

Amateurs

KEVIN MARTENS WONG

He was a girl, on a Thursday, in the last Kristang play ever to be performed in Singapore. An Uzbek girl, or a Tajik girl, or something like that. He couldn't remember the role. He couldn't remember the lines. He couldn't remember the play, other than the title, and only because the title had been plastered in large letters across the front of the Theatre – cost the Company almost \$80, and which ended up staring back accusingly next to him, after he missed his cue because he had been too busy thinking about what he would do – because midway through the play Archimedes had run in to say that Mr. Tessensohn was dead.

Mr. John Edwin Richard Tessensohn, founder of the Eurasian Association, patron of the Portuguese Amateur Dramatic Company, and first-ever Eurasian to sit on the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, was dead. As dramatic in life as in death; almost like a play in himself, always and forever. The generosity, the money. The sickness, the decay. Even the play itself; Mr. Tessensohn was supposed to have been getting better, the Company was supposed to have been getting better – this was supposed to have been their big turnaround, their big cultural moment. *Their big bowl for Johor, and their big pitch for Melaka – and Malaya, and the world! Their big drink, after the years in the wilderness. Their big Lower Six luck-out.* Mr. Tessensohn was dead. It was over. A luck-out. A big drink.

Too many things had happened that day. Being a girl, for the very first time in his nineteen years, because *everyone had to give the revival their*

all. Everyone had to step up. Everyone had to try something new. Missing the cue, on-stage, for the very first time in two years with the Company. Mr. Tessensohn dead, for the very first time ever. *Mr. Tessensohn dead.*

And what came after Mr. Tessensohn was dead, too. For the very first time ever.

There was just this thing about calling Mr. Tessensohn “Mr. Tessensohn” that the boy who had been a girl had always envied. *Mr. Tessensohn is coming. Mr. Edwin Tessensohn will speak to the Governor on our community's behalf. Allow me to present, with great excitement, Mr. John Edwin Richard Tessensohn, first Eurasian Legislative councillor in the Settlement, and our very own immensely esteemed patron of the august and very well-respected Portuguese Amateur Dramatic Company.* No one else alive had even come close to what Mr. Tessensohn had achieved for those born in Malaya. It was almost a heresy to think of his own name in the same way.

How could he not cower? And yet, how could he not also be jealous that he cowered? Namecards. Whiskers. Women and men who recognised him by name, and who looked out with desire from behind similarly considering eyes. That little genuflection at an important personage that all the other races did (but which his mother had always said Eurasians did not have time for). *And who could have imagined the people of this Settlement would ever have genuflected at Eurasians,* his grandfather had used to say, *before Edwin Tessensohn.*

Mr. Pereira. Mr. Nahuel Edward Cosimas Pereira. An important personage. Nobody, especially his Crafts teacher and his mother, ever calling him Hoo-Hoo again. (One could not possibly imagine Mr. Tessensohn ever even permitting one to think of “Win-win”.) *God, what I would do with that name!*

Power corrupts absolutely, Mr. Pereira. Only Mr. Tessensohn had ever

called him that before, and it was after, as stage manager, he had swapped the fake dollars for real ones during the second dry run of *The Merchant of Venice* – and blamed it on Hippo, who endured a thrashing from Mr. Bodestyne.

Mr. Pereira. Just a little thought, a little immodesty, a little brash indolence, peeking out behind his fears now and again, especially on-stage.

And that was why it was so hard to remember that day – because that was also the day that someone called him, for the very first time, *Mr. Pereira*.

“Mr. Pereira.”

The Stranger didn’t genuflect, which was fine – the boy who had been a girl for a day hadn’t ever imagined anyone would genuflect at him, ever, in his life – and who genuflects at someone who has worked their way through quite the stash of whatever it is nineteen-year-olds snort in the sorry streets of a Settlement so far removed from that Weimar place or the West Indies or wherever it is the rest of the world is fighting over now? But it is enough to ensure that he remembers nothing else on that day well, and that it all blurs into a very sorry state of haphazard flickers, like amateur bulbs going off when the photographer has been hired from somewhere even less prestigious.

But he remembers what came next.

“Mr. Pereira. Or would you prefer, Nahuel?”

“My friends call me Nah.” Too grumpy; but he’s not performing – but then he is, because he’s secretly upset that this moment could not work more functionally, that the universe could not arrange for its oddities to appear at separate, less frustratingly confusing times. The stranger is still out of focus. Thursday, September 9, 1926, Anno Domini. Wake up, Nahuel. *Mr.*

Pereira. “But how do you know my name?” *Slurring. Verbal slouching! I want to see confidence!*

Yes, Mr. Tessensohn.

NAHUEL (*kung konfiansa*): Keng bos? Bos sabeh yo sa nomi? Ki kauzu?

STRANJERU (*ta rih, na Inggres*): Ah! You still speak.

The Stranger switches to the patois. Still out of focus, but at least we can hear each other’s hearts beating now. Patois has always been richer. More alive. More grounding. *Patois is what makes us better than the Englishman, listen here, my Amateurs. The hard work of an Amateur is the soul of the Eurasian, the blood of the common man who knows no colour and suffers no race-blindness. An Amateur is an Auteur.*

Yes, Mr. Tessensohn.

You can talk in the Mother Language with me. I am an Auteur.

Seng, Sinyor.

THE STRANGER (*in Portuguese patois as smooth as his English*): It’s good to hear your voice again.

NAHUEL (*confidently*): My mother gave it to me.

THE STRANGER: I haven’t had the pleasure.

NAHUEL: My, I would hope not.

THE STRANGER (*as if to himself?*): More of a scoundrel than I remember.

Called *Mr. Pereira* and *mufinu* in the same conversation. One cannot help but remember this for now, and forever. Over and over again. But there is respect. The stranger knows him, somehow. He has no idea who the stranger is. *Does the stranger want to know me?* But he does not quite feel that either.

NAHUEL: I played a girl today. I suppose it's the role.

THE STRANGER: Did you enjoy it?

More into focus now; a swirling overcoat, not too distant from that of an Upper Ten; a hat with a faintly gilded rim, and a young face. Eurasian too, but too dark to be Upper Ten. Not Mr. Tessensohn. An enigma.

NAHUEL: As much as you seem to have.

THE STRANGER: Oh, I didn't watch the play. (*Gestures at the Theatre Royal, and at the peeling letters* IN LOCAL PORTUGUESE: ARJUNA, OR THE RUINED MERCHANT OF BOKHARA, A REVIVAL BY SINGAPORE'S OWN PORTUGUESE AMATEUR DRAMATIC COMPANY) It must have been a worthy effort, though.

NAHUEL: Oh. I haven't really been on-stage anywhere else, though. Josephian, then?

School was how he had started with the Company. Archimedes, Santi, Evans, Hippo – they had all gotten started at the school. God, another thought that Mr. Tessensohn must be telling God to dismember him for, but how much he hated *Jacob and His Twelve Sons*. Reuben's part was definitely written for someone Mr Zuzarte disliked, and he hoped it wasn't him.

THE STRANGER: In a manner of speaking. On my stage, they call it St Pancras's.

A pause. Notes are pursued, mentally. They are not found. A part of the body is found (and again, only because of Mr Zuzarte's bizarre scripts), but the boy is quite sure that that has an *e*, and it would be rather strange for a school (and a saint) to be named ...)

NAHUEL: I don't know of any St ... Pancras. Is it in the FMS?

THE STRANGER: Oh. Yes. In a manner of speaking as well.

A rather tedious affair.

NAHUEL: I don't quite get your manner of speaking, sir.

THE STRANGER: You usually never did. But that's fine. (*sighs*) Where I come from, they'll take any one of you.

A very tedious affair.

NAHUEL: I know I'm a player, but I would prefer a somewhat clearer game.

THE STRANGER: I shall take that as clarity enough on where this could go.

And he grabs the boy's arm, and it was in that moment that the boy who had been a girl became a man.

(*Blackout as NAHUEL gasps and a loud rushing sound is heard.*)

He was a girl, on a Thursday, in the last Kristang play ever to be performed in Singapore; and on Friday, he was, as the stranger put it, on another stage.

Melaka.

A completely, utterly alien Melaka.

“*Yo sa* Melaka,” said the stranger when they emerged. The boy who had been a girl who now had to pretend to be a man would always remember those words when they first emerged, coughing and shrieking and sputtering something very, very bitter and metallic that had not been in his mouth seconds before, into the mirror.

The mirror. Spelu. Nus teng na spelu. Later the vocabulary would catch up with him, but that was the line in his head. *Go with the line, even if it makes a fool of you. Fools work at companies and make money. We make money out of foolery.* A mirror, then. One of a billion. The boy saw them all in those few seconds, and he tried to become a man as a result, and could not. It was another stage. Another Melaka. Another world.

There is Kristang *everywhere*. Street signs are *rua* this and *rua* that. Brown faces. He cannot breathe for all the magic. *People talking – jenti, jenti, tantu jenti ta papiab –*

NAHUEL (*in shock, like he has just been baptised at the wrong church*):
Where – Melaka is like ... this? How is Melaka like this? I thought ...
the pictures ...

THE STRANGER: Not your Melaka.

Confusion. Severe. *Project it. Make sure they can see it! Make sure they can feel it!*

THE STRANGER: (*smiles confidently*)

NAHUEL: (*smiles confidently, but in a way that makes the viewer somewhat uneasy*)

THE STRANGER: Maybe ... *our* Melaka.

And then, in the middle of other Melaka, not-Nahuel’s-Melaka the stranger kisses the boy who became a girl who became a man, and the boy who became a girl who became a man became a boy again, absolutely, totally, fully, in that street.

THE STRANGER: You’re dead, Nahuel.

You can understand now, why, Mr. Tessensohn, your death was, eventful as it were, not quite the star of the show of Thursday, 9 September 1926.

(*Blackout.*)

KINYANG DOS

(*Curtains up on NAHUEL and THE STRANGER, in the SPELANEZA, in THE STRANGER’S MELAKA.*)

Friday, 10 September 1926.

In a certain kind of way, I suppose, yes, I would have to be considered dead.

So he has died on many stages, as the Stranger keeps saying – many mirrors; many different worlds. Many different realities. *Like the stage, but different. Just the world-stage. The universe-stage.* And on the Stranger’s world-stage.

NAHUEL: Am I always called Nahuel?

THE STRANGER: Not necessarily.

NAHUEL: Am I always Portuguese?

THE STRANGER: Do you mean creole, or from Portugal, or –

NAHUEL: ... well ... both –

THE STRANGER: – no.

NAHUEL: ... so ... I could be ... German? Russian? I could be a communist?

THE STRANGER: I've met at least one of those.

NAHUEL: ... am I always like ... this?

THE STRANGER: ... like how?

You know ... you know ...

Identify! Identify the thought. Identify the feeling. The audience cannot do it for you. They are here to be entertained.

NAHUEL: ... like ... like ...

THE STRANGER: ... horrendously attractive to the point that we keep bringing new versions of you back to this very room to explain the same thing over and over again to you?

NAHUEL: ... no ... commonalities ... ?

THE STRANGER: ... I mean, your name usually begins with Nah?

Wait – many versions of me over and over again –

NAHUEL: What happened to the original me? Who *was* the original me?

The Stranger tells him, and Nahuel ... is awash. Adrift.

Mr. Pereira. I'm sorry, Mr. Tessensohn, but it is so much more than Mr. Pereira ...

NAHUEL: ... so ... so ... a *captain* here is ...

He tries to say it. The word is familiar in Kristang, and yet, so alien in this Melaka, where it means so much more. *Kapitang*.

THE STRANGER (*laughs*): You were not *kapitang* yet. But you were the most likely to be.

Sixteen noble houses in this Melakan country – Melakan *Empire* – each with their own surname that has vivid echoes of his own community, his own people – but they are also his people. Delskara. Algandara. *Tesensor*. *Mr. Tessensohn*. *I was like you here*. These are my people. I was the *kapitang*.

THE STRANGER: You are a Perenna here, Nahuel Pereira. The house raised you up to the vote. You could have been kapitang. You were a deeply strong candidate.

NAHUEL: Why?

THE STRANGER: Oh ... well.

He looks out the window, wistfully.

THE STRANGER: Because you could *perform*. They loved it. You gave them what they wanted. You said you were a girl in your world? Oh, here, you were everything (*touches Nahuel's cheek*) to everyone.

NAHUEL: To you, as well?

THE STRANGER: I told you; I knew you the best.

The stranger unclenches a fist that Nahuel did not know was even clenched. It is an extremely beautiful ring. Tigers on the signet. Nahuel means tiger, though not in the patois.

THE STRANGER: Nor is it a patois here.

NAHUEL (*examining the ring*): How ... how is this possible here?

THE STRANGER: ... are you from the stage where they exchange sandals instead?

NAHUEL: No, but ... (*looking at the stranger. Thinking of the kiss*) That.

THE STRANGER (*simply*): It is our language. The language that we followed to our independence from the world. So that we could put on a play of our own.

September 9, 1806. The mural fills the dome of the *spelaneza*, the circular mirror-room in the old fortress, where a dozen machines crackle and whisper to each other against a huge bay window flooded with light. A band of some sort glitters around the wrist that revealed the ring. The boy is more concerned with the mural. The central figure is clearly meant to be Melaka. She wields what must be the flag: purple, yellow and black. There is a bird on her shoulder of some kind. A green eagle, or parrot. There are other figures.

NAHUEL: Is that ... still Argentina? Bolivia?

THE STRANGER: Siblings in our revolutionary zeal. Brazil too, and Granada. Concepcion. And Batavia.

NAHUEL: Batavia is independent too?

THE STRANGER: Why would it not be?

The Stranger takes the ring back. Again, the confused, lost tenderness. *I do not know you. You kissed me. But I also kissed you. That was also me. But it also wasn't.* Thoughts and feelings mix and collide.

THE STRANGER: It is a mix. A mishmash. If you have a name, we named it as well. *Eresberes*. Creole thought. Creole progress. Creole exceptionalism. Purity is beautiful. But you know what is more beautiful?

Beauty! Make it beautiful, even if you have never felt beautiful in your life. They came for a show, and you will reward, whether man, woman, child, dog or tree!

THE STRANGER: The old world died. It has been dead since 1806. Melaka has led the way with her siblings on every stage. Society. Technology. *Progress*.

When I started to support this Company, I wanted the best for the Eurasian people. For the Eurasian youth, like you, and you, and you. And I want that. I demand that. I expect that.

THE STRANGER: Purity of blood is beautiful. But only creole thought could lead the way to the higher, more beautiful, more progressive purity that comes from things mixed. Things challenged. Things given form, at last. I gave these machines form. You encouraged me. You gave me form.

The Stranger takes Nahuel's hand.

THE STRANGER: And now I give you form, over and over again.

THE END

Wait.

Form. Posture. We need to pay attention to all of these things, always.

NAHUEL: ... I'm sure my form is always impeccable, though I hope the version of me on this stage was as good-looking.

THE STRANGER: You have no idea.

Ideas, too. Ideas are how we grow. We are enriched by ideas. Ideas are why we will perform Ali Baba, Shakuntala, Liandro and Lizarda.

NAHUEL: ... I don't, and I also have no idea about how I died in this universe.

A pause. Expressions change.

Someone is not happy anymore.

THE STRANGER: You always ask this question.

NAHUEL: And I know you don't answer questions very well, but really, I think this one is important.

THE STRANGER (*sighs*): Would you be surprised by the answer?

NAHUEL: Not really, seeing as you already knew I'd be attracted to you.

THE STRANGER: Such strength of character.

NAHUEL: If you've met enough of me, I assume enough of me were trained in the Portuguese Amateur Dramatic Company, or some form of it.

THE STRANGER: The real you was never concerned with drama.

And that's the rub. *The devil is in the details, and inside all of you devils too.* Mr. Tessensohn didn't really need to say the second part, but the point is clear.

NAHUEL: How did the real me die?

THE STRANGER: You were murdered.

NAHUEL: In cold blood?

THE STRANGER: While you were performing.

NAHUEL: I thought you said I didn't perform.

THE STRANGER: To adoring crowds.

NAHUEL: And what were they adoring me for?

The Stranger hesitates. And Nahuel knows what he will say. Because it's too easy. It's too easy for how it always explodes. In his head, in his mind, and sometimes on the stage.

Nahuel knows himself too well.

Mr. Pereira. Mr. Nahuel Edward Cosimas Pereira. God, what I would do with that name!

God, what I have probably done.

And the Stranger knows it. He says it.

THE STRANGER: Two traitors.

NAHUEL: What kind?

THE STRANGER: The impure kind.

NAHUEL: I thought you said there was no purity anymore.

THE STRANGER: I said there was a higher kind of pure.

NAHUEL: What kind of impure traitor?

What kind of Melaka would I lead?

Not just Mr. Pereira. But up-and-coming Kapitang Nahuel Edward Cosimas Pereira.

THE STRANGER: I told you we see race differently here.

NAHUEL: We made it a thing, didn't we?

THE STRANGER: I don't think I understand what you mean.

NAHUEL: I know you don't think you do, but I do.

He knows. He can imagine. *Power corrupts absolutely.* Being mixed or being patois or creole whatever. Creole thought. Creole progress. Creole exceptionalism.

Mr. Pereira. Or Perenna. Whatever.

He can imagine what happens if one doesn't have creole exceptionalism.

NAHUEL: Send me home.

THE STRANGER: I can't.

NAHUEL: You brought me here against my will. You kissed me.

THE STRANGER: You liked it.

NAHUEL: You didn't know that before you started.

There is something else under the stranger's coat. Nahuel doesn't know what it is, but he also does. He knows because he never got the opportunity to ask the other question about himself, the boy who became a girl who became a man who apparently also became a kapitang, and who now does not want to become that.

The one about the other Nahuels who came here before him.

THE STRANGER: You liked it here. You liked being here.

NAHUEL: Nah.

(THE STRANGER *and* NAHUEL *circle each other*)

NAHUEL: As you yourself said –

(NAHUEL *laughs*)

NAHUEL: – that was the real me.

(THE STRANGER *pulls back his coat to reveal what is underneath*)

KEVIN MARTENS WONG is a gay, non-binary Kristang/Portuguese-Eurasian speculative-fiction writer, independent scholar and linguist born, bred and based in Singapore. He leads the internationally recognised grass-roots movement to revitalise the critically endangered Kristang language in Singapore, Kodrah Kristang, and his own freelance coaching and consulting initiative, Merlionsman (merlionsman.com). Edwin Tessensohn, the Eurasian patriarch mentioned in “Amateurs”, is his great-great-great-grandfather, the first-ever Eurasian to sit on the Straits Settlements Legislative Council, a founding member and president of Singapore’s Eurasian Association, and the patron of the Portuguese Amateur Dramatic Company, a key component of colonial Singapore’s Kristang-language theatre scene, between 1892 and 1926.

South of Memory

SHARMINI APHRODITE

It is the man named Lee who speaks first. He is leaning forward, a nick between his brows but his expression otherwise placid, his voice when he speaks enough to quieten the murmur in the room, which had rustled around the smooth pillars and high ceiling, the dark and polished wood. Outside the sun is making its equatorial music so that the light in the room is that of a chiaroscuro, stark against shadow, and it is against this light that the conference is unfolding, against this light that the decisions are being made – or unmade – to create a nation.

“I would like to suggest,” Lee says, “that you speak your mind frankly. Let us know what are the things you feel have to be safeguarded. Let us know how they can be done, and when.”

Silence follows his pronouncement. Across from Lee sits Stephens, the representative from North Borneo, his throat parched and his head still spinning from the flight he took just yesterday, two-and-a-half hours across the South China Sea, and now here he is on another island, much smaller, but with the same tropicality outside the window. But when he looks outside he does not see the shadows of foothills, he does not see an unburdened sky. Instead the press of a city, its clamour and clang. This thought is brief; the man next to Stephens clears his throat, and he comes back to himself, to his position here as the lone delegate from Borneo. For many months now the Malaysians have been chasing them with their talk of a shared nation, of a brotherhood that goes back beyond the British, the Japanese, embedded in history. But the Borneans have their misgivings, they are worried, and it