis of \textit{Good People} (Sharma) in Chapter 5.

\textsuperscript{34} Alatas notes that the \textit{Revolusi Mental}, which had been drawn up to effect change in the Malay ‘character’, included far more negative traits than had been purveyed in colonial times. Promulgated by Straits Malay leaders, \textit{Revolusi Mental} added to the internalised cultural deficit of the Malay communities in the region.
In Dreamplay, Muscle Boy relates an experience representative of the Malay community in Singapore as described by Alatas, Mutalib and Rahim. When Agnes notices that he “seem[s] to be the most confident one” in the pub (Five.45), it is illuminating that Muscle Boy makes pointed reference to the popular performative markers of Malay ethnicity in Singapore:

MUSCLE BOY: I didn’t use [sic] to be this way. There was Brylcreem in my hair, I wore Second Chance clothes, and I listened to cassette tapes of Sudirman.35 And then one day I discovered the Internet Relay Chat [IRC]. I start to go to #gam and #gayteens.36 But most of the people stop talking to me once I told them I am Malay. I didn’t understand why. So after that when people chatted with me, I would ask from the very beginning: ‘Me Malay. Do you mind?’ (Five.46)

Where the official view within the Malay-Muslim community is that homosexuality is a personal challenge to be overcome by individuals who are same-sex attracted, and in a country where homosexuality is cast into circumscribed places such as the dimly lit set of the scene, Muscle Boy’s additional rejection from contingents of the gay community because of his ethnic identification demonstrates the abject status of the gay Malay-Muslim Singaporean.

35 Brylcreem is a hairstyling product marketed to men. While it was once universally popular in Singapore, the slicked back hairstyle requiring Brylcreem and its greasy aesthetic became outdated by the 1990s. Men who continued using Brylcreem were considered unpresposessing. “Second Chance” is glossed as the “[n]ame of Singapore-based menswear label, popular among Malays in the 1980s, now no longer in existence” (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 279). Sudirman Arshad was an accomplished Malaysian performer whose work received international acclaim. Having won numerous awards, including the award for Asia’s Best Performer at the 1989 Asian Music Awards in London, Sudirman, a Malay man, was a source of inspiration and pop icon to many (“Sudirman Arshad”), especially amongst the ethnic minorities in Singapore and Malaysia.

36 #gam is a hashtag that stands for “gay Asian male” first used on the Internet Relay Chat (IRC) platform as an identifier for users and channels. The hashtag is still in popular use as of this writing in 2016.
CHAPTER 1: (Re)claiming History in Alfian Sa’at’s Dreamplay

Following the effacement of his performative ethnic markers, a consequence of the internalisation of the negative stereotype, Muscle Boy takes recourse in the widely available Western archetypes of “gay jocks” or “muscle marys”. He says:

MUSCLE BOY: [...] Can you tell that I was once a skinny Malay boy? My beauty is not only skin deep. Between my skin and whatever is inside, there is now muscle. [...] (Five.47)

According to E.-B.-Lim, “the visual representations of gayness in [Western] media are often concomitant with an erasure of individual identity, suggesting that a type forms part of a collective identity” (“Glocalqueering” 401). Muscle Boy’s development and later vitriol is in keeping with this view and can be read as an inevitable survivalist strategy in dealing with the rejection that he has suffered because of his race, especially by the majority Chinese population in Singapore. Muscle Boy, a significantly taller character, played by Mark Richmond in Dreamplay (2000) and Rodney Oliveiro in Dreamplay (2013), physically towers over the much smaller Boy, played by Hossan Leong in Dreamplay (2000) and Tan Sou Chen in Dreamplay (2013), in an assertion of power:

MUSCLE BOY: I must settle the score with each time someone on IRC stopped talking to me because I wasn’t his race. Now cheena babi, take me home! (Five.47)

Boy who is representative of the Chinese ethnic majority in Singapore is the “cheena babi” in this scene, against whom Muscle Boy directs his anger. Muscle Boy asserts his power through his physicality, fashioned from an appropriated image, having erased his individual identity. The scene further suggests,

37 “Cheena Babi” translates from the Malay as “Chinese pig”. It is a racial slur used by some Malays in Singapore to portray the majority Chinese as unclean because of their perceived predilection for eating pork and practice of not washing after defecation.
therefore, that the prevailing racial stereotypes and gay marginality frustrate the establishment of possible meaningful relationships, attempts at in-group acceptance and the construction of positive identities.

**Staging Dreamplay: Destabilising Spectator Positions**

The characters’ alienation is effectively portrayed by the staging of the pub scene, lit with blue lighting and the rhythmic dispersal of light from the mirror ball hanging from the ceiling of the performance space. The blue “colour of loneliness” (Ten.102) is appropriate in emphasising the different strands of alienation experienced by the gay men in the pub. I suggest that what Göran Stockenström refers to as Strindberg’s “Inferno mythology” is alluded to in this scene (82).³⁸ A Dream Play’s portrayal of the different types of suffering experienced by characters depending on their socio-economic and educational status, as if in a human inferno “to be punished and to atone for crimes committed in this or a previous existence” (82), is itself an allusion to the levels of human suffering and eternal repetition in Dante Alghieri’s *Inferno*. Strindberg arguably borrowed from the canonical text to describe his experience of mental instability and to work out his own feelings of guilt and persecution when envisaging his post-Inferno plays (Robinson xxiv; Stockenström 82).

According to Linda Rugg, Strindberg strove to stage “subjective reality” that produced different viewing positions for the audience:

> The audience does not occupy a privileged position; we do not stand outside the dream, but are lost with the characters in the confusion of symbols and inexplicable behaviour. (17)

Heng is similarly artful when he undermines the Singaporean spectator’s position throughout the staging of *Dreamplay* (2013), especially in “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.41-54). Indeed, the characters’ proxemics include only brief physical

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³⁸ *The Road to Damascus: A Trilogy* (1898, 1904), *A Dream Play* (1901) and *The Ghost Sonata* (1907) are plays that were written following a period of psychotic attacks that Strindberg dubbed his “Inferno crisis” (Robinson xxiv).
contact, if any at all, before the men aimlessly wander across the performance space, away from one another, so that the intended spectator's gaze moves with the lost, moving bodies on stage. In this way, Heng effectively portrays how the non-heteronormative man remains entrenched in reactionary identifications that alienate him even from within the queer community in this scene.

**The Species of the Wild(e) Effeminate Gay Man: Historicising The Bugis Street “Ah Qua” and “Orchard Road Queen”**

Whereas Muscle Boy is twice alienated through being doubly marked by his race and non-heteronormative sexuality, Bi-Boy is alienated by the fear of showing evidence of and positively exploring his same-sex attraction. Bi-Boy's alienation is due to the unavailability of positive non-binary representations or narratives, and the privileged version of masculinity in Singapore. He says:

**BI-BOY:** I could not fall in love with another man.

[...]

Because I am manly. I am top. I am tanned and toned. I am straight acting. I don't blow. I just fuck. On my body there are no open holes. There are no open wounds. Every session I have with a guy is a dream. A wet dream. I can wake up from it.

[...]

[...] When I first walked in, I felt people looking at me. So I held on tight to one of my dyke friends. I would not let go of her hand.

(Five.43-44)

Bi-Boy's apparent repudiation of having an emotional connection with another man is informed by the myth that the playwright, through Boy, dispels at the outset of the journey—that “all gay men are sissies” (Four.38), that is, effeminate. According to Fabio Cleto, the first referent for the modern (Western) homosexual-as-type was Oscar Wilde, whose “effeminate, aristocratic, ‘aesthetic’ posing [was] a sure sign of inner ‘degeneracy’” (“Queering the Camp” 13).
Effeminacy, then, becomes a performative sign for homosexuality, stigmatised at the moment of its stabilisation in modern discourse. Newton further contends that since “the effeminate man is the stigma bearer for gay men”, he occupies the lowest rung on the social hierarchy in the gay community (“Mythic Mannish” 560).

The Singapore transvestite/transsexual had undergone a similar derogation at the time of Dreamplay’s staging. Russell Heng gives an account of the visibility of transvestites and mostly pre-operative transsexuals along the infamous Bugis Street “in the heart of the city [CBD] where transvestite/transsexual prostitutes used to gather every evening to ply their trade” (81). While the predominantly Western clientele described the Bugis Street transvestites/transsexuals as “Beanie Boys” and “Kai Tais”, the locals used the term “ah qua” derived from the Chinese Fujian dialect. In a Wildean turn, the first time that homosexuality entered the local parlance as embodied in the Bugis Street “ah qua”, it “became a widely used pejorative term for all gay men” (R.H.K. Heng 81-82). The “Orchard Road Queen” soon emerged as a middle-class, higher educated corollary of the success of the Bugis Street sex-trade for foreign clientele. Gay men frequented the gay pubs that peppered Orchard Road, the locale of Singapore’s nascent tourist economy in the 1970s (82). Importantly, although the “Orchard Road Queen” was more affluent and globally mobile, able to leave Singapore with their Western partners for more politically open shores, Heng notes that the gay connections made were also “dominated by a very set and dichotomised ‘local-foreign/Asian-Caucasian/dominated-dominating/bitch-butch’ pattern of sexual pairing” (82). Akin to the Bugis Street “ah qua”, the “Orchard Road Queen” was marked by abject effeminacy.

Rejecting this abject status, Bi-Boy’s soliloquy above resonates with a fear of the loss of what he sees as a performance of virile masculinity, and he performs

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39 For the genealogy of “the discourses on the species and subspecies of homosexuality” and the stabilisation of the sign of the homosexual, see Foucault HoS: v1 History of Sexuality Vol. 1. He writes:

The […] homosexual became a personage, a past, case history, and a childhood, in addition to being a type of life, a life form, and a morphology, with an indiscreet anatomy and possibly a mysterious physiology […] The sodomite had been a temporary aberration, the homosexual was now a species. (HoS: v1 43)
the only version of masculinity legitimised by heteronormative cultural artefacts and State policies. Philip Holden argues that the “national masculinity” is reflective of Lee Kuan Yew’s idea of his own masculinity, in that it “stress[es] upon disciplinary practices applied to a male body as a metaphor for nationhood” (186). Daniel Goh summarises this “manliness [as] exemplified by oriental ruggedness, ethical self-discipline, austere severity and self-made entrepreneurialism that would ultimately serve the national interest” (“Hegemonic Masculinities” 146). It is a version of masculinity, however, that is incongruous to Bi-Boy’s queer sexuality and inhibits the exploration of his desire.

The intention of the play to undermine harmful stereotypes that mark the gay figure as abject is clarified with the introduction of the body of the “ah qua” or “pondan” into the performance space. Whereas the descendants of the middle-class “Orchard Road Queen” appear in “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.41-54), those of the Bugis Street “ah qua” are introduced as the Drag Queens in “The Beauty Pageant” (Two.2-28) and “Agnes Meets the Drag Queens” (Three.30-37). The four characters other than Agnes and Boy in these scenes are transsexual, and each of them desires a metamorphosis from “a caterpillar” [read: with a penis] into a butterfly [read: with a vagina]” (Three.33). Occurring before Agnes sets off on her guided journey, these two scenes successfully create a performative space for the first known local queer figure so important in Singaporean queer history, erased from the official State narrative when Bugis Street was redeveloped from the late 1970s to mid-1980s. In the play, they are

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40 The notion of Singapore’s “national masculinity” also underscores the State’s definition and implementation of the official role of the “head of household” (S.R. Quah 63; Yuen, Teo and Ooi 4; Glossary Household Expenditure 75) and the mandatory conscription of Singaporean men in NS, both of which will be further explored in later chapters.
41 “Pondan” translates from the Malay as “transsexual”. In the play text, “[p]ondan-pondan” is glossed as “[t]rannies” (Dreamplay, Three.37).
42 It is essential to stress that “drag queens” and “transsexuals” are separate identifications, despite the play’s seeming conflation or overlap of the two positions. They are not interchangeable terms.
43 The history of the Bugis Street transvestites and transsexuals is available only through anecdotal evidence, narrative fiction and film. See, for example, Bob from Australia “The Sailor’s Birthday Present”; R. Tan “Bugis Street: Transgender Aspects”; Yonfan Bugis Street; and more recently, Eckardt Singapore Girl. The only easily accessible official references to the Bugis Street transvestites/transsexuals were found in a few archived newspaper clippings (T.J. Yeo, Khoo and Lee) and a cursory description in Singapore Infopedia: “Bugis Street cabaret atmosphere [and] parade of transvestites” (Cornelius “Bugis Street”).
portrayed as crass and vulgar. For example, they tease Drag 4, “Miss Toa Payoh” (Three.32) for having a loose anal sphincter because she “screw[s] those black sailors”, and has now “become like wind tunnel already [so that] next time when the hand dryer not working, can use her backside” (Three.31) whenever she farts. They also refer to intercourse as “kangKANG” in their description of Drag 2’s “biSING” sexual antics (Three.33). Their crudeness is performative of the Drag Queens’ low economic and educational status highlighted in this scene:

DRAG 1: So, daughter of a god, big deal! So glamorous is it? Must yaya is it? I know lah, my father only taxi driver, that one [Drag 2] fishmonger, yours [Drag 1] postman, yours, what ah?

DRAG 4: Die already.

DRAG 1: Yah, all not so atas, like yours. Who are we ah? [...] (Three.31)

The identification with the working class sets the Drag Queens—and, implicitly, all the other gay identities in the scenes that follow—in opposition to the affluent, sheltered, authoritative figures like Agnes. More importantly, their presentation as sons of working-class Singaporean fathers is counterposed to the State’s focus on the “Western” (“cosmopolitan”, educated middle-class) derivation of queer sexualities. Arguably, a critique of the State’s apparent liberalisation to cater only to Singapore’s well-educated, “cosmopolitan” polity and global investors is implied in this scene. The Drag Queens identify as “heartlanders”—the conservative core of model citizens who espouse the stated Singaporean identity—and each is named after public housing estates in Singapore: Drag 1 is “Miss Bedok”; Drag 2 is “Miss Sengkang” (Three.33); Drag 3 is “Miss Katong”; and Drag 4 is “Miss Toa Payoh” (Three.32). Furthermore, reference is made to popular red light districts frequented by transsexual prostitutes along Orchard Road and outside of the CBD, where the Drag Queens,

44 “Kangkang” is glossed as “[t]o spread one’s legs wide open”; “bising” is glossed as “make noise” (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 278-279) or “noisy”.  
45 “Yaya” is glossed as Singlish for “[s]how off, boastful” (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 278).
having few available alternative sites of identification in mainstream Singaporean cultural artefacts, learn to “carry [themselves] with such poise[,] [...] elegance and grace” (Three.32):

DRAG I: [...] You have to make your rounds, start at Changi, sashay a bit, down to Geylang, pose, stop at Desker, pout, and do a turn. The whole stretch is your catwalk. (Three.32)\(^{46}\)

In this scene, their transsexual bodies are representative of the “heartlands” in Singapore, thus effectively queering the boundaries of national identity defined by the State (cf. C.T. Goh “PM’s NDR 1999”). “Ah quas” and working-class gay men continue to be abject in relation to the nation of Singapore, yet Dreamplay powerfully attests to their continued existence even amongst average Singaporeans purported to be model citizens, but marginalised by the State’s pursuit of its binary ideology.

Notably, the Drag Queens are not representative of the community that Agnes is sent to Singapore to help, which she learns when Boy is first introduced:

BOY: You have chosen the wrong targets. [...] Why do you think all gay men are women trapped in men’s bodies? (Four.38)\(^{47}\)

In this, I read the reference to the Drag Queens being “the wrong targets” as the playwright addressing the conflation of the transsexuals, marked by effeminacy and representative of the only local queer figure visible in mainstream Singaporean culture and public space at the time of Dreamplay’s (2000) staging, with “all gay men” (Three.38). More significantly, I contend that their inclusion is

\(^{46}\) The carpark at Changi Village is a well-known place for transvestites/transsexuals to ply their sex trade. Geylang and Desker Road form part of the red-light district in Singapore. Notably, these places are in addition to the CBD areas for prostitution, including Orchard Towers along Orchard Road.

\(^{47}\) It must be noted that this definition of “transgender” presented in Dreamplay is widely contested. See Transgender History for a summary of this debate (Stryker II).
pertinent to the project of the re-membrance of the marginalised gay figure in Singaporean history. In Dreamplay, this is operationalised by the performative shift from the alienating stereotype of the “ah qua” to the self-reflexively performed subjectivity of the Drag Queens.

Newton explains that “[o]ne of the main things that make gay men uncomfortable about drag queens is their visibility [that] has made them symbolise the potential vulnerability of all gays” (“Mythic Mannish” 560). Paradoxically, this is perhaps also the reason why “transvestism and transsexuality” are the only theatrical portrayals that had previously been permitted by the State (Peterson “Sexual Minorities” 69). According to Sandy Stone, “the highest purpose of the transsexual is to erase him/herself” (230). In the view of the patriarchal, homophobic State, the homosexual man in drag might therefore pose no real threat. Newton continues, “[O]n the other hand, it is also their inevitable visibility that makes “[drag queens] adopt and represent a stance of proud defiance” (“Mythic Mannish” 560). Instead of safely remaining within the phantasmic, camp abstract like the transvestite mermaid in the 2000 production’s collaterals (Figure 1-1), the Drag Queens in this scene make reference to their lived, marginal realities on the “streets” of the Singaporean “heartlands”, thus potentially destabilising the dominant cultural constructions that paradoxically glamorise and subalternise them as “uneven, incomplete production[s] of meaning and value” (Bhabha “Freedom’s Basis” 47). Dreamplay certainly portrays the Drag Queens’ irreverence towards Agnes’s deific status when they defy her criticism of them:

AGNES: [...] You are not real!
DRAG 1: The world does not want real, Agnes. We are more woman than woman. We can make love 30 days in a month.
DRAG 4: Women like us will never have big bellies.
DRAG 3: We will never have swollen ankles.
In this way, added to their socio-economic counterposition to the State is a corporeal and, thus, political defiance of prescriptive boundaries articulated in Agnes’ denunciation of their authenticity as “real” women (Three.34) through the performance of drag.

Writing of Wilde’s transgressive aesthetic in spite of the heteronormative naturalisation of the homosexual-as-type, Dollimore asserts that it

writes desire into a discourse of liberation inseparable from an inversion and displacement of dominant categories of subjective depth [...] [P]erverse desire is not only an agency of displacement, it is partly constituted by that displacement and the transgressive aesthetic which informs it. (223)

That is to say, by queering heteronormative cultural artefacts to perform homosexual desire that is, in the first place, rejected by the dominant order—specifically, the effeminate gay man—homosexual desire itself becomes an agency of displacement of dominant categories (Dollimore 223). This performative displacement that drag achieves reveals the constructedness of gender and other marginalising heteronormative discourses that Judith Butler postulates:

This perpetual displacement [of the law] constitutes a fluidity of identities that suggests an openness to resignification and recontextualisation; parodic proliferation deprives hegemonic culture and its critics of the claim to naturalized or essentialist gender identities. (Butler Gender Trouble 176)

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48 “Cheebye” is glossed as “[a] vulgar term referring to female genitalia” (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 279), or “cunt”. 

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DRAG 2: Never ever bleed from our antiseptic cheebyes.
In *Dreamplay*, heteronormative constructions of “woman”—as bodies that must be aesthetically pleasing, but that must endure pain and bleed in demonstration of their reproductive capacity—are parodied by the Drag Queens to reveal their arbitrary formulations and, more importantly, to displace their otherwise unquestioned status as “real”. This, Butler says, is always performative. As shown in the discussion of *Dreamplay* so far, it is precisely this displacement—a queer camp theatrical strategy—that *Dreamplay* employs to denaturalise oppressive State scripts. The Drag Queens are thus an important launching device for the camping of Singaporean history to include queer desire and other queer subjectivities in addition to the effeminate gay man, which is how Boy frames their quest in “Agnes Meets The Boy” (Four.38–41). He says: “You were sent down to help gay people” (Four.38). At this, the spectator is invited to anticipate the performance, and provisional acceptance, of other queer subjectivities in *Dreamplay*, namely, different types of Singaporean gay men throughout history.

“So where can we find these gay men?” (Agnes.4.39): Localising Gayness in Singapore

These subjectivities are performed in each of the scenes in the non-linear dramatic narrative of *Dreamplay* that is Agnes and Boy’s—and the spectator’s—journey. In addition to the paradigmatic reinscription of *A Dream Play*, the symbolic flag of American Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) pride, elements of *Aladdin* (Menken and Rice) and *Journey to the West*—originally a 16th century Chinese novel recounting the pilgrimage of a monk to the west of China, specifically, Central Asia and India—are also meaningfully reinscribed to further localise the experience of gay men through the displacement of Western heteronormative artefacts. Firstly, each of the scenes in *Dreamplay* is lit with different coloured general lighting symbolic of a colour that is paradoxically “missing” from the “six-coloured rainbow” (Four.39). For example, in “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub”, “the missing colour is blue […] the colour of the sea” (Five.41); in “Agnes and the Sexual Awakening”, “the rainbow’s missing colour [is] [r]ed. The colour of poppies” (Six.55); in “Agnes Visits the Japanese Occupation”, “green[,] [t]he colour of fear” lights the scene (Seven.71). Significantly, the
meanings ascribed to each colour of the rainbow differ from that of the American LGBT pride flag, furthering the playwright’s intent to (re)write a queer history that, as Lim argues,

considers the complex flows of queer realities as they are inflected, as in the case of Singapore, by multiculturalism, state policies, transnational capital, and regional, inter-Asian diasporic circuits and exchanges. (E.-B. Lim “Glocalqueering” 384)

Secondly, instead of Aladdin’s magic carpet, Boy and Agnes travel on a carpet from Ikea which Boy keeps in his satchel; and instead of the genie’s magic lamp, a vibrating dildo is the “magic staff” that provides direction for the duo’s journey, without which, Boy says, “[W]e are completely lost” (Four.39). Thirdly, the pair journey “[t]o the West! To the West!” (Four.41), alluding to the seminal Chinese text, but referring to Tanjong Pagar, one of the regions in the “heartlands” of Singapore in which several gay pubs may still be found. The reinscriptions of *Journey to the West* are relevant in the analysis of “Agnes Meets the Disciples” (Nine.94-99). The discussion will presently turn to the significance of this “magic staff”—a phallic object that reproduces the form of the penis—to the play’s provision of more relevant and positive sites of identification for the gay figure in Singapore.

Jacques Lacan introduces the phallus as a theoretical construct, nonetheless necessary for the realisation of subjectivity. According to Lacan, the phallus “is the [privileged] signifier that is destined to designate meaning effects as a whole, insofar as the signifier conditions them by its presence as signifier” (“Signification of the Phallus” 579). In other words, the point of entry of the subject into the Symbolic—the Lacanian system of language and cultural signs upon which subjectivity is contingent—is marked by the intervention of the phallus. Lacan further postulates that this entry into the Symbolic also inducts

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49 Boy’s exclamation could also be a reference to the song, “Go West”, popularised by the Village People (Morali, Belolo and Willis 1979) and the Pet Shop Boys (Morali et al. 1993). Both versions envisage a more welcoming land for alternative subjectivities and were performed in the camp mode.
the subject into desire (581), which is then constituted either by having the phallus or being the phallus, that is, respectively, being a (heterosexual) man or being a (heterosexual) woman; having a penis, or the lack thereof (582). In this configuration, it is the “Law of the Father” (who has the phallus) that produces the appearance of the phallus (582).

June L. Reich claims, however, that “[t]he phallus has too long been associated with being or not being the penis (this is heterosexism) [...] privileging [heterosexual] male constructions of desire” (257-258). In the place of the penis-as-phallus and the “Law of the Father”, Reich seeks to interrupt this hegemonic referentiality by proposing the dildo-as-phallus and the “Law of the Daddy Butch” to allow for non-heteronormative constructions of desire (260-261). With reference to the use of the dildo by lesbians, she further writes:

At its most radical, the dildo, as an equal-opportunity accessory, and as a simulacrum (an object circulating without origin), undermines the penis as a meaningfully stable organ, denaturalising the body without erasing its materiality. (261)

The vibrating dildo as it is used in Dreamplay is, therefore, yet another theatrical object of transgression. Presented as a dream, a product of the unconscious, Dreamplay implies the performance of a dreaming subject with a wish for signification. In Lacan’s psychoanalytic construction, the subject’s signification requires the intervention of the “Law of the Father”, or, the State that continues to deny cultural signification to certain marginalised bodies. Bearing Reich’s queering of the phallus in mind, however, the use of the dildo—Boy’s “magic staff” (Four.39)—as a gestural object in Dreamplay then becomes dramatically cogent on several levels. Firstly, the dildo-as-phallus in the hand of a man who already has the phallus disrupts the primacy of the penis-as-phallus and Lacanian configurations of desire, thereby dismantling heteronormative constructions of gender and sexuality. Secondly, the dildo mimics the privileged signifier and is wielded by (a gay) Boy. With this signifying device, the marginalised gay figure defies the sole signifying authority of the paternalistic State, that is, the “Law of
the Father”. In this sense, the ability to symbolically transgress his abject figuration is made available to the marginalised gay figure by *Dreamplay*.

Thirdly, in addition to its function as a signifying device, or, to put it another way, a writing tool of sorts in *Dreamplay*, the dildo is also an interpretive device for Agnes to be able to freely read the othered bodies whom she encounters beyond rigid heteronormative reading strategies. Importantly, as an othered body herself within the Singaporean context, the dildo-as-phallus also works to confer upon Agnes the active agency that is only available to her if she were to adopt a male perspective in Lacan’s formulation of desire (“Signification of the Phallus” 583), crucially, the national masculinity promulgated by the State.

**Agnes as the “nanny” State: Subjugating the Gay Figure**

Espousing Singapore’s national masculinity, Agnes in *Dreamplay* subverts the role of Agnes envisaged by Strindberg. Instead of a messianic figure of purity who is empathetic to the lives of the humans she is sent down from heaven to survey through role-play, Agnes initially plays an authoritative, interventionist role in relation to the marginalised figure of the gay man in Singapore:

AGNES: Just shut up and follow my instructions.

[Agnes issues instructions which the drags follow sharply but reluctantly.]

Repair broken wrists! Straighten your arms! Clench your fists! Do push-ups! Burpees! Situps! Pondanpondan cepat jalan! (Trans: Trannies, start marching!)

[All the four drags start marching]

(Three.37)

In the above scene, the goddess “curses” the Drag Queens (Three.36) to adopt heteronormative gender performance scripts in contradiction to their own. Her declaration to want to “help” them is undermined when she uses her power to “make human beings freeze in time” (Three.35) to bend them to her will.
Significantly for the Singaporean audience, Agnes forces the Drag Queens to perform her orders as they march and run physical drills that allude to the military drills of NS. In *Dreamplay* (2000; 2013), the Drag Queens’ faces are masks of fear and horror; their voices are shaky and emotionally distraught, while their bodies are as puppets performing the scripts of the national masculinity. In this parody, the cruelty that the Drag Queens have to endure under the futile, yet oppressive, force of compulsory heteronormative scripts in Singapore is cast in sharp relief for the spectator, who might then, with Agnes, be more open to the alternative gender scripts that follow in the play. As a complement to the publicity collaterals of both productions of *Dreamplay*, the manipulation of the Drag Queens’ bodies by Agnes’ magic is efficacious. It subverts previously unquestioned positions of power and abjection by (dis)locating the usually central authoritative power—that of Agnes as the State—to a position that is often occupied by the queer figure. This deferred position is that which is wholly Other. Hence, by the end of her journey with Boy, it becomes apparent that it is her character whose physical and psychical metamorphosis the play’s dramatic narrative intends to effect.

Agnes’ metamorphosis is foreshadowed in the publicity collaterals of both productions of *Dreamplay* (2000; 2013), but especially so for the more recent staging of the play. The text on the publicity poster for *Dreamplay* (2013) is rendered in textured gold font against the flamboyantly styled, white hair of the painted face of Agnes (Figure 1-4). This golden face is decked in sparkling gems, presumably diamonds, with a central forehead appliqué called a “bindi” in the Hindi language. Traditionally worn between the eyebrows, at the point that designates the sixth chakra known as “agna”, the bindi is said to retain the body’s energy. It is important to note that while Daughter in Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* is a Christ-figure (Johnson “Introduction to *A Dream Play”* 9) that the playwright orientalises (Johnson “Notes on *A Dream Play*” 87), Alfian’s Vedic goddess is visually and corporeally reclaimed as an Asian deity in both productions of *Dreamplay* (2000; 2013). Furthermore, Strindberg might have chosen the name of Agnes for the god Agni’s role as “mediator between gods and men” (Johnson, “Notes on *A Dream Play*” 88). Yet, as befitting Alfian’s endeavour to incorporate
Singapore’s transnational influences into the construction of Singaporean gay identities by parodying heteronormative texts, I note that Agnes’ name also recalls the Christian “Agnus Dei”, meaning “Lamb of God”. The name of the goddess Agnes in Dreamplay, possibly also a derivative of “agna” meaning “command” in Sanskrit, could be reinterpreted as endowing Agnes with characteristics of wisdom, creation and command. Clearly, the character of Agnes is both analogous to the State and as a mediator between the State and the Singaporean gay figure. This analogy is suggested several times in the play.

In “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.41-54), she becomes, in turn, the incarnation of The Madonna of Christianity, Kuan Yin of Taoism, Saloma, a popular local diva who sings Malay songs, and Saraswati of Hinduism. She “award[s] prizes” to each of the gay men in the pub, along with advice to relinquish their homosexual desires and submit, instead, to filial piety, inaction, shame and old age: to Lonely Boy, Agnes “[a]s the Madonna” gives a plasticine doll with a reminder that “[his] father is old” (Five.51); to Bi Boy, Agnes “[a]s Kuan Yin” gives a coaster with the number 69 printed on it, a symbol of “Yin and Yang” (and, playfully, mutual fellatio), instructing him to “[s]tare at it[,] [c]ontemplate the meaning of Tao” and remember that “unnatural desire will lead to unnatural suffering” (Five.51); to Muscle Boy, Agnes “[a]s Saloma gives a “goreng pisang”, 50 telling him that “[h]e must get back to [h]is roots” and highlighting the importance of his repentance (Five.52); and finally, to Old Boy, Agnes “[a]s Saraswati” gives a pair of gloves to remind him of the fragility of the young men in the gay pub (Five.52-53).

In Dreamplay (2013), stock images of these religious and popular female icons are flashed onto a screen behind Agnes during the “prize-giving ceremony” (Five.50), thus queering their religious significance. In juxtaposing religious and pop icons with incongruous prizes awarded in a (gay, therefore, sacrilegious) pub, Alfian and Heng continue to parody the arbitrary construction of heteronormative symbols and authoritative dispensations of directives by the State and its institutions that do not attempt to establish tolerance for their (gay)

50 “Goreng pisang” translates from the Malay as “fried banana”, a popular, savoury Malay snack in Singapore.
citizenry. Furthermore, the staging delivers a poignant portrayal of the elided identities consistently unable to find adequate signifiers in existing heteronormative texts: the characters in this scene are here reduced to identifying with meaningless, non-representative objects. Mere trifles similar to “toys” are doled out by a “nanny” State (Nine.98) to placate rather than nurture the gay men in the scene, as their marginalised existence is flippantly dismissed by Agnes.

**Agnes as Diva: Affirming the Dynamic Subjectivity of the Gay Figure**

It can certainly be argued that as a result of the many obstacles that gay men face depicted in previous scenes, in “Agnes Meets the Disciples” (Nine.94-99), the gay men express their desire to conform to the expectations of a heteronormative society because, as the character of Sandy says, “Being gay is very confusing” (Nine.96). Two of the characters in this scene, Sandy and Pigsy, have names that allude to the popular television show, *Monkey* (1978-1980), acquired by the British Broadcasting Corporation and dubbed in English from the original Japanese, which was, in turn, a filmic adaptation of the Chinese *Journey to the West* by Wu Cheng-en (c. 1592). White Horse, on the other hand, especially as it pertains to constructions of national masculinity, bears some significance for the Singaporean audience. The term, acknowledged for the first time by then Minister of State for Defence Cedric Foo in response to a question posed to him in Parliament, had long been rumoured “to identify sons of influential persons” who were then “supposedly getting special treatment during their National Service” (qtd. in D. Loh). In *Dreamplay*, White Horse echoes this rumour when he introduces himself:

**WHITE HORSE:** I chose the nick White Horse because that is what my army platoonmates call me. My father is a you-know-who. So often during
training the sergeants pan-chan me
a bit.\(^{51}\) (Nine.94)

White Horse’s inclusion in this scene and his account of his time in NS qu(e)eries the construction of the national masculinity. Assuming that the award for “Platoon Best” in Officer Cadet School (Nine.97) was won through his own efforts, White Horse demonstrates an ability to meet the expectations the State has for its male citizens, his gayness notwithstanding. Moreover, White Horse’s implicit status as a gay, nepotically protected son of a member of the PAP lies in contradistinction to the only available and othered representations of the gay figure aligned with Western ideals and desires. Therefore, instead of as representative of the national masculinity and the political elite, it is possible to consider White Horse in juxtaposition with the abject bodies of the Drag Queens of working-class fathers earlier discussed. As a visitor to an Internet Relay Chatroom (IRC), which the didascalia describes as being “[l]ike at a meeting for Alcoholics Anonymous” (Nine.94), White Horse is compelled to obfuscate his sexuality as a consequence of the limited alienating stereotypes circulated by the State, despite his privileged class status. Importantly, it is within cyberspace that the Singaporean gay man is able to interact with other gay-identified Singaporean men, permitting the intersubjective relations that sustained the development of a gay community in Singapore and consequently, made way for more opportunities for positive local gay identities (R.H.K. Heng 92-93). Appropriately, cyberspace is the final sojourn on Boy and Agnes’ journey.

Sandy, Pigsy and White Horse introduce themselves in an IRC and are invited by Agnes to “tell us [their] problems” (Nine.95). Critically, the staging is a subversive parody of the religious conversion therapy sessions advocated by the Christian Right\(^{52}\) in Singapore: in a circle, the gay men are on their knees in supplication to Agnes, who stands in the middle of the circle and listens to their

\(^{51}\) “Pan chan” is glossed as slang for “Give a chance” (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy 282), or put another way, to give someone latitude.

\(^{52}\) The impact of the Christian Right on the progress of the queer community to gain recognition in Singapore is more fully portrayed in Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3 and will be further discussed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.
confessions of homosexuality. Heng lights the performance space with a dim, mustard yellow, simulating an aura of religious overtones in this scene (Dreamplay 2013). Though semiotically distinctive, this staging is an echo of the parodic prize-giving ceremony in “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.50-53; Dreamplay 2013). Whereas Agnes has thus far been a mimetic portrayal of proscribing authority, the different tenor of this scene’s staging anticipates the change in Agnes’s attitude towards gay men in Singapore. Rather than meaningless, flattened icons, a ring of white, empowering text is shone onto the floor, illuminating the group seated at centrestage. Contrary to her earlier position that “unnatural desire will lead to unnatural suffering” (Five.51), having listened intently to the characters’ confessions, Agnes poignantly realises that theirs “are universal problems. They are not gay problems” (Nine.98). In this way, the obstacles that the gay man may face are reframed as problems shared by the average Singaporean. The spectator is interpellated, firstly, as equally responsible for supporting gay men in the expression of their same-sex desire, and secondly, as part of the same Singaporean society of which the gay man is part.

In her roles as the manifold deity in “Agnes Enters a Gay Pub” (Five.41-54) and as the interrogator in “Agnes Visits the Interrogation Room” (Eight.85-93), Agnes performs the proscribing and punitive State. In this penultimate scene, however, as if transmogrified by her engagement with various gay subjectivities in the queered locations of the play, Agnes takes on the role of “a goddess, and not [the gay man’s] nanny” (Nine.98). This change in Agnes’s position could be a manifestation of the wish pictured in the publicity poster for Dreamplay (2013), where Agnes (as the State) understands and empowers the different gay men pictured as Singaporean citizens, rather than as the State’s abject figure (Figure 1-4). In a nurturing and presenting gesture, Agnes holds the titular Asian Boys in the cup of her hands. Significantly, her eyes are closed and she wears a tender smile directed at the group of men, implying her withholding of judgment, and conceivably, acceptance of the gay characters of the play, an exhortation possibly made of the prospective spectator of Dreamplay (2013).
Inhabiting this new position, Agnes shares “[t]he secret to happiness” with the gay men (Nine.98), which is the empowering chant projected in white light onto the floor of the stage:

![Image of Dreamplay performance]

*Figure 1-7: Dreamplay 2013 still of Agnes reaffirming the gay men in “Agnes Meets the Disciples”. (WILD RICE Ltd.)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGNES:</th>
<th>Repeat after me. “I will not find heaven in an orgy room.”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>SANDY, PIGSY &amp; WHITE:</td>
<td>I will not find heaven in an orgy room.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGNES:</td>
<td>I will not find hell on an empty bed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANDY, PIGSY &amp; WHITE:</td>
<td>I will not find hell on an empty bed.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGNES:</td>
<td>There is no goddess in the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANDY, PIGSY &amp; WHITE:</td>
<td>There is no goddess in the sky.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGNES:</td>
<td>There is no other goddess but I.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SANDY, PIGSY &amp; WHITE:</td>
<td>There is no other goddess but I.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*[Agnes blesses each one in turn with her magic mirror. Upon seeing their own reflections the disciples break into smiles. They exit.]* (Nine.99)
The chant reminds the gay men to accept themselves in order to find happiness, and warns against what Dyer argues is the pursuit of pleasure at the risk of self-hating and the effacement of subjectivity (111) and also against the threat of alienation that divides the queer community portrayed in the play. Agnes’s recuperated empathetic point of view results in an affirmation of their various subjectivities rather than rehabilitation to heteronormativity, thereby rejecting the injunction on the gay man to change his object of desire. As the last site of queer possibility of Agnes’s and Boy’s quest, the affirmation of the gay man’s different subjectivities and homosexuality is achieved through the use of the mirror, which I argue recalls the Lacanian entry into the Symbolic Order (Lacan “Mirror Stage” 75-79).

In Lacan’s “Mirror Stage”, the formation of the subject’s identity is initiated in a (mis)recognition of the mirror-image of the child as the “I”, which the child then strives unsuccessfully to embody. If the phallus were the privileged signifier in Dreamplay, there might be little, if anything, the gay man could do to perform as an autonomous subject. However, it is not the “Law of the Father” that inducts Dreamplay’s gay men into the language and culture that constitute their subjectivities, but the “Law of the Diva” through Agnes, with the assistance of Boy’s “magic staff” in this case. Suggesting that for gay men in Singapore, even (mis)recognition is impossible due to the unavailability of non-heteronormative cultural artefacts, Dreamplay arguably queers Lacan’s mirror-stage by providing a multitude of queer images and subjectivities that the viewing gay subject can then choose to embody. In so doing, heteronormative imperatives implied by the dominant order are demystified and make way for queer deviation. Taking this argument further, I suggest that Dreamplay may hence be read as the Lacanian mirror itself, firstly, held up to the gay man who can, then, (mis)recognise himself. Indeed, Agnes holds a mirror up to each of the gay men, who “break into smiles”, arguably from (mis)recognition and self-affirmation (Figure 1-7). Secondly, Dreamplay as a mirror is also held up to the Singaporean heteronormative spectator who hopefully beholds the portrayals of their complicity with the marginalisation of the gay figure in Singapore.
Conclusion: “You have to let people be gay in the way that’s best for them” (Dyer 111)

Following this scene of acknowledgement, Agnes finally apprehends and, importantly, shares the pain felt by the gay figure’s lack of positive signification in Singapore. At this, the goddess spends two minutes sobbing miserably (Dreamplay 2000; 2013). Having set out to “save mankind” (Three.33, Four.38), Agnes mournfully discovers that she cannot, in fact, “show them the way to true happiness” (One.30). This realisation of the error of her interventionist, castigatory stance and subsequent transmogrification effected by Scene Nine of the play can be interpreted as a wish-fulfilment fantasy of the State’s analogous altered figuration from prohibitive and punitive to accepting and nurturing of its gay citizenry.

Additionally, according to Dyer, one of the most important functions of camp style is to “demystify the images and world-view of art and media [...] by playing up the artifice by means of which such things [...] retain their hold” (113, 115). I have argued that this is accomplished by Dreamplay in its dismantling and reinscription of heteronormative cultural artefacts. Although Dyer celebrates the camp style as “a form of self-defence [that] kept, and keeps, a lot of gay men going” (110), he also warns of the adverse effects that dismissing serious political oppression and activism for change has on gay men. He asserts that camp can also trap us if we are not careful in the endless pursuit of enjoyment at any price, in a rejection of seriousness and depth of feeling (Dyer III). Bearing Dyer’s warning in mind then, Agnes’ crying may be perceived as a transformation because, as a consequence of the camp strategy deployed by the play, humour transforms. This may well signal an invitation to the heteronormative spectator to be cognizant of the pain and seriousness behind the camp pleasure of excess, evocative of audience laughter throughout both productions. In Dreamplay (2000; 2013), the camp pleasure of the spectator is interrupted with the portrayal of Agnes’ prolonged, mournful wail, thereby allowing enough time for the spectator to possibly apprehend the extra-theatrical situation: that the State has not, indeed, been transmogrified with Agnes on stage. Agnes’s melodramatised
performance here also undermines any assertions that the play is merely a “happy joy ride” (*Dreamplay* 2000 Publicity Collaterals). It is “heartwrenching” (Loh and Tan).

Boy’s physical decline throughout the play further arrests the spectator’s visual and vicarious access to pleasure gained from consuming the carnivalesque spectacle. Beginning from age 17 in Scene Four, Boy realises he is already 60 years old in Scene Nine, having “spent [his] life following [Agnes], hoping that [she would] teach [him] something” (Nine.99). At the outset of their journey, the goddess had tricked Boy into using a tiara to force him to do what she had demanded of him (Four.40), which prevented Boy from forming relationships and finding companionship while he played the role of her guide. A parodied symbol of the malicious disciplinary devices deployed by the State—the cane and, paradoxically, through the Western images of gayness in circulation at the time—the tiara is a parallel to the “crown of thorns” that Daughter places on the Lawyer’s head in recognition of his altruism (Strindberg *A Dream Play* 38). In this sense, the tightening tiara conveys the dilemma of the Singaporean gay man. In a context that only allows the economically pragmatic (“Western”) performance of homosexuality, Boy’s identification with the tiara as a metaphor for his homosexuality, a camp symbol of the Divas whom he worships, necessarily causes him suffering at the hands of the State. By these means, *Dreamplay* points to how the openly gay Boy and other(ed) Asian Boys in the play are persecuted as they are portrayed as survivors of an oppressive dominant order. In the dreamscape of the play, however, Boy is given another chance by Agnes.

Empowered with empathy instead of the whip (*Dreamplay* 2000) and axe (*Dreamplay* 2013) of brute force in Scene Eight, Agnes is visibly altered in “Agnes Blesses The Boy” (Ten.99-104). At the play’s denouement, she stands illuminated in soft, white lighting, conveying her elucidation and subsequent transmogrification (*Dreamplay* 2013). Visibly recognisable as a woman of a racial minority marginalised as well in the Singaporean context, the performer as Agnes the Diva is similarly reinscribed with the authority of the dildo-as-phallus when the character facilitates the affirmation of the gay men’s subjectivities at the end of the previous scene. In this incarnation, the goddess removes the tiara/head
clamp torture device from Boy’s head, which then allows him the opportunity to make his own choices. Boy says:

BOY: Let me find out for myself. I know I will suffer. I know life will not be easy. But I want to make that journey to the end of the rainbow. [...] (Ten.103)

Boy’s words resonate with the hope and desire underscoring Dreamplay, that is, that the “Asian Boys” in Singapore have autonomy to identify with varied, positive gay representations and perform dynamic subjectivities within a dream of Singapore. Notwithstanding this, an acceptance of the difficulties and pain that inhere in the experience of the gay man is also made apparent here, which I argue adds to the performance efficacy of Dreamplay. As Howard Barker proposes, “[i]t is pain that the audience needs to experience, and not contempt. We have a theatre of contempt masquerading as comedy” (31).

Indeed, this pain is conveyed in Dreamplay (2000) at the play’s close. The performers are spread out across the stage in silence, their right arms raised as if reaching towards the audience while Ella Fitzgerald’s rendition of Cole Porter’s “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” scores the scene. In 2000, the song is appropriate. Dreamplay’s dreamscape and camp strategy had permitted the tentative appearance of the gay figure on the Singaporean stage. The performers’ outstretched arms represent an appeal to the Singaporean spectator to recognise, as Agnes has, the subjectivities and pain portrayed before the performers had to retreat into the darkness of the theatre. Though the play remains relevant at the time of its staging in 2013 (Director’s Message “Dreamplay 2013 Publicity Collaterals”), as suggested by the much more localised depictions in the 2013 production’s publicity collaterals, the struggle of the gay man and the queer community in Singapore has changed to some extent. In the closing scene of Dreamplay (2013), all the players enter the presentational space dressed in white and dance to Gloria Gaynor’s performance of “I Will Survive” (1978). Using a recognisable gay anthem, this latter production encourages the spectator to
celebrate with the marginalised characters on stage and also with the queer community in Singapore. The closing scene conveys not a departure as in Dreamplay (2000), but, rather, an embarkation. Dressed in the white of the main political party, the performers hold a subversive rally in support of the recognition of the subjectivities portrayed in the play.

Furthermore, the celebratory song creates a circular reference to the verses recited during the birth of the Foucauldian “homosexual species” in the logic of the play (Six.58, 60, 63, 68). In this way, the passive-combatative performance of the verses by Ah Seng in “Agnes and the Sexual Awakening” (Six.54-70), coincident with the first days of modern Singapore, is chronologically linked to the defiant celebration in contemporary Singapore despite the reality of continuing State proscription (Dreamplay 2013). Included in the parody of the textual and political influences, therefore, is a bold claim on a space for the Singaporean gay man within the history that informs the stated idea of the nation and is, in fact, perhaps even representative of Singapore’s contemporary transnational exchanges. The playwright’s project of camping and reinscribing heteronormative artefacts in Dreamplay extends to key events in Singapore’s (queer) historical and political narrative and from any one of Singapore’s transnational influences in Asia and the West, appropriately constructing a more fluid, dynamic set of identitarian script(s) for the Singaporean gay man.

In this chapter, I have shown through the play’s portrayal of alternative sites of identification achieved in the play’s queering of popular heteronormative cultural artefacts and history, the gay subject and the implied spectator have not just been told, but shown a myriad of local ways of performing gay. Dreamplay might then be a means towards enabling the interpellation of the marginalised gay figure vis-à-vis an imagined Singaporean history wherein choice and agency are restored, at least temporarily on the space of the stage. In the following chapter, the discussion turns to the queering of the Singaporean spatial landscape in Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2.
You who never Arrived
in my arms, Beloved,
who were lost
from the start,
I don’t even know what songs
would please you. I have given up trying
to recognise you in the surging wave of
the next moment. All the immense
images in me – the far-off, deeply-felt
landscape, cities, towers, and bridges, and
unsuspected turns in the path,
and those powerful lands that were once
pulsing with the life of the gods –
all rise within me to mean
you, who forever elude me.
(Rilke Excerpt qtd. in “Playwright’s Message”
“Landmarks Publicity Collaterals”)

“We know where they are.” (PM H.L. Lee): The Socio-Political Context of Landmarks (2004)

In response to queries as to the provenance of the title of the first instalment of The Asian Boys Trilogy, Alfian Sa’at clarified that it was chosen because it had “punch” (“Interview with Alfian”) and bore the “sexy” (“Feature: Alfian”) pornographic connotations that director Jeff Chen (Dreamplay 2000) envisaged as part of the presentation of the play. The playwright adds, “[Asian Boys] also had this Orientalist ring to it which I could subvert” (“Feature: Alfian”). As I have argued, the subversive and transgressive techniques inherent in the camp staging of Dreamplay are indeed efficacious in delivering the playwright’s critique of the proliferation of Western gay cultural artefacts in Singapore. This is notwithstanding that in the previous chapter, I proposed that Dreamplay (Alfian Sa’at) could be viewed as a parallel to Michel Foucault’s The History of Sexuality Vol. I: An Introduction, in that the play traces and re-members the gay figure within Singaporean history to queer the hegemonic nominalisation of the
“homosexual [Singaporean] species” (Foucault HoS: v1 43). However, the parallel drawn between Alfian’s second volume of The Asian Boy’s Trilogy and Foucault’s History of Sexuality is barely tenable. Excepting the play’s portrayal of the consequences of the dominant order’s anxieties towards homosexuality also dealt with in The Uses of Pleasure, the analogy must be abandoned, especially as the Western heteronormative text ceases to be relevant by Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3, which I discuss in the next chapter. Instead, in the publicity collaterals for Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2, Alfian references part of the first stanza of the poem that begins this chapter by Rainer Maria Rilke to explain his motivations for writing the play.

“You Who Never Arrived” (Rilke) resonates with the concerns of Landmarks. As its poetic subject is “[b]eloved” (Rilke 2) yet “forever elude[s]” (15) the speaker, so does an inclusive Singaporean State elude the marginalised gay figure. Pertinently, Rilke’s poetic subject is constantly available, yet always unapproachable and fleeting in every place that the speaker looks, so that the speaker is always shifting, moving through and between places in search of his/her “Beloved”. The shifting position of the marginalised gay figure, “lost/from the start” (3-4), is similarly portrayed in Landmarks as the play deals with how the attendant State proscriptions are negotiated in the public, private and intersubjective spaces of Singaporean society. As the playwright explains:

In addition to physical terrain, LANDMARKS is also an exploration of other spaces: breathing spaces, spaces between bodies, that metaphorical space we all fight for in a land where even the bedroom has been deprived of its privacy and sanctity. (“Playwright’s Message” “Landmarks 2004 Publicity Collaterals”)

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53 Foucault’s work, which focuses on the West, is also a series of three volumes, including The Uses of Pleasure (1985) and The Care of the Self (1988). These next two volumes study corporeal pleasures and hegemonic moral intervention in the sexual experience, leading to the consequences of contemporary anxieties of sexual pleasure.

54 References to the dramatic text will hereafter be to Landmarks, appended with the respective order of the vignettes and page numbers. Where I discuss elements of the performance text only, I refer to Landmarks 2004. Note that the play-script does not number each vignette, and I adopt the ordered numbering reflected in the publicity collaterals for Landmarks 2004 for convenience. Video-recording of Landmarks 2004 viewed onsite, with permission from W!LD RICE.
By staging this exploration of gay spaces within, between and, importantly, in relation to the Singaporean physical, psychical, social and national landscapes, I suggest that *Landmarks* not only engages with the otherwise silenced relationships between gay lovers in Singapore, but also with the spatial discourse of the Singaporean gay body. In this sense, the play more substantively alludes to *A Lover’s Discourse* (Barthes *Fragments*) that Alfian cites as one of his inspirations for *Dreamplay* (Loh and Tan “Dreamplay 2000 Publicity Collaterals”). Moreover, the postmodern, fragmentary discourse in Barthes’ text is appropriately adopted in *Landmarks* as it stages the (re/dis)location of the marginalised gay figure by queering the Singaporean spatial landscape.

For the purposes of this chapter, the previously cited pastoral metaphor deployed in Tay Eng Soon’s warning to theatre practitioners in 1992 becomes significant. In Tay’s speech, Singapore is signified as a potentially flourishing landscape where “blossoms [should] be beautiful and wholesome”, whereas the homosexual figure is marked as a blight on the “still […] traditional” spatial imaginary; that is, as unwanted, “prickly pears or weeds” (qtd. in R. Lim 8). Ironically, while the criminalisation of homosexual practices makes public the sexual relations between men, Tay insists that Singaporean society desires the strict separation of the private from the public. That is to say, through its policing of the practices and subjective discourse of sexual minorities, the State forecloses any assertion of subjectivity through public engagement, while it simultaneously imposes oppressive controls in the private sphere.

Furthermore, having dismissed “homosexual rights” as particular to the West and not a concern of Asia on the international stage in 1993 (K.S. Wong “Real World of Human Rights”), Foreign Minister Wong Kan Seng more recently expressed the State’s millennial economically pragmatic stance in 2009. Despite asserting the State’s acceptance of the “heterosexual stable family [as] the norm and the building block of [Singapore] society”, he affirmed that “homosexuals […] have a place in our society and are entitled to their private lives” (qtd. in Human Rights Resource Centre 466). As with Tay before him, Wong relies on spatial metaphors to demarcate the boundaries that limit the identification of the gay figure in relation to Singapore. In the same response to media queries on the
question of homosexual rights in Singapore brought to the fore in the AWARE controversy, which I will expand upon further in the next chapter, Wong nevertheless advised sexual minorities not to

assert themselves stridently as gay groups do in the West [and] import into Singapore the culture wars between the extreme liberals and conservatives that are going on in the United States. (qtd. in Human Rights Resource Centre 466; Obendorf 107)\(^\text{55}\)

In this Manichean logic espoused by the State, where Singapore’s morally superior “Asian values” are favourably juxtaposed against “Western decadence” (Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 5), the essentialised, ‘good’, “Asian” “Singaporean” must be reproductively heterosexual. Tacit in this, according to Simon Obendorf, is the reinforcement of the homosexual as essentially foreign, “always already alien” to the Singaporean national imaginary and thus a threat to the continued political order that has won economic prosperity for Singaporeans (107). Against the backdrop of this national, heterosexist rhetoric, The Asian Boys Trilogy, Eng-Beng Lim rightly claims, “undercut[s] the monolithic assumptions that make the city-state ‘Asian’ and ‘Singaporean’ by adding queer time, queer thought, and queer space in the mix” (“Queering S’pore” 22).

In the ensuing years following Dreamplay, it would appear that Alfian’s “dream” of the visibility of the Singaporean gay man had begun to be realised. This visibility was affirmed in an article in The Straits Times, which stated, “Plays on homosexuality have been the latest rage in local theatres and drawing in the audience” (“Homosexuality: The New Rage in Local Theatres?” 4 Aug. 2003: A15 qtd. in E.-B. Lim “Mardi Gras Boys” 300). In the same year, Simon Elegant observed the State’s acknowledgement of the need for a more independent and innovative local workforce and foreign talent as a defence against the global

\(^{55}\) Here, Wong is referring to the adversarial legal battles and rising tensions between gay advocacy and conservative, especially Christian evangelical, groups in the United States of America (USA). When Wong was speaking in 2009, Connecticut, Iowa, Vermont, Maine and New Hampshire had passed legislation allowing same-sex marriage. For a history of the same-sex marriage debate and legislation in the USA, see National Conference of State Legislatures “Same-Sex Marriage Laws: History (USA)”. 81
economic downturn and exodus of educated Singaporeans to more liberal countries. To achieve this, “repressive government policies previously enforced in the name of social stability [were] being relaxed” (Elegant “Lion in Winter”). Elegant further cited the burgeoning number of economic establishments—saunas and dance clubs, in particular—that exclusively target the gay demographic as evidence of the State’s apparent liberalisation. Most significantly in 2003, the year before *Landmarks* (2004) was staged, then incumbent PM Goh’s public announcement of the State’s newfound acceptance of gay civil servants, even in high-ranking, sensitive positions, indicated a direction towards an ever-more inclusive Singapore in the new millennium. Announcing this landmark policy direction, Goh added:

So let it evolve, and in time the population will understand that some people are born that way. [...] We are born this way and they are born that way, but they are like you and me. (qtd. in Elegant “Lion in Winter”)

Although Goh’s now oft-cited comment maintains the State’s familiar othering of sexual minorities in relation to mainstream Singaporeans through a “we” versus “they” dialectic, the stark and positive change in the portrayal of sexual minorities towards inclusion is evident. Obendorf also lists the international recognition of the State’s newfound ostensible tolerance for sexual minorities in Singapore with specific reference to the changes observed in the Singaporean landscape, and it is worth quoting here at length. He writes:

A sophisticated and self-confident community of queer consumers inhabited the streets and shopping malls of Singapore’s urban space. Gay and lesbian festivals and dance parties were regular occurrences, discotheques, bars and night-clubs provided social spaces for queers, lesbian and gay characters and issues were commonplace on the stages of Singapore’s new creative arts venues, [...] and a range of sex-on-premises venues designed to facilitate male homosexual encounters were dotted about the island. (103)
Obendorf correctly points out, however, that the specious possibilities for queer visibility were limited to the queer community’s contribution to the economic globalisation of the State. In other words, sexual minorities in Singapore are only acknowledged for their potential to generate tourist capital by value-adding to the cosmopolitan identity that the State exports.

The contradictions that inhere in the State’s stance of desire/derision towards sexual minorities are repeatedly addressed throughout *Landmarks*. For example, Gordon in “Supper at Maxwell” (1.2.117-124) jokes that he is tired of going to bars where a common sight is “[t]wo guys making out beside a sign saying, ‘No Kissing No Hugging’” (1.2.118)—a tongue-in-cheek indication of the State’s acknowledgement of its queer citizenry, yet subsequent proscription even in designated gay places of consumption. Similarly, in “California Dreaming” (1.3.133-144), Jin Han chides Eugene [Jeff] and Leon for their celebration of the State’s alleged liberalisation.56 He explicates the acquiescence of the gay community to the continued oppressions of section 377A that symbolically excludes them from the Singaporean mainland when they indulge in the consumerist and performative excesses of the Nation Day parties permitted on the offshore island of Sentosa. The State’s writing on the body of the marginalised gay figure as a commercial engine and the consequences thereof are also portrayed in “My Own Private Toa Payoh” (2.3.163-172), the title alluding to *My Own Private Idaho*, a filmic reimagining of William Shakespeare’s *Henry IV* (*My Own Private Idaho*). In this vignette, two “rent boys” might be read as the inevitable products of the State’s depiction and production of sexual minorities, where the bodies of the two characters are objectified as sites of capitalist production.

Critically for my argument, the maintenance of this tension between permissiveness and surveillance of the State’s sexual citizenry in the public and private spheres is generally established *spatially*. During the debate on the abolition of Section 377A (which failed to pass), notably following the staging of

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56 The play-script of *Landmarks* names Eugene as a 28-year-old “dedicated circuit boy” (1.4.133). In the video recording of *Landmarks* (2004), however, Jeff is named with Jin Han and Leon and speaks the same lines given to Eugene in the play-script. I will hereafter refer to Jeff for convenience. Where Eugene’s speech parts are quoted from the dramatic text, the marginal entry will refer to [Jeff] in brackets.
Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3, the then and current PM Lee Hsien Loong emphasised the demarcation of queer and Singaporean space in his concluding Parliamentary address:

So there is space, but there are limits. De facto, gays have a lot of space in Singapore. Gay groups hold public discussions. They publish websites. There are films and plays on gay themes. There are gay bars and clubs. They exist. We know where they are. We do not harass gays and we do not proactively enforce section 377A on them. (“Lee: Parliamentary Debates re 377a”)

Here, it can certainly be argued that the Prime Minister exaggerates the extent of queer visibility in Singapore in 2007, and adds to his seemingly innocuous comment, the promise of panoptic surveillance. PM Lee echoes his father, Minister Mentor (MM) Lee Kuan Yew, who earlier that same year also highlighted this spatial management of queer visibility in Singapore. MM Lee said:

They tell me and anyway it is probably half-true that homosexuals are creative writers, dancers, et cetera. If we want creative people, then we [have] got to put up with their idiosyncrasies so long as they don’t infect the heartland. (qtd. in Yin and Chiang)\(^\text{57}\)

In the same breath that Lee grudgingly acknowledges the possible economic pragmatism in “put[ting] up with” gay people, he deploys an essentialising gay stereotype that confines the Singaporean gay figure into an identitarian space that may supplement, but does not drive, the economic progress that is so much a part of the stated Singaporean identity. This gay figure is, as previously argued, marked with Wildean characteristics as “creative writers, dancers, et cetera”. Immediately following this, Lee qualifies queer space as not just an infection of the Singaporean body, but that it must be isolated from the space of the national imaginary, the “heartland”—or, from “home”. To understand how Landmarks

\(^{57}\) My emphasis.
addresses this abjection of the gay figure in relation to Singapore’s spatiality as imagined by the State, it is useful to first consider Homi Bhabha’s conceptualisation of how the nation is written.

Referring to the “national vision[s] of emergence” described by Mikhail M. Bakhtin in his reading of texts such as Johann von Goethe’s *Italian Journey*, Bhabha critiques the fictitious holism that inheres in such projects to establish seemingly finite boundaries of a nation (“Dissemination” 187). This narrative construction, he argues, produces a specific, visible location of the nation—a “national time-space” (“Dissemination” 187)—that then symbolises that nation’s identity. It is a homogenising project that views society horizontally (“Dissemination” 188), thereby obscuring cultural difference. National identity is here underwritten by the totalising metaphor of “the many as one [...] expressive of unitary collective experiences” (“Dissemination” 186). Arguably, this spatial metaphor of the nation-space is evident in the rhetoric of Wong, PM Lee and the late MM Lee as representatives of the Singaporean State extracted above. It is persistently invoked to similarly fix the boundaries of the nation of Singapore and, more specifically, the Singaporean “heartland” at its core. Bhabha refers to such an authoritative enunciation as being part of the “pedagogical”, which is a store of linear, historical events that assumes the a priori presence of the people/nation (“Dissemination” 192). Barred entry to this nation-space, the Singaporean gay figure is displaced onto the margins and denied national affiliation. Importantly, according to Bhabha, it is from this marginalised position that “the concept of the ‘people’ emerges” (“Dissemination” 189). Bhabha argues for the national space as a liminal form, where “[c]ounter-narratives of the nation that continually evoke and erase its totalising boundaries [...] disturb those ideological manoeuvres through which ‘imagined communities’ are given essentialist identities” (“Dissemination” 192). As I set out in the introductory chapter, it is at this juncture that the “performative” intervenes, and “the temporality of the ‘in-between’” is introduced (“Dissemination” 192). The “performative” engages in a contested cultural discourse that undermines the claim made by “pedagogical” authority by performing as “subjects’ of a process of signification” from the margins (“Dissemination” 189). In this agon or conflict,
national identity is always already unstable and ambivalent, where some interests and identities are excluded even as they are interpellated to contribute to the living project of the nation. Necessarily, the responsibility to interrogate the boundaries of the nation-space so as to produce a minority discourse that importantly maintains its ambivalence—in other words, stage the “performative”—falls to the “liminal figure” (“Dissemination” 192, 199).

In *Landmarks*, the contradictory fault-lines in the State’s monologic discourse are identified by Alfian. Arguably, through postmodern and queer camp theatrical strategies, the position of the “liminal figure of the nation-space” is enlivened by Ivan Heng’s dramaturgy in *Landmarks* (2004), which performs discursive public, private, corporeal, emotional and liminal spaces which the Singaporean gay figure in the theatrical space may call “home”.

Having given an overview of the economic and political context following the staging of *Dreamplay* (2000), I will now provide a synopsis of *Landmarks* and suggest how its intervallic composition\(^{58}\) is apposite in dismantling the State’s monologic discourse on the (in)appropriate existence of the gay figure in “straight Singapore” (“*Landmarks* Publicity Collaterals”). Next, I use the collaterals and staging of selected vignettes in *Landmarks* to comment on the play’s assertion that the gay figure is constitutive of the Singaporean nation. I argue that in doing so, the play reinscribes Singapore as a politically inclusive home for the marginalised gay figure. A discussion of the interrogation of the gaze in the different portrayals of gay male relationships will follow. Finally, I conclude with a reading of how the play responds to the State’s commodification and fetishization of the Singaporean gay figure by asserting its responsibility as “supplementary” in the Derridean sense and, thus, productive of the nation-space of Singapore.

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\(^{58}\) The common musical term “intervallic” describes a musical passage characterised by notes in ascending or descending pitch. My use of the term is intended to highlight both the non-linear structure of *Landmarks* and the spaces “in between” each constitutive vignette in performance. As will become clear below, music is a dramaturgical strategy in *Landmarks* 2004, and its description as “intervallic” is therefore fitting.
Chapter 2: The (Re)Inscription of Place in Alfian Sa’at’s *Landmarks*

**Authenticating Conventions: The Nation-space As Referent**

Whereas *Dreamplay* makes reference to formative temporalities in the history of Singapore as part of its authenticating conventions, *Landmarks* refers to geographical places and spaces—actual landmarks—in the Singaporean landscape in a series of eight vignettes. “Supper at Maxwell” is set at the Maxwell Food Centre, a popular hawker centre frequented by the queer community after partying at nearby gay discotheques and pubs (1.2.117-124). It is a narrative of unrequited love and follows the musings of two gay men—21-year-old undergraduates, Gordon and Danny—about the communication that transpires in gay romantic relationships. “Raffles City Rendezvous” (1.3.125-133) and “California Dreaming” (1.4.133-144) are set in apartments where gay men cohabit. The content and titles of these vignettes allude, respectively, to Raffles City, notoriously nicknamed “headquarters” by the queer community in Singapore because of its vibrant queer cruising scene, and Sentosa, where the Nation parties were held (2000-2004). While “Dreaming” is akin to modernist political theatre where the characters discuss the history of Singapore and the ironic, unjust contemporary oppressions of the queer community, “Rendezvous” is a terse drama of love and deceit in a long-term gay male relationship. In “The Kings of Ann Siang Hill”, 53-year-old Wee Kim strikes up a conversation with 20-year-old Alan who is averse to the former’s supposed advances in a bathhouse (2.1.144-153). This vignette ends with a twist critiquing the institution of the heterosexual nuclear family and is set in one of two major 24-hour gay bathhouses, now defunct, in Ann Siang Road, Chinatown. In “Downstream, Delta”, the friendship between two men—Felix, a gay 28-year-old man, and Jack, his straight best friend—is set in the popular Delta Sports Complex Swimming Pool, a gay cruising site (2.2.153-163). A vignette primarily in exposition, their friendship began when Felix misconstrued Jack’s “[m]eaningful glances” years before, but continued to love him even now when Jack is about to get married. Distinctively, “My Own Private Toa Payoh” is set in the Singaporean “heartland” and portrays the mutually supportive relationship of two gay lovers (2.3.163-164).

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59 Hereafter, “Rendezvous” and “Dreaming”.
60 Hereafter, “Kings”.

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Significantly, 24-year-olds Aloysius and Meng are incongruous with the State’s portrayal of the gay figure as “cosmopolitan” and “creative”. They have to work as prostitutes just to get by.

The first and final vignettes are both set along Tanjong Katong: “Katong Fugue” portrays the strained relationship between a mother and her presumably gay son who refuses her pleas to be let in on his “secret” (1.1.III-I.IV); and “The Widow of Fort Road” is set in the dreamscape of a woman who only discovers that her affections for one of the 12 gay men in the 1993 police sting operation at Fort Road were unwelcome when she saw his damning picture in the newspaper (2.4.172-183). It is noteworthy that Tanjong Katong is known for its ambivalent location, being a historical coastal stretch marking a physical boundary of the island of Singapore and now partially reclaimed as a residential estate (Cornelius “Tanjong Katong”). In this sense, as the setting in the first and final vignettes, Tanjong Katong could serve not merely as a bracket for _Landmarks_, but also as a metaphor to describe a new provisional boundary of the nation-space that integrates the Singaporean gay figure portrayed in the play.

This assertion of the gay figure’s presence is initially demonstrated in the titles of the eight vignettes. Although they may allude to the spaces frequented by queer Singaporeans and where the queer community are said to cruise for sex, they are also locales that any Singaporean could visit, work and reside, thus emphasising the gay figure’s enunciation as part of the nation-space. The invocation of the metaphor of mapping the landscape in the play’s staging, therefore, is an efficacious rhetorical strategy, in Kershaw’s sense, in launching the play’s intent. Importantly, it is the play’s fragmentary structure and its staging that furthers the attempt, as Bhabha would describe it, to “write the nation” (“Dissemination” 185, 190).

**Rhetorical Conventions: Postmodern Elements in _Landmarks_ (2004)**

The narrative fragmentation of the dramatic text of _Landmarks_ recalls the failure of the master narrative posited by Jean-Francois Lyotard. In his seminal work,
Chapter 2: The (Re)Inscription of Place in Alfian Sa’at’s *Landmarks*

Lyotard “defines *postmodern* as an incredulity toward metanarratives” (xxiv) and proposed the ascent of micronarratives, performability, plurality and exchange over truth, unity, and legitimation. In other words, where an authoritative, linear narration (e.g. of a national character) asserts itself as *a priori* (or, in Bhabha’s terms, the “pedagogical”), disparate narrative fragments (the “performative”) may offer avenues of enunciation that contest the apparent homogenous and unchanging truth of that narration. Viewed in conjunction with Bhabha’s postulation of the intervening power of the “metonymic, iterative temporality” of minority discourse (Bhabha “Dissemination” 200), Lyotard’s description of micronarratives becomes relevant to my reading of *Landmarks* as effecting an emergent minority discourse.

Though I do not suggest that *Landmarks* is a definitively postmodern text, I propose that Heng’s employment of postmodern techniques in staging the play on a traverse stage contributes significantly to its performance and political efficacy. According to Paul Allain and Jen Harvie:

> Postmodern performance is democratising because it challenges elitist, universalist assumptions, and it is often thrillingly pleasurable in its playful abandon of the familiar, its renegade engagement with diverse source materials, its exuberance and humour. (192)

Reading each vignette as a micronarrative—or, rather, microplay, as I will call them—portrayal of queer spaces contesting the Singapore State’s master narrative of the nation-space, the postmodern elements of Heng’s staging of *Landmarks* (2004) effectively sets up this very “democratising” challenge that Allain and Harvie describe. In so doing, the play potentially restores queer agency in writing the Singapore nation. This challenge is first seen in the production’s collaterals.

**A Queer Tour: Mapping the Gay Body onto the Nation**

The printed programme for the production of *Landmarks* (2004) takes the form of a folded brochure that opens up to a large A2-sized sheet with the central
image shown in the figure below (Figure 2-1). The mimicry and then parody of the many tourist brochures and fold-out maps that pepper public spaces in Singapore, where the total contribution to travel and tourism is 10.1% of the country’s GDP as at 2015 (WTTC 1-2), has two effects. The first effect is a sardonic critique of the State’s economically pragmatic appropriation of the queer subject to bolster Singapore’s (pink) tourism. The Landmarks (2004) programme parodically subverts this appropriation to assert a position of enunciation from within the nation-space—theatrically, the State-commissioned Esplanade Theatre Studio, and metonymically, the Singaporean economy. That is to say, in the staging of the play to ticketed audiences, the Singapore gay figure reclaims a degree of subjective agency in his participation in the “pink tourism” industry in Singapore, which otherwise relies on his commodification (E.-B. Lim “Glocalqueering” 131-152; “Mardi Gras Boys”; Brown Boys 91-136; Brooks and Wee). The second effect of the programme’s form flows from this, in that Landmarks (2004) interpellates the (heterosexual) spectator as a tourist of a queer landscape. In this way, as I will argue below, the programme contributes meaningfully to the play’s subversion of the normative displacement of the gay figure from the Singaporean landscape and the nation-space.

Rather than depicting (queer) “tourist” destinations on a flat image of the island, the Landmarks programme topographically maps the different

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63 The World Travel & Tourism Council (WTTC) defines “Total Contribution” as including travel and tourism’s “wider impacts” (i.e. the indirect and induced impact) on the economy. The “indirect” contribution includes the GDP and jobs supported by:

- Travel & Tourism investment spending—[…] includes investment activity such as the purchase of new aircraft and construction of new hotels;
- Government ‘collective’ spending, […] made on behalf of the ‘community at large’—e.g. tourism marketing and promotion, aviation, administration, security services, resort area security services, resort area sanitation services, etc.;
- Domestic purchases of goods and services by the sectors dealing directly with tourists—including, for example, purchases of food and cleaning services by hotels, of fuel and catering services by airlines, and IT services by travel agents. (WTTC 2)

A comprehensive overview of the State’s investment in “pink tourism” as part of its rebranding to remain viable in the global economy is provided in Eng-Beng Lim’s works, which analyse the transnational and neocapitalist influences on the queer community and queer plays in Singapore. See “Glocalqueering” “The Mardi Gras Boys” and Brown Boys and Rice Queens. E.-B. Lim’s analysis builds upon the concept of the “glocal”, now relevant to studies “around ‘global/local linkage, disjunction and fracture at the neo-capitalist border: the counterlogic of both/and’ intersections of culture” (“Glocalqueering” 386). I note that the “both/and” virgulic construction is aligned to and helpful in my analysis of the ambivalent position of the Singaporean gay figure in Landmarks (2004).
Singaporean spaces referred to in the play onto a three-dimensional image of the body of what appears to be a man in an athletic or suggestively sexual position. The man’s figuration is ambiguous: he might be doing push-ups, performing and/or receiving fellatio, or even preparing to penetrate another body *a tergo*, suggested by the forward thrust of his lower body indicated by his clenched buttocks and the concave curvature of his lower back. His nipple and buttocks are clearly depicted in the programme, emphasising his nakedness. Crucially, he is exhibiting his sexualised, male body, which asserts its power in what could be read as a confrontation to the voyeuristic (heterosexual, male) spectator. Finding no site of identification pictured except the othered body of the performance of the “Asian Boy” he has come to the theatre to consume, this implicit, socially constructed spectator, by means of identification, might encounter the possibility of assuming the position of the penetrated body not figured in the frame. A feeling of estrangement ensues as a result of this Brechtian technique, where the (heterosexual, male) spectator’s identification is interrupted, firstly, by an awareness that an-Other non-normative spectator is the primary addressee of the play. A second interruption to the (heterosexual, male) spectator’s pleasure possibly occurs in the figure’s que(e)ry of the socially constructed heterosexual, male desire that Laura Mulvey asserts is normatively signified by and projected onto the woman’s form (“Visual Pleasure” 6, 11).

In her explication of the enthrallment of the dominant narrative cinema as predicated on the antecedent identity and social matrices of individual spectators, Mulvey focuses on the contrasting portrayals of men and women in film. She assumes, understandably, “[i]n a world ordered by sexual imbalance […], [a]n active/passive heterosexual division of labour” when she claims that “the male figure cannot bear the burden of sexual objectification. Man is reluctant to gaze at his exhibitionist like” (II-12). Mulvey’s discussion of filmic identification on the one hand and voyeuristic and fetishistic scopophilia on the other has been invaluable to feminist performance theory and practice (De Lauretis 13-26) and to this thesis, for example, where I discuss the portrayal of the homoerotic and
Figure 2-1: Programme for Landmarks. (A. Lim, C. and Yap (photography))

Chapter 2: The (Re)Inscription of Place in Alfian Sa’at’s Landmarks
inter-subjective gaze between characters on stage in The Asian Boys Trilogy. However, a number of critics have since observed that Mulvey’s premise all but denies the existence of desire for the male body as an erotic object (e.g. Rodowick; Ellis; Thomas; Neale). Notably, “active homosexual eroticism of the central male figures” in films, specifically with reference to the “buddy movie”, is dismissed in a parenthetical comment (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure” II). Responding to Mulvey’s exclusion of (“active”) subjective non-heterosexual male (I would add, active heterosexual/bisexual female) spectators in her thesis, Steve Neale contends that Mulvey’s observations are essentialist and may be extended to the reading of male filmic figuration as well. Having evidenced some examples of the voyeuristic homoerotic gaze that occur between men in film and the eroticisation of the male body, Neale concedes as follows:

in a heterosexual and patriarchal society, the male body cannot be marked explicitly as the erotic object of another male look: that look must be motivated, its erotic component repressed. (8)

In other words, his criticism notwithstanding, Neale at least concurs with Mulvey’s identification of the implicit (heterosexual, male) spectator of dominant narrative cinema, noting that while male bodies might be on display in film, their figuration is clearly not for the scopophilic pleasure of the spectator (14-15). Instead, a heteronormative filmic portrayal of the male body typically displaces the homoerotic desire for the male body onto non-erotic relational looks with other characters and onto the (often violent) narrative spectacle itself (14).

Although Mulvey’s theory is in relation to the dominant (Hollywood) cinematic narrative and apparatus, her arguments on the male gaze and portrayal of imbalanced power have had significant implications for performance studies as well. In the theatre, Mulvey’s concepts offer insight into how the realist theatre tradition upholds the socially constructed “active/male and passive/female”

64 See, for example, the importance of the look between the characters in “Agnes Visits the Japanese Occupation” (Dreamplay Seven.70-85), explored in the preceding chapter.
dichotomy (Aston 6-8), influencing the works of Sue-Ellen Case and Caryl Churchill, for example (7, 43). Feminist performance theorists and practitioners, and following on from this, other minority scholars and artists, have engaged in the development of counter-cultural practices that effectively question prevailing hegemonic structures of power and representation (e.g. De Lauretis 13-26). Furthermore, I contend that Alfian and Heng accomplish this interrogation of the hegemonic in staging The Asian Boys Trilogy.

In this light, the naked male body figured in the programme for Landmarks (2004), marked “as [an] object[t] of erotic display” as I have earlier argued, can be said to disrupt the determining gaze of the implicit heterosexual spectator constructed by the State, thereby installing a homoerotic male, and/or even “active” bi/heterosexual female, gaze. More significantly, this rhetorical convention which interpellates the non-heteronormative spectator then serves to bring what De Lauretis refers to as the “space-off” into the centre of the theatrical space (26). That is to say, with the programme’s form and the figuration contained within it, the play positions the spectator within a discursive space that, while always erased from within the frames of reference of hegemonic discourse, is nonetheless always there, or in De Lauretis’s terms, “elsewhere” (26). I argue that in this way, the theatrical space of the Esplanade Theatre Studio becomes a multivalent space during the performance of Landmarks (2004), a queer space where the discourse of the hegemonic and the marginal “coexist concurrently and in contradiction” (26), denoted by the contour lines marked on the image of the male body in the play’s programme (A. Lim, C. and Yap (photography)).

The play’s assertion of the multiplicity of queer time, space and thought is set in opposition to the essentialising and circumscribing portrayal of the gay man as only “cosmopolitan”, as earlier seen in the rhetoric of the nation’s leaders, and as over-indulgent and promiscuous in State-sponsored tourist promotions of the Nation Day parties (E.-B. Lim “Glocalqueering” 389-390; “Mardi Gras Boys” 300). This reductive, yet ubiquitously purveyed stereotype is summarised by Gordon Fairclough in his assessment of Singapore’s apparent tolerance in the years prior to the staging of Landmarks (2004), where he notes that “[t]he
government is content to let gay bathhouses [...] exist in the centre of town, but loath [...] to give gays permission for much besides sex, dancing and drinking” (“Singapore Is Getting Rather Gay-Friendly”). In the play’s programme, the spatiality of the gay man promulgated by the State is undermined by alluding to the street names of significant queer Singaporean spaces that appear in the titles of selected vignettes. Fort Road, Maxwell, Delta, Ann Siang Hill and Katong are indicated in the grid overlay that topographically marks the contours of the image of the naked male body. The grid locations of each space, however, do not follow any imposed or real-world spatial linearity, perhaps inviting the spectator to critically engage with the performance, as if peripatetically, and share in the play’s spatial meaning-making. In this way, a reclamation of the power of nomination of significant queer spaces within the Singaporean landscape is effected by *Landmarks* (2004), arguably signalling, to use David Robinson’s phrase, “the first step in taking possession” (qtd. in Yeoh) of space by the marginalised gay figure.

Heng emphasises the non-linearity of the dramatic narrative by adding layers of visual, spatial and audio textualities that contest the Singaporean State’s master narrative of the nation. At the play’s opening, the actors enter the traverse stage and look around at the audience and one another, as if unaware of where to position themselves in space. When “Bach’s *Fugue* number 1 in C Major plays” (1.1.111), however, they begin to map the stage space to create a visual six by four rectangular grid with masking tape, a metaphor of taking control of the location of their own identity coordinates. Their choreography and collective action of (re)mapping the performance space asserts the play’s intent to reclaim agency and space for the marginalised gay figure. Just as importantly, this mapping of stage space is a both postmodern and Brechtian metatheatrical technique that privileges the process of meaning-making over the utterance or product and establishes a dialectical exchange between the characters in the world on stage and the spectator in the theatre.

Furthermore, by foregrounding the process by which space is mapped, the play’s opening effectively encourages the self-reflexivity and introspection of the spectator as to what prevailing essentialist notions they might hold of particular
spaces in Singapore. I argue that rather than pursuing what critics of postmodern works condemn as gratuitous indulgence in disconnected fragments that might purport to do away with the master narrative—that of the State in this case—Heng’s postmodernist techniques paradoxically tether the microplays of *Landmarks* together in the spatial imaginary, portraying multiple, interconnected narratives *in spite of* the master narrative. In this way, Heng’s postmodernist techniques mount a criticism of the very commodity fetishism that Fredric Jameson, for one, claims is purported to be characteristic of the postmodern (234-235), and by extrapolation, the commodification and fetishization of the gay figure in the Singaporean context.

Heng continues to call attention to the play’s self-conscious theatricality in the other liminal spaces between microplays. Save for an intermission after the staging of four vignettes, there are no intervals in darkness between microplays. Instead, each scene change is filled with potential meaning and, crucially, movement. The actors, of which there are 17, facilitate the movement of one vignette to the next, changing the minimalist properties to re-set the performance space. I will refer to this plurality as the “liminal chorus” due to the spatial function they perform within the interstitial space-time of the play(s). Meaningfully, in performing the perforation of the imaginary boundaries between vignettes and those of Singaporean spaces, this liminal chorus self-consciously find themselves in both previous and subsequent microplays before exiting the stage. In “Fugue” for example, 12 additional bodies are seen in the intimate space of this first vignette and visually support Mother’s role as a teacher of young minds while being tangibly estranged from her own gay son. That there are 12 bodies is significant to the portrayal of the gay figure within the spatio-temporal landscape of Singapore in *Landmarks* (2004). Figured in classrooms in the opening vignette, in the final microplay, the actors’ bodies will represent the bodies of the gay men who were publicly shamed and corporally punished as a result of the 1993 anti-gay operation at Fort Road in Tanjung Rhu, not far away from the estate in which this vignette is set. *Landmarks* returns to this formative event in the last vignette discussed below.
The Alienation of the Gay Figure from Home: Staging the “Space-off”

The alienation of the gay figure even within his own home is clearly depicted in “Fugue”. While Son plays the piano in melancholic isolation, Mother speaks to him from beyond his locked door and reminds him that “[l]ocking [himself] in means locking [her] out” (1.1.111). The part of the stage(map) that Mother inhabits is lit with blue lighting to convey the doleful plight of Mother left in the dark of Son’s (gay) life. On the other hand, Son is lit with yellow lighting, conveying the safety of Son’s room, which is a spatial container symbolic of the shield that his “secret” (1.1.117) provides him. Son says that his room is “the only place in this house” where, implicitly, he is free to inhabit his queer subjectivities (1.1.113).

Son’s sexuality, however, is never made explicit in his conversation with Mother, who “know[s], but […] can’t acknowledge it” (1.1.116). Effectively, lacking the knowledge and language to openly discuss Son’s alternative sexuality, Mother uses metaphors to communicate instead. She says:

**MOTHER:** [...][Katong] means turtle in Malay
[...]
[They lay their eggs on land[.]] And then they crawl back into the sea. Slowly, with great effort. [...] Do you know turtles cry when they lay their eggs? [...] (1.1.113-114)

Mother expresses the pain of separation that she feels as a mother from her son who denies her entry into his room and the knowledge of his sexuality. Extending the same metaphor in response, Son explains the protective nature of his private, proscribed space:

**SON:** You will not find me. A turtle has laid its eggs on the beach. As long as nobody finds the nest it has buried, at least one of its eggs will survive. At least one will get its chance to live. Let me live, Mother. Let me live out my secret. (1.1.117)
With this metaphor, the vastness of the beach, an analogue of the heteronormative space beyond the threshold of Son’s room—arguably itself a metaphor for the closet—is rendered a dangerous space where the turtle’s eggs, that is, the gay figure, are left vulnerable. In this first microplay, the themes of alienation from home, yearning to communicate and private space explored in the play are thus introduced to the spectator.

In the performance, “Fugue” ends on a tense note (in a minor key played on the piano), and the previously mute chorus, seated in spaces of the grid as if in a classroom, start singing the Singaporean Malay folk song, “Di Tanjong Katong” (n.p., n.d.). As they jump up and jauntily dance to their new blocking configurations at the four corners of the stage in preparation of playing in “Supper at Maxwell”, the liminal chorus effectively dispel the tension of the previous microplay (Landmarks 2004). Following Danny and Gordon’s exit at the conclusion of their microplay (1.2.124), the actors who play Mother and Son in “Fugue” enter the stage space as part of the liminal chorus and pick up the main set of “Supper at Maxwell”, which comprises two stools at centrestage. In a markedly metatheatrical foregrounding of the process of production, these two actors pause in what appears to be recognition of each other even though their microplay has concluded, before leaving the stage space. Once again, a defamiliarisation with the world of the stage is produced, reminding the spectator of the theatricality of the action. The spectator, similar to the actors who once played Mother and Son, could consequently recognise their analogous position in the queered theatrical space: they are positioned in the “space-off” yet, as the movement of the liminal chorus suggests, are empowered to assist or even add to the action in the performance space.

Next, when “Rendezvous” ends on a tenor of deceit in a gay couple’s long-term, cohabitative relationship (1.3.133), a member from the liminal chorus enters from offstage and starts playing “Over the Rainbow” (Arlen and Harburg) on the piano, from the film, The Wizard of Oz (Fleming). The rest of the chorus and the main characters of the fourth microplay then enter the stage space with the properties for the apartment set of “Dreaming” (1.4.133-144). The chorus, looking
up as if in hope, then sing the ubiquitously popular Singapore National Day song originally performed by Kit Chan entitled “Home” (D. Lee). The piano score then segues, significantly, from an anthem recognised as a “gay anthem” in the American context, to a contemporary anthem of the Singaporean nation. In falsetto, the players sing:

This is home truly, where I know I must be
where my dreams wait for me,
where the river always flows;
this is home surely, as my senses tell me,
this is where I won’t be alone,
for this is where I know it’s --- (Landmarks 2004)

The liminal chorus stop short of the last word of the verse, “home”, and exit after Jeff, age 28, Leon, age 27, and 26-year-old Jin Han open their microplay. The choice of the three songs in the liminal spaces between microplays one and two and microplays three and four are noteworthy. Both “Di Tanjong Katong” and “Home” (D. Lee) are songs about spaces deployed by the State during the annual National Day Parades to arouse nationalistic feelings of belonging and communal history in Singaporeans (Kong and Yeoh 227). In the context of Landmarks (2004), however, the rallying intent of these songs is undermined by the State’s abjection of the liminal chorus—actors who play gay men in different settings in Singapore throughout the play—in the national imaginary.

“Di Tanjong Katong” and “Home”, when paired with “Over the Rainbow”, a song resonant with the history of the rebellious hope and pride of the Western gay movement that had its roots in the Stonewall Riots (New York: 28 Jun. 1969), produce a paradoxical affect of community belonging and alienation. On the one hand, the piano’s musical segue first conveys the Singaporean gay figure’s acknowledgement and provisional identification with the aims of the gay movement in 1970s America that lobbied for gay rights and the creation of a cohesive queer community. Then it localises these objectives and stakes a claim for the gay subject in the Singaporean nation. This localisation is accomplished through the aural juxtaposition of the songs and the spatial transposition effected by the piano set on which the song is played live (Landmarks 2004).
On the other hand, the musical scoring of the liminal spaces staged before the intermission conveys the still unrealised hope and yearning for a feeling of “home” in Singapore. The gay figure remains “elsewhere”. Notably, translated from the Malay, “Tanjong Katong” not only names the coastal site of a now extinct sea-turtle, but also refers to “the rippling effect of a sea mirage” perceived at the water’s edge (Cornelius “Tanjong Katong”), emphasising the illusoriness, but also the possibility of the blurring of boundaries achieved by Heng’s staging of the play’s liminal spaces. The consequent overlapping of queer spatiality and queer corporeality in the performance text, similar to that postulated by De Lauretis (26), effectively depicts the challenges that the gay figure might face in establishing a home in Singapore, where they are regularly expurgated from the national spatial imaginary.

“*I’d be safe and warm if I was in L.A.*”: Imbricating the Singaporean Gay Figure on the National Imaginary

This local displacement even while in Singapore is most clearly portrayed in “Dreaming”. In this vignette, Jin Han vehemently expresses his distaste for Nation.04, the party that the other characters, Leon and Jeff, eagerly dress up to attend. Leon is correct to say that “this is the party of the year” for the queer community in the region (I.4.134). The Nation Parties, held on the night before the “pomp and circumstance” of the annual National Day Parade mounted by the State on 9 August in celebration of the nation’s independence, is deemed by Leon to be a “subversive remix” (I.4.137) whereby the queer community celebrates “[its] own independence” (I.4.135). Jin Han, however, dismisses the import of the Nation Parties as signifying little more than an indulgence in the meaningless pleasure of excess:

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65 The annual Nation Party organised by Fridae.Asia (2001-2005) was vital to Singapore’s participation in the “pink economy”, attracting an estimated 8000 tourists from Malaysia, Thailand, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Australia, [...] North America and Europe” (Fridae “Nation.04”). In the year of the play’s staging, Fridae reported an independent market research company’s projected economic returns of Nation.04 to the country’s tourist revenue to be as much as US$6 million (SGD$8 million) (“Nation.04”).
JIN HAN: It’s a circuit party, for crying out loud! Attack of the clones! Sweaty bodies and overpriced beer served in paper cups! Laser lights and fashion disasters! Terrible music and people too high on alcohol or E to notice!

[...]

It’s not subversive, it’s just excessive. [...] (1.4.135, 137)

Jin’s criticism of the Nation Party is not without cause, given it is this very performative excess that was later cited as one of the reasons Nation V was denied a licence by the Licensing Division of the Singapore Police Force in 2005. It is also this performative and signifying excess that this microplay interrogates, considered by scholars like Moe Meyer to be the foundation of “Camp” as a “queer [...] discourse” (1) and upon which a queer identity is enacted (4).

However, bearing in mind suggestions by Dollimore (221-226), Bergman (4-5) and Cleto (Camp: Queer Aesthetics passim) that camp is a variegated mode that resists stabilisation, both Leon and Jeff nonetheless execute the performative codes of camp theatricality and excess often attributed to the gay subject in this microplay (Sontag; Newton “Role Models”; Dyer). Leon is first depicted in a golden robe doing push-ups at the beginning of the microplay before changing into a sleeveless T-shirt with the words “Born to be Gay” emblazoned on the front, tight shorts and a sailor’s hat; Jeff prances around the apartment in similar attire, but with a tiara on his head. Both men accessorise their outfits with bright pink and blue feather boas before leaving for Nation.04. As well, Leon and Jeff’s banter and self-consciously effeminate gestural excess depict the stereotypical portrayals of gay men, the “poster boys of Singapore’s global cultural capital” (E.-B. Lim “Mardi Gras Boys” 296). According to E.-B. Lim, the deployment of these stock types exploits “the commodification of homosexuality to deflect the father-state’s objecting gaze” (304). However, through Jin Han, the playwright seems to suggest that in so doing, the parodic and subversive camp effect of the performative excess of Nation Day is itself appropriated by the State, so that the “shadow existence” (1.4.137) of the gay figure in Singapore is reinstalled.
Leon and Jeff perform a coordinated cheer as they kick their legs high with their arms akimbo, akin to popular filmic stock depictions of cheerleaders when Jin Han asks them to specify what they are celebrating. They chant:

**LEON [AND JEFF]:** We’re out and proud, we’re queer and we’re here. Get used to it! (1.4.136; *Landmarks* 2004)

Their cheer alludes to the tagline used on the publicity collaterals for *Mardi Gras* by TNS which was first staged in 2003 and then substantially reworked and restaged with its sequel, *Top or Bottom*, as part of the Nation.04 celebrations. Such a contemporaneous reference lends immediacy to the debate that unfolds between the characters in this microplay and engages the spectator-in-the-know with the pertinent issues that Jin Han makes plain. In response to Leon and Jeff’s choreographed cheer above, Jin Han reminds them of section 377A and sardonically parodies their baseless delight when he sneers, “We’re out with no clout, we’re queer and living in fear. Get used to it” (1.4.136-137).

His scathing tone escalates to frustration and then righteous anger by the climax of the dramatic narrative, thereby calling attention to the agitprop quality of the vignette. As part of his elucidation of the fallacy of independence sustained by Nation Day, Jin Han draws an analogy between it and the National Day Parade, which he says is a similar performance of excess to “hide the [State’s] pain of separation from Malaysia” (1.4.136). Jin Han further asserts that the site of the Nation Party, Sentosa, “a miniature southern island at the base of Singapore”, is analogous to that of Singapore with Malaysia: “Both carry the burden of being outcasts, divorced from the mainland or the mainstream” (1.4.138). Here, “Dreaming” bravely queers the Singaporean State by creating the marginalised gay figure’s identification with the nation. Nonetheless, a distinction can be read in Jin Han’s analogy: while Singapore is a sovereign nation no longer part of Malaysia, the country’s queer citizenry are only “here” because of their permitted queer visibility within circumscribed space. Due to the continued operation of 377A, however, they remain exiled from the physical landscape of the
Singaporean mainland, which prevents their symbolic constitution as part of the Singaporean nation (1.4.136-142).

The resultant melancholia of this displacement is portrayed when Leon and Jeff initially decide to leave for the festivities anyway, and Jin Han, wearing a T-shirt with the ironic phrase “Born Free” on the front, wanders the space of the apartment. In this sequence, his *gestus* represents the search for coordinates of identity within the spatial imaginary of Singapore conducted by all the gay male characters portrayed in *Landmarks* (2004) on the mapped grid of the stage. Following this, he begins to sing the first verse to “California Dreamin’” by The Mamas and the Papas (J. Phillips and Phillips):

JIN HAN: All the leaves are brown (All the leaves are brown)
And the sky is grey (And the sky is grey)
I’ve been for a walk (I’ve been for a walk)
On a winter’s day (On a winter’s day)
I’d be safe and warm (I’d be safe and warm)
If I was in L.A. (If I was in L.A.)

*[Jeff and Leon enter the stage, singing along with Jin Han.]*

California dreaming (California dreaming)
On such a winter’s day... (1.4.142)

In an interview with Michelle Phillips, the co-writer of “California Dreamin’”, Susan Stamberg describes the song as a “song that came from a dream and from longing: the wistful wish to be someplace else, someplace safe and warm[,] [...] inspired by Phillips’ homesickness” for sunny California, which Phillips said then “became an anthem for the golden State” of California (M. Phillips). The melancholia expressed by this song rebounds from the normatively intended affect of national belonging of “Home” (D. Lee) that scores the liminal space-time before the microplay, and Jin Han expresses the feeling of homesickness even while he is physically in Singapore. He dreams for the sexual liberation of other
queer capitals, like “Amsterdam[,] Sydney[,] Copenhagen[,] San Francisco” and, of course, “California” (I.4.140), to escape the pain of homelessness enforced upon the gay figure by the State’s abjection.

Significantly, as I have shown, the queer camp elements of “Dreaming” complement the modernist historical and political commentary of the vignette. As a consequence of this balanced portrayal in the performance space, the microplay overtly challenges the same images of the “Westernised”, “homoerotic excess [and] spectacle of buff male bodies” that reduce the gay characters of *Mardi Gras* and *Top or Bottom*, for example, to “politically vacuous figures” (E.-B. Lim “Mardi Gras Boys” 298, 302). This socially and politically engaged dramatic posture of “Dreaming” in performance could be argued to reposition the spectator neither sexually nor economically, but nationally as Singaporeans, in common identification with the marginalised gay figure portrayed in *Landmarks* (2004).

**The Gay Nuclear Family: Queering the National Ideology**

By this point, the gay figure's imbrication on the Singaporean national imaginary implicit in *Landmarks* (2004) is performatively established. In the next vignette, Alfian then postulates the consequences the gay community might suffer should the (State-permitted) investment in the prevailing queer tropes of performative excess and sexual promiscuity that Jin Han denounces persist. In Heng’s staging, the spectator is given the interval to ruminate on the problems put forward in “Dreaming”, including the im/plausibility of a long-term gay domestic partnership in Singapore that Jin Han makes plain to Eugene, who has romantic feelings for a man named Andrew (I.4.141-142), before the next microplay addresses this very im/plausibility. “Kings” explores the corporeal space of the gay man. The microplay juxtaposes the obsession with youth, the abandon to sexual pleasure and excess, against age and the establishment of the nuclear family unit by a gay couple.
In the prelude to “Kings”, the liminal chorus come on stage clad only in towels and re-enact the sexually charged intensity and crucial visibility involved in cruising for sex in a gay sauna (Landmarks 2004). The stage is lit with low, red lighting, conveying what reviewer Matthew Lyon describes as an atmosphere of “[s]ex and a frisson of menace” (“Rev. Of Landmarks”), and the actors exchange glances laden with sexual tension as they slowly traverse the performance space. This tension is then dispelled when the liminal chorus starts to dance the cha-cha to a popular Mandarin love song (c. 1940), eliciting peals of laughter from the audience. Appropriately, Heng opens the second half of the production with a tense and serious atmosphere before suddenly invoking the camp mode. This reversal in tone is best understood in terms of what Dyer appreciates about the mode:

"Basically, it is a way of prising the form of something away from its content, or revelling in the style while dismissing the content as trivial. [...] What I value about camp is that it is precisely a weapon against the mystique surrounding art, loyalty and masculinity [...] it demystifies by playing up the artifice by means of which..."
such things as these retain their hold on the majority of the population. (112)

In other words, camp effaces the authoritative ratification of constructs fallaciously grounded in Truth by unveiling them as but one of many fabricated means by which life may be understood (Dyer 115). Thus, in the opening of the next four vignettes in *Landmarks* (2004), Heng occasions a “failure of seriousness” (Cleo “Queering the Camp” 24) of the menacing spectre of the hypersexual homosexual that threatens, as MM Lee warned, to “infect the heartland” (qtd. in Yin and Chiang). Additionally, by drawing attention to artifice, Heng pre-empts the demystification of the national ideology founded upon the “naturalness” of heterosexual marriage and reproduction that the vignette also takes on. The rectitude of heterosexual marriage is first undermined by the choice of the song that the gay men cha-cha to in the sauna.

“Ye Lai Xiang” is an upbeat rhumba that tells of a lover’s yearning for a woman. Anecdotally, translated from the Mandarin as “Evening Fragrance” or “Evening Flower”, the phrase was also a regional euphemism for the overwhelming stench from chamber pots before they were cleared out by nightsoil carriers in the past. This double entendre and the camp effects of the prelude serve to queer the staged Singaporean space in two important ways. First, the sentiments of love portrayed between bodies in heteronormative cultural artefacts that support the national ideology of the heterosexual nuclear family, like “Ye Lai Xiang”, are subverted. Then these artefacts are reinscribed, in paradoxical camp celebration, with the abject characteristics accorded to the gay man in heterosexist discourse. To this end, the male body “as an object of erotic display” first figured in the production’s programme is brought from the “space-off” to the centre when Alan of “Kings” unfurls his towel in the middle of the dance and walks around centrestage with his genitals covered, but his buttocks exposed. At the end of the cha-cha, the muscular, youthful male body then sits on the piano while the liminal chorus push him into position for the microplay, as if on a sedan chair, and worship him on bended knee before exiting the performance space.
Alfian first critiques the gay man’s obsession with physicality by initially portraying the older Wee Kim as desperate. Set on “[t]he roof of a bathhouse”, Wee Kim attempts to establish what appears to be a meaningful connection with Alan. Wee Kim reaches out to shake Alan’s hand, but Alan rebuffs his friendly overtures (2.1.144-145). Alan expresses his physical aversion:

**ALAN:** I’m really not into dirty old men. Please.

[…]

**WEE KIM:** I’m an old man. Sure. I’m 53. But where did the dirty part come from?

**ALAN:** [...] You walk around, trying to grope people in the dark rooms. You take up the space in the cubicles for sleeping because you can’t get anyone[.] [...] (2.1.146)

Alan’s aversion to a man of Wee Kim’s ‘advanced’ age, based on the former’s assumption that the latter just “want[s] to have sex” (2.1.144), is a telling portrayal of the impediments that a primary focus on ‘stranger sex’ poses to the formation of the gay community in Singapore. Wondering why Alan “sound[s] so angry” despite having access to “places like these” (2.1.147), Wee Kim reminisces about his experience as a young gay man in Singapore prior to Singapore’s globalisation. He says:

**WEE KIM:** [...] It seemed at that time that if you wanted to follow your heart, you had to follow it to some other country. So the only thing we could have that was closest to a relationship was sex. It doesn’t take long. Just one night. Because the next day they’ll be gone.

[…]

It’s been 30 years. And what has changed? (2.1.150)
Significantly, Wee Kim’s monologue about the 1970s here echoes the contemporary displacement of the gay figure from the Singaporean nation that Jin Han laments in “California” in response to Leon’s quasi-positive comment:

LEON: Jin Han, you can’t argue against the fact that there have been tremendous changes in the last decade. We have our pubs. We have our saunas. Nobody’s closed them down yet.

JIN HAN: But as long as we have 377(a), the threat is always going to be there. [...] (1.4.138)

In this light, the implicit answer to Wee Kim’s comment is, “[Not much] has changed” (2.4.150).

The indulgence in promiscuous, sexual excess, plus the pressure to conform to the stereotypical, spectacular images of the homosexual body in mainstream circulation as signs of the State’s apparent liberalisation are cast as oppressive spatial controls in this vignette. Alan admits that he is actually there “just to look for sex” (2.1.149). He so fears aging that he says, “I tell myself I want to die before I’m 40” (2.1.151). In a dramatic twist, Wee Kim reveals that he is the father of the attractive gay man who enters the performance space twice during this microplay, whom he had raised with his gay lover of 20 years following the death of his wife (2.1.151). Wee Kim’s query of Alan, “Don’t you want anything more [...] than sex?” could thus be read as the playwright’s question posed to the gay community (2.1.149), a critique of the carnivalesque excess alluded to in “Dreaming”. More significantly, the “heartlanders” implicated in the nuclear family unit endorsed by the State are parodied here, thereby challenging the State’s warning against the dissolution of the nation and the home should queer cosmopolitan sexualities “infect” the Singaporean heartland.

Notably, Wee Kim’s revelation and ultimate rejection of Alan’s desires to be introduced to the former’s son elicits much audience laughter and applause that could be read in several ways. Firstly, the audience laughter might be the probable intended result of the parody of the State’s fetishization of the
heteropatriarchal nuclear family unit to the exclusion of all other familial configurations. Secondly, it could be read from a heteronormative perspective that finds the possibility of a homosexual nuclear family unit unfathomable and ridiculous. And thirdly, the audience response could be seen as a release of discomfort and in solidarity with the older Wee Kim, whose overtures of friendship have been repeatedly rejected by the younger Alan throughout the microplay, now that it is made clear that he is not, indeed, attempting to look for sex. In all of these readings, “Kings” successfully engages the audience in a consideration of homosexual corporeal and emotional concerns that undermine the hegemonic oversimplification of the homosexual body and its sexual practices within a Singaporean space designated as “gay” (the sauna). This engagement and revelation diffuses the oppressive force of the gaze that fixes the gay figure firmly in the closet of the Singaporean imaginary, far from the borders of the nation’s “heartland”.

Demystified Heartlands: (Re)inscribing (an Always Already) Queer Space

The “heartland” is the next space queered in Landmarks. Set in the first Housing Development Board (HDB) residential estate in modern Singapore, “Private” effects a reinscription of the venerated image of the Singaporean “heartland” as a space where firstly, gay men live, and more significantly, one that colludes in the objectification and commodification of Singaporean gay men by refusing to acknowledge their presence. Aloysius and Meng are in love and cohabitate while they earn a living by selling their bodies as “rentboys” (2.3.163). Once again, Landmarks undermines the State’s portrayal of homosexual promiscuity and excess by depicting Meng as having lofty dreams of becoming a chef and opening up a restaurant with his partner, Aloysius (2.3.165). Meng is shown making plans for the couple’s future because, as he says to Aloysius, “We can’t do this [sex work] forever” (2.3.165). Similarly, Aloysius is depicted as reasonably ambitious and concerned about the couple’s economic future when he says:

ALOYSIUS: I want us to make sure we have enough savings. The economy’s
bad. And who’s going to hire two guys who don’t even have an ‘A’ level cert? (2.3.166)

In addition to their lack of financial security and post-secondary qualifications, the two gay men do not have support from their families. Meng’s expression of the hope that he had for the future upon meeting Aloysius, “a chance to be innocent again” (2.3.169), is a heart-rending description of the consequences of his marginalisation:

MENG: Before I got kicked out of my house, before I started living on cigarettes and one meal a day, before I found myself opening my mouth to let in the tongues of people who gave me fake names. Before I woke up in strange houses surrounded by strange furniture and trying to find my way to the toilet in the dark. (2.3.169-170)

In other words, Meng’s family’s expulsion of him from the home causes Meng to be spatially “lost/from the start” (Rilke 3-4), forcing him into prostitution to survive.

The “nightmare” (Landmarks 2.3.170) in which the two rentboys find themselves is magnified by the single mattress of the set and the plain, unassuming costumes of both Meng and Aloysius (Landmarks 2004). Situated in Toa Payoh, moreover, both characters aptly portray the “ordinary” “heartlander”, but for their disenfranchising homosexuality (Figure 2-3). Far removed from the upwardly mobile, highly educated, “cosmopolitan” trope acknowledged by the State, gay “heartlanders” like Meng and Aloysius are shown not to have access to

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66 The Singapore-Cambridge General Certificate of Education Advanced Level (‘A’ level) is a post-secondary qualification that enables entry into local and international universities. Additionally, the qualification is a minimum requirement by many employers in Singapore, giving holders opportunities to be more upwardly mobile. At the time of this writing in 2016, the most recent statistics report that 14.8% of residents aged 25 and over have attained a diploma or professional post-secondary qualification, that is, ‘A’ level, diploma, International Baccalaureate, et cetera (Singapore Government Census 2010; Highest Qualification Obtained 2015).
the proscribed space of apparent liberalisation of the “pink economy”. Arguably, then, the characters’ familial rejection and subsequent commodification as prostitutes in this vignette are analogous to the State’s abjection of the gay figure, excepting its only acceptable incarnation as a mimicry of “Western decadence” and cosmopolitanism. In so doing, the State reduces gay sexual desire to economic terms, thereby displacing Singapore’s gay citizenry who find themselves in a multiply estranged space outside of home.

The neoliberal focus on the production of wealth is further critiqued in Aloysius and Meng’s discussion of a potential job, made somewhat dehumanising by the price tag attached to the concomitant potential loss of privacy in their relationship. In this vignette, Meng and Aloysius debate whether to engage in sexual intercourse for the voyeuristic pleasure of a client in Bukit Timah, a very affluent, private estate in Singapore in stark contrast to the government estates in Toa Payoh. In the face of Meng’s refusal to exhibit their intimacy for $2000 (2.3.168-269), Aloysius proffers a compromise:

![Figure 2-3: Aloysius (left) and Meng (right) in “My Own Private Toa Payoh”. (C. Yap “Landmarks: Asian Boys Vol. 2. By Alfian Sa’at. Dir. Ivan Heng”)](image)

**ALOYSIUS:** [...] I know what we’ll do. We’ll switch. When we perform for the guy, you be my top. That way we’ll know for sure we’re acting.
Significantly, Aloysius presents a strategy not too dissimilar from that offered by the camp mode according to Dyer, that is, as “a form of self-defence” operationalised by parodic performance (110). That there are no discernible camp elements in this microplay, however, is efficacious in augmenting the potential discomfiture of the spectator who witnesses the discussion between Aloysius and Meng. The power differential between the characters and their prospective client for whom they must perform their sexual desire may be read as a parallel to the oppressive, yet exploitative surveillance of the marginalised gay figure by the State. Rather than the political abstractions of “Dreaming”, the spectator is privileged with what is portrayed as the lived reality of the marginalised gay figure. More importantly, the panoptic spectatorial position of the State (and the spectator in the theatrical space) is made apparent in their prospective client’s desire for the exhibition of their sexuality.

Interrogating Tay’s assertion of the separation of the public and the private spheres discussed earlier (qtd. in R. Lim 8), “Private” makes evident the intrusion of private space by the paternalistic, surveilling gaze of the Singaporean State. In the liminal space between this microplay and the next, “Widow”, analysed below, the intrusive gaze of the spectator into the private space of the marginalised gay figure is masterfully accomplished by Heng. Mulvey distinguishes between the voyeuristic mechanism of desire and fetishistic-scopophilia. She explains that whereas the pleasure of voyeurism “has associations with sadism[,] [...] ascertaining guilt[,] [...] asserting control and subjecting the guilty person through punishment or forgiveness”, in fetishistic scopophilia, the physical beauty of the object—in Landmarks, this refers to the gay male body—is amplified so that “it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous” (Mulvey “Visual Pleasure” 29). I contend that whereas the eroticised male body-on-display figured in the publicity collaterals and in “Kings” mirrors the fetishistic-scopophilic commodification of the homosexual male body by the
State as part of increasing its global economic profile, the denial of privacy in “Private” inverts this process of representation, so that the violence of the intrusive gaze of the State is beheld.

In Heng’s staging, Meng lays down to sleep on the couple’s “small mattress in the living room” after Aloysius leaves to service another client (2.3.166), and a spotlight, modified with a gobo with stars, shines on him at centrestage while all other lights are dimmed in the theatrical space. In this lighting, the blue colour of Meng’s quilt completes the simulation of starlight, depicting his vulnerable and childlike innocence as he sleeps. Ironically, an insidious and menacing atmosphere is created when the liminal chorus enter and very slowly drag the sleeping Meng on his mattress offstage as classical music is played on the piano, which enters from the other side of the stage for the eighth and final microplay. Here, Heng shows that despite Meng’s belief in the safety and privacy of his home, while he is unthreatening, he is nonetheless a body under threat. This is a succinct metaphor that describes the plight of the gay figure in Singapore where, in Alfian’s words, “even the bedroom has been deprived of its privacy and sanctity” (“Playwright’s Message” “Landmarks Publicity Collaterals”).

In memoriam Tanjung Rhu, 1993: (Re)inscribing the Memory of the Gay Figure in Singapore

*Landmarks* (2004) further interrogates the spectatorial gaze in its final microplay. The staging of “Widow” echoes that of the first microplay, “Fugue”, and solemnly and emotionally narrates the details of the police operation that fixed the Singaporean gay figure with a punishing, voyeuristic, heterosexist gaze. That is to say, “Widow” effectively permits entry of the spectator into the metaphorical closet, the space of the abject gay figure in the Singaporean landscape. Notably, this instance of persecution of the gay figure had the effect of reifying the figure’s *spatial* marginalisation, where their illicit activities in the darkness of the bushes, carpark and under the bridge by the beach at Fort Road in Tanjung Rhu justify their continued abjection.

In this vignette, Sandra, a 34-year-old female executive, dreams about Kelvin, her 36-year-old ex-colleague, though not having spoken to him for 10
years. Although set in Sandra’s dreamscape, this lapse of a decade parallels the decade that followed what came to be known as the “Fort Road Incident” in 1993, the aforementioned police “anti-gay operation” at Tanjung Rhu, and situates the dramatic narrative as occurring contemporaneously with the then present staging of Landmarks in 2004. Confronted by his homosexuality when she saw his photograph in the newspaper (“12 Men Nabbed in Anti-Gay Operation at Tanjong Rhu” 19), Sandra demands to know what Kelvin was doing at Tanjong Rhu:

\[
\text{SANDRA: Where is this place? Tanjong Rhu?} \\
\text{What did you do over there? Was that why you had such good complexion? Because you went down on your knees and... (2.4.178)}
\]

In doing so, she performs the fascination of the State with its paranoid control over gay sex and the voyeuristic spectator who subsequently consumes its abjection. As Kelvin correctly states, this enforced visibility and illicit consumption of the gay man subjugated to State control was also achieved by the newspaper article to which Sandra refers (2.4.177). He says:

\[
\text{KELVIN: [...] The message was loud and clear. Homosexuals are criminals.} \\
\text{They come in many shapes and sizes. If not for those policemen,} \\
\text{they would have gone on to molest your cousins, your brothers, your sons. (2.4.178)}
\]

Summarising the conceit of Landmarks, Kelvin observes that as a result of the newspaper article, “[t]he homosexual completely eclipsed the Kelvin that [she] knew” and installed the State-sanctioned hypersexual homosexual in its place

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67 In a police entrapment operation, 12 gay men were arrested when they were cruising at Fort Road Beach in Tanjong Rhu in Nov. 1993. Outrage of modesty charges were brought against them. They received prison terms of two to six months and three strokes of the cane each (Penal Code §354). Their names, occupations and photographs were published in “12 Men Nabbed in Anti-Gay Operation in Tanjong Rhu”, The Straits Times, on 23 Nov. 1993, which is the headline and date that Sandra refers to in “Widow” (Landmarks 2.4.177).
(2.4.177). To her pressing questions about what he was doing when he was caught, he counters, “It’s always about sex, isn’t it?” (2.4.178), before an alternative account of the event is offered in answer in the dreamt-up letter in counterposition to the reportage of the State. By inquiring into the foundation of her fascination, Kelvin potentially disrupts the voyeuristic pleasure of the spectator of this microplay as well, who might then be prepared for the lengthy exposition that follows.

In *Landmarks* (2004), Heng accomplishes the engagement of the spectator with the expository dramatic narrative by effectively utilising the liminal chorus and stage lighting as described below. Akin to the depiction of children in a classroom in the first microplay, 11 men of the liminal chorus enter the same grid coordinates of the performance space—with Kelvin, representing the “12 men nabbed”—and their miming accompanies the inevitable consequence of the police operation that Kelvin describes in confronting detail for the Singaporean spectator seated in the audience:

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KELVIN: You know before they caned us, 68
they made us bend over. I could hear the guards making all these
jokes. Look at his hole, they said. That’s a hole that’s been fucked too
many times. I could feel tears on my face even before the cane touched
my skin. (2.4.179)
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At this, the liminal chorus players put their hands behind their backs as if cuffed, bend over slowly to the floor and perform a low kowtow to depict their shame and disgrace. As Sandra reads the letter she wrote to Kelvin expressing her empathy for what had befallen him and her admonition of the voyeuristic sadism

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68 Judicial caning in Singapore is a permitted sentence for many wide-ranging offences and only ordered for male convicts. The sentence is mandatory for over 40 offences, including murder, overstaying a tourist visa beyond 90 days, violence with a weapon, drug-trafficking where the death penalty is not applied, and relevantly in this vignette, “outraging modesty in certain circumstances” (*Penal Code* §354A). Caning is a ritualistic punishment designed to inflict violence and shame. The procedure physically scars the recipient indelibly. Ex-Director of Singapore Prisons in 1974 describes the procedure in detail in “Branding the Bad Hats for Life” (Raman 13). See also the illustration, “How a Prisoner is Caned”, that was paired with “Prisons Department Sets The Facts Straight On Caning”.


of the police who, “watching TV, bored out of their minds, [decided], let’s go and arrest some faggots” (2.4.180-181), the liminal chorus line the borders of the traverse stage and shine flashlights into the faces of the audience seated in the dark. When Sandra describes the police officer as needing “to pass on his disgrace to someone else, and all of [the gay men that night] mistake that heavy breathing for lust, when it’s just hate” (2.4.181), the chorus shine the flashlights below their own faces, forming ghastly masks. Finally, the liminal chorus turn their backs to the audience, kneel and shine the flashlights onto the bodies of Sandra and Kelvin as Sandra’s letter ends on a note of reconciliation. In this way, the staging of “Widow” evokes various spectatorial positions that arguably simulate the different gazes involved in the persecution of the gay men in the “Fort Road Incident”, designed to engage the spectator more fully in the dramatic narrative. The importance of this participation is described succinctly by Lyon:

Alfian is good with the past and its consequences. He makes you want to find out more and makes you feel guilty that you don’t already know. He makes you examine the foundations of the present and discover their fragility. He makes you understand that things should not be forgotten. (”Rev. Of Landmarks”)

Certainly, based on true events, including the overseas suicide of one of the 12 men who had been publicly shamed, “Widow” may be read as a threnody of the gay community in contestation of the persecution that this formative event in Singaporean queer history visited upon the Singaporean gay man.

The microplay concludes with Kelvin announcing his own death to Sandra, which he says marks the end of a decade of “one endless night” (2.4.183). His description of the article that publicly named him as a homosexual(/criminal) as his “first obituary” (2.4.183) betrays the emotional struggle, psychological turmoil and physical alienation of the homosexual man as a result of State persecution and abjection in relation to the spatial imaginary. Kelvin finally climbs on top of the piano as if climbing on top of his own funeral bed and is gravely borne off the stage by the liminal chorus while a ringing sound is heard in the background, the sound of Sandra’s alarm clock urging her to “wake up and
catch the dawn” (2.4.183). Arguably, as the last microplay in Landmarks (2004), the sound of the alarm possibly appeals to the spectator to engage with the play’s various portrayals of Singaporean gay male relationships and queer spaces so as to critically reconsider the abjection of the gay figure in Singaporean State discourse. The spectator is here interpellated to take personal responsibility in viewing the gay figure as a subject, as Sandra does, rather than as a fetish object and/or as unquestionably abject in relation to the nation.

**Transgressive Performativity: The Piano as a Relational Sign of Gayness in Landmarks (2004)**

The acknowledgement of the mirage of queer spaces portrayed is performed in closing the play. In contrast to Bach’s Fugue that scored the opening, the concluding sequence of Landmarks (2004) is scored by Bach’s Prelude. This reversal emphasises the hopeful note of Kelvin’s final words to Sandra to “catch the dawn” (2.4.183), in other words, start afresh. Here, the liminal chorus rhythmically and deftly remove the masking tape that had grid-mapped the performance space throughout the play, before they once again find themselves in seemingly unmapped space. Again, the actors look at each other as if unsure of where their identity coordinates lie, symbolically demonstrating the marginalised gay figure’s continued displacement from the Singaporean spatial imaginary. However, rather than a final acquiescence to the “no place” of the gay figure from the nation, I argue that Heng’s use of the piano as a sign in Landmarks (2004) provides an alternative site(s) of identification for the gay figure.

By using an upright piano on a trolley that signifies different sets in different microplays, Heng efficaciously establishes a non-linear inter-relationality between scenes despite their disparate content, even lending an aural, non-verbal dimension to the play. By these means, Heng disturbs the easy spatial and rhetorical demarcations practised by the State and portrays a fluid and dynamic queer Singaporean landscape that queer subjectivities may inhabit in the play. Additionally, the instrument is relocated and repurposed for situational uses within a performance space signified as the (queered) Singaporean landscape. Moved into and used even within spaces that sexual
minorities must not inhabit (e.g. a public swimming complex in “Downstream Delta” and the “heartland” in “Private”), the artefact serves to tether the Singaporean gay figure within the portrayed national space. The piano set used in this way transforms the theatrical space into a dialogic function of spatial relations that include the spectator in the reading of queer spaces, subjectivities and queer relationships in the play. The piano thus enables of Landmarks' performatative production of what De Lauretis describes as “two kinds of spaces”, that is, “the (represented) discursive space of the positions made available by hegemonic discourses and the space-off, the elsewhere, of those discourses” (26).

Secondly, and crucially, the piano is also a changing, mobile set. While it is first used as an instrument in “Fugue”, it is a side-table in Mike and Kiat’s apartment in “Rendezvous”; a couch in “Dreaming”; a sedan chair and then wooden bench on the rooftop of a gay sauna in “Kings”; part of the bleachers at a public swimming pool in “Downstream Delta”; and finally, a funeral bed of the publicly humiliated Kelvin in “Widow”. In Landmarks (2004), the piano is therefore a symbol open to metonymic signification for the players who portray the gay male relationships in the many queer spaces depicted in the performance space.

In clarifying its contribution to the play’s transgressive effects, I propose that the piano set thus performs the spatial displacement of the fetish that results from “a look that has frozen or isolated fragments of the spatiotemporal continuum” in Freudian terms (Birringer 214). The perceived initial threat is consequently quelled in the fetish object in a process that is, as Mulvey and others have argued, akin to photographic practice (Visual and Other Pleasures 139-141). Certainly, this view is applicable to the striking image of the naked (gay) male body in the production’s publicity collaterals, part of the rhetorical conventions of Landmarks (2004), that parodies the State’s production of the gay figure as a fetish object. In the Singaporean landscape, the gay figure is fixed in the rhetoric of the State, which effectively disavows the threat of the failure of castration presented by the eroticised male homosexual body by concealing the absence of heterosexual desire. The space in which the gay figure is confined is transgressed by the piano-sign in its disruption of the entrapping chain of
signification, thereby suggesting the unspeakable ‘no-place’ of the abject or, in other words, the closet.

Anne Fleche makes a compelling argument about the identification of the homosexual with the closet in her the analysis of the portrayal of the structure of the closet in relation to the criticism and works of Tennessee Williams. She makes a distinction between Lacan’s postulation of the specular identification of the subject (Lacan “Mirror Stage”) and Mulvey’s reading of the production of identification through metonymic displacement (“Pandora”). Fleche writes that in Mulvey’s metonymy:

[t]wo things come to be identified with each other, creating both association and substitution, by virtue of a displacement. [...] above all, a spatial relation. Identification is produced through the association of a person with a place, and its metonymic equivalent is produced as that which occupies a distinct, and also relative space. (264-265)

Fleche applies this spatial conferment of identity to the homosexual, where identity is “relative to [the] image of the closet, rather than dependent on its placement inside or outside” (265). That is to say, in Fleche’s contention of the spatial production of homosexual identity,

[where the homosexual is, spatially, is on the side of the closet, relative to the structural principles of containment, secrecy, and mystery. And so, the homosexual identifies by/as the displacement of this structure. (265)

Arguably, the presence of the piano, a ‘container’ of sorts for at least seven different signs for the spectator in Landmarks (2004), similarly conceals the fear of an absence of a spatial relation of the gay figure to their Singaporean home(/closet). Borrowing Fleche’s argument here and taking Mulvey’s view of

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69 My emphasis.
70 Emphasis original.
metonymy as “a spatial relation”, I contend that the displacement of the piano-sign in different (closeted) Singaporean spaces portrayed in the play thus accomplishes the re-location of the marginalised gay figure as constitutive of the Singaporean nation by staging the metonymic production of their relative space. (Re)inscribing and tethering closeted spaces together—namely, Son’s room in “Fugue”; the apartment of the cohabitative gay couple in “Rendezvous”; the “out” Nation Parties on the offshore island of Sentosa alluded to in “Dreaming”; historical and contemporaneous Singaporean queer spaces in “Kings”; and metatheatrically, the structure of the theatre itself that permits queer visibility within its own circumscribed space—the piano thus identifies the gay figure in Singapore relationally, metonymically. In other words, rather than being dependent on being inside or outside the Singaporean landscape, Heng’s staging possibly provisionally situates the gay figure in Bhabha’s liminal, national, performative space, relative to the nation and, as Bhabha would have it, necessary in Singapore’s identitarian imagining.

Conclusion: Reinscribing Singapore as “Home”

The intent of this chapter was to analyse how Heng’s 2004 staging of Landmarks by Alfian Sa’at successfully re-locates the marginalised gay figure in the Singaporean spatial imaginary, accomplishing a reclamation of Singapore as “home” by disrupting the oppressive, heterosexist gaze of the State and, potentially, the voyeuristic spectator. By explicating on Heng’s use of the piano as the excess of the sign in Landmarks (2004), I have suggested that his staging provides an alternative site of identification for the marginalised gay figure in spite of the State’s proscription of queer space in Singapore. In the following chapter, I turn to Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3, the final instalment of the trilogy that explores queer thought through the intertextualities provided by literature.
Chapter 3

A (Re)imagined Future in Alfian Sa’at’s *Happy Endings*

“There are two things you can do with a book. You can either jump in and stay there, which is basically literature as consolation; or you can, you know, jump in and jump out transformed, which is literature as inspiration. [...] How do you make fiction something real?” (Alfian Sa’at “Feedback Friday”)

“Demands for ‘homosexual rights’ are the political claims of a narrow interest group masquerading as legal entitlements. [...] You cannot make a human wrong a human right.” (Thio)

In Service of Public Morality: The Socio-Political Context of *Happy Endings*

Nation.04 was a three-day festival that ran from 7 to 9 August 2004, six months after *Landmarks* (2004) was staged. It was the largest Nation Day to date, reportedly generating SGD10 million (USD6 million in 2004) in tourism revenue for Singapore (Stuart Koe qtd. in T. Fong 8). A themed party opened the festival: “Military Ball: Make Love, Not War” was held at the Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre located in the CBD. In addition to two art exhibitions held in conjunction with Nation.04, three renowned theatre companies contributed queer-themed plays to the inaugural “Nation Arts Programme” section of the revelries. But Alfian’s implied scepticism of the State’s apparent liberalisation, made evident in *Landmarks*, would prove prescient in the months that followed. Yet another shift in the State’s attitude towards sexual minorities was coincident with a change in the nation’s leadership. On 12 August 2004, just three days following Nation.04, Singapore saw the inauguration of its third and current Prime Minister (PM), Lee Hsien

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71 TNS staged Haresh Sharma’s *Mardi Gras*, first staged the year before, and its sequel, *Top or Bottom* (dir. A. Tan); Toy Factory staged a Mandarin double-bill production of Eleanor Wong’s *Mergers and Accusations* (dir. B.T. Goh) and *Wills and Secession* (dir. N. Chia), first restaged in its entirety by W!LD RICE in 2003 (dir. C. Wong); and Dream Academy Productions staged *Revenge of the Dim Sum Dollies*, the second production of the popular serialised musical cabaret run by the company (dir. Oei, D. Tan and S. Tan).
Loong.

Soon after, the much anticipated Snowball.04 party, a private Christmas party aimed at the local queer community and organised by Jungle Media, was denied a Public Entertainment Licence by the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) of the Singapore Police Force (SPF). The late denial or revocation of a public entertainment licence under the Public Entertainment and Meetings Act had long been a panoptic strategy used by the Singaporean State. Framed as moving towards giving more “responsibility” over content regulation to “the individual, the public, particularly parents, and the industry” (CRC 2003), the State encourages artists to practice self-censorship by expressing the criteria for the provision of licences in vague terms. Should their work be found to be either “wholly or in part of an indecent, immoral, offensive, subversive or improper nature” or “contrary to public interest” in the view of the Licensing Officer, artists are said to breach what are ubiquitously referred to as “out-of-bounds (OB) markers” and would have their licences suspended or cancelled at the last minute (Public Entertainments and Meetings Act).

With effect from 1 January 2015, the Parliament of Singapore amended the Act in question so that the Licensing Officer must at least provide prior written notice of his intention to refuse, suspend or cancel a licence. However, as at 2004, licences were often refused or cancelled without any comprehensive explanation. It seems warranted, therefore, that the detailed reasons provided in a press statement by the SPF upon its denial of Snowball.04 be reproduced here at some length. The SPF stated:

72 “OB markers” is a term defined by William Peterson as “denot[ing] the limits of free expression” (Theater and the Politics of Culture 253). They are designed to be opaque so that artists must always be wary that their works do not overtly challenge the dominant order.

73 For example, earlier in 2004, The Fun Stage, a theatre group for youth, had applied for a public entertainment licence to hold three forums on 6, 20 and 27 Mar. 2004, to complement the staging of their then upcoming play, Lovers’ Words. The play by Taiwanese playwright Qui An Chen considered gay rights in an imagined society in which heterosexuals comprised the minority. The intended forums, which explored themes such as the treatment and expression of “same-sex love in Chinese literature and culture”, were targeted at “academics, critics and theatre practitioners”. On 4 Mar. 2004, the PELU issued its refusal a mere two days before the first planned forum, summarily stating that they had been deemed “contrary to public interest” (Oon 16).
(a) The promotional materials were widely advertised on Fridae.com, a known gay portal; 
(b) Observations during the indoor Opening Ball at Suntec showed that patrons of the same gender were seen openly kissing and intimately touching each other. Some of the revellers were cross-dressed, for example, males wearing skirts. Patrons were also seen using the toilets of the opposite sex. The behaviour of these patrons suggested that most of them were probably gays/lesbians and this was thus an event almost exclusively for gays/lesbians; 
(c) A number of couples of the same sex were seen hugging and kissing in public after the event while waiting for taxis and checking into the nearby hotels after the party. 
(d) Several letters of complaint were received from some patrons about the openly gay acts at the Ball. (SPF)

Based on these observations, the police deduced that Snowball.04 would be contrary to the moral values of the conservative majority and thus could not be allowed to eventuate. That the revellers of Nation.04 had been under surveillance was made explicit in the statement, which also concluded with the implied foreclosure of any appeal made by the organisers: “Future applications for events of similar nature will be closely scrutinised” (SPF).

The invocation of the oft-cited but arguably largely mythical “conservative majority” is perhaps indicative of the purpose of such an exhaustive public statement, that is, to clarify the disapprobative position that Singaporeans are expected to take in relation to the nation’s gay citizenry. By enumerating the ways in which “gay/lesbian” patrons had breached “OB markers”, the SPF had elucidated the continued abjection of the gay figure in Singapore for the public. This had been foreshadowed in PM Goh’s 2003 National Day Rally speech. Clearly under pressure from “conservative Singaporeans and religious leaders”

74 Following the Mar. 2004 denial of Funstage’s application to hold the forums and the criticism of the SPF in The Straits Times by Jason Wee, editor of Vehicle, an art journal, the SPF could also have been responding to the call to “spell out what they felt was unsuitable” when refusing to issue public entertainment licences (Oon 16). A press statement had also been unexpectedly released in May 2000 when the SPF had denied a licence to “Gays and Lesbians Within Singapore 21”, a forum proposed by Alex Au, part of the People Like Us group (I. Ng 84).
following his commendable position of tolerance and reception of gay individuals into sensitive positions of the Civil Service (Elegant “Lion in Winter”), PM Goh assured the nation that his comments did “not signal any change in policy that would erode the moral standards of Singapore, or [Singapore’s] family values”. He further stressed: “I do not encourage or endorse a gay lifestyle. Singapore is still a traditional and conservative Asian society” (C.T. Goh “PM’s NDR 2003”).

By April 2005, the Licensing Division of the SPF had issued a blanket ban on all future Nation parties. Meaningfully, the notification of the ban was delivered to organisers a month following a comment made by Junior Minister for Health, Dr Balaji Sadasivan, during the 2005 Parliamentary Budget debate. Sadasivan had posited that the sudden rise of HIV infections—a third of which affected homosexual men at the time—was attributable to the Nation parties. He said:

We do not know the reasons for the sharp increase of HIV in the gay community. An [unnamed] epidemiologist has suggested that this may be linked to the annual predominantly gay party in Sentosa—the Nation Party—which allowed gays from high prevalence societies to fraternise with local gay men, seeding the infection in the local community. [...] (Sadasivan, qtd. in “S’pore Gay Party Moves”)

Dr Sadasivan, a neurosurgeon, had also delivered a speech at the Obstetrical & Gynaecological Society entitled “The Limits of the Brain” in Dec. 2002. Citing a study of the brains of “gay sheep” conducted by researchers at the Oregon Health and Science University School of Medicine published in Journal Endocrinology, Sadasivan had purportedly stated:

Research has also shown that the brain of homosexuals is structurally different from heterosexuals. It is likely therefore that the homosexual tendency is imprinted in the brain in utero and homosexuals must live with the tendencies that they inherit as a result of the structural changes in their brain. Within the moral and cultural constraints of our society, we should be tolerant of those who may be different from most of us. (Sunday Times 1 Dec. 2002, qtd. in Au)

According to the Ministry of Health (MOH) HIV update, the number of HIV cases reported rose from 317 in 2005 to 359 in 2006, with 92% being sexually transmitted. Heterosexual sex accounted for two-thirds of newly diagnosed infections as at 2006. 222 heterosexual, 95 homosexual and 14 bisexual had been diagnosed by 2014 (Ministry of Health HIV/AIDS Situation 2010; HIV/AIDS Situation 2014). To date, MOH reports that “[h]eterosexual transmission accounted for 38% [...] while 50% were from homosexual transmission and 10% were from bisexual transmission” (Ministry of Health HIV/AIDS Situation 2015). For numerical figures, see https://www.moh.gov.sg/content/dam/moh_web/Diseases%20and%20Conditions/H/HIV%20%26%20AIDS/ANNEX%20A%20HIV%20AIDS%20UPDATE%202015.pdf.
Considering the rate of heterosexual transmissions had been higher at the time, Sadasivan’s emphasis on the rise in homosexual transmissions betrays a kind of “systematic blindness” that Michel Foucault describes as part of the “Scientia Sexualis” of the State. The “Scientia Sexualis” was a Victorian-era discourse crafted to control sexual behaviour. It was “imbued with age-old delusions”, wherein “moral obstacles, economic or political options, and traditional fears could be recast in a scientific-sounding vocabulary” (Foucault HoS: v1 54). Motivated by bourgeois concerns of population growth, labour capacity and the prevailing hierarchical social order (36-37), this discursive apparatus privileged the heterosexual reproductive unit and isolated peripheral sexualities as perversions that needed to be eliminated (47).

The discourse that produces the gay Singaporean subject as such a perversion is also recognisable in the new PM Lee’s response to the charge of homophobia issued by James Smith, a reporter for TIME magazine. During the “In Conversation’ with Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong” event organised by the Foreign Correspondents Association on 6 October 2005, PM Lee explained the challenging onus that lay on the State to strike a balance between permitting gays “the maximum space” to “live his own life” and ensuring that the “flaunt[ing]” of “gayness” does not become “intrusive and oppressive to the rest of the population” (H.L. Lee qtd. in Peh 10).

As part of the State’s plan to “create a conducive environment for sustained growth in the arts” (41), the first Censorship Review Committee (CRC) had been appointed to review Singapore’s censorship policy and practices. The committee sat while a burgeoning theatre scene tentatively explored the as yet undefined limits of the State’s interest in cultural development from 1990 to 1993 (Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 139-149). Upon receipt of the CRC’s report, Yeo, the then newly appointed Minister for Information and the Arts, had written in response:

[w]e have to strike a good balance between allowing more room for creative expression and maintaining moral standards. [...] [W]e should not liberalise in an unthinking manner just because other countries are also liberalising. We ignore at our peril the link between
moral depravity and the decline of civilisations.
(Singapore Government CRC 1992 3)

Despite the acknowledgment that since “much work of considerable merit has been created by homosexuals, sometimes with homosexual themes[,...] acceptance of, rather than hostility towards, homosexuals is an attitude to be encouraged”, the committee had clearly deemed homosexuality as one spectre that might be responsible for Singapore’s potential slide into “depravity” and eventual “decline” (§2.4.3, 24). With distinct circular logic, the CRC had adduced the illegality of homosexuality as evidence for the “underlying beliefs of Singaporeans] that homosexuality is a form of unnatural sexual behaviour” (§2.4.2, 24), categorising homosexuality with paedophilia, bestiality and child pornography (§2.3.3, 23). As is clearly demonstrated in PM Lee’s response later in 2005 extracted above, the State’s monologic stance on homosexuality had remained significantly unchanged in 13 years—that it is “a lesion, a dysfunction, or a symptom” (Foucault HoS: vl 44) of a social order under threat.

It is this “medicalization of the sexually peculiar” (44), together with the consequent discursive formation of the homosexual subject by the State, that launches the dramatic narrative of Happy Endings: Asian Boys Vol. 3. Significantly, the final instalment of Alfian’s trilogy was staged in the context of intense public debate over the amendments to the Penal Code—which included among them the possible repeal of Section 377—proposed on 8 November 2006 (Singapore Government Consultation Paper) and read in the Parliament of Singapore on 22 and 23 October 2007 (Dr. Teo et al.). Foreshadowed by the playwright as “what would possibly be [his] last gay play” (“Playwright’s Message” “HE Publicity Collaterals” 1), HE (2007) performatively invests in the ongoing public debates that had ensued and challenges the State’s monologic discourse that seeks to isolate and perpetuate the abjection of the gay figure in Singapore. Expanding on my contention that this negotiation of the interstices in the

77 References to the dramatic text will hereafter be to HE, appended with Act, scene and page numbers as they are printed in the play-script. Where I discuss elements of the performance text only, I refer to HE 2007. Video-recording of HE 2007 viewed onsite, with permission from W!LD RICE.
national fabric is achieved through metonymic displacement in the play’s staging, I propose that the stage space in *Landmarks* (2004) may then be paralleled to the chora as put forward by Julia Kristeva.

According to Kristeva, the chora is a discharge of the “energies” in the signifying process, a modality—for it is neither a space nor a coalescence—“generated in order [for someone] to attain to [a] signifying position” (“Revolution” 93-94). Importantly, the chora is that which precedes the subject and is indispensable for significance to occur, yet remains unsignifiable itself (94); it is implied in *Landmarks* (2004) by the return to the unmapped space of the stage at the play’s conclusion.\(^{78}\) I argue that *HE* (2007) seeks to move beyond this chora to the processual and provisional constitution of the gay subject in Singapore. Additionally, a simmering frustration with the need for the gay subject to continuously defer to the repressive scripts written by the State so as to negotiate a proscribed and precarious space for self-expression is evident in *HE*—the play seems to defiantly encourage the active social and political engagement that the State repeatedly cautions against.\(^{79}\) Apposite to the discussion that follows, the means by which the playwright suggests that this can be realised is when “you [the reader/spectator] are holding the pen as well” (Alfian “Feedback Friday”).

Firstly, I will provide a brief synopsis of the play and discuss the main recognisable intertexts of *HE*, bearing in mind Roland Barthes’ criticism of how merely identifying source texts “fall[s] in with the myth of filiation” (Barthes *Image-Music-Text* 160). Secondly, as dialogism and intertextuality are the main rhetorical conventions deployed in the play’s staging, it would be useful to clarify how I use these terms in my analysis. Thirdly, I will conduct an analysis of the play, focusing on how Ivan Heng’s performance methodologies achieve Alfian’s

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\(^{78}\) For Kristeva, the signifying process includes both the Symbolic as defined by Jacques Lacan and what Kristeva calls the “semiotic”. She writes, “Although originally a precondition of the symbolic, the semiotic functions within signifying practices as the result of a transgression of the symbolic” (“Revolution” 118). In contrast to the linguistic and law-governed order of the Symbolic, the semiotic in Kristevan terms is corporeal, rhythmic and kinetic—elements that are innate in the non-verbal dimension of theatrical production and are thus relevantly applicable to this discussion.

\(^{79}\) For some examples of the State’s disapproval of overt activism over the years, see R. Lim 8; K.S. Wong “Real World of Human Rights”; B.S. Koh 4; K.Y. Lee “LKY and the Gay Question” and Peh 10.
stated intent, that is, to explore “the actual process of writing” to answer the question, “Why do we write?” (“Playwright’s Message” “HE Publicity Collaterals” I). Finally, I conclude by elucidating the potential of the play’s intertextuality and dialogism to stage a “revolution” in the Kristevan sense for the gay figure in Singapore, more accurately described as a “subject-in-process” by the end of the play (Moi “Intro.: Kristeva Reader” 13-14).

The Intertexts: Synopses of Peculiar Chris, Maurice and Happy Endings

The seminal coming-out literary works that are the principal influences in HE include Peculiar Chris (J.S. Lee), Maurice (Forster), and to a lesser extent, the second part of Angels in America, that is, Perestroika (Kushner). Necessarily, the intertexts within these constituent texts themselves and their ideological and socio-historical concerns inevitably continue to reverberate within the production of HE (2007), notable among these being Plato’s Symposium. Primarily, however, as will be clarified below, HE is a Bakhtinian and Kristevan ‘rephrasing’ of Peculiar Chris, initially published in 1992 and set in Singapore.

Peculiar Chris

The form that PC takes is a largely linear, descriptive first-person narrative in 19 chapters over a five- to six-year period, bracketed by a metatextual foreword and a narrative epilogue. It is told retrospectively from the point of view of the novel’s protagonist and eponymous Christopher Han, a week after the death of his lover, Samuel. The narrative is interspersed with Chris’s diary entries, his surreal dream sequences and his letters to Jack, his one-night stand in Australia. Similar to Maurice—an intertext which succinctly functions as the signifier of homosexuality between Chris and his love interests—PC is a conventional

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80 I acknowledge that Alfian intertexts and queers William Shakespeare’s Romeo and Juliet in HE as well, as Shakespeare’s work is a plot device that motivates the protagonist to come out to himself in Peculiar Chris (J.S. Lee). This intertext is evident in the titles of scenes that portray homosexual love: “Romeo and Juliet” (1.3.204-206); “Goodbye Juliet” (1.4.207-209; 2.5.250-252); “Hello Romeo” (1.5.209-210; 2.3.240-246) and “Goodbye Romeo” (1.8.215-218). Beyond its thematic similarities, this intertext is not significant in my argument for the efficacy achieved by HE’s intertextual engagement with extant queer texts.

81 Hereafter, PC. All further references are by page number in the text.
Chapter 3: A (Re)Imagined Future In Alfian Sa’at’s *Happy Endings*

*Bildungsroman* with a ‘marriage’ plot. While *Maurice* ultimately rejects the oppressive then prevailing social codes of England that deemed homosexuality unnatural—the protagonist choosing instead to live out his life in exile in the “greenwood” with his lover, Alec Scudder (Forster 196, 236)—PC “consistently privileges the order, rationality and civilised comfort which Singapore strives to represent over the chaotic, intractable forces of the body and nature” (Yeoh 124).

In other words, PC espouses an aligned relationality of the gay man with the ideals espoused by the Singaporean State: all of the gay characters are Chinese, highly educated and extremely wealthy and able to comfortably circumvent the repressive economic and housing measures carried out by the State to protect the heterosexual reproductive institution (Peterson *Theater and the Politics of Culture* 134). In Junior College, Chris, the captain of the swim team, and Sylvia, the chairperson of the Debating Society, become a couple. However, Chris ends things with Sylvia when he experiences his first stirrings of homosexuality, but leaves Sylvia hurt because he is unable to offer her any explanation for the break-up. He then begins his first gay relationship with an older schoolmate, Kenneth Widjaya. But Kenneth eventually rejects his own homosexuality (38-40) and finally leaves Chris to enter an arranged heterosexual marriage in Indonesia.

As an able-bodied male Singaporean, Chris is then drafted into National Service (NS) for the mandatory period of two years after he completes his ‘A’-levels. His official declaration of his homosexuality and admitted engagement in homosexual sex acts brand him with a 302 classification, which is “the military medical designation for officially gay recruits” (C.K.K. Tan 78) that I contend is clearly part of the State’s “Scientia Sexualis”.

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82 Singles under 35 years of age are not eligible to apply for public housing in the “heartlands” where 80.1% of the population reside at the time of this writing in 2016 (Singapore Government *Population; Eligibility*). Long-term gay couples must look to the private housing market where prices can go up to SGD1,383,705 or USD1,028,510 (SGD3440 or USD2557 to rent per month) for a 70m² apartment in areas designated as more “cosmopolitan”, for example, Holland Road, River Valley Road, Orchard Road and Tanglin Road (*Global Property Guide*). Furthermore, there is neither a legislated minimum wage in Singapore nor recognition of spousal rights for *de facto* couples. So that generally, only the “cosmopolitan” elite with substantial purchasing power are able to afford to enter long-term homosexual domestic partnerships below age 35.

83 See Chapter 1 of this thesis for a detailed explanation of classification 302. See also C.-S. Lim “Serving Singapore as a Gay Man” for an anecdote of the State processes involved in dealing with
employment status (PES) that sets him apart from frontline soldiers performing
more physically demanding training because of his 302 classification, Chris is
placed in an administrative role in the military transport unit. At this posting, he
falls in love with and enters into a domestic partnership with Lieutenant Samuel
Lye, a Yale graduate in receipt of a prestigious government scholarship. Samuel
inducts him into a homonormative world of long-term gay couples in
cohabitative relationships. Soon after, hegemonic order is restored when Samuel
dies from AIDS, the cause of which is not ‘wanton’ homosexual promiscuity as
advanced by the State, but a blood transfusion needed due to critical injuries
sustained in a vehicular accident. The novel ends on an ambivalent note,
arguably, depicting the preferred outcome of the State: Chris and Sam’s domestic
union is shown to fail, and the openly gay Chris leaves Singapore to further his
studies in England.

Although it was initially distributed “often in brown-paper covered copies
passed from hand to hand” (N. Collett qtd. in PC n.p.), the contemporaneous
critical reception looked favourably on the novel’s conservative “emphasis […]
clearly on gay relationships as opposed to gay sex” (M. Lanham, qtd. in PC n.p.).
Although these reviews possibly framed the novel as ineffectual in its capacity to
challenge hegemonic, heteronormative discourse, as Paul Yeoh
acknowledges, PC
“[b]ear[s] testimony and offer[s] an important resource for identity-formation”,
and its “efforts to transpose the coming out novel into a Singapore context should
not be underestimated” (131). Indeed, as Plato’s Symposium is the means by which
Clive Durham makes his homosexual affections known to Maurice (Forster 42,
50), Forster’s text is instrumental in facilitating the connections between gay
men in PC (15, 131, 226); and in turn, Lee’s text played an active role in facilitating
connections between gay men in Singapore. PC was, for Alfian and many others
“coming out to themselves” in Singapore, a narrative that was “instrumental in
validating [their] experiences” when mainstream Singaporean discourse induced
guilt, dispensed blame and threatened shame if gay sexuality was brought up at
all (Alfian “Dear Joe (I): A Dialogue Between Playwright & Novelist” “HE Publicity

openly homosexual men in the military; and C.K.K. Tan “Oi, Recruit!” for a critical investigation of
the experience of gay men in NS.
Collaterals” 3). In this way, *Maurice* and *PC* can be said to have “become part of a queer 'mediascape' which contradict[s] the negative images of homosexuality promoted within the national ideology” (Appadurai 23). However, in his critique of *PC*, Yeoh also notes that:

> Not surprisingly, the ideal gay relationship imagined by the novel represents a conservative vision as far as the dominant national ideology is concerned [because] the gay model to which Chris is drawn is a world of domestic order, privilege and a sense of emotional connectedness. (126-127)

Given the precarious position of the gay man in Singapore, once subject to institutional persecution (Peterson “Sexual Minorities”; *Theater and the Politics of Culture* 153-157; R.H.K. Heng), the conservatism of *PC* can be seen as justifiable. On balance, although Forster wrote *Maurice* in 1914, due to the legal and social circumscription of homosexuality, the work was only published in 1971, a few years after the 1967 partial decriminalisation of homosexuality in England. Even so, according to Yeoh, it is “remarkable [...] how little [PC] challenges [Singapore's] national values” (127). This challenge is taken up by Alfian and Heng in *HE* (2007).

*Happy Endings*

*HE* is a play in two Acts. In the first Act, the plot of *PC* is staged in a prologue and 10 scenes, with the addition of a narrator named Muse. Muse sets the scene in 1992, the night before Joe, the author, books into camp to begin his NS (1.Prologue.191). Joe is “stuck” (1.Prologue.191) at a critical turn of his novel when the “[t]ragedy [of Samuel’s HIV diagnosis] strikes” (1.Prologue.196). Joe is initially portrayed as tentative and unsure of himself, being “just a 20-year old trying to write a book” (1.Prologue.192) and having “only had sex once” (1.Prologue.195). Muse alerts the audience to the significance of *PC* when he tells Joe that “[n]obody's written a book like [his] before. Not in Singapore anyway” (1.Prologue.194), but also confronts the author on some of his plot motivations.
For example, he asks, “Why does every gay story have to involve someone dying? You can do better than that” (1. Prologue. 196). Saying that Joe “need[s] a break” (1. Prologue. 197), Muse instructs him to “[r]ead what [he has] got so far […] [f]rom the very beginning” (1. Prologue. 197) as a means to reinvigorate his writing process. As he “reads”, Joe performs the role of his protagonist, Chris, and enacts the plot of the novel. The characters of Sylvia, Kenneth, Nicholas and Samuel are introduced to the audience as they enter Chris’s life. By the end of the enacted narration of PC, Muse reveals himself to be Chris, the novel’s protagonist, now 33 years old. Muse/Chris then issues an invitation to Joe—and the spectator—to find out what happens to Chris, who had been unsure if he would be “leaving for good” at end of Lee’s novel (J. S. Lee PC 225). At the point when Muse and Joe exit through the door upstage at the end of Act 1 (HE 2007), a caveat spectator is delivered to frame Act 2 of HE: despite its seeming realistic mode, what is staged is within the imaginary realm of Lee’s PC (1.10.229).

The second Act follows the characters of PC, 15 years on, and abandons the narrator and metatheatrical staging of the novel’s plot in Act 1. The contemporaneous political climate is also firmly alluded to in the space-off, and Alfian’s extrapolation of PC’s narrative is often polemical, belying its modernist influences, as the characters present different perspectives of the ongoing debate on homosexuality and gay rights in Singapore. Syl is now a lawyer and a vocal gay rights activist, “Singapore’s most famous fag hag” (2.1.231); Nick is completely transformed and has renounced his effeminate, camp persona in Act 1 for one that is butch and portrayed as reckless, interested only in drug-saturated gay circuit parties and the physically demanding Dragon boat sport (2.1.233); and Ken returns as a public speaker peddling a “cure” to Singapore’s gay community (2.5.250-251) that is aligned with fundamentalist Christian dogma. Two new characters are introduced to the dramatic narrative and add to the play’s rich intertextuality. Syl and Chris both want to help a 60-year-old man, Alec—the name of the protagonist’s lover in Maurice—whose dismissal from his teaching position occurs after the State’s discovery of his homosexuality (2.9.237); and Kuang Ming is a younger gay man in Syl’s employ.
The realism of the first seven scenes in Act 2 is interrogated in “Broken Mirrors” (2.8.260-269). In this scene, the childhood friends, now reacquainted as adults, resolve their differences and personal traumas on stage. And with the help of Alec, Chris eventually finds love again with Kuang Ming. In keeping with the objective of the play to destabilise the fixed boundaries of ‘truth’ imposed by the dominant order, the theatrical mode shifts once more in “Coming Home” (2.9.269-272), when Joe and Chris meet again. Aptly, Joe is no longer the uncertain writer who was initially introduced to the spectator. Rather, when Chris asks him, “So what happens to us?” Joe replies assuredly, “I think you can figure that out for yourself. You don’t need me anymore” (2.9.271). With his encouraging words, the author empowers Chris, a character whom Joe had initially written into being, with the power to signify as an autonomous subject, and both Joe and Chris affirm their ensuing happiness at the play’s close.

In HE, Alfian significantly departs from conventional narratives of homosexual love, including PC, which have often depicted homosexuality “as an essentially tragic condition” (Woods 217). He instead chooses to write (provisional) happy endings for most of the characters. In other words, in HE, Alfian appeals to the writing process as key in the claim to power of the marginalised gay figure in Singapore. The discursive (re)construction that the playwright alludes to may be understood as part of an irruption\(^4\) into the State’s unchanging discourse of the gay subject, a process similar to that described by Judith Butler. In her criticism of the charge that feminism had not yet successfully specified a “stable subject”, Butler problematizes the assumptions that would underlie such a construction (Gender Trouble 35). To do this, she cites Foucault’s influential genealogical inquiry, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1, which exposed the systematic discursive production of the (homosexual) subject (Gender Trouble 33-34).

Noting the damaging exclusionary practices that would be ineluctable in reifying “the subject of feminism”, Butler nonetheless concedes to the impracticability of a complete disavowal of representational politics (36).

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\(^4\) I borrow Kristeva’s term, “irruption”, to accurately refer to a breaking into the Symbolic in order to disrupt it. This is distinguished from “eruption”, which refers to a bursting forth and is not precisely relevant to my discussion of the portrayal of marginalised figures in this thesis.
identifies the need to engage in a critical discourse that interrogates the arbitrary, yet legitimised, classifications of identity that seek to “engender, naturalise, and immobilise” (36). The facet of identity that particularly troubles Butler at first is, somewhat obviously, that of gender, given her view that “persons’ only become intelligible through becoming gendered in conformity with recognisable standards of gender intelligibility” (47). Even Foucault, whose ideas exert a notable influence on Butler’s theory of gender, is observed by Butler to implicitly subscribe to the culturally produced binary categories of “man” and “woman” (53-55) in his reading of the hermaphrodite Herculine Barbin (Foucault “Intro.: Herculine” vii-xvii). In her thesis, which she develops in subsequent works (see Butler “Performative Acts”; Gender Trouble; Bodies), Butler meticulously demonstrates how her proposal of a theory of the discursive performativity of gender could be directed to destabilising the illusive reifications that foreclose possibilities of identities beyond that which are hegemonically sanctioned. Butler’s refutation of the corporeal anchor of gender has had a significant impact on feminist and queer theory (“Performative Acts” 521-522), as she places emphasis on the linguistic basis of not merely gender, but other facets of identity as well and even the body itself.  

 Crucially for my purposes, Butler’s theory of the discursive performativity of identity formation points to the potential for the gay figure in Singapore to refashion his State-conferred (abject) identity through the appropriation of the Derridean power of “citationality” (Bodies 208-209), which Alfian alludes to in his invitation to the reader/spectator to “hol[d] the pen” (“Feedback Friday”).

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85 Note that Butler’s theory of the discursive performativity of identity is distinguished from Bhabha’s concept of the “performative” as opposed to the “pedagogical”. However, the two complement each other. That is to say, in Bhabha’s view, the “performative” irrupts from the in-between of, and disrupts, an ostensibly stable hegemonic narrative. Similar to Butler, Bhabha also views identities as being enacted and constantly shifting (Bhabha Location of Culture passim). Both theorists consider the processual formation of identity and its subsequent enactment as the means by which marginalised others become agentic subjects. Butler’s theory of performativity and Bhabha’s concept of the “performative” bear significantly on the ideas developed in this thesis, and I use them in concert.

86 In “Signature Event Context”, Jacques Derrida impugns J.L. Austin’s claim that the success of performative utterances is contingent on adhering to authorial intention and context. Derrida performs a deconstruction of Austin’s argument to give evidence to the contrary. Emphasising “the essential iterability of the sign” that cannot definitively be limited by intention or context (93), Derrida contends, instead, that signs can be translocated and appropriated—that is to say, reiterated—in unpredictable ways. He refers to this process as “citational grafting”. In this way,
Chapter 3: A (Re)Imagined Future In Alfian Sa’at’s *Happy Endings*

Aptly, then, *HE* enacts this very re-fashioning of the Singaporean gay figure in its exploration of the space of literature and the “re-citation” of monogamous (homosexual) domestic partnerships and (homosexual) romantic love. Moreover, through the layers of social, political and seminal gay literary texts interwoven into the dramatic narrative of the play, *The Asian Boys Trilogy* here climaxes—as the title, *Happy Endings*, connotes—by invoking dramatic intertextuality. By this, I do not refer to the “invisible presences” put forward by Marvin Carlson as the inevitable, yet neglected elements of performance for analysis, namely, the previous roles of actors where celebrity is noteworthy, allusions to other performance texts of the same production or other works in the extant repertoire of the company staging the performance (“Invisible Presences”), save, of course, *Dreamplay* and *Landmarks*. Rather, my analysis considers the rich interplay of texts in *HE* and the role that this intertextuality has in the signifying process of the gay subject of the play. In a similar move to the portrayal of his predecessor (the character, Joe), Alfian proffers the intertext of the play, itself a “citational” process, as a means by which the gay spectator of *HE* (2007) may be transposed to a new scheme of *significance*, so as to similarly find happiness as a gay subject-in-process.

**Rhetorical Conventions: Dialogism and Intertextuality in *HE* (2007)**

Before we turn to the political efficacy of *HE* (2007) as an intertext, the concept of intertextuality as a rhetorical convention in the play must first be explicated. To this end, the discussion first turns to “dialogism”, from which the concept of intertextuality is derived.

Though the term was not coined by Mikhail Bakhtin himself, “dialogism” is a concept that permeates all his ruminations on language, most comprehensively expounded in *The Dialogic Imagination* (Holquist *Dialogism* 15; Bakhtin *Dialogic Imagination*). Viewing all utterances as existing relationally with those that have come before and after, Bakhtin argued that language is always the failure of the sign to mean what the author intends in any given context is quintessential to the very construction of the sign itself (97, 101-103).
already heteroglot, that is, permeated with many different voices (*Dialogic Imagination* 272, 291). Heteroglossia is explained as follows:

> When a member of a speaking collective comes upon a word, it is not as a neutral word of language, not as a word free from the aspirations and evaluations of other, uninhabited by others’ voices. No, he receives the word from another’s voice and filled with that other voice. The word enters his context from another context, permeated with the interpretations of others. His own thought finds the word already inhabited. (201)

The stress on otherness and community in dialogic interaction implied above situates “language in the individual consciousness [...] on the borderline between oneself and the other” (293), recalling the importance of relationality in subject formation. Furthermore, the polyphony inherent in dialogism facilitates the interanimation of different languages and cultural discourses, so that “language [becomes] something entirely different, its very nature changed” (65). According to Graham Allen, this Bakhtinian view of the polyvocality of language is posited to manifest a dynamism that threatens unitary, hegemonic texts (Allen 29), which is a point germane to the potential of *The Asian Boys Trilogy* to disrupt the monologic discourse of the Singaporean State. It should be noted, however, that Bakhtin exalted the dialogic novel over poetry and drama which he dismissed as inescapably monologic forms: poetry had been utilised in the “cultural, national and political centralisation of the verbal-ideological world in the higher official socio-ideological levels” (*Dialogic Imagination* 273); and “the whole concept of a dramatic action”, in his view, “as that which resolves all dialogic oppositions, is purely monologic” (*Dostoevsky’s Poetics* 17).

Nevertheless, Helene Keyssar notes that the concepts in *The Dialogic Imagination* seem centred in the most elemental attributes of dramatic forms. [...] The continuous recreation of meaning, what Bakhtin calls the heteroglossia of communication, is the basic condition and phenomenon of theatre. (88–89)
With this observation, Keyssar suggests that it is Bakhtin’s understanding of drama based on the Aristotelian unities of action, place and time that disqualifies drama in his theory of dialogism. She goes on to elucidate how a selection of modern dramas in fact reject “monologism and the patriarchal authority of the drama in performance” (95), thereby discursively “celebrat[ing] rather than annihilat[ing] or exil[ing] difference” (93)—a practice so prized by Bakhtin in the dialogic novel. Additionally, Michael Holquist states that “‘novel’ is merely the name Bakhtin gives to whatever force is at work within a given literary system to reveal the limits, the artificial constraints of that system” (“Intro.: Dialogic Imagination” xxix), which, as mentioned earlier, describes the overarching intent of HE. Taking this view, HE, layered as it is by the contemporaneous texts from the political milieu and at least two main novels, may thus be referred to as “an intentional novelistic hybrid” (Bakhtin Dialogic Imagination 390-391) that is just as polyphonic and hybridised as Bakhtin’s dialogic novel. Relevantly, Kristeva would use Bakhtin’s notion of dialogism in developing her theory of intertextuality and its role in the signifying process (Kristeva “Word, Dialogue and Novel”).

Similar to Bakhtin before her, Kristeva emphasises the nature of the text as being composed of a myriad of previous utterances. She adds, however, that these texts include all cultural and social discursive structures, so that texts are not definitively discrete, stable forms in her view. To Kristeva, they are always already intertexts. As Allen observes, in Kristeva’s paradigm, texts are sites of the agon of signifiance because they “embody society’s dialogic conflict over the meaning of words” (Allen 36). Impossible to be reduced to mere hegemonic representation then, the intertext is a practice and a productivity wherein the author/speaker, reader/listener/spectator and society and history are continuously encouraged to be involved in the production of meaning (Kristeva Desire in Language 65). Emphasising the processual and productive nature of the intertext, Kristeva posits that intertextuality facilitates a subversive transposition from “the old

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87 Keyssar names Georg Bücher’s Woyzeck, Ntozake Shange’s for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enuf and boogie woogie landscapes and works by Caryl Churchill as exemplars of modern dramas that are not monologic in the Bakhtinian sense.
position [to] the formation of a new one”, thereby engendering a plurality of subject positionalities, permutations and exchanges made available to the subject (“Revolution” III). The subject as constituted by the signifying process—of which the irruption, or *significance*, of intertextuality is part—is thus also a “work in progress” that “ought not to be fixed and stabilised” (Moi “Intro.: Kristeva Reader” 14). Hence, we have the Kristevan construction of the “subject-in-process”.\(^{88}\) In this way, intertextuality—a term that Kristeva then renominates as “transposition”—challenges the reifying hegemonic structures that seek to confine the subject (“Revolution” II-II2). According to Allen, “[w]hat Kristeva calls transposition directly concerns [a] struggle to employ pre-existent signifying practices for different purposes”, namely, “the destruction of the old position and the formation of a new one” (Kristeva, qtd. in Allen 53).

Granted, Kristeva cautions against the descent into “the banal sense of ‘study of sources’” (“Revolution” III); and Barthes makes a similar assertion that “the intertextual [...] is not to be confused with some origin of the text” (*Image-Music-Text* 160). But as Allen reminds us regarding Kristeva’s theory of “transposition”, it is important to “recognise that texts do not just utilise previous textual units[,] but that they transform them and give them [...] new signifying positions” (Allen 53). Therefore, we must first understand from what “old position” the (inter)text of HE launches. It has therefore been necessary to acknowledge the main intertexts in HE to elucidate the ways in which the play accomplishes the Kristevan transposition of the gay man from a State-sanctioned monologic figuration to an empowered dynamic positionality as a subject-in-process. Indeed, in Kristevan terms, Lee’s novel does not utilise Maurice to “pass from one sign system to another, to exchange and permutate them; [to] the articulation of the new system with [...] new representability” (Kristeva “Revolution” III). There is little, if any, transposition of the gay subject achieved in *PC*, for *Maurice* does not function as an intertext or a catalyst to change, but is merely alluded to as a signifier of homosexuality. In contrast, Alfian’s *HE* (2007) does perform such a repositioning of subject positions by dramatically

\(^{88}\) Moi’s translates Kristeva’s “*le sujet-en-procès*” as “the subject in process/on trial”, described as “the mobile, unfixed, subversive writing subject” (*Moi Kristeva Reader* 89).
transposing PC into a new schema of signifying possibilities staged in the play. Hence, as an intertext, HE (2007) enacts a challenge to the State’s monologic discourse by offering the marginalised gay figure, in performance, the power to signify as an agentic and dynamic socio-political subject-in-process in Singapore.

For the reasons so far outlined, I have favoured Bakhtin’s philosophy of dialogism and Kristeva’s explication of intertextuality, both theories grounded in the social with an emphasis on praxis so as to create opportunities for the subject-in-process, as opposed to that put forth by Harold Bloom in The Anxiety of Influence. The question of why writers write that troubled Alfian is without a doubt redolent of the concerns that also beleaguered Bloom, especially as the playwright sought to adapt and extrapolate from the narrative of Singapore’s first gay novel, Johann S. Lee’s Peculiar Chris, in HE. Nonetheless, HE (2007) in its context cannot conscionably be simply reduced to a plausible defence against the playwright’s predecessors that Bloom would allege. On the contrary, Bloom’s conceptualisation, founded as it is on an analysis of a tradition of British poetry and the English literary canon, becomes problematic when applied to multiply othered writers like Alfian Sa’at.

I contend that, firstly, rather than as a demonstration of agonistic posturing, minority writing is always already heteroglot. Given this, as Showalter argues, several discursive possibilities are in dialogue with each other, including the dominant order with which such historically “muted groups” of writers must negotiate and write against (qtd. in Allen 159). And secondly, as was the case with PC (J.S. Lee), works by othered writers become, in turn, yet another avenue for the expression of historically muted subjectivities and, more significantly, a metonym that establishes a dynamic relationality within the marginalised community itself. Significantly, having returned to Singapore to watch the run of HE 2007 that was inspired by his first novel, PC, Lee states on his Facebook page that he had, in turn, been “inspired by his experiences” (“About Johann”). As if to affirm the transposing effects of the play as an intertext and a metonym for historically muted subjectivities, the second (To Know Where I’m Coming From)

89 See Chapter 1 of this thesis, where the Bloomsian struggle that ensues between an artist and his predecessors is further explained.
and third (Quiet Time) novels in Lee’s own trilogy were then written and released in 2007 and 2008 respectively. As I will elucidate further below, especially in my analysis of the function of the production’s main sets, HE (2007) dialogically engages and interpellates the spectator of the play consistently.

In Conversation: Establishing the Dialogic Intent of HE (2007)

The transposing power of dialogism and intertextuality in reading and writing is established in the play’s publicity collaterals, where the pages of the programme booklet are styled as photocopies of other pages in that same publication. In the margins of each page image, lines of text from other pages intrude into the frame to emphasise the intertextuality that underpins the play (Figure 3-2). Other intertexts included in the programme booklet also serve to further highlight the importance of dialogue and relationality that HE (2007) advocates.

Foremost of these are excerpts from the email correspondence between Alfian and the author of PC, Lee ("Dear Joe (1) "HE Publicity Collaterals" 3-6). In their dialogue, the spectator is privy to what could sometimes be intimate snippets of conversation that would eventually inspire the play that they have come to the theatre to watch. For instance, Alfian shares how influential PC was for him when he was “first growing up and coming out to [him]self” and that he had “teared [...] while [he] was reading some of the passages” of PC again when he had struck up an acquaintance with Lee (3). The playwright describes how much he had wanted PC and Chris to be real (5), “the different parts inside [Alfian] moving from innocence to jadedness, idealism and scepticism, naiveté and world-weariness” as he re-read Lee’s narrative, thereby expressing the dialogic effects of PC on his teenage and adult, past and present personae (3, 5). Similarly for Lee, nostalgia permeates his writing as their correspondence progresses, and we discover that Alfian had reached out to him while he was “in the midst of filling in a form […] for naturalisation as a UK citizen” (5). The spectator is also informed that Lee’s dialogue with Alfian had aroused in him “more spirit, and fertility of mind” (6), “forc[ing] [him] to look back, look back…before [he] cut the umbilical cord to [his] motherland forever” (5).
Chapter 3: A (Re)Imagined Future In Alfian Sa’at’s *Happy Endings*

In the publication of these excerpts as part of the publicity collaterals, the act of reading and writing is underscored for the spectator of the play, now perhaps receptive to the ambitious interplay of texts that the play stages. Moreover, with these excerpts, Alfian arguably enters into the performance text of *HE* (2007) himself, just as the character Joe enters the world of his novel at the end of Act 1 (1.10.229). Notably, the playwright intertexts a well-known personal experience in the dramatic narrative as well, explored in the analysis of the character Alec below. In doing so, Alfian discursively performs the transposition that both he and Lee experience as a result of the intertexts—PC, *HE*, their dialogue—by which the artists are processually “written” and, in turn, write. These, in addition to the inclusion of selected fan mail received by Lee (“Dear Joe (II): Fan Mail From Readers of ‘Peculiar Chris’” “*HE* Publicity Collaterals” 7), efficaciously contribute to the play’s emphasis on the processes of writing and active reading in order to produce a textual space for gay subject identification and community. More importantly, juxtaposed against excerpts of the State’s various statements pertaining to “Men having Sex with Men” and gay rights in Singapore (Figure 3-2), the personal, epistolary intertexts serve as a dialogic interruption in the State’s monologic discourse that seeks to reify the gay figure as abject (“Footnotes” “*HE* Publicity Collaterals” 8-9).

The discursive process is further emphasised in the cover image of the programme booklet pictured above, which features the character of Muse, played by Robin Goh, looking up in ecstasy (Figure 3-1). “[A]bstract [and] ethereal” (1.Prologue.192), Muse is seemingly naked except for his wings which are the fanned out pages of a book, possibly subverting the “fundamentalist” (Christian) dogma that Ken embraces in promulgating his “cure” to homosexuals in Singapore later in the play (2.5.251-251). In other words, instead of a monologic religious Coming, Muse’s book-wings, which are also part of the character’s costume, allude to an intertextual coming/cumming for the gay reader/spectator. The liberating and dynamic *signification* of the gay subject in a dialogic relation to literature is introduced here and reiterated in the depiction of the cast in defiant open-mouthed laughter (e.g. Figure 3-3), later realised in the “happy endings” of the dramatic narrative.
Figure 3-1: Back and Front Cover. Happy Endings Programme Booklet. (WILDRICE Ltd)

Figure 3-2: “Footnotes.” Happy Endings Programme Booklet. (WILDRICE Ltd)
Notably, when Muse’s angelic figuration had been envisaged by Ivan Heng during the play’s conceptualisation, Alan Seah, the collaterals designer, had described its inevitable allusion to Tony Kushner’s *Angels in America* as “so passé” (I. Heng “Feedback Friday” *HE* 2007).\(^9\) I suggest, however, that the intertext of Kushner’s angelic figure is apropos in *HE*’s challenge to the State’s monologic discourse due to the transposition of the figure in Alfian’s work: Muse is a character that the author, Joe, had initially written into being, but appears to be cognizant of his own discursive formation. The words of the character Hannah Porter Pitt in *Perestroika* are appropriate at this juncture:

HANNAH: An angel is just a belief, with wings and arms that can carry you. It’s naught to be afraid of. If it lets you down, reject it. Seek for something new. (Kushner Four.6.237)

While Heng’s and Alfian’s transposition is not merely a personification of “a belief” as such, it possibly symbolises an irruption of the artists’ inner creative drives (the semiotic in Kristevan terms) inspiring the spectator to play with and autonomously enact the discursive creation of their own subjectivities. Furthermore, whereas the heavenly beings in Kushner’s play pressure the prophet Prior Walter to “stop moving”, cease, be immobile “and never thirst again” (*Perestroika* Five.5.265), Muse chides Joe for his apathetic distance from his characters (that is, his resistance to dialogic interaction):

MUSE: [...] But from a safe distance. Anytime they want to look away, they can stop reading. You want to take them into the water but their feet remain dry. Just like yours. [...]  

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\(^9\) The plot of *Perestroika* picks up from the closing scene of *Millennium Approaches*, the first play in Kushner’s *Angels in America*. In brief, *Perestroika* centres around the Prophet Walter Prior who is a gay man with HIV at the height of the AIDS epidemic in the 1980s-1990s. The overall tone is an inspiring one, where Prior rejects the passivity he performs in *Millennium Approaches* and defies the Angel’s injunction on the progress of humankind. Relevant to the discernible themes in *HE* (2007), Prior actively chooses to live and carry on despite his troubles, supported by his friends and family.
Thus, as an intertext, Kushner's angel is transposed in Muse from its figuration as a herald delivering the Word (Kushner 172). And in turn, Muse facilitates Joe's transposition to a dynamic signifying positionality as a gay author not solely determined by the dominant order by HE's conclusion.

**Authenticating Conventions: Alfian's Dismissal and Ongoing Public Debates in Singapore**

In Act 2, the spectator is presented with at least three different political positions that were observable in the then ongoing debates on gay rights over the repeal of Section 377 of the Penal Code. These impassioned public arguments are chiefly presented in the debates that Syl has with Ken and Nick discussed below. Significantly, the playwright's own experience with the institutionalised discrimination that inheres in the position of the State in relation to its gay citizenry is also intertexted in HE.

In May 2007, Alfian was suddenly and without explanation terminated from employment as a secondary school relief teacher by the Ministry of Education (MOE). In the correspondence between himself and the MOE published on his widely read blog, Alfian meticulously enumerates how he met and exceeded the stated requirements for the job, before reproaching the MOE for its obfuscation rather than elucidation of its “stringent criteria”, “specific requirements” and the nebulous “several factors” upon which his dismissal was based (“Kafka's Shadow”). In HE, Syl informs Chris of a recent case that unmistakably refers to the playwright's personal experience:
SYL: [...] [W]e’ve got this case recently with this teacher who was asked to leave the service. The Ministry of Education isn’t revealing why exactly, but we suspect that it’s got to do with them finding out that he’s gay.

CHRIS: But I thought the PM said they allow gays in the civil service.

SYL: That was in 2003. And that was ex-PM. [...] (2.2.234)

In this intertext, Alfian not only makes plain his suspicion that the MOE had dismissed him on the grounds of his gay sexuality, but also correctly portrays the adverse impact the change in the State’s leadership has had on the advancements in freedom of expression and rights for sexual minorities. It seems that in hindsight, the playwright’s earlier critique of the gay community’s disconnectedness and reckless abandon to corporeal pleasures, and reminder
against expressing naïve gratitude for the allotted gay spaces never before available (see *Dreamplay* and *Landmarks*), becomes portentous of the shifting attitudes of the State.

This theme is reprised in *HE* when Nick echoes Minister Lim Boon Heng’s warning to gay rights activists that “it would be a step backward if the gay community starts to push and demand rights” (qtd. in Channel News Asia). In reply, Syl emphasises the damaging implications of being merely satisfied with the current extent of State permissibility:

SYL: Gay clubs, gay saunas, that’s it? And for you that means everything’s just fine?

[...]

NICK: So you give licenses to clubs and saunas, but you won’t allow a gay organisation to get registered. [...]

SYL: I call that being sensitive to noise levels. You know having a registered organisation makes more public racket than having a gay club. There’s all the letters you’ll be writing to the press, all the forums you’ll be holding...[...]

SYL: So you keep it underground. So they can walk all over you. Once in a while, they’ll stomp around to show you who’s in charge. Conduct a raid, censor a play. The next time you think being able to party means there’s more tolerance, Nick, let me spell out the policy for you. Gay consumers, yes. Gay citizens, no. You have to own this, Nick. The personal is the political. (2.3.244-245)

There are at least two intertexts in the above exchange that reveal the concerns of the playwright in writing his trilogy for the marginalised gay figure in Singapore. Syl asserts that beyond their economic worth as contributors to the global cosmopolitan profile of Singapore as queer-friendly, gay consumers are
discouraged from engaging in communities. For instance, Alex Au’s second application to register “People Like Us (PLU): a gay and lesbian group focused on advocacy and public education” as an organisation under the Societies Act in 2004 is intertexted at this point.\textsuperscript{91} The State’s refusal is clarified by Syl as, essentially, a delegitimisation of any attempt at community engagement or participation by the nation’s gay citizenry.

This denial of legitimate community formation and the accusation of apathy inherent in Syl's argument relates to a second intertext, Carol Hanisch’s “The Personal is Political”. In her 1969 essay, Hanisch stresses—as does Alfian in his trilogy—the political engagement and significance of supportive communities that focus on eliminating self-blame, before learning to think autonomously through the very relationalities that that community provides. Hanisch writes:

\begin{quote}
One of the first things we discover in these groups is that personal problems are political problems. There are no personal solutions at this time. There is only collective action for a collective solution. (4)
\end{quote}

In the Singaporean landscape in 2007, such a community was still in its formative stages, cautious of the State’s surveillance, and legal support had neither been encouraged nor was readily available. Hence, at the end of his emotionally charged blog post on his dismissal, Alfian asks in frustration:

\begin{quote}
What redress does the ordinary citizen have against the bureaucracy? I don't know. What I know is, I've weaved some elements of the above into my new play. Come and watch! (“Kafka's Shadow”)
\end{quote}

The playwright’s direct address to his readers and spectators of the upcoming production here asserts his belief in the importance of building mutually

\textsuperscript{91} PLU reports that three plain-clothes police officers attended Alex Au’s residence close to midnight on 9 Nov. 1996, two days after the first application to register PLU as a society had been lodged. Au was asked to give a formal statement to police on the coming Monday to explain why he wanted to register the society (“History of PLU”). Thereafter, Au’s application was rejected by the Registrar of Societies who also stated that he was not obliged to give any reason under law (Joseph Lo and Huang 32; R.H.K. Heng 88-90).
communicative (dialogic) relationships in a supportive community. In *HE* (2007), it is this leitmotif that is repeatedly portrayed in the play as being capable of alleviating, if not resolving, the effects of alienation, hopelessness and loss suffered by the marginalised gay figure in Singapore.

In contrast to the lack of redress offered to Alfian, Syl and Chris reach out to the wrongfully dismissed teacher in *HE* to provide him with both legal and community support. Syl says:

**SYL:** Well, maybe Alec Choy would be more willing to talk to you. [...] Tell him I sent you to talk about counselling here at the centre. He's expressed interest in being a volunteer. (2.1.235)

When Alec is first introduced on stage, his alienation and rejection are conveyed by the dim blue lighting of the stage. With his guitar, he sings to himself before picking up a glass of alcohol and then conducting a school choir (played by the actors who played the younger characters in Act 1) that enters the presentational space at stage right. That he only imagines this choir is revealed when Chris rings the doorbell and the choir exits; the subsequent change from blue to general yellow lighting jolts Alec out of his nostalgic and lonely reverie (2.2.236). Chris then establishes a dialogue with the initially reticent Alec and gives him purpose by eliciting his help in sharing his personal narrative so that Chris may, fittingly, write a biography. An alternative narrative for the gay figure not simply marked by trauma and othered by hegemonic discourse is thus called for in this scene. In his interaction with Alec, Chris says:

**CHRIS:** [...] We need to hear stories like yours.

**ALEC:** Chris, you know I’ve led a very quiet life. What’s there to tell?

**CHRIS:** You don’t know how inspiring it’ll be for young gay men out there. (2.2.239)
Arguably, this is a plea that the playwright similarly makes of the gay spectator through *HE* (2007). Furthermore, Chris’s affirmation of Alec’s story demonstrates the importance of the non-heteronormative narration of gay lives and experiences to identity and community formation, in response to the dehumanising discourse (purveyed later by Ken) that seeks to isolate the gay figure in Singapore. Having finally been interpellated as a gay subject with a story to share, Alec is next seen in Scene 6, relevantly titled “Three Generations” (2.6.252-257).

In contrast to his introductory scene, Alec is next portrayed in the company of Chris, Nick and Kuang Ming: “three generations of gay men” in the *mise en scène* (*HE* 2007) who visit him in his apartment (2.6.253). The description of the gay characters in the scene as generational underscores the relationality that is successfully established between them as a community through dialogue, which subsequently effects a transposition of Alec’s character. Correspondingly, it is Alec’s lived experience and identification with the “happy ending” that Forster was adamant to write for *Maurice* that helps Chris finally find his own “happy ending” when Chris is unsure of what to write (of) himself. Stating what is possibly the overarching motivation of *HE*, Alec echoes Chris’s own advice in the former’s introductory scene. He says to Chris:

\begin{quote}
ALEC: Why don’t you write an autobiography?
CHRIS: There’s really nothing so interesting...
ALEC: I was reading *Maurice* again last night. [...] [Forster] actually wrote, ‘a happy ending was imperative. I shouldn’t have bothered to write otherwise. [...]’.

[...]

[...] And it made me wonder whether a biography was really about writing down what you had lived through. Or what you could live with. [...] (2.9.269-270)
\end{quote}
The form of the biography that Alec and Chris refer to denotes the writing of a personal story, a compilation of all the intertexts—literary, political and experiential—that enable the gay writer to reframe the world into something (an intertextual space) that can be “lived with” (2.9.270), who may henceforward, perform a personal transposition. Arguably, in HE (2007), such an intertextual space is created for the characters and the spectator to be free from limiting static texts imposed by the Singaporean State, so that they may inhabit new positionalities as subjects-in-process in a supportive community.

“Homosexuals can change”: Portraying the Right in Ken Widjaya

The adult Ken is portrayed as providing the alternative to the positive, supportive community that Alfian implicitly envisions in “Three Generations” (2.6.252-257). As a psychologist providing Reparative Therapy for homosexuality, which he asserts is “treatable and preventable” (2.3.241), Ken is the embodiment of the Christian Right contemporaneous to HE (2007) and a vocal opposition to the proposed repeal of Section 377 in the then upcoming reading of the Penal Code (Amendment) Bill. His rhetoric and therapeutic promises allude to a real banner that Syl intertexts (2.3.241). The banner had read, “Homosexuals Can Change” (K.-K. Tan and Thenabadu 1). Put up by the Anglican Church of our Saviour (ACOOS) in February 2001, the banner had prompted vocal protests from the country’s gay citizenry and is easily recognisable as a social text by the Singaporean spectator. Ironically, the exclusionary move by ACOOS led to the beginnings of a Singaporean gay community, united in their public outrage against the homophobic message.

In HE, Ken holds the similar view that homosexuality is “deviant, abhorrent” (2.7.259). This is first portrayed in Act 1 in “Backstage”, when the young Kenneth of PC inducts Chris into the disconnectedness of the gay clubbing scene and the loneliness and desperation of gay men cruising for sex by the river (1.7.213-215). It can be argued that given the lack of community and positive portrayals of gay men in Singapore in the 1992 socio-political context of PC, the adult Ken of HE (2007) is still convinced that accepting his gay identity would lead to a “bleak [future]. A dead end” (2.7.259).
It is noteworthy for my argument that Ken’s rejection of his homosexuality is expressed as his deliberate scorn of “the need to be defined by a word” (2.7.259). Clearly, Alfian shows that Ken’s unchanged and unchanging view of homosexuality does not liberate the character from inhabiting a limiting and stultifying position defined for him by monologic, heteronormative discourse. Rather, viewed in terms of the importance of production and practice of intertextuality in the *signifiance* of the subject-in-process, Ken’s rejection of the discursive expression of his subjectivity results in his being denied access to the power to signify afforded to the other characters in the play. In distinction to Alec and Chris who are transposed through dialogic relationality and interpellated as part of a community, Ken remains “lonely” (2.7.259). Revealingly, he is unable to traverse the confines of the limiting discourse of the State, yet momentarily fails to repress his homosexuality when he “leans over to Chris, to kiss him” (2.7.259). Chris recoils and asks Ken, “What are you trying to do? Kenneth, what are you now?” Ken responds:

KEN: [...] I can’t go back, Chris. I made a promise.
CHRIS: To whom?
KEN: To someone called Kenneth Widjaya. I’m gay. He isn’t. I’m letting him be the stronger one. (2.7.259)

Significantly, rather than exuding strength, the dissolution of his marriage (2.7.257) and continued, in his view, illicit attraction to Chris point to Ken’s markedness as othered in relation to monologic discourse, thus rendering him unable to perform the heteronormative scripts he deems to be correct. Accordingly, Ken does not succeed in letting go of his entrenched beliefs during the penultimate recognition scene in *HE* (2.8.260-269). Ken is similarly distinguished from Syl and Nick who are transposed to new signifying positionalities made possible by the dialogic *mise en scène* conceptualised by Heng.
Becoming Other in *Happy Endings*: Crossing the Threshold

The main sets of *HE* (2007) pictured above (Figure 3-4 and Figure 3-5) successfully facilitate the dialogism with which the play consistently encourages the spectator to engage. As Joe “reads” (performs) the narrative of PC with Muse in Act 1, the introduction of each of the five other characters to the dramatic narrative and presentational space is complemented by the pushing in of a door from the stage wings. Each character enters and exits through their respective doors throughout the duration of the play. Although they are clearly in separate structural frames, the entry of each door onto the stage with its corresponding character both constructs and is simultaneously constructed by the dramatic intertextuality created in the presentational space. Blocked in a semi-circle upstage, the doors visually weave the characters together dialogically in the creation of the performance text as each functions as a metaphorical and literal “rejoinder” to Joe’s initially controlling narrative voice, as in a dialogue (Bakhtin *Dialogic Imagination* 76, 274). More significantly, the two-way doors through which the characters emerge, as though formed by the author’s words, visually stage the Bakhtinian assertion of the word as

a two-sided act[,] determined equally by whose word it is and for whom it is meant. As word, it is precisely the
product of the reciprocal relationship between speaker and listener, addresser and addressee [...] A word is territory shared by both addresser and addressee, by the speaker and his interlocutor. (Bakhtin and Volosinov 86)

One of the ways that HE’s staging is distinguished from that of Dreamplay (2000; 2013) and Landmarks (2004) is its return to the traditional proscenium stage that is usually perceived to create that “fourth wall” that validates the relationality that Bakhtin denounced as able to be “sustained only on the basis of a unitary [...] myth that perceives itself as a totality” (Dialogic Imagination 64). However, this monologic characteristic of traditional theatre is disrupted in HE (2007) by the web of relations created by the mise en scène designed to dialogically include the spectator in the practice and production of meaning. Specifically, by opening both ways, the characters’ doors enact the “law of placement” in Bakhtin’s dialogic philosophy, which privileges more than one perspective of the world (Holquist Dialogism 21), including that of the spectator. In this way, along with the characters, the spectator is also encouraged to perform an interrogation of the monologic discourse the play criticises, beginning with that of the author, Joe.

For example, the characters of Sylvia and Nicholas first take on the third-person narrative voice in their respective introductory scenes:

SYLVIA:

[Sylvia enters through her door.] Her name was Sylvia.

[...]

The account of how one of her opponents had been driven away from the scene, in tears, by her caustic and flawless rebuttal, had travelled far and wide throughout debating circles in the country. (1.1.198)

[...]

NICHOLAS:

[Nicholas enters from his door.] Nicholas, or Nicole, was a lanky youth from Ken’s tutorial group.

[...]

153
Nicholas must have been fun to have around. He made people laugh. He was contrived and extraordinary. (1.6.211)

Sylvia and Nicholas are dialogically repositioned at certain points in the text as, alternately, character and narrative (authorial) voice. Furthermore, the characters even actively participate in the production of the dramatic text by questioning the choices that Joe makes in their characterisation:

SYLVIA: [...] Anyway, I've got a few questions.
CHRIS: Sure.
SYLVIA: Chris is my boyfriend, right?
CHRIS: Yes.
SYLVIA: And the whole school knows we're a couple.
JOE: That's right.
SYLVIA: So how come you don't write more about us?
JOE: What do you want me to write about? (1.1.200)

[...]

NICHOLAS: [...] You know what? Don't write the scene where Chris tells me. If I can't have love, I'd like to have some dignity.
JOE: All right.
NICHOLAS: [Nicholas makes to exit, but turns back.] Will anyone ever love me? (1.6.213)

By means of dialogue, HE thus affords the otherwise fixed characters in PC some autonomy in their own characterisation. Though this autonomy is clearly limited, it is meaningful nonetheless. In addition, although the play begins with Joe’s authoritative “reading” of PC, as he is dialogised in his performance of the text—specifically, engaged as a character in dialogue with his own creations—his position as the author is also dynamically exchanged with his textual
construction as the novel’s protagonist. For example:

    SYLVIA: [Sylvia enters.] Sorry. It’s Joe, right?
    JOE: Chris.
    SYLVIA: No, you’re the author. Joe.
    JOE: What’s going on? I thought I’m Chris.
    SYLVIA: No, Chris is a lot better looking than you. And bigger. That uniform’s a bit loose on you.
    [...] Am I scaring you?
    JOE: No. I just haven’t had a character actually talk to me before. (1.2.200-201)

In the dialogic relation, the characters demonstrate a consciousness that the author had not been aware of and who might consequently be, as Sylvia correctly suggests, somewhat threatened by the confrontation posed by his characters regarding his work. Viewed in parallel, HE (2007) similarly accomplishes the dialogic dismantling of stable meaning and subject positions that Bakhtin celebrates. Effectively, the play mounts a metacritique of the authorial, monologic discourse of the Singaporean State. In so doing, HE (2007) asserts the consciousness and ability of the gay subject-in-process to que(e)ry his State-sanctioned discursive reification.

In particular, I argue that the play here stages the intertext as the Kristevan site of struggle during subject formation, where the irrepressible “instinctual semiotic” (creative) energies remain as an “insistent presence” that irrupts into the fabric of fixed and stable meanings in the Symbolic (Kristeva “Revolution” 102-103). The utilisation of the main sets of the play, the character doors, thus make manifest the threshold that Kristeva posits, across which the subject-in-process traverses in the signifying process (104) to “attain to [a] signifying position” (93-94). Critically for my purposes, as the characters in HE (2007) have open discourse across this threshold in the midst of the Kristevan site of struggle, they reiterate and engage with “the place of the Other” that signification, in other words, the dominant order, will eventually enclose (102).
From this perspective, *HE* (2007) can be said to restage, or “re-cite”, the processual nature of the signifying process for the spectator in order to discursively construct new positionalities not defined by the Singaporean State.

**The Dialogised Anagnorisis: Performing Transposition**

The dissolution of the single authorial subject is portrayed again in “Broken Mirrors” (2.8.260-269). This climactic scene emphasises the multidimensional, dialogic and heteroglossic nature of the play, and also of its characters, both real and imagined, between one another and with their own personal histories across time. It is also an iteration of the traditional recognition scene, defined by Keyssar as “a process by which a character (or characters) comes to know himself […] by unravelling and confronting his own history” (92). Such a confrontation occurs in “Broken Mirrors” when the younger iterations of Syl, Ken and Nick perform a postmodern break into the dramatic narrative and return to establish a dialogue with one another and with their older counterparts:

[Syl turns to leave. She opens her door. The younger Sylvia is standing at the doorway, blocking her. Syl stands aside to let Sylvia enter. Sylvia walks up to Nick, sizing him up. She turns to Chris and stares at him.] (2.8.263)

These actions highlight the adult Syl’s repressed anger and hurt, as it is embodied in the younger Sylvia, towards Chris. Later in the scene, Chris finally enters into a dialogue with Sylvia to justify his inability to explain his rejection of her love when they were teenagers:

**CHRIS:** [...] When we broke up I never told you why. And I can imagine how difficult it must have been for you.

**SYLVIA:** No, you can’t Chris. I never knew where I’d gone wrong.

**CHRIS:** But I couldn’t tell you. Because I had been taught to keep my life a secret. I had to learn a language that wasn’t my own, to talk about
girls and make jokes about people like Nicole. [...] (2.8.265)

Subsequently, as a result of their dialogue, the adult Syl gently reminds the younger Sylvia that “[i]t’s time to let go” before she exits (2.8.266). Though Sylvia/Syl is not strictly transformed in this scene—a term that Keyssar employs to describe the subject’s continual process of “becoming other” (93)—she is, crucially, repositioned by Chris’ apology and may thus be seen to enact healing as a subject-in-process. Using the same dialogic methodology, Nick is similarly confronted by his younger iteration, but with different effects:

Nicholas enters through his door.

Oh my. I have muscles.

You don’t sound happy. Why aren’t you happy? Look at you.

[...] I’m sorry. I left you behind.

So you left me in London and brought a broken heart back home?

[...] I would have left it in London and brought me home. Anyway, I’ve stopped wearing make-up. See?

You can wear all the make-up you want. I don’t care. It doesn’t matter. (2.8.267-268)

Significantly, the Nicholas/Nick sequence emphasises the importance of dialogism with personal history and with an iteration of the subject as it exists as previous texts within that personal narrative. In the Anagnorisis of the traditional theatre, the revelation of the “truth” reifies the text’s (monologic) status as stable and unchanging (Keyssar 92). In contrast, Nick does not suddenly discover a ‘true’ (stable) self upon confronting his history as it is intertexted in Nicholas. More accurately, the effect of Nick’s dialogue with Nicholas is a transposition,
similar to Keyssar’s processual “transformation” (93). That is to say, in Nick’s case, a confrontation with the Other as signified by Nicholas results not in a Symbolic enclosure, but an embrace of the semiotic that has irrupted into his personal intertext in “Broken Mirrors” (2.8.268). Consequently, Nick is transposed as he enacts an alternative positionality to the apparently liberating gay identitarian scripts disseminated by the State to, in Butler’s terms, “engender, naturalise, and immobilise” the gay subject as always already othered (Gender Trouble 36). Though Nick may still be othered in relation to the State’s monologic discourse, my contention is that his engagement in dialogue endows him with the autonomous power to signify as a gay subject-in-process in HE (2007).

Conclusion: The “Textasy” of Happy Endings

I have argued that in writing his play as an intertext, Alfian attempts to provide an alternative to the “dark, heavy wave of sadness” that Kenneth describes as threatening to overwhelm the alienated gay figure in Singapore (1.8.215). My discussion has made evident an insistence on the practice of dialogue and relationality in HE (2007), potentially achievable in the production of a non-heteronormative communal and personal gay historical narrative, which is itself a production of the intertext of the subject-in-process and its othered community.

In the dramatic and performance (inter)texts of HE (2007), there is a liberating sense of celebration that potentially accords with Kristeva’s and Barthes’ descriptions of textual jouissance. Robert Young defines such an irruption of energies as follows:

‘Jouissance’ means enjoyment in the sense of enjoyment of a right, of a pleasure, and, most of all, of sexual climax. ‘Jouissance’ and ‘significance’ invoke the sense of an ecstatic loss of the subject in a sexual or textual coming—a textasy. (qtd. in Allen 32)

The “textasy” that Young refers to here might elucidate the title of the climax of Alfian’s trilogy. Moreover, in HE (2007), the characters are portrayed as transposed as a consequence of liberating themselves from the hold of fixed and
past iterations of their identities. Facilitated by the dialogism of the intertexts, that threshold across which the subject-in-process traverses, the characters of Syl/Sylvia, Nick/Nicholas and Chris are overwhelmed by the repressed memories that irrupt into their consciousness, effecting, in other words, *jouissance*. Following their dialogic Anagnorisis, the characters’ “textasy” is staged in the powerful closing sequence of *HE* (2007).

 Appropriately, now transposed to new signifying positionalities through the intertexts, all of the characters re-enter the presentational stage with books in their hands. During the swell of the music that scores the scene, the characters are drawn together to centrestage, thereby signifying their participation in a community. The characters then visually depict the flapping of wings alluded to in the pulsing movement of their open books, held high above their heads, as the upstage lighting intensifies so that only their silhouettes end the play (*HE* 2007). Through their gestures, the pages of the books connote the liberating flight of literature—that is, the *jouissance* of intertextuality—first alluded to with Muse’s book-wings (*HE* 2007). In no uncertain terms, the spectator is subsequently left with a final, arguably photographic, image of the characters who convey the director and the playwright’s expressions of hope for a different future trajectory for the gay subject-in-process, in contrast to one of continued abjection in relation to the Singaporean nation.

 Written and staged in the lead-up to the possible repeal of section 377, that law that institutionally denies the gay subject the right to legal citizenship (C.K.K. Tan 71-73), *HE* (2007) espouses the hope for the “happier year” that Forster wishes for in the epigraph to *Maurice*, in this case, for Singapore. Additionally, as a staging and extrapolation of *PC*, Alfian writes a provisional happy ending for Chris, who is finally set free of the refutation of beginnings and endings that entrap him in Lee’s novel and begins again with Kuang Ming. Pertinently, Nick learns to love his intertextuality in *HE* (2007). To conclude, I address the obvious: a “happy ending” is generally understood as a massage to ejaculation, a physical sexual climax, the “Plasma Orgasmata” that Kushner’s Angel refers to (Kushner *Perestroika* 2.2.174), which is a concept invoked to arguably affirm a corporeality of homosexuality that is no longer marked as
abject. *HE* (2007) has indeed enacted a (be)coming that parallels the “textasy” of intertextuality, so that in its destabilisation of the State’s monologic discourse, the play claims for the Singaporean gay subject-in-process the “redress” that the playwright seeks.

**Intermission**

The discussion now turns to the portrayal of other marginalised figures in the Singaporean context in Haresh Sharma’s *Trilogy*. This next ‘Act’ in my thesis begins with an examination of *Fundamentally Happy*, and analyses the social critique advanced by the play through its dramaturgical strategies and themes of child sexual abuse and the vicissitudes of memory.
Chapter 4

Mimetic Violence and Victimisation in Haresh Sharma’s *Fundamentally Happy*

“All drama is about lies. When the lie is exposed, the play is over.” (David Mamet qtd. in Nadel 256)

“It’s about truth. A truth which must be spoken...”—Eric (Sharma *Fundamentally Happy* II.18)

Four Million Smiles and Singapore’s “Happy Multiculturalism”: The Socio-Political Context of *Fundamentally Happy*

In January 2005, *The Straits Times* ran an article highlighting the comments of the then Deputy Prime Minister of Malaysia, Datuk Seri Najib Razak, who expressed his disgust at the “appalling” number of reported cases of child rape in Malaysia (qtd. in Azura Abas 5). Najib emphasised the need for the cooperation of “the Government, society, non-governmental organisations and the Malaysian Children Hope Foundation” to successfully address the issue of child sex abuse and specifically highlighted cases in which close family members had been identified as perpetrators of the crime (5). According to Najib, these cases included “72 cases where the offenders were the fathers, 112 stepfathers, 42 uncles, 20 brothers-in-law, six step-brothers, 33 cousins and five grandfathers” (5). Just four months later on 27 April 2005, Singapore’s *Today* newspaper ran a front-page article citing a report by Dr Mohamed Y. Mattar of Johns Hopkins University on the thriving sex trade in Asia (Yin l). In his report, Mattar had stated:

Singaporean sex tourists are reported to make up the largest number of sex tourists visiting Indonesia’s Riau Islands, where many of those they sexually exploit are under the age of 18. (qtd. in Yin l)
Responding to Mattar’s comments, the United Nations Children’s Emergency Fund called upon the Singaporean State to be responsible for leading the region in addressing the problem of child sex tourism because, as the article reported, the nation’s “citizens [were] among the worst offenders” (1). These examples demonstrate the nature of the mediatised rallying against the newly formed spectre of the paedophile amongst Singaporeans.92 In contrast to the comments of DPM Najib, made just across the causeway in Malaysia, Singapore’s State-controlled media situated the figure of the paedophile firmly beyond the ostensibly safe borders of the nation, which implied that it was, therefore, alien to the Singaporean domestic sphere.

According to AWARE, despite the brewing moral panic in the region and on the world stage (Beyond Borders), the reputation of Singapore as a socially and economically flourishing metropolis—an Asian nation that had emerged from the 1998 Global Financial Crisis “relatively unscathed” (Ngiam 19)—was the Singaporean State’s main concern in the year following the new Prime Minister’s inauguration. This privileging of Singapore’s global image came in light of “the biggest [international] event ever” in modern Singaporean history, that is, the 61st Annual Meetings of the Boards of Governors of the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank Group (Jamie Koh 26).

Dubbed “Singapore 2006 (S2006)”, the IMF-World Bank Annual Meetings were held at the Suntec Singapore International Convention and Exhibition Centre located in Marina Centre, downtown in the CBD, from 13 to 20 September 2006. In preparation for the event, which would host 16,000 delegates and leaders from all over the world, PM Lee launched the “Four Million Smiles” campaign on 8 July 2006. In this latest State campaign which ran for seven weeks until 2 August 2006, 16 “smile ambassadors” were deployed to residential estates and business centres to encourage Singaporeans to smile for photographs or upload their smiling faces online as part of the nation-wide project. Although

92 Reports of child sex abuse in other countries were also featured in The Straits Times that year. These reports included Gavin Arvizo’s testimony against Michael Jackson in Los Angeles (AFP Los Angeles 3); the sentencing of Paul Shanley, a Catholic priest convicted of child rape in Boston (“Priest Convicted” 12); and a sensationalised case of a child paedophile ring in Angers, France (“Child Sex: Parents and Grandparents in the Dock” 33).
there was some online dissent against the campaign, many Singaporeans answered the call, probably motivated by “10 top prizes”, which included the “Grand Prize” of an “OSIM iDesire Intelligent full body massage chair” (H.L. Lee “Launch of ‘Four Million Smiles’”). The upshot of “Four Million Smiles” was a thirty-foot public mural on the side of the Suntec Singapore International Centre that announced, “Four million smiles welcome you.” Speaking of the significance of the mural, Lee stated:

It's more than just a collection of friendly faces, but our collective desire to offer our guests a positive, unique and unforgettable “Singapore Experience”. [...] But beyond the organisation, logistics and facilities, what we need is the human face and the human touch of our people. (H.L. Lee “Launch of ‘Four Million Smiles’”)

Underlying Lee’s emphasis on “the human face and the human touch” as part of “the Singapore Experience”, in addition to the efficiency and political stability that the nation is renowned for, is a revealing priority of the Singaporean subject’s economic productivity and subservience to the State over all other individual and social concerns. Noting the resonance within “Four Million Smiles” of Singapore’s earlier National Courtesy Campaign (1978-2001)—which positively affirmed Singaporeans who were polite to one another—Wong and Wainwright observe that “[i]t is not enough for Singaporeans to smile at one another. They should smile to the entire world as well” (404).

I contend that the underlying mythos in the aforementioned campaigns derives from the State’s consistent promulgation of the “happy and harmonious multiculturalism” and multiracialism that is central to the stated version of Singaporean identity (Frost and Balasingamchow 389; Poon 71-73). Distinguishing its governmentality from the institutionalised exclusionary

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93 Two instances of online protest took the form of two parodies of the campaign, namely, “400 Frowns” and “Four Million Frowns” (Yasmin Ibrahim). The organisers of “400 frowns”, Seelan Pillai and two other men, were arrested on 14 Sept. 2006 for their online protest activities and charged under the Printing and Processing Materials Act (Takver).

94 See S.Y. Lim and Mazelan bin Anuar “National Courtesy Campaign” for an overview of the State’s National Courtesy Campaign.
practices that favour indigenous Malays or *bumiputeras* in Malaysia (Goh and Holden 25), the Singaporean State is committed to its vision of national integration that celebrates racial harmony. In previous years, Lee Kuan Yew had explicated the State’s motivations behind the country’s multicultural model as follows:

> The government’s policy was not to “assimilate”, but to integrate our different communities, in other words, to build up common attributes such as one common working language, same loyalties, similar values and attitudes, so as to make the different communities a more cohesive nation. (qtd. in Jacqueline Lo 22)

In order to build this cohesion, which is supported by Singapore’s meritocratic principles that promise upward social mobility “regardless of race, language or religion” and is affirmed in the National Pledge (S. Rajaratnam, qtd. in Zhi and Saparudin), the official “harmonious” multiracial character of Singapore is ritually performed on the national stage. For example, stylised, “traditional” Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian performances appear consecutively before being woven together in an *en masse* finale that conveys Singapore’s diverse, yet apparently harmonious, social fabric during the annual National Day Parade festivities.95 Throughout the year, State-sponsored banners with representations of the four “official” races in Singapore—Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others (CMIO), the last racial category usually represented by a person of apparently Eurasian or Pan-Asian ethnicity—are prominently displayed in all public areas. This multicultural consensus asserted by the State is further rationalised annually on 21 July, Racial Harmony Day, which commemorates the Sino-Malay riots that broke out in 1964 (“Communal Riots Occur: 21st Jul 1964”). All Singaporean educational institutions mark the event by encouraging the student body to attend school in a costume of a race other than their own, and assemble to participate in a concert similar to that presented on National Day. Importantly, as

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95 See Lily Kong and Brenda Yeoh’s “The Construction of National Identity” for their analysis of National Day Parades in Singapore, which includes the “cultural pageantry” (228) and key themes of multiracialism, [...] multiculturalism, multilingualism and multireligiosity” (231) that I anecdotally describe here.
part of the State’s “discourse of crisis” (Birch “Staging Crises” 75), the Racial Harmony Day pomp is infused with a tenor of fear triggered by a Ministerial speech that recounts the violent narrative of the Maria Hertogh racial riots and two Sino-Malay riots that had once threatened the country’s tenuous social, political and economic stability.96

As the examples of National Day and Racial Harmony Day cited above suggest, race has become a fundamental identity marker in social interaction, prominently indicated on every National Registration Identity Card, a document that all Singaporeans and Permanent Residents are required by law to carry at all times. As Jacqueline Lo observes, in the State’s deployment of racial and cultural stereotypes under the banner of multiculturalism, issues of race have inadvertently become deeply entrenched in the Singaporean consciousness (16). Crucially, however, the stated intent of engendering “harmony” is insidiously undermined in the State’s pedagogical portrayals that demand the proliferation of stereotypes that serve the dominant schema. As Kenneth Paul Tan correctly argues in his study of Singaporean television and cinema, such stock portrayals of race effectively maintain “‘multiracialism’” as a superficial ideological expression of racial harmony that disguises latent beliefs about racial superiority [or] inferiority and practices of racial discrimination” (Resistance xxi). In this light, the State’s staging of the Singaporean identity within “Four Million Smiles” is arguably founded upon a pedagogical rhetoric that denies any expression of the country’s simmering racial and cultural tensions and dissatisfaction with the dominant order as it is inscribed upon the Singaporean body politic.

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96 The Maria Hertogh Riots occurred on 11 Dec. 1950. Hertogh had been born into a Dutch-Eurasian Roman Catholic family, but was fostered out to a Malay-Muslim family during the Japanese Occupation of Singapore in World War II. Raised in the Muslim faith and renamed Nadra binte Ma’arof, she was later found by her Dutch-Eurasian family after the war, who won custody of their daughter. While Hertogh was awaiting repatriation to her birth family in the Netherlands, riots broke out in the Muslim community when Justice Brown of the Singapore High Court ruled the thirteen-year-old’s betrothal to twenty-one-year-old Mansoor Adabi unlawful. Shortly after Singapore’s independence, two other violent racial and religious clashes occurred. The first riot on 21 July 1964 erupted during a Muslim procession that publicly celebrated the birthday of Prophet Muhammad, prompting the State to put a curfew in place until 2 August 1964. A month later on 2 Sept. 1964, another Sino-Malay riot erupted, sparked by the stabbing murder of a Malay trishaw-rider. See A History of Modern Singapore (Turnbull) and Singapore: A Biography (Frost and Balasingamchow) for further reading.
It is within this specific socio-political context that *Fundamentally Happy* was first staged from 20 to 24 September 2006, opening on the last day of the IMF-World Bank Annual Meetings in Singapore. Whereas the space for protest demonstrations and peaceful dissent to the Annual Meetings had been considerably proscribed by the State (Yasmin Ibrahim; Wong and Wainwright 44), *Fundamentally Happy* creates a theatrical, discursive space in which to launch an oppositional performative response to the State’s own staging of Singapore as a “cosmopolitan city [and] an energetic and forward-looking society” (H.L. Lee “Launch of ‘Four Million Smiles’”). In what follows, I will first give a brief synopsis of *Fundamentally Happy*, the first play in Haresh Sharma’s *Trilogy* in collaboration with artistic director of The Necessary Stage (TNS), Alvin Tan. Next, I discuss how the play’s rhetorical conventions, including its perspectival strategy, work with the authenticating conventions that the play invokes in achieving performance efficacy. I will then explore *Fundamentally Happy*’s portrayal of the marginalised figure in the Singaporean context with a focus on victims of domestic abuse. Finally, I analyse the play’s problematisation of memory to show how *Fundamentally Happy* engages the spectator in its destabilisation of the State’s authoritative construction of Singaporean identity as put forward contemporaneously in the “Four Million Smiles” campaign.

**Ambivalent Homecomings: Introduction to *Fundamentally Happy***

*Fundamentally Happy* is a two-hander in three Acts, each portraying a meeting between Eric Sim Guang Yeow and Habiba Hj Salam over the course of a month. Set in the living room of a terrace house, the play opens with a homecoming marred by grief. Eric is a 30-year-old medical social worker based in Melbourne. Although he has been away in Australia for a number of years, Eric is a Singaporean by birth and returns to Singapore to attend his father’s funeral. Following a “depressing” two weeks of mourning (I.12), his intended departure from Singapore is interrupted by an impulse to visit a couple with whom he spent

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97 References to the dramatic text will hereafter be to *Happy*, appended with Act and page numbers as they are printed in the play-script. Where I discuss elements of the performance text only, I refer to *Happy* 2006. Video-recording of *Happy* 2006 courtesy of TNS archives.
most of his childhood. The woman is Habiba, a 40-year-old teacher; and her husband is Ismail, an entrepreneur trading in carpets and evidently, a pillar of the community. The reunion between Habiba and Eric quickly becomes tense, however, and this tension centres on their relationships with Ismail, who remains conspicuously absent from the stage. Eric’s indulgence in remembering his happy childhood spent at Habiba and Ismail’s house gives way suddenly at the end of the first Act. By the opening of the second Act, Eric has extended his stay in Singapore with the intent of bringing Ismail to justice for allegedly molesting and raping him as a child. A discomfiting atmosphere is created on stage as Eric recounts to Habiba the sexual abuse that he had been subjected to by her husband when he was younger. While at first Habiba defends her husband and denies Eric’s accusations, her eventual, but hesitant, admission of having knowledge of Ismail’s history of sexual abuse leads to an examination of their conflicting memories of the past. Feeling undermined by Habiba’s persistent challenging of his account of the sexual abuse, Eric demands a confrontation with his abuser at the end of the second Act. However, at the beginning of the third Act, Eric recants his accusation; he has “dropped the charges” (III.36), thereby setting up the volte-face of the dramatic narrative. Nonetheless, as a result of Eric’s earlier report made to police, the investigation into Ismail produces evidence, found on his computer’s hard-drive, of his ongoing paedophilia and crimes; and Habiba reluctantly admits that she is not surprised. Ismail’s arrest leaves Eric distraught, and he reveals his desire to have been the sole recipient of Ismail’s abuse. At this, Habiba’s earlier, seemingly cruel accusations of Eric’s complicity in his own victimisation through his seduction of Ismail as a child take on a disturbing aspect, complicating the potentially condemnatory impulse of the spectator.

As Habiba now refers to Ismail as “Syaitan” (III.42-43) and calmly accepts the dissolution of the familial narrative that she has spent decades defending, Eric finally confesses to his relentless emotional and sexual yearning for Ismail as the primary motivation for his return. An atmosphere of inescapable melancholia is created in the dénouement of the play with the two characters’ final reconciliation and simultaneous separation (III.51). Neither Habiba nor Eric is
allowed a fulfilment of their stated desires, that is, a successful relationship with the paedophile, Ismail. The complex motif of “happiness” and how to attain it is problematized with tragic irony by the play’s end.

**Rhetorical Conventions: Disrupting the Theatrical Illusion**

In contrast to the renowned body of experimental work produced by Haresh Sharma and Alvin Tan at TNS\(^98\)—the company’s stated mission being to “[c]reat[e] challenging, indigenous, and innovative theatre that touches the heart and mind” (“About Us” TNS Official Website)—Happy adheres to a structurally realistic form on its face. A conventional Aristotelian plot structure with a beginning, middle and an end is suggested in the play’s unambiguous chronological movement through three Acts. Specifically situating the play’s opening twenty years after the characters’ last interaction, the passage of time between Acts is further conveyed by Eric’s reference to his first reunion with Habiba “last month” (II.21) and then to his confrontation with Ismail “last week” (III.37). Furthermore, the overt temporal sequence is complemented by the fixed spatial location of Habiba and Ismail’s household in which the dramatic narrative unfolds. An acutely determinate plot movement and setting that is in keeping with traditional Western theatre’s unities of time and place is thus established on a raised proscenium stage erected in a black box theatre. The spectator, seated in tiered bleachers brought into the theatre for Happy (2006), is initially positioned as an observer of the play’s hermetically sealed world that is seemingly set up to imitate the “action and life [...] happiness or misery” (Aristotle 2320) in a structurally coherent and teleological dramatic work. Alternative perspectives of the performance that a traverse, thrust or round stage might offer are denied to the spectator whose unidirectional, self-consciously external perspective is dictated by Happy’s staging choice. The structurally strict separation of the

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\(^98\) TNS’s performances which have been deemed “experimental” and sometimes not easily accessible by critics have included BOTE: The Beginning of the End (2002), described as “all about style and aesthetics” (Lyon “Rev. Of Bote”); godeatgod (2002; 2004; 2012) with its “almost desperate scattershot quality madness” (K. Kwok “Rev. Of Godeatgod”); Revelations (2003), where “some [audience members] decided to leave in the middle of it” (L.L. Fong); and the camp staging of Mardi Gras (2004; 2005) and Top or Bottom (2005).
Chapter 4: Mimetic Violence and Victimisation in Haresh Sharma’s *Fundamentally Happy*

spectator and the dramatic work is further emphasised by the maintenance of the integrity of the “fourth wall” throughout the play.

As such, the configuration of *Happy* (2006) might initially seem to comply with what traditional Western theatre has sought to effect, which is in Raymond Williams’ view, a maintenance of “the ideology of the middle-class world” that the form represents (qtd. in Zarrilli et al. 389). In this traditional realist theatre, famously refuted by the influential modernist (and Marxist) playwright, Bertolt Brecht, emotional purgation is effected through its instant hallucinatory gratification, but, it has been argued, any satisfaction of genuine social and political desires is consequently deferred (Willett 37). Echoing Brecht, Jeanie Forte maintains that the realist mode, as it stages a teleological world blessed with static and unambiguous meanings and identities, ultimately renders the spectator powerless (qtd. in Peterson *Theater and the Politics of Culture* 116).

However, according to Peterson, much of the gamut of estranging effects proposed by Brecht to dispel the illusion maintained by realist theatre, especially direct audience address, had become “somewhat of a theatrical cliché” in the Singaporean theatre of the 1990s (*Theater and the Politics of Culture* 64).

While Brechtian distanciation remains a critical technique in the dramaturgy of *Happy* (2006) and other plays in Sharma’s *Trilogy*, as Jacques Rancière has argued, Brecht’s repertoire does not necessarily work as a catalyst for change (Rancière 74-75). Instead, it might bypass the “critical procedure” of the spectator altogether in a reproduction of the mechanism by which the dominant order dispenses its approved identitarian scripts (29). However, in the Singaporean context, *Happy* (2006) is positioned as a work of New Realism, described by Tan as aiming to “explore diverse points of views and minimize a controlling perspective” (“Preface” *Trilogy* i-ii). In this sense, the play may then be viewed as aiming to paradoxically “restore ambiguity, which rewards an active, probing spectatorship” (Andre Bazin, qtd. in Horton 28). As I will argue in this and the following chapters, in the staging of *Happy* (2006) and other plays in *Trilogy*, Sharma and Tan approach the cultivation of “the emancipated spectator”, who is able to consider the varied perspectives presented in the work and
autonomously generate new associations independent of the spectacle before them (Rancière II).

To this end, the play consistently frustrates the easy gratification of the spectator by appropriating and then destabilising complex familiar cultural stereotypes through the detailed development of Happy’s characters and the dramatic narrative’s discursive turns. The play’s mimesis of the State’s multicultural rhetoric is one such example of this work, which is first observable in the production’s publicity collaterals.

**Authenticating Conventions: Mimicking Dominant Racial Portrayals**

In Happy’s publicity collaterals shown below (Figure 4-1 and Figure 4-2), Eric is dressed in a striped, collared, polo T-shirt while Habiba wears a hijab (a headscarf commonly referred to as a *tudung* in Malaysia and Singapore that a number of Muslim women wear in observance of the Islamic dress code). In Figure 4-1, her hands are demurely clasped to her chest as if in prayerful contemplation, and her gaze is directed at Eric as she stands behind him at an angle to the front of the frame; in contrast, Eric casts a confrontational gaze to the spectator. In Figure 4-2, Habiba and Eric each carry a white placard on which the words “Fundamentally” and “Happy” are respectively inscribed. The broken visual utterance of the title in this image possibly points to the fissures in foundational beliefs that the play attempts to reveal as it simultaneously symbolises the broken relationship between the characters pictured. In these publicity collaterals, Eric’s position in front of Habiba could be said to signify the privileged role that his (Chinese) representation occupies. He carries his “Happy” placard askew and wears a deep frown on his face, clearly conveying the contradiction between how he is labelled and how he actually feels. Correspondingly, Habiba’s placement in the background of both images conveys the subservient role that she plays, and her “Fundamentally” placard further validates her stereotypical reception as a deeply religious Malay-Muslim woman. The characters remain stubbornly unsmiling, thereby evoking a sense of foreboding precisely because they stand in stark contrast to both the State-sponsored posters where these races are depicted.
in joyous accord, and to the most recent campaign of “Four Million Smiles” earlier discussed.

The undermined mimesis depicted in these images could be understood as intending to effect, in Rancière’s conception, an “aesthetic break” where the unambiguous “concordance inherent in representation” between the dominant order and its mimetic portrayal is problematized (60, 121). The mimetic portrayal of the characters against a plain, white background in Happy’s publicity collaterals—similar to the dominant photographic representations of the four “official” races put on display in all Singaporean neighbourhoods—emphasises not only their one-dimensionality, but their self-consciously decontextualized staging as well. In this way, the “aesthetic break” occasioned by the play’s staging is arguably launched. Consequently, as Sharma first activates the stereotypes inherent in the Singaporean cultural context, then attempts to restore ambiguity to them, a tense atmosphere of disquiet is sustained throughout the production (Happy 2006).

From its beginning, Happy (2006) calls on dominant racial and gender representations to underscore the characterisations of Habiba and Eric. Habiba quickly puts on her tudung before answering the door and comically dodges Eric’s attempt to hug her when they cross the threshold into her house (I.3-4), calling attention to the image of the Malay-Muslim woman as represented in the public sphere, that is, a picture of piety and feminine propriety (Nursyahidah bte Mohamad Jamal 111-116). Her dual role as traditional wife-mother and participant in the workforce is succinctly depicted before Eric’s entry when she alternates between tidying up the house and typing at her computer with a folder open on her lap. Here, she picks up a soccer ball and badminton racquet from the floor to put away and vacuums the carpet. As she mutters to herself, seemingly working out a problem in her head, Habiba appears to have an epiphany and excitedly leaves her housework to return to work at her computer (I.2). Even when entertaining her unexpected guest, Eric, Habiba is seen entering the kitchen to prepare a drink for Eric (I.6), answering a work telephone call regarding a problem that she promises to discuss later (I.7),99 and folding clothes (I.13). Her

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99 My annotation and translation of Habiba’s telephone call, which was in the Malay language
characterisation further alludes to the vaudevillian portrayal of middle-aged women in the Singaporean media that has become a cultural meme\textsuperscript{100} for the Singaporean audience. These have included, for example, the garish, vulgar, but lovable, Chinese housewives from the most popular Singaporean television sitcoms, namely, Rosie from \textit{Phua Chu Kang Private Limited} and Dolly from \textit{Under One Roof} (K.P. Tan \textit{Resistance} 128, 130-132, 134-136). Notably, the spectators laugh at—not with—Habiba’s immediately recognisable high-pitched exclamations, exaggerated gesticulations, Singlish usage and raucous laughter (\textit{Happy} 2006). Additionally, her cadence, exclamations and pragmatic particles, such as “lah” and “eh”, are obviously influenced by the Malay language in Singapore, which function as unmistakable signs of her minority identity (\textit{Happy} 2006).

Habiba teaches in a Madrasah, a private educational institution that combines secular and religious learning into their curricula.\textsuperscript{101} The Madrasah educational system continues to be a matter of public discussion and scrutiny, criticised by ex-PM Goh for the high drop-out rates, a presumed failure to impart the basic skills required to thrive in the global economy and as a possible threat to national integration.\textsuperscript{102} As such, Habiba’s initial portrayal is not merely a mimesis of the representational regime of racial and gender stereotypes deployed by the State, but also signals her marginality in relation to the State-sanctioned narrative of Singapore success.

Similarly, Eric’s portrayal in the opening Act is an equally recognisable stereotype. He enters from the rain dishevelled, with long, shoulder-length hair (\textit{Happy} 2006). In \textit{Happy}’s context, his presentation is likely an implied reference to a Singaporean ban on men sporting hair past their ears, practised to resist the

\textsuperscript{100} A meme is defined as an element of culture (e.g. behaviour, concept, custom) that is replicated, especially by imitation, and then varied before it is passed on to someone else (Blackmore).

\textsuperscript{101} Madrasahs in Singapore are under the purview of the Islamic Religious Council of Singapore, more commonly known as Majlis Ugama Islam Singapura or MUIS. Although the National Institute of Education and MUIS now jointly offer a specialist diploma course to train Madrasah teachers in pedagogy, at the time of \textit{Happy}’s staging, these teachers were without the professional qualifications necessary to teach in any other Singaporean educational institution.

\textsuperscript{102} See Noor Aisha Abdul Rahman and Lai (eds.) \textit{Secularism and Spirituality} for further reading.
CHAPTER 4: Mimetic Violence and Victimisation in Haresh Sharma’s Fundamentally Happy

Figure 4-1: Habiba (left) and Eric (right). Happy (2006) publicity collaterals (i). (The Necessary Stage “Happy Publicity Collaterals”)

Figure 4-2: Habiba (left) and Eric (right). Happy (2006) publicity Collaterals (ii). (The Necessary Stage “Happy Publicity Collaterals”)
‘invasion’ of Singaporean (“Asian”) society by (“Western”) “drug-taking hippie types” in the 1960s and 1970s (“Foreign Hippies Situation under Control: MP” 15). Although this ban has since been lifted, Singaporean men with long hair continue to be socially stigmatised and grouped with the “criminal” element, so that the allusion to Eric’s position as the victim of the child sexual abuse explored below is problematized. Notably, after having extended his stay in Singapore to pursue justice against Ismail, Eric’s hair has been cropped short in Act II (Happy 2006), a style choice that Habiba approves of in Act III when she says, “Your hair short, very nice, ah” (Happy 2006).

Eric’s ‘foreign’ (non-Singaporean) taint is further emphasised when Habiba points out his Australian accent with a tone of veiled disapproval (Happy 2006), which he justifies by saying that he had “been in Australia for quite a few years” (I.4). In addition to this, having completed a degree in social work in Australia and attained employment in Melbourne, Eric’s initial portrayal is thus generative of the public disapproval of the erosion of the “Asian values” disseminated by the State to be distinctively “Singaporean”. Habiba mocks his overseas figuration once more when she learns that Eric’s fiancée is of Greek descent, saying, “Eh, she sound like Miss Universe” (I.15), a comment that the audience of the play responds to with laughter (Happy 2006).

The laughter prompted by this exchange is perhaps telling of the contentious idolatry of and aversion to the Occidental Other in the Singaporean consciousness. Lo describes this paradox as predicated on the implicit “colonialist race-based imaginings” now appropriated by the State to formulate a post-independence national culture (29-30). The imagery used to communicate “Western decadence” is that of illness and infection, suggesting a need for Singaporeans to be protected against the threat which is, ironically, an inevitable accompaniment to being part of the global economy. Peterson also notes this “cultural schizophrenia”, arguing that:

103 Men who arrived at Singaporean immigration checkpoints sporting long hair were refused entry into the country unless they submitted to a haircut. Also, posters prescribing the arbitrarily determined, State-approved length of hair for men were prominently displayed in public institutions, warning that men sporting hair that did not conform to the prescribed standard would be served last. These posters were part of the exhibition curated by the National Library Board, Singapore, from 3 Sept.-10 Oct. 2009.
While on the one hand Singaporeans need to feel that their country has a sense of history and rootedness that is at least in part Anglo-Saxon, there may also be a residue of unconscious resentment over the false, reductive, and racist views of Asians that were perpetuated by the British during their period of dominance. (*Theater and the Politics of Culture* 90)

In this paradoxical paradigm, the anxious desire to align the Singaporean identity with that of its past colonisers is simultaneously tempered with “[t]he desire for revenge [...] to do to the enemy exactly what the enemy did to [the colonial subject]” (Chow “Where Have All the Natives Gone?” 131). Importantly in the Singaporean postcolonial context, the Otherness of the Westerner is that with which Eric seems clearly aligned in *Happy* (2006), and this may shed light on the passive hostility demonstrated by Habiba towards Eric.

Comparable to Habiba’s portrayal, Eric’s othering is developed in his role as a medical social worker, “work[ing] primarily with women and [...] kids” (I.9). His implicit “failure” as a male within the patriarchal order espoused by the State (Holden 186; D.P.S. Goh “Hegemonic Masculinities” 146) is emphasised when Habiba exclaims, “Social work! Like same like that eh our job” (I.9). This idea is confirmed when Eric himself later observes, “I look like a girl!” (I.16), when he sees a photograph of himself when he was younger in Habiba’s family album. The pregnant pause that follows this comment betrays Habiba’s awkward agreement (*Happy* 2006), which implicitly questions Eric’s current masculinity. Not only is he “emasculated”, but as Habiba and Eric get reacquainted, he is distinctively portrayed as a child, taking a toy car belonging to one of Habiba’s primary school children from the side-table and playing with it on the stairs. Childlike, Eric is unashamedly inquisitive as he looks around and outside the house, and even sits at the computer rifling through Habiba’s work and files in Act I (*Happy* 2006). Eric’s intrusive behaviour and impulsivity signal his regression into childhood, made more apparent when Habiba stresses his similarity to her ten-year-old son three times in the first Act (I.15-16). Having suddenly run out into the rain after being overwhelmed by a flood of memories, Eric is regarded by Habiba as weak,
and she expresses this in her observation that he is “all wet, macam tikus [like a mouse]” (I.17).

His regression is compounded when he vomits onto the freshly cleaned floor and needs to be soothed by Habiba (I.17), before sinking to his knees onto the carpet as the lights fade out (Happy 2006). Characterised as “undeveloped, decorative, non-essential, emasculated, puerile, buffoonish, ridiculous, immoral, or even criminal” in public discourse (K.P. Tan Resistance 153), the Westernised Chinese Singaporean finds its manifestation here in Eric’s portrayal. Significantly, then, Eric and Habiba’s markedly marginalised figuration may be interpreted as maintaining the boundaries of the imagined Singaporean community by being, in Giorgio Agamben’s formulation, firmly banished from it (Agamben 29).

By drawing the characters in comic relief—a garish, ‘lovable’, middle-aged woman not to be taken seriously, and an effeminate, Western-educated Singaporean Chinese who has succumbed to foreign influences and is now infantilised—Happy (2006) criticises the marginalising effects these very State-imposed indicators encourage. Significantly, through its mimesis of the State’s representational regime, Happy (2006) could initially be seen to reinforce the prevailing stereotypes as well. However, with only two, powerfully othered Singaporeans on Happy’s stage, aversion and spectator-identification is alternately invoked here, thereby disabling the cathartic function of the theatrical illusion.

Additionally, as a part of Sharma’s attempt to cultivate the “active” spectator (Bazin qtd. in Horton 28), there is an obvious investment in allusions to the familiar Singaporean landscape that effectively interpellates the Singaporean spectator. For example, Eric explains how he had been in Siglap with his mother for lunch (I.4), a place popularised in Singapore for its numerous and varied eateries. He then refers to Opera Estate (I.5), easily recognised by the Singaporean spectator as being a private housing estate in the eastern part of Singapore. It is also explicit that before his detour to Habiba’s house, Eric had been on his way back to Australia when he cites Changi as his intended destination, the location of the airport (I.5). Next, Habiba alludes to common Singaporean concerns. When speaking of her children, she prays for her
daughter’s success at the Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) so that “she [her daughter] will go to a good secondary school” (I.6). Here, Habiba voices the ubiquitous anxiety fostered by the State’s discourse of success and shared by virtually all Singaporean parents and students alike (Singapore 21 Chapter 2 18-19). Her plan to reform the Madrasah, so that “[they] must not so much focus on Islam teaching but also on the usual lah, maths, science all that” (I.8-9), is read not only as her taking the initiative, but also as being in direct response to the State’s criticism of the Madrasah educational system that had been receiving broad media coverage at the time. The Singaporean political landscape is also alluded to when Ismail’s character is first introduced as being occupied with his duties at the “C[ommunity] C[entre]... [in a] meeting lah with the don’t know what R[esidents’] C[ommittee]” (I.5). Necessary public institutions in all Singaporean districts, Community Centres and Residents’ Committees function as social hubs and political intermediaries between the citizenry and the State. They are part of every Singaporean’s residential experience (Frost and Balasingamchow 390-391).

Ismail’s participation in local politics and regional trade in carpets—a luxury item—conspicuously signals the family’s elite status and economic success (II.19, 22, 3.39). The partitioned stage clearly depicts the backyard upstage, and there is mention of a swing on the front lawn (I.5) of a double-storey, well-furnished terrace house (II.35) in an upmarket residential district (Figure 4-3).

Habiba also departs from the media portrayals of the middle-aged woman (cf. K.P. Tan Resistance 128, 130-132, 134-136) when she demonstrates how capable she is in being promoted to a managerial position where she will oversee the curriculum development of her students in the Madrasah (I.8). In this way, having established the opposed subjectivities of the spectator and the marginalised figures on stage, Happy’s simultaneous contextualisation within contemporary Singaporean society implies the spectator’s participation within the world of the play rather than estrangement from characters that do not tally with representations of the common Singaporean in the public sphere. The ease with which the spectator might relegate Habiba to the margin and dismiss her is thwarted. Significantly, the play’s mimesis and then transgression of formulaic,
reductive and rigid stereotypes employed by the State and mainstream Singaporean culture involves the spectator in potentially questioning the application of these very stereotypes. The spectator of Happy (2006) is caught in the contentious position, then, of denying the inclusion of the subjectivities portrayed on stage that are rendered mute or marginalised by the prevailing State-sanctioned narrative, and is possibly primed to question their own subjectivity when confronted with similar anxieties and experiences as the dramatic narrative unfolds. A destabilisation of the ostensibly secure boundaries of the nation is thus initiated and pursued in the play's interrogation of the Singaporean family unit.

**Individual Success and the Singaporean Family: Interrogating Singaporean Happiness**

The invocation of Singapore's justifiable vulnerability is reified and staged by the sudden Civil Defence exercise siren that interrupts Eric and Habiba’s reminiscing:

**A CIVIL DEFENCE EXERCISE SIREN IS HEARD**

ERIC: [shocked] What’s that?
As one of the five pillars of the State's comprehensive nationalist defence strategy, “Total Defence: Protecting the Singaporean Way of Life”, Civil Defence mobilises Singaporean civilians in defence of the country (Total Defence Online). The island-wide Civil Defence siren that startles Eric in the above scene is sounded on the first day of every month at noon, and on Total Defence Day to mark Singapore’s fall to the Japanese as a result of the British surrender on 15 February 1942 (Singapore Civil Defence Force Public Warning System “Public Warning System”). All civilians, including students in schools where lessons are suspended, take part in the national exercise by immediately tuning in to the radio, as they would in wartime, for a broadcast of a Ministerial brief narrating the fall of Singapore. In other words, an exercise supposedly intended to arouse nationalistic feelings in Singaporeans is fuelled by the arousal of fear. Importantly in this scene, Happy (2006) juxtaposes the State’s rhetoric “Protecting the Singaporean Way of Life” with the lived experience of both fear and apathy as performed by Habiba and Eric. Here, the play could be said to elucidate the fear and displacement that is experienced by Singaporeans as a result of the State’s reliance on its discourse of crisis. We see this when Habiba’s joke that Singapore is at war, followed by her sardonic jest at the safety of Singapore from external attacks (I.10), expresses cynicism of the State’s defence strategy to fulfil its nationalist goals.

Developing its critique of the dominant order, the siren in Happy (2006) begins an inquiry into the basic family unit that the State codifies as “the most stable fundamental building block of the nation” (Shared Values). The importance of the pillar of Civil Defence, which involves “Taking care of your family, friends, and people around you in times of crisis” (5 Pillars), is fractured here when the siren interrupts a story of family, that is, Eric’s alienated
relationship with his parents. When Habiba asks if he has come back to Singapore for a holiday and expresses her sympathy over his father’s death, Eric appears unmoved. He says, “My father died. […] He just died” (I.9). This episode highlights the role of family, which is emphasised when Habiba sings a Malay nursery rhyme:

HABIBA:  
*Satu satu, saya sayang ibu*  
*Dua dua, juga sayang ayah*  
*Tiga tiga, sayang adik kaka*  
*Satu dua tiga, sayang semua nya!*  
(I.II)  

[Gloss: One one, I love mummy  
Two two, I love daddy too  
Three three, I love my little and big sister  
One two three, I love everyone!]  
(Sharma Trilogy 181)

Later, as the two talk about happiness, Eric divulges his nonchalance at his father’s death when he guiltily qualifies his statement, “I’m happy…”, with “I mean...I was never close to my dad but... *[laughs]*” (I.14). Eric’s parents are portrayed as aloof and more focused on the economic pursuits lauded by the State than on Eric’s upbringing. Sharma here foreshadows their neglect as instrumental in Eric’s trauma, later revealed in Act II when Eric explains why Ismail’s sexual advances had aroused “positive” feelings in him as a ten-year-old child. He says:

ERIC:  
I didn’t think it was wrong to be touched. My father didn’t touch me. My family...we didn’t hug or kiss...on TV they did. I wanted someone to hold me, hug me, kiss me. (II.29)

With this, the genial, “happy” tone of Eric and Habiba’s reunion and the humour invoked by the mockery of the Civil Defence exercise is undermined. Firstly,
Habiba’s memory of the nursery rhyme seems activated by the sounding of the siren intended as a reminder of the importance of the family. The forty-year-old woman immediately jumps up from the couch and walks downstage to perform the above rhyme from a local Malay television show for children in the 1980s, “Mat Yoyo” (Koh and Singapore Children’s Society 100). Habiba’s song and dance at this point is a disturbingly conditioned response that might evoke feelings of unease in the spectator witnessing her dehumanisation. This Pavlovian image is drawn again in Act III when Habiba asks Eric how his previously “positive feeling[s]” about Ismail’s attentions “bec[a]me negative” in the 20 years that have elapsed (III.45). Eric replies:

**ERIC:** When I realised, when I realised Habiba, that an adult is not supposed to shove his cock down the throat of a ten year old. That’s when it became negative. Any other questions?

*PAUSE.* (III.46)

At this, Habiba puts on a mask of C3PO, the robot from the *Star Wars* franchise, and mimes its robotic movements to dispel the tension between her and Eric (*Happy* 2006). Sharma’s critique of the State’s unquestionable reification of the functional and happy family unit to the exclusion of acknowledging alternative types of familial relationships—be they unconventional or abusive—is clarified with Eric’s response. His uncertain mimicry of Habiba’s song and dance brings him “happiness” as part of their reminiscing, yet he has no real memory of it (scene pictured in Figure 4-3), revealing a painful disjuncture between his personal experience and the experience sanctioned by the State. Appropriately, the feeling of “happiness” that this empty memory conjures gives him “a happiness headache” (I.11).

His announcement, “I’m happy Kak Biba. I have my family here, my job in Melbourne...and...my fiancée. [...] I am blessed...and I do...I truly feel blessed” (I.15), is indicative of an arrival of sorts in consumerist Singapore. The dual emphasis on economic success and the constant reminder to be alert to external
dangers reveals the construction of the Singaporean gaze outwards. As Lee Kuan Yew has intoned, Singapore’s phenomenal economic success, in stark contrast to the surrounding countries blessed with natural resources and large populations, is owed to the efforts of the State. In an ironic mimetic portrayal of the logic of State discourse, Eric similarly criticises his friends for being consumed by their economic success, “talking about their new cars [and] the new condos in town” (I.14), when “there’s so much violence and suffering going on in the world[,] Singaporeans should be grateful they have clean water, a roof over their heads” (I.14-15). Yet, as Happy (2006) suggests, “happiness” in the fulfilment of State-formulated goals seems to be a conditioned behavioural response that necessitates the suppression of personal experiences that do not have a sanctioned space for expression. Eric’s sudden physical upheaval at the end of Act I is indeed telling of his inability to further endure or contain within himself the personal experiences not approved by rhetoric which necessitates that, as Habiba states, “everything must be efficient [and] cannot fail” (I.14). Habiba’s observation that Singaporeans’ seemingly good fortune “doesn’t mean [that they] are happy [or] bless[ed]” (I.14-15) is therefore deictic of Sharma’s interrogation of the fundamental definition of “happiness”, made manifest in the State’s staging of “Four Million Smiles”.

Habiba, on the other hand, recognises the need for Singaporeans to take time to retreat from their consumerist lifestyles and to cast an inward gaze that Happy (2006) seems to exhort of the spectator. When Eric asks her how she teaches happiness in her school curriculum, she says, “So we must slow down, think about God, his teaching, all that lah” (I.14). However, even this inward gaze is cast in doubt when Habiba realises that “when [she was] sitting there, [her] eyes close[d], thinking of God, thinking of happiness”, Ismail had been sexually abusing Eric (III.42). In this way, Habiba’s former complacency asserts yet another form of social critique that implicates the spectator’s possible collusion in weaving the illusions of “happiness” that serve to silence counter-hegemonic portrayals of the Singaporean experience.

Arguably, an investigation into the fundamental beliefs nurtured by the State and taken for granted as truth is set in motion. The boundaries of truth and
fallacy are pursued in *Happy*’s problematisation of memory, which attempts to destabilise conventional boundaries of space and time; and so, by extension, the dominant ideology and common historical narrative enforced by the Singaporean State.

**Explorations of Memory: Collapsing Time and “Working Through”**

In the “Production Notes” of his play, *The Glass Menagerie*, Tennessee Williams describes his devising of the genre of the “memory play” (1). Williams alludes to using dim lighting and music to better depict the inner landscapes and memories of characters on stage. The form of the memory play may also make staging choices that disrupt the continuity of the dramatic narrative where often, as Terry Otten notes, “scenes are patterned associatively rather than chronologically” (109). Paul Nolan states that the memory play “projects action through consciousness, approaching a monodrama in which a single character talks to himself, re-enacting events shared by others but only presented through the speaker’s consciousness” (qtd. in Otten 109). That is to say, the memory play often orients the spectator towards experiencing the past as remembered by a single narrator. Framed as a historical and subjective narrative, the maintenance of the limits of the theatrical space and the creation of temporal distance in the memory play serve to reduce the potential risk to the spectator’s contemporary reality.

As the memory trope is a significant plot device, *Happy* could indeed be described as a kind of memory play. However, the play cannot be said to be the historicising, retrospective and illusory imagining merely staged for the spectator’s passive consumption that Williams had conceived. Instead, *Happy* is better analysed in view of Eugenio Barba’s contention that meaning in theatrical performances is contingent on a dialogical performer-spectator relationship. In his complex narrative crafting of the vicissitudes of memory and forgetting, Sharma creates the “conditions within which [the spectator] can ask her/himself about [the play’s] meaning” (Barba, qtd. in Waterson 514). Specifically, I argue

104 Emphasis original.
that the playwright accomplishes what Dominick LaCapra describes as a Freudian “working through”, as opposed to an “acting out” of memories. LaCapra contends:

[W]orking through is intimately bound up with the possibility of being an ethical and political agent. ...Working-through involves coming to terms with extreme events, including the trauma that typically attends them, and critically engaging [...] the tendency to act out the past while nonetheless recognising why acting out may be necessary and even compelling. (LaCapra, qtd. in Roth xxvi)

It follows that as the spectator of Happy (2006) similarly works through the characters’ pasts and their attendant traumas through participation in what Roxana Waterson describes as the performative “interplay of speaking the past and speaking the present” (521), the Singaporean subject’s ethical and political agency might be restored, at least for the duration of the play. This bringing “into the open” of what has otherwise been suppressed (514) is further enabled by the focus on a single site of action—the mise en scène of Happy (2006)—that increases the level of intimacy between the spectator and the on-stage characters (526).

In Happy’s memory work, the voyeuristic and simultaneously participatory spectator position is constructed as an unsettling intrusion, looking into a house metonymic of the private, domestic sphere. Granted, while this performer-spectator relationship is present in much mainstream theatre (and local situational comedies, e.g. Under One Roof, Phua Chu Kang), Happy (2006) shifts the focus from the normatively representational to the presentational elided in public discourse. In contrast to the outward gaze relied upon by the State as described above, Happy’s aim to structure an inward gaze appropriately confines the dramatic action to the interior of a Singaporean household.

Walls coloured orange, purple and red add to the seemingly uplifting atmosphere of Habiba and Ismail’s home. Upstage, a gate opens to what appears to be a well-kept backyard, evincing the care invested in the home’s maintenance.
In addition to a computer at stage-left, a dining table at downstage-left and a television at stage-right with a stack of video and digital compact discs, an eclectic mixture of old and new furniture, including a carpet at centrestage, contribute to the home’s lived-in atmosphere. The usual lively activity in the household is also displayed by newspapers that have been thumbed through and left on the dining table with used dishes. Toys that have obviously been played with and left strewn on the floor at the play’s opening are a further indication of the presence of energetic children in the household. The construction of this image of a bright, happy and well-functioning home is contrasted by the sound of thunder and heavy rain that can be heard over the blaring music in the beginning of the play (*Happy* 2006). The disparity thus established between the external and internal spaces at the point of Eric’s arrival presents Habiba and Ismail’s home as a safe haven to which Eric returns. By Eric’s own admission, his visit to the site of the dramatic action was fuelled by feelings of nostalgia. He says, “I guess I just felt... *[laughs]* Nostalgic!” (I.5) And in Williams’ design, “nostalgia [*is]* the first condition of the [memory] play” (Williams 2).

Michael Roth notes that historically, medical investigations into what was known as the “maladies of memory” identified

[t]he desire to return to the scene of those [first] impressions [...] to experience again the affections of home and native soil [as] overpowering factors in impeding the nostalgic person from living in the present. (27)

Roth argues that the return to the scene of the nostalgic person’s memory provides one strategy to fulfil the desire for the reiteration of the past by “[r]e-establishing the connection with the lost object of desire” so as to behold it before a reintegration into the present might be effected (30). Inasmuch as this applies to *Happy*, Eric’s return to the site of his childhood—and more significantly, the scene of his childhood trauma—characterises him as desirous of the past as a curative to his current feelings of loss. From the moment of his arrival, however, this and its constitutive objects seem incongruous to Eric’s
recollection. He exclaims, “The house…it looks so different… […] God, the place has changed so much!” (I.4-5) before playing with Habiba’s children’s toys and touching the carpet (Happy 2006), demonstrating his compelling need to re-establish a connection with his past. When Habiba invites him to sit down at what she remembers as his “favourite place” in the house (I.4), Eric’s tone of disappointment as he apprehends that “[i]t’s new…” (I.4) is apparent (Happy 2006). Moreover, in the middle of their conversation, Eric casts his glance at the television and says, “The TV’s not on. […] It always used to be on” (I.10), clearly betraying a solipsistic desire for the immutability of the scene fixed in his memory.

His long-held phantasy105 of being part of Habiba and Ismail’s household is aptly expressed in the following exchange, when he recounts the game he played with Habiba and Ismail as the latter “touch[ed] [his] genitals” (II.29):

| HABIBA:  | -He [Ismail] ask us to close our eyes and think of happy things… |
| ERIC:  | Yes, happy thoughts. […] |
| […] | I closed my eyes and thought about…I always imagined what it was like to be here all the time, to live here, to be brought up here. This was paradise. (III.42) |

Despite the failure of his memory objects to adequately reconstitute this scene of memory, Eric continues in his nostalgic reverie.106 When he muses, “I loved being here” (I.17), his pathological attachment to his childhood (phantasy) home inscribed with his version of the past is underscored.

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105 In Melanie Klein’s usage, “phantasies” are constructed from the amalgamation of the experiences and the objects of the external world and the inner landscape in the child’s unconscious, deployed as a means to build an understanding of the world. Klein differentiates “phantasy” from “fantasy”, the latter of which involves conscious activities (e.g. daydreaming) (Segal 35). For Klein, phantasies that function as defence mechanisms and identification govern the behaviour and development of children to a large extent, especially affecting how they eventually differentiate between their phantasies and reality (I36).

106 In the abovementioned scene, Eric’s demonstrated discomfort at the incongruous placement of the objects in Habiba’s house when compared to their placement in his memory signals a persisting phantasy that he has not yet differentiated from reality.
Correspondingly, Habiba’s recollection of the importance of her family home to Eric is also significantly firmly situated in the past when she recounts how she cared for Eric when his own parents were busy in the pursuit of economic success:

HABIBA: [...] I remember last time you always come here. Your mother ask me to jaga^{107} you lah because she and your father always busy with your family business. So many years... (I.10)

The depth of her maternal bond with Eric is clarified much later in the play, coincident with the tenuous reconciliation and subsequent separation of the characters. In Act III, Habiba makes an emotionally charged confession to Eric:

HABIBA: You like our son last time. Sometime you are inside this house more than your own house. Very good boy. So quiet, polite. Not like children today. Even my own children are so spoilt. Sometimes...sometimes I wish you are my child...not them... (III.44)

Arguably, insofar as the play performs the memory work for the characters, Habiba’s consistent recollection of Eric’s childhood facilitates his regression and confronts him with its attendant traumas.

Indeed, it is exactly when Habiba juxtaposes photographs of Ismail and her children against that of Eric as a ten-year-old child that the traumatic memory of Eric’s sexual abuse overwhelms him, and he exits the house into the rain (I.17). His sudden vomiting on his immediate return is significant in Eric’s characterisation as it marks him as an abject figure, unable to contain his excretory substances within the boundaries of his physical body (Kristeva *Powers of Horror* 4). More pertinently, Eric’s vomit may be read as a physical

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^{107}“Jaga” is glossed as “take care” (Sharma *Trilogy* 181).
manifestation of Ismail as his object of desire who remains absent from his scene
of memory and provides no reprieve for Eric’s “malady of memory” (Roth 29,
passim). Rather than affording him the comfort and security of his childhood
home, Eric’s return ironically triggers his alienation and emphasises his
otherness. In Klein’s terms, Eric’s phantasy, once safely situated in his memory of
the past, is brought to the fore of his present consciousness and is horrifically
made manifest. The unheimlich nature of this experience, in its sense of a visible
return of that which has been repressed, is staged with an unsettling atmosphere
at the close of Act I. At this point, Eric sinks to the carpet that the spectator will
learn was the place of his debasement, and the two characters remain silent as
loud, discordant music floods the theatrical space.

In LaCapra’s description of “working through” memory, the ability “to
distinguish...between past, present, and future” is necessary in addressing trauma
and restoring the subject’s agency (qtd. in Roth xxvi). To this end, the conflation
of past and present dramatic time discursively achieved in the play further
facilitates the initiation of Happy’s memory work. The chronological progression
of Happy’s staged plot is denoted both in the didascalia and in the characters’
dialogue. Act I begins on the last day of Eric’s visit to Singapore for his father’s
funeral (I.9, I2); it is a late “Saturday afternoon” (I.5, 7), “twenty years” after the
characters’ last meeting (I.3). Subsequently, the drama in Act II occurs “three
weeks later” (II.18) and Act III follows “one week” after that (III.36). However,
reviewer Amos Toh identifies “[t]he ambiguous, almost careless leaps in time and
circumstance” as the singular flaw of Happy’s staging that was “met with puzzled
looks from the audience” (Toh). Toh makes a critical observation that contributes
to the objectives of the play to “work through” the characters’ traumas.

Firstly, this perceived temporal incoherence of Happy (2006) is
exacerbated by the characters’ continued use of the present tense to convey past
events. Both Eric and Habiba employ direct speech when reporting past
utterances, thereby lending credibility to the characters’ conflicting individual
recollections. Happy’s deployment of this speech technique compels the
spectator to decide the veracity of each account and enables a rehearsal of inquiry
discouraged by State discourse. Secondly, Habiba’s exclusive use of Singlish to
communicate with Eric employs the variable use of the copula and tense markers characteristic of Sinitic and Malay linguistic varieties in Singapore. For example, she says, “I say I go to the shop, but actually I never go” (II.19), and “Remember, you always so excited when he is coming home from work” (III.40). Inevitably, a disorienting effect in the dramatic chronology of the play is created. Furthermore, the declarative sentence construction of Singlish and the prevalence of the second-person pronoun in place of normative first-person syntactic constructions (e.g. “You are in Australia?” instead of “Are you in Australia?”) more significantly frame Habiba’s questions as accusations, or more perturbingly, as imperatives. When she presents her conflicting account of the past, Habiba tells Eric:

HABIBA: You seduce my husband. I remember. 10 years old...but already you are like...You wear tight tight...you smile, open your eyes big big...your lips so red, your skin so smooth...You ask him is it? You rub yourself on him is it? You take his hand and- (II.31)\textsuperscript{108}

Importantly, although Habiba’s accusations seem callous, her continued contextualisation of past events as present occurrences assists Eric to “resolve [his] past” (II.33).

This temporal collapse that functions to assist Eric’s “working through” is clarified when the spectator is told of the precipitating factor of Eric’s recollection of his own abuse. Eric tells Habiba:

ERIC: [...] I was working on a case where the child was raped every night by his stepfather. Every night he would go to the boy’s room and sodomise him. The child told his mother who thought he was crazy. He eventually told his teacher. [pause] I didn’t tell

\textsuperscript{108} My emphasis.
anyone. I didn’t even know I had been abused. For 20 years I was silent. (II.20)

Here, two children’s stories—that of his client, and Eric’s own from twenty years ago—are juxtaposed to highlight the contemporary impact of Eric’s childhood trauma. By articulating his own feelings of helplessness two decades past by means of analogy, Eric relies on the resemblance between the two stories in order to temporally shift the trauma of past incidents to be currently witnessed by Habiba and the spectator of Happy (2006). In effect, he brings what is potentially unheimlich to be examined at centrestage and breaks his silence.

Arguably, the temporal collapse established in the characters’ utterances and recollections paves the way for Eric’s eventual articulation of his phantasy. In the third Act, Eric confesses to the continuing influence of his past abuse on his current experience when he says, “I wanted it...I yearned for it...for 20 years...I yearned...for him...” (III.49). More significantly, in expressing his enduring sexual desire for his abuser, he explicitly admits that “[he] had hoped that Ismail—” (III.50) would reciprocate his desires now that their relationship had been brought into “the public domain” (II.18). In this way, the play’s exploration of the impact of the past on the present is foregrounded and suggests the dynamic interconnectedness between the two time periods. Hence, a dialogical movement is established between the past and the present, creating an opportunity for the continual “working through” of memory.

**Memory as a Dynamic Process: Making the Case for Inquiry and Introspection**

Relevantly, however, as Gillian Cohen has noted, memory processes are “dynamic, being readily subject to revision, updating and modification” (qtd. in Waterson 511). Similarly in Happy, the revisionist possibility of memory is depicted in the destabilisation of Eric’s memory of his past sexual abuse after its encroachment upon his present consciousness. The accuracy of Eric’s memory is first undermined and dismissed as confusion by Habiba because it “happen[ed]
so long ago” (II.19). After the police report is lodged against Ismail “for the alleged crime of Unnatural Offence[,] Carnal intercourse against the order of nature” (II.22), Habiba’s awareness that there might be some semblance of truth in Eric’s allegations is betrayed by the characters’ proxemics: she sits apart from him, her eyes averted, facing the audience (Happy 2006). Her subsequent denial by thrice repeating “[n]othing happen” might initially characterise Habiba as colluding in Eric’s continued abuse (II.19-20).

In response, perhaps attempting to obtain an emotional distance from his traumatic memories, Eric adopts what he asserts is an “objective[,] accurate [and] responsible...stand” (II.18) when he explains his reasons for wanting to bring Ismail to justice. Crucially, his accusations are framed within a discourse of othering based on what is presented as indisputable facts, similar to that disseminated in the broader Singaporean context. He informs Habiba:

> ERIC: You don’t know how they operate. They prey on your innocence, your naïveté. They take you under their care, they reign [sic] you in, and then they abuse that trust. They, they create this whole...they lull you with their kindness, their care...for their own sexual gratification. [...] (II.23)

However, as I have earlier argued, the culture of fear nurtured by othering discourse is contrapuntal to Happy’s advocacy for introspection and investment in the construction of the inward gaze. In aid of this, the dialogic construction of memory in Happy is pursued with the eventual admission of Eric’s claims of abuse, resituating the trauma in the past:

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109 This refers to the then standing §377 of the Penal Code set out in Chapter 1 of this thesis. As previously noted in Chapter 3, this section was repealed in the Penal Code (Amendment) Bill in 2007 and replaced with “Sexual Penetration of a Corpse”. See “Section 377” (P.L. Lim) and “Consultation Paper on the Proposed Penal Code Amendments”.

110 My emphasis.
Upon her grudging validation of Eric’s allegations of sexual abuse suffered at the hands of Ismail, Habiba then moves to question the exactitude of Eric’s memory and begins the play’s crucial memory work. Despite the reluctance conveyed in Eric’s twice repeated response that he had “already given [his] statement to the police” (II.26-27), Habiba demands a detailed retelling of the sexual abuse because she “want[s] to understand” (II.27). Implicitly, Sharma suggests that Eric’s wish to “move on” from his past merely by reporting it to the authorities has the effect of preventing him from adequately addressing his traumatic experience (II.33). Therefore, Habiba’s insistence on Eric’s personal recollection thus facilitates the introspection that the play valorises.

Eric is guided by Habiba who paces in a circular path around him, creating a visual depiction of her interrogation of his version of the truth (Happy 2006). Habiba interjects at various points to clarify, contextualise and question Eric’s memory as he remains seated on the couch at upstage centre (Happy 2006). She asks:

HABIBA: You never tell him to stop?

[...] Because?

[...] He was only playing...

ERIC: Yes. No. He told me to turn over.
And to close my eyes. I did. That’s when he started to touch my genitals. [slight pause] I opened my eyes. I looked at him. He smiled. You like that? I just smiled back. I didn’t know what to do...I...I was frozen. It didn’t feel right but...but it felt nice...

HABIBA: If it did not feel correct, then why you never run away? Why you never tell anybody? Why you never tell me? (II.28-29)
In this exchange, Habiba not only compels Eric to work through his traumatic memory, but she is also able to present a narrative that is contrary to his own, providing both Eric and the spectator a consideration of an alternative account of the past. Habiba’s narrative, moreover, destabilises Eric’s position as a victim:

HABIBA: You see... your shorts...
[...]
Yah, very tight eh your shorts. [laughs loudly] So young you know how to dress like that.
[...]
Like that lah... you wear tight tight...
[...]
[in a childlike voice] Kak Biba, what time Uncle Ismail come back? Kak Biba, I put his plate on the table for him. I put the rice for him. I know how much he like. Remember? And then when dinner finish, you bring his vitamins for him. [in a childlike voice] Uncle Ismail, you must eat your pills. [pause] You wanted to wear my apron... you wanted to cook his food... Eric, you wanted to be his wife. (*Happy* 2006 II.31-33)

At this point, the pause in the dramatic action signals Eric’s successful introspection as he considers the possible validity of Habiba’s description of his collusion in his own abuse. Although an inward gaze is arguably accomplished with Habiba’s guidance, Eric’s memory work resituates his desire for his loved object, that is, Ismail, within himself.

Consequently, instead of a restoration of LaCapra’s “ethical or political agency” (qtd. in Roth xxvi), Eric willingly resubmits to Ismail’s manipulation and runs upstairs towards his abuser at the end of Act II (*Happy* 2006). He cries:

ERIC: I want to see him.
HABIBA: Why?
ERIC: I want to see him.
[...] I need him. I need to be with him, to speak with him, to see him. Please…don’t keep me away from him! (II.35)

In Klein’s terms, Eric's inability to withstand the loss of his loved object previously part of the phantasy of his “internal world” triggers a “manic defence against [his] grief” (Segal 136). Consequently, his portrayal as “happy” following his confrontation with Ismail at the beginning of Act III may then be read as a paralysis of his “internal world” that prevents his progression to maturity (I36).

Eric proudly shares his adult encounter with his abuser as follows:

**ERIC:** It happened…he admitted to me. I didn’t imagine it. It happened. He apologised. He cried…so much…and he kept on apologising. He said I was the only one…the only one and…and he cared for me fondly. Just as I did for him. He cried…and I…and he asked me to forgive him. (III.37)

The disquieting tone of happiness in Eric's return to Ismail (Happy 2006) lies in stark contrast to the tone of confused anguish when Habiba once again disrupts the fulfilment of what can now be referred to as his *fantasy*.

Habiba informs Eric of Ismail’s arrest and, meaningfully, the nature of his preference for girls and not boys as Eric incorrectly assumes (III.39). Furthermore, she divulges her conflicting recollection of what Eric had earlier confessed was Ismail’s first instance of sexual abuse as follows:

**HABIBA:** You are correct, I come home early that day. But I come home with you. You want to go and see the Strawberry Shortcake show, so we go together. But no more ticket, so we come back. We come back. We open the door. And Ismail is...he is
Habiba’s continued provocation expresses the concern of the play, that is, the malleability of truth in memory. When a comparative reading is done of Eric’s trauma and Habiba’s recollections, the possibility that Eric never suffered sexual abuse by Ismail presents itself. More significantly, with Eric’s confession of his sexual desire for Ismail, his memory of his sexual abuse might not be the actual traumatic event. Instead, Eric’s memory of being abused might be what Sigmund Freud defines as a “screen memory”, which prevented the trauma of witnessing Ismail giving his affections to someone other than himself from irrupting into his consciousness (“Screen Memories” 319). When Habiba finally asks Eric, “When this happen...20 years ago...what you feel?” (III.44), the spectator previously called to bear witness to Eric’s seemingly present trauma now has to contend with this explicit and conflictual focus on past events. Habiba’s repositioning of perspectives effectively distinguishes the past from the present, revealing the distortion of the memory with the passing of time and more alarmingly, even recasting the abuse as “positive”—as love (III.45). The working through of Eric’s memory by both characters brings to light the troubling possibility of Eric’s complicity in his own abuse, if, indeed, the abuse even happened.

The memory objects that construct the notion of “home” at the play’s opening are progressively removed from the stage space—the VCDs, DVDs and computer are no longer on stage in Act II, and all other handheld properties are packed or thrown away by Habiba throughout the playing of Act III (Happy 2006). This ‘clearing’ is symbolic of the persistent melancholia that continues to plague Eric at the play’s close. Eric cannot overcome the loss of his loved object and is faced with the erasure of the scene of memory, which is an ironic consequence of his homecoming.
In this way, *Happy* (2006) draws the spectator out in discourse with the margin, increasing the focus on the two characters on stage, their interaction and the ever-elusive (presence) absence of Ismail. Although he does not physically enter the theatrical space throughout the duration of the play, Ismail’s corporeal non-appearance is apposite in achieving what I argue are the play’s main goals in relation to the Singaporean spectator. These are, namely, to raise awareness of the issues of paedophilia and the consequent abuse of characters eschewed in Singaporean public discourse, and more importantly, to perform with the spectator an exercise in assessing the truth and fallacy of narratives. By being involved in the working through of traumatic memories along with the characters on stage, as well as actively bearing witness to dramatic testimonies, the engaged spectator may feel a sense of responsibility and a discomfiting complicity in effecting the traumas experienced by the characters. I suggest that this feeling of discomfiture is both a consequence of, firstly, how the play positions the spectator in relation to the characters on stage, and secondly, a result of how the play characterises Ismail.

**Violence, Agency and Victimisation in the Singaporean Household**

Given *Happy’s mise en scène* in a terrace house, the implied space-off is a freehold private housing district. Importantly, these residences are exorbitantly priced and are not eligible for government subsidies. As such, the purchase of freehold private housing has become a marker of economic success and is inscribed with the concomitant privacy this affords in Singapore. Whereas Singaporeans who live in public housing are assumed to be from the lower socio-economic strata, and so, are subject to the increased surveillance of the State, the converse is true of owner-occupiers of private housing. This reward of privacy implies the State’s

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111 “Public housing” denotes flats in high-rise buildings erected and subsidised by the Housing Development Board. Flats are leased to occupants by the State and are inscribed with panoptic disciplinarity. In addition to being especially palpable in the proximity and visibility of neighbouring flats, the panoptic mechanisms of observation and examination are extended in building design, where high-rise blocks of flats are often grouped in a parabola over a car park or other public space. In contrast, “private housing” includes condominiums in gated communities, semi-detached or terrace houses and bungalows, where a higher degree of privacy is afforded.

112 Chapter 3 of this thesis briefly discusses the estimated cost of private housing and the restricted choices that this entails. See *Global Property Guide* for real figures.
complacent approval of the pursuits and choices of the well-to-do in Singapore. In the play, this stratum of society is represented by Ismail, whose “carpet business [is] doing very well” (II.19). Yet, as the form of the play lacks intermissions and asides to the audience for comic relief or as a theatrical device for authorial commentary, Tan also denies the spectator any reprieve or disengagement from the theatrical space and dramatic time. I argue that in making these choices, Tan dramatizes what Michel Foucault called “the nomination of the visible” imposed by the State (Foucault Order of Things 144), and disrupts the assumed complacency of the implied Singaporean spectator, who presumably does not expect to be exposed to criminal behaviour in this theatrical mimesis of the private domain.

An important dramaturgical technique in Happy (2006), that is, the delineation of public and private spaces, might here be intended to increase the spectator’s culpability as voyeur. As Eric suggests, there is an implicit onus placed on the spectator of Sharma’s play to participate in constructing their own social realities, rather than passively accepting State-imposed spatial boundaries. He claims:

ERIC: It is not personal, not subjective. One always has to be objective, to be accurate, to be responsible for one’s views, one’s memories... [...] The truth [...] must be expressed...in the public domain. (II.18)

I suggest that the spectator is implicitly placed as taking pleasure in standing by and doing nothing while the abuse takes place. Through Eric’s plea, however, Sharma makes a demand of the spectator to “be responsible” (II.18), or otherwise, find themselves in radical identification with the (present) absent perpetrator of the violence, Ismail.

The presumed pleasure of the voyeuristic spectator from within the darkness of the theatre is arguably set up in parallel to the patriarchal pleasure that Ismail enjoys in his authoritative position within the larger Singaporean
context in the space-off. Although the characters on stage appear to have a close relationship with one another, it becomes clear that Ismail plays the main role in both their lives: he is the fundamental element around which Eric's and Habiba’s identities coalesce, and upon whom their relationship depends.

His encroaching presence is first made known in a text message that Habiba receives (Happy 2006) immediately before Eric informs her that his father had died (I.9). Next, Ismail enters the theatrical space via a telephone call that he makes to Habiba at the exact moment that the memories of Eric's child sexual abuse suddenly overwhelm him and he rushes offstage (I.17). During these exchanges, Ismail’s presence is almost omniscient, crucially occurring at moments that coincide with Eric’s mourning and sudden recollection of childhood trauma, which respectively signify paternal loss and a loss of innocence. His intrusions are suggestive of the complex and controversial nature of the relationship that Eric and Ismail share, which is equally nurturing and abusive. As his primary paternal influence, Ismail provided Eric with the attention and physical affection that he did not otherwise receive (II.29). Together, they spent time cooking in the kitchen (I.5, II.29), “playing badminton” (I.16) and “watching TV” (II.28), and Eric followed him “everywhere he [went]” (I.7). That Habiba and Ismail had both been loving, parental figures in Eric's childhood is evident in the characters’ recollections of their time spent together as a family. As Habiba fondly declares to Eric at their first meeting, “Although so many years we never meet, you are still like our child, like our first child” (I.12); and she subsequently dubs him “[a]nak ku sayang [gloss: my beloved child]” (III.50) at the play’s end.

By casting Ismail in his overseeing role, metonymic of the Singaporean State and its legitimate authority, Sharma presents the spectator with an opportunity to investigate communally held notions of exclusion and inclusion. With Eric’s allegations of child sexual abuse and Habiba’s conditional validation of their occurrence, Sharma seeks to raise the spectator’s awareness of the radical identification with Ismail, which might lead the spectator to question the culture

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113 Ismail occupies a political position in a neighbourhood named Siglap, directly translated from the Malay language to “darkness that conceals” (Savage and Yeoh 346). This may further suggest an alignment of the spectator’s privileged perspective with that of Ismail's.
of passive reception of political authority in Singapore. Rather than simplifying Ismail’s exclusion as a paedophile, however, in contrast to the one-dimensional binaries that Eric recites—namely, “‘abuser[,] ‘perpetrator’, ‘manipulator’, ‘controller’, ‘predator’” (II.20)—Sharma arrests the spectator’s judgment by underscoring Ismail’s nurturing aspects in addition to Habiba’s querying of the veracity of Eric’s accusations in Act III. In assessing the plausible effects of Ismail’s portrayal in relation to the spectator of Happy (2006), it is useful to consider the play alongside Paula Vogel’s comparable treatment of the paedophile and the taboo subject of paedophilia within the diegetic community in her play, How I Learned to Drive.

Andrew Kimbrough discusses Vogel’s controversial portrayal of the “sympathetic paedophile” (49) and the alternative model of community conceived by the playwright in her prize-winning play. In Kimbrough’s view, the paedophile is not a generalised evil that can safely be ostracised as an anonymous, transgressive other. Instead, the other is made radically the same. [He] is one of us. He lives in our families, eats at our tables, and cares for our children. To confront the particular disturbance of [the sympathetic paedophile] is not to confront the evil of the other, but to confront the evil in oneself. (61)

In this light, Ismail’s characterisation in Happy may be unsettling precisely because he is simultaneously a trusted local political figure, loving father and unrepentant paedophile. Habiba succinctly articulates this contentious portrayal when she says that “[Ismail] is Syaitan [gloss: Satan]. But he is also a good man. He got good heart. He love his children so much” (III.43). Through Ismail, Sharma further invites the spectator to question the over-simplified othering of the abject characters on stage, and more importantly, how the Singaporean identity is (violently) realised in relation to these othered figures. I argue that both Habiba and Eric, clearly othered in State discourse, are both cast as victims in the dramatic narrative and within the Singaporean community in the space-off.
of Sharma’s play. The role that the victim plays in maintaining such a (mimetic) community is explicated in the work of René Girard (Violence and the Sacred).

Girard asserts that human behaviour and interpersonal dynamics are grounded in mimetic desire, where the satisfaction or fulfilment of the subject’s desire is contingent upon the acquisition of another’s object of desire and how that said object is desired. This “acquisitive mimesis” (Girard “Mimesis and Violence”) inevitably leads to “conflictual mimesis” where the desire and the resulting conflict between the subject and its rival intensify (Girard Deceit, Desire, and the Novel). In the ensuing and escalating violence, these antagonists recognise their respective rivals as a “monstrous double” that then fuels an internal self-hatred that must be vented (Girard Violence and the Sacred 161-190). Girard goes on to state:

If acquisitive mimesis divides by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same object with a view to appropriating it, conflictual mimesis will inevitably unify by leading two or more individuals to converge on one and the same adversary that all wish to strike down. (Things Hidden 26)

In other words, the necessity to prevent a further escalation of violence and self-loathing as the “monstrous double” of a rival leads to the creation of a scapegoat upon whom this violence and hatred is displaced. For Girard, therefore, the scapegoating mechanism is integral to the preservation of the community. He further posits that the scapegoat is “chosen only because it is vulnerable and close at hand” (Girard Violence and the Sacred 2). However, in his consideration of Girard’s mimetic theory, Rey Chow contends that the victim of the scapegoating mechanism is not as arbitrary as Girard maintains. Taking a similar view to Kimbrough, in that the repulsion borne by the subject towards the sympathetic paedophile is located in that subject’s identification with this figure (Kimbrough 61), Chow puts forward the argument that

the victim is sacrificed...because he is like us[;] because he resembles the community of those who would otherwise be engaged in an endless frenzy of
CHAPTER 4: Mimetic Violence and Victimisation in Haresh Sharma’s *Fundamentally Happy*

retaliation. (“Sacrifice, Mimesis, and the Theorizing of Victimhood” 143)

Taking this view, I suggest that the victimisation of Eric, Habiba—and arguably, even Ismail—within Sharma’s dramatic narrative may be read as the necessary consequence of maintaining the State’s idyll of the Singaporean family unit. The tension that continues between Eric and Habiba demonstrates the acting out of that “conflictual mimesis” put forward by Girard. Despite her role as a religious teacher advocating “happiness” and reflection, Habiba so desires the continued stability of her family that she initially resists wholly validating Eric’s allegations of child sexual abuse. When she attempts to defend the objects that mark her as successful in Singapore, she subsequently accuses Eric of harbouring the desire to “destroy [her] family” (II.25) and exacting revenge upon Ismail (II.30). As is conveyed to the spectator, however, Habiba has had to “close [her] eyes” to Ismail’s abuse of children, his unfaithfulness towards her (III.49) and Eric’s victimisation by Ismail.

Similarly, in fulfilling his conflictual desire for Ismail, Eric first files the police report that leads to Ismail’s arrest, but then drops the charges when Ismail accedes to his desires for affection (III.37); this apparent fulfilment of Eric’s desires causes the dissolution of Habiba’s family and household. Eric’s later claim that he “withdrew the allegations because of [Habiba]” is particularly violent (III.47), as it echoes Ismail’s manipulative and abusive plea to Eric to keep the secret of their sexual relationship from Habiba. Eric recounts this exchange as follows:

\begin{quote}
ERIC: Uncle Ismail [...] said no...no, sayang, don’t tell her...if you tell her, she will die. No, no, Uncle, I don’t want her to die. Then don’t tell anyone. This is our secret. He cried. He cried. He said, sayang me, sayang me Eric...And I held him. I kissed him. I took care of him. I did
\end{quote}

\footnote{“Sayang” is glossed as “love” (Sharma Trilogy 181).}
Notably, as victims of Ismail’s abuse, Habiba and Eric are both silenced in order to attain “happiness”. Crucially, as part of the implied Singaporean mimetic community, a desire to exact vengeance upon Ismail, symbolic of abject criminality and recognised as a “monstrous double”, might be aroused in the spectator. Yet, lacking the satisfaction of viewing Ismail’s expulsion and denied the fulfilment of the desire for Ismail’s appearance, the spectator might instead channel their loathing towards the already othered characters, the scapegoats, on stage. The spectator of *Happy* (2006) could thus be said to be positioned within that mimetic community that cruelly demands Habiba’s and Eric’s silence.

This practice of maintaining silence for apparent “happiness” takes on a violent aspect when Habiba emphasises the powerlessness she has felt in her role as a Muslim wife:

HABIBA: Sometimes people say, eh, Muslim woman always like second class, cannot do so many thing...There is even one saying you know *[laughs loudly]* ...When the husband come home, the wife is waiting at the door. She is holding a stick, one glass of water [...] and she is holding up her skirt. The stick is to say, if I wrong you, you can hit me. The drink is to say, welcome home husband. And she pull up her skirt because husband, if you want to take me now, you can... *[laughs loudly]* (III.47)

Here Habiba expresses her own former victimisation both at the hands of her husband and the mores of the Singaporean Malay-Muslim community. In Habiba’s anecdote, she elucidates the role that she has occupied as one that is defined by its subservience and service to her husband, Ismail. That is to say,
prior to the characters’ memory work, Habiba could be said to have sacrificed her agency to a substantial extent so that she may fulfil the State-sanctioned narrative of the family and economic success. Later, in response to Eric’s lamentation that his fiancée “doesn’t make [him] happy” in the way that Ismail does (III.50), Habiba advises him to make a similar sacrifice so that he may eventually attain “happiness”. She tells him:

HABIBA: It’s ok Eric. You stay with her. You close your eyes. When you open, 20 years pass already. And then you see...nobody...nobody is more important than her. (III.50)

In Habiba’s experience, sacrifice and silence are the means by which both she and Eric may survive in pursuit of “happiness”.

Once again denying the creation of an untroubled spectator perspective, Sharma presents two responses to the condition of victimhood experienced by the characters. Following the Koranic story of Ismail’s namesake whose father, Ibrahim, was rewarded for being “loyal and submissive” (III.44), Eric reminds Habiba that she “sacrificed [her] life for [Ismail]”; and he is, in turn, congratulated for being “[s]ubmissive[,] [l]ike a lamb” (III.44). In Girard’s conceptualisation, Eric and Habiba could be described as the scapegoats in their sacrifice of agency to maintain what the State has reified as the safe boundaries of the Singaporean family, and thus, the nation. When read as a political allegory, the play depicts a community where rather than being passed over in silence, dramatized as the only available recourse for the marginalised others on stage, the acceptance of abuse and the loss of agency is valid in the pursuit of the State’s version of “happiness”.

On the other hand, Habiba provides an alternative to victimhood when she dissembles her illusions of happiness and reclaims her agency at the play’s conclusion. Her rejection of her role as a victim, and thus, a rejection of her marginalised status, is first depicted in her denouncement of Ismail, which is in stark contrast to her initial defence of her husband. In Act III, she says, “He is
Syaitan [gloss: Satan]” three times (III.42-43) and chides Eric for dropping the charges against him (III.42). Additionally, though she initially exhibits pride in her occupation as a religious educator, Habiba announces in Act III that she is “not working at the Madrasah already” (III.40) and ignores the call to prayer, choosing to pack her removal boxes instead (Happy 2006). Significantly, her decision to move from the house she has lived in since Eric’s childhood may be read as a metaphor of her progress from her previous position of silence. In the play’s staging, a black garbage bag is seen at downstage-left next to a few boxes, into which she disposes of the objects that had constructed Ismail’s presence for the characters and the spectator throughout the play (Happy 2006). In this way, Habiba further opposes her marginalisation by purging the lingering presence of Ismail from her life and the presentational space. Her final reclamation of agency and rejection of victimhood is then controversially performed in the removal of her tudung and physical contact, a hug, with Eric (III.50). In the Singaporean context sensitive to the overt performance of religion, this action is tantamount to Habiba undressing on stage for the audience that is representative of Singapore’s mimetic community implied by the play. By pointedly making public what is expected to be kept private, Sharma and Tan challenge the “nomination of the visible” (Foucault Order of Things 144) through Habiba’s portrayal at this juncture and present the spectator with an alternative response to the discourse of victimhood necessitated by the Singaporean mimetic community.

In contrast to Habiba, Eric’s final acceptance of the object symbolic of his alleged debasement, the carpet, before his only staged exit (Happy 2006),\(^\text{115}\) performs his continued self-victimisation and unresolved mourning for his loss of Ismail. With this staged action, Eric knowingly internalises what Freud refers to as the “open wound” in the melancholic complex and deliberately chooses not to “move on” (“Mourning and Melancholia” 253). Importantly for the spectator, however, Sharma depicts Eric’s otherness—and the spectator’s potential othering

\(^{115}\) Although Eric takes the carpet in the recording of the performance (Happy 2006), in the didascalia of the play-script, Habiba “takes the carpet and gives it to [Eric]. He doesn’t take it. He leaves” (III.51). In a personal interview with the playwright in Dec. 2013, he explained that he had vacillated between Eric taking the carpet and him leaving without the carpet on each night of the performance in 2006, so that this closing sequence was different for different audiences. When it came to the publication of the play, he decided that he wanted Eric to be seen in a better light and chose an ending that suggested the beginning of the character’s healing from his trauma.
of Eric—as a choice, especially juxtaposed against Habiba’s response. In this way, the spectator might first be made aware of their complicity in the violence enacted on stage, but is then invited to inquire where they are located in relation to the Singaporean narrative, be it as victim, perpetrator or an inquiring subject, and principally, in relation to the State’s promulgation of “happiness”.

**Conclusion: Troubling the Meaning of Happiness**

In its radical examination of the Singaporean family, *Happy* (2006) repositions the spectre of the paedophile from being only an external threat to one that is located firmly within the seemingly idyllic Singaporean home. In so doing, the play effectively undermines the State’s reductive demonstration of Singaporean identity through its invocation of the “Four Million Smiles” project and also provides an intelligent inquiry into the subject of paedophilia that had been absent from Singaporean public discourse (except to be positioned as an external threat beyond the safe borders of the nation). Significantly, the play exposes the spectator to the possible violent consequences this silencing has on the marginalised subject cordoned off by the Singaporean community. In this way, the spectator of *Happy* (2006) proceeds on what Julia Kristeva describes as “a journey into the strangeness of the other and of oneself, toward an ethics of respect for the irreconcilable” (qtd. in Kimbrough 61). The play ends not only under the cloak of the dark of night, but after Eric leaves at the end of Act III, Habiba ritualistically switches each light off in her household before exiting the stage in darkness. I would argue that Sharma has succeeded in potentially motivating the unsettled spectator, sharing this darkness in the theatre, to re-evaluate what their “happiness” and responsibility to the community means within the Singaporean context.

In the next chapter, this emphasis on personal responsibility to the Singaporean community is further developed in the analysis of *Good People*. 
Chapter 5

Morality and The Docile Body in Haresh Sharma’s Good People

“The relatively safe and crime-free environment is one important attraction of Singapore to tourists and investors, and also an important factor for the Singaporean’s sense of safety and security. [...] Singapore has some of the toughest laws in the world such as for drug trafficking and use of firearms offences, both of which attract the capital punishment.” (Prof. Jayakumar)

“But however you define it, however it’s done...whether it’s assisted or by choice...murder is murder!” —Miguel (Sharma Good People II.iii.86)

The Spectacular Hanging of Shanmugam Murugesu and Van Tuong Nguyen: The Socio-Political Context of Good People

In January 2004, Amnesty International published a report that sought to question the application of capital punishment in Singapore, noting that “[o]fficial information about the use of the death penalty in Singapore is shrouded in secrecy” (1). Clarifying the organisation’s stance that the death penalty “is the ultimate cruel, inhuman and degrading punishment” (2), the report identified Singapore as possibly having “the highest execution rate in the world relative to its population of just over four million people” (1). 116

In Singapore, capital punishment is the maximum punishment for several offences including, but not limited to, gang robbery resulting in death (Penal Code ch. XVI §396), perjury in a capital case where the accused is executed (ch. XI §194 §196-200), kidnapping resulting in death (ch. XVI, §364), waging war against the State or plotting to inflict harm upon the President’s body (ch. IV §121, §121A, §121B, §121C), arms trafficking (Arms Offences Act §6) and other terrorism-related arms offences not resulting in death (Internal Security Act ch. III §58). In addition, the application of the death penalty is mandatory for convictions of war crimes (Penal Code ch. VI(B) §130E), piracy with endangerment of another person (ch. VI(A) §130B), murder (ch. XVI §299-302;

116 This figure was correct as at 2004. At the time of this writing in 2016, the Department of Statistics reports that the total population of Singapore is 5.535 million (Population).
Terrorism (Suppression of Bombings) Act of Singapore §3), mutiny during battle (Armed Forces Act §15), and, before 1 January 2013, the traffic and/or manufacture of illegal narcotics (Misuse of Drugs Act §33). A “wide range of offences” attract capital punishment in Singapore (Amnesty International 11). However, of the six case studies included in its report (9-11), Amnesty International clearly focused on the mandatory death penalty under the Misuse of Drugs Act and cited five drug trafficking cases where the death penalty applied. Several (unsolicited) recommendations were made to the Singaporean State, including that it “impose a moratorium on all executions[,] commute all pending death sentences to terms of imprisonment” and “[s]ign and ratify key international human rights treaties” (17).

The State issued an official response that systematically debunked or dismissed all of Amnesty International’s allegations and reiterated its position on the seriousness of drug trafficking (Response to Amnesty International’s Report). To the human rights organisation’s criticism of the imposition of the death penalty for “fairly small amounts of drugs” (Amnesty International 14), the State responded as follows:

17 On 1 Jan. 2013, the Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Act 2012 came into effect. Among the changes was the addition of §33B, which allowed for the “[d]iscretion of court not to impose sentence of death in certain circumstances”. Correspondingly, the Criminal Procedure Code was amended so that under the conditions of §33B of the Misuse of Drugs Act, “life imprisonment may be imposed in lieu of death” at the discretion of the sentencing judge (Criminal Procedure Code §253(3)(aa)). However, there had been 110 State executions from 1999-2004 under the mandatory death penalty for drug-related offences, which is addressed in the play analysed in this chapter (Singapore Government Response to Amnesty International’s Report).

18 The death penalty cases involving drug-related offences cited by Amnesty International in its 2004 report include that of Rozman Jusoh, a 24-year-old Malaysian labourer whom the sitting judge, Justice M.P.H. Rubin, described as “a guileless simpleton without any gift for contrivance” and who was executed in Apr. 1996 (see Public Prosecutor v. Rozman bin Jusoh, [1994] SGHC 251 and Public Prosecutor v. Rozman bin Jusoh, [1995] 2 S.L.R.(R.) 879, qtd. in Gopalan); Poon Yuen-Chung, an 18-year-old Hong Kong citizen, executed in Apr. 1995; Zulfikar bin Mustaffah, a 32-year-old unemployed Singaporean with a long-term drug addiction, executed in Sept. 2001; Thiru Selvam, a 28-year-old Singaporean father of two who had been accused by his friend who had possession of the drugs in question, executed in Sept. 2001 despite his plea of innocence; and Vignes s/o Mourthi, a 23-year-old Malaysian, executed in Sept. 2003 despite his plea of innocence (Amnesty International 9-II). The main witness in the prosecution’s case was Sergeant S. Rajkumar, the undercover policeman who made the arrest. According to Alan Shadrake, during Vignes’ trial, Rajkumar had been “under investigation for the alleged rape and sodomy of a young woman [...] and for subsequent attempts to bribe her to drop the charges” (133). However, the policeman’s trial began only after Vignes’ execution, and Rajkumar was found to be “corrupt” by the sitting Judge Sia Aik Kor (135).
It is no secret that Singapore considers drug trafficking among the most serious crimes and that given Singapore’s small size and location near the Golden Triangle, views itself as particularly vulnerable to the drug menace. (*Response to Amnesty International’s Report*)

As it has done with other spectres, the State has nurtured the crisis mentality of the Singaporean public by depicting drug traffickers as purveyors of “evil” who threaten the precarious Singaporean social fabric (H.L. Lee qtd. in “Drug Trafficking”). In light of this, it would appear that the State is correct in stating: “The fact is that the death penalty is not a burning issue in Singapore” (*Response to Amnesty International’s Report*). Furthermore, according to a survey referred to by *The Straits Times* (L. Lim and Yong 8), the State is also correct in asserting that “[m]ost Singaporeans support the death penalty for serious crimes” (*Response to Amnesty International’s Report*). Nonetheless, one plausible reason for the tacit acceptance of the death penalty by the majority of the Singaporean public is that the life of the condemned on death row and the conduct of executions are protected under the *Official Secrets Act* in Singapore.

Critical to the analysis undertaken in this chapter, this disappearance of the spectacle of public execution and the body of the condemned from public scrutiny in Singapore resonates with what Michel Foucault describes as the modern regime of law and justice (*Discipline and Punish*) where “punishment [is] the most hidden part of the penal process” (9). Foucault states that where “the condemned man was no longer to be seen” (13), the object of the penal system becomes the crime itself and all its attendant “passions, instincts, anomalies, infirmities, maladjustments, [and] effects of environment or heredity” (17). These “attenuating circumstances” are also the means by which individuals are defined (17), so that the modern penal system aims not merely to punish offences, but also to police the character, desires and actions of individuals (18). In this way, the bodies of the condemned, by their legal conviction alone (9), and otherwise invisible to the public eye, represent the dangerous societal elements that necessitate and justify the meting out of the penalty.
Before 2005, contentious issues over the mandatory death penalty had been almost imperceptible in public discourse, save the work of a small number of anti-death penalty activists in Singapore. Think Centre has been the only anti-death penalty non-governmental organisation registered with both the Registry of Companies & Businesses and the Registrar of Societies in Singapore. However, as with all Singaporean activists, their activities have been largely proscribed by the right to assembly laws that deem unlicensed public gatherings of more than four people to be potentially unlawful assemblies (*Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) Act; Miscellaneous Offences (Public Order and Nuisance) (Assemblies and Processions) Rules; Public Order Act §5*). Another vocal opponent of capital punishment in Singapore was the late Secretary-General of the Workers’ Party and first Member of the Opposition to win a seat in the Parliament of Singapore in 1981, Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam (“More than 5 Decades of Service” The Workers’ Party). On 11 July 2001, Jeyaretnam had attempted to initiate a Parliamentary debate with the Cabinet by raising the facts of the case of Zulfikar bin Mustaffah. However, his points were summarily rebutted by then Senior Minister of State in the Ministry of Law and the Ministry of Home Affairs, Associate Professor Ho Peng Kee. Ho stressed that the law was appropriate to maintain the stability and safety of Singaporean society as follows:

Of course, the simple rebuttal to that by Mr Jeyaretnam and those of his ilk will be that he is a simple-minded man, he is a naïve man, he is a gullible man. But imagine if you take that tack for all accused persons who suffer from the penalty of the law, including the death penalty, then I think Singapore will not, today, enjoy the standard of law and order and reputation for safety which we enjoy. (“A Case of Drug Trafficking”)

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119 In his National Day Rally 2004 speech, then and current (2016) PM H.L. Lee claimed that because the government needed “to encourage participation and debate, [...] for indoor talks”, the State would “do away with licensing [...] requirements unless they touch on sensitive issues like race and religion”. However, Think Centre reports that a Public Entertainment Licence had to be obtained from the Singapore Police Force to hold the indoor vigil protesting the execution of Shanmugam Murugesu at the Furama Hotel in May 2005, discussed below (Samydorai).
Whereas Jeyaretnam had been attempting to elucidate the specific circumstances of Zulfikar’s case, Ho, a member of the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP), maintained the State’s stance on following the letter of the law as morally coded for the common good of Singaporean society. A Parliamentary debate on the issue did not ensue. Amnesty International fittingly expressed in its report three years later that the corresponding lacuna in public discourse owes to “[c]ontrols […] on the press and civil society organisations [that] curb freedom of expression” (2). In response to this observation, the State issued this challenge:

If a person wants to advocate a particular stand, he should campaign on the basis of his platform and get the people of Singapore to vote him into Parliament. But he would not find much support in Singapore. (Response to Amnesty International’s Report)

Significantly, however, the Singaporean public’s engagement with the death penalty would not be facilitated by Parliament, but by the then nascent civil society in Singapore. According to Alan Shadrake, this “unprecedented public discussion” in Singapore was sparked by the hanging of Shanmugam Murugesu120 in May 2005 (137).

Shanmugam, aged 38, had been convicted for trafficking over a kilo of cannabis from Johore Bahru into Singapore (Levett), the legal threshold for cannabis being 500 grams (Misuse of Drugs Act Part IV, Second Schedule). Shanmugam’s lawyer, human rights activist M. Ravi, in collaboration with anti-death penalty activists from Think Centre, commenced a tireless and strategic campaign that sought to expose the “arbitrary, biased and discriminatory’ flaws in Singapore’s justice system [to] mobilise public opinion” for the first time in Singapore (Aglionby). Beginning a month before Shanmugam’s scheduled execution, the campaigners distributed flyers at Centrepoint, a central shopping mall along Orchard Road, informing the public of Shanmugam’s case and the mandatory death penalty (Shadrake 143). They continued this campaign of

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120 Murugesu is a patronymic. Following this convention, Shanmugam Murugesu will hereinafter be referred to by his given name, Shanmugam.
information until August that year. Also, T-shirts that said “400 men and women executed since 1991” (Aglionby)—directly quoting the aforementioned Amnesty International report published the year before (Amnesty International 1)—were worn by the campaigners and raised awareness of the consequences of the public’s acquiescence to the mandatory death penalty as it then stood. Finally, photographs of the family’s futile efforts for Presidential clemency circulated to the press increased the visibility of the campaign of protest in the broader Singaporean context (see Shadrake Photo Plates Between 68-69). Additionally, as part of this campaign, a vigil was organised by Singaporean arts practitioners and Think Centre, but was thwarted by police officers in attendance who “shut down the open mike session just as the first person was getting into his stride” (Aglionby). Shanmugam was hanged at dawn the day after on Friday, 13 May 2005. Nonetheless, in John Aglionby’s view of these events, “Singapore finally [found] a voice in [the] death row protest” in 2005.

In the same year, Australian anti-death penalty activists mounted a months-long protest urging the Singaporean State to pardon Australian citizen, Van Tuong Nguyen, aged 25, convicted for trafficking 396.2 grams of heroin (that is, diamorphine). In December 2002, Nguyen was caught in the transit lounge of Singapore’s Changi International Airport during a stopover on the way back to Melbourne, Australia, with more than 26 times the legal threshold for diamorphine, that is, 15 grams (Misuse of Drugs Act Part IV, Second Schedule). By 20 March 2004, Nguyen’s final appeal had been denied by the High Court of Singapore, and he was sentenced to death. The mandatory death penalty in Singapore was harshly criticised as barbaric and a violation of human rights.121 Through media reports of the public outcry and news coverage of the meetings held between Australian Prime Minister John Howard and Singaporean Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong, where Howard’s issue of appeals for Nguyen’s clemency were summarily denied, Singaporeans viewed the masses of ordinary people protesting in the major cities of Australia. According to Howard’s spokesperson, “the Singaporean government [had] misjudged the depth of feeling

121 See, for example, “S’pore Stands by Hanging”; “No Silence”; “The First Australian to Be Executed in 12 Years” (Butcher and Levett 3); and Just Punishment, a documentary of the events (Beamish and Owen).
here in the Australian community about their actions” (qtd. in “No Silence”). The Australian protests also garnered the attention of the Holy See, which issued two separate appeals under Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI respectively to then President S.R. Nathan of Singapore. This communiqué was reported in *The Catholic News*, the main religious newspaper for the Catholic community in Singapore, and stated that:

In the first case, the Minister for Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Singapore, on Mar. 2, 2005, assured that the request for clemency was transmitted to the office of the President […]. The authorities of Singapore have not yet given any response to the second request. (qtd. in “Appeals Fail, but Nguyen Will Die in the Faith”)

Arguably, the dissemination of this report by the Catholic Church in Singapore, an institution historically marked as a dissenting entity by the State, raised the gravity of the application of the death penalty for the Singaporean public in an assertion of human rights. Whereas the State had hitherto divorced human rights from criminals, the protests, vigil and denouncement of the death penalty by the Catholic Church disrupted the ease with which the Singaporean body politic accepted the law.

The public interrogation of the death penalty was further crystallised by the televised public mourning of the condemned man at the requiem mass held at St Patrick’s Cathedral in Melbourne on 7 December 2005, the day after Nguyen’s hanging (Beamish and Owen). Later, when the Parliament of Singapore voted to change the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking in October 2012 (Singapore Government *Misuse of Drugs (Amendment) Bill*), M. Ravi commented that it was the measure of concern expressed by the Australian public that had “triggered a slow rethink that led to the changes” in the law (qtd. in Yu). In Foucauldian terms, the Singaporean protests and international uproar effectively re-positioned “the body [of the condemned man] as the target of penal repression” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish 8*) through a re-humanisation achieved with photographs and interviews that visually depicted the concern of their families and their lives in the community. Furthermore, the violence of
judicial murder for the crime of drug trafficking was effectively cast as incongruous and revealed the responsibility borne by the State for this violence, typically concealed by the legitimacy of the penalty imposed on detractors of the law in question (10). Significantly, it was also the publicised hanging of Shanmugam and Nguyen that inspired the crafting of Good People, the second neorealist play in Haresh Sharma’s Trilogy.

In what follows, I will first give a synopsis of Good People and explore how the play’s publicity collaterals contribute to its engagement with the debate on the mandatory death penalty in Singapore. Next, I turn to the significance and effects of the play’s dramaturgical strategies to elucidate individual moral convictions and underlying inter-cultural tensions in Singapore as effects of State policies. Using the principles of discipline and the panoptic mechanism of modern states as described in Michel Foucault’s Discipline and Punish: The Birth of a Prison, I will argue how the staging choices of Good People lend to the play’s engagement with its main themes. Finally, I explore the play’s consequent overall performance efficacy in its examination of how the moral convictions of the spectator are shaped.

A Play on Differences: Introduction to Good People

Good People was first staged in 2007 at the TNS black box as part of the company’s main season and then restaged the following year in Malaysia at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre. Written by Haresh Sharma and directed by Alvin Tan, the play explores how morality and inter-cultural relationships affect the application of the mandatory death penalty for trafficking illegal narcotics above the legal thresholds stipulated by the State. The dramatic action of People is set in a hospice and takes place during the final days of the life of a terminally ill woman, Mrs Radha Krishnan, a former “queen of entertainment” in the 1970s (I.i.65). In order to alleviate her pain so that she may experience a better quality of life before she dies, she self-medicates with marijuana. Yati, her

122 References to the dramatic text will hereafter be to People, appended with Act, scene and page numbers as they are printed in the play-script. Where I discuss elements of the performance text only, I refer to People 2007. Video-recording of People 2007 courtesy of TNS archives.
nurse, and Miguel, the medical director of the hospice, each develop a relationship with Radha whose love for life and initially calm acceptance of her imminent death confound, but endear her to them. Yati and Miguel’s bickering is cast in sharp relief with Radha’s *gestus* of exuberance and love for life upon her arrival.

The debate between the characters about the different tenets of their respective religions is a continuing thread throughout the play, creating a discursive space for the spectator without the fetters of fearing the recrimination of the State’s repressive controls. As the plot unfolds, the three characters are portrayed as striving to do what they each believe is morally sound, but their religious and socio-cultural value systems and complicity with the rule of law in Singapore considerably differ and become equivocal. The characters’ heated arguments mark the high points of tension in the dramatic narrative and explicate the different ways in which they wrestle with their religious morality and personal convictions. More importantly, their interactions reveal the simmering intolerance of their racial and religious differences contrary to the national image of multicultural, multi-religious and multi-racial harmony depicted by the Singaporean State (Ackermann; Goh et al. 21).

When the authorities are alerted to Radha’s illegal drug consumption, the characters are interrogated, and Radha is charged with drug trafficking under Singapore’s *Misuse of Drugs Act* which carried a mandatory death penalty at the time of the play’s staging.123 The State’s stance that “capital punishment applies only to the most serious offences that cause grave harm to others and to society” (*Statement by MHA*)—where drug trafficking is the offence prosecuted more often than homicide and firearms offences (Amnesty International II; Singapore Government *Response to Amnesty International’s Report*)—thus seems callous in Radha’s specific case. Despite her terminal illness and unbearable level of pain, the authorities arrive to arrest her and send her to the remand centre pending her trial, which they promise will be “a closed-shut case” (IV.ii.107). The tautological compound adjective used here highlights the swift delivery of the

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123 See Singapore Government *Amendments to the Misuse of Drugs Act* for an overview of the changes to the application of the death penalty for drug trafficking, effective 1 Jan. 2013.
inevitable judgment and the mandatory death sentence that will follow, being not the least open to judicial discretion in 2007. Faced with the prospect of not being able to control her own pain, Radha surrenders to the authorities.

Her dying words declare the central message of *People* in its discovery of what simmers below the surface. That is, despite the dire consequences of their actions and their conflictual dynamics, as K.K. Seet states in his introduction to *Trilogy*, “each of the three protagonists is unremittingly good at the core” ("Haresh Sharma and the Architectonics of Humanism" viii). Crucially, Radha dies of her cancer before the authorities can take her away (IV.iii.II0-III).

**Authenticating Conventions: Staging an Answer to the UN Moratorium on the Death Penalty**

As he was crafting the play, Sharma considered the death penalty and the severity of the law in Singapore. Specifically referring to the cases of Shanmugam and Nguyen as the inspiration for his exploration of the prevailing standards of morality and the acquiescence of the Singaporean public to judicial murder, the playwright started to consider, what if the premise was different? What if a terminally-ill woman was addicted to marijuana for pain management and gets caught? Will she be sentenced to death when she only has a few months to live? ("Main Season 2007")

Similar to the re-humanisation effected in the aforementioned 2005 anti-death penalty campaigns, Sharma sought to address the “attenuating circumstances” that are subsumed in the prosecution of the offence (Foucault *Discipline and

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124 Note that the Media Development Authority had denied The Fun Stage a performance permit for their play, *Human Lefts* (dir. Benny Lim). *Human Lefts* was initially a play about Shanmugam’s hanging and his relationship with his father. It was scheduled to open the day after Nguyen’s execution. The Fun Stage’s application for a permit was only approved when they acceded to MDA’s requirements that “no mention of the death penalty and no reference to any political leader” be made in the play (B. Lim qtd. in Reuters). It is therefore significant that an exploration of the death penalty for drug trafficking in Singapore is successfully achieved on stage in *People* (2007) as a consequence of the fictional context of the dramatic narrative, and certainly, the practitioners’ dramaturgical techniques and savvy negotiation of the “OB markers” in Singapore.
The playwright’s allusion to the hangings of Shanmugam and Nguyen in another interview served to further reinvigorate the memory of the public debate that had ensued just two years prior to the staging of the play (Tay 52). In this way, Sharma positions his work and the spectator of the play as participants in the same debates and campaigns over the humanity of the condemned men on death row. Through People, the unconditional acceptance of the axes of morality dictated by religious tenets and the State is interrogated, so as to prompt the spectator to consider the legitimacy and value of the mandatory death penalty in Singapore—hopefully, perhaps, with some compassion.

As part of the company’s prompt to action, TNS unapologetically promoted the play’s exploration of the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking, thereby authenticating the dramatic narrative as occurring firmly within the contemporaneous socio-political milieu. On 15 November 2007, Permanent Representative of Singapore to the United Nations (UN), Ambassador Vanu Gopala Menon, had asserted Singapore’s retention of the death penalty in answer to the landmark UN appeal of its members to suspend the meting out of capital punishment in sentencing and all pending executions. Adhering to the State’s rhetoric espousing values in contradistinction to those held by the West, Menon criticised the European drafters of the resolution for attempting to foist their (Western) values on other sovereign countries like Singapore in a “lecture”, rather than fostering open debate on the issue. Menon further argued that “for many delegations, capital punishment is a criminal rather than a human rights issue” (qtd. in United Nations “Moratorium on Death Penalty”), thereby clearly distinguishing between subjects who should and should not have human rights.

Although Menon was one of the 52 naysayers that comprised the minority vote on the issue of the death penalty at the UN General Assembly, I propose that People (2007), which ran from 6 to 11 November 2007, effected an engagement that enlivened the issue for Singaporean residents and citizens—both readers of the media coverage leading up to and during the performance run and the spectators of the play—rather than merely as an issue to be decided by the authoritative State.
Rhetorical Conventions: Initiating Spectator Engagement

To this end, TNS provided a “Reading List” in the footnotes of pages in People’s programme booklet (Figure 5-1). In these footnotes, highlighted by their contrasting white background against the main black background of the booklet’s pages, the spectator is directly addressed: “[Y]ou’ll find useful links to articles pertaining to issues in Good People.”125 The intention of these “useful links” is clarified during press interviews about the playwright’s then upcoming play, which received substantial media attention following the critical acclaim of Fundamentally Happy. Sharma maintained:

I am not suggesting if taking drugs is good or bad; I’m not supporting any particular side. But I do want people to think about their perceptions of these issues. (qtd. in Hong 78)

The State controls the flow of information that it declares would offend the “conservative, silent majority” (Leong 35), citing the unpreparedness of the Singaporean citizen to make decisions on such radical issues in an informed way. By contrast, People (2007) provides the spectator with an opportunity to enter the discussion; and should they desire, arm themselves with the relevant information.

In the play, the function of the mandatory death penalty as an “expiation of evil-doing” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 10), specifically, drug trafficking as defined by the State, is made ambiguous. The problematization of the State’s unequivocal distinction between “good” and “evil”, “right” and “wrong” begins in the destabilisation of seemingly invariant signs, in this case, the words, “good people” in the play’s publicity flyer (Figure 5-3). Set in rounded, sans serif font that typically suggests the self-containment of text in contrast to a (serif) depiction of its flow, the titular text is a solid black hue. This colour seeps out of each letter in wisps of lines that simulate a swirling scribble in gradations of black.

125 These include articles that discuss “Marijuana Use in Medicine”, “Marijuana Use in History, Culture and Religion”, “Palliative Care”, the “Principle of Double Effect”, and perhaps most pertinently, the “Death Penalty in Singapore for Marijuana Trafficking” and “Euthanasia” (People Publicity Collaterals 7-13).
and grey over the entire publicity flyer, including the photograph of the featured protagonist (Figure 5-2). In this way, the play graphically announces its intent to deconstruct the stability of the notions of “goodness” and what it means to be “good people” in Singapore.

![Figure 5-1: Programme booklet entries in the “Reading List” for People (2007). (The Necessary Stage “People Publicity Collaterals”)](image)

The colour swatch of the program booklet is a simple monochromatic one with white and black pages designed to activate the spectator’s binary perception, which prepares the spectator to consider the binary oppositions and its consequences inherent in the rhetoric of the State. Notably, the photographs of the protagonists are set in greyscale in contrast to the black and white pages, symbolising the spectrum of possibilities and nuances that complex human individuals bring to the palette of the idea of “goodness”. In other words, with the addition of the human element, the collaterals seem to suggest that actions and
circumstances cannot be simplified in the “black and white” terms deployed by the State.

Figure 5-2: Publicity Flyer for People (2007), featuring the protagonist, Miguel. Singapore: TNS, 2007.

Figure 5-3: Cover of Programme Booklet for People (2007), featuring the protagonist, Radha. Singapore: TNS, 2007.

Figure 5-4: Inside-front cover of Programme Booklet for People (2007), featuring the protagonist, Yati. Singapore: TNS, 2007.

(The Necessary Stage “People Publicity Collaterals”)

219
These same photographs are set in colour in the publicity flyers, so as to visually identify the three protagonists as ethnic minorities in Singapore (e.g. Miguel in Figure 5-2). Miguel, played by Rody Vera, a Filipino, represents the ethnic category of “Others” in the multiracial model used by the Singaporean State; Radha, played by Sukania Venugopal, is ethnically Indian (Figure 5-3); and Yati, played by Siti Khalijah, is ethnically Malay (Figure 5-4). Conspicuously, there are no representations of the Chinese majority in People (2007). The characters’ visual ethnic identification is magnified by the close-up framing of the faces of Miguel, Radha and Yati, each on their own publicity flyer, which adds to the palpability of humanity that the play argues must be considered in its exploration of “goodness”. Similar to the ambivalence conveyed in the programme booklet, the colour of the photographs is edited with a brightening and whitening effect that illuminates the protagonists’ faces and reduces the intensity of the brown colour of their skin. Consequently, visual ethnic identification that can lead to the application of the prevailing reductive racial and religious stereotypes, later explored in the play, is here undermined. Not without acknowledging their visual ethnic identification as minorities in Singapore, the play portrays the characters as “good people”, signalled by the juxtaposition of their facial close-ups with the title of the play.

Furthermore, in contrast to the discipline mechanisms of the State that require the “crime [to be] faceless” for its successful operation (Foucault Discipline and Punish 14), People (2007) subversively displays the faces and narrates the histories of the condemned in its publicity collaterals and on stage. Hence, the figure of the condemned is re-embodied, and the spectator is engaged in a consideration of the congruity of the mandatory death penalty for drug offences. In this way, People (2007) brings to light the tacit belief that “a condemned [person] should suffer physically more than other [people]” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 16), which may disrupt the spectator’s sanction of the judicial murder of the subjects in question.

126 See “Multiracialism and Meritocracy” (Moore 344) and “Pick and Mix” (Poon 104) for explications of the CMIO model.
The Production of Docile Bodies by the State: Establishing the Spectator’s Horizon of Expectations

In his “Director’s Message”, Tan explains the collaborative devising process that is the cornerstone of TNS’ dramaturgy as follows:

The first phase of their [the actors] participation in March ‘07 included their responses to a visit to a hospice, interviews with hospice personnel and a doctor about pain alleviation and palliative care. (*People* Publicity Collaterals 5)

Kenneth Kwok notes in his review of *People* (2007) that as a result of TNS’s process, the personal experiences and idiosyncratic ethnic and religious identifications of the actors contribute significantly to the crafting of the characters and their interpersonal relationships as performed on stage. Over nine months, the playwright, director and actors adapted what I contend is Augusto Boal’s methods put forward by him as practices that would create a theatre “placed at the services of the oppressed” (121). In *People*, the “oppressed” are portrayed as the “vulnerable members of society” (Amnesty International 9), specifically, the terminal ill and ethnic minorities in Singapore.

The racialized bodies of the actors in Sharma’s *Trilogy*—and, crucially, their representation of the Singaporean subjects with whom they interacted in their field research—must therefore be read explicitly as part of the exploration of the social issues raised by *People* (2007). The impact of the State’s formulation of seemingly “pure” ethnic categories in support of its multicultural ethos is then also appropriately dealt with in the play. I concur with Kenneth Tan, among others, who describes the State’s politicisation of ethnicity as part of its “garrison mentality” in securing the tenuous stability of the heterogeneous Singaporean nation (97). However, as Andreas Ackerman argues, the State’s apparent

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127 This description of TNS’s methods being redolent of Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed is my own. See Chapter 6 of this thesis for a summary of the allegations of Marxism brought against Sharma and Tan after their attendance of a workshop conducted by Boal in New York City.
acknowledgement of the different racial and religious affiliations in Singapore involved the creation of

an “artificial” ethnicity in which political loyalty, cultural identity and interest association were first isolated, then engineered, and finally reassembled [and] subsumed under [...] the principles of multiracialism, multilingualism, multiculturalism and multireligiosity. (455)

In other words, the State's multicultural ethos can best be described as the ironic dissolution of the heterogeneity of the diverse identities in Singapore. As discussed in the previous chapter, the State's politicisation of ethnicity pervades all areas of Singaporean life. Singaporean residents are, for example, racially identified on birth certificates and national identity cards, required to elect a “mother tongue” language other than English in school as part of the State’s bilingual policy, identify as part of a religious community, and rely on racial quotas to determine their eligibility for public housing. The effect of such ethnic identification is that Singaporeans are now

deeply aware that he or she is a member of a race, speaks a particular language, believes in a particular religion, and is simultaneously cognisant of others, who are similar and dissimilar to him/her. (L. Lim qtd. in Ackermann 459)

Through its ubiquitous application of reified and identifiable categories of race, the State makes difference intelligible so that, as Foucault argues, “the supervision of each individual and the simultaneous work of all” is made possible (Discipline and Punish 147). In this way, the State achieves the production of what Foucault defines as the “docile body that may be subjected, used, transformed and improved” (136). The Singaporean body is thus inexorably marked—or, disciplined (137)—by race and the corresponding socioeconomic, political and spatial codes in the Singaporean context. Having viewed the publicity collaterals for People (2007), the spectator potentially enters the theatre primed with
preconceived notions of the characters in the play as representative of their minority ethnic identification within the Singaporean context.

Appropriately, *People* is set in a State institution that succinctly mechanises the disciplinary controls that produce the docile bodies subject to authoritarian control in a confined space—the hospice (cf. Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 143). The play opens with the actors, framed as silhouettes behind a translucent curtain, who have entered from upstage left, through a narrow aisle lined with dim, incandescent backlights which simulate a row of candles. Their entrance is scored by a repetitive bar of music in a minor key, reminiscent of a rhythmic and sombre funeral march (*People* 2007). With the rest of the stage in darkness, this veiled and shadowy opening sequence introduces the atmosphere of secrecy, internal struggle and life and death that permeates the four-act play.

When the lights come up, the brightly lit stage reveals the bodies of the actors, previously merely silhouettes, to the spectator. The moment of revelation achieved by this staging technique makes apparent the prevalence of visual and verbal cues accessible to the spectator in ethnic identification. Arguably, the characters are immediately identified using the racial determinants deployed by the State in its multicultural rhetoric. Miguel's speech carries with it the characteristic cadence and rhoticity of the Filipino accent and is not inflected by

*Figure 5-5: Yati (left) and Radha (right) get acquainted (I.i.65-66) in People (2007). (The Necessary Stage “Good People. By Haresh Sharma. Dir. Alvin Tan”)*
the pragmatic particles of Colloquial Singaporean English or CSE, such as, “lah” (I.i.ii.71) and “eh” (III.iii.97).\textsuperscript{128} This firstly emphasises the distance of his official capacity as the hospice administrator from the other two characters, and secondly, marks him as almost foreign on stage. In stark contrast, Yati only speaks CSE. Her sharp and comic asides that undermine the intended gravitas of Miguel’s aggrandizement of the facilities at the hospice include “Got biskut inside” (I.i.60), which is a direct syntactic translation of the Malay “Di dalam terdapat biskut.”\textsuperscript{129} The sentence also borrows the Malay word, “biskut [gloss: biscuit]”. Moreover, Yati’s angry outbursts at Miguel are complemented by expletives in the Malay language when she exclaims, “[k]epala butoh” (I.i.65, III.ii.93, III.ii.95) and “puki mak” (III.ii.95),\textsuperscript{130} thus further marking her on stage as ethnically Malay. Comparatively, Radha’s Indian ethnicity is identifiable through the prosodic features of her speech which bears the distinctive rise-fall tone that has been found to be characteristic of the Indian variety of Singaporean English (K.P. Tan “Ethnic Representation” 304). This characteristic prosody is predominantly influenced by the State’s election of the Tamil language as the official “mother tongue” assigned to individuals categorised as “Indian” and taught in schools (Smakman and Wagenaar 309; Y.Y. Tan 571).

As a result of the intimate spectator-performer relationship set up in the black box theatre during the play’s staging, the spectator is positioned in close

\textsuperscript{128} Due to the language and cultural variation of the Singaporean populace, especially due to its beginnings as a migrant nation, a contact linguistic variety (i.e., a language that develops to facilitate the communication between people speaking different languages) has emerged. This variation, Colloquial Singapore English or CSE is often distinguished from the standard variety of Singapore Standard English or SStdE. Whereas SStdE is often used in more formal contexts, such as in educational instruction, CSE is “used as a native language, informally, in the home, and to children” (Gupta 32). Educated Singaporeans with a higher socioeconomic status have access to both varieties and can code-switch depending on the context and level of solidarity between speakers. For example, in People(2007), Radha code-switches when she talks to Yati in CSE, which also establishes the solidarity between them; Radha’s conversations with Miguel in SStdE connote their distant relationship. Conversely, people who are unable to code-switch effectively are marked by their lower education and socioeconomic status (for example, Yati), or by their foreignness (for example, Miguel). Also see Smakman and Wagenaar for a discussion on how ethnic origins in Singapore may or may not influence the choice of CSE particles deployed by speakers.

\textsuperscript{129} My translation.

\textsuperscript{130} “Kepala butoh” and “puki mak” are glossed as “Dick head” (Sharma Trilogy 182) and “mother’s cunt” (my translation) respectively.
proximity to the presentation of only minority characters, where representations of the dominant Chinese ethnicity are absent from the presentational space. This clear focus on minority representation further signals to the spectator a discursive movement from the mainstream to the margins attempted by the play. I suggest that this relocation is activated by the initial acknowledgement of the “horizon of expectations” (Bennett 56-58, 100-101; Kershaw 25-26) of the Singaporean spectator, particularly, in the reading of “[c]ommon ethnic stereotypes” (Ackermann 461). As Ackerman found in interviews conducted during field research with correspondents in Singapore, these describe [...] [t]he Malays [...] [as] extreme in religion, warm, friendly, family-oriented, conservative [and] generally assumed to be somehow more “traditional” than the other ethnic groups [...]. Indians are said to be cliquey, conservative, cunning, verbose, family-oriented. (461)

Similar to the other plays in Trilogy, however, such stereotypes and the national ideology of multiracial harmony are almost immediately revealed to be fallacious or, at least, reductive, in People (2007). Whereas the characters are corporeally and audibly ethnically identified, and so, can be read with their concomitant assumptions of prevailing stereotypes at the play’s opening, their interactions pave the way for a deeper characterisation for the spectator. This complexity is especially conveyed in the tensions that arise between the characters as they attempt to reconcile their complex identities and desires within limiting boundaries.

**Oppressive Effects: Arresting the Disciplinary Codes of the State**

The play's destabilisation of prevailing stereotypes begins with Radha's arrival in her celebratory approach to life and death when she advises Miguel and Yati to dispense with “melancholy” and “Have fun! Laugh! Celebrate life!” (I.i.61) despite her terminal illness. Her introduction immediately appears to contradict the “cunning” and apprehension of others ascribed to the Indian community in
Singapore as described by Ackerman (461). Additionally, Radha’s rejection of her family’s disapproval of her choice to forego chemotherapy (I.i.67) and their absence during her last days (I.ii.71) is at odds with the “family-oriented” ethnic descriptor of Indians in Singapore (Ackermann 461). As it is soon revealed, her lifelong adherence to the mores of the Singaporean-Indian “conservative” community has only yielded what she describes as an “existence [...] of constant decapitation” (II.ii.85). Finally unencumbered by the expectations of the “common ethic stereotype” (Ackermann 461) at this late stage in her life, she has “left [her] husband, [her] children” (I.iii.77) to exercise her right to choose how she will spend her dying days.

As suggested by Radha’s portrayal, in this play, personal desires are set in contradiction to the community pressures that occur in conjunction with, if not as an effect of, the distinct racial-religious and authoritarian categories of control imposed by the State. When Yati tells her that a colleague had recognised her as once having been a singer (I.i.65), Radha smiles broadly (People 2007) and waxes nostalgic over the happiness that singing had once brought her:

RADHA: I loved it. I was singing on radio...even TV. You know, I was among the first few singers on colour TV in 1974? I was 25 and I sang with– [slight pause] Anyway, it was very difficult... in my culture. People were talking...so my parents married me off and...That was the end. (I.i.65-66)

This revelation prompts Yati to share her mutual love for singing in a band that performs at Home Club every weekend. And similar to Radha’s experience of the disapproval of her ethnic (“conservative” Indian) community that pressured her to abandon her desires, Yati’s “rocking” (I.ii.74) is not something that gains the approval of her (“conservative” Malay) “culture” (I.i.66).

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131 Home Club is a venue located in Upper Circular Road in the CBD in Singapore. Since its opening in 2004, Home Club has supported the showcase of fledgling Singaporean bands playing alternative music. The venue is still in operation, despite plans to open a new venue in its place, Canvas Singapore, with the aim of being more selective in its showcase (M. Kwok).
Importantly, Yati rebels and says: “But I don’t care. I want to be a singer” (I.i.66). Yati is also visually marked as resistant to the conservative dictates of Malay-Muslim culture in Singapore evidenced when she quits her job at the hospice following the death of a patient, a child, Bobby (IV.i.101). Throwing off the conservative constraints that bind her, she releases her hair from its bun, revealing its red-dyed ends (People 2007), symbolic of her alternative punk-style rebelliousness as part of Singapore’s defiant “Mat Rock scene” (Fu and Liew 217). According to Kelly Fu and Liew Kai Khiun, Singaporean Malay youths like Yati are members of a subculture that runs “counter to the State’s attempts to mould its population into a tightly controlled, efficient and achievement-oriented society” (217). Notably, “[s]uch deviance has been frowned upon not only by the State, but also by elements from the Malay community” (217), as expressed by Yati. In People (2007), however, a reductive deviant figuration of Yati is forestalled by her seemingly incongruous religious devotion explored below (I.i.67).

Her portrayal is first problematized when she discovers Radha smoking a joint in the garden and is visibly nervous, but then partakes in the illegal activity (I.ii.69). At this, the laughter from the audience is perhaps explained by a release of tension created by the staging that compels Yati and the spectator to bear witness to the consumption of an illegal substance in Singapore—a crime by association that carries with it heavy penalties (Misuse of Drugs Act §18). The audience bursts into laughter again when Yati, having declared that Radha’s actions are abhorrent in Singapore, asks for “a puff” (People 2007 I.ii.69). Following her drag on the joint, Yati’s demeanour is altered: her frown gives way to pleasure; her previously anxious posture, tilting forward, relaxes as her head lolls slightly to the side, and she heaves a sigh of satisfaction (People 2007).

132 “Mat Roker” is glossed by Fu and Liew as being a combination of the abbreviation of the common Malay male name, “Ahmad”, to “Mat”, and the translation of “rocker” into the Malay language. The term is “used to describe Malay youths of the 1970s and 1980s whose interest in rock music lead to the development of a unique subcultural style” (Shirlene Noordin, qtd. in Fu and Liew 219) and music scene in Singapore.

133 The hand prop that Radha and Yati smoke during the performance lights up when they drag on it, and what appears to be smoke can be seen rising from it. It is certainly fair to assume that it is a “prop” joint and not a real one, but I can find no critical commentary in this regard. Nonetheless, it is plausible to suggest that the visible smoke and apparently lit “prop” joint heightens the realism and, therefore, the tension felt by the witnessing Singaporean spectator.
Significantly, Yati and Radha are in the garden, symbolically “outside” of the surveillance of the State, that is, the structural building of the hospice. Moreover, the action takes place downstage, so that a complicitous relationship between the characters and the spectator is created. The spectator’s personal investment in what happens to Radha and Yati is established at this juncture.

In this intimate exchange, Yati shares what she perceives as her role in adversely affecting her grandmother’s well-being:

YATI: Last time...when I am young...my parents always fight. My nenek live with us [...]. She got diabetes but they always travelling because they got antique business. Then one day, nobody at home...my nenek [...] say, Yati, I need the injection. Nobody here. You give me the injection. I say cannot Nek, I got gig. I must go. I leave her. I go and sing. When I come back she is in hospital. In coma. They must cut her left foot [...]. (I.ii.69-70)

Although Yati risks her job at the hospice by exchanging shifts with other nurses without Miguel’s approval so that she can perform with her band on their gigs to fulfil her stated ambition, as made evident in the above monologue, she is nonetheless laden with guilt for the individualistic choices that she has made for herself. Significantly in this scene, the illegality of smoking marijuana has conjured the memory of her role in her grandmother’s collapse and amputation, which is a sin that she seeks to redress. That is to say, her collusion with Radha to “sin” (against the State) is analogous to her “sin” of putting herself above her grandmother’s needs contrary to her religious learning and serves as a reminder for her to regulate her personal desires:

YATI: [...] But cannot lah Radha...Illegal is illegal. Right or wrong, it is still illegal. When I do something bad, I
CHAPTER 5: Morality and the Docile Body in Haresh Sharma’s *Good People*

must do something good to pay back. (I.ii.71)

While in Radha’s view, “Illegal doesn’t mean wrong...just illegal” (I.i.69), Yati, on the other hand, conflates her religiously influenced morality with the adherence to the law. Tellingly, at this point, Yati mimics the reductive practice of the State that is explored throughout the play.

Nonetheless, Yati also defies the State’s and her community’s disciplinary codes. She says:

YATI: [...] I don’t care about my nenek. I don’t care about this place. It’s only my work. But when I’m performing...when I am singing...I am high... [slight pause] They are clapping...for me Radha...they are clapping for me. (I.ii.70)

In this light, Yati might initially be read not as a deviant, but as a radical figure because she struggles with the restrictive mores of her ethnic and religious community that disapprove of her ambitions, but to which she is expected to accede, and the rule of the State that she identifies as being exerted through Miguel’s (that is, the State’s) authoritarian control. Evidently, however, her desire to sing is driven by passion that, within the confines of the expectations placed upon her, makes her feel guilty. This guilt, rather than an idyll of “pure” religious devotion, is redressed in her adherence to performing her prayers five times a day. Her motivations behind her efforts to “do something good to pay back” (I.ii.71) may arrest simplistic notions of her character as a “good” person possibly formed by the spectator.

Indeed, even though she seems to demonstrate empathy for Radha’s condition, admits to smoking marijuana in the past (I.i.69, II.iii.87) and rudely swears at her boss for not being “more human” (III.iii.96), it is Yati who is the instrument of Radha’s inevitable execution. When Radha accuses Miguel of
alerting the authorities and the tension between them escalates (People 2007), Yati confesses:

YATI: [...] I...I'm sorry... [pause] I told them. I called them [...] and told them got people taking drugs here. Not because I want to hurt you Radha...because...because that is the correct thing to do...because what you do is illegal...what you do is wrong. (II.ii.87)

Her confession brings to the fore the weight of absolute authority that presses upon Yati in the production of her docile body by the State's authoritative policies. In this way, the effective operation of the disciplinary mechanism described by Foucault, where “the penalty must have its most intense effects on those who have not committed the crime” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 143), is staged. Yati’s certainty that Radha’s marijuana consumption is “wrong” (II.ii.87) is proven to be based not on her individually motivated opinion, but on guilt and a compelling submission to an authority, that is, Islam, which she appears to conflate with the State’s code of law, both of which she believes have the power to assuage that guilt.

Consequently, her attempts to fulfil her personal desires in apparent radical defiance of the social mores of her community are thwarted precisely because of the absolutist extent of the law upon which the social contract in Singapore depends. As a docile body, Yati yields to this authority, and must, therefore, sacrifice another errant subject, that is, Radha. To wit, in the disciplinary regime of the State operationalised by Yati, a rift is inevitably created between heterogeneous communities in Singapore—represented on stage by Yati, Miguel and Radha—that, as described by Jacqueline Lo, “serves to neutralise any possibility of political solidarity” (158). This is suggested when Radha asks Yati “what [she is] praying for” (II.iii.88), and Yati answers:
YATI: Salat.\[^{34}\] It is what separates Muslims from non-Muslims. [...] With Salat, I am in fear of God. I learn not to do wrong and immoral things. That is why I pray...

[...]

RADHA: Will you pray for me?
YATI: I pray for me. For Muslims. (II.iii.88)

The ritual of praying five times a day gives her comfort and makes her “feel connected with God” (II.iii.88). But her response suggests that her religious fervour has the possible effect of keeping her insulated from building supportive relationships with people in other communities, in this case, with Radha. Furthermore, she interrupts Radha’s attempt to share her experience with religion by merely asserting she does not understand Radha’s god “with so many arms and legs” (II.iii.88), thereby refusing to enter into a dialogue about religious differences and preventing any level of understanding. Yati’s corporeal and symbolic closure is implied in what Radha asks her to pray for:

RADHA: Pray then. Pray not for me. But for goodness. Pray for integrity. Pray for an open mind...and an open heart. Pray for two arms and two legs. Pray for what is right. (II.iii.89)\[^{35}\]

As Radha says this, Yati’s initially radical figuration is undermined. In this scene, Yati’s docile body is visually presented as she genuflects in her prayer garb (People 2007). Her empathy for others is “neutralised” (Jacqueline Lo 158) through this symbolic submission to absolute authority.

Yet, even this submissive figuration is disrupted when the spectator later learns that Yati’s anonymous report was also motivated by her hatred of Miguel. She exclaims:

\[^{34}\] “Salat” is glossed as “prayer” (Sharma Trilogy 182).
\[^{35}\] My emphasis.
YATI: [to Miguel] You know why I call them? Because I want you to get into trouble. So you will be fired. [slight pause] [...] [H]ow you can have more productivity! [slight pause] Sister Dolores [...] knows this is not a business. She give us space. Freedom. As long as we take care of the people, everything is ok. [slight pause] That's why I report. Because I want you to go. (III.ii.95-96)

Her reason for involving the authorities as part of her machinations to effect Miguel's dismissal elucidates the frustration that she feels under Miguel's administration. I contend that couched in her criticism of Miguel's administrative style is a barely veiled analogous critique of the State and its abnegation of the vicissitudes of human needs and desires in its running of the country, further explored below.

In the final volte-face in her characterisation in People, Yati later responds to Radha’s gut-wrenching screams by procuring marijuana for her to ease her pain and even allows Radha to smoke in her prayer room (III.iii.97-98). Despite her earlier judgement of Radha (II.ii.86-87), Yati assures the terminally ill woman that nobody will know (III.iii.98). In this poignant scene, the strict boundary between what is morally righteous becomes, with the drawing of a translucent curtain between the characters and the audience, distorted for Yati and, possibly the spectator who does “know”. Significantly, Yati “prays as Radha smokes” (III.iii.98), thus emphasising the contradiction between her act of compassion, which this scene suggests is fuelled by her religiously influenced morality, and the authoritative tenets that isolate her from making connections with people who are different. Her internal conflict persists as she says in the next scene, “[f]or us [Muslims], taking drugs like that is haram” (IV.ii.102). But Radha retorts:

RADHA: Go and read your history Yati, instead of listening to what people tell you. Hashish was glorified by Muslims in the past. (IV.ii.102)
The spectator is faced with a conundrum: despite Yati’s belief that drug consumption is “haram”, her selfless act of compassion towards Radha cannot be deemed a “sin”. Also in this scene, by assisting to relieve Radha’s pain, Yati does not merely collude in, but abets Radha’s illegal drug use; and under the law as it then and presently stands in 2016 (*Misuse of Drugs Act §18*), also becomes liable for prosecution. Unmistakable here is the play’s intention to call on the spectator to engage in an individual examination of their perceptions as it attempts to make ambivalent the distinction between moral certitude and legal rectitude. More critically, Yati’s complex character portrayal undermines the reductive practice that seeks to control difference through the application of “common ethnic stereotypes” (Ackermann 461) and effectively challenges the spectator’s acceptance of these reified categories.

**The Price of Economic Pragmatism: Dissociating Goodness from Economic Prosperity**

In contrast to the portrayal of Yati and Radha as the “common” Singaporean, Miguel is clearly a representative of the current Singaporean State as he repeatedly delivers the party line for increased productivity. This is met with Yati’s derision due to its apparent neglect of the hospice’s core objective to care for the dying (I.iii.76, III.ii.94), supported by her invocations of Sister Dolores (III.ii.95-96). Referring to his hospice patients as “clients” (I.i.62), Miguel’s language conveys the business ethos of the palliative care facility and by extension, being a State-subsidised institution, the Singaporean State’s instrumentality. His personal ambition, however, is betrayed in his repeated self-aggrandizement:

MIGUEL: [...] I’m building– we’re building a children’s wing. It’s going to ready in a few... (I.i.60)
As his sentence trails off, Miguel looks away in embarrassment and discomfort (People 2007) when he realises that Radha’s stay at the hospice is short-term due to her terminal condition. Here, his personal investment in the addition of the children’s wing to the hospice, which would reflect progress during his civil service performance review, is at the expense of sensitivities that might be expected of someone running a hospice.

It is useful to consider Miguel’s initial portrayal as part of the play’s destabilisation of the foundation upon which the State’s economic pragmatism rests, where success and economic progress are synonymous with “goodness”. This conflation is first made explicit by Yati when she is reminded of her grandmother’s assurance of her “goodness”: “[Y]our mother father rich...but you will see heaven. They are successful...but you are good” (I.ii.70). Later, during the interrogation scene, Yati reiterates this distinction between economic prosperity and “goodness” when she says that her “family...they like to make money. [...] They tell me, Yati...we are not like other Malay family. [...] You can do well” (II.ii.81). In contradistinction to the “lazy native” stereotype attributed to the Malay community and criticised by Alatas, Yati’s parents’ wealth denotes their meritocratic success which is lauded by the State. In other words, in the State’s economically pragmatic terms, Yati’s parents are “good”. However, similar to the suggestion made in Fundamentally Happy concerning Eric’s parents’ economic success and the consequent neglect of their child (Sharma Happy I.10, II.29), Yati’s parents’ neglect of her grandmother as a consequence of them “always travelling because they got antique business” (People I.ii.69), undermines the easy ascription of “goodness” to economic prosperity. Given this, I contend that despite Miguel’s achievements of personal success through the improved efficiency of the hospice, the reading of him as a “good” person when juxtaposed with Radha and Yati is, at first, obviated. Pertinently, then, so is the reading of the Singaporean State inasmuch as Miguel adheres to its tenets.

Miguel’s authoritarian management is evident when he chides Yati’s self-initiated negotiations to improve her work-life balance by changing her schedule with another nurse in the following exchange:
MIGUEL: Did you change the schedule?
MIGUEL: No. There is something wrong. You just don’t see it because you’re a nurse. You don’t have the bigger picture because you are not running this place! (I.i.63)

Similarly, when Yati questions his endorsement of Radha’s discharge from the hospice before she has died, he impatiently tells her, “I’m the doctor. I decide. I don’t have to explain anything to you” (III.ii.93). His response echoes the rhetoric of the State when criticised for its authoritarian stance. Prior to Singaporean independence, in 1962, the late Lee Kuan Yew declared that:

If I were in authority in Singapore indefinitely, without having to ask those who are being governed whether they like what is being done, then I have not the slightest doubt that I could govern much more effectively in their own interest. (qtd. in Mutalib “Illiberal Democracy” 321){superscript 136}

That is to say, in addition to lacking expected sensitivities to vulnerable subjects such as Radha, Miguel is here portrayed as dismissive of the needs of his support staff and asserts his supposedly more enlightened abilities as the overseer.

Additionally, “Miguel enters with a new karaoke system” and interrupts Radha and Yati’s intimate conversation about their personal desires and cultural obstacles (I.i.66) with his loud laughter (People 2007). In his role as an agent of the State, Miguel can be read as yet another obstacle to the fulfilment of the other characters’ desires. In this way, the distance that bureaucratic niceties have created between Miguel and the two other characters, and analogously, between the State and its citizenry, is conveyed in People (2007). However, Miguel’s staged internal conflict denies this simplistic characterisation of Miguel as merely

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136 The PAP leaders have maintained this stance over the decades. See Mutalib “Illiberal Democracy” for more examples.
an agent of the State, so that, akin to Yati, even he is revealed as a docile body subjected to State control, struggling to do “what is right” (II.iii.89).

For example, despite his seeming insincerity, personal ambition and obsequiousness to the Chairman of the Board (I.i.66), Miguel demonstrates his genuine care for Radha. This care is demonstrated when he prioritises Radha’s quality of life over his responsibility as a Medical Director and does not report her illegal drug consumption. Miguel’s tolerance of Yati’s blatant insubordination (I.i.66) and his later conversation on the phone with the Chairman of the Board fighting for the retention of his staff at the hospice (III.ii.92) also betray his empathy for others that lies in contrast to his performance of management smiles and laughter (People 2007). Ironically, in People, Miguel’s care for his patients and staff is viewed as an obstacle to his expected role accorded him by the State, which is cast as a disciplinary one. He shares the conflict that this causes him with Radha following the characters’ interrogation by the authorities:

MIGUEL: [...] I cried in fear. I was afraid of losing my job because the Board thinks I’ve been an ineffective leader... [...] ‘Did you know,’ they kept asking me. ‘How could you NOT know?’ [...] Yes, I knew. I knew and I allowed it. [slight pause] [...] (II.ii.85-86)

Critically, here, Miguel’s apparent authority—as a Medical Director and as a carer for the vulnerable—is overshadowed by the State’s power. On the stage of People (2007), Miguel is yet another docile body, divested of its power and subjected to disciplinary “coercions” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 138). Beginning with the portrayal of the characters’ internal conflict, however, the play engages the spectator in examining the fractures that inhere in the State’s disciplinary apparatus.
Moral Certitude versus Religious and Legal Rectitude: Portraying Internal Complexity

The internal moral conflict that confronts both Yati and Miguel is staged in juxtaposition with Radha’s assertion of her right to choose to manage her pain for herself. A dialectical engagement with the issues raised in the play is achieved through the placement of Yati’s monologue between Miguel’s two conflicting monologues, followed by Radha’s monologue. At the end of Act I, scene ii, the lights dim and the translucent curtains at centrestage open to reveal Yati who is seated on Radha’s bed at centrestage; Miguel stands at downstage left, and Radha continues smoking her joint at downstage right, so that the private musings of each of the characters are shared with the spectator with dramatic irony (People 2007).

Miguel’s monologue details the ashing on the foreheads performed by his Catholic priest on Ash Wednesday, the first ritual in the Catholic calendar that marks the religion’s most important season of Lent. He says:

MIGUEL: [to audience] Before God we are all equal. I always heard that during Ash Wednesday. That old priest [...] as we line up to be reminded of our death[,] [h]e marks us and tells us in slow audible words, “From dust you came and to dust you shall return.” (I.ii.73)

Here, Miguel’s consideration of equality in death is preached to him by a custodian of the Catholic religion. Rather than being encouraged to conduct an introspective exploration of what equality and death mean to him, Miguel is portrayed as accepting what he is told by a figure of authority without question. In contrast to Miguel’s religious account, Yati’s monologue recounts her most meaningful conversations with “God”:

YATI: […] When I sing a rock song, I feel God. […] Sometimes I can hear Him. […] I am singing. I am rocking
on stage...but I am also talking to God. How you want me to help other people? And then I cannot hear. [*slight pause*] [...] God is good. God is a good God. But people...I don’t know. (I.ii.74)

Yati’s conviction clarifies the distinction made between the religious deity, “God”, and the faithful as a fundamental one that invites the spectator to question people’s motivations instead of ascribing their actions to racial, religious and/or authoritarian tenets. Even as she speaks of “God”, Yati’s monologue shifts responsibility for all actions from an unseen figure of authority to the experience of the “common” Singaporean who are, namely, the characters on stage and the implied spectator of the play.

Miguel’s second monologue immediately ensues at this juncture, and his internal conflict is revealed when he asserts his belief that “[t]he highest act of human dignity is to reduce inequality” (I.ii.74). However, in his wry acknowledgment that “[c]apitalism is our new god” (I.ii.74), Miguel presents a contentious critique of the economic pragmatism that informs State policies. Miguel continues:

MIGUEL: [...] And before this god, we are all unequal. Those who die here die a gracious death— [...] Those who die here [in the hospice] are more equal than those who don’t. (I.ii.74).

As is evident in his two philosophically distinctive monologues, Miguel’s initial obeisance is complicated in the play. Importantly, Miguel’s religious upbringing is called into question when the Catholic tenets of equality in material terms espouse an idyllic concept that has no place in a country like Singapore, driven primarily by economic pragmatism and meritocracy. In this scene, Miguel’s

137 The Singaporean State’s economic pragmatism has been widely studied and explored on stage. See, for example, “Of Coffins and Parking Tickets” (J. Ng 40); *Theatre, Social Critique and Politics* (B.H. Chua 317); and *Constructing Singapore* (Barr and Skrbiš 67-69)
unflattering portrayal in the first Act of the play is made ambivalent. The implicit question his monologue raises, as an employee of the State operating within institutional parameters, is what recourse does he have to enact “[t]he highest act of human dignity” (I.ii.74)?

Religion is therefore boldly deployed in People as being, firstly, analogous to the State in its absolutist tenets and demand for the submission of its followers/citizenry. Simultaneously, however, People also seems to suggest that the respective religions of Yati and Miguel have had a substantial influence on their “common desire to do good” (Chia 58). Revealingly, as demonstrated by their compassionate acts towards Radha, this desire puts them in compromising positions in relation to the State. Whereas the negotiation and reflection of conflicting personal, religious and communal values are absent from public discourse, they are meaningfully performed for the spectator of People (2007). Arguably, through the problematization of the religious beliefs that influence the actions of Yati and Miguel, the play urges the spectator to reflect upon the code of law that is legitimised by their implied unquestioning obedience to it.

After Miguel’s and Yati’s above monologues, they both exit and a spotlight is brought up on Radha who sways from the effects of smoking marijuana (People 2007). Her monologue expresses, in no uncertain terms, the confrontation of her imminent death in direct audience address:

RADHA: [to audience] It’s not easy to die. Even when you’re dying. You know you’re going to die. [...] You want to die. But...you just can’t. You wait. Maybe tomorrow will be the day. Maybe tonight I’ll sleep and never wake up. And then night turns to day and you wake up. Still alive. BLACKOUT. RADHA GIGGLES IN BED. THEN SHE CRIES. SHE IS SOBBING. (I.ii.74)

Her despair is successfully conveyed by inverting an oft-used trope of waking up every morning to new, hopeful opportunities for happiness—when she wakes up,
she wants to die. Rather than “[c]elebrate life” (I.i.61), Radha privately mourns not being able to have the ordeal of life over and done with. It is critical to my argument that the sudden change in her disposition—when her characteristic laughter and light-heartedness suddenly turn to loud wailing during the blackout—is hidden from the spectator’s view. Certainly, the staging of Radha’s hidden body at this juncture serves to augment the portrayal of pain endured behind her façade, overheard by the spectator in the dark (People 2007).

Almost immediately after her last sob, muzak is streamed into the theatrical space, followed by an announcement over the hospice’s Public Address (PA) system (People 2007). This dramatic change in tone reflects the callousness of the disciplinary institution, that is, the hospice as a synecdoche of the State. Arguably, this aural dramaturgical technique elicits empathy from the spectator for Radha’s terminal condition and could then be said to provoke a consideration of the conditions under which the consumption of marijuana is acceptable. In this way, a discussion on religion, (in)equality and the suffering of the “most vulnerable members of society” (Amnesty International 9)—topics considered taboo in the public sphere— is instigated in what then becomes a discursive (theatrical) space, efficaciously achieved in the proxemics created on stage.

“Supervisors perpetually supervised” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 177): Portraying Racial/Religious Tension in Singapore

The set of People (2007) provides a dynamic space for the negotiation of the moral convictions held by the characters in the play. The stage is awash in white: the floors are covered with white panels, the patient’s bed, wheelchair seat, small bench and stools are painted white (Figure 5-5); translucent white curtains hang on rows of rails attached to the fly bars upstage and downstage, and rows of bright fluorescent light bulbs hang low from the fly-bars at centrestage and downstage. More than effectively portraying the stark, sanitised, sterile and cold setting of a hospice facility in which the dramatic narrative unfolds, the

138 See Penal Code §74, §298 and §298A which provide for legal action to be taken against offending racial and religious sensitivities. When he announced the expanded permissibility of the State of issuing licences for public gatherings in his 2004 National Day Rally speech, PM Lee also warned against public discussions on race and religion (“PM’s NDR 2004” para. 21).
predominantly white set functions as a structural metaphor in the Singaporean context, the foremost connotation of which being the ruling PAP. Unofficially referred to as the “men in white” (S. Yap, Lim and Leong; “Asia: The Men in White Are Always Right; Singapore’s General Election”), the members of the party conduct their community outreach visits and campaign in full white uniforms. In People (2007), therefore, the white set that is ever present and devoid of warmth may be read as analogous to the unwavering and uncompassionate, omnipresent State.

In spite of this, the presentational space is contrastively flexible and mutable, demarcated by the drawing of many translucent white curtains to mark the different spaces in different scenes (Figure 5-6). The actors are also seen drawing these curtains, performing the possibility of a variety of spaces for the

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139 As discussed in Chapter 1 of this thesis, this allusion is also used subversively in Dreamplay (2000, 2013), where the characters enter the stage space (Dreamplay 2000) and celebrate their re-memory in Singaporean history at the play’s conclusion (Dreamplay 2013).
characters to autonomously inhabit and/or build, in spatial opposition to the seemingly incontrovertible fixed literal and figurative spaces sanctioned by the State for marginalised others and minorities in Singapore. Moreover, the translucent curtains first permit then disrupt the lighting effects of light and dark, thereby deploying a lighting metaphor for the shifting and blurred moral boundaries enacted in the play.

Within this structural synecdoche of the State, the simmering tensions that persist between racial and religious communities in Singapore in spite of the State’s engineering of multicultural harmony are revealed in the light of the stage. These (taboo) intercultural tensions are first indicated by Miguel’s barely tolerant attitude towards Yati’s religious practice. When he asks Yati to set the karaoke system up and she says that she has to pray (1.1.66), Miguel waits for her to accede to his request until she impatiently grabs the box from his outstretched hands and throws it onto the wheelchair that she is about to wheel offstage (People 2007). Later, as he laments the shambles that the hospice had been in before his arrival, Radha reminds him that Yati’s religious needs cannot adhere to the “tight ship” (1.1.67) that he envisages in administering the hospice:

RADHA: She has to pray.
MIGUEL: I know but 5 times a day?! Why can’t they pray once a week like– [slight pause] Sorry... that wasn’t... [laughs] [...]. (1.1.67)

Once again, Miguel’s genuine thoughts and prejudices are betrayed in a verbal slip. In the above extract, Miguel is undoubtedly about to compare Yati’s community’s Islamic religious practices to that of his own Catholic community who pray “once a week”, but he stops himself from completing the comparison, in a realisation of its ostensible display of intolerance.

Importantly, when Radha explains her acceptance of her death and wilful separation from her family in karmic terms, Miguel conveys the arguably superficial intercultural (in)tolerance in the Singaporean context in the following exchange:
RADHA: [...] We are spirit-souls trapped in our physical bodies fulfilling our pre-destined karma. I have no attachments... to good... or bad. Anyway my relationship with God... is between God and me.

MIGUEL: I respect your beliefs... and if at any time you would like your religious leader to come here for any service or... prayers... we are more than happy to oblige. (1.1.67)

Even though Miguel states his respect for her beliefs, in performance, Miguel’s uncomfortable, soft and stilted laughter and facial gestures (People 2007) betray an underlying aversion to, or, at least, trivialisation of them. Despite his lack of understanding, however, he delivers a by-the-book pseudo-acceptance of her (Hindu) beliefs, which is inevitably undermined by his annoyance with Yati, moments later, for having to pray “5 times a day” (1.1.67).

As Kenneth Tan states in his study of mainstream Singapore films, the circulation of crude and reductive stereotypes in apparent celebration of the nation’s multicultural ethos serves to perpetuate racist depictions of minorities (“Racial Stereotypes”). While these stereotypes are informed by limited understandings of racialized minorities, Tan argues that they nonetheless function as “coping mechanisms” that Singaporeans employ to deal with the “difficult fact of a multicultural society” (171), implied by Miguel’s portrayal in the above extracts. Racial caricatures that purport to reflect Singapore’s multiculturalism also serve to “exaggerate [...] differences with respect to out-groups” in relation to the spectator, whose esteem is comparatively built up, yet embroiled in the derogation of the Other (170-171). However, due to the legal sanctions against potentially “wound[ing] the religious or racial feelings of any person” (Penal Code §298) and the reiterated vulnerability of the heterogeneous national fabric, the underlying discord paradoxically sowed by the State’s multicultural ethos persists.

Arguably, the dynamic of voyeuristic pleasure in the derogation of difference as described by Tan is masterfully represented on stage when Miguel
and Yati “look at” Radha while she performs her “laughter therapy” (People 2007 1.1.68). Radha’s posture is open as she laughs loudly, but Miguel and Yati can be seen peeking from behind the set curtains at stage right and left respectively. Their surreptitious gazes resonate with the disciplinary apparatus described by Foucault where a systematically ordered multifarious populace, disciplined by the intelligibility of desirable and undesirable behaviour (Discipline and Punish 148), functions in a “network of relations” that is optimised by “hierarchized surveillance” (176). In this way, the State maintains its omnipresent power and centrality of control by

\[
\text{transform[ing] the whole social body into a field of perception: thousands of eyes posted everywhere, mobile attentions ever on the alert...the “observers”...the secret agents...the informers...}(214)
\]

In other words, by accepting and practising the racial identification that pervades the State’s multicultural ethos, the Singaporean subject is, firstly, controlled by the pressure to identify with reductive categories, and secondly, tasked in perpetuating the oppressive control of the State by ensuring that other subjects are similarly defined. Extrapolating from Tan’s contention that “perverse pleasure” is taken in the affirmation and practice of these stereotypes (“Racial Stereotypes” 171), I argue that the State’s perpetual supervision (Foucault Discipline and Punish 177) is inevitably suggested in this scene that stages the voyeurism, or surveillance, of the Singaporean racialized body and its practices from behind the metaphorically insulating curtains of (in)tolerance. Consequently, the surveillance of the ordinary citizen, as demonstrated by Yati and Miguel’s observation of Radha’s vulnerable body implicates the spectator’s “authoritarian gaze of watching over other(s)” (Gilbert and Tompkins 248). Seated in the darkness of the theatre, the spectator might be made aware of their surveillance of the racialized others represented on stage. People (2007) could then be said to stage the “re-encounter” with the racist reading practices (“Racial

\[140\] Laughter Yoga has its origins in 1995 Mumbai, India (Kataria). Yoga is itself a centuries-old Indian practice that focuses on personal, physical, mental and spiritual well-being, conveyed by Radha’s initial celebratory gestus.
Stereotypes” 191) of the spectator that Tan calls for in Singapore film, revealed here to be part of the State’s disciplinary apparatus.

Additionally, I concur with Gay McAuley, who eschews the notion of a “monolithic gaze” in the theatre and argues that the mere “physical presence of other spectators” in the theatrical space is disruptive to the simple derivation of passive (“perverse”) pleasure (239). Given the live presence of the actors’ bodies on stage, there is a doubling in the theatrical gaze where, aptly, the spectator is also “looked at” by the actors on stage. In effect, positioned as part of the “network of relations” alluded to on stage (Foucault 177), the oppressive power of the State on the body of the spectator too may be felt in the theatre. In People (2007), the presence of this omnipresent overseer is made tangible by the PA—the voice that can “see”.

**The Faceless Gaze of the Panoptic State and the Display of the “Recalcitrant” Body**

This “voice that can see”, although not billed in the *dramatis personae*, serves as another character in *People* (2007) that, similar to Ismail in *Happy* (2006), is never corporeally present on stage. I argue that the PA is a manifestation of what Foucault describes as the “faceless gaze that transform[s] the whole social body into a field of perception” in the disciplinary apparatus of the State (*Discipline and Punish* 214). In the theatrical space, this disembodied voice highlights its oppressive influence on the lives of the characters in the play.

The PA is first heard as a bright, female voiceover (*People* 2007), deemed innocuous by Yati as “[a]nother one of Miguel's STUPID ideas” (1.1.65). In this first instance, the PA performs the function of the regulator of time and activities in the hospice:

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PA: Beautiful morning! It’s 9 o’clock and our day centre is open. Today is music therapy day, so feel free to join our volunteers in the rec room. Lunch will be served at noon at the common room. And in the afternoon, we have some massage
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The PA’s timed, omnipresent interventions in the theatrical space resonate with the strict regulation of time, space and activities that Foucault identifies as vital in the maintenance of authoritative power. In Foucauldian terms, “[t]ime penetrates the body and with it all the meticulous controls of power” (Discipline and Punish 152) so as to produce the docile bodies of the patients in the hospice and, disconcertingly, of the spectator in the theatre caught in the “network of relations” (177) implied in the play’s staging and in the doubling of the theatrical gaze, as I shall argue below. Concomitantly, the voice of the PA takes on an oppressive aspect in the theatrical space as the play progresses.

True to Miguel’s promise that “[t]here will be consequences” (1.2.73) to Radha’s illegal drug use, an implicit threat opens the next scene:

**PA:** Beautiful morning! It’s 9 o’clock and our day centre is open. Before we begin our activities for the day, we would like everyone to gather at the common room for a simple [drug] test... (1.3.75)

“[T]his sudden spot check” (1.3.76) creates a sense of fearful anticipation of the possible punitive measures taken against the characters for colluding in Radha’s drug use in the previous scene (1.2.68-72). Ominously, Act I ends with Yati’s question: “They won’t hang her right? They won’t hang someone who is already going to die... right?” (1.3.77)

Act II opens with the interrogation scene (II.i.78-81). In front of drawn curtains, Yati, Radha and Miguel sit on benches at downstage right, centre and left respectively, facing the audience. The bright, white lighting accentuates the cold atmosphere of this scene and emphasises the “trap” of “visibility” that “capture[s]” the characters under “the eye of a supervisor” on stage (Foucault Discipline and Punish 200). This is emphasised in the proxemics of the
characters. Although Yati, Radha and Miguel are seated abreast, their answers to PA’s questions suggest that they are unable to see one another even though there are no walls separating them (People 2007). The characters’ staged unawareness of one another is dramatically ironic and emphasises the all-seeing perspective of the spectator who can see all three of them at once on the stage. Notably, whereas Yati and Miguel physically convey their fear as they sit still on their respective benches with their hands together in their laps, the threat of the situation does not successfully discipline Radha’s body (People 2007). The broad reach of State authority is made apparent when Radha is told that her home has been searched and her family members have been tested without any need for evidence to warrant the intrusion either into her home or the corporeal privacy of her family members (II.1.78). Yet, Radha is defiant and does not even respond to the first two questions posed to her about her well-being. Although she displays signs of being in pain as she moves in her seat and rubs her legs, she remains unafraid (People 2007). In her gestus, therefore, Radha demonstrates that she is not a docile body and is in opposition to the authority of the State.

As the interrogation progresses, the incongruously chirpy, female voice of the PA slowly changes to a sinister, multi-layered voice. Its source unknown though permeating throughout the theatrical space, the interrogating PA is portrayed as a disembodied, dehumanised automaton(s), its dehumanisation issuing a threat to the bodies of the characters on stage and hence, potentially, on the body of the spectator in the theatre. However, due to the doubling function of the theatrical gaze established between the spectator and the characters on stage, this distribution of power is problematized. Although the spectator’s arguably “authoritarian gaze” (Gilbert and Tompkins 248) is aligned with the PA’s voice that “sees”, one sole incandescent light bulb, hanging down from the fly bars above the stage, is lit during the blackouts of scene changes, which effectively repositions the spectator within a broader field of visuality wherein the spectator is similarly subjected to a “faceless gaze” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 214). This theatrical effect recalls the operation of the Panopticon, an architectural model of the ideal penitentiary, first posited by Jeremy Bentham and applied by Foucault in his explication of the “panoptic mechanism” (199-
202). In the *Panopticon*, the overseer—who does not need to be there—is positioned in a central tower behind a light that illuminates the prisoners’ cells. Hence, the overseer remains unseen by the prisoners. Aply, then, the characters’ proxemics in the interrogation scene efficaciously portray the “many cages, so many small theatres, in which each actor is alone, perfectly individualized and constantly visible” to the overseer in the panoptic construct (200). In *People’s* staging, therefore, the lighting, proxemics and this voice of the PA act in concert to simulate the unequal distribution of power achieved by the panoptic gaze. The involvement in the characters’ frightened and tense interrogation may be acutely felt by the spectator who, by this point in the play, may recognise their role as another character in *People* (2007), caught in an uneasy identification with the complex characters portrayed on stage and the authoritative and punitive voice of the PA that demands the characters’ confessions.

Necessary for the legitimate use of punitive measures against accused persons, the confession is also symbolic of the submission of the docile body to power (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 37-39). However, this intended submission is disrupted in the interrogation scene where, in spite of their separation and fraught relationships with one other, all three characters perjure themselves when asked about the others’ involvement:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PA:</th>
<th>Nothing will happen to you if you cooperate.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MIGUEL:</td>
<td>You have my full cooperation. As I said, I have no knowledge of the patient consuming illegal drugs.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA:</td>
<td>Have you seen her eating brownies?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>YATI/MIGUEL:</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA:</td>
<td>Have you seen her smoking marijuana?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MIGUEL:</td>
<td>No.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>[...]</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PA:</td>
<td>If you have not done anything wrong, why are you protecting her? (II.i.79)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Importantly, rather than submitting to the demand for their confessions, the characters' denial of their knowledge marks them as subversive as they refuse to accept the consequences for drug offences dictated by the State, which include providing false testimony (*Misuse of Drugs Act* §46). In Foucauldian terms, Yati and Miguel resist participation in the functioning of the panoptic machine. Their passive resistance through perjury may be understood with reference to Elizabeth Grosz's contention that the body is never simply an object in passive reception of authoritative controls. According to Grosz:

> [T]he body and its energies and capacities exert an uncontrollable, unpredictable threat to a regular, systematic mode of social organisation. As well as being the site of knowledge-power, the body is thus a site of resistance, for it exerts a recalcitrance, and always entails the possibility of a counter-strategic reinscription, for it is capable of being self-marked, self-represented in alternative ways. (64)

As she has maintained throughout the play, Radha's ownership of her own body and rejection of the mores of her community, her family and the legal codes marks her body as “recalcitrant” in Grosz's terms. For example, during the interrogation, Radha says:

**RADHA:** They don’t know anything. I’m a sneaky devil. I do it when no one is looking. I am at fault. I have been caught. So punish me. Sentence me. Leave them alone. (II.i.80)

In her challenge to the authority of the PA, just as Yati and Miguel lie to protect her, Radha lies about their knowledge of her illegal drug use.

Once the characters have separately accomplished this subversive act of solidarity, the voice of the PA is no longer heard (*People* 2007). Significantly, although their proxemics previously indicated their physical separation, Miguel and Radha turn to Yati who has now moved to centrestage and is able to respond
to the other characters. This arguably stages a symbolic fracturing of the isolating “cellular power” of the panoptic machine (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 149). Instead of the State’s procurement of a confession, therefore, a conversation about their beliefs ensues between the characters, allowing them to performatively frustrate the intentions of the State to render them docile (II.i.80-81). The characters here demonstrate that they are not simply cogs in the panoptic machine of the State, but also have empathy for one another, fuelled by their personal beliefs. In this way, *People* (2007) seems to suggest that the State’s authority on the bodies of minorities is not, in fact, absolute.

**Disharmonious Negotiations: Testing the Vulnerability of Racial Heterogeneity**

Certainly, the simmering racial/religious tensions that are elided from public discourse are theatrically conveyed in *People* (2007). However, as intimated in the interrogation scene discussed above, an alternative model of negotiation between communities is also discernible in the relationships the characters form with one another. A flashback to Radha’s “second day [at the hospice]” (III.i.90) opens the third Act and interrupts the rising tension between the characters. With his knowledge of Radha’s love of singing, Miguel has arranged for a karaoke session that encourages all three characters to celebrate their diversity as they sing “Can’t Take My Eyes Off You” (Crewe and Gaudio)—a song that is apposite to the parodic confrontation of the panoptic gaze. In this scene, their interpersonal tensions are not simplistically sublimated, but are actively negotiated, as shown in the characters’ proxemics (*People* 2007). For example, whereas Miguel is at first reticent and turns away with his arms folded when Yati joins the group, he accedes to Radha’s encouragement of his participation (*People* 2007). Even though Miguel and Yati continue to exchange scathing glances and roll their eyes at each other when they come together in their choreography (*People* 2007), it is noteworthy that they are both active in negotiating the contempt they feel for each other. By these means, the characters demonstrate an ability to work through their differences that are not sacrificed in this scene in the maintenance of the State’s idyll of multiracial “harmony”. When Radha says,
“Now in our own languages” (III.i.91), Miguel and Yati take their place on an elevated makeshift stage, a bench at downstage centre (People 2007), and continue to sing the song in Tagalog and Malay in turn (III.i.91).

When they find their individual voices in their own languages, the karaoke video that highlights the lyrics in English that had been projected onto the set curtains behind them is switched off (People 2007), symbolising the equal importance of each language, and hence, of each ethnic minority. After solo verses are sung, the projection is switched on again and the characters harmonise in the languages in which each is adept, before returning to singing in English in the final chorus refrain. In an echo of the interrogation scene, Sharma and Tan stage the possibility of an alternative model of multiculturalism that does not maintain the separation of different communities in reductively homogeneous Foucauldian “cells” constructed by the State’s “discourse of crisis” (Birch, qtd. in Peterson Theater and the Politics of Culture 5) and “common ethnic stereotypes” (Ackermann 455). Despite the racial/religious and power differences that strain their relationships elsewhere in the play, in this scene, the characters are able to negotiate their differences and are fluid in making space for one other in their choreography (People 2007). As the characters harmonise in song, a model that celebrates a cooperative diversity is staged. An implicit critique of the State’s stance on the vulnerability of racial heterogeneity is evident here, which is arguably directed to prepare the spectator to engage in a similar critique of the State’s stance on Singapore’s particular vulnerability to “the drug menace” (Response to Amnesty International’s Report) that rationalises the application of the mandatory death penalty.

The Staged Debate: Arguments For and Against The Death Penalty

As I have discussed, Radha, Yati and Miguel perform a way to oppose the oppressive authority of the State through careful individual consideration driven by personal moral convictions and supportive relationships created between people in Singapore. Radha goes so far as to challenge the rationale of the panoptic mechanisms of the State when she responds to the PA questioning her. She defiantly asserts that marijuana continues to be widely distributed and
available in Singapore (II.i.80), thereby suggesting a need to reconsider the mandatory death penalty as a deterrent measure. This need for a reconsideration of the State’s absolutist stance is further implied by Yati’s radical concession during the interrogation:

YATI: [...] If my grandmother want to take drugs I will let her. Because it is not the same if she take and if I take. It is not the same. (II.ii.81)

Her reference to the “attenuating circumstances” (Foucault *Discipline and Punish* 17) of the offence effectively destabilises the simplistic notion that “illegal is illegal” (I.ii.69) and affirms, contentiously, that “[i]llegal doesn’t mean wrong...just illegal” (I.ii.69). This theme is revisited in the penultimate scene of *People*.

When Radha returns from further police interrogation, she erroneously holds Miguel responsible for her impending criminal prosecution and demands that he allow her “the dignity [that she] deserve[s]” by euthanizing her (II.iii.86). In the context of *People*, Radha’s request seems reasonable, juxtaposed with Miguel’s instructions to the offstage child, Bobby, on how to self-administer his morphine that opens this scene (II.ii.82). Her surrender to death is important, given her “recalcitrant” figuration (Grosz 64); and the loss of freedom that she feels upon being forcibly made “docile” is so unbearable that she views death as her only viable option. Notably, in his role as a doctor, Miguel replies:

MIGUEL: It is not our practice to hasten death in the service of treating pain. [...] We have to believe in the natural process of death.

[...] I wish you dead Radha, no doubt about it. But however you define it, however it’s done...whether it’s assisted or by choice...murder is murder! (II.ii.85-86)
Miguel’s powerful declaration and refusal to euthanize Radha here pointedly exposes the irony of capital punishment.

The succeeding exchange between Radha and Miguel performs the debate that People (2007) intends to generate and conveys what seems to be one of the main questions raised by the play—when judicial murder for the purposes of social control and retribution is acceptable, but not so for mercy, then the moral righteousness of the State’s death penalty stance must be called into question. Miguel elucidates the State’s position of absolute power and, specifically, the unbending nature of the law in Singapore: “if I had my way I would ban all intoxicants—drugs, cigarettes, alcohol. And punish the consumers” (IV.ii.104). The mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking, Radha crucially asserts, is not morally coded so as to ensure that “evil [is not] inflicted on thousands of people” (“Drug Trafficking”) as the State would have it, but economically motivated and deployed as an instrument of social control (IV.ii.104).

Here, by revealing and dismantling the disciplinary mechanisms of the State, People (2007) restores the responsibility for judicial murder onto the State and the populace that accept it. The characters’ final exchange may potentially prompt the spectator to question whether people who consume drugs are the “evil drug addicts” (II.i.80) that deserve the death penalty, a question implicitly posed to the spectator in the play’s bold and powerful closing scene.

**Conclusion: Reinstating the “Theatrical representation of pain” (Foucault Discipline and Punish 14)**

The stage is brightly lit in the closing scene, and Radha is in bed at centrestage (People 2007). Miguel enters from stage left and informs Radha, “[T]hey’re here”, referring to the narcotics officers who have arrived to take her away to the remand centre (IV.iii.110), but “walks away” when he “[r]ealises she is sleeping” (IV.iii.III). As the scene progresses, the upstage lighting behind the set curtains comes on and increases in intensity, repeating the lighting motif in the play that signals death, first deployed earlier in Bobby’s death scene (People 2007 IV.i.100-101). Radha’s slow death is staged by the aural magnification of her laboured, rattling breathing and wide, frightened eyes. The scene is a disconcerting one,
and the spectator watches helplessly as the character of Radha dies for four minutes. With this scene, Sharma and Tan execute the work that the characters have done in the play as they metaphorically draw the curtains open and relocate the reality of the (figurative) execution of a character in the public arena of the stage.

As the play’s “recalcitrant body” (Grosz 64), Radha has maintained possession of the knowledge of how best to manage her own body. When Miguel refuses her request for assisted suicide, she exclaims:

RADHA: [...] You are the doctor but this is my body. This is my body! Just because I prescribe my own drugs I’m labelled an addict? You take away my freedom to die, you take away my freedom to self-medicate, and you say you are protecting me? [...] (IV.ii.109).

Her corporeal self-possession notwithstanding, she “give[s] up” (IV.ii.110) when she is “incapacitated”, tellingly, by “the government” that denies her rights (IV.ii.108) to her own body, and dies. Crucially, it is her death that completes her “recalcitrant” figuration as she refuses to hand control of her body over to the State by dying just minutes after the arrival of the authorities (IV.iii.110-111).

The impact of this concluding scene on the audience is palpable in the recording of the play (People 2007). There is no resolution to the dramatic narrative, save the fading of the lights on Radha’s ‘lifeless’ body, her eyes still wide open (People 2007). The house lights do not appear to come up, and it seems that the audience does not know that the play has ended (People 2007). Without a curtain call, the co-creators deny the audience the release of tension traditionally promised by the ephemerality and safety of the theatrical space, and the audience wait in pregnant silence for almost a minute. It is only when the upstage backlights come on again, perhaps to signal the end of the play, that tentative clapping is heard (People 2007). I propose that this is evidence of the
political efficacy of the play’s staging in its impact on the attitudes of the spectator towards the issues addressed in *People* (2007).

Given the consistent rhetoric of success and progress promulgated by the Singaporean State, social ills in Singapore are rationalised by the ethos of meritocracy and rejection of welfare provision, thereby shifting responsibility onto the vulnerable and less fortunate victims of the nation’s progress. The dynamic exchange between Yati and Miguel in the setting of a hospice, however, with Radha’s vulnerable body on display for most of the play, effectively interrogates the ease with which such progress and its consequent suffering are rationalised for the spectator. Moreover, the dynamic negotiation between racially and religiously diverse characters is not only portrayed in the ebb and flow of their interactions, but can also be viewed as a practice that the spectator is encouraged to adopt. Critically, with this refusal of a closure on the issues performed in *People* (2007), I argue that the spectator’s engagement with the debate on moral certitude and legal rectitude is prolonged, thereby possibly effecting a momentary estrangement from the tacit acceptance of the mandatory death penalty for drug trafficking as part of the Singaporean social contract.

The discussion will now turn to an examination of *Gemuk Girls*, the final play in Sharma’s *Trilogy*, which explores the conflictual origins of this social contract.
Chapter 6

Politics, Family and the Singaporean Minority Woman in Haresh Sharma’s Gemuk Girls

“The power that writing’s expansionism leaves intact is colonial in principle. It is extended without being changed. It is tautological, immunised against both any alterity that might transform it and whatever dares to resist it.” (De Certeau 216)

“But if you are a troublemaker, in the sense that you will do Singapore no good, it’s our job to politically destroy you. [...] Everybody knows that in my bag I have a hatchet[.] You take me on, I take my hatchet, we meet in the cul-de-sac. That’s the way I had to survive in the past. That’s the way the communists tackled me.” (Lee Kuan Yew, qtd. in Han 146)


Mas Selamat bin Kastari, the Singaporean leader of the Southeast Asian Islamic militant group, Jemaah Islamiyah (JI), had evaded capture during the December 2001 anti-terrorist operation that had led to the arrest of thirteen terror suspects (“Operation against Jemaah Islamiyah in Singapore Begins: 8 Dec. 2001”). According to Indonesian police who first arrested him on 3 February 2003, under Mas Selamat’s leadership, JI’s plans had included the truck-bombing of foreign targets on Singaporean soil and the hijacking and crashing of an American or British plane into Singapore’s Changi International Airport (Haisumarto).

Although Mas Selamat fled Indonesian custody, he was apprehended again on 20 January 2006 and deported to Singapore, where he was issued with Detention Orders under the Internal Security Act (ISA) (Y.L. Tan). Held without trial for the next two years, Mas Selamat’s subsequent escape from the Whitley Road Detection Centre (WRDC) on 27 February 2008 (G. Wong) triggered an international manhunt for “Singapore’s most-wanted terrorist” (Y.L. Tan). In the apologia of then Minister of State for Home Affairs Wong Kan Seng, Mas

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141 Kastari is a patronymic. Following this convention, Mas Selamat bin Kastari will hereinafter be referred to by his given name, Mas Selamat.
Selamat’s escape was “a costly and painful wake-up call” that exposed fractures in the State’s promise of national security (qtd. in Shahriyayahaya and Ng 6). The fallibility of the Singaporean State, often equated to the Singaporean “nation that prides itself on efficiency, competence and rigorous law enforcement” (Mydans), was made more pronounced when Mas Selamat was finally recaptured by the Malaysian Special Branch on 1 April 2009.

In addition to reinforcing the reality of the geopolitical threats that beset the Singaporean nation, this incident also raised what James Chin describes as the “managed tensions” between Singapore and Malaysia (347) in public discourse. Indeed, the recapture of Mas Selamat initiated an online outpouring of accolades for the nation’s neighbours and criticism of the Singaporean State’s competencies (Seah). One commentator remarked:

Hope this is a big lesson to Singapore. Please don’t mock our neighbours again, as both Indonesia and Malaysia have captured someone whom we cannot even hold. (qtd. in Seah)

The “lesson” pertains to the often unfavourable characterisation of Malaysia by Singaporeans and the Singaporean State as expressed by another commentator, who writes:

The Malaysian Police may be accused of corruption and being inefficient, but the fact that they caught Mas Selamat speaks volumes. (qtd. in Seah)

In Seah’s view, these comments demonstrate a distinct shift in the attitudes of the younger generation of Singaporeans who “are gradually leaving behind the bitterness of their [Singapore and Malaysia’s] separation in 1965.”142 Seah’s recognition—that Separation underscores the bilateral tensions and affinities surrounding this incident—is significant as it is astute. Not only did the Mas

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142 Hereinafter, Separation.
Selamat scandal challenge the omnipotence of the Singaporean State, it also motivated the development of a critical discourse of Singaporean history, politics and the relationship of the Singaporean State to its people. This discourse is exemplified in the online posts curated by Seah.\(^\text{143}\)

As author and political commentator, Catherine Lim, would later assert,

\[\text{T]he incident may be seen as a watershed in the history of the government-people relationship, resulting either in a strengthening and maturing of the relationship on the one hand, or irreparable damage on the other. (\text{“The Mas Selamat Scandal”})\(^\text{144}\)

Lim’s comment is prescient: instead of publicly demonstrating an acceptance of culpability for the security lapse and subsequent failure in the reapprehension of Mas Selamat, the State graciously thanked the Malaysian Internal Security Department for cooperating with its Singaporean counterparts and reminded the Singaporean people that “[t]he price of security is eternal vigilance” (H.L. Lee \textit{PM Lee on the Re-Arrest of Mas Selamat}). In other words, the State asserted the mandate of the Singaporean people for its continued authoritarian regime as necessary in the continued security of the nation. Moreover, while Mas Selamat’s family were charged and imprisoned for harbouring the known fugitive (Shanmugam), Wong apologised for the security lapse (“Budget: Head P”), but retained his portfolio as Deputy Prime Minister and was given a new appointment as Coordinating Minister for National Security in 2010 (S. Ho “Wong Kan Seng”). He remained in office until his retirement on 21 May 2011 (“Former DPM Wong Kan Seng Steps Down”).

The “government-people relationship” (C. Lim) was further strained later that year during the 2008 Beijing Olympics. According to Stephan Ortmann,

\(^\text{143}\) Also see “Singapore Govt Butt of Jokes” for further examples of online commentary criticising the Singaporean State during the Mas Selamat scandal.

\(^\text{144}\) The disjunct between the State and the Singaporean people that Lim refers to was demonstrated on 22 Nov. 2010 when the findings of the Committee of Inquiry convened to investigate Mas Selamat’s escape from the WRDC was reported in Parliament: Mas Selamat had taken shelter at his brother’s house in Tampines in the eastern part of Singapore for two days before he crossed the Straits of Johore, on a buoy of his own devising (Shanmugam).
Singaporeans were dissatisfied that the table-tennis team representing the nation comprised mainland Chinese players who had been naturalised as Singaporean citizens only two years before, having “been consciously won over by the government in its bid to attract foreign talent” (24). Despite winning an Olympic silver medal for Singapore, the team's explicit and televised identification as “Chinese nationals” was perceived as a slight to the nationalistic feelings of viewing Singaporeans who felt that the players “were not real Singaporeans” (24). Online debates on what constitutes the Singaporean national identity subsequently increased to a fever pitch in late 2008. This incident, Ortmann argues, demonstrated that the Singaporean national identity as authoritatively constructed by the Singaporean State is untenable, with demands for the participation of civil society in identity politics increasing even as the State clings to its illiberal democratic governmentality (41). Significantly, following the Mas Selamat scandal, the “discourse of crisis” that engendered the “patriotism [that] is dependent on the government’s ability to govern effectively” (40) was undermined.

It therefore comes as no surprise that 82 out of 87 parliamentary seats were contested by the Opposition in the May 2011 Singapore Parliamentary General Election (GE)—the largest number denoting political dissent against the PAP since it began its rule in 1963 (GE 2011). The 2011 GE was appropriately dubbed a “watershed election” (H.L. Lee, qtd. in “Singapore Opposition Make ‘Landmark’ Election Gains”), in which six members of the Opposition from The Workers’ Party were voted into parliament (Singapore Government 2011 Parliamentary Election). These results affirmed the warnings of Lim, Ortmann (42) and other critics of a widening “rift between the aspirations of the electorate and the composition of their representatives in parliament” (“Asia: The Men in White Are Always Right; Singapore’s General Election”).

It was in this climate of brewing political dissent and pressing questions of the foundation of the Singaporean national identity that Gemuk Girls,¹⁴⁵ the third play in Haresh Sharma’s Trilogy, was devised and staged. First performed at The

¹⁴⁵ The title, Gemuk Girls, is a typical Colloquial Singaporean English blended construction with an adjectival borrowing from the Malay, “gemuk”, meaning “fat”. My translation.
Necessary Stage black box theatre in Singapore from 29 October to 9 November 2008 to sell-out audiences and critical acclaim, the play was re-staged in Malaysia at the Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre later that year. Due to the play’s widespread popular appeal in its first staging, TNS restaged Gemuk Girls, unchanged, in November 2011 (Sharma “Meaty Drama”). With this play, the company made an “incisive, illuminating and incandescent” intervention in the contemporaneous Singaporean socio-political context (Kapadia “Rev. Of Gemuk Girls 2011”) following the nation’s “watershed election”. Reviewer Naeem Kapadia comments on the play’s significance:

It has been a monumental year for local politics and Gemuk Girls brings it to a fitting end, reminding us of all we have achieved as a nation and the distance we have yet to traverse to be, as Juliana declares, “truly independent”. (“Rev. Of Gemuk Girls 2011”)

In addition to this, and similar to the “significant gains” made by the Opposition in the 2011 elections (“Singapore Opposition Make ‘Landmark’ Election Gains”), Gemuk Girls creates a performative space for political opposition virtually absent since the 1963 elections.

In this chapter, I will first give a synopsis of Gemuk Girls and discuss its significance to the theatre company. My discussion then turns to the dominant historical narrative and its role in clarifying the play’s interventionist intentions. Using the valuable critical lens put forward by Diana Taylor in The Archive and the Repertoire, I next argue that Gemuk Girls conveys the traumatic memory embedded in the Singaporean imaginary otherwise suppressed by the hegemonic State. Following this, I analyse the way in which wider State politics influence character relationships and development. Finally, I contend that the family on stage can be viewed as a microcosm of Singapore in past, present and future terms, and that Gemuk Girls raises the spectator’s socio-political consciousness, while also imagining a future trajectory for Singapore.
The Other(ed) Singaporean Family: Introduction to Gemuk Girls

Gemuk Girls is a three-hander in three Acts, focusing on three generations of a Singaporean Malay-Muslim family. Marzuki bin Abdul Rahman is a photographer during the politically tumultuous period (c. 1961-1963) that then Prime Minister (PM) Lee Kuan Yew had entered into the public record as “The Battle for Merger”. At 4 a.m. one morning in 1962, Marzuki is hauled off by the Special Branch (I.i.120-125). Marzuki’s family is distraught by the sudden intrusion and is informed by the officers that they “[would] take him away for a few hours” (I.i.121). Before he leaves, Marzuki placates his seven-year-old daughter, Kartini, and tells her, “Count to hundred I say. And I’ll be back” (I.i.122). However, his refusal to confess to the allegations of communism and racial chauvinism (i.e., communalism) brought against him results in his lifelong detention; and he unavoidably reneges on his promise to his daughter. His sudden departure from his family has a detrimental effect on Kartini, who is introduced to the dramatic narrative in her late forties (I.ii.126). She is a mother of three daughters, the progeny of her marriage to a Chinese man to whom she appears disaffected and who is otherwise absent from the dramatic narrative.

Kartini and her youngest daughter, Juliana Lim Abdullah Marzuki, are the eponymous “gemuk girls” of the play. In Act I, Juliana is a university lecturer at the start of a promising political career. Much to her mother’s dismay, Juliana is a member of the “Young PAP” (YP) and the “YP Women’s Wing” (I.ii.128). Although the two women are drawn in stark contrast to each other, they share an intimate bond at first, and Juliana describes her mother as her “best friend” (I.iii.139). According to Sharma, Juliana and Kartini’s close-knit relationship and repartee was modelled on the mother-daughter duo portrayed in one of director Alvin Tan’s favourite American television series, Gilmore Girls (Gilmore Girls). The plot of Gilmore Girls also centres on a multigenerational family and their

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146 References to the dramatic text will hereafter be to Gemuk, appended with Act, scene and page numbers as they are printed in the play-script. Where I discuss elements of the performance text only, I refer to Gemuk 2008. Video-recording of Gemuk 2008 is courtesy of TNS archives.

147 The Special Branch is the colonial incarnation of the current Internal Security Department (ISD), which is the intelligence agency working out of the Ministry of Home Affairs.

relationships, which is a format that suited the themes of *Gemuk's* own multigenerational drama. However, unlike the characters of Lorelai and Rory Gilmore in *Gilmore Girls,* Sharma’s “gemuk girls” grow distant and, finally, are completely estranged from each other by the play’s conclusion.

The decline of their relationship begins when they receive news of Marzuki's death in custody in the penultimate scene of Act I. Acts II and III present two alternate imaginings of how Marzuki’s death has affected Kartini and Juliana “three years later” (II.i.142; 3.1.154), following Kartini’s refusal to attend his funeral in Penang. In Act II, Kartini “turn[s] into [a] Business Makcik”\(^{149}\) (II.i.148) who describes herself as “having too much fun to really care” (II.i.144) about giving her child the level of support she had demonstrated in Act I. Juliana, on the other hand, becomes an “NGO activist”\(^{150}\) (II.i.143) for the abolition of the ISA (II.iii.151). In Act III, Kartini withdraws from everyone around her. In this alternate imagining, Juliana is married with a son and has become a Minister of Parliament (MP) (III.i.154). In both iterations of the future presented in Acts II and III, the mother-daughter relationship suffers. The closing scene of the play is set “20 years” after Kartini and Juliana part ways (III.iv.167). Clearly having achieved her political goals, Juliana, a Malay-Muslim woman, is the PM of Singapore and delivers the National Day Rally speech that has become an integral feature of Singaporean politics since independence in 1965.

Significantly, this is the only play explored in this thesis where the nominal head of the household, often the husband-father (Singapore Government *Heads of Households; Families and Households*), corporeally enters the performance space. Yet, although he is always present, Marzuki is achingly absent from the lived realities of the female characters on stage. *Gemuk Girls* thus positions women, who do not appear in the official historical narrative except as supporters of the main male prime-movers of Singaporean independence and political leadership (Lyons “Politics of Accommodation” 241), at centrestage.

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\(^{149}\) “Business Makcik” translates from the Malay as “Business Aunty”, where “aunty” is a local term of respect for middle-aged and elderly women. My translation.

\(^{150}\) The non-governmental organisation (NGO) that Juliana works for is unspecified in the play. For information on the range of NGOs currently in operation in Singapore, see “International Non-Profit Organisations” (Singapore Economic Development Board).
Juliana’s seemingly radical depiction conveys a cautious tone of hope that is nonetheless undermined when juxtaposed with Kartini’s final portrayal.

**Authenticating Conventions I: TNS and the ISA**

It is worth noting that amidst the many criticisms levelled against the State during the 2008 Mas Selamat scandal, TNS’s was evidently the lone voice that performatively interrogated the legitimacy of the ISA through its staging of *Gemuk Girls*. By doing this, the play contributes to the development of a social discourse that productions like *Gemuk* (2008) encourage. It also underscores the coercive and silencing circumstances of *merdeka*, that is, Singapore’s independence from British rule, on present-day Singapore. Significantly, Alvin Tan explicitly clarifies the personal investment that he and Sharma have in the themes of the play:

In 1993, The Necessary Stage’s *Off Centre*, a play about mental illness was embroiled in a controversy. This was swiftly followed up by the Marxist allegation in 1994 when forum theatre, introduced by the company to Singapore after a stint with Brazilian Marxist theatre practitioner Augusto Boal, came under scrutiny and was eventually proscribed. (“Director’s Message” “*Gemuk* 2008 Publicity Collaterals” 3)

Here, Tan is referring to the interrogations that he and Sharma were subjected to in 1994, following an article published in *The Straits Times* that accused them of having Marxist leanings (Soh 23). At this point in Singaporean history, the State had reportedly uncovered what became known as the Marxist Conspiracy. The subsequent execution of Operation Spectrum that had led to the arrest and detention of twenty-two people suspected of “conspiring to subvert and destabilise the country to establish a Marxist state”151 (Teo 96) was still fresh in

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151 Operation Spectrum was another covert operation that the Singaporean State carried out under the ISA towards the end of the Cold War, beginning on 21 May 1987. Further arrests were made in 1988. Consequently, the political detention of a total of 22 detainees was rationalised as quashing the “Marxist Conspiracy” that was believed to be brewing amongst overseas-educated
the minds of the Singaporean public. Soh’s accusatory article thus put both Tan and Sharma in a precarious situation in relation to the Singaporean State, though no charges were filed.\textsuperscript{152} Moreover, this incident came months after Josef Ng’s performance of \textit{Brother Cane},\textsuperscript{153} prompting the State to take action and quell the burgeoning social commentary that had only just begun in the Singaporean theatre (Peterson \textit{Theater and the Politics of Culture} 44-50).

However, Tan also notes in 2008 that

\begin{quote}
[t]oday, nudity is allowed on stage, and plays touching on paedophilia and death penalty \textsuperscript{sic} are passed by the Media Development Authority with a rating or an advisory. (“Director's Message” “\textit{Gemuk 2008 Publicity Collaterals}” 4)
\end{quote}

Certainly, the apparent liberalisation of the arts scene that finally permitted the discussion of sensitive socio-political issues that Tan recognises is owed in no small part to the work done by TNS. This is implied in his reference to the themes explored in \textit{Fundamentally Happy} and \textit{Good People}. He concludes on a hopeful note, asserting his faith in the positive influence of art on the Singaporean consciousness:

\begin{quote}
[I]t is important that we continue to dream. Dreams enable us to re-imagine our futures. We need to embrace the re-constructive potential that dreams possess and provide.

Transformative possibilities never fail the dreamer. This is what the \textit{Gemuk Girls} project has come to mean to me. While culture screws us up, art is there to save us. (5)
\end{quote}

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
\item graduates, professionals and Liberation Theology advocates in the Catholic church. By describing these newly discovered “Marxist conspirators” as “determined to advance the cause of Marxism as the earlier largely Chinese-educated CPM cadres” (“Red Threat Is Still Real”), the State established a clear genealogy harking back to the threat of communism that had beset Singapore prior to independence discussed in the next section. See Seow \textit{A Dissident in Lee Kuan Yew’s Prison} and Teo \textit{Beyond the Blue Gate} for their elucidating accounts of their political detention under Operation Spectrum.
\item For other discussions of Tan and Sharma’s experience with the ISA, see, for example, W.C. Lee “Chronology of a Controversy”; Devan 243-244; and A. Tan “Forum Theatre”.
\item Chapter 1 of this thesis provides a summary of the events surrounding \textit{Brother Cane}.
\end{itemize}
I argue that the diction used in Tan’s conclusion here announces *Gemuk* (2008) as a performance that “re-construct[s]”—or, more appropriately, intervenes in—the Singaporean historical narrative, so as to imagine a future trajectory for the nation, “transform[ed]”. To understand how the play achieves this, I will briefly turn to the modern nation’s founding moment often mythologised in *The Singapore Story* (K.Y. Lee).

**Authenticating Conventions II: *The Singapore Story* and Operation Coldstore**

According to Philip Holden, the history of modern Singapore first became a concern for the Singaporean State in 1996 when the Ministry of Education (MOE) found that younger Singaporeans were ignorant of the nation’s past (4). Whereas the PAP had hitherto disregarded the nation’s pre-independence history as “a threat to nation-building” (K.S. Loh 2), the evident disconnect of the younger generation of Singaporeans from the national imaginary proved sufficient to effect a shift in the State’s position. The State’s response to MOE’s findings was swift and decisive: on 17 May 1997, the National Education (NE) program was launched (H.L. Lee “Launch of NE”). In addition to a formal curriculum that is ubiquitously delivered in all educational institutions, the State further requires that educators include components of NE in all lesson plans and extra-curricular activities in order to “develop national cohesion, the instinct for survival and

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154 Frost and Balasingamchow also note the State’s rebuff of the nation’s history following independence. In 1966, for example, in a speech to school principals, Lee Kuan Yew asserted that while “an American” could boast of a rich history, Singaporeans “are not in the same position because our society and its education system was never designed to produce a people capable of cohesive action” (qtd. in Frost and Balasingamchow 430). The then Minister of Foreign Affairs and Minister of Labour S. Rajaratnam was even more explicit in expressing the State’s rejection of the nation’s past, which he declares as a hindrance to Singapore’s modernisation:

We do not lay undue stress on the past. We do not see nation-building and modernisation as primarily an exercise in reuniting the present generation with a past generation and its values and glories. ... A generation encouraged to bask in the values of the past and hold on to a static future will never be equipped to meet a future predicated on jet travel, atomic power, satellite communication, electronics and computers. For us, the task is not one of linking past generations with the present generation, but the present generation with future generations. (qtd. in Frost and Balasingamchow 430)
confidence in the future” (Ministry of Education “Purpose of NE”). As part of the NE programme, the Singapore Heritage Board opened the NE exhibition the following year. This multi-media exhibition, entitled, “The Singapore Story—Overcoming the Odds”, was sanctioned by the State as narrating “the modern history of our island-state from the time of colonial rule to the present day” (C.T. Goh “Opening of NE Exhibition”). Importantly, bearing the same title as the memoirs of Lee Kuan Yew published earlier in 1998, the exhibition clearly endorsed Lee’s narrative.

The *Singapore Story* (Lee) thus entered the historical record as the “authorized version” of events surrounding the conception of the modern Singaporean nation (Turnbull 3), being, in Holden’s definition, a “national autobiography” (Holden 6).¹⁵⁵ In this narrative, Lee is depicted as the mastermind behind *merdeka*. Lee proposed Merger, which meant that Singapore would join the Federation of Malaya to form the Federation of Malaysia. However, he first had to deal with “the [ever-present] danger of communist penetration of government and administration” (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 331). This “danger” was an ongoing concern of the colonial government (338–339) and compounded the reluctance of the Chief Minister of Malaya to admit so “[m]any Chinese-educated and new immigrants to the country [who] will always be loyal to China and [...] less Malayan-minded” (Tunku Abdul Rahman, qtd. in *S’pore Story* 362). After what became known as the “Eden Hall tea party” on 18 July 1961 (373–384), where Lim Chin Siong met with then British Commissioner, Lord Selkirk, Lee publicly denounced Lim and his supporters as “the Communist Left” for allegedly colluding with the British Government to “try and capture the PAP Party [sic] and government” (qtd. in “Lee’s Bombshell” 1). Lee maintained that Lim and his comrades who opposed Merger had been unduly influenced by the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM).¹⁵⁶ Expelled from the PAP, the alleged pro-communist

¹⁵⁵ Coined by Holden, the term “national autobiography” refers to a form of autobiography “in which the growth of an individual implicitly identified as a national father explicitly parallels the growth of national consciousness and, frequently proleptically, the achievement of an independent nation-state” (Holden 6–7).

¹⁵⁶ The CPM had begun its armed revolt against the British colonial government with guerrilla warfare in the jungles of the region in mid-1948, primarily owing to the exclusion of the Chinese community from equal political participation in the postcolonial governments that were being
faction formed the opposition party, the *Barisan Sosialis Singapura* (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 385).\(^{157}\)

The Barisan’s claims to peaceful agitation towards *merdeka*, however, were undermined by the continued social unrest in Singapore for which Lee held Lim and his new party responsible. For example, Lee writes:

> On the industrial front, I expected Lim Chin Siong to organize widespread unrest and warned at a press conference that we were likely to see a repetition of 1955-56.\(^{158}\) In 1961, there were 116 strikes, 84 of them after the PAP split on 21 July, and in the 15 months from July 1961 to September 1962, there were 153, a record for post-war Singapore. (389)

Furthermore, the charge of Malay and Chinese chauvinism aroused the Singaporean public's fear of all other political parties that campaigned for the specific needs of their respective Malay and Chinese communities. This was set in contrast to the stated intent of the PAP’s right-wing faction to unify the vastly different racial communities in a “happy and harmonious multiculturalism” that “innoculat[ed] society against [the] dangers” presented by communalism (S. Rajaratnam, qtd. in Frost and Balasingamchow 389).\(^{159}\)

The accusations hurled at Marzuki in *Gemuk* are thematically similar and situate his account in Singapore's pre-independence years. In Marzuki’s re-

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\(^{157}\) *Barisan Sosialis Singapura* translates from the Malay as the Socialist Front of Singapore. Hereinafter, Barisan.

\(^{158}\) Lee refers to the social unrest arising from the 1955 Hock Lee Bus Riots and 1955 Chinese Middle School student protests. Both incidents received support from allegedly pro-communist trade unions. See S. Ho “Hock Lee Riot” and (“Protests by Chinese Middle School Students: 10th Oct. 1956”) for further reading.

\(^{159}\) Arguably, through the creation of the spectre of racial chauvinism, the right-wing PAP exacerbated the already strained relationship between the Malay and Chinese communities, thereby creating the instability that called for the policing actions of the State thereafter.
enactment, the Special Branch officers interrogate him regarding his political affiliations as follows:


Though imprisoned without trial for forty years, ostensibly for his communist and/or chauvinist activities, Marzuki eventually tells the spectator that he had not been involved in any political machinations at all. Instead, he says:

MARZUKI: [In Malay] Over the years, I took photographs and sold them to the newspapers. I met politicians, union leaders, communists, editors. I never listened to what they said. I didn’t care. I wasn’t interested in politics. I had no desire to join any party. [...] (*i.iv.140-141*)

Marzuki’s disputation echoes that of those branded as communists by Lee in 1963. Their denial notwithstanding, Lee nonetheless asserted to the

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\(^{160}\) “Sepak” translates from the Malay as “kick”. My translation.

\(^{161}\) Similar to Marzuki in the play, at least five Coldstore detainees were held for several decades. For example, Chia Thye Poh languished in prison for twenty-six years followed by six more years under Restriction Orders before his release (Wade “Operation Coldstore: A Key Event” 66). Said Zahari, an influential journalist detained for seventeen years, was arrested on the day after he was voted into leadership of Partai Rakyat, another leading opposition party in 1963 (Said Zahari *Dark Clouds* 119, 179-181). He was one of the detainees interviewed by Sharma and Tan in the research phase of *Gemuk* (“Personal Interview with Sharma”). Although *Gemuk* “depicts fictitious events” (“*Gemuk* 2008 Publicity Collaterals” 16), the dramatic narrative is permeated with resonances from Said’s memoirs (Said Zahari *Dark Clouds; Long Nightmare*). This includes his reflections on the impact of his detention on his family. Said’s youngest daughter, Noorlinda Said, was “in utero” at the time of his arrest (*Long Nightmare* xl); and her political activism and tri-lingualism in Malay, Mandarin and English can be said to be embodied in the character of Juliana in the play.

\(^{162}\) Although Lim had twice publicly denied being either a communist or pro-communist (*Frost and Balasingamchow* 377; 398), he is remembered as the personification of the communist bogey in the national autobiography. Similarly, Said Zahari reports having asserted to his interrogators that he had “nothing to do with the communists” and that he “was arrested on false charges” (*Dark Clouds* 192). Despite this, he was publicly branded a communist eight years into his detention (119).
Singaporean public that “they, the communists, must lose” (K.Y. Lee “Battle for Merger”).

To this end, the *Preservation of Public Security Ordinance* (PPSO) was invoked, which legitimised the detention without trial of political subversives. On 2 February 1963, with the agreement of the Internal Security Council, which included Selkirk, Lee and the Tunku, the Special Branch “round[ed]-up” the alleged Singaporean pro-Communists in Operation Coldstore (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 472). Lee would later use the powers of the Special Branch and the threat of the PPSO to deter “[t]he Barisan and communist troublemakers”, still at large, from “foment[ing] disorder or violence” during a rally aimed “to report on the insincerity of the Japanese government in settling Singapore’s demand for compensation” in the lead-up to Merger (496-497). Pleased with his political manoeuvres, he writes:

This occasion turned out to be a demonstration of my resourcefulness and resolve to meet their threats when they played it rough, and enhanced my standing as a leader prepared to go to the end of the road in any fight. (497)

Singapore’s defeat of the “communist threat” would be indebted to Lee’s foresight and political perspicacity. As Mark Frost and Yu-Mei Balasingamchow state, “the methods [the PAP] used to neutralize its opposition and ensure Merger’s peaceful enactment, proved epoch-defining” (399): their opposition, in effect, destroyed, *merdeka* was won with the PAP in power on 16 September 1963—a rule that they have maintained to this day in 2016.

But Merger could not be sustained. Lee’s narrative pointedly identifies the institutionalized exclusionary practices that favoured Malays or *bumiputeras* as irreconcilable with the “social revolution” (Frost and Balasingamchow 409) that he had envisaged for the Federation of Malaysia (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 616-627;

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163 Of the 169 people listed for detention, only 115 were found by the Special Branch officers during Coldstore. According to Lee, “This was always the problem with locating communists. Knowing they were vulnerable, they kept changing the places where they spent their nights” (*S’pore Story* 472).
passim). Consequently, two years later on 9 August 1965, Singapore was expelled from the Federation (Abisheganaden “S’pore Is Out” 1). Lee recounts Separation in the chapter entitled, “Talak! Talak! Talak! (I Divorce Thee)” (The Singapore Story 648-663), which is an utterance that finalizes a divorce in the Islamic Syariah Court. Firstly, Holden argues that in doing so, Lee “identifi[es] Islam with Malayness and us[es] the archaic vocabulary common in colonial writings about Malay culture” (174), thereby othering the Malay community in Singapore that then became the minority as a result of Separation. Secondly, when paired with the now historic televised and radio broadcast of Lee weeping as he announced Separation (K.Y. Lee “Transcript of a Press Conf.”), this metaphor of divorce evokes the trauma and abandonment that has since rationalized the “siege mentality” (Lydgate 49) and survivalist ideology (Holden 175) that is integrated into the national imaginary.

A new set of national ideals that focused on nurturing the government—people relationship by encouraging “active citizenship” was disseminated at the turn of the millennium (Singapore Government Singapore 21). Following this, supplementary versions of the advent of Singaporean independence—that regard Coldstore as the moment of national trauma—have been published. This growing corpus of literature includes the political memoirs and posthumous biographies of ex-detainees and academic scholarship. These texts contest Lee’s depiction of Singapore’s pre-independence left-wing politicians as rallying for a violent overthrow of the democratic state and as detrimental to the merdeka project.

164 Adopting a rehabilitative historiographical approach, and contrary to Lee’s allegations, these works suggest that the Barisan leadership had strategically avoided Emergency-era tactics used by the CPM for which they were nonetheless accused of and detained (Frost and Balasingamchow 400). Rather, Lim and his comrades had adhered to a policy of non-violence and constitutional struggle

164 As these works demonstrate an effort to rehabilitate the aspersions borne by Coldstore detainees, I will refer to them as being supportive of and adding to a “rehabilitative historiography” of the Singaporean nation. For political memoirs of ex-detainees, see, especially, Said Zahari Dark Clouds and The Long Nightmare. Scholarly works that explore alternative versions of The Singapore Story (Lee) include “The Fundamental Issue is Anticolonialism; (Thum); “Creating Malaysia” (Jones); Comet in Our Sky (J.Q. Tan and Jomo); and The 1963 Operation Coldstore (Poh, Tan and Hong).
(Wade “Operation Coldstore: A Key Event” 44, 68). Despite this, more than 113 influential members of the opposition, the Barisan Sosialis and Partai Rakyat, and “trade unions, Rural Residents’ Associations, Nanyang University and Singapore University graduates and undergraduates and a number of journalists with the Chinese-language newspapers” were arrested and detained without trial (Said Zahari Dark Clouds 180). Moreover, in his examination of the secret correspondence that passed between the British colonial government and the PAP at the time, Geoff Wade finds no evidence to corroborate what he presumes “was misinformation provided to the press to validate the arrests [made during Coldstore] for the public.” Thum Pingtjin further argues that Merger, so critical in the bid for Singaporean independence, had been crafted by Lee to neutralise the Barisan as they “were on the verge of taking power in Singapore” (3).

Together, the State’s ongoing NE programme, the 1998 Singapore Heritage Board’s exhibition and Lee’s national autobiography, and even the recently published rehabilitative histories of Singapore, are encompassed in what Diana Taylor designates as the “archive”. For Taylor, the archive is that manifestation of memory that takes tangible forms—“documents, maps, literary texts, letters, archaeological remains, bones, videos, films, CDs [and] all those items supposedly resistant to change” (Taylor 19). It follows that often, objects of national memory are selected to serve those in power, allowing them to control the direction of the historical narrative as I have shown applies in the case of Singapore until very recently.

Sharma similarly embraces the rehabilitative historiographical endeavour in Gemuk, as the plot departs from a national narrative of Lee’s political acumen and Merger-Separation. In Sharma’s play, it also becomes apparent that the real cause for Marzuki’s political detention is not simply about quelling the communist uprising, even though he is arrested under the aegis of the PPSO. Instead, Marzuki’s detention is predicated on silencing an influential and well-connected member of the press who is not in the service of the party in power.

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Furthermore, Juliana’s speech at the protest rally three years after Marzuki’s death in Act II (II.iii.150) is a subversive parallel to the aforementioned pre-Merger rally at which Lee demonstrates his power (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 497). Juliana cites “16 September 1962” as the date that her grandfather “was detained under the PPSO, together with 127 other people” (II.iii.150). Although Coldstore was executed on 2 February 1963, the partially fictitious date of Marzuki’s arrest in *Gemuk* is blended to simultaneously coincide with the date of Merger, which occurred on 16 September 1963. In this way, the play relocates Singapore’s national trauma from Separation (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 648-663) to Coldstore and Merger. Crucially, these events that Wade and others have described as being of “palpable importance to both the process of the [Merger] and to the creation of virtually every aspect of modern Singapore” (Wade “Operation Coldstore: A Key Event” 15) are extrapolated in *Gemuk’s* staging of the private thoughts, dreams and recollections of a political detainee and the subsequent impact on his family. In sensitively exploring the Singaporean national imaginary, *Gemuk* (2008) furthers its goal of intervening in the *Singapore Story*.

**Rhetorical Conventions: Historicising Performance**

The company’s intention to stage a possible intervention in the dominant historical narrative of Singapore is gestured at in the publicity collaterals of the play. The programme for *Gemuk* (2008) is a postcard-sized booklet that primarily features textual content with an inverted monochromatic scheme. The only image in the programme is a greyscale family portrait of *Gemuk’s* characters on the back cover of the programme (Figure 6-1). Significantly, this image activates the spectator’s horizon of expectations towards an idyllic portrayal of the Singaporean family unit so revered in the national ideology promulgated by the Singaporean State. As the dramatic narrative of Marzuki’s lifelong detention unfolds, however, a defamiliarisation of this image of the cohesive Singaporean family could be said to ensue. This occurs when the spectator learns that the portrait of Marzuki’s family could never have been taken by reason of the spatial and familial separation caused by his detention. The family pictured is an
imagined construction, and suggests that the play's events possibly occurred in a “dream”, echoing Tan’s previously cited “Director's Message” (Gemuk 2008 Publicity Collaterals 5).

Importantly, in contrast to those aforementioned works of the “archive”, Gemuk (2008) offers a different interventionist engagement with Singaporean history through its theatrical form. Particularly, the 'liveness' of performance facilitates the spectator’s possibly deeper emotional and discursive engagement with Singapore's omitted past and marginalised figures. According to Taylor,

“performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance [and] singing” take on the role of the “repertoire” through which embodied memory and knowledge of a community are transmitted (20). Unlike the supposed stability of archival objects, such as The Singapore Story (K.Y. Lee), the “repertoire” is dynamic and open to change (Taylor 20). This change is set in motion by the active engagement of both those who enact embodied memory and the recipient-participants of this knowledge, who must then decipher the polyvalent meanings therein (20). In the staging of Gemuk (2008), the spectator of the play becomes the recipient-participant of the embodied memory of a political detainee who “was never charged in court and was never reunited with his family” (III.iv.168).

166 The other publicity flyers for Gemuk (2008) and Gemuk (2011) have been curated by Centre 42 Limited and can be viewed online at The Repository.
In contrasting the “repertoire” with writing, the tangible and enduring tool of the “archive”, Taylor invokes Jacques Derrida, who observed that “[w]riting is unthinkable without repression”, namely, those “deletions, blanks, and disguises of and within writing itself” that occur to foreclose possible interventions or transformations (qtd. in Taylor 25). What performance does, therefore, is form the “repertoire” that intervenes by occupying the elided spaces in the “archive”, not just with writing, but also with embodied knowledge that demands engagement. Performance and embodied knowledge are alike: they must be transient, ephemeral (e.g., when a performance is captured on video, it bears the traits of an archival object). But as Taylor argues, through the repetition of “structures and codes” of performance, the “communal memories, histories and values” transmitted therein survive (21). Accordingly, it is the dynamic interaction between the “archive” and the “repertoire” that allows social actors excluded from the dominant historical narrative to conduct a political intervention through performance. These interventions, significantly, have the potential to extend beyond the duration of said performance (albeit, for a limited time).

Notably, the alternative imaginings presented in Acts II and III may also be analysed as “scenarios” (Taylor 28). In positing her methodology, Taylor deploys “scenarios [...] as meaning-making paradigms” that, by definition, “bear[s] the weight of accumulative repeats” (28). That is to say, because of this repetition, elements in scenarios are readily recognisable and follow prescribed structural formulae. It is due to these formulaic elements that scenarios become amenable to revisions (31).

As the discussion thus far has shown, the pivotal scenarios invoked by Gemuk are analogous to those available in The Singapore Story, namely, the Merger and Separation scenarios. Inasmuch as Gemuk (2008) is a product of the “repertoire”, I aim to show that the play extrapolates these formulaic national scenarios. For the purposes of my discussion, it also becomes useful to consider Acts II and III of Gemuk (2008) as interventionist Coldstore/Merger scenarios that plot the different iterations of the generational impact of Marzuki’s detention. As Taylor argues:
CHAPTER 6: Politics, Family and the Singapore Minority Woman in Haresh Sharma’s Gemuk
Girls

[...] the notion of the scenario allows us to more fully recognize the many ways in which the archive and the repertoire work to constitute and transmit social knowledge. The scenario places spectators within its frame, implicating us in its ethics and politics. (33)

Viewed in this light, the scenarios that permit the play’s performative intervention in the “archive” are critical in contributing to a more polyvalent Singaporean imaginary with which the spectator is invited to engage. I argue that in Gemuk (2008), the set design, multilingualism and surtitling\textsuperscript{167} work to effect such engagement with Singaporean history.

The performance space for Gemuk (2008) is neither demarcated by a lip nor raised on a platform, though the action of the play occurs as it would on a proscenium stage, facing front on to the audience. In place of a backdrop and wings are large screens at stage right and upstage, on which surtitles, photographs and writing are projected throughout the play. Also, seven brown wooden decks on tracks function as the play’s main set and are rolled and locked in different configurations to convey the changes in character relationships throughout the performance. On the floor, bright green Astroturf serves as the only delimeter of the staged action. The close proximity of the audience to the performance space makes ambivalent the boundaries between what is real and the fictitious world of the play. This ambivalence aptly suggests that the Singaporean spectator is physically involved in the alternative performance of Singapore’s history, present and future as it is depicted in Gemuk (2008). Not only does this proximity allow the actors to portray the minutiae of their roles with micro-expressions and recognisable changes in pitch, which add to the realism of the performance, but the intimacy created between the spectator and the characters in the performance space is heightened as well. Given the almost complete erasure of political detainees from the dominant historical narrative

\textsuperscript{167} “Surtitling” refers to the “captions displayed on a screen above the stage during a performance of an opera, giving a translation of the libretto” (“Macquarie Dictionary”). Although the surtitles in Gemuk (2008) are not sung, I use the term in this chapter to refer to the captions that translate non-English speech parts and other text projected above the staged action and onto the upstage and stage right screens.
and from public life, the ambivalent boundary between the performance and spectator develops the spectator’s relationship with Marzuki as character. Together, Marzuki and the individual spectator become part of the interventionist objective of the play.

Multilingual Anxieties: Re-enacting Merger’s Linguistic Displacement

The play opens on a bespectacled man, Marzuki, barefoot and dressed in a simple white T-shirt and brown shorts. Lying on a platform at centrestage, he appears to be sleeping, but happily rises in recognition of the presence of the audience when the spotlight shines on him (Gemuk 2008). Marzuki smiles, sits up and begins his soliloquy in direct audience address, further blurring the boundaries between performance and spectator spaces. Given the company’s previous works and its established reputation as an early pioneer of the Singaporean English language theatre (Chong Theatre and the State 76-77), the spectator’s expectations are disrupted when Marzuki “speaks to the audience in Malay” (I.i.120) in a production conceivably assumed to be performed in English. This defamiliarisation in the opening sequence is integral to the play’s exploration of the consequences of the Singaporean State’s choice of English as the main language of education, politics and commerce.

According to Lee Kuan Yew, the reason that the State had “decided to opt for English as a common language” was because “it was the only decision which could have held Singapore together” (qtd. in T.P.). Fundamentally, Lee wanted to achieve an egalitarian society able to engage in world trade: “Everybody [would be] on an equal basis” learning English, “the language of international commerce” (qtd. in Kwang et al. 34). Believing that communal sentiments prevented the different racial communities from interacting with one another and, more significantly, contributed to the racial riots of the era, Lee and his government chose the English language to ensure that “no race would have an advantage” (K.Y. Lee, qtd. in Kwang et al. 219).

168 These riots are introduced in Chapter 4 of this thesis. See (“Maria Hertogh Riots Erupt: 11th Dec. 1950”) and (“Communal Riots Occur: 21st Jul 1964”).
Yet, prior to the implementation of the State’s language policies, conflicting evidence suggests that there had been lively communication between racial communities, owing to the willingness of each community to learn one another’s languages (Harper 8-10). Contemporaneous historian Victor Purcell even pointed to the existence of a “creative merdeka” finding an emergence of a “Singapore consciousness” in non-elitist spaces where “Singaporeans, irrespective of race, live[d] a life in common” in the pre-independence years (qtd. in Frost and Balasingamchow 341-342). This was especially so in the people’s enjoyment of performances—or, Taylor’s “repertoire” (20)—regardless, or, perhaps, because of the different languages and cultures that these repertory works embodied (Frost and Balasingamchow 342-343). In addition, both Lee and Said Zahari’s descriptions of their experiences of learning the Mandarin language attest to this open sharing and interracial communication (K.Y. Lee S’pore Story passim; Said Zahari Dark Clouds 210-214; passim). Despite delivering his account in the Malay language in Gemuk (2008), Marzuki demonstrates a command of the Mandarin language which he “learnt […] at Changi University”, that is, Changi Prison, because he “didn’t want them to think [he] was a chauvinist” (II.ii.148). As suggested by Marzuki’s characterisation, the source languages of the diverse racial communities in Singapore’s pre-independence years performed the vital function of maintaining their respective community identities. This, in turn, arguably afforded people the security and encouragement needed to reach out to others in other communities. In light of this, I argue that Lee’s preference for the English language inexorably contributed to the isolation of racial communities from one another and, to an extent, forestalled the development of deeper inter-community understanding. Importantly, it could also have served to unsettle the security of intra-community identities and relationships as defined and previously encouraged by the embodied cultural memory inherent in their respective source languages.

For example, during his first interrogation by the Special Branch and in his interaction with the audience, Marzuki insists on speaking in the Malay language. He even chides his (Malay) interrogator for speaking in English, which is the language of the colonial masters as they were at the time of his arrest:
MARZUKI: [In Malay] [...] Do you know why you are here, he [the Malay officer] asks in English. I reply in Malay. He asks another question, again in English. Friend, I know your English is very good, but you are Malay and I am Malay. Is there someone you’re trying to impress in here or what? He walks to me and punches my stomach. We are Malay, we are Muslim, but this is not an Islamic country. That’s why I speak English. Another punch. [...] (I.i.123)

Here, the Malay officer responds to Marzuki’s attempts to identify with him in their common language, firstly, with physical violence, and secondly, with the internalised Islamophobia implicitly disseminated by Lee.\textsuperscript{169} Lee has stated his belief that “the more English-speaking they [Malay-Muslims] are, the less they are prone to” Islamic radicalisation (qtd. in Kwang et al. 241). By switching to the English language, Lee claimed that the Singaporean State thus “opened up a wider world for them” (qtd. in Kwang et al. 241) and successfully steered the English-speaking Malay-Muslim Singaporean community away from religious fundamentalism. Arguably, the effect of this stance has set the Malay-Muslim identity at variance with the stated version of the Singaporean identity, thereby adding pressure to the Malay-Muslim community, implying that one identity must be sacrificed for the other. The State’s approved identitarian scripts are performed by the Malay officer interrogating Marzuki. The Malay officer non-reflexively abjures important parts of his (racial, religious) identity that the State deems harmful to the national multicultural imaginary.

This painful disjunct between personal identity and Singaporean identity, and the inter-community schisms formed by the State’s prescriptions of and proscriptions on language is staged through the juxtaposition of Marzuki’s

\textsuperscript{169} For an overview of Lee’s views on eugenics and his belief that the Malay-Muslim population suffers from a “cultural deficit”, see “Lee: Race, Culture and Genes” (Barr “LKY: Race” 146-148). Most recently in 2011, Lee reiterated his views on the Malay-Muslim community and maintained his belief that “they are distinct and separate” (qtd. Kwang et al. 228).
embodiment of Malay-Muslim orality and the English surtitling on the screens that surround the performance space (Gemuk 2008). As Najib Soiman, playing the role of Marzuki, possesses a native fluency in the Singaporean Malay language, his delivery is flawless. Consequently, only those spectators with the same mastery of the language would have been able to adequately comprehend his soliloquies without referring to the English surtitling. For the other non-Malay speaking spectators, this dramaturgical strategy thus requires a constantly shifting line of sight between Marzuki’s performance and the translation of his soliloquies projected onto the set screens. Potentially, a sense of anxiety is induced in the non-Malay speaking spectator attempting to decipher the meaning of the text. Later when Marzuki and Juliana converse in Mandarin (II.ii.147-149), this anxiety is extended to the (minority) non-Mandarin speaking spectator.

The spectator’s position of being ‘lost in translation’ could well be compared to that of speakers of languages displaced in favour of the English language in the State’s early iteration of national identity. Significantly, Michael Barr argues, this displacement would have been most palpably felt by members of the Malay-Muslim community after Separation (‘LKY: Race’ 145-146)—a rationale that Kartini proffers to explain her lack of ambition to Juliana in Act III:

KARTINI: [...] We were the majority, being Malay in Malay. Then overnight, my father disappeared. Overnight, we were separated. Overnight, we became the minority...being Malay in Singapore. (III.i.157)

Additionally, the surtitling technique makes a physical demand on the spectator to engage with the performance text by placing the text’s decipherability at one remove, thereby creating an acute awareness of the disjunctive experience of the Other embodied by the onstage characters and marginalised in the national autobiography.
CHAPTER 6: Politics, Family and the Singapore Minority Woman in Haresh Sharma’s *Gemuk Girls*

**Portrait of a Political Detainee: Staging the Kernel of Trauma in the National Imaginary**

This Brechtian distanciation remains a feature in the background of all of the scenes in which Marzuki speaks (*Gemuk* 2008). But Marzuki’s smiling face, relaxed posture and open tone convey a *gestus* of amicability that quickly endears him to the audience, evidenced by their engaged and hearty laughter at appropriate comedic moments in his account (*Gemuk* 2008). However, more details of his narrative eventually convey Marzuki’s delight as at odds with his circumstances. The repeated onomatopoeic “bang bang bang” (I.i.120-121, 124) embellishes Marzuki’s narrative and adds to the mounting tension felt in his household on the night he was hauled away. It is worth reproducing here at some length:

MARZUKI: [In Malay] [...] Bang bang bang. They knock on my door. Bang bang bang again—because it’s 4 o’clock and we’re all sleeping so couldn’t hear. Then finally my father wakes up first. [*laughs*] *Mualaikum salam!* He thinks some visitor has come for tea. By the time he opens the door, my mother is also there. What is going on, she asks. Who’s here so late? Is it our relatives from Penang? (I.i.120)

[...]

And then I see my little princess, my sleepy princess, eyes barely open, standing there in her favourite cotton nightgown. [...] What is everyone doing here, she shouts. [...] Her eyes widen when she sees the Malay officer holding my handcuffed hands. She marches to him and kicks his leg. My wife quickly grabs her. My daughter is screaming. (I.i.122)

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170 An Arabic greeting glossed as “Peace be upon you” (Sharma *Trilogy* 183).
At this point, his father’s welcoming salutation and mother’s assumption that it might be relatives come to visit from across the border emphasise the unexpected and hence, traumatising arrival of the Special Branch officers. Critically, as will be discussed in the next section, Kartini’s agitation is quelled with a promise that Marzuki “will see [her] later” and would “be back” after she “count[s] to hundred” (I.i.122), in that way crystallising the moment of her trauma caused by the sudden loss and disappearance of her father. This marks the decisive point at which Kartini closes her eyes and begins counting, and continues to “count” into adulthood, still waiting for her father to return (III.ii.161).

The vivid portrayal of the sudden, indelible disruption to the lives of each of Marzuki’s family members caught “between sleep and wake” (III.ii.161) is made even more powerful by the banality of Marzuki’s thoughts after “one Malay officer handcuffs [him]”:

MARZUKI: [In Malay] [...] It’s still dark outside. Only about 3 minutes have passed since bang bang bang. I’m trying to remember what I was dreaming about. I’m trying to remember what I ate for dinner last night. [laughs] Because I was hungry. [...] (I.i.121)

Marzuki’s musings of what he had dreamt and had last eaten are glaringly detached from the reality of his situation. Pointedly, his late-night arrest triggers a defence mechanism against the trauma that he later experiences, portrayed in his growing confusion and subsequent soliloquies.

On his way to “Outram”, his performed knowledge of the turns and landmarks of Singapore even though he is “blindfolded in the car” (I.i.122-123)

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[171] Marzuki guesses that the Special Branch officers stop at Outram, which is historically significant. The Outram Prison (Pearl’s Hill Prison) was the site used for the detention and interrogation of political detainees, including the majority of Coldstore detainees, until it closed in 1963. Following its closure, Changi Prison and the offshore detention centre on St. John’s Island housed political detainees (B. Tan et al.). Currently (2016), I assume that political detainees are housed in the WRDC from which Mas Selamat escaped.
symbolises Marzuki’s familiarity with the Singaporean landscape and close affinity with the nation of which he is proud. In this sequence, Marzuki exemplifies a stark contradiction to the State’s allegations of his treasonous plotting to cause unrest. However, a change in stage lighting from warm white to a dim blue and a swell in the musical fugue appositely communicate his descent into confusion, revealing to the spectator that Marzuki is speaking from inside the confines of a detention cell (Gemuk 2008). Importantly, in the close proximity of the performance space, the spectator as a silent but active interlocutor in Marzuki’s embodied memory of traumatic events might be said to inhabit the same dramatic space as the onstage storyteller—a position that, in effect, augments the spectator’s involvement in the interventionist “repertoire”.

A dramatic shift from the previously upbeat atmosphere in the opening sequence of Act I occurs when Marzuki nods off and wakes up twice, unaware of the passage of time and his presence in space. This is a sense of disorientation that the spectator might now share:

MARZUKI: [In Malay] I wake up. I am in the same room. There is a sandwich. I’m hungry but my hand can’t move. Maybe I’m not awake. Am I dreaming my detention or is my detention dreaming me? I say something. My daughter is waiting for me. She is counting to a hundred. My daughter is hungry. My hand is sleeping. My wife is here. I am a photographer. Is someone speaking? Is it already a hundred? My daughter is sleeping. My wife is hungry. My hand is speaking. The sandwich is in the same room. (I.i.125)

The repeated beatings that he has taken, re-enacted solely by him to complement his oral narrative prior to the above confused soliloquy, has left him breathless (Gemuk 2008). His spectacles askew, he retreats to a foetal position on a deck,
thus evincing the complete breakdown of his initially endearing, light-hearted persona (Figure 6-2). Comparable accounts of severe psychological and physical exhaustion akin to Marzuki’s have been written down in the extant political memoirs of ex-detainees. In response, the State has repeatedly denied these allegations, posing a challenge to adduce evidence to substantiate these claims.

For example, in response to a student’s question pertaining to the treatment of political detainees during Operation Spectrum at a social event held in October 2007 at the library of the Singapore High Commissioner in London, then Brigadier-General and current PM Lee Hsien Loong asserted:

> It is not true that we ill-treat people. You can’t do that because if you do, the evidence you get is not reliable and you would be found out. In Singapore, the detainees have lawyers and friends, and if you ill-treated one, it would be broadcast throughout the world. [...] There have been no specific allegations. [...] If there were any, we would investigate them. But where is the evidence? There can be none. (qtd. in Teo 93)\(^\text{172}\)

Lee’s challenge here is a sinister one, given the complete control over the routines, living quarters, provisions and even interpersonal contact of political detainees. Indeed, “[t]here can be [no evidence]” of tangible archival objects due to their necessary mediated exclusion for the integrity of the Singaporean State’s “archive”. Arguably, however, the “repertoire” of Marzuki’s ill treatment intervenes in the dominant historical “archive” by embodying the physical and psychological suffering of ex-detainees. Some rehabilitation of these marginalised voices in the Singaporean story is consequently achieved by the play’s staging.

\(^{172}\) For other examples of the State’s response to allegations of the ill treatment of political detainees, see Press Secretary to the Minister of Home Affairs, Chin Fook Leong’s letters in *Asiaweek* 27 Sept. 1987; and *Far Eastern Economic Review* 12 Nov. 1987 and 10 Dec. 1987 (reproduced in Teo 93, 95-96).
CHAPTER 6: Politics, Family and the Singapore Minority Woman in Haresh Sharma’s *Gemuk Girls*

The dissolution of Marzuki’s grasp of reality as an effect of his prolonged detention is most efficaciously expressed at the end of the first scene of Act I on the surtitling screen upstage (Figure 6-3), during his above soliloquy. As his thoughts wander, the text projected on the screen transforms into different sizes and overlap on the screen. Instead of communicating decipherable meaning, the “ticker tape” text runs from stage left to stage right and in the opposite direction simultaneously and becomes chaotic and incoherent. This mediatised backdrop intensifies the unknowable passage of time that Marzuki experiences, with which the spectator can then visually and experientially identify as it is represented on the screen. Additionally, the text is repeated and eventually becomes unreflective of Marzuki’s orality, so that the “immunisation against alterity” afforded to writing in the “archive” (De Certeau, qtd. in Taylor 19) is undermined by this textual disjunct. In a further reflection of his confused thoughts, non-sequential numbers are superimposed on the text in different sizes as well, in this way staging Marzuki’s ever-present memory of his daughter who he had left “count[ing] to a hundred” years before (I.i.122). The scene ends on a tragic note when he repeats, presumably to his (imagined) daughter, that “[i]t’s not hundred. It’s not hundred yet” (I.i.125).
This cyclical repetition, where “thoughts become dreams…dreams turn to imagination…and then to reality” (I.iv.141) is reprised when Marzuki paces in circles on two decks on stage right as he “takes a pen, a roll of toilet paper and begins writing” (Gemuk 2008; I.ii.135). The scene is scored with discordant music that blares into the theatrical space following an “urgent” call (I.ii.134) from Kartini’s mother, which the spectator discovers carries the news of Marzuki’s death at the end of the next scene (I.iii.140). Notably, at this juncture, the “repertoire” asserts a space in the “archive”. Marzuki lies down between the rails of one of the decks downstage; the live image of his face, altered with a blue filter, fills the screen upstage and confronts the spectator as the camera’s eye zooms in on him in repose from above (Gemuk 2008). When he completes his soliloquy, he slowly rolls the deck up to cover his entire body, so that he appears interred beneath the stage on which Kartini and Juliana’s relationship begins its progressive decline (Gemuk 2008). By means of the video projection, the live performance of Marzuki, a political detainee, and the engagement, but more importantly, presence, of the spectator, are collectively recorded as an archival
object. I argue that this staging strategy facilitates the access (of both spectator and Marzuki) to a narrative space of power otherwise solely controlled by the hegemonic State. As a result, the “deletions, blanks, and disguises” that have previously prevailed in the national “archive” have become open to possible reinsertions and reconstructions of pivotal figures formerly absent from the dominant historical narrative. Critically, Gemuk (2008) suggests that the “reconstructive potential” afforded by this intervention is inevitably bound to the trauma that these elisions initially entailed.

Nevertheless, despite his apparent death, Marzuki never leaves the performance space throughout the next two Acts, which run into each other without intermission, much like his own devolving thoughts while in detention. His continued presence adds to the surrealistic undertones of the play and is effective on several levels. Firstly, its dreamlike quality indicates that the rest of the dramatic narrative will depict the “transformative possibilities” that Tan imagines in Singapore’s future (“Director’s Message” “Gemuk 2008 Publicity Collaterals” 5). Secondly, and more apparently in the play, Marzuki’s presence embodies the enduring traumatic impact of his detention on the lives and relationship of the “gemuk girls”, even though he remains invisible to Kartini and Juliana except in their dream-like interactions with him. In the sense of trauma as described by Cathy Caruth, the “repeated possession of the one who experiences [the traumatic] image or event” (4-5) is successfully dramatized through Marzuki’s disjunctive reality and re-enactment of his arrest, interrogation and detention for the spectator despite the passing of decades. Aptly, Caruth’s words are recapitulated in Marzuki’s thrice-repeated contention that “different permutations...of the same action...will repeat” (I.i.125, I.iv.141, III.iv.167).

Marzuki’s refrain also bears the aura of a warning given to the spectator from across Singaporean history at a time prior to merdeka. That is, that the State will go on to use the ISA to demonstrate the reach and force of its power repeatedly, even to the contemporaneous context of the aforementioned Mas Selamat scandal in 2008, all in the name of maintaining the stability of the nation. Marzuki’s portrayal of innocence and trauma, however, embodies the costs of merdeka borne by those who merely “believed it was [their] moral right
to have freedom of expression” (II.i.149), so that a challenge to the spectator's tacit acceptance of the ISA inheres in his refrain. By these means, *Gemuk* (2008) advocates an engaged re-consideration of the future development of the Singaporean imaginary, which I discuss in the next section.

**The Significance of Access to Personal History: Making a Difference**

Three years after Marzuki’s death, Kartini and Juliana open the second Act significantly transformed. Kartini, who is introduced to the audience in Act I in a colourful sundress that complements her initial vivacity and unapologetic liberal views, has changed into a black business suit. She totes a cabin-bag as part of her characterisation as a jet-setting entrepreneur (Figure 6-4), a designation that she views with disdain in Act I when she says:

KARTINI: [...] An entrepre-nerd? Join the capitalistocracy? Eh, in the 50s and 60s life wasn’t like this you know. People fought for what they believed. Today everyone is useless. They just want to make money but not make a difference...unlike us! Their wealth has castrated them of compassion, of thought, of beliefs!
(I.i.132)

In contrast, she is portrayed as woman who has given herself over to the rhetoric of economic progress and wealth propagated by the State in Act II. In a seemingly complete about-face to her previous position, Kartini dismisses Juliana’s engagement in action that would “make a difference”:

KARTINI: -A difference? Girl, what country do you think you’re living in?

 [...] A mother must support her child. But this mother is having too much fun to really care. I’m sorry Sayang. I’m in love with wealth and power.
The change in Kartini’s demeanour is further symbolised by the decay of her garden. Whereas Kartini gushes over her thriving garden in Act I—her “babies[,] [her] plants, [her] flowers, [her] herbs” (I.ii.129)—she expresses no desire to care for them in Act II. Her callousness is noted by Juliana who attempts to reconnect with her now distant mother, to which the latter responds: “Is there nothing more you want me to do with my life then [sic] cultivate F&F [flora and fauna]?” (II.i.143) Kartini’s retort sardonically echoes Juliana’s criticism of her in Act I when, striving to succeed in achieving her political ambitions, the latter asks, “Is there nothing more you want to do with your life than cultivate F&F?” (I.ii.132). This repetition elucidates Kartini’s and Juliana’s role reversal as a consequence of their different ways of working through the trauma of Marzuki’s detention and subsequent death.

Juliana’s characterisation in Act II is also markedly distinct. In Act I, she is introduced in full body shapewear—a symbol of her early conservative leanings—before dressing in a pencil skirt and long-sleeved white blouse, with not a hair out of place. In Act II, Juliana is costumed in a casual red T-shirt and blue jeans; her hair tied in a practical ponytail (Figure 6-4). This costume change is apropos as it conveys her disregard for “wealth and power” (II.i.144) in opposition to her dream of becoming “PM Juliana” in Act I (I.iii.139) and complements the frenetic energy that she expends in her “fight to have BASIC RIGHTS FOR [THE SINGAPOREAN] PEOPLE” (II.i.143). Angered by her mother’s nonchalance and accusation that her motivations are selfish, Juliana exclaims that she has changed because her beliefs have changed. She tells her mother:

JULIANA: /I’m fighting a different battle! The same battle your father lost/his life to!

173 “Shapewear” is “fitted women’s underwear designed to give the body shape” (“Macquarie Dictionary”).

288
I’m not going to rest until Datuk\(^{174}\) has been exonerated. He’s innocent. 

\(\ldots\) (II.i.145)

Juliana’s reference to her grandfather’s unjust detention as fuelling her activism highlights the substantial effect that Marzuki’s death in custody has had on both her, her mother, and the pair’s relationship.

I contend that the considerable variance in the development of Kartini and Juliana’s characters in both Acts II and III is produced by the differing degrees of access to the historical narrative of their family. When she attends Marzuki’s funeral service in Penang, Juliana meets her maternal grandmother, known to Kartini only as “the vampire bitch” (I.iii.139). During the course of rekindling this intergenerational familial connection, Juliana gains access to the archival objects that constitute Marzuki’s, Kartini’s and hence her own personal historical narrative. This is evidenced in her eventual disclosure to Kartini of having obtained Marzuki’s memorabilia from her grandmother.

Critically, distinct from Juliana’s active investment in reconstructing her personal history, Kartini becomes closed off. Her refusal to attend Marzuki’s

\(^{174}\) “Datuk” is glossed as “Grandfather” (Sharma Trilogy 184).
funeral and her rejection of a re-establishing a meaningful relationship with her mother, with the ensuing disconnect from her own history, brings about her detachment from her initially portrayed love for life and from her relationship with her daughter. As a consequence, the only knowledge of Marzuki that Kartini has access to—and through him, her own personal history—is contained in those vilifying archival objects of the dominant historical account (e.g. Abisheganaden “‘Cuba’ Threat 1; K.Y. Lee S’pore Story). When Juliana hands over a photograph that presumably depicts Kartini and her father, the callous Kartini of Act II is moved to tears (Gemuk 2008). Kartini is especially hurt by the discovery that Juliana had kept Marzuki’s memorabilia from her for “for three years” because she had angered her daughter by not attending his funeral (II.i.146). Nonetheless, feeling embittered and betrayed by Juliana’s begrudging of her history, Kartini expresses her disappointment in Juliana when she says: “I expected a bit more from you...from a Gemuk Girl. I expected a bit more...from my daughter” (II.i.146). At this, Kartini exits (Gemuk 2008), intimating the dissolution of the “gemuk girls”.

The characters’ conflicting emotions are richly conveyed by the accompanying swell in the evocative music that scores this scene (Gemuk 2008). More significantly, following the projection of the text of Marzuki’s letters to Kartini’s mother onto the screen upstage (Gemuk 2008), Marzuki becomes visible to Juliana onstage. Arguably, here, he is the embodiment of the memory and history of Juliana’s family, conjured by her perusal and use of his letters. In a similar way that Juliana uses Marzuki’s photographs and writing to reconstruct her own personal historical narrative, Gemuk (2008) reconstructs the embodied memory of the once forgotten or overlooked figure of the Coldstore detainee as part of its rehabilitative historiography of Singapore. I contend that by then putting “a documentary [o]n Datuk’s life” together (II.ii.146) and Honouring her grandfather’s memory with her activism—notably both performative acts—Juliana intervenes in the Singaporean “archive” to finally include Marzuki’s narrative.

Her newfound access to her own narrative by means of Marzuki’s is portrayed in Act II, scene ii, when the pair perform their national belonging by
conversing in three of the four official Singaporean languages of Mandarin, English, and finally, Malay. In this imagined interaction, Marzuki is enraged by the lack of political activism in Singapore “today”, which is dismal in comparison to the political climate of “the 1950s, the 60s, [where] people had a voice” (II.ii.148). In their exchange, he asks Juliana, “What has happened? Why is everyone dead?” (II.ii.149) Arguably, the creators of Gemuk (2008) make this query of the spectator as part of the play’s interventionist objective. When Juliana promises to continue his work, however, Marzuki cautions her against it, frustrated that his lifelong resistance to State oppression had come to naught:

MARZUKI: [In Malay] -Don’t. What legacy have I left behind? Thousands of us were detained...

[...] Even today. For what? [...] Is it worth it? Does it mean anything? Look at those who are out there. Out of detention, back into society...but still lost. Living in the present but haunted by ghosts from the past. (II.ii.149)

With his last sentence, Marzuki points a finger directly at the spectator in an explicit recognition of their consumption of the Singaporean narrative that has elided, yet, as the play has shown, been deeply affected by the trauma of Coldstore (Gemuk 2008). In this engagement with the spectator, Gemuk (2008) makes a deictic comment on the civil liberties and political involvement that have been “exchange[d] for comfort” (II.ii.149) since independence. This “comfort” has, contentiously, given rise to the (political) lifelessness that Marzuki observes.

In a moving conclusion to their imagined meeting, Juliana drags the set decks so that a traverse stage is created for Marzuki, who hesitantly walks across

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175 Discussed in Chapter 5 of this thesis, in addition to English, there are three official languages designated by the Singaporean State “to represent the three official races of ‘Chinese’, ‘Malay’ and ‘Indian’”. These are Mandarin, Malay and Tamil” (L. Lim 53).
it from stage right to stage left (Gemuk 2008). Marzuki finally stands tall and proud as he listens to Juliana particularise his traumatic arrest and detention and stridently “DEMAND FOR THE IMMEDIATE ABOLISHMENT OF THE INTERNAL SECURITY ACT” (Figure 6-5; II.i.150-151).

Figure 6-5: Still of Juliana (left) at a protest rally as Marzuki (right) looks on. Gemuk (2008). (The Necessary Stage Ltd.)

The Traumatic Impact of Historiographical Erasure: Letting Go

The tone of Act III is strikingly different from the previous two Acts. At the conclusion of the scene depicting his psychological torment and desolation suffered at the hands of the director of the Special Branch (II.iv.152-153), Marzuki drags two of the middle decks upstage (Gemuk 2008). When Act III opens, he is seated with his back to the audience on these two decks, while Kartini prepares to lie down on the three decks at centrestage right. Significantly, standing on the two decks at centrestage left, Juliana is visually separated from Kartini by Marzuki’s intervening presence in the middle. The discord between Kartini and Juliana is conveyed by the configuration of the set, which complements the
proxemics of the characters in this alternative scenario, also set three years after Marzuki’s death.

Juliana and Kartini are again portrayed as having substantially changed from Act I. Kartini is no longer the “fierce [...] flabulous” (I.ii.127), “domestic goddess” (II.i.145) of Acts I and II. With her hair loosely tied back, dressed in shorts and an unflattering blouse that emphasise her seemingly increased corpulence (Gemuk 2008), Kartini is portrayed as a listless woman who is “not well” (III.i.155). She spends her days tending her garden while having “a long conversation with God” (III.i.155), still in mourning over Marzuki’s death. Her despondency is further stressed when she does not respond to Juliana’s question about making an appointment with a “psychiatrist” or her invitation to spend the evening at Juliana’s “Meet the People” session (III.i.154). Instead, she “increases the volume of the music” (III.i.155) and lies down on the decks at stage right (Gemuk 2008). Clearly, the news of her father’s death has only brought the traumas of her childhood to light, and she is unable to deal with her “baggage” (III.i.157), even though Juliana attempts to “encourag[e]” her mother “to get back on track” (III.i.155). Notably, however, it appears that Juliana’s transformation from being political activist to political conservative has not positively contributed to alleviate Kartini’s internal conflict, but much to the contrary.

In comparison to Juliana’s character development in Act II, Marzuki’s death has a dissimilar effect on her in Act III, evinced in Kartini’s following accusation:

KARTINI: [...] But you were so wrapped up in your own nightmare you didn’t care for me, or my father or the bitch my mother. (III.i.156)

Worried that her “reputation was at stake”, Juliana tells of her embarrassment and anger upon learning that Kartini’s “father [had been] in prison” (III.i.156). Subsequently, she has prioritised her political career and focuses on having “a life, a family [and] a mission” (III.i.157). In stark contradistinction to her mission
to “abolish [the] ISA” in her alternative incarnation (II.i.150), Juliana here espouses ideals that are more aligned with those of the State. Her perspectival shift from being “brave and progressive” (III.i.157) to conservative is made clear in her costume change. In Act III, Juliana is dressed in a baju kurung\(^\text{176}\) and tudung (Gemuk 2008), which denote her support of the traditional practices and values of the Singaporean Malay-Muslim community. Fittingly, Kartini tells Juliana, “[Y]ou’re no longer a Gemuk Girl” (III.i.155).

In this scenario, Marzuki “did not even get in touch with” Kartini’s mother, who, likewise, never disclosed the knowledge of Marzuki’s detention to her daughter (III.i.156). Thus, there is no opportunity for a rehabilitation of Marzuki’s narrative in the archive, which clarifies the development of the “gemuk girls” in this scenario, neither of whom benefit from access to their family’s history. As a result, upon receiving news of Marzuki’s death in custody, Kartini is belatedly traumatised and becomes trapped in the damaging memory of her father’s departure when she was seven years old. However, in Kartini’s imagined reunion with Marzuki, she is afforded the chance to work through this trauma. Speaking to the embodied memory of her father in the Malay language, Kartini shares with Marzuki the deleterious effects that his arrest and absence has had on her life:


Crucially, when “Marzuki holds Kartini’s hand” and starts counting as if he had never left her, she tells him in English, “Time has stopped. My life has stopped. I don’t want to count anymore. It’s too late. Let me go. Just let me go” (III.ii.162). Having released Marzuki’s hand, Kartini walks off and stands at stage right with

\(^\text{176}\) The *baju kurung* is a traditional Malay dress that is loose, long and has long sleeves.
Denied the opportunity to mount a repertory intervention in the “archive”, both Kartini and Juliana must accept the authorised version of events surrounding Marzuki’s arrest. Significantly, their choices not to “wallow in the past” (III.ii.158), but let go of their familial history can be said to parallel those similar choices made by the Singaporean State following *merdeka* earlier discussed (K.Y. Lee and S. Rajaratnam, qtd. in Frost and Balasingamchow 430), with the same attendant outcome of their “lack of knowledge of the [...] past” (Holden 4). In other words, Kartini and Juliana’s disconnect from their familial history causes an irrevocable disjunct in their identities and breakdown of this relationship.

**The Tea Party: Staging a Political Intervention**

The dissolution of Marzuki’s family is affirmed in the “family reunion slash break-up [...] party” that follows (III.iii.162-164). Staged as an ‘absurdist’ tea party, where the characters’ actions are frequently incongruent with their speech, (*Gemuk* 2008), the scene alludes to the “Mad Tea Party” in *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland* (Carroll 115-137). Significantly, the main thrust of that party is the inversion of prevailing social conventions so as to reveal them as merely arbitrary constructions; so it is with this party as part of the play’s interrogation of the legitimacy of the ISA. But more importantly, I contend that the scenario that *Gemuk*’s tea party calls upon, in order to subvert, is the 1961 “Eden Hall Tea Party” in the national autobiography (K.Y. Lee *S’pore Story* 373-384), which also led to the breakup of the PAP.

Whereas the public branding of Lim Chin Siong and his comrades as pro-Communists plotting to overthrow the democratic State arose out of Lee’s speculations on what transpired at the “Eden Hall Tea Party”, Marzuki finally gets “the trial [he] never had” (III.iii.162) at his tea party in *Gemuk* (2008). He says:

Marzuki: [In Malay] So you can choose to arrest and detain people as you
wish? First you called them Communists, then you called them Marxists. Now you’re calling them Terrorists. Anytime you’re not happy with someone, you just lock them up? You don’t care what happens to their families? (III.iii.164)

Delivered in direct audience address (Gemuk 2008), Marzuki’s questions have the dual effect of challenging the State’s actions as well as the spectator’s socio-political inaction. This explicit, though analogous, criticism continues:

JULIANA: We cannot change the past or predict the future. There is no truth except our truth. Yes, everyone is happy. Because they are afraid. We have created fear – the best solution for progress.

MARZUKI: [In Malay] When will people stop being fearful?
Certainly, as reviewer Matthew Lyon writes, “in any case, a stinging consciousness of injustice had by this time already been provoked” by the play (“Rev. Of Gemuk Girls 2008”). Additionally, as I have shown, the staging of this tea party scenario plays a significant role in the performance efficacy of the play. By performing the trial that Marzuki never had and facilitating his (theatrical) declaration of innocence, Gemuk’s tea party conducts a repertory intervention in the “archive”. Crucially, with the breakup of Marzuki’s family and the abandonment of history, the oppositional politics embodied by Marzuki are analogously forgotten in the context of the play.

Non-Confrontational Politics: Imagining a Future Singapore

Juliana’s political ascent over the three Acts to the position of Prime Minister in Gemuk’s concluding scene, set “20 years” into the future (III.iv.167), may be said to be a radical portrayal of a Malay-Muslim woman, especially in the Singaporean context. And I make that concession. Pointedly, however, Juliana’s characterisation in Act III adheres to the scripts for women in politics as set out by the Singaporean State.

These scripts have been extensively examined by Lenore Lyons in relation to “Singaporean feminism”, with a specific focus on the most recognisable group lobbying for women’s rights in Singapore, that is, the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE). Lyons observes that Singaporean feminism—similar to the LGBT activism discussed in my earlier chapters that analysed The Asian Boys Trilogy (Alfian Sa’at Asian Boys Trilogy)—is shaped by the need for activist groups to negotiate with the authoritarian State: “Maybe working very slowly but making gains in the long term” (qtd. in Lyons “State of Ambivalence”)

177 See Lyons “Believing in Equality”; “The Limits of Feminist Political Intervention in Singapore”; “A Politics of Accommodation”; and “Feminism in a Singaporean Women’s Organisation”.

297
16). This stance adopted by women’s rights groups in Singapore is also contingent on the “Asian values” national ideology disseminated by the State, which identifies feminism as a “Western” construct. Furthermore, women’s rights groups have to negotiate the widely circulated, disparaging tropes of feminism as they occur in Singapore. Lyons writes:

> [P]ublic perceptions of feminism include: militant, lesbian, bra-burning, anti-men, western, high-brows, western educated, middle-class, man-hating, sexually promiscuous, people who are really not women, really aggressive, women who don’t shave their legs, liberals, radicals, women with a chip on their shoulders, ranting and raving, and making noise. (6)

These tropes have been largely influenced by the views of feminism put forward by the State.

According to Lyons, in 1993, the then Acting Community Development Minister Abdullah Tarmugi expressed the Singaporean State’s expectations of women in the political sphere is to “continue to be moderate and avoid being confrontational” (qtd. in Lyons “State of Ambivalence” 16). Subsequently, in order to productively lobby for women in Singapore, AWARE has had to adopt an activist policy of “strategic conservatism” (19), in other words, “strategise’ and ‘work within’ state defined boundaries” (Lyons “Limits of Feminist Political Intervention” 67). Lyons observes that most of the membership of AWARE, for instance, “were married to publicly supportive husbands” (“State of Ambivalence” 13).

Given this, Juliana’s Act III iteration, firstly, does not pose any “threat to women’s culturally inscribed role as mothers” or to the inviolable institution of heterosexual marriage in Singapore (10); and secondly, performs her acquiescence to the conservatism of the Malay-Muslim community in her dress (*Gemuk* 2008). That is to say, Juliana adopts a policy of “strategic conservatism” that is advantageous to her political career. In *Gemuk* (2008), this political strategy allows her to finally address the embedded yet forgotten trauma in the
Singaporean national imaginary, namely, Operation Coldstore, but only on the nation’s “63rd birthday” (III.iv.169). Although Marzuki is exonerated and posthumously bestowed with the inaugural “Singapore Peace and Freedom Award” (III.iv.168), the tone of the play’s conclusion as it relates to the wider Singaporean context is a wary one.

This is initially conveyed by the foregrounding of Kartini’s isolation as an embodiment of the still enduring trauma borne by the detainees for Singapore’s merdeka. “[O]ld and obese” (III.iv.168), she sits on the floor at stage left in darkness while an ostensibly ‘live’ recording of Juliana’s National Day Rally speech “in Mandarin, Malay and English” (III.iv.167) is projected onto the screen upstage (Gemuk 2008). Aptly, Kartini addresses her isolation by “smoking an opium pipe” (III.iv.168), which is an allusion to the drug of choice smoked by nineteenth-century “coolies” in Singapore to alleviate their loneliness and separation from their families in mainland China.\(^{178}\) In this way, despite the passage of time and the nation’s achievements listed by Juliana (III.iv.168), Kartini’s portrayal affirms Marzuki’s mantra throughout Gemuk (2008), reminding the spectator that “[t]ime will pass. [But] different permutations…of the same action…will repeat” (I.i.125, II.iv.141, III.iv.167).

The pessimism implied in Kartini’s embodiment is then juxtaposed with Juliana’s hailing of “a new era” in her National Day Rally Speech:

**JULIANA:**

[... ] No longer do we have to live in fear. No longer do we have to silence our thoughts, or censor our views. No longer do we need to stifle our voices. And I am happy to say that despite your newfound freedom, there has been no voice of discontent. No protests. No riots. No petitions. No letters of complaints. There is no opposition.

(III.iv.168)

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\(^{178}\) For an overview of the plight of the “coolies” in pre-modern Singapore, see my discussion in Chapter 1 of this thesis.
At this, it should be clear to the spectator that this future Singapore is not the Singapore of the “1950s and 60s” era described by Marzuki to Juliana (II.ii.148), when political activism and dissenting voices engaged in socio-political discourse, enlivening the Singaporean nation. Rather, this imagined future is the inevitable consequence of the traumatic merdeka scenario and the continued apathy of the Singaporean spectator that the play criticises through Marzuki (II.ii.148). Accordingly, Juliana’s concluding declaration of “true independence” for Singapore (III.iv.169) is problematized by her chilling celebration of a Singapore where “[t]here is no opposition” (III.iv.168). It would seem that even in Act III’s scenario of the future “20 years later” (III.iv.167), “different permutations...of the same action...[has] repeat[ed]” (I.i.125, II.iv.141, III.iv.167), and nothing will change.

**Conclusion: Dreaming of “Transformative Possibilities” (A. Tan)**

As a family unit spanning three generations, Marzuki, Kartini and Juliana may thus be viewed as a microcosm of the Singaporean nation, still beleaguered by the trauma of Coldstore. By alluding to key events in The Singapore Story and other Singapore stories, Sharma and Tan have masterfully staged a performative intervention in the “archive” of the nation. More importantly, Gemuk (2008) leaves the spectator with a depiction of a future that is ambivalent, especially conveyed when the onstage lights go down immediately after Juliana instructs the audience to “stand for the national anthem” (III.iv.169), and it is not sung (Gemuk 2008).

It follows that although Gemuk (2008) has clearly portrayed the positive and negative “transformative possibilities” that intervening in the “archive” may offer, the conflictual conclusion of the play potentially urges the spectator to “[b]e involved” (III.iii.164) because “[m]aybe more needs to take place on the ground” before change can be effected in Singapore (A. Tan “Director’s Message” Gemuk 2008 Publicity Collaterals 5).
Conclusion

Dreaming Singapore

The arts can be innovative in its creative process. We innovate, break old regimes and create new paradigms. The arts encourage play. To play means, first of all, playing within the rules with tried-and-tested methods. After a while, one must start playing creatively, go beyond the rules and improvise. Then only can one start to make new discoveries. (Kok Annual Budget Statement 5 Apr. 2016)


Since 2005, the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, curated by The Necessary Stage (TNS) in collaboration with the Singaporean telecommunications service provider, M1, has testified to the continued contribution of oppositional performances to the social imaginary of Singapore. The project’s stated objectives focus on:

[I]nnovation and discussion; [providing] a platform for meaningful and provocative art to engage our increasingly connected and complex world. (The Necessary Stage “M1 S’pore Fringe Fest.”)

Each year, the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival issues a global call for performances based on a theme that highlights the multivalent performative intersections of art. At the time of this writing in August 2016, the organisers are already preparing for the upcoming thirteenth edition that will run from 4 to 15 January 2017, based on the theme of “Art & Skin” (The Necessary Stage “M1 S’pore Fringe Fest.”). To give an appropriate bookend to my discussion, I refer to the 2012 “Art & Faith” Fringe Festival highlight of Cane, which is Loo Zihan’s re-enactment of Joseph’s Ng’s Brother Cane—the performance that was decisive in the State’s reactionary and abortive response to the arts in the early 1990s. As Loo’s primary concern was to deploy his “performing body to recuperate the public memory of Brother Cane” (Cane 7), the Performance Art piece is exemplary of the significant
gains made by the alternative or fringe theatre in Singapore in encouraging social critique.

Nonetheless, in his interview with Melissa Wansin Wong, Loo reminds us that:

> It would be simplistic in judging that the fact that I can stage *Cane* means that the country has liberalised. My intention in presenting this work is to make transparent that it does not equate. The fact that I can stage *Cane* just means that I am *allowed* to speak about it. (qtd. in M.W. Wong 71)

Wong further contends that the requirements to which Loo had to defer in order to mount his performance—namely, submit a comprehensive script of his Performance Art to the Media Development Authority (MDA) for approval and strictly adhere to it during the performance—could be said to “complicat[e] any easy assumption of ‘progress’” (73) in the advancement of queer rights in Singapore. Wong discerns a similar “conditionality” underscoring the annual Pink Dot event in support of queer rights in Singapore. She asserts:

> Tellingly, Pink Dot’s slogan of “supporting the freedom to love” is indicative of the carefully chosen and non-antagonistic stance of the organisers to appeal to the general public and prevent a crackdown by state forces. (75)

First held in 2009 at Hong Lim Park, also known as Speakers’ Corner, which is the only area designated for licensed public protests in Singapore, Pink Dot is an inclusionary event that drew 28,000 attendees in 2015 (Nurul Azliah). Wong argues that part of the event’s legitimacy derives from the corporate support that it receives,\(^{179}\) which is aligned with the State’s goal in establishing its global image (M.W. Wong 76–77). In the same way that Loo’s *Cane* may be said to be

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contained by the State’s licensing regulations, Wong proposes that Pink Dot’s corporate sponsorship results in “the potential depoliticisation of its radicality” (76). Echoing Alvin Tan’s Director’s Message (“Gemuk 2008 Publicity Collaterals” 5) that concluded the previous chapter in this thesis, Wong acknowledges the complex nexus of complicity and transgression in works like Cane and Pink Dot, and accurately “re-emphasise[s] the work that still needs to be done” (M.W. Wong 77).

Significantly, however, following the success of the eighth Pink Dot on 4 June 2016, the Ministry of Home Affairs (MHA) issued a statement that reveals the consternation of the Singaporean State caused by Pink Dot, despite the event’s adoption, in Wong’s view, of the normativity of “Asian family values” (cf. M.W. Wong 77). Asserting Singapore’s sovereignty, MHA stated:

The Government’s general position has always been that foreign entities should not interfere in our domestic issues, especially political issues or controversial social issues with political overtones. These are political, social or moral choices for Singaporeans to decide for ourselves. LGBT issues are one such example. […] The Ministry of Home Affairs will take steps to make it clear that foreign entities should not fund, support or influence such events held at the Speakers’ Corner. (Singapore Government MHA Statement on Foreign Sponsorships paras. 3, 5)

In response, the organisers of Pink Dot issued a statement on its website that publicly affirmed their corporate sponsors as being “registered and incorporated in Singapore” (“Pink Dot Statement on Corporate Sponsors” 8 June 2016). Contemporaneously, Ivan Heng, the Artistic Director of W!LD RICE, curator of the Singapore Theatre Festival (2006, 2008, 2011, 2016)—another critical space for Singaporean oppositional performance—reports that the company’s sponsors had received similar warnings by the State (I. Heng). The State’s queries were specifically directed to the sponsors’ support of “plays like Let’s Get Back Together” (Let’s Get Back Together), a work of testimonial theatre “exploring the realities that lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people face on a daily basis in
Conclusio
n: Dreaming Singapore

Singapore” (W!LD RICE “S’pore Theatre Fest.”). Crucially, Pink Dot’s and W!LD RICE’s “local and international” sponsors have maintained their support and stand, to use Heng’s powerful words, “on the right side of history” (I. Heng).

These examples reveal the contentious negotiations that continue to occur between Singaporean artists of oppositional performance and the Singaporean State. Terence Chong’s recent ethnographic work, *Theatre and the State in Singapore*, examines similar negotiations primarily using a Bourdieusian lens. In addition to contending that “English-language theatre” is a middle-class endeavour characterised by a “nonconfrontational, many times covert and subversive” passive form of resistance (Chong *Theatre and the State* 154), Chong makes the case that such resistance serves to “validate their cultural ‘distinction’ in relation to the ‘philistine’ or ‘conservative’ state” (*Theatre and the State* 166).

Certainly, as put forward by both Wong (72, 76-77) and Chong (155-162) in their respective works, Singaporean oppositional performance artists have deployed a range of strategies to negotiate the artistic and, by extension, socio-political limits set down by the Singaporean State.

However, I take issue with the suggestions that these negotiations and “modes of resistance” could be characterised either as “successes and failings” (M.W. Wong 77) or as chiefly “determined by the anticipated retaliation and punishment from the authoritarian state” (*Theatre and the State* 171). On the contrary, as the work performed by this thesis has shown by using the methodology put forward by Baz Kershaw in gauging the political efficacy of oppositional performances (Kershaw 3, 25-28), it is through these very negotiations that a minority discourse emerges in opposition to that of the hegemonic State. Indeed, aspects of political efficacy as defined by Kershaw are present throughout this thesis.

**Tethering: The Singaporean Imaginary as a Performative Work-in-Process in 2016**

In the first ‘Act’ of this thesis, the analysis in Chapter 1 showed how *Dreamplay*, a “groundbreaking” work in the Singaporean alternative or fringe theatre, interpellates the marginalised gay figure. In this play, the Singaporean gay man is
portrayed as key in an imagined Singaporean history through the queer camp interrogation of popular heteronormative cultural artefacts. Chapter 2’s analysis of Landmarks draws out the play’s critique of the imbrication of the Singaporean gay man in what Audrey Yue has denoted as the “illiberal pragmatism” of the State (Yue 4-9). That is to say, Landmarks interrogates the State’s “continued policing of homosexuality on the one hand, and [its] economically driven social liberalisation on the other” (Yue 8-9). Furthermore, Landmarks performative reclamation of the space of “home” in Singapore for the gay figure is demonstrated to relocate the Singaporean gay man within the Singaporean spatial imaginary. In Chapter 3, Happy Endings is then analysed as an intertext that I have shown dialogically establishes the expression of a range of Singapore gay subjectivities through the performative space afforded by literature.

The second ‘Act’ of this thesis then focused on the portrayal of other marginalised contingents in the Singaporean landscape, beginning in Chapter 4 with Fundamentally Happy, a play that, similar to Happy Endings, interrogates notions of love and happiness. In my analysis, I have argued that the play’s dramaturgies effectively encourage an active mode of social critique even as it stages the adverse consequences of the proscriptions on public discourse on the Singaporean subject. In Chapter 5, the importance of the active engagement of the Singaporean subject is again emphasised in the analysis of Good People. Here, I demonstrated how the play troubles ostensibly stable definitions of the Singaporean subject’s moral certitude and the legal rectitude of the actions of the Singaporean State. Finally, in Chapter 6, the analysis focuses on the traumatic genesis of the Singaporean social contract as portrayed in Gemuk Girls. Crucially in this final chapter, I have argued how this play—as do all the other plays studied in this thesis—performs a political intervention in the Singaporean historical narrative. As the closing scene of Gemuk Girls suggests, a Singaporean future without a lively opposition—such as that provided by the Singaporean alternative theatre—that, critically, perseveres in a dynamic negotiation with the Singaporean State, is one that is moribund.

This negotiation is carried out not merely in the Singaporean alternative theatre, but also gathers momentum in civil society. Here, stakeholders in the
arts (e.g. academics, arts managers, National Arts Council advisors, veteran artists, etc.) have collaborated to find new ways “to start playing creatively, go beyond the rules and improvise” (Kok) to further develop the arts scene in Singapore.

**Further Threads**

Both W!LD RICE and TNS have continued to actively challenge the limiting identitarian scripts disseminated by the Singaporean State in their theatre practice. *Cooling-Off Day* (Alfian Sa’at), *Cook a Pot of Curry* (Alfian Sa’at) and *Hotel* (Alfian Sa’at and Marcia Vanderstraaten) are recent works produced under the auspices of W!LD RICE that address issues of nationhood and migration and deserve further study. TNS’s intercultural, polyglot, interdisciplinary and intergenerational productions of *Mobile* and *Mobile 2: Flat Cities* (Haresh Sharma), *Manifesto* and its performative outcomes of its Theatre for Seniors programme are also worthy of further study for its intimate engagement with a range of Singaporean subjectivities that have not been explored by this thesis. Without a doubt, the pioneering work of these two theatre companies has inspired the establishment of other theatre companies that similarly engage with the “discourse of the margin” (Seet “Disassembling” 193). I note the importance of the adoption of good archival practices, especially exemplified by TNS, by these theatre companies, so that their works are more readily accessible to theatre scholars for further study.

The myriad positions available in the oppositional performances under study perform different ways of being “Singaporean”, thereby ineluctably creating an oppositional space in Singapore, where these identities and the contentious, but attendant issues of these marginalised communities are considered taboo. This thesis has demonstrated its critical relevance to the examination of the Singaporean alternative or fringe theatre as the “performative” in opposition to the “pedagogical” (Bhabha “Dissemination” 211-212), proving that the Singapore alternative theatre is a vehicle for socio-political activism. Significantly, oppositional performances play a crucial role in continuing to dream the Singaporean social imaginary as a performative work-in-process.
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