

**Verena Tay, *In the Company of Heroes*. Singapore: Math Paper Press, 2011. 270 pp. ISBN 978-981-08-7782-8.**

Verena Tay is a Singaporean writer with over twenty years of experience in acting, directing and playwriting. She was a member of the International Writing Program at the University of Iowa in 2007, and is currently an Associate Artist with The Substation and a founding member of the Storytelling Association in Singapore. Many of Tay's plays have been staged and have received wide acclaim.

*In the Company of Heroes* is Tay's second volume of plays following *In the Company of Women*. In both volumes, she inclines toward the female perspective and draws deeply from a rich autobiographical store. Tay portrays modern Singapore vividly, but her plays frequently remind us that the world she lives in is in fact a reflection of the world at large. Since her plays deal with issues and problems that are a part of everyone's life, they are easy to relate to; however, an experimental spirit and a quirky voice belie her works.

One of the things I find most interesting about Tay is her constant juggling with conventionality and postmodernity. Her respect for tradition sometimes contrasts sharply with her desire for non-conformity. Richard Chua complains that she can be "too reserved, too safe" so much so that it is "not Singaporean-like." However, being Singaporean means that she can never really escape the postmodern phenomenon that is Singapore. By writing about Singapore Tay taps into this postmodern vein, but her quest for answers to bigger questions like identity and belonging always brings her back to the grand narrative that is Chinese tradition.

According to Jean-François Lyotard, the Enlightenment "hero of knowledge" works toward a good ethico-political end, but the "postmodern condition" is the knowledge that the idea of universal peace is unachievable. The many language games that are available to us means that there is a crisis of narratives, a heterogeneity of elements that only gives rise to patchy instructions which are inevitably locally determined.

Singapore is a port city that is full of voices speaking in different languages meeting for the cultural lottery. According to Jeremy Fernando, the success of Singapore is its ability to be nothing and yet so full of nothingness that it is open to all possibilities. In this sense, Singapore is truly a postmodern city. However, Tay has strong Chinese roots and she feels the pull of its traditions. There is a tendency for Chinese culture to advocate the "hero of knowledge" who believes in working toward communal good. Hence Tay's plays, although written in English, likes to pose grand questions: What is

identity? Where do I belong? Am I a filial daughter? How can I be a good woman?

*Bumiputra Cina* is a play about identity and belonging. “Bumiputra” means “native of the soil” and “Cina” means “Chinese.” For a Chinese Singaporean woman like Tay, the idea of being a “native” of the soil and rightfully Singaporean by birth is not enough. What does it mean to be a Singaporean? Is it a willingness to put down roots, contribute to population growth and die defending the land? Although men, including the heroic Lieutenant Adnan, seem to commit easily to these ideas, Tay portrays women differently. Using herself as an example she asks: What if our ancestors are from another land? What if we have children with partners from another country? Despite Earth’s reiteration that we are all children of the same soil, a “bumiputra” that is “Cina” reveals Tay’s uncertainty toward the prominence of her Chineseness on Singaporean soil.

If Singapore is an ever-changing country where people live in the moment, then *The Car* is a play that questions the values of such a society. The owner of an old, lovingly-kept car has died and his daughter is selling it to a junk dealer. The car tries to remind the girl of his years of loyal service and the memories that they created together with her father. Unfortunately, in a place where things age fast and people value efficiency more than sentimentality, the girl can only see the car as a burden. Despite his predictably dismal end, the car manages to persuade the girl to take one last trip down memory lane thus helping her re-evaluate the meaning of her past.

*The Lunar Interviews* is an eloquent tract about women, language and power. Zhang E, the Chinese moon goddess, and Diana, the Greek goddess of hunting and the moon, are women who belong to two very different cultures yet both relay the same message of transformation for women from weak and subservient to powerful and symbolic figures of fertility and creativity. The image of the “good” woman is portrayed as virtuous, virginal, self-sacrificing and obedient. But, there is a feminist slant in this play where women rise above their weaknesses to shed light on the flaws of men, who seem to be frequently portrayed as chauvinists and perverts. I would agree with Ng Yi-Sheng about the disappointing epilogue, not only because of the prosaic comparisons of the moon to women and the menstrual cycle, but the hasty attempt to incorporate masculinity into what has specifically been a female equation.

Despite Tay’s treatment of serious issues, her creations are not lacking in playful and unconventional elements. In *Bumiputra Cina* Earth converses with humans and characters reveal themselves on dating websites; in *The Car* the protagonist is actually a car; in *Right and Left* a pair of feet debate on control and subservience; *Queen Sophia and That Dog Buster* is a play about the relationship of a cat and dog. *The Lunar Interviews* consists of three unusual, what Ng termed, goddess monologues. In *Imperfect Family Recipes*, there is a voice-over for one of the characters who has suffered a stroke and cannot speak for herself.

While Tay faces what directors like Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou do with the obligation to incorporate a multi-faceted Asia for an English-oriented audience, Tay not only has the opportunity to observe this process in action but even has the advantage of living it out on a daily basis. There is probably no place in Asia quite like Singapore with its condensed and ever evolving cultural diversity and historical complexity. Tay's experimental spirit and quirky voice brings a twist to the more serious and conventional issues that preoccupies her. Yet it is ultimately her freedom to choose and mix as she artistically pleases that conveys Singapore as a place of postmodernity with its own local distinctiveness that is best termed the "Singaporean condition."

### **Works Cited**

Richard Chua. "A Necessary Voice in Singapore Theatre." 15 November 2011. <http://richardchuaprojects.tumblr.com/post/6488732134/a-necessary-voice-in-singapore-theatre>.

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