PAUL THEROUX

THE SOUTH MALAYSIA PINEAPPLE GROWERS' ASSOCIATION

They had a drama society, but it was not called the South Malaysia Pineapple Growers' Drama Society; it was the Footlighters, it met on Wednesday evenings in the club lounge, and the official patron was the Sultan. He seldom came to the plays and never to the Club. It was just as well, the Footlighters said; when the Sultan was at the theater you couldn't drink at the bar between the acts, which was why most of the audience came, the men anyway. Angela Miller, who drove down from Layang Layang every Wednesday, said the Sultan was a frightful old bore whose single interest was polo.

An effortlessly deep-voiced woman, much more handsome at forty-five than she had been pretty at twenty, Angela had played a Wilde heroine six years before – that was in Kota Bharu – and found the role so agreeable, so suited to her temper, that in moments of stress she became that heroine; telling a story, she used the heroine's inflections and certain facial expressions, especially incredulity. Often it allowed her to manage her anger.

It was Angela who told the story of Jan's first visit to the Club. Jan had looked at the photographs on the wall of the bar and then sat in a lounge chair sipping her gimlet while the other members talked. Only Angela had seen Jan rush to the window and exclaim, 'What a lovely time of day!'

'All I could see were the tennis courts,' said Angela later, 'but little Jan said, "Look at the air – it's like silk."'

Jan Prosser was new, not only to the Club and the Footlighters, but to Ayer Hitam, where her husband, Rupert, had just been posted to cut down a rubber estate and oversee the planting of oil palms.

'Anyone,' said Angela, 'who spends that long looking out the window has to be new to Ayer Hitam. I look out the window and don't see a blessed thing!'

It had happened only the previous week. Already it was one of Angela's stories; she had a story to explain the behavior of every Footlighter and, it was said, most planter families. That exclamation at sundown was all the Footlighters knew of Jan on the evening they met to pick a new play. She was a pale girl, perhaps twenty-six, with a small head and damp nervous eyes. Some of the male Footlighters had spoken to Jan's husband; they had found him hearty, with possibilities backstage, but mainly interested in fishing.

Angela was chairing the meeting; they had narrowed the selection to Private Lives and The World of Suzie Wong, and before anyone asked her opinion, Jan said, ‘We did Private Lives in Nigeria.’ It was an innocent remark, but Jan was slightly impatient and gave it a dogmatic edge, which surprised the rest into silence.

‘Oh, really?’ said Angela in her intimating bass after a pause. She trilled the r as she would have done on stage, and she glared at Jan.

‘Yes, um,’ said Jan, ‘I played Amanda. Rupert helped with the sets.’ She smiled and closed her eyes, remembering. ‘What a night that was. It rained absolute buckets.’

‘Maybe we should put it on here,’ said Duff Gillespie. ‘We need some rain over at my place.’

Everyone laughed, Angela loudest of all, and Jan said, ‘It’s a very witty play. Two excellent women’s parts and lots of good lines.’

‘Epicene,’ said Tony Evans.

‘I’ve noticed,’ said Henry Eliot, a white-haired man who usually played fathers, ‘that when you use a big word, Tony, you never put it in a sentence. It’s rather cowardly.’

‘That’s who we’re talking about,’ said Tony, affecting rather than speaking in the Welsh accent that was natural to him. ‘Noel Coward.’

‘Too-bloody-shay,’ said Duff, ‘pardon my French.’

Jan looked from face to face; she wondered if they were making fun of her.

‘That settles it,’ said Angela. ‘Suzie Wong it is.’

‘When did we decide that?’ asked Henry, making a face.

‘You didn’t,’ said Angela, ‘I did. We can’t have squabbling.’ She smiled at Jan. ‘You’ll find me fantastically dictatorial, my dear. Pass me that script, would you, darling?’ Angela took the gray booklet that Tony Evans had been flipping through. She put it on the table, opened it decisively to Cast, in Order of Their Appearance, and ran the heel of her hand down the fold, flattening it. She said, ‘Now for the cast.’

At eleven-thirty, all the main parts had been allotted. ‘Except one,’ said Jan.

‘I beg your pardon,’ said Angela.

‘I mean, it’s all set, isn’t it? Except that we haven’t –’ She looked at the others ‘– we haven’t decided the biggest part, have we?’

Angela gave Jan her look of incredulity. She did it with wintry slowness, and it made Jan pause and know she had said something wrong. So Jan laughed, it was a nervous laugh, and she said, ‘I mean, who’s Suzie?’

‘Who indeed?’ said Henry in an Irish brogue. He took his pipe out of his mouth to chuckle; then he returned the pipe and the chuckling stopped. He derived an unusual joy from watching two women disagree. His smile showed triumph.

‘You’ve got your part,’ said Angela, losing control of her accent. ‘I should say it’s a jolly good one.’

‘Oh, I know that!’ Jan said. ‘But I was wondering about –’ She looked at the table and said, ‘I take it you’re going to play Suzie.’

‘Unless anyone has any serious objections,’ said Angela. No one said a word. Angela addressed her question to Jan, ‘Do you have any serious objections?’

‘Well, not serious objections,’ said Jan, trying to sound good-humored.

‘Maybe she thinks –’ Duff started.

Angela interrupted, ‘Perhaps I’m too old for the part, Jan, is that what you’re trying to say?’

‘God, not that,’ said Jan, becoming discomposed. ‘Honestly Angela, I think you’re perfect for it, really I do.’

‘What is it then?’

Jan seemed reluctant to begin, but she had gone too far to withdraw. Her hands were clasped in her lap and now she was speaking to Duff, whose face was the most sympathetic. ‘I don’t want to make this sound like an objection, but the point is, Suzie is supposed to be, well, Chinese… and, Angela, you’re not, um, Chinese. Are you?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ said Angela, raising a laugh. The laughter subsided. ‘But I am an actress.’

‘I know that,’ said Jan, ‘and I’m dead sure you’d do a marvelous Suzie.’ Jan became eager. ‘I’m terribly excited about this production, really I am. But what if we got a Chinese girl from town to play Suzie. I mean, a real Chinese girl, with one of those dresses slit up the side and that long black hair and that sort of slinky –’

Angela’s glare prevented Jan from going any further.

‘It’s a challenging role,’ said Angela, switching her expression from one of disapproval to one of profound interest. ‘But so are they all, and we must be up to it. Henry is going to play the old Chinese man. Would you prefer that Stanley did it?’

Stanley Chee, a man of sixty, with gold-rimmed glasses and a starched uniform, was Head Boy of the Club, and at that moment he could be seen – all heads turned – through the bar door, looking furtive as he wiped a bottle.

Jan shook her head from side to side.

‘It’s going to be a hard grind,’ said Angela, and she smiled. ‘But that’s what acting is. Being someone else. Completely. That’s what I tell all the new people.’