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## *Encore for a great man*

In The LKY Musical, I discovered the human being behind any life of unremitting power is better understood if common human emotions can be found and explored.



**Meira Chand**



Sharon Au as Madam Kwa Geok Choo (left) and Adrian Pang as Mr Lee Kuan Yew in The LKY Musical (2015). PHOTO: METROPOLITAN PRODUCTIONS

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Connection with an audience is what completes a cycle of communication for any creative person and gives his work its true meaning. It is therefore exciting to everyone originally involved in The LKY Musical that the production will return to the stage in Singapore on Sept 7.

It is now 10 years since the September morning in 2012 that I opened my e-mail to find a letter from someone I did not know, conveying a strange request. I was asked if I would write the synopsis for an opera based upon the story of a young Singapore couple's romance.

The young couple in question were the late Mr and Mrs Lee Kuan Yew. I read and re-read this e-mail, wondering how to reply. Lee Kuan Yew. An opera. Singing. The great man singing on a stage. The proposition appeared beyond improbable.

However, the letter writer had been directed to me by an eminent man, a mutual friend, someone who personally knew Mr Lee, someone whose opinion I could not discount.

Eventually, I met Tan Choon Hiong and Bianca Cheo, along with their collaborator Alvin Tan, at the Four Seasons Hotel. Over the following months, we met there many times, usually choosing the same table in the coffee lounge.

I had gone to the first meeting without expectation but the infectious passion around me made the proposition appear viable. The three were all ardent theatre lovers but had never been involved in production. They had a dream and boundless ardour. They spoke about the success of the musical, *Evita*, an equally unlikely political story, that had recently taken the world by storm. They were proud of Singapore's own unique story. Why could a similar international success not be home-grown in Singapore?

Over the months, the idea changed and grew. A highbrow opera became a more popular musical. The narrow band of a young couple's romance stretched to become the narrative of a nation's birth through the life of an extraordinary man.

The story was familiar to me, for I recently published my novel, *A Different Sky*, with its backdrop of Singapore's pre-independence history, a history filled with incredibly powerful drama. Mr Lee's life was shaped by the events I had researched and vicariously lived through in the writing of my fiction.

## Remembrance of war

At the time I began tussling with the synopsis, I had been reading a scholarly book about the wretched life of rickshaw runners in the early years of the century. I was therefore delighted to find that the Lee family had employed their own rickshaw man when Mr Lee was a child, a man who took Mr Lee and his siblings to school and back.

Later, this same man, Mr Koh Teong Koo, hid and protected the young Mr Lee at the time of the Sook Ching massacre in 1942 during the Japanese Occupation. I decided to draw on this very human side of Mr Lee's early life.

I also drew on the deprivations of the war years and the inventive improvisations people created. The making and sale of a home-made glue was what initially drew Mr Lee and his future wife Kwa Geok Choo together. The human being behind any life of unremitting power is better understood if common human emotions can be found and explored.

I soon realised however that Mr Lee's iconic status was an ongoing problem for my work. To deconstruct such a revered and complex figure, both feared and admired, into bite-sized pieces for light public consumption, yet to convey the magnitude of his achievements with the respect and seriousness they deserved, was no easy task, especially in the context of the medium of a musical.

Also, to fit a man's life and a nation's history into a couple of hours of human time means that much of importance will inevitably be simplified and compressed, or even completely ignored.

Over the ensuing months, discussions continued. The pressing and vital question now was which actor should be approached to play Mr Lee. Everything would rest upon his shoulders. A variety of names were thrown up, but whoever was suggested, we returned always to one person - Adrian Pang.

Only Adrian seemed to carry within himself the depth and dignity of character we searched for in whoever would impersonate Mr Lee. Would he be interested in the role? Could he even sing?

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## Divine hand

Looking back now, remembering above all the trepidation that accompanied each step of the production's journey, it appears as if a divine hand steered everything forward. The dream was to create an international world-class production. How could there be a Singapore musical without Dick Lee? Dick was wished for and miraculously he appeared, and wholeheartedly supported the project. Similarly, Adrian materialised as desired, and astoundingly, he could sing. Then, the Singapore Repertory Theatre also came on board, and so it went on.

All the while the budget and risks ballooned but funding was not forthcoming, causing high anxiety. Filled with passion and dedication, Choon Hiong and Bianca invested their life savings in the project. Then, at last, synchronicity, which had been working quietly all along, finally placed that last spoke of funding in the wheel, and the production became a solid entity.

Even after the production opened, this synergism remained, every mishap overcome. On the opening night, actress Sharon Au, playing Mrs Lee, sprained her ankle, but limped on.

Adrian, running onstage in the second act of one performance, collided with a staircase, cutting open his head. He continued onstage, still bleeding, unaware of the severity of the injury, thinking the blood was sweat. He never left the stage, and the audience took the blood to signify that Mr Lee had suffered an injury in a riot before coming home to Mrs Lee. Later, Adrian needed 20 stitches.

Right up until opening night, a strong sense of apprehension remained. The production team was aware that in its subject matter, the musical entered areas of political sensitivity never explored before in Singapore. How would the higher authorities respond?

The team pushed forward. Rehearsals began. Excitement built. The beauty of the sets took the breath away. The music soared.

Then fate intervened again in the most bewildering way. Mr Lee passed away in March 2015, leaving Singapore bereft and in shock. The production team was stunned and anticipated an order to delay the musical's opening. Surprisingly, no such order came, and The LKY Musical opened as planned in July 2015, and was quickly sold out.

Yet, the strange synergism surrounding the production enfolded it once again. The deep poignancy of the times now gave the production an unanticipated depth of relevancy. Suddenly, the musical was more than a vibrant and lively production - it had become an enduring tribute to an iconic and extraordinary man and his equally extraordinary life and times.

- Meira Chand has a doctorate in creative writing and is the author of nine novels, whose themes examine the conflict of cultures and the search for identity.
- The LKY Musical will be restaged at Sands Theatre, Marina Bay Sands, from Sept 7 to Oct 2.
- We welcome contributions to the Sunday Views column. Write to us at [stopinion@sph.com.sg](mailto:stopinion@sph.com.sg)

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