Atomic Jaya
by Huzir Sulaiman

Atomic Jaya was first produced by Straits Theatre Company. It opened on 11 March 1998 at the Actors Studio Theatre, Kuala Lumpur.

Performed by Jo Kukathas
Directed by Huzir Sulaiman
Song Composed by Rafique Rashid
Set Design Hayati Mokhtar
Lighting Design Mervyn Peters

In the revised version printed here, it was presented by Five Arts Centre, in association with Straits Theatre Company, at The Substation, Singapore, opening on 15 February 2001.

Performed by Claire Wong
Directed by Krishen Jit
Set Design Caroline Lau
Lighting Design Bernard Chauly, Jr.
Characters
(to be played by one actress)

Dr. Mary Yuen, a physicist
General Zulkifli
A CNN newsreader
A Cabinet Minister
An RTM newsreader
A BBC newsreader
Dr. Saiful, a physicist
Dr. Ramachandran, a physicist
Teng, a contractor
Bala, a contractor
Otto, a smuggler
Noraini, the canteen lady
an NGO Protestor
Madeleine Albright, US Secretary of State
Prologue

The stage is dark.
The house lights dim slightly.

Voice-over Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to this performance of Atomic Faya. We'd like to take this opportunity to remind you to turn off your hand phones, pagers, and watch alarms so that they do not disrupt the performance. (Pause) Ladies and gentlemen, please rise for the national anthem.

"Negaraku" is played — the old, slow version.
The house lights go out.

I.

A spotlight on Dr. Mary Yuen. She speaks to the audience.

Yuen Okay. I turned 35 last year, and I thought to myself: Mary Yuen, now is the time when you’re supposed to start hearing the clock tick. Tick tick tick tick tick boom. The thing is that instead of wanting to make babies I made atomic bombs. This is the story.

What drives a woman to make atomic bombs? There are no columns on it in Marie Claire or Cleo. Let’s go back to my school days in Ipoh. I used to read a lot of biographies of physicists. When all the other girls would be hanging around the recreation hall in the cafeteria waiting for the bus full of ACS boys to pass — these superb, pimply, horny specimens of Chinese manhood — I'd be in a corner reading about Rutherford, Niels Bohr, Schrödinger, Dirac, Feynman, Einstein, Max Planck, Max Born. Those gods of 20th century physics. People who told stories about the way the world worked in a fundamentally new way. So I'm thinking to myself, what is physics but the telling of stories about the world at the tiniest level? When I grow up, I thought, I will have succeeded if I too
have a new story to tell, and if I could tell it with as much
elegance and precision as these great scientists.

Well, now that I've got a great big old story to tell, I begin to
think about the very nature of telling stories. The rules and stuff.
Is it possible to be objective? This is the question. Objectivity
suddenly becomes an issue. As a physicist I've learnt that, on a
subatomic level, it's impossible — which comes from
Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, which you probably
remember from school. When you're the observer of a sequence
of events and you want to tell that as a story, those events
themselves change. Nothing is certain. You can't trust your own
point of view as an observer, because we now know that there is
no such thing as a neutral observer. Great. What more if you
were an actor, a participant in those events, as I was in the
construction of the Malaysian atomic bomb. Then it becomes a
very hard story to tell.

But I have to try. I don't think anything as momentous is going
to happen in my life again. My story starts six months ago. I am
fairly certain of that. I had a visitor to my office.

2.

Lights. Mary’s office. General Zulkefli enters.

General Good morning, I am Zulkefli. General Zulkefli. I come
from Mindef. Where the generals come from. You are Dr. Amry
Yuen?

Yuen Mary Yuen, actually. Can I help you?

General I’m looking for Dr. Amry Yuen, Room 214, Malaysian
Institute for Nuclear Technology Research, Bangi, 43000
Selangor. He is here?

Yuen No, I think...
the armed forces. Napoleon Bonaparte, the great European warrior: at the battle of Waterloo, disaster. His prawns had gone off. Humidity. Belgium very wet.

Yuen I see.

General But I'd like to ask you a question. How come you decided to study so much the atomic bombs in the USA? Why not business administration at the University of Southern Illinois, for example? Mass Com in Ohio?

Yuen Well, I've always been interested in physics, and the physicists who were my childhood heroes all helped the Americans build the atomic bomb during World War Two. I was emulating... just hero worship, I suppose. I don't really know.

General So you admire these builders of bombs?

Yuen Well, they were afraid Hitler was going to get it first. It wasn't built on a whim. What is... can I ask why you're asking all this, Encik... General?

General What would you say if I said that Malaysia is going to construct an atomic bomb?

Yuen What? Malaysia is building a nuclear device?

General I said to you, what would you say if I said that we are going to construct... I have not said it. I have not said it.

Yuen Well, it's a reasonable assumption, I should think. You came to see me. You know I have research experience in that field. This is unbelievable.

General I am only interested in your cocoa beans. Napoleon won Austerlitz because his cocoa beans were tip-top.

Yuen Well, first of all, didn't Malaysia sign the International Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty in '68 or '70? I mean, we agreed not to develop nuclear weapons capabilities. We have no nuclear weapons programme. We're never going to have one. That's why I'm stuck here blasting basmati rice with gamma rays.

General You could have stayed in the USA. Become the brain drain. They offered you a job, is that correct? Why did you come back?

Yuen My grandmother in Ipoh was dying, so my mother asked me to come back and spend time with her, to make sure that our side of the family inherited the shophouses in Taiping and the Ipoh Garden house.

General But you returned to Malaysia in 1995. She did not die?

Yuen We're waiting. She takes Calcimex, for healthy bones.

General Look, let's say I said that Malaysia is going to construct a nuclear weapon. What would you say?

Yuen Why don't you say it? Then we can be empirical.

General We are building an atomic bomb.

Yuen My God. You're serious. Malaysia is building...

General You better not say it. Official Secrets Act, OSA. Two years in jail. Cannot repeat it back.

Yuen Repeat what back?

General You cannot trick me. I can say it. You are not allowed to say it. Also you cannot say that I said it, because that would mean that you are saying it, and that means OSA. I am only interested in the rice. Napoleon never took rice, you know. That is why he was defeated.

Yuen General, why are we building... what are we doing this for? We don't have any enemies.
General I tell you something. Nobody respect the Malaysian Army. Every other ASEAN country the army very powerful. Indonesia, army still very strong. Thailand, army very strong. Eat your tom yam goong, turn around, army has a coup. Philippines, army strong. Myanmar, military government. Singapore, every man do army service. DPM is a general. Malaysia, go to Bosnia also get no respect. Just march in Hari Merdeka parade. Malaysia, nobody care about the army. But if we have the atomic bomb! If we have the atomic bomb, then the fish is in the other kettle. And you no need to preserve them. Dr. Mary Yuen.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen Frustrated researcher in dead-end job makes deal with devil? Is that what you think? A clue, okay: the third rule of storytelling is don't simplify excessively. I forget rules one and two. We can probably ignore those. So why — at the outset, that's the big question — why did I agree? Because my brain is big, and my life is little, and I wanted a better fit between the two. But if I appear a little conflicted here, if I seem not without guilt, maybe it's because, you know, I am a little conflicted, and I am not without guilt. Shit, I don't know: you've been in training all your life to do something. You haven't had a chance to do it. And then you get offered a chance of a lifetime. Of a deathtime. So there are repercussions. So there are consequences. So? So what if the General's a little bit Hollywood? Sean Connery, or at the very least Gary Oldman, as the rogue general who enlists Sigourney Weaver, or at least Winona Ryder, as the Physicist Who Later Has Doubts. I know what you're going to say. But it's what happened, okay? More or less.

Blackout.

3.

BBC Radio (VO) There is growing concern in the international community over reports that Malaysia is developing atomic weapons capabilities. A series of US Central Intelligence Agency bulletins leaked to the Washington Post allege that key Malaysian physicists are being transferred from their university and research institute posts to a secret government weapons laboratory. The US State Department has requested an urgent clarification from the Malaysian government. This follows yesterday's communiqué by European Union foreign ministers, currently meeting in Brussels, seeking assurances that Malaysia will not begin a Southeast Asian arms race. In Kuala Lumpur, the Malaysian capital, a senior government official denied that Malaysia had a nuclear weapons programme.

Lights on the Minister.

Minister They have asked for some clarification. I will give a full clarification. Malaysia is not developing the atomic bomb. Now I say in Malay so the Malay news can have the quote also: Malaysia tidak developkan bomb atomik. This allegation of the Western Media Jewish Conspiracy is a fiction of their imagination. Our R&D is 100 percent concentrate toward develop the instant palm tree to put by the side of the road for when we host the SUKOM, the CHOGM, the LIMA, the ENAM. Or any time when the foreigner come here because they want to see the tree. We no-need to put for Malaysian because they know already what is the palm tree. Our education system is very good. They can recognise the palm tree. In fact, I want to announce the create of a new fund. If you wish to throw your old palm tree, you can donate to the Tabung Penanaman Pokok Pelancongan Malaysia so we can have enough palm tree for all the highway the tourist will pass by.

Blackout.

RTM (VO) He was speaking to reporters after the groundbreaking ceremony for the construction of the Al-Fayed Duty Free Islamic Information Technology Theme Park and Crafts Village on Pulau Langkawi, Kedah.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.
Yuen I remember I had a what-will-other-people-think moment. The grad student section from Chicago, the Division X people at Los Alamos: would they watch the news and put two and two together and get 10 (in base 4)? Would they connect the dots and think, "Isn't that Mary from Malaysia who had all the instant noodles?" And David Nussbaum, my first boyfriend? Well, not boyfriend, I don't know — we kissed behind the neutron counter in 3B. Would he be happy for me? For him, bombs meant peace, not war. He was one of the few people I met during my time in the States that actually believed that nuclear weapons would serve as a deterrent to war. To believe that in 1950 is one thing, but I mean, come on, this was, what, 1989. Where had he been? You build bombs so you can beat up people with impunity. Everyone knows that.

Or people from home. I wasn't supposed to tell my family — anyone — about the new job. But I was supposed to go home for Gongxi Raya. My mother wanted me to bring back some radioactive rice to give my popo to hasten her departure. (Filial piety is not what it used to be.) What would I tell her? Sorry, mummy, but next year I'll bring a low-yield nuclear device? That should do the trick?

What would people say?

4.

Lights. Atomic Jaya facility.

General Hello and welcome, Dr. Mary. Very nice to see you. When I look at you I feel like Napoleon looking at the French scientist. But in English, I attended Sandhurst Military Academy you know. They throw me out because I eat belacan in the barracks. English Army food so bad what I'm supposed to do? Please follow me. Welcome to the research laboratory of Syarikat Perniagaan Atomic Jaya Sdn. Bhd.

Yuen Yes, I was confused about the sign. You mean this is a private company?

General It's not my decision. Everything they must privatise now. But it's okay. The directors of the company include seven generals and one Prime Minister's son. You must have Prime Minister's son. Keep them busy. Otherwise if unemployed they will start the NGO.

Our facility is in the former helicopter hangar. All the old Super Puma helicopter crashed already, so we can use this extra space. Here is the barrack block, on the right hand side, where you will be housed. On the left hand side is the computing facility where we have the most up-to-date computer. We buy from Texas Instruments and Hewlett-Packard. They manufacture in Penang. Then they export to US. We order from US. At four times the price it come back. As the French say: chest la vee.

Here is the lounge area. Ah, Dr. Saiful and Dr. Ramachandran are here. I introduce you to your colleagues. Dr. Mary Yuen, Dr. Saiful.

Yuen How do you do?

Saiful It's very good that you can join us.

General Dr. Mary Yuen, Dr. Ramachandran.

Ramachandran What a great pleasure to meet you.

General Dr. Saiful is the chief physicist. He is from Universiti Kebangsaan. He is on secondment.

Saiful Not secondment. Three months already. Thirdment. My research is analysing the background radiation in Malaysia. Background.

General Dr. Saiful has a very close knowledge of radioactivity. He used his own skull to measure the penetrative power of alpha-beta-gamma-X-rays.

Saiful Radioactivity is my friend.
Yuen But have you done work with fission?

Saiful Just on the weekends. Only ikan bandaraya. Cannot eat, have to throw back. With my son. My wife prefer to see TV.

Yuen Oooo-kay.

General Dr. Ramachandran. His background is also in physics.

Ramachandran New Delhi: BA, MA, PhD.

Yuen Delhi University? So you’ve worked with Rajarao and Gill. Didn’t they work on the Indian bomb?

Ramachandran Not Delhi University. Delhi Polytechnic. They build for Pakistan.

Yuen Oh, I see.

General Dr. Ramachandran was Instructor in Physics at California State University at Fullerton. His field is the hydrodynamics of implosions and explosions. This is very important for building the bomb. But most importantly he is here so that we can have one Chinese, one Malay, and one Indian. Otherwise not complete. Chinese do the work, Malay take the credit, Indian get the blame.

Ramachandran But we climbed the mountain.

General Now, gentlemen, perhaps you will brief me on this construction of the bomb? Noraini, bring some tea.

Yuen Who is that?

General That is Noraini, the canteen lady. Her nasi campur is very good. Dr. Saiful, please go ahead. You must explain it to me.

Saiful General, there are two methods we can use to construct the atomic bomb. One is with uranium, and one is with plutonium. They are both radioactive elements. They both give off neutrons. Sometimes the neutrons will split the nearby atoms, which releases more energy. When you have enough of the radioactive material together, at the point we call critical mass, there will be an explosion of energy. So to make an atomic explosion you just need to have enough to make a critical mass. Which is how much?

For the uranium bomb we have to obtain a large quantity of highly enriched uranium. We say 55 kilos, lah, enough. This must be the highly enriched uranium, which contains a large percentage of the isotope uranium-235. We say 90%, lah.

We obtain the critical mass by bringing the two parts of the uranium together very rapidly. This is called the gun method. This is the same method as the bomb that they dropped on Hiroshima. You make a tube, like a gun barrel. At the one end you have a bullet of uranium of approximately 15 kg. At the other end we have... the balance. Then you make a small explosion with normal explosive and you fire the uranium bullet into the larger part so they achieve critical mass. Boom. The whole device weighs about 300 kilos at the most. Can put in a van. This is the uranium bomb. For the plutonium bomb I call upon Dr. Ramachandran?

Ramachandran Thank you very much. Now please stand here. I need some room. General, please, stand here. With weapons grade plutonium, to manufacture the plutonium bomb, we don’t need all this 55 kilo all, no. We only need about 8 kg, which is the size of a cricket ball, but the Selangor Club flers will get a very big shock if they use it. Everyone knocked for six with radiation burns. But with plutonium, I have to admit there are some problems because we cannot use the gun method. We have to use the implosion method, where we compress the plutonium sphere, compress it by explosions all around, so it becomes smaller, and then attains critical mass. We cover it with high explosive, and then we have fifty or sixty detonators located all around, that we detonate simultaneously. So it forces it inwards so that it goes critical. But that is plutonium metal. It is a little bit difficult to work. It burns in air. It is highly toxic, plutonium metal. It
is easier for us to get plutonium oxide, which is the powder form. It is stable. But then I admit we need 35 kilos, not 8 kilos. Which is the size of a cabbage. But not as nice as my wife’s cabbage with mustard seeds and turmeric.

**General** So what is the great secret? You mean it is that simple?

**Ramachandran** General, her mother-in-law herself taught her the recipe.

**Saiful** You can learn this from the Internet, General. “Oh, IT. Love IT.”

**General** So what is the catch? Dr. Yuen?

**Yuen** The catch is getting enough uranium or plutonium. The rest is no problem.

**General** Ah, Noraini, very good. Can put there.


**General** Dr. Yuen, Rome was not built in one day. Two-three days is better. I know what to do.

**Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.**

**Yuen** I don’t want to frighten people, but... actually, nothing frightens people any more. It’s actually really easy to build a bomb. An A-level student could do it. Even with the KBSR syllabus. And it’s not that hard to find uranium and plutonium on the international black market, if you know what you’re doing. Which was, in this case, a big if.

**Blackout.**

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**Atomic Jaya**

5.

**CNN (VO)** Allegations that Malaysia is building nuclear weapons have resurfaced following testimony from a Czech national arrested in Dresden, Germany with 17 kilograms of highly-enriched uranium in the trunk of his car. German Border Police said the uranium bore the markings of the Russian nuclear weapons facility Chelyabinsk-70. The suspect claimed that the uranium was bound for unspecified buyers in Malaysia who had advertised in the local newspapers. In Kuala Lumpur, a senior government spokesman denied the claims.

**Lights up on the Minister, as before.**

**Minister** As a result of the Western Financial Jewish Conspiracy, our currency has lost value. We are therefore trying to reduce our dependence on imported products. Such as the highly enriched Iranian, which come from Iran. We are not going to import the Iranian. We already buy the Persian carpet and the Persian cat from the Iranian so they become highly enriched at our expense. Why should we import them any more?

**Blackout.**

**RTM (VO)** He was speaking to reporters after opening the exhibition entitled “100 Years of Chastity Belts” at the National Art Gallery.

**Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.**

**Yuen** For years I had the sneaking suspicion that whatever the headline was in the newspaper, the truth was the exact opposite. “No truth to rumours,” invariably meant the rumours were true, and that everyone in Port Dickson was paid off or threatened so they’d keep quiet about it. The only gutsy, unbiased reporting was in the sports pages. Hey, it doesn’t matter if he’s royalty, if he’s messing with football — with the *rakyat’s* football — he was gonna hear about it. So I suppose it shouldn’t have bothered me
that they were denying the existence of our project. I don't know, maybe I was just being silly.

6.

Lights. Atomic Jaya facility.

General Dr. Yuen, I am very upset. They intercepted my uranium supplier. That never happened to the Emperor of the French.

Yuen Well, I don't think the Emperor of the French put an ad in the Malay Mail classifieds.

General It's the newspaper. No respect for the Army. They should put in the positions vacant section. They put in the personal announcements.

Yuen I saw it. Between "Bless the Sacred Heart of Jesus and St. Jude," and "Guan Eng, please come home, all is forgiven." There it was: "Wanted: Uranium Smuggler."

General So what do we do now?

Yuen Well, I thought I would speak to a contact of mine.

General One of your American colleagues?

Yuen He's from Ipoh, actually. Mr. Teng.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen By this point I was beginning to have grave doubts that we would ever pull it off, even if we did get some uranium or plutonium. Saiful and Ramachandran were nice, but not the most qualified weapons physicists. General Zulkifli was either a hawkish romantic, if you want to be nice, or just a dinky loony. The most competent person was Noraini the canteen lady. Her nasi campur was excellent. Looking back on it, that in itself was pretty suspicious. But against the wider backdrop of insanity that was Atomic Jaya, who would notice? Anyway, I decided I would go up and see Mr. Teng.

Lights up on pool hall. Music plays for a few seconds, then fades.

Teng: Wah, Mary Yuen. So big already. Last time I see you, you were schoolgirl lepak in the Jalan Chamberlain KFC. Father-mother all okay ah? Your popo not dead yet? Shophouse in Taiping, Ipoh Garden house she still holding? So what you want? Anything I can get for you.

You want car? Very cheap now. But must buy few lots, lah. Finance companies, the flers take loans, cannot pay back, so the finance company take back the car. You got cash, very cheap. Three Wiras 45,000. Each one 15. You want? Seven Kancils 70,000 plus free one. So eight Kancils for 70. Give all your colleagues one, one, one. Want or not? Round headlight Mercedes. New one. Cash, 40,000. Two months ago 100,000. Now nobody got cash. You want?


You want roller blind, window shade? Imported from Australia. Prices all before Soros prices. You want? Bathroom tile, Italy. You want computer? My friend work the Hewlett-Packard factory in Penang. He give me very good price. No questions asked. You want?

What? Uranium?

You Mary Yuen, you think you are who, ah? Who you think I am? You think I Chingaman, I can get such funny-funny things? Your own people you want to insult. You bring your mother-father shame. You make fun of me. I run an honest business. You don't poke fun with me, ah, Mary Yuen.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen That phrase of his echoed in my head like a bad movie: "You bring your mother-father shame, you bring your mother-father shame." Not for the reasons he thought of, but because I was beginning to wonder. My Catholic Chinese buttons are all still very pushable. Guilt, shame, shame, guilt. I have to stress, however, at this point I wasn't sure what there was to be guilty about or ashamed of. I had little time to think, because I got a call from a Mr. Bala, who said he wanted to meet me.

Spotlight on Bala.

Bala I think I can get for you. I got a cousin-brother, lah, fher married my auntie's husband's cousin. Seremban fher. From Seremban. He's a caroms champion, lah. First-class, international competition all. These caroms flers, all taking drugs. Steroids, lah. Thumb and finger all suddenly damn big. Because why, caroms they still don't test. Urine test don't have. This test lah, that test lah. So the flers can nicely whack whatever pills not scared. My cousin got a supplier. European. From Europe. One kind fher. Otto. Lot of contacts. Contacts, contacts, contacts. Anyway, European Otto reading the Malay Mail, say to my cousin-brother, this all no problem, can get. How to get, my cousin-brother say? My cousin also suddenly damn interested, bugger failed his studies, Vanto Academy also throw him out, lah, so he thought this uranium is a caroms sort of pill. As if who also donno. Uranium is the alien from planet Uranus. Anyway, this East European Otto say he got a contact in the former USSR.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen A general note about foreigners. Not that I'm an expert on the history of white people in Asia, but it seems to me that we're getting white people of significantly lower quality than we did in the 70s. Bottom of the barrel, really. That's a horrible thing to say, I know, but hey, you didn't meet Otto. I did.

Lights up on disco. Loud music briefly, then softer, but audible under this scene.

Otto I tell to you, the Dr. Mary Beautiful. He is in the laboratory in Moscow working. When break up the Soviet Union, when collapse the Communism, it is the freedom bringing, ja? They have like the Malaysia democracy. Everyone is free. But Russian have lot of problem with the mafia. Russia organised crime not so good. In Malaysia all the organised crime person wear the name tag so you know the name so you can have a conversation. It is a good thing. But in Russia no name tag. Only the gun. The plutonium and the uranium the organised crime are selling to you. They obtain from the laboratory of the science.

You no believe to me? I tell to you.

First number. In the Russian Federation now very poor are the scientists. For the children some food they are also not having. The small babies are hungry. They are every night the small-baby-hungry-noise making. The father is with the desperation to the organised crime the uranium selling for the money for the small-baby-hungry-noise stopping. So.

Second number. In the sometimes occasion, the organised crime person go to the laboratory of the science. Security, he is bad, so they enter the unlocked window through and make the unstoppable burglary. They have achieved bingo. I am to you sexy, ja, Asian woman?

Music stops. Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen I felt like I had no choice. In retrospect, of course, I
had all the choice in the world. I could have stopped it then and there, claimed I couldn’t get hold of any materials. But that’s not what I did. I gave him the green light. Go Otto go. And it just got more nightmarish. I can’t even tell you.

Blackout.

7.

CNN (VO) On the issue of the Malaysian atomic weapons programme, US intelligence sources today confirmed that Malaysia has apparently been successful in obtaining sufficient quantities of highly enriched uranium to proceed with the construction of a nuclear device. According to the source, satellite imagery clearly showed small crates of type used to transport weapons-grade nuclear materials, with the markings of the Russian weapons laboratory Arzamas-16, being unloaded by unprotected Bangladeshi workers at a Malaysian government laboratory. According the source, an unidentified female technician or scientist quickly ordered the work stopped. Soldiers in protective gear later appeared and attempted to load the material into eight very small cars. When these cars failed to start, water buffalo and elephants were brought in to move the materials.

Lights on Minister.

Minister The Western Media Danish Butter Cookie Conspiracy has again manufacture the story about Malaysia. They say that we are using the kerbau and the elephant to transport the Iranian. This is just foreign elephants jealous of our success. They have said that we are develop the atomic bomb as a nuclear weapon. This is not true. We are develop the atomic bomb as a tourist attraction. Don’t worry, you no-need to understand. I also don’t understand. But never mind. To boost the tourism sector, we are develop the atomic bomb. We have made a song, and we play it on the TV and the radio, to counteract the lies and propaganda of the foreign elephants.

RTM (VO) He was speaking to reporters after eating a light meal at Restoran Akbar Shah, Lucky Garden, Kuala Lumpur.


“We’ve Got the Atomic Bomb”

Colonialism is now gone
Now our government is strong
We are proud to be Malaysian
We are nice to our neighbour nations
We trim the hedge, mend the fence
Spend some money on defence
So when they come from near and far
Our atomic bomb will be a star

Chorus:
We’ve got the atomic bomb!
We’ve got the atomic bomb!
The Malaysian atomic bomb!
The pride of our nation!
We’ve got the atomic bomb!
Our very own atomic bomb!
The Malaysian atomic bomb!
To keep our nation proud and strong!

Malaysia is now the best
Commonwealth Games and Everest
The MSC, the Twin Towers
We are now a superpower
We learn and love and use IT
To earn the world community’s
Respect, and they will see we’re strong
Now we have an atomic bomb

(Repeat chorus)

House lights up. Intermission.
8.

House lights down. In the blackout:

RTM (VO) At Taman Air Tembikai, in Kuala Lumpur, men of the Federal Reserve Unit (FRU) used tear gas and water cannon to break up an illegal assembly of seven local residents and NGO members protesting the construction of an atomic bomb in the laboratories of Syarikat Perniagaan Atomic Jaya Sdn. Bhd. State Police Spokesman Assistant Superintendent of Police Arlan Buah Tangan confirmed that the demonstrators were taken into custody when they refused to disperse.

Lights. Outside the lab. An NGO protestor appears. In the background, overlapping, are sirens and the police loudhailer.

Loudhailer (VO) This is an illegal assembly. I order you to disperse. This is your final warning. *Tangkap mereka semua.*

Protestor On behalf of the Coalition of Concerned NGOs Against the Atomic Bomb we protest the senseless and aggressive construction of this device. We call upon the government. What? You said we could have ten minutes. Let me finish my sentence. We call upon the government. I am dispersing. I am walking away. I am dispersed. You cannot arrest me. Who are you? You are only a small inspector. (coughs and splutters) Don't gas the Reuters cameraman, ah? This has to come out on CNN in half an hour.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen Meanwhile, far from the little universe of those who act as professional consciences for our cynical and soul-impaired society, I was having a cynical and soul-impaired night out in Telawive, in Bangsar, with Serena Foong.

Lights. A restaurant.

Serena And you remember Alex? I saw him again. So fat. Gluttonous. At the Prada sale. He was there with his new girlfriend. I went to buy the black patent leather slingbacks? You know the ones. And a bag. But they don't give you a discount on the luggage, do they? Still, one doesn't go because it's cheaper. One goes because there's a greater chance of running into people who know you, who can take note of the fact that one is in Prada. Even during the sale. There's a fine balance. So Alex. Large, with some little teenager in CK, which is just the most predictable thing from Alex Woo, he spots me and he says another white wine, please? he says, have you heard from Mary Yuen?

Yuen Really? He said that?

Serena Well, of course he's been madly in love with you from the dawn of time, you know, but when we were at school he was afraid of the originality of that choice and so he pretended to be in love with me like everyone else. But it was you really.

Yuen Serena, please. I'm sure it was nothing like that.

Serena No, you're probably right. It's just more interesting the way I tell it. Anyway, he said, have you heard from Mary Yuen? And so what do you think I said?

Yuen She's building atomic bombs for a general of dubious sanity?

Serena No, I said, she's working in some boring old lab job, you should go and sweep her off her feet with your ample girth and make a remisier's wife out of her.

Yuen Well, it's not that boring.

Serena What is it you do? Still that prawnv zap-zap stuff? How can it be interesting?

Yuen Actually I'm working on the atomic bomb at the moment.

Serena Well, I hope they're paying you more. Look, do you want to go to Charlemagne Ooi's birthday thing at Carcosa or
not? Where’s my white wine? You could go with Alex Woo.

Yuen Serena, it doesn’t bother you that Malaysia is building an atomic bomb? It doesn’t surprise you?

Serena You’re still that way, I see. You always were funny at school. Why should it bother me? I’m sure these army people know what they’re doing. Good, actually. Good. Good. Better we have it than, I don’t know, someone else. Isn’t that Egregious Tan? Not that I care, I’m just looking.

9.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen I was beginning to think I was the only one on the planet who had moral doubts about the project. But it seemed that I had company.

Lights: The laboratory. A delicate experiment is underway.

Yuen Dr. Ramachandran?

Ramachandran (Absently) Mm.

Yuen Be careful with that canister, please.

Ramachandran Mm. Sorry. What is it, Dr. Yuen? Anything?

Yuen Are you all right, Dr. Ramachandran? Now is not the time for your mind to be elsewhere.

Ramachandran Dr. Yuen, I must relate to you the story of the incident last night.

Yuen Perhaps you could complete the transfer first? It’s not a good idea to be waving... look, please be careful.

Ramachandran It’s my wife. Perhaps you will understand because you yourself are once, twice, three times a lady. Usha and I — Dr. Usha Nair, she’s a medical doctor — we had a bit of an altercation. She’s a very lively sort. Brimming with vitality and all that. It was a love match. We met at Iyengar’s wedding. Our parents introduced us but essentially it was a love match. I think of marriage as a partnership between two equals. Or equivalents. She’s the physician and I’m the physicist.

Yuen Perhaps the physicist could assist his colleague by securing the material properly?

Ramachandran Last night we were watching the news, Usha and I. Apparently there was a hullabaloo outside here, the Atomic Jaya Sendirian Exectera, with demonstrators. They were showing footages and all that. These flers were chanting and shouting and carrying on. I thought, thank God the police were there, otherwise what an ugly situation. Stepped in to restore law and order and all. Used the air freshener, whatever. Okay. But Usha — Dr. Usha Nair, she’s a medical — Usha wanted to take umbrage. I thought to myself, if you want to take umbrage, make sure this taking of umbrage is correct and proper. Umbrage cannot simply be taken at whim or whimsy. You will waste the umbrage. Making a mockery. “Why is it you are building bombs? Can you furnish me with one good reason?” she said like that.

Yuen What did you say?

Ramachandran “We are building it for the good of the country,” I said.

Yuen It would do the country more good if you didn’t wave...

Ramachandran At that particular point she developed a strangeness. I couldn’t understand the thread of her logic. The fairer sex is completely. “What is it for, this building bombs business? If it is potency symbol that you desire, go and build a stone lingam in the garden, I won’t stop you.”
Yuen Dr. Ramachandran. Put the materials down.

Ramachandran I wanted to reason with her but she was oblivious. Completely oblivious.

Yuen DR. RAMACHANDRAN! SECURE THE MATERIAL RIGHT NOW!

Ramachandran (pause) Just because you are graduate of American university is not a reason for this high-and-mighty.

Yuen Dr. Ramachandran, we're talking basic safety here. It's not enough to wear the suits. Remember what happened to Dr. Saiful?

Ramachandran You are suggesting I don't know what I am doing?

Yuen No, Dr. Ramachandran. I'm doing nothing of the kind.

Ramachandran And the next minute what is it you'll be insulting? My qualifications? PhD, madam! Honestly earned. I tell you, unlike that MIC flier, all paid for from the catalogue. How many years of struggle, I tell you. And my wife. And Usha. Medical doctor qualifications are not two a penny whatever.

Yuen Please, Dr. Ramachandran, calm down.

Ramachandran "Build a stone lingam in the garden." That is what she said. She kept asking, "Why is it we are doing this? What is the point?" Dr. Mary... I also don't know.

Saiful enters.

Yuen Ah, Dr. Saiful, come in. Could you secure the material that Dr. Ramachandran is waving around?

Saiful Dr. Ramachandran, you can hand me the thing.

Ramachandran "What is the point? What is the meaning? Why are you doing this?"

Saiful Oh, you are discussing philosophy. Philosophy is different. Very interesting. For example, Men are from Bees, Women are from Dungun. I also like philosophy.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen Ethics and recriminations and moral dilemmas. I'm a good Malaysian, I used to think; I shouldn't dwell on all the murk of our souls. Don't dig too deep. But Dr. Ramachandran was right to ask: why?

The American physicist J. Robert Oppenheimer, who was in charge of the Manhattan Project at Los Alamos during World War 2, the American effort to build the bomb — when he saw the fireball and the mushroom cloud from the first test rising above the New Mexico desert, he was reminded of a line from the Bhagavad-Gita: "I am become death, the eater of worlds.”

A world is a big thing to eat. I decided to stick with being Mary Yuen, the eater of popiah.

10.

The Atomic Jaya facility.

Saiful General, you have called us for a meeting. is it?

General I am not very satisfied with the progress. I think the time has come for us to test the device.

Saiful Oh, test the device? Oh. You want to test?

Ramachandran I am afraid that if we are having Test matches now we will all be bowled out for duck. You will put us into a very sticky wicket situation.
General  India and Pakistan can do it.

Ramachandran  But General, how long has been their innings! And furthermore the pitch is very large!

General  Dr. Ramachandran, I don't understand you sometimes. Dr. Mary Yuen? I trust your opinion. You are my Marshal Murat. The only one who used tu and not tous with the Emperor of the French.

Yuen  Well, I'd like to draw your imperial majesty's attention to, one, the fact there appears to be little pressing reason to test the device at all, and two, the fact that there is nowhere in Malaysia to test a weapon this destructive.

General  I will answer point by point. One, the pressing reason is that we wish to host the Olympic Games.

Yuen  What, and nuclear warfare is now a medal event? Or is it just an exhibition sport?

Saiful  Taekwondo is an exhibition event. Last time. But now medal. I think so yes. So same, lah.

General  Dr. Mary Yuen, the pressing reason is because I say so. Two, we can test. We find a padang.

Ramachandran  No, all the calculations have been done. It is quite powerful. About 10,000 tons of TNT equivalent. The Hiroshima bomb was about 12,000 tons.

Saiful  It's the same. Ten, twelve. Eleven, lah, eleven.

Consensus.

General  Twelve thousand tons means what?

Yuen  The damage would be enormous. The atomic bomb is lethal for three reasons: heat, blast, and radiation. There's an enormous flash of searing heat, then a pulverising shockwave, then deadly poisoning radioactivity. Let's put it this way. If you detonated the device on the Selangor Club Padang, you would have total devastation in a circle with a 2 km radius. To the East, until Lot 10. To the North, until the UMNO Building. To the West, past Parliament. And to the South, to the Brickfields YMCA.

Ramachandran  YMCA! I used to use the tennis courts there. There is a very good ikan bakar shop nearby.

Saiful  Not just the ikan become bakar. The whole shophouse.

Yuen  KL would be on fire. Depending on the winds and the weather, people until Damansara Heights would later die of radiation poisoning. And this is a primitive device, General. American nuclear artillery shells now carry the same payload. Their missiles are 80 times as powerful. We're talking apocalypse, General.

General  I see. That is quite serious.

Yuen  Okay. Or let's detonate our little gadget in the suburbs. In PJ, let's say, at the Cold Storage in Section 14. You would kill every single person in Sections 7, 8, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 17A, 19, 51, 51A, 52, SS1, and SS2, and a great number in the rest of PJ.

Saiful  Why PJ the number so funny? I never understand.

Ramachandran  Because they don't want you to go there. PJ very closed. No foreigners.

General  That is very powerful.

Yuen  We're not like other countries. We don't have uninhabited deserts or remote atolls where we can blow up things unimpeded.

General  Borneo? There is Borneo. Sabah-Sarawak.
Ramachandran They don’t even consider themselves Malaysian. They should get a stiff reminder.

Saiful They are in a different time zone. Out of step.

General Furthermore we have the Bakun area. Seventy thousand hectares, the size of Singapore. They were going to flood it anyway. Flood, burn, it’s the same. The area has been earmarked for eradication, we can eradicate. Just because the government got no money doesn’t mean we want to shake legs only.

Ramachandran If you shake your legs, the ball will strike the wicket.

Yuen And you’ll be out. You’ll be bloody well knocked far the fuck out.

11.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen Heisenberg’s Uncertainty Principle. If you want to determine the position AND the momentum of an electron, you have a problem. You can’t. Get a reading on the position, and the momentum changes. Get a reading on the momentum, and you can’t fix the position. The act of observation changes that which is being observed, said Heisenberg. A good thing to remember. Something happened, but the fact that I noticed those things happening means something else happened instead. Keep that in mind. This is the point in the narrative where my point of view starts getting questionable. I’ll give you a hint. Second rule of storytelling (I just remembered it): you can never be too obvious. So here goes. I did it. I sabotaged the device.

“What? What?”

One more time: I made sure it wouldn’t work. Later, if I can calm down a little, and have a cup of coffee, I’ll tell you how. And why. But first things first. The Americans were getting upset.

Blackout.

BBC (VO) The United States today repeated its warning to the Malaysian government to immediately cease plans to test the low-yield atomic weapons that it is developing. Speaking at a press conference in Washington following a meeting with the Malaysian Ambassador described as “tense and unproductive,” US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright reiterated the United States policy of zero tolerance for the continued proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.

Lights up on Albright.

Albright There will be serious consequences if Malaysia detonates an atomic device. The United States stands by its policy to punish those nations who arbitrarily assume nuclear powers, who contribute to the growing global nuclear arms menace. We have the might, and we have the right, and we will not hesitate to fight for the right to our might, and our might alone. We want to remind the people of Malaysia of the words of a great American president, who said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; rather ask what our country can do to your country.”

Lights up on the Minister.

Minister The United States should not meddle in the internal affairs of our country. First they want to attack our currency, make us poor. Now they want to tell us what to do. They think they can tell the Malaysian don’t have the bomb. They think they can tell the Pakistan don’t have the bomb. Why don’t they listen when we tell them don’t have the bomb? The Malaysian people are loyal. They are patriotic. When we play the national anthem they stand up. They will listen to the wisdom of their leaders and not these foreign meddlers.
Blackout.

RTM (VO) He was speaking to reporters after speaking to other reporters.

Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.

Yuen I'm not very trustworthy, you know. I make no guarantees of... I'm a little mixed up. Nonetheless.

How to sabotage an atomic bomb when you are the only person who really knows what they are doing. Step 1: Make sure the explosive charge that is supposed to drive the uranium bullet into the uranium block is not sufficient to drive the uranium bullet into the uranium block. Step 2: Make sure the explosive charge instead fractures the tube so that the two blocks of uranium fall away separately and are lost. Step 3: Falsify the test results like there's no tomorrow. Step 4: Hope you don't get caught.

12.

Lights up.

General Dr. Saiful, when the greatest warrior of Europe was exiled in defeat to the island of St. Helena, what did he leave behind?

Saiful The greatest warrior of Europe is who? The Eric Cantona, is it?

General No! Bonaparte! Napoleon Bonaparte! When Bonaparte was exiled to St. Helena, he left behind his reputation. His glorious past. His triumphs. His victories.

Saiful Maybe he left some clothes also. Not all the baju he need to take, isn't it? Just a sarong to sleep, enough.

General Dr. Saiful. What I am trying to say is that he had some victories before he had the defeats. I have had a defeat before even one victory. Why didn't the bomb work? All the Penan are laughing at us. Next time we no need to resettle them. Why didn't it go off? You answer me this.

Saiful Oh, I see. I see. No. I don't know the answer. Here comes Dr. Ramachandran. He will know the answer.

Ramachandran I cannot put my finger in it. All the data I've looked at two-three times. It should all have worked according to the plan.

General Noraini! Bawa teh! Where is Noraini?

Ramachandran General, in all honesty, I think that is a matter for some speculation and indeed it would be quite profitable to do so, to undertake this various speculation.

Saiful We have some suspicion.

Ramachandran We were not in the habit of asking you earlier in this regard, but tally-ho and all, and so we will say it now.

General What are you talking about?

Saiful The nasi campur is not so good these past few days. Am I correct?

Ramachandran What is the possible scenario for a sudden decline in quality of the nasi campur followed with swiftness by a sudden decline in the visibility of Noraini?

Saiful Possibly because for few days Noraini did not cook the nasi campur. Another person cook the nasi campur.

Ramachandran And during that time Noraini was making an effective sabotage of the project.
General (pause) It seems to be quite possible. Here comes Dr. Mary Yuen. We were just discussing the possibility that there was a sabotage of the project.

Yuen I see. Who do you suspect?

General We are considering that Noraini has sabotaged the project.

Yuen Noraini? You suspect Noraini? Why would Noraini sabotage the project?

Saiful She is agent of the foreign elephants. Jealous of our success.

Yuen And you have to watch out for them. I have a different theory.

General I also am very interested to hear your theory, Dr. Mary Yuen, about the shameful bomb. It did not go off. Why? Why? Why?

Saiful Ah, philosophy question! I prefer I don’t answer. The Road Not Finished.

Yuen I think it had something to do with that European, Otto.

General European auto? My new round-headlight Mercedes? How can it affect?

Ramachandran No, the smuggler, whatisname. Otto. Call the flier in for questioning and we can sort this out toodle-pip-sweet.

Yuen With your permission, General?

General I want to get to the bottom of this matter. Until the bottom is reached, the top cannot be happy.

Lights: time passing.
General  Dr. Yuen, this is very unsatisfactory, this allegation.

Ramachandran  Oh my goodness. I think that is the Minister who is just now making his arrival. I recognise him from the RTM.

Otto   I am making intention of to the top level of this government complaining. I have a service performed for such type of gratitude is the mind boggling.

Minister  General Zulkifi. I have to give PM some explanation. I hope you have some good reason. We are wasting one whole song.

General  Yang Berhormat, we are deciding between two people who can be blamed.

Saiful  One is make the nasi campur but is an elephant spy.

Ramachandran  Or alternatively, YB, there's one sort of white fler here not playing cricket with us.

Minister  We must also consider these Iranians. I always advise them, the Iranians are Shi'as. We don't permit the Shi'a here. I am highly suspicious of the highly enriched Iranians.

Yuen  Yang Berhormat, wouldn't it be dangerous to antagonise the Iranians by accusing them without proof? This is unbelievable.

Minister  This is the policy: Accuse first, excuse later.

General  But what about this Noraini? Where is she?

Minister  The key to the mystery is stuck in the lock of the door of the mystery.

Yuen  Let's not jump to conclusions. It might be neither Otto nor Noraini. We haven't reviewed all the test data that thoroughly.

Otto   So now is for me the opportunity permitted to have a departure?

Minister  You can go if you want to go. We will not stop you. We will re-arrest you. Is up to you.

Ramachandran  The whole matter is very complicated.

Saiful  And by the way, Dr. Ramachandran, weren't you the one having the doubts about the project? You pretend you discuss the philosophy but philosophy graduate cannot get job, so what is the point you discuss it, so actually you are having the atomic doubt?

General  I don't know what the actual truth is, Yang Berhormat.

Minister  I think if we look for the truth some more, it will run away some more.

Yuen  That much is certain.


*Fade to black.*

**Epilogue**

*Spotlight on Yuen. She speaks to audience.*

Yuen  And this is the way the world ends — or doesn't end — not with a bang but a whimper. They all, inexplicably, lived happily ever after. Dr. Saiful got his wish. He returned to UKM. He was made a Datuk for his services to Malaysian science.

Dr. Ramachandran retired under a cloud of suspicion and migrated to Gold Coast, Australia, where Dr. Usha teaches yoga,
aromatherapy and pranic healing, and Dr. Ramachandran coaches the cricket team at Bond University.

General Zulkifli was asked to take early retirement. He divorced his wife and married Noraini. The couple have moved to Corsica, where the General is Honorary Malaysian Consul.

The Minister is still speaking to reporters.

Mr. Teng would like you to know that he was joking when he said he could get you the ten dollar bill printing plate.

Mr. Bala's cousin lost his caroms title to an unseeded Cambodian challenger.

Otto married a girl that he met at the Hard Rock Cafe the night of his release.

Serena Foong ran into Boniface Liew at the Gucci sale and subsequently went to Amankila with him. She has not been seen since.

The NGO Protestor is filing a civil suit against the Malaysian government, the Royal Malaysian Police, and Syarikat Perniagaan Atomic Jaya Sdn. Bhd. She is not expected to win.

Madeleine Albright is no longer US Secretary of State, but is making more money now on the lecture circuit.

And me? My grandmother died. We didn't inherit the Taiping shophouses and the Ipoh Garden house. I've accepted a research post at Lawrence Livermore National Weapons Laboratory, USA. Yeah, I know. David Nusbaum is there too. It'll be good to see him. I have a story to tell him. Or a version of it.

_Fade to black._

_End._