

Taking the Plunge into writing

Once a pragmatic economist, playwright Jean Tay wants to revisit Singapore's forgotten stories



Corrie Tan

Playwright Jean Tay, 38, has her fingers firmly on the pulse of modern Singapore. From the erratic jags of the Asian financial crisis in the late 1990s to the palpitations of the property boom in the mid-2000s, her plays have something to say about them all.

The author of four full-length plays has had three of them nominated for Best Original Script at the Life! Theatre Awards, winning once for *Everything But The Brain* (2005). This tender father-daughter work will be restaged for the third time in August this year.

Her real-estate tragicomedy, *Boom* (2008), is on the O- and N-level English literature syllabi. The scripts for both plays have been published and can be found in bookshops here.

Yet the acclaimed writer comes across as girlishly unassuming, referring to her plays as "weird messy things".

Dropping her hands in her lap, she sighs: "I always feel like my plays are imperfect. It's exhausting but I have to keep struggling and wrestling with them and shaping them."

The economist-turned-playwright is speaking to Life! in her quiet condominium unit in Stevens Road. Cheerful family photographs lining the walls attest to the fact that she, her civil servant husband and their two young daughters live there – as do stacks of books and board games. There is a pink Hello Kitty bag in a corner, next to an upright piano.

She quips: "Basically, I'm a full-time mum. I'm only a part-time writer."

Writing aside, Tay does a fair amount of teaching and mentoring. Last year, she was selected to be one of the Nanyang Technological University's writers in residence and was also appointed to helm the Singapore Repertory Theatre's playwriting programme for its youth wing.

She has two projects up her sleeve. Next week, she is presenting a new work at The Arts House titled *Sisters: The Untold Stories Of The Sisters Islands*. She is also working on another history-based play about the island of Pulau Senang, which the theatre group Drama Box is hoping to stage next year.

Tay, who worked at the Monetary Authority of Singapore (MAS) for seven years as an economist, has a knack for teasing stories from deafening numbers and mind-numbing bureaucracy, and transforming the dead weight of history with a dash of Singaporean soul.

Yet she almost did not become a professional writer and is still trying to get used to the fact that she is fulfilling her dream.

The bookish daughter of an orthopaedic surgeon and a chemistry teacher grew up surrounded by words. Her father loved literature, and so Tay and her brother, who is five years younger, were never short of reading material.

While Tay wrote simple tales as a child and watched school assembly plays while at Singapore Chinese Girls' School, she was not an outstanding student of English literature. She got a B3 for the subject at O levels, attributing it to an inability to write critically at that time.

But "it was probably still the subject I enjoyed the most and got the most out of – and it's the class I still remember after all these years", she says.

At National Junior College, she stuck to her strengths, which she felt were in mathematics and science, and studied those subjects for her A levels.

This pragmatic trajectory continued into her tertiary education, after she won a scholarship from MAS to study applied mathematics and economics at Brown University in the United States. It was at the Ivy League school that she first dabbled in dramatic writing.

On a whim, she applied for a small beginners' class in playwriting taught by the Cuban-American playwright Nilo Cruz. She had no samples to submit, so she handed in a story about her grandaunt. To her surprise, Cruz picked her to be one of his students.

Helped along by nurturing teachers such as Cruz and Paula Vogel, the Pulitzer Prize-winning head of playwriting, Tay's writing blossomed.

She describes the first time one of her plays was staged as "just magical". Her work, *Water From The Well*, tackled female infanticide in China and was staged in a black box space at the university.

She says: "Part of me feels like I'm always writing



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for a black box because I feel like the magic happens there. It's just something simple and you create magic in that space with some lights, actors and a couple of very, very simple props."

That work was staged by several other theatres in the US and Tay had a taste of life as a playwright. But she did not believe that living that dream was possible: "I didn't think it was feasible. I didn't know if I had what it took to be a playwright, especially for the long term."

So she returned to Singapore in 1997 to work for MAS. She says hesitantly: "It was very difficult. It was extremely challenging."

She found herself confronted by stacks of economics papers and vast amounts of research into the manufacturing, semiconductor and disk drive, refining and petrochemicals industries – things she had never encountered. And while she was surrounded by good colleagues and bosses, there were times when she was so stressed from work that she could not even bring herself to read a good book.

Tay says: "I think it was challenging because part of me really wanted to write as well. So I grabbed every opportunity I could to take part in any playwriting programmes available. Anything."

Pushing back against the tide of work, she signed up for playwriting programmes conducted by theatre companies such as TheatreWorks' Writers' Lab and The Necessary Stage's Playwright's Cove under playwright Haresh Sharma.

She took part in Action Theatre's 10-Minute Play Contest in 1999 and won its open category with *The Knot*, about a wife's struggle with her controlling

husband. It was through Action Theatre that she met the late Malaysian theatre luminary Krishen Jit, who gave Tay her big break in the local theatre scene.

As a young economist, Tay was deeply shaken by the effects of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, when she realised how these spiralling numbers had prompted riots and rapes in Indonesia following the vast depreciation of the rupiah, coupled with steep hikes in petrol and food prices. That seed of an idea became *Plunge* (2001), about the impact of the Asian economic crisis on life and politics in Indonesia through the eyes of a Singaporean newscaster and an Indonesian teenager, which Krishen di-

rected. He also directed the well-loved *Everything But The Brain*, which uses the theory of relativity as a metaphor for the touching story of a physics teacher coming to terms with the fact that her scientist father is dying from a stroke.

It was a play she had started writing in 2000 but which made it to the stage only five years later. "It was a very long incubation period. And there were times when I despaired. I think people did tell me that it was a hard sell. Who wants to watch a play about relativity? I mean, who would want to write a play about relativity?" she chuckles.

Krishen, whom Tay describes as "amazing" and "an inspiration", died from a stroke a few months later.

She recalls this, her voice catching: "He always knew what he was doing. He took amazing risks with my plays. Even now, my plays are imperfect.

THE LIFE! INTERVIEW WITH Jean Tay

They're risky plays, they don't fit into a particular mould, they're complicated – so I'm grateful to him, to Action Theatre, for taking those risks with me."

Tay quit her day job in 2004 to take care of her elder daughter, Rachel, and to take the leap into playwriting.

Australian theatre director Darren Yap, 45, has known her for eight years and directed the two musicals whose books she wrote – *The Admiral's Odyssey* (2005) for the Singapore Arts Festival, and *Man Of Letters* (2006) for the National University of Singapore's centennial celebrations.

He speaks warmly of her writing and her work ethic: "She's never arrogant and she's generous about allowing ideas to formulate. I don't think every writer is open to doing that – sometimes they're closed."

After the success of *Everything But The Brain*, Tay was approached by the Singapore Repertory Theatre to be its resident playwright.

In between playwriting residencies at Britain's Royal Court Theatre in 2007, where she met her theatre idols Harold Pinter, Tom Stoppard, David Hare and Martin Crimp, and a stint at Italy's La MaMa playwrights' retreat in 2010, she wrote *Boom*.

The play about Singapore's disappearing physical heritage was picked by the Ministry of Education as a literature text for secondary schools students in 2009, while *Everything But The Brain* will be on the list for 2014 to 2015.

Of *Boom*, a ministry spokesman says in an e-mail: "It is an important work in the local canon because it dramatises current Singaporean concerns such as the property boom and en-bloc property sales, which form the background to the play, even as it addresses timeless themes and issues. These include the concept of home, heritage, memory and the conflict between the individual and society."

It was recently announced that the number of students taking pure literature at O levels fell from 16,970 in 1992 to a meagre 3,000 last year. Tay finds the decline "very sad".

She says: "Literature gives Singapore its soul. When you read the books of a certain country, that's when you fall in love with a place and you learn a bit more about the soul of that country."

Her love affair with Singapore runs in tandem with her love story with her husband of 12 years, Tan Kok Yam, also 38. Mr Tan, who studied engineering and now works at the Ministry of Defence, had simplified the theory of relativity for her and was the one who tipped her off that burials in Singapore were far from a permanent rest in peace, which became the premise of *Boom*.

They met when they were university students and their first date, which they agree was a "bad idea", was to a production of Samuel Beckett's absurdist *Waiting For Godot* in Britain.

Her husband is also her first sounding board for her plays. Mr Tan tells Life! in a separate interview: "She's really humble – she doesn't think everything she puts down on paper is golden. She's very open to criticism from others... and slightly embarrassed, even, that she's getting attention."

"She has the compassion to see the other person's point of view and that guides her writing and how she treats the people around her."

These days, in between teaching and rehearsals, Tay snatches some time to write at libraries and fast-food outlets when her daughters, Rachel, nine, and Emma, six, are in school.

She started writing her upcoming work to be staged, *Sisters*, about three years ago, after being approached by director Jeffrey Tan to collaborate on a project on Singapore's indigenous myths. She was quite taken by the tale of the Sisters Islands, in which two symmetrical islands rose from the sea at the spot where two close sisters had drowned.

She says: "This is my attempt to reclaim a story that might otherwise be forgotten – and once you forget, what else do you have left? Because a soul of a country is made out of its histories, its stories, the stories of its people."

Her daughters, young as they are, are also her audience members.

She says of Rachel and Emma: "As much as my plays and my words are my legacy, they are also my legacy. So now, just to create that sense of history, that sense of connection to the past, the stories that I have learnt from my grandparents – I want to have a sense of passing that on."

She shrugs, smiling: "I just want to tell stories."

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Book it

SISTERS: THE UNTOLD STORIES OF THE SISTERS ISLANDS

Where: The Arts House Play Den
When: Wednesday to March 19, weekdays at 8pm, weekends at 3 and 8pm
Admission: \$25 from The Arts House (call 6332-6919 or go to www.bytes.sg)

My life so far



Tay as a young girl with her parents and brother.

"MOE came back and said, oh, we'd like to do *Boom*. And I said, are you sure? There's a lot of Singlish in there. Can we take out the Singlish first and clean it up?"

On her reaction to the Ministry of Education picking *Boom* (2008) as a secondary school literature text

"As the years have gone along, I've become less attached to things. If these scenes have to go, they have to go. And I've worked on plays where I've thrown out the first draft that I've worked on for about a year, then started again. That's painful. But at the same time, that's how the process works."

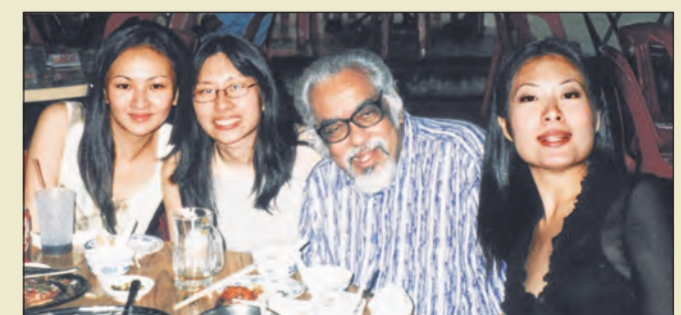
On editing her plays

"It's very invigorating. They're so intelligent, so articulate, and they critique each other so well. I don't have to do much! I've been there before and I know what it's like to struggle to write when you're holding a full-time job – and you may not be a full-fledged writer yet, but your potential is there."

On mentoring young writers



Tay with her husband, Mr Tan Kok Yam, and daughters Rachel and Emma.
PHOTOS: COURTESY OF JEAN TAY



Tay (second from left) with (from left) the late actress Emma Yong, the late director Krishen Jit and actress-director Beatrice Chia.

"I enjoyed reading Catherine Lim and finding these little stories about ourselves and recognising yourself in the stories or, if it's Shakespeare or something bigger, recognising a world that is bigger than you. Otherwise, you think the world is centred on you."

On why literature is important for Singapore