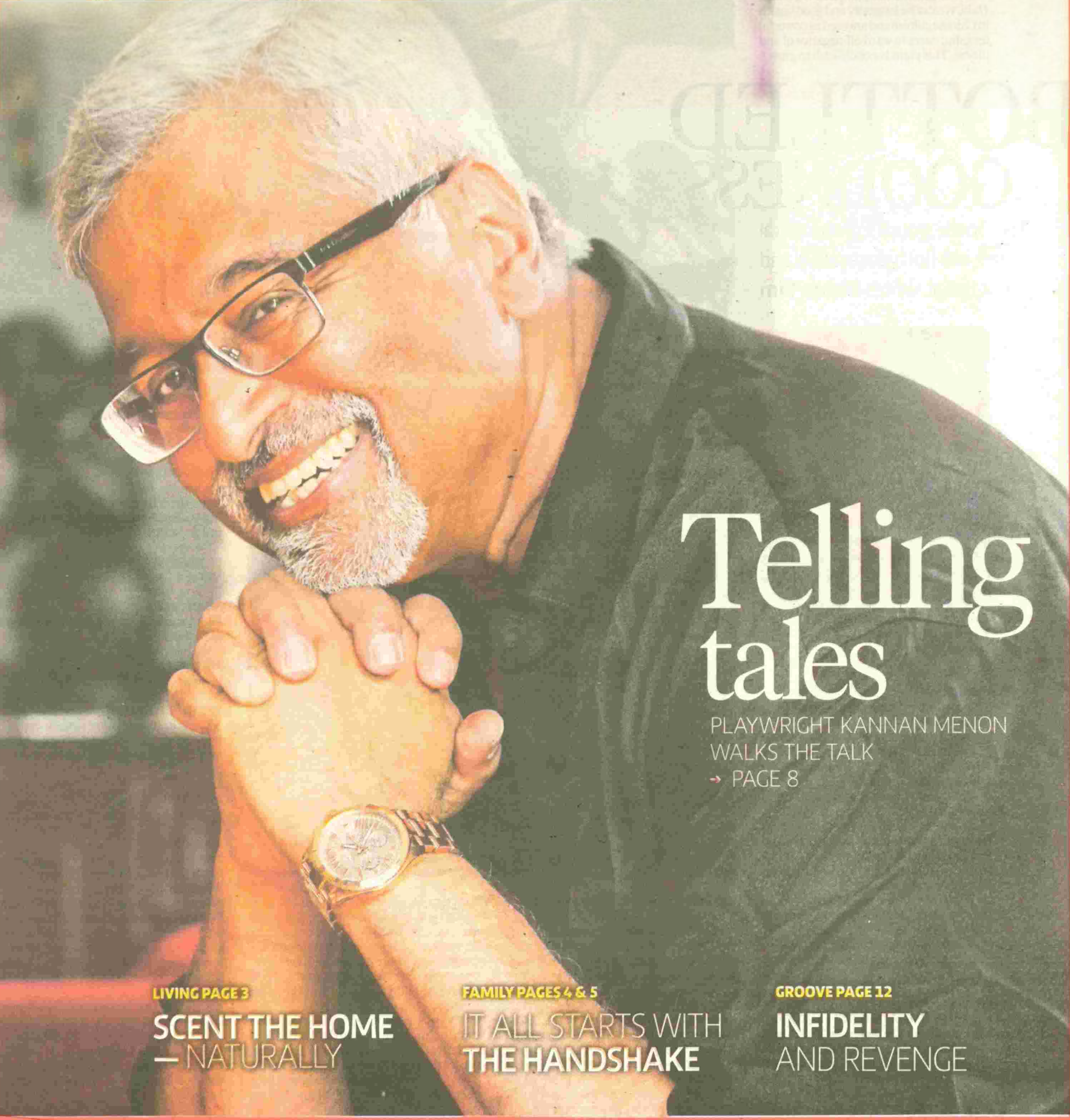


LIFE &
TIMES



PULSE

SATURDAY, AUGUST 15, 2015



Telling tales

PLAYWRIGHT KANNAN MENON
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— NATURALLY

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IT ALL STARTS WITH
THE HANDSHAKE

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INFIDELITY
AND REVENGE

BROUGHT TO YOU
BY THE TIMESPULSE *people*

ON a lazy 1950s evening, in a house on top of a hill somewhere near the Parliament building in Kuala Lumpur, a woman tells her grandson stories from the Hindu epic, *The Mahabharat*. When she finishes narrating the great battle of Kurukshetra, he asks for more stories and she tells him about Krishna's counsel to Arjuna on the eve of that great battle and how Arjuna won a princess's hand in marriage. That curious little boy listening to his grandmother's stories is today 64 years old. And his name is Kannan Menon, a New York-based Malaysian playwright.

"That house belonged to an uncle," says Kannan who is in transit to Kerala, India to visit his maternal home in a place called Kodungallur. His family, Kannan says, later moved to their own home in section 4, Petaling Jaya where he grew up.

"Artistes," insists Kannan, "have to be intensely curious about the world. Especially if you want to be a director or playwright."

Kannan will soon be back in KL to perform staged readings from three of his plays at the Silverfish Festival Of Cabbages, an event that celebrates intellect and ideas and features a number of prolific speakers.

Zoo and *Transit* are two short scenes from *Lounge Lizards* set in airline lounges in an international airport. *Zoo* features a zoo manager, an animal rights activist and a billionaire who are each working to solve a huge problem while searching for true happiness.

Transit is a scene between two bankers competing for love and sales across Southeast Asia.

The third reading, *The Driving Lesson*, is a scene from Kannan's 1997 comedy *Haze Fever* which features a driving instructor Dr Drive giving Mrs Zee a few tips on life, love and driving on Malaysian roads.

A COLOURFUL EDUCATION

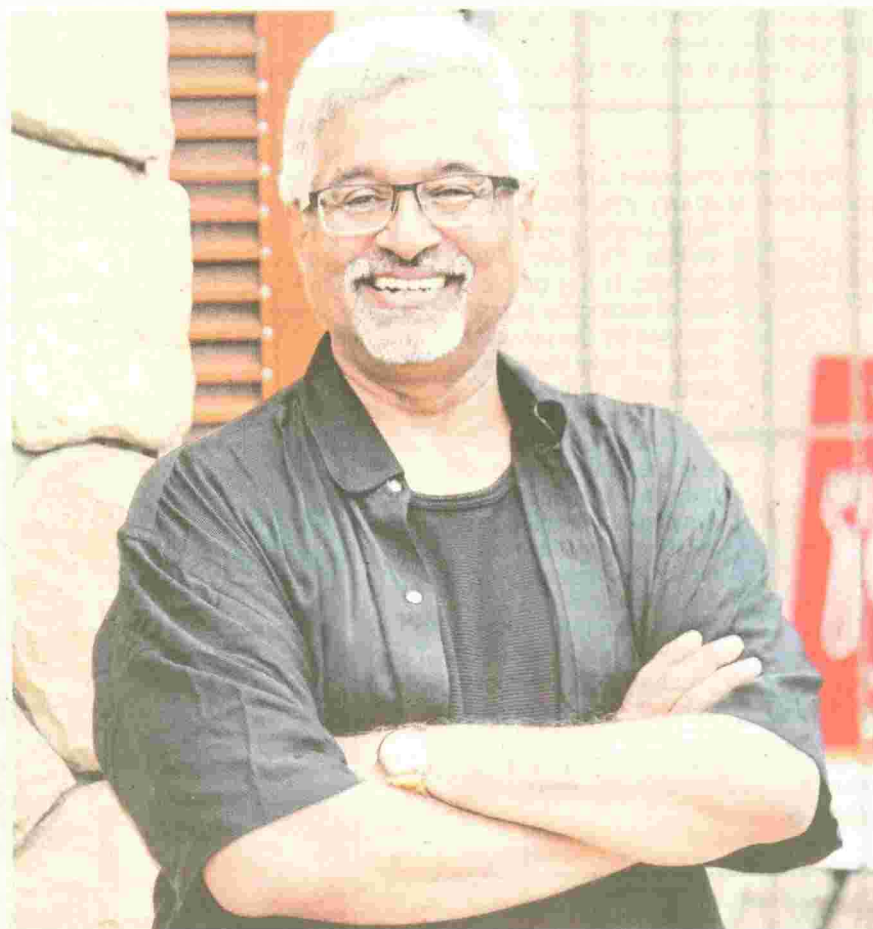
Kannan has been part of the theatre scene both here and in America for a long time. In fact, when he was in Form 6, he was all prepared to venture to the UK to read law when he made friends with volunteers from the Peace Corps. They suggested he apply for scholarships to study in America. After applying to 30 or 40 colleges, this only son of VMN Menon (one of the founders of Amesu, All Malayan Estate Staff Union) eventually joined a Bachelor of Arts programme at Catawba College, Salisbury, in North Carolina.

Of all the things he missed most during his time in this small town (population: 25,000) was the Chinese food. "There wasn't a single Chinese restaurant. There's one on every street corner in America and there wasn't even one in Salisbury," says Kannan. What Salisbury did have were bars, but they were located across town. To get there, he often had to hitch a ride and, one day, things got a little tense.

"I hitched a ride from a man the Americans refer to as a 'redneck,'" Kannan recalls. "He had a gun rack at the back and I was wary of him. As we were making our way through town, we came across a couple walking by the side of the road. My driver got all angry and said, 'I can't stand no black guys dating white girls.' I sort-of-replied, 'Well, I ask white girls out sometimes.' He turned to me and said, 'But you're not black.' With that gun rack at the back of his truck, I wasn't going to argue with him on this!"

TALES OF THE ASIAN PEOPLE

New York-based Malaysian playwright Kannan Menon tells our stories, lest they are forgotten, writes **Aneeta Sundararaj**



When Kannan was in Form 6, he was all prepared to venture to the UK to read law when he made friends with volunteers from the Peace Corps.



Kannan's maternal home in Kodungallur, Kerala.

After Salisbury, Kannan moved to New York and completed a Master of Fine Arts Degree in 1976 from Tisch School of the Arts, New York University. Later, in 1989, he read law at New York Law School.

INDIA CALLING

Describing his legal career as a little unconventional, he shares: "Usually,

lawyers will join a big firm and stay there or get pushed out. I was lucky because I was in this boutique firm, ...I got to come to Asia."

This was also the time when India opened its economy. Recognising the potential for business, Kannan's attention was, therefore, focused on the Indian sub-continent. "India of 1990s was not like

India of today," he says, a gentle smile on his face. "There was no Coca Cola. They had the Indian version called Thumbs

Up. And the only cars they had were those American Ambassador cars. Even if you went to a mechanic in the smallest village in India, he'd have parts for this car. And the roads were terrible."

On one particular journey with three American bankers in Uttar Pradesh, aware that it would take the better part of 10 hours to reach their destination, Kannan promptly went to sleep soon after the journey commenced.

"When I woke up," he says, grinning, "you should have seen the look on these guys' faces. They were frozen in shock. They thought they were going to die. For me, if we didn't get there, I was asleep anyway."

TELLING THE ASIAN STORY

Another trip which would inspire the story in one of his plays is one he made to Thailand with his late wife, Girija. They visited Kanchanaburi and the site of the Burma Railway, or as it's also known, the Death Railway, a 415km railway built by the Empire of Japan in 1943 to support its forces during World War II. At the memorial for the Allied Prisoners of War, Kannan was astonished to learn that some 150,000 Asians were also involved in the construction of this Death Railway.

Shaking his head, he says: "I never heard about this. I mean we all knew about the suffering of the Allied Forces. You have movies like *The Bridge On The River Kwai* (an adaptation of Pierre Bouelle's novel about Prisoners of War in Burma who were forced to build a bridge to aid the war effort of their Japanese captors). But Asians?"

When he returned to the US, Kannan researched this subject. "I went to the library and read the notes by soldiers who'd written about it. One Aussie guy wrote that while the Allied soldiers had it bad, the Asians had it worse. Many of them were uneducated and had no idea about disease. They died by the thousands from dysentery and typhoid."

As a response to the plight of the Asians who suffered in Kanchanaburi, Kannan created his play, *At A Plank Bridge*, based on events after the Japanese forces withdrew from Malaya in 1945 and just before the British returned to Malaya. Two strangers meet on a deserted country road, near a plank bridge. Their confrontation touches on the anti-Japanese resistance movement, the communist rebellion and the construction of the Death Railway.

Kannan isn't surprised that many Asians remain unaware of our history. This is because many who survived World War II hardly ever talk about what happened to them. "It's like a silent generation," he says, before sharing: "My mother, Devi, used to work in India for that typewriter company... Remington, I think it was called. All she said was that life was hard during the War and they were always hungry. There was no food for the Indians. The rice was all sent to Britain. They created an artificial famine in India."

In a very serious tone, Kannan offers his parting advice, saying: "We should write our own history."

Kannan Menon (including Mano Maniam, Chako Vadaketh, Takurdas and Lynne Foster) will perform staged readings of three plays as part of the Silverfish Festival of Cabbages.

WHERE: Silverfish Books at 2F-20, 2nd Floor, Bangsar Village II, KL. Admission is free

WHEN: Aug 22-23, 5-7 pm
More info at www.facebook.com/SilverfishBooks or call 03-2284 4837