

Broken Birds An Epic Longing

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Conceived and directed by Ong Keng Sen

Text by Robin Loon and Ong Keng Sen

> Music composed by John Sharpley

> > Libretto by Robin Loon

Movement and Choreography by Lim Fei Shen

> Video by Johnson Choo



"Ah Ku and the Karayuki-san : Prostitution in Singapore 1870 - 1940" by Dr James Francis Warren

> A TheatreWorks Production March 1 - 18 1995 Fort Canning Green

Director Ong Keng Sen

Production Director Tay Tong

Text Robin Loon Ong Keng Sen

Music Composer John Sharpley

Librettist Robin Loon

Movement Director/Choreographer Lim Fei Shen

Video Director/Camera Johnson Choo

Japanese Translator Yoshiko Fukushima

Lighting Design Lim Yu-Beng

Techincal Manager Mohd Rafaat Hamzah

Sound Engineer John Kompa

Stage Managers Neo Kim Seng

Musriah Mohammad Salleh

Lucilla Teoh

Costume Design Tay Tong

Hair Design/Wigs Ashley Lim

Make-up Designer Joseph Ng

Voice Coach Carol Stone

Technical Assistant Vincent Tan

Production Assistant Tan Lay Hoon

Stage Assistants Jonathan Gwee

Jonathan Gwee Althea Hennedige Audrey Hoo Karen Tan Michael Tung Peter Wyatt

Wardrobe Doreen Cheng

Rilla Melati

Business/PR Manager Michele Lim

Assistant to Business/PR Manager Leslie Lee

Publicity Flyer Design

PR Assistant Patrina Lim

Geraldine Lau Dahlia Osman

Leslie Lee

Programme Design Michele Lim

Leslie Lee Geraldine Lau Dahlia Osman

Photography (flyer) Jose Enrique Soriano of Alaya Photos

Front of House Manager Leslie Lee

Ticketing Juliana Yeh

Performers (in alphabetical order)

Jeremiah Choy Norayesah Ismail K Rajagopal Koh Joo Kim Janice Koh Wendy Kweh Casey Lim Lim Fei Shen Lim How Ngean Lim Kay Tong Sharon Lim Lim Yu-Beng Loong Seng Onn Rosita Ng Pamela Oei Karen Tan Tan Kheng Hua Tang Fu Kuen Wong Kwang Han Sheila Wyatt

> Singers Gani

Hawk Liu

Musicians

John Sharpley Tan Peng Tow Dominic Wan

Video Performers Lok Meng Chue Claire Wong



"The culmination of a journey that began with Longing.
Scouring the internet for any leads.
Obsessive searches for the karayuki-san in libraries.
Clutching my bible', James Francis Warren's fascinating book.
Struggling to communicate with Japanese bookstores.
Video libraries. Film libraries.

Four months of pursuing the karayuki-san in New York. A totally incongruous location.

A race against time - no, I need this before I leave New York on Jan 2nd.

Courier it, fax it - I need it.

Often, I felt the loneliness and excitement of an investigative journalist. No, not fictitious accounts but I want their voices, real oral interviews (whatever that means!). Scuttling between Japanese academics who gave freely of their time and my translator who worked through Christmas Eve and spent New Year's Eve simultaneously translating an entire Japanese book to me ...

Remapping the journey the karayukis took to our country, I felt the responsibility that no Singaporean had traced this journey extensively before. Long distance conversations with Robin, John and Tay Tong. Panic stricken messages on phone machines. Obsession. Desperation.

Was I a karayuki in my past life perhaps??

Ultimately, this performance reflects the present's guilt with respect to the past.

Am I exploiting the karayukis, in simply wanting to talk about them? A guilt which is irrational as we were not there in the past. We are not responsible. But perhaps, if we listened to history more, events would not be repeated in time - the genocide in Cambodia; Bosnia would not carry with it echoes of the Jewish extermination. The collective memories and tears of humanity"

Ong Keng Sen February 1995

Fulbright scholar, Singapore Young Artist 1993, recipient of British Council and USIS fellowships,
Keng Sen is recognised for his Singaporean and Asian theatre work in Singapore, South East Asia, Japan and the
United States. Since 1992, he has taught theatre in the NUS, struggling to maintain
a balance between sharing and creating. Last year, he was awarded a grant by the Asian Cultural Council
based in New York for his achievements in Singaporean theatre.
Next month, Keng Sen makes his directorial debut at the prestigious Public Theatre in New York City.



"In many ways Broken Birds is about us with strong Faustian implications,

Broken Birds dives into the ultimate commodity
....ourselves.

So what is the connection of body, mind and soul? Does one exist without the other?

Is the desecration of one instantly a rape of the whole? ...are we all not part of the whole?

Is there healing? Healing of what and of whom?

Broken Birds is ritual; cathartic and purging, disturbing, yet soulfully restoring.

This is my message."

John Sharpley February 1995

John Sharpley gave his first public performance at the age of four.

In Singapore he is known for his many collaborations with such groups
like the Singapore Youth Orchestra, the Singapore Dance Theatre,
the Singapore Guilar Quartet and the National University of Singapore.
This is his first collaboration with TheatreWorks.

"I am constantly amazed at how fragile our reality is - how it disintegrates as we uncover events in our past that were hitherto hidden from us.

This is my greatest realisation in Broken Birds.

But the task now is not to lament the atrocities of history but to rebuild ourselves with this knowledge of the past.

Being a student of literature and history, I found great satisfaction in merging the two seemingly disparate disciplines into one form - fact and fiction fusing into theatre.

Scripting for Broken Birds has been both inspiring and painful;

inspiring because I am once again reminded of the tenacity of the human spirit in the face of adversity; painful because I realised that

I am ultimately detached from the Karayuki-sans even though they are part of my history.

I am thankful for the chance to excavate and reconstruct a moment sunk in time;

and being a participant in the magic of what is theatre."

Robin Loon February 1995

Robin Loon is a 27 year-old post graduate student at the National University of Singapore. His past works for TheatreWorks include Absence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder (1992) and Watching The Clouds Go By (1994)



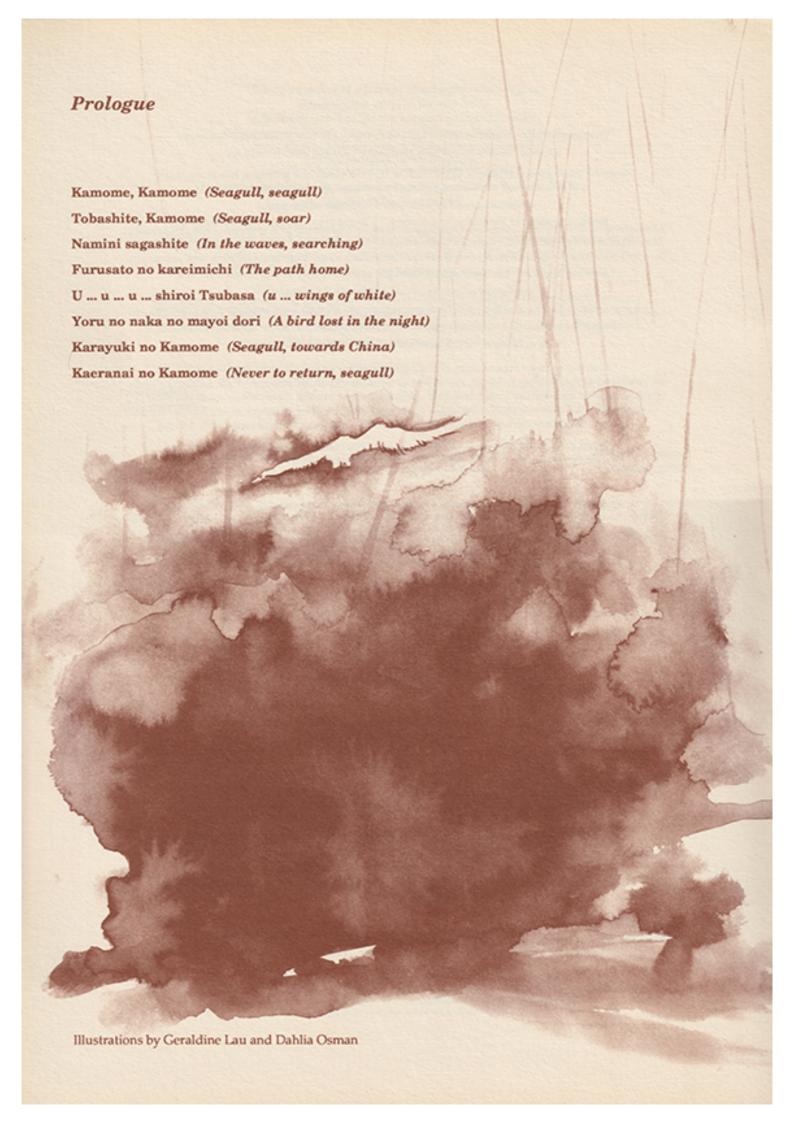
"How many ways can the body be moved, be shaped, so as to speak the desired effect?

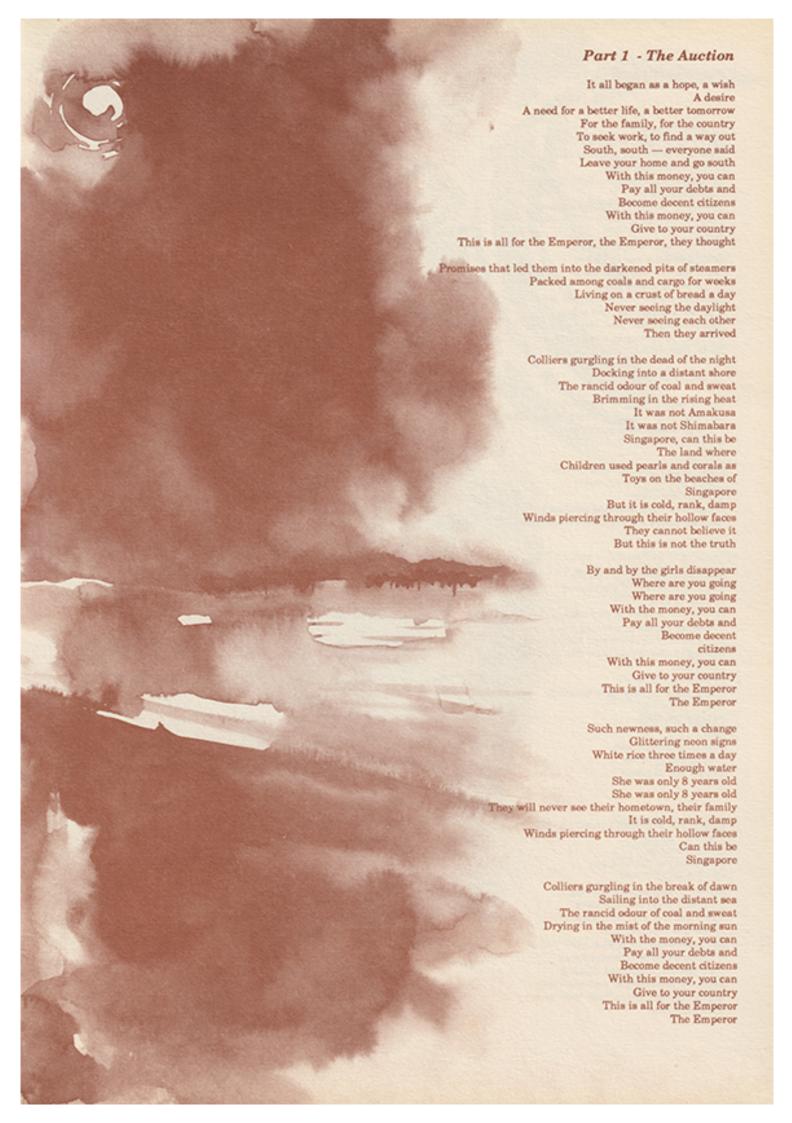
Body parts cannot be separated any more than we can separate time from the space or energy of a dancing figure.

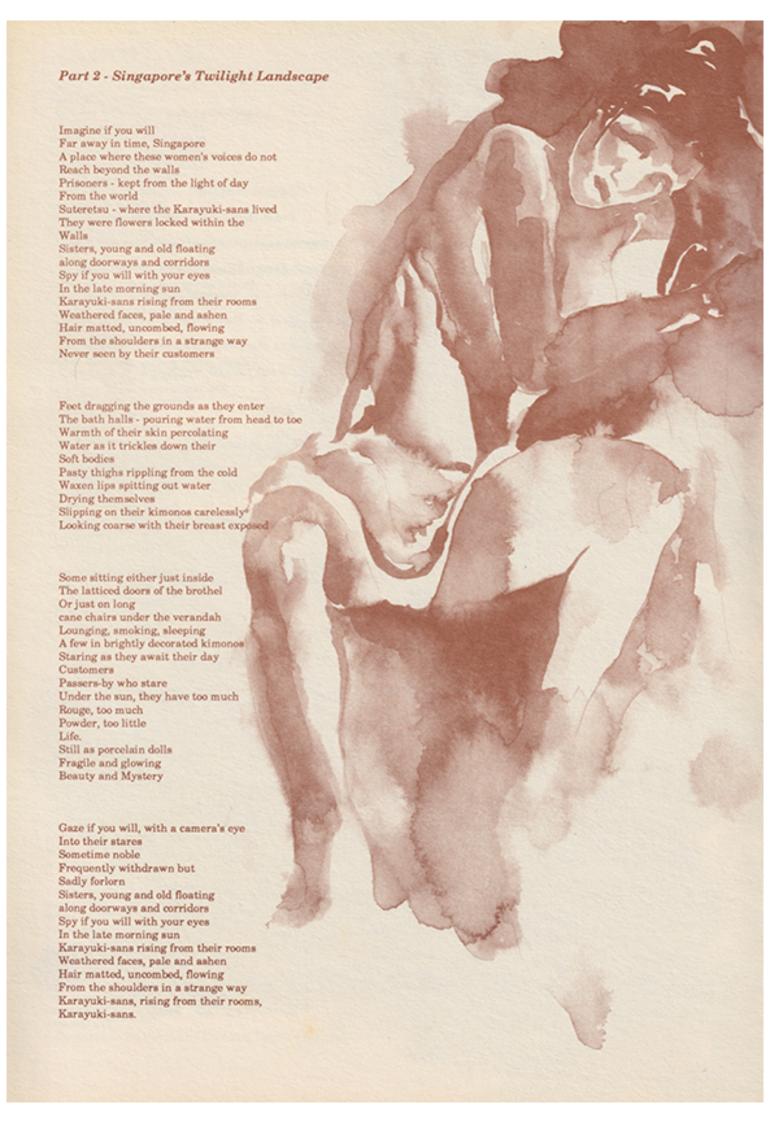
My contribution to Broken Birds is the extensive body knowledge and the process of transforming choreography into a comprehensive theatre movement.

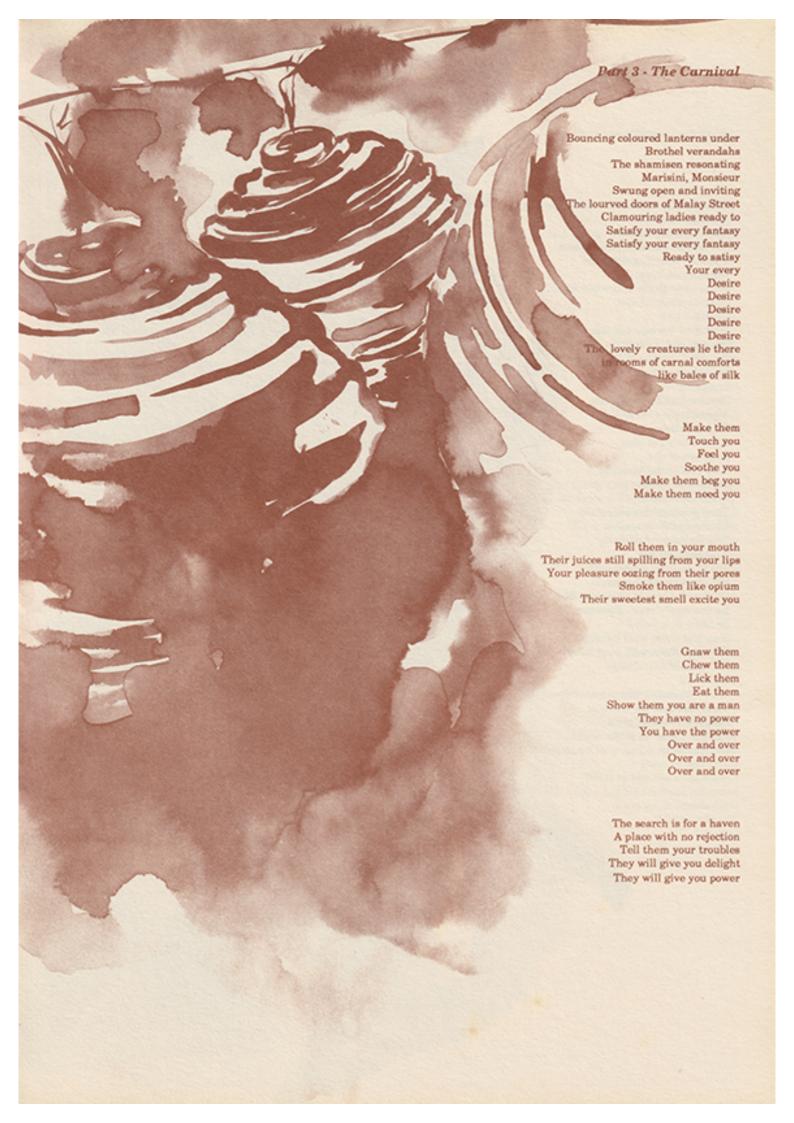
I seek innovative interaction between theatre and dance. This is a new journey".

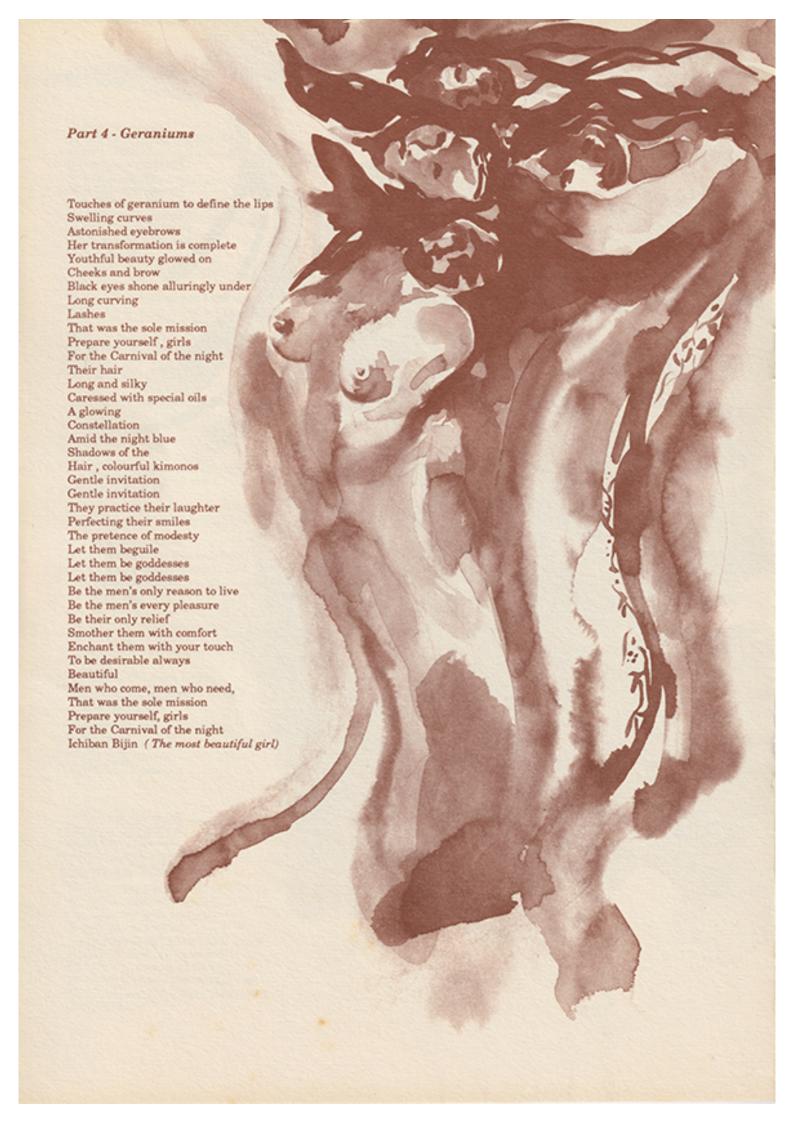
Lim Fei Shen February 1995

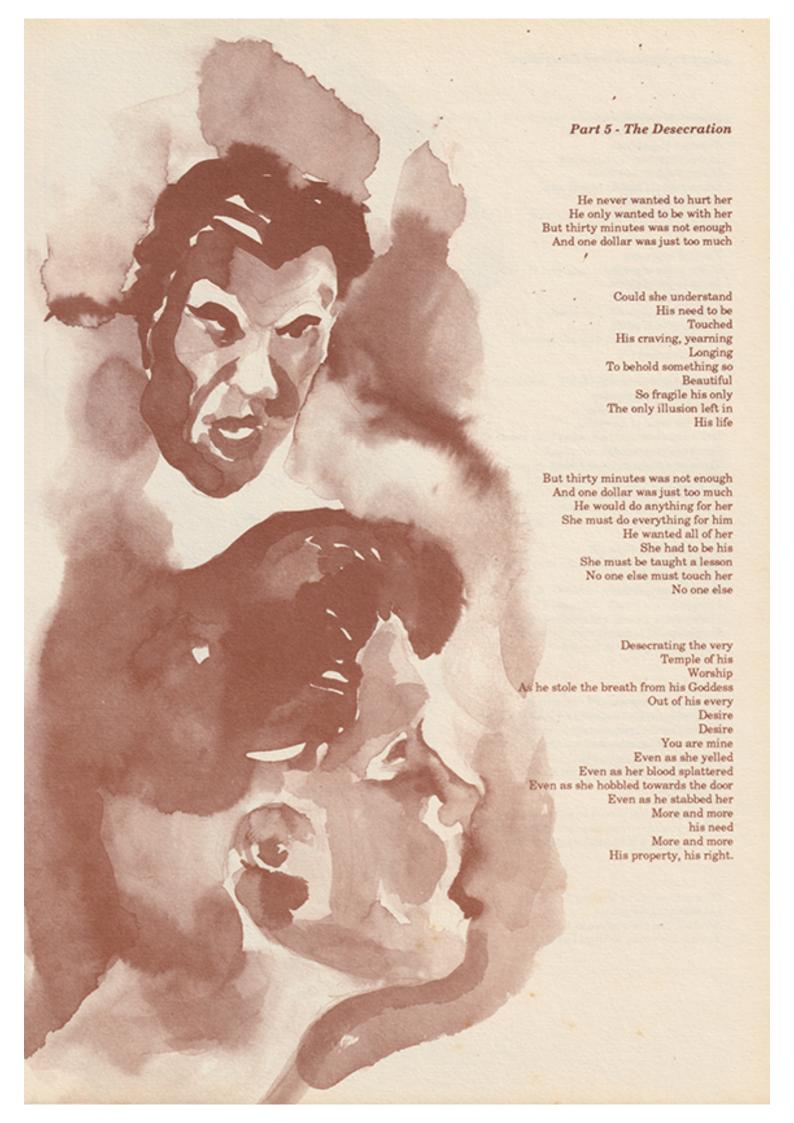












Part 6 - Mothers and Daughters

Mothers and daughters Sisters, young and old Together in bondage Linked together Under the buoyant faces Lies a reign of terror Lies a reign of terror Mother and keeper Offering no solace Kin and oppressor Kin and oppressor In the name of profit In the name of profit

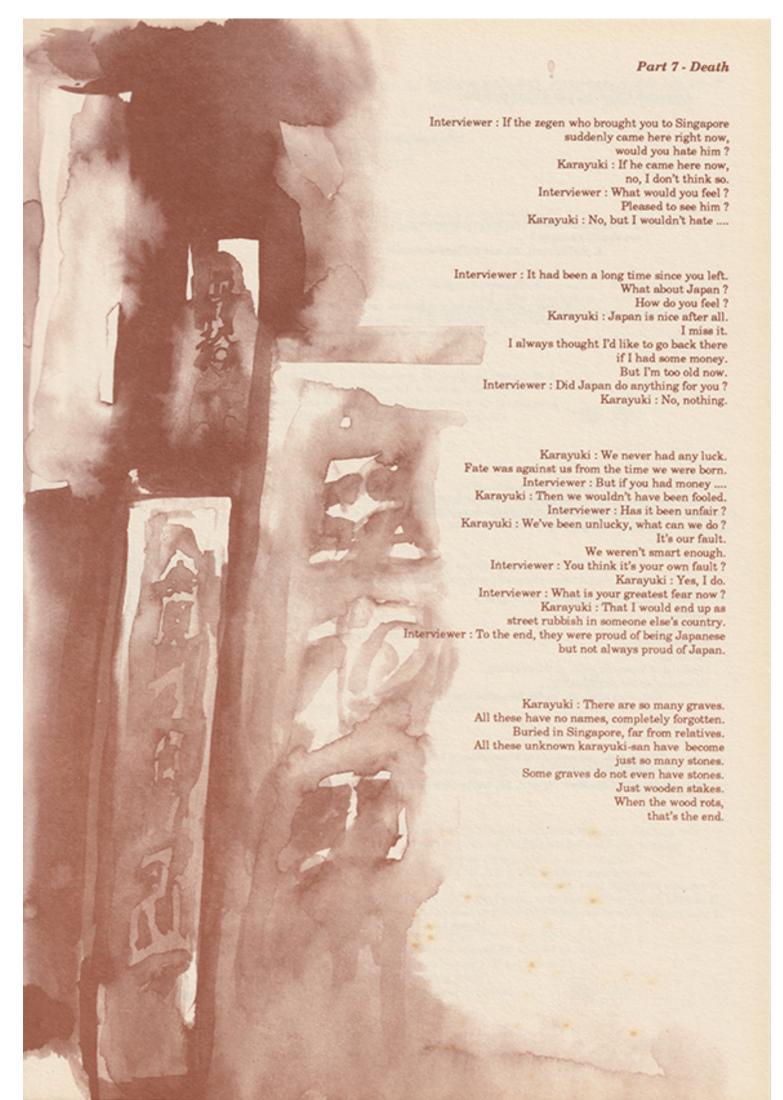
I can't stop the monthly flow
I can't stop it, Mamasan
With the slant of a smile
With the twist of an eyelid
Mamasans remind them what they owed
To whom they belong
There was no room for thinking
There was no room for loving
Everything is business

It was my fault
You tend to my wounds
You tend to my needs
You take care of me
I love you
I love you
Mamasan

In that place
A Karayuki dreams
Of disease that leaves no mark
Of lust that wears no price
Of beauty that never fades
Of bodies that feels no pain
In that place a Karayuki dreams
Of Amakusa
Of Shimabara
I know you never meant to kill my babies
I know you never meant to send them away
In that place, a Karayuki sings her song

"You are too young to sleep for ever Let fallen leaves gather All shall lose themselves in time You are too young to sleep forever"





"Tears. Joy. Shock. Animal sex. Pain...I am very tired." Jeremiah Choy, 32, practicing solicitor

"The most physical and emotional three-in-one play I have ever been directed in!"
Norayesah Ismail, 24, graphic artist

"I joined the production on the strength of my ignorance, I am slowly learning." K Rajagopal, 29, art gallery executive

> "Compared with the karayuki-sans, women in Singapore have that much more power and choice; yet in many ways we continue to retain attitude not unlike those of women in bondage."
>
> Janice Koh, 21, undergraduate

海路

"Can this be...Singapore?" Lim Yu-Beng, 29, actor

"It makes me feel extremely sad and angry that these women's lives were completely in the hands of others." Lim Kay Tong, 40s, actor

> "Broken Birds has been a challenge requiring a lot of sensitivity." Wendy Kweh, 19, actress

"Broken Birds taking flight across the green.
Moving.
Haunting.
Remembering.
Learning.
I wanted to know the voice of the voiceless.
To remember the forgotten."

Koh Joo Kim, 32, radio broadcaster



"Tracing the journey of the karayuki-san has been a personal journey of discovering inner strengths and chasing ideals." Lim How Ngean, 26, writer for a food and beverage magazine

"Like the opening of a floodgate of discovery and learning, emotions and desires, friendships and opportunities."

Gani, 25, artiste

"I am very privileged to be involved in this epic.

It was the first time I learned about the plight of the karayuki-san.

I hope people will learn to respect their fellow human beings from these women."

Hawk Liu, 31, school teacher



"Blood. Sweat. Tears. Rashes. Pain." Sharon Lim, 26, lawyer "Perspiration...Pain...Pleasure?"

Loong Seng Onn, 35, civil servant

"What price to pay in selling their souls to materialism." Casey Lim, 31, actor



"I hope the karayuki-sans who died and were buried here will rest better after we tell their story." Pamela Oei, 23, Architectural undergraduate

"Working on Broken Birds has been excellent - it's hard work, but the good thing is that I will soon be able to do one push-up. I think I learnt quite a bit about the resilience and strength from the lives of the karayuki-sans, which I won't forget too soon. Karen Tan, 28, actress, fashion merchandiser and housewife

"When I first learnt about the karayuki-sans, I was initially shocked and filled with a deep sadness.

How many more of these people, ordinary but yet significant, have been missed or
swept under the carpet of our selective documented memory called history?"

Lok Meng Chue, 40, actress

"It has been a privilege for a brief moment, we stepped into another time, another place and another life. The Karayuki's story weaves a bleak, fragile, often horrific and ironic carpet of fate and circumstance. There is something there for all of us to learn from.

Life is "a journey with no particular destination".

We think we have arrived, but there is always somewhere else to go.

Our lot in life is set · we need only learn to live it through as best we can."

Tan Kheng Hua, 31, actress

"I think it is good to remember." Wong Kwang Han, 24, undergraduate





"A flight in search of core."

Rosita Ng, 26, lawyer

"Broken Birds is a tale of human endurance in the face of hopelessness, where the choices of the karayuki-san was one of existence without dignity, rights or love and death."

Sheila Wyatt, 32, wife, mother and actress

"It is too easy for me to romanticise the sufferings of the karayuki-san.

The reality is that women continue to be used and abused all around us today.

I hope our experience with the karayuki-sans will spur us to

stop history from repeating itself."

Claire Wong, 30, lawyer and actress

"Ah Ku and Karayuki-san", focussing as it does on the Japanese prostitutes of Singapore, provides the feminine companion volume to James Warren's earlier "Rickshaw Coolie: A People's History of Singapore". Both explore the world of immigrant labour during Singapore's period of rapid economic development in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Together they provide a powerful corrective to the romantic image of colonial Singapore as a city of excitement, sophistication and exotic charm. Here James Warren provides a personal account of his research process and some of the thoughts that went through his mind while writing the book that inspired this production.

"I have attempted in Ah Ku and Karayuki-san to conjure up an image of the atmospheric truth and drama surrounding the portrayal of ordinary Japanese women like the Karayukisan Oyoshi and the brothel keeper Kwana Muta, relying on courage and a spirit of decency to transcend a "traumatic event" or hard circumstance, as colonial Singapore with its rapidly developing economy, attracted thousands of Japanese women and immigrant labourers. Such individuals and "events" told me about the larger reality and hidden meanings in my endeavours to re-interpret and re-present the history of prostitutes and coolies in the brothels and city streets. Here the intertwining lives and fragmentary careers of ordinary women and men serve as lesser known turning points to chart the pace of a developing city and the speed of a new century by reconciling social forces with individual passions.

But, let me pause for a moment here, to consider, albeit briefly, the "context of discovery" of the most important source for writing this history - the Coroners Records for Colonial Singapore. It is late January 1978 in Singapore. I am stymied. I was fast running out of Government repositories and libraries in a desperate search for documents that would provide insight into the unique identity and sociability of Japanese women. Perhaps, I asked, in a race against the clock, does the elderly clerk know of the whereabouts of records which would help me place the lives of his parent's and grandparent's generation in a meaningful historical context. The old man did not think he could be of any real assistance but said that he still remembered the location of "some old things" in the huge modern building. The two of us arranged to visit the Subordinate Court store room just two floors above the following day.

When the door was unlocked for me, after several months of fruitless searching, to a still largely empty storeroom in the new Subordinate Courts Building, I gained entry to a collection of several hundred unclassified quarto size volumes stacked high against a wall, to a height of four feet. The floor itself in several spots was also covered with piles of unsorted Certificate of Coronors Views and miscellaneous documents into which everything has been dumped, higgledy-piggledy

-a horizontal load filling an area the size of my office! Most of the volumes of Inquests and Inquiries and bundles of Coroners Views wedged beneath a stack or lying at the bottom of a heap had invariably suffered damage due to dampness and the ravages of white ants. Over the decades the record keepers had developed a habit of throwing things in piles and boxes just to get them out of the way - the Court officials had a different sense of the past and priorities and for years had just put things aside, and forgot about them.

I can still remember my surprise when the mindful clerk standing in the open door pointed across the large room. Not sure where to start without a check list or guide of some sort, I began to rummage among the stacks closest to me. I started to dig in and there was just about everything - Coroners Inquests, Coroners Views, suicide notes, drafts of letters, even recipes and household bills! The first two hours or so were both thrilling and somewhat confusing. Without stopping for a rest over the entire day, I was introduced to the beginning of an absolutely enormous cast of ordinary men and women whose life experiences were situated at a point in time in a "visitable past" - prostitutes, construction workers, the homeless, parents, addicts, rickshaw pullers, petty criminals, and many others - and, I immediately wondered how they all might fit together. Sensing the historiographical possibilities these documents offered for the study of Japanese women and the fact that they all might fit together, as I gradually learned, was one of the major points towards the making of Ah Ku and Karayuki-san. Initially, I randomly picked up and excitedly read the Coroners View on the suicide of the Karayuki-san, Oichi. My first encounter with this extraordinary source. I shall never forget it. In a very real sense, Oichi's way of dying was the thread I pulled to begin to untangle the whole fabric of that change occurring in the underside of Singapore society.

The material I found was breathtakingly exciting, not only for the light it threw on Singapore's pre-war society and economy, but for the way it illuminated in sharp detail the dramatic changes that occurred in Japanese culture and history, yet within the memory of a visitable generation, still close enough to be grasped, especially, the period from the early 1900s to the late 1930s. I then set to work, travelling back and forth for several years, between a tiny corner of the Subordinate Courts library in Singapore and my own University office, reading, analysing and getting the material in order. I realised that the contents of this repository would yield up with skill and patience, the living testimony of women and men who did not know how to express themselves in print and have access to people in power.

I wanted to write a history of the Karayuki-san in Singapore full of "imaginative drama and narrative sweep", and primarily about ordinary individuals who had the incalculability of life, stories based on the Inquests and Inquiries with plot and dialogue that were deeply impressive and the Coroner's work stunning yet thoroughly purposeful, cases with ironic intent and powerful feelings. It seemed to me writing about these cases of death from the point of view of social history was a way of re-framing what had actually happened in life to these Japanese prostitutes and for giving voice preferably their own voice or voices of family and friends, and enemies or strangers in association with them, or, if they were dead, another or a lot of other voices - a client, lover, samaritan or assailant. I started out with a basic idea in my history of trying to communicate to as wide an audience as possible about what it was like to be a Japanese prostitute, what happened to them, how their lives developed within the city and beyond, and that was a very complex process. I have spoken as naturally and as compassionately as possible of the individual and collective characters and how they developed within my book - as if Oyoshi, Oichi and Duya Hadachi and many, many others were old friends. In some ways, many of the individuals in Ah Ku and Karayuki-san were deeply flawed, a tightly tangled knot of desire and despair, of hopes and dreams gone to ruin. There was also a paradox. I had to reconcile myself to about catching the lives of Japanese prostitutes in ways that we had not experienced before in a city like colonial Singapore. I was forced into an awareness of these women making fundamental sharp choices that could haunt and/or drop from sight without a trace. Consequently, I also had to consider making basic choices about different approaches to innovative historical writing. I knew in such moments that the answer was not to leave the rude beast or "event", the extant material, also known as the life

around the prostitutes to the novelists or playwrights, but to do what social historians do, or are supposed to do, which was to confront the deepest concerns of humanity, wrestling the beast of human life and bringing it to terms in an original, lasting and illuminating way.

All the fundamentally great themes of power and innocence, friendship and loyalty, goodness and evil, love and betrayal in all its forms and fathomless complexities are found in the Coroner's cases about the lives of these very ordinary, sometimes dangerous and inarticulate women. Until that moment of "discovery" of the Coroner's Records in a court basement in 1978, there was no knowledge of such vanished feelings and 'events' to speak of whatsoever. And I have tried to recreate such emotions and moments through the complex voices which the Coroner and others spoke of the dead and by travelling back in time in his imagination, not just along the busy thoroughfares lined with rickshaws, but onto the brothel verandah and beyond. Ah Ku and Karayukisan attempts to understand the character of a colonial city and experiences in the lives of prostitutes linking behavioural codes, cultural attitudes and work that was potentially rewarding but, that left many fumbling for a livelihood and unsure of their emotional ground in the face of grief, loss of employment, or resentment of the failure of love.

It is also an attempt to make the commonplace in Singapore society memorable, to communicate through these cases of essentially uninflected lives, until that moment of death, all the spontaneous pleasures and unanticipated tragedies of the kind of living that most prostitutes experienced. There are no soft embellishments, no nostalgia, no romantic finery. My focus concentrated on the pain, anguish, confusion, accomplishments, affection and sacrifice of these Japanese women amidst the harsh, developing "modern" landscape of a colonial city and port. Through this social history, these Japanese prostitutes of the past speak to present generations of the things which concerned them then and which concern us now as the twenty-first century approaches. The excruciatingly personal record of the Larayuki-san's lives in Singapore speak to us, as individuals on the other side of the curtain, of the traditional virtues of humility and endurance, of poverty, work and family, of sexual inequality and social repression, of hurt, grief and passion and of loneliness and death."

> James F. Warren February 1995

Dr James Francis Warren is the Head of Asian Studies and Associate Professor of Southeast Asian Modern History at Murdoch University in Perth, Australia. He is the author of the book, Ah Ku and Karayuki-san: Prostitution in Singapore 1870 - 1940.



THEATREWORKS (SINGAPORE) LIMITED

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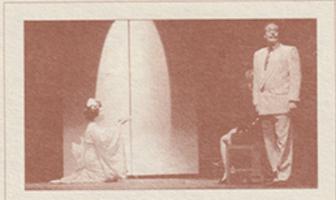
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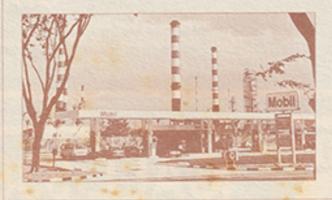




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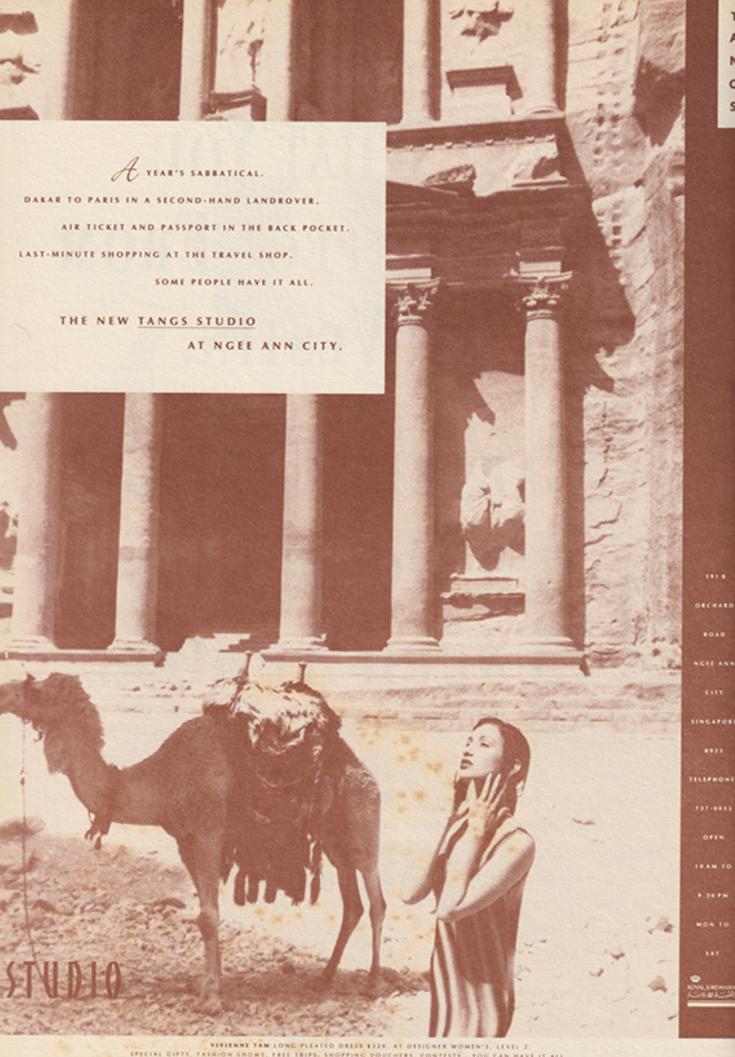
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