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## Don't Let the Bastards

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Panel: Freedom's Limits? Core Values in a Changing World

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## Jeremy TIANG

### Don't Let the Bastards

On the first of September this year, Tan Tarn How's *Fear of Writing* was premiered at Theatreworks, Singapore. This play, by one of Singapore's longest-standing playwrights, took a close look at the issues of censorship that have bedevilled Singapore's literature for as long as I can remember. Towards the end of the performance, a group of men and women in uniform burst into the auditorium, announcing that they were from the Media Development Authority (MDA) and were there to stop the play, which contravened their regulations. They began taking down names and confiscating phones of audience members. After several long minutes of this, they revealed themselves to be actors - the "raid" was part of the play.

Here in Iowa City, I was messing about on the internet instead of writing my novel, as you do, when I noticed that my facebook and twitter timelines were filling up with people in Singapore talking about the authorities "raiding" a play. It started with people in the audience urgently typing out what was happening, and the message being passed on by their friends until it became, within minutes, common knowledge. It's safe to say that by the second performance, very few people in the audience were unaware of the twist.

Two things struck me about this incident: one, that most people found it perfectly plausible that the Singaporean government would intervene to stop a play - it has happened before, in real life, and no doubt will happen again, all in the name of "security" and "stability." I have had two Singapore arts council grants withdrawn, explicitly on the grounds of the political content of my work. Earlier this year, British author Alan Shadrake was jailed for six weeks for his book *Once a Jolly Hangman*, about the injustices inherent in Singapore's use of the death penalty; rather than refuting his allegations, the authorities chose to prosecute him for "scandalising the judiciary," a charge for which the truth of the statements in question is not material.

More interesting to me is the second thing: that it is no longer possible for the authorities to operate under the cloak of secrecy. In previous times, had such a raid on a theatre really taken place, most of us would only have learned of it the next day, when government-approved reports appeared in the national newspapers, assuring us that the theatre-makers were dangerous radicals bent on subverting our peaceful Asian society with Western revolutionary ideas. There are now too many ways for the truth to out, and the public can judge for itself what is truly happening in our society, rather than having to trust the government to make these judgements for us.

I don't want to overstate my case. Singapore is more liberal than many other places - indeed, whenever I say something about censorship, someone will pop up with dreary regularity to tell me I should try living in Libya/Afghanistan/North Korea for a bit. This is not the point. The truth does not operate on a sliding scale where we can choose how much of it is politic to

reveal, nor are we truly faced with a simple binary choice between “freedom” and “order.”

What I have observed is a kind of first-world censorship, one predicated not so much on straight-up repression, as on making people so comfortable that they have too much to lose by rocking the boat. When I tell Singaporeans what I am writing about, the response is often “You’re so brave” – as if what I do is somehow dangerously radical. It really isn’t. I may raise issues of social concern in my writing, but honestly – I am a comfortably middle-class writer, not Che Guevara. I am humbled by being in a program with writers such as Cho Tu Zaw, who has been imprisoned by the Burmese government for his beliefs and activities. No one in Singapore faces that degree of oppression, least of all me. If even what I do is seen as subversive, that speaks of a society so complacent that even the most timorous questioning of norms is to be feared.

Yet this is often framed as the result of competing value systems. Amy Chua from the MDA said in an interview, “Censorship is a reflection of a country’s social norms and values” – thus presenting her organisation’s repressive attitude to, amongst other things, homosexuality and anti-establishment views, as cultural rather than political. The Ministry of Information, Culture and the Arts has banned films that “deal with political issues in a partisan manner” – that is, present alternative viewpoints, voices which dissent from the official line of the People’s Action Party (PAP) which has held power in Singapore for forty-eight years. In 2005, when the Paris-based *Reporters Sans Frontières* ranked Singapore as 140<sup>th</sup> out of 167 countries for press freedom, former prime minister Goh Chok Tong insisted that this was not a problem, that what Singapore needed was not “the Western model of a free press” but “a non-adversarial press that ... understands what is in, or not in, our national interest.” By this point, I’m sure you will be able to guess what he had in mind.

Singapore is not the only country where this kind of soft oppression takes place, and governments are not the only ones doing the oppressing. In 2004, the British Sikh writer Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti’s play *Behzti (Dishonour)* was produced in Birmingham, only to be cancelled due to violent protests outside the theatre organised by religious protestors who objected to the play’s portrayal of rape and murder within a Sikh temple. The Birmingham Repertory Theatre issued a statement that the cancellation of the play was “purely on safety grounds.” A similar excuse was used last year when Tarleton State University in Texas cancelled a student production of Terence McNally’s *Corpus Christi*, following Christian protests.

As writers, we tell the stories that need to be told. To quote a World War II slogan, “books are weapons in the war of ideas.” Let us then use our writing to tell urgent truths, not to create pleasant entertainments for the bourgeoisie. In her response to the banning of her play, Gurpreet Kaur Bhatti wrote *Behud*, a satire in which theatre producers and community leaders sit around a table, trying to create a piece of art that offends no one. At one point, one of them laments, “I wish someone would write a nice play about a nice subject.”

I could object to the wording of the topic we were given, with its references to “a changing world” and “the post-9/11 world,” as if we were somehow living through a particularly dangerous epoch in human development. Many appear to think so, but then we would all like to believe that we are special and our place in history unique. Yet there have always been those who would use historical circumstances to silence dissenting opinion.

In May 1933, Joseph Goebbels presided over a mass burning of books considered “un-German” in Berlin. The same year, *The Grapes of Wrath* was banned in California for its “unflattering portrayal of area residents.” Arthur Miller was accused of being anti-American – first for attacking capitalism in *Death of a Salesman* and then for comparing the McCarthy trials to a witch-hunt in *The Crucible*. I could go on. At every point in history, there have been voices that said: we are at war, you may not write this. Think of the troops. Think of the enemy. Think of the sensibilities of the easily offended. And be silenced.

Times change; that is what they do. This should never be an excuse for writers to stay away from the truth. Walter Benjamin sounds a warning when he says in “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” “the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the ‘state of emergency’ in which we live is not the exception but the rule.” Those of us who are not likely to be locked up for our writing have a duty to those who are – to the truly oppressed – not to be silenced. Never mind speaking truth to power, just speak the truth – and trust that it will reach the right ears. The uniformed men and women bursting through our doors are often just actors, who will be thrown if we refuse to follow their script. The choice between “freedom” and “security” is a false one. There is only truth, and if enough of us speak it, there is no power on earth that can stop us.