

FROM NATIONAL TO GLOBAL, CREATION AND CONSUMPTION

THE ARTS AND THEATRE IN FLUX IN SINGAPORE

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In the year 2000, a document appeared with a title that grandly proclaimed Singapore's artistic ambition in global terms *Renaissance City Report Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*. Coming from a city state better known, on the whole, for its economic prowess, it seems that a mouse had roared. Closely following the Report, the government made good its intentions by allocating through its prime arts agency The National Arts Council (NAC), \$5 million per annum over the next five years to four major arts companies, namely TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, Practice Theatre Ensemble and The Singapore Dance Theatre. Of the four, the first three are theatre companies.

In the year 2001, two full-length books were published on the theatre, with emphasis on the English language theatre, namely *Theatre Life!* By Clarissa Oon journalist and the theatre critic of the largest English daily The Straits Times, and the other by William Peterson, an American academic who taught in the National University of Singapore in the early nineties, entitled *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. While there have been books on Singaporean arts and artists, particularly books by and author or authors in the visual arts especially or collections of essays edited by a single person about literature, it is rare to have two full-length books on the theatre by two different authors in one year. It is a testimony of the significance of the development of theatre in the whole arts scene.

In the year 2002, much governmental and public ink has been spilled on the subject of remaking Singapore. Remaking Singapore is a committee set up by the government to goad Singaporeans in the new millennium and in a recession-affected year to re-invent the nation. The arts have been co-opted into the process of refashioning Singapore. If that sounds apocalyptic, it does not, at least not to Singaporeans used to the crisis mentality

implanted successfully and fine-tuned to come through past crises; they will see it as part of the ruling Peoples Action Party's continuous attempt to propagate a permanent peaceful revolution. Nonetheless, censorship problems in the theatre and the performance arts have accelerated an official response in the form of the appointment of a new censorship review committee early this year, exactly ten years after the report of an earlier committee. The Arts Festival, from 30 May to 23 June, is into its second year as an annual event, a confident development for a festival that used to be held once in two years. Ong Keng Sen, the artistic director of one of Singapore's leading theatre company, is curating a festival called *In Transit*, from 31 May to 15 June at The House of World Cultures, Berlin, featuring 150 artists and 54 performances; he will direct the festival for 2003 as well. *In Transit*, according to TheatreWorks, "is largely driven by the concept and motivation of *intercultural and process work*, where *process* is explored and diagnosed. This is new for Germany in that a festival for the first time is taking an interest in *process* rather than a finished product. Similarly, this is the first time a Singapore is invited to curate and direct a major festival internationally."¹ The Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay, the biggest cultural complex ever to be built in Singapore and costing \$ 600 m, will open in October. The design launch a few years ago provoked fierce debate between creation and consumption. Pro-Singaporean artists attacked the project for emphasizing the economics of building the larger spaces first to attract the big, foreign productions as against the smaller spaces to meet local needs. When ready, it will seat prominently on reclaimed land facing Marina Bay and overlooking historic, colonial places like Clifford Pier and the restored Fullerton (now) Hotel.

Today, it is impossible to avoid the impression that, from its legendary, partly-accurate "cultural desert" reputation of post-war and pre-independence image, Singapore is no longer a mouse but befitting its Malay branding (singa = lion), a cultural lion roaring. And it aspires to a roar that hopefully will be heard across the world.

The English-language theatre, more than theatrical activities in the other three active languages of Singapore, more than what happened in the other arts, provides a truer mirror of the push towards acquiring a national

identity, and beyond that grasping a global one. This is because, in the years before and after Singapore's independence in 1965, theatre and indeed the other arts, particularly literature, tended to derive inspiration from the "mother" countries of China (for the Chinese), India (for the Indians) and for the Malays of Singapore, (Indonesia) linked by the Malay language and race. Important political and cultural events in China and India, to cite the more obvious, influenced the arts, particularly literature, in Singapore; norms came from abroad. Only the English language writers, writers in the fifties and dramatists in the sixties, were relatively free of this debilitating mothering. And this was because they were fighting their British colonial father using his own language.

In 1964, a year before Singapore became independent, probably the first of a broken line of playwrights, Lim Chor Pee, wrote dismissively of the Western plays staged by expatriate clubs which dominated the theatre scene. "One of the factors that has retarded the establishment of an English-speaking theatre in this country is that almost every play that is produced here is some superficial piece of Western drawing room drama... I refer particularly to the Victorian and Edwardian drawing room drama, which, so we are told, was how the Englishman lived. Did they? We are not so sure. To put it simply, they just do not concern us."² Earlier, he helped found a theatre company in 1961 called the Experimental Theatre Club, wrote and staged two plays in 1963 and 1964 to show the way towards establishing an indigenous theatre in the English language. At the same time, another dramatist Goh Poh Seng, wrote and directed three plays and co-founded an arts group called Centre 65. Goh's plays were bravely and self-consciously nationalistic in aim and content; he also confronted the issue of what constitutes an appropriate language for the stage in a context which is multilingual and where English was very much a second language for most people. By 1966, the nationalistic aspirations of both Lim and Goh, in their dual roles as cultural activists and dramatists, ceased (Lim stopped writing and concentrated on his law practice, Goh went on to write in other genres, principally poetry and novels) and the promising line of dramatic writing they briefly inaugurated trickled to nothing. When Robert Yeo, having returned home from studies in England in the late sixties, wrote and

had his first play *Are You There, Singapore?* produced in 1974, the line revived. He followed up on that first play with his second, *One Year Back Home*, (staged in 1980) and both plays contributed to the consolidation of the line which was truncated in 1966 when Goh wrote and staged his last play. Yeo's activism, as compared to that of Lim and Goh a decade ago, took the form of chairing a governmental committee (as Goh did a decade ago) that promoted theatrical activities in the four official languages of Singapore, namely Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil. In addition to writing plays, he also wrote advocate essays urgently urging that the writing of Singaporean plays was the most important activity in the creation of a viable theatre.

Max Le Blond, an influential academic, theatre critic and director of the eighties, had added Yeo to the list of pioneers of the English language play. These are the three who, according to Le Blond, contributed to the "breakthrough" decades for English of the language theatre in Singapore which "witnessed the emergence of dramatic and cultural groupings that provided a sustained focus for the energies dedicated to an indigenous theatre..."³ What distinguished the three from later practitioners in the eighties was that they were all Western- educated, as lawyer (Lim), medical doctor (Goh) and lecturer (Yeo) but had no direct theatre education. The focus of their contribution was largely literary i.e. playwriting, though both Lim and Goh directed their own plays.

In the late seventies and early eighties, drama and arts festivals, stepped-up governmental, corporate and audience support, professionalization and arts housing propelled the English Language theatre into new directions. The establishment of professional theatre companies, beginning in 9 July 1984 with the setting-up of Act 3, consolidated the base by making it worthwhile for some people to earn salaries working full-time on and off-stage. This was to have enormous impact on subsequent development as important players realize the economic potential of the arts, of which theatre had become an essential component. It is not just the nationalist trust, the writing and staging of Singaporean plays in Singapore, but the corollary, international recognition of the plays. Of this, there are two related ideas, the export of the Singapore play and the import of big,

Western productions. The first will fly the Singapore flag abroad and the second will transform Singapore into a market place for international and largely Western shows and make it a livable place to work and live in. But where are the grand spaces for them? Can enough tickets be sold? Can Singapore rival Asian cities like Hong Kong, with similar ambitions? Or international megacities like New York or London?

In this phase of development, it is appropriate to close with a statement from Ong Keng Sen, the artistic director of TheatreWorks who is perhaps the most important person to lead the move from the national to the global. Summing up, he wrote, "In the eighties, the concern for identity was not confined to a small core of individuals. Many theatre companies had as their mission statement the promotion of Singaporean expression through our own plays... The fervour in the theatre coincided with a nationalistic fervour in the late eighties. Singaporeans were beginning to develop a national pride, which was harnessed further by the ruling government."⁴

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This harnessing was not problem free. Advancement of the theatre, beyond the text-based plays of the sixties and seventies, witnessed the expansion of theatre vocabulary which utilized the talent of visual, installation, performance, video and digital artists. The devised play, of which the Necessary Stage is one of its leading exponents, problematizes the notion of the well-made play conceived and written by one person and raised questions about ownership. The notion of process, one of the pillars of postmodernity which affects the Singapore stage, added to the ambiguity of the deliberately blurred text and exacerbated the subjectivity of reception. The censor, representing and acting on behalf of the government who acts on behalf of the people, is caught in the middle. Perhaps one instance will suffice and it centred on two performance artists, Josef Ng and Shannon Tham. On 31 December 1994, as part of a week-long alternative arts festival called the Artists' General Assembly, Ng cut his pubic hair, and Tham vomited to protest against governmental action on homosexual

solicitation and sensational press reporting. Their acts were reported and roundly condemned by The National Arts Council, the arts agency responsible to the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA); debate raged between critics and defenders. In the end, MITA issued statements banning all performances without fixed scripts. Ng and Tham were barred from future public performance and the organizers were prosecuted; forum theatre, derived from the works of the internationally-known Brazilian theatre theorist Augusto Boal, which required spec-actors to complete the performance (and hence the conclusion is scriptless), was also included in the ban. MITA and the Ministry of Home Affairs issued a statement on January 22nd, 1994, whose last paragraph is worth quoting in full: “Organisers of scriptless public performances will have to provide a synopsis when they apply to the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit for a license. If approved, they will have to put down a security deposit.”⁵ Thus, in one fell swoop, the force of authority gagged performance art and forum theatre. It was a naked act of power designed to ban what was, relatively new, avant garde and what the censor only dimly understood or did not at all. It was an attempt to erase ambiguity from art.

In 1997, Ong Keng Sen staged a deconstructive, postmodernist, multicultural version of Shakespeare’s *King Lear*, which he simply called *Lear*, in Tokyo. It was financed by the Japan Foundation and it had to be performed in Japan because he could not garner enough financial support at home. The performance was a success and its international appeal was confirmed by largely excellent reviews, as well as a few puzzled ones, in his native Singapore, in January 1999. The point to be made is that neither governmental resource (the National Arts Council which gives grants to Singaporean artists) nor corporate sponsorship were able to see the global potential of Ong’s bold, original neo- Shakespearean projects. He showed his success was no fluke when he was commissioned by the Adelaide Festival to open its 2000 Festival; this time, he tackled *Othello*, which he re-titled *Desdemona*, giving to his version a feminist and very-process oriented slant. It performed in Singapore the following year.

This reversal is not a case of an artist not honoured at home. Ong is a known quantity and his international credentials (with performances in New

York, Frankfurt and Kuala Lumpur) are there for all to see. At home he had been doing a succession of cutting-edge, multicultural plays. Yet, the possible sponsors on the lookout for selling a Singaporean artistic product were not able to recognize Ong's enterprise as the triumphant global adventure it turned out to be. Singaporeans were poorer for not being the first audience, and arts entrepreneurship must take responsibility..

Yet, the Renaissance City Report referred to earlier, published in March 2000, but prepared earlier, probably when Ong was cogitating over *Lear*, could write confidently in this way:

Vision of a Renaissance Singapore

Renaissance Singapore will be creative, vibrant and imbued with a keen sense of aesthetics. Our industries are supported with a creative culture that keeps them competitive in the global economy. The Renaissance Singaporean has an adventurous spirit, an inquiring and creative mind and a strong passion for life. Culture and the arts animate our city and our society consists of active citizens who build on our Asian heritage to strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through expressing their Singapore stories in culture and the arts.

Roles of the Players

In order for this to happen, the state, the arts community, the private sector and individual Singaporeans will have their own roles and responsibilities to fulfil. The state and the private sector must provide support and space for the development of the arts. The arts community must strengthen its sense of professionalism and accountability. The private sector and individual citizens must engage in a fruitful and symbiotic partnership with the arts community.⁶

Ong Keng Sen must have asked, "Where were you when I needed you?" Certainly, his success must have contributed to including a renaissance element in the Report. The reference to "individual

Singaporeans [who] will have their own roles and responsibilities to fulfil” sounds very much like wisdom from hindsight.

In a comprehensive article, cultural and theatre critic Wee Wan Ling writes about Ong Keng Sen’s second Flying Circus Project, a wide-ranging research and performance project which brought together about fifty Asian artists in dance, theatre, music into workshops designed to reinvigorate traditional arts in contemporary ways. “Ong wants Asian artists to be able to ‘enter’ other Asian cultures and develop a vision for a wider Asian (and not just Singaporean) arts. Ong feels that the national framework of local theatre is currently inadequate and perhaps even parochial. If the Singaporean state and Singaporean theatre-goers are too cautious in envisioning what a society could be (responding only to that which is directly Singaporean), then Singapore will not become the ‘Global City for the Arts’ that the Government desire.”⁷

Ong Keng Sen has pursued, and is pursuing, global challenges as an individual and not as someone representing a government. Global is perhaps too un-specific a term; his preferred terminology, at least that of his publicist in Singapore, is *intercultural*. His latest venture, a performance called *Hamlet* based on Shakespeare’s play, will premier in Europe, at Kronborg Castle, Elsinore, 17–24 August 2002, as part of the Copenhagen International Theatre Festival. He will work with artists and designers from eleven countries in Asia, Europe, Australia and Africa. “The performance itself will be created via *workshop processes* lasting 1 week in Singapore and at a later date 2 weeks in Denmark, during which the players will develop their characters by utilizing the individual disciplines they come from. The essence of the characters will consist of the *participants’ artistic back-backgrounds*, which mainly is *dance, music and vocals*. The cast of artists, due to powerful artistic disciplines, partly represent *a specific culture*, and partly evoke the necessary tension that lies beneath the conflicts in Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.”⁸

The italics, which are mine, are designed to focus on Ong’s characteristic *process-oriented* method of working. What is interesting is the tapping of the “participants’ artistic backgrounds” in which each artist represents “a specific culture” and the fusion of their discipline into one.

Even the words *fusion* and *one* (my words, not his) are problem-fraught as they suggest some kind of integration, whereas Ong's previous stagings of *Lear* and *Desdemona* quite often juxtapose a multiplicity of forms and Western and Eastern styles as collages. Collage, process, multicultural and deconstruction (in the production the central figure of Hamlet is missing) and one has an unfinished product which could be described as postmodernist, a word Ong has himself used to describe his neo-Shakespearean invasions.

Intercultural is a debatable word; to be precise, the attempt to prefix culture so as to embrace its global nuances, is open to dispute. In a theatre conference as part of the 2002 Singapore Arts Festival, the paper of a Spanish participant, Manuel F. Vieites, was read out in his absence; he attempted to distinguish five cultural categories, namely intracultural, multicultural, pluricultural, intercultural and transcultural (supported by slides and photographs which were unfortunately not shown) and wrote, "This proposal can be used to analyse a concrete production, the production of a company or a stage director or even the products of a concrete theatre system in a set or fixed period."⁹ At this stage, this essay does not propose to engage this large topic except to say that the theatre in Singapore, through Ong Keng Sen, and earlier, a playwright and director Kuo Pao Kun, is deeply engaged in intercultural endeavours.¹⁰

What about global consumption in Singapore? The pre-eminent site for consumption is the proposed Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay, a huge arts complex scheduled for a grand opening on October 2002. The first design brief was drawn up in 1987 with input from the arts community; in 1989, the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts recommended the construction of a new performing arts centre, in 1990 a steering committee chaired by George Yeo, then Minister for Information and the Arts, was set up, in 1992 the Singapore Arts Centre Co. Ltd was formed to develop and manage the arts centre, in 1993 a master plan was prepared to decide on the number and kind of performance spaces and in 1994 the first public exhibition of the architectural model was unveiled. This triggered disagreement on several issues; for example, on the design. But the most acrimonious debate was over the timing of the opening of the performing

halls. Local critics, some of whom were artists themselves, attacked the initial plan to open the big spaces (the massive concert/ opera spaces) before the small ones (studio theatres). The strong suspicion was that the management of the arts centre were doing this to favour the big-bucks productions e.g. operas like Verdi's *Aida*, Lloyd Webber musicals like *Cats* and *The Phantom of the Opera* (all three played in Singapore) over the modest, indigenous plays. Critics assailed what they thought was the privileging of the economic, global imperative over the consolidation of the fledging, nationalist enterprise; prioritizing was seen as a neo-imperialist, capitalist-driven enterprise threat to the fast-growing, Singaporean effort.

While sympathizing with the concern, I thought the criticism was premature. Nonetheless, it must have raised consciousness over pro-Singapore sensitivities, over the need to address both global consumption and local creation, and lead to this important decision: when the Esplanade opens on 12 October, all the performance spaces will open simultaneously. This will please both parties and settle the global vs local disagreement for the moment. Usage of the spaces may generate further argument but that is a later development.

The Annual Report 2000/2001 lists the Esplanade's facilities as

Theatre – with 2,000 seats and an orchestra pit for up to 100 musicians, a adjustable proscenium and main stage with side and rear stages;

Concert Hall - has 1,600 seats with adjustable acoustic features and a Klais pipe organ. It is ideal for all genres of music from jazz, to pop and orchestral;

Theatre Studio and Recital Studio – seating up to 250 each, they are suitable for intimate performances. There is also a Rehearsal Studio and other support facilities in the Centre – a visual arts gallery, private booths and hospitality suites;

Outdoor performing spaces – the Concourse, the Outdoor Theatre along the 300m long Waterfront promenade, an experimental space known as The Edge, and landscaped gardens for visitors to enjoy outdoor entertainment;

Esplanade Mall – 8,600 sq m retail mall offering thematic dining and retail experiences with alfresco dining facilities by the waterfront;

An 800-lot basement carpark and convenient access to the city's subway, buses and taxi stands.¹¹

For these spaces to be filled, and filled presumably at rates that are economically successful, the Esplanade cannot rely only on local patrons i.e. people resident in Singapore. Tourists must be induced to come to Singapore to buy the tickets and augment local support. And tourists who come to catch operas, plays, exhibitions, dances, etc. can be expected to spend money on dining and shopping. Marketing the arts will not just be the function of the Esplanade, as the major site of arts consumption, but the Ministry of Information and the Arts and other government-supported agencies, like the National Arts Council, the Singapore Tourist Promotion Board and International Enterprise Singapore (formerly the Trade Development Board) will be involved. These agencies will need to pursue an integrated policy. This takes the argument back to the beginning, the idea of making Singapore a renaissance city, a city of the arts. Susan Low, director of marketing, National Arts Council, talks of a dream, "Edinburgh is one of the world's greatest arts cities, and its international festival costs £7 million (S\$18.3). But another £21 million is spent in related industries like tourism, retail and hotels. That is our dream for Singapore."¹² There are encouraging signs and one of them, for instance, in the success of the just-concluded 2002 Arts Festival; in terms of ticket sales, the Festival sold 80.2% of tickets compared to 75.2% last year and this indicates sizable home support.

In a recent seminar, Dr Tan Chin Nam, Permanent Secretary for the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, invited more than 100 representatives from 23 public and corporate agencies to discuss the concept of "cultural capital." He said, "Business cannot simply operate on the status quo in the new globalised world of today. To keep up with competition, they will have to experiment with design and borrow ideas from the arts."¹³

The above proposal that business people can learn from artists appears timely at a time of economic downturn; cultural capital may inject an idea, new to Singapore but not to Europe or the US, and open up a new sector of the local economy. But there remains still the challenge of managing the arts as business and the arts as art.

Managing the arts as art will always be problematic as the combustible nature of art will always throw up unpredictable situations. Managing the arts as business is the more easily anticipated. On Sunday July 19, 2002, the Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr Goh Chok Tong, toured the Esplanade and described the arts complex as a “dream come true for Singapore... We should now be able to give Singapore that roundness which is important to the country... I would regard science, technology and economics as sinews of the country and the arts, its soul.”¹⁴ And the CEO of the Esplanade, Mr Benson Puah, said that he would turn to the government for funding for programme and operational costs. If this comes about, managing the arts as business and the arts as arts will have twin objectives and come closer, hopefully, towards integration and success.

ロバート・ヨー (Robert Yeo) は、詩人・戯曲家。現在ラ・サール・S I A 芸術学院で教鞭をとる。

NOTES

1. E-mail message to the author dated 5/6/02, from Traslin Ong, Marketing and Publicity Manager, TheatreWorks, Singapore.
2. Lim Chor Pee (1964). Is Drama Non-Existent in Singapore?, *Tumasek* 1, January, Singapore, page 43.
3. Le Blond, Max (1998). Singapore (Overview), in *The World Encyclopedia of Contemporary Theatre, 5 Asia/ Pacific*, edited by Don Rubin, Routledge, London and New York, page 402.
4. Ong Keng Sen (1991). *The Practice of English Language Theatre in Singapore, in Prize Winning Plays, V*, edited by Thiru Kandiah, Singapore, UniPress, page 185.
5. Quoted in *Chronology of a Controversy* by Lee Weng Choy, in *Looking at Culture* edited by Sanjay Krishnam et al (1996), Arties Design and Communications, Singapore, page 66.
6. Ministry of Information and the Arts (2000). *Renaissance City Report Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*, Singapore, page 5.

7. Wee, C.J.W. – L (2002). National Identity, the Arts and the Global City, in Singapore in the New Millennium, edited by Derek de Cunha, Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, Singapore, page 225.
8. E-mail message to the author dated 12/6/02 from Traslin Ong.
9. Manuel F. Vicities (2002). Theatre and Globalization: the right to be different, the right to live together, in Creating, Critiquing, Consuming Theatre Today Forum, 8-9 June, Singapore, pages 8 & 9.
10. Dramatist and theatre director Kuo Pao Kun created a multi-cultural play with *Mama Looking for her Cat* staged in 1988. Working in a devised way he shaped this play with his cast and in the crucible of process, the characters spoke the following Singapore languages; Mandarin, Cantonese, Hokien and Teochew (Chinese), Tamil (a South Indian language spoken by the majority of Singapore Indians) and English. He followed up on this experiment with *Spirits Play* (2000) which included a major Singaporean/ regional language Malay, which he had not used before. Malay is the national language of Indonesia (Bahasa Indonesia) and Malaysia (Bahasa Malaysia) .
11. Annual Report 2000/2001 (2001). The Esplanade Co. Ltd., page 7.
12. Alicia Teo (2002). Esplanade's grand opening will give boost to economy, *The Straits Times*, 28/5/02, Singapore.
13. Tan Shzr Ee (2001). Arts Meets Business, *The Straits Times Interactive*, May 18.
14. Esplanade Centre turns to Government for funding aid. *The Straits Times*, July 20, 2002, page 43.