

Stage Play

Dr Chee – The War of the Words

A shambolic exercise in one act

by Garrett A. Hughes

Dr Chee receives a mock trial by Alice in Wonderland characters and is sent to prison for violating a Singapore law that prohibits speaking in public without a permit.

CAST OF CHARACTERS

in order of appearance

JAILER	a jailer (male, middle-aged)
DR CHEE	himself (male, 40s)
WHITE RABBIT	the court herald (male or female)
JURY (of 1)	the jury (male, elderly)
KING or QUEEN OF HEARTS	the judge (male or female)
MAD HATTER	officer of the rules (male)
MARCH HARE	the star witness, aka Peter (female)
PAT	a gardener (male, elderly)
ALICE	a maid servant (female, 20s)

PLACE: Singapore

SETTINGS: (1) A prison cell consisting of a single frame of prison bars and a cot. (2) A courtroom consisting of a carpenter's workbench, a low stool, and a jury box containing one chair surrounded by a cardboard box.

TIME: In the prison cell: the present. In the courtroom: the recent past.

SYNOPSIS: *Dr Chee – The War of the Words* uses theatre of the absurd to expose the reasons for the inherent dichotomy between Singapore law and its written constitution. The Public Entertainments and Meetings Act requires a police permit to speak at a public gathering of five or more persons, in spite of Singapore's constitution guaranteeing freedom of speech and assembly.

Dr Chee Soon Juan, a Singapore human rights' advocate, has challenged this law more than once. He has been arrested, tried, convicted, fined and/or sent to prison on more than one occasion. This play attempts to capture the ludicrous, but often serious nature of one of his trials and imprisonments. While in prison on this occasion, Dr Chee suspects that he is being poisoned and refuses to eat. The play opens on that note, and then flashes back in a dream sequence to the comical nightmare of the trial that got him there. By using characters from Louis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland*, the play attempts to capture the spirit of the actual trial in parody, humor, and satire.

The witnesses for the prosecution – the Mad Hatter, March Hare, Pat, and Alice – are allegories for injustices of the Singapore city-state as perceived by Dr Chee. As such, they make terrible prosecution witnesses, but great press.

The characters engage in constant verbal skirmishes, right up to the climax – a full-pitched battle of words with the winner-take-all at stake. In the end we see Dr Chee facing off against his primary adversary. Will Dr Chee prevail? Only time will tell.