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A Brief Review of a Play in Progress: "Dear Mr. C"

Ted Morrissey

I have titled this a *review*, but it isn't so much a review as a *report* on a play in progress: *Dear Mr. C*, a memory play with music by **Tidtaya Sinutoke** < <https://www.tidtayasinutoke.com/>>, which I had the pleasure of seeing April 22, 2022, at Illinois State University's Center for the Visual Arts. *Dear Mr. C* won the 2022 Diverse Voices Playwriting Initiative.

There are lengthy and illuminating **interviews** < <https://news.illinoisstate.edu/2022/04/meet-the-artists-behind-dear-mr-c/>> online with Sinutoke and the performance's lead actor, **Sanhawich Meateanuwat** < https://smeateanuwat.wixsite.com/smeatea?fbclid=IwAR1jKE_wlXronMhRcjpVqSNOuVEps1nWgfgMrJC_5kpLBmz2boOC39ZsWm0>, conducted by Kee-Yoon Nahm, chair of the **Crossroads Project** < <https://finearts.illinoisstate.edu/crossroads-project/>>, which is dedicated to promoting diversity and inclusion in the theatre at the university. I encourage you to read the interviews for a detailed description of the play's development, from inspiration to presentation at the university. In lieu of repeating the information, I'll mainly focus on my experience when viewing the

multidimensional piece, which was presented as a staged reading and not a fully formed, finalized dramatic work.



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Nevertheless, some further context is needed. Sinutoke was born in Thailand but is a New York City-based composer, writer, and musician who holds a B.M. from the Berklee College of Music and an M.F.A. in musical theatre writing from NYU Tisch School of the Arts. The play is based on Sinutoke's experiences while living in the U.S. after discovering that her mother was diagnosed with cancer at home in Thailand. Director Janet Wilson's note in the **program** https://www.canva.com/design/DAE8qhQqFpQ/A907JVk3rRTpoMnayF2csQ/view?utm_content=DAE8qhQqFpQ&utm_campaign=designshare&utm_medium=link&utm_source=publishsharelink#1 says, "In the play, [Tidtaya] describes cancer as her personal 'definition of suffering.' Through delineating her five stages of grief (not 'based on the Kubler-Ross model'), Tidtaya uses beautiful and poetic imagery, in word and song, to express her private suffering due to her mother's diagnosis, compounded by Tidtaya's immigration status in 2017. With gut-wrenching honesty, Tidtaya has created the time and space for us to connect with and experience our own suffering."

Before the staged reading began, Professor Kee-Yoon Nahm conducted a brief interview with Sinutoke; then four readers took their places at stools with music stands to hold their scripts (Meateanuwat as "The Writer," Rosie Hauck as "Ensemble 1," Satomi Radostits as "Ensemble 2," and Zenon Zamora as "Ensemble 3," with Grace Eom's accompaniment on the piano); and afterward the audience was invited to share their reactions to the play (in addition to filling out an optional online survey). It was stressed throughout that *Dear Mr. C* was a

work in progress, and the playwright was very much interested in audience reaction.

Sinutoke had been at the university workshopping the script throughout the week. It was only the second time the play had been presented to an audience—and the first time, the playwright said, that she'd been able to see the production as an audience member. During the week, Sinutoke composed new music (she's been at work on the play since 2017, when all of the events took place), and rearranged some of the numbers before Friday night's presentation.

I found the 90-minute staged reading not only successful but delightful, in spite of the heaviness of the subject matter. The script alternates between dialogue and musical numbers, with a simple yet haunting score delivered via the single piano. Projection was also used, to a screen behind and above the actors. The projections were either simplistic drawings (an element of humor in the play), or they were to aid in translation. Generally the actors were speaking in English, but on the screen we saw the dialogue in Thai. Periodically, however, the actors spoke (or sang) in Thai, and we looked to the screen for English translation. The use of the languages in tandem not only added realism to the story, but depth as well, as it underscored the distance between The Writer and his family members back home, especially of course The Writer's ailing mother.

The five stages of grief, which characterize the playwright's personal reaction to her situation, were used as a structural device and essentially mirror the chronology of events. Instead of a heavy-handed transition between "acts," white balloons with faces drawn on them were brought out by stage manager Jenefas Okonma and delivered to the actors, where they remained, anchored by ribbon and clothespins, so that eventually the staging area was lined with the five balloons. It was a simple but, like everything else, creative and effective device. Perhaps the simplistic drawings projected on the screen and the cartoonish balloon faces suggest the The Writer's feeling like an overwhelmed child in the face of his mother's illness. In the play there are frequent references to The Writer's childhood and his relationship with his mother.



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Let's talk about the pronoun *his*. The play is autobiographical and therefore written with a female lead character. When the Diverse Voices Initiative selected *Dear Mr. C*, they had in mind that Sanhawich Meateanuwat would direct the play. After all, Meateanuwat is a second-year M.F.A. candidate in directing and is from Thailand. However, once Meateanuwat read the script he wanted to do something he hadn't felt compelled to do in a long while, he said: act. Sinutoke agreed to change the gender of the lead role (which included revising the key of the musical compositions). Based on Friday's performance, Meateanuwat's and Sinutoke's instincts were on target, as the Thai director-turned-actor was perfect in the role, capturing the intense emotions of The Writer's situation while successfully injecting humor here and there; and his performance as a singer was startlingly good.

The talents of the other three actors were well on display too, especially Hauck's, as she played The Writer's mother (and other roles). Like Meateanuwat, her dialogue was sometimes in Thai.

Since music is such an important element in *Dear Mr. C*, it's appropriate to recognize the reading's music director, Maggie Marlin-Hess. Also, Sinutoke shared credit for the lyrics with Lily Ali-Oshatz and Naomi Matlow.

Dear Mr. C is a mixture of many things: the raw emotions associated with separation and impending loss, the frustrations caused by government bureaucracies, and the harmonizing impulses of Buddhist philosophy. And at this moment in time the horrors of the war in Ukraine filtered into the presentation, with references in the program and a call to support those suffering because of the invasion. The pandemic was also referenced from time


to time, in part because even though this is the Diverse Voices Playwriting Initiative's third year, it was the first time the program was performed in person.

One assumes that as *Dear Mr. C* evolves it will get better and better. Based on this early staged reading, the ultimate version of the play will be a tremendous work of theatre that will not only entertain but also benefit untold numbers of performers and audience members who encounter the young playwright's obvious genius.



Ted Morrissey < <https://tedmorrissey.com/> > is the publisher of Twelve Winters Press and its entities. His novel excerpts, short stories, poems, critical articles, reviews, and translations have appeared in some 100 publications. His most recent novels are *The Artist Spoke*, *Mrs Saville*, and *Crowsong for the Stricken*.

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