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Opening The Door To The Arts

Why have we chosen to use the performing arts as a method of education?

PROFILE

The Importance of Pre-school Arts Education: An Interview with Mdm Goh Lay Kuan

Translate / Write

Interviewer: Suhuai , Editor (E for short)

Interviewee: Goh Lay Kuan, Co-Founder and Artistic Consultant of The Theatre Practice (G for short)

“I don’t think you are cultured simply because you study a lot or that you have a lot of knowledge. ”

E : Why do you think a pre-school education in the arts is important to a child? What significance does it play in their development?

G : An arts education is important to a child simply because the arts is a part of our culture. When a child first experiences the world, it is scary for him because he is in a state where he has completely no idea who he is or why he is here. Culture contextualises things for children; it tells them how to live, think, do, feel. It also helps them to develop their own

personal sense of pride, an avenue for them to develop a sense of identity. More importantly, by understanding culture, it allows for communities to come together. By knowing how to see, hear, live, then can we truly know how to communicate, so that we share with others the experiences that have come about in the course of our lives. These children are members of a country and a race, and the way they look at things is also an important character trait. I don't think you are cultured simply because you study a lot or that you have a lot of knowledge. These are two different things. For a child, he would naturally acquire such information during the process of growing up. However, if children do not learn about their culture or the arts, they would be detached from their country, their race. They will become individuals who are lost, like leaves on water, moving wherever the waves bring them. As such, the greater purpose behind the arts is in nurturing individuals. The basic building block in the development of one's identity comes from the understanding of his culture.

In the case of The Theatre Practice, why have we chosen to use the performing arts as a method of education? Firstly, the performing arts incorporate the unique trait of culture. Secondly, nowadays, people prefer to specialise in specific areas of knowledge, hence most information about things have become disjointed and dissected. I believe that what's important is not to understand things narrowly from one aspect and be an expert on it, but to have an understanding of the overall picture. For example, a doctor should have an overall understanding of the human body before delving in-depth into a specific portion of the human body. Whether you are a good doctor or not, it really depends on whether you have a thorough understanding of the overall body. If not, you are just treating symptoms at specific places and not targeting the root of the problem. Similarly, a child should, from a young age, start to learn about life itself – What is it exactly? What about the inter-personal relationships between people? What are one's responsibilities and duties? What does it mean to be a human? After these questions have been answered, then the child can start acquiring knowledge about the world. This is why The Theatre Practice decided to go into the education sphere through the performing arts – because it provides that breadth.

Of course, there was another issue that disturbed us even more. At that time, we were having strong reactions towards the accusations of Singapore being a “cultural desert”. We have lived here for decades, yet we were unable to tell others what our culture was. Of course, I also understand the fact that we are a nation of migrants. And these migrants had moved abroad because of the hardship they faced at home, so naturally they would not have brought with them any deep or sophisticated cultural influences. Therefore, we also naturally ended up with little history. Pao Kun frequently referred to us as “cultural orphans”. However, through the years, we have started to invest in this place, and

throughout our lives, we have also started to borrow and assimilate the cultures of others such that we began to enhance our identity and our ability to communicate. And precisely because of these skills, we began to have and articulate our own culture. As such, I feel that using the arts for early childhood education to develop culture is more important than any other form of education. To me, teaching children how to read/write is not important at all.

Culture helps articulate what a country, or race, encompasses – its directions, developments and values.

If we simply talk about these concepts with our children, it would be too abstract for them. Therefore, we do it through theatre games. We allow them to learn about these complex issues subconsciously. Only the performing arts have the power to fulfil such aspirations, because it is not difficult to adapt performing arts into games. And also, the act of playing games is an innate ability that is present within all of us. I don't think we can "teach" these young children, in fact, we can only "lead" them. If you "teach" them, you start destroying their sense of creativity and imagination. When you "lead" them, then it means that you acknowledge and accept their already innate ability to think and imagine. Your guidance only serves to bring out these abilities within them. A child's way of thinking usually does not cohere well with our sense of logic. And this is precisely their gift. When you "teach", you kill their ability to learn on their own, and also start to eradicate their initial characteristics and traits. In the long term, this would have an impact on how they learn and behave when they grow up. They will become unimaginative, and subsequently lose their creativity, flexibility and sensitivity, thereby ending up as dull and uninteresting individuals. Therefore, I believe we cannot "teach" our children; we can only find out means and ways to develop their innate potential. This is why we should also respect a child's opinion and expression, because we cannot use our already-inflexible brain to "teach" one who is more powerful and flexible.

E : What do you think are the conflicts present between theatre education and the current education system?

W : If the teacher is excellent, our methods complement him. A weaker teacher will never learn and understand what we are doing. I feel that I had the most successful training with teachers who were involved in education for students with special needs. This is because, in our training, we focus on using other methods in developing our children, because the method of telling them directly and hoping that they would understand is now not as efficient and has been highly curtailed. And this is precisely what these teachers needed.

Hence, they enjoyed our lessons, and these lessons aided them greatly in their daily work.

Sometimes, parents would question us, “What are you doing in your classes? You are just playing and playing.” In actual fact, every time we play, we know what we are playing, why we are playing, and our teachers are aware of what to look out for. Nowadays, the stress that a child faces does not merely come from the school. It also stems from the education system and the sense of “kiasu-ism” that parents have. In our classes, we can often identify these “kiasu” parents very early on. During games we play in class, we can tell that, those students who often want to lead, or are afraid to lose, are the children of these “kiasu” parents. Sometimes, we would play games that involve the elements of winning and losing. Often, we just want to test and find out what the children’s perception of failure is and how they feel towards it. From my observations, I would then tell the parents, “Your child is afraid of losing. And that is because you are also afraid of losing.” When a child feels that he can escape from punishment or feels relaxed because he has won, then it is no longer just about winning. There is a problem with the child’s sense of security. If a child is afraid of losing, often we have to look at the parents to fix the problem.

“we cannot use our already-inflexible brain to teach one who is more powerful and flexible. ”

E: Are children more afraid of losing nowadays? What are the differences you see with children these days, as compared to those from previous generations?

W : There are some unique qualities about the Singaporean child. Due to the fast-paced developments of our nation, our children are also changing every decade. Firstly, the quality of the body changes every decade. Now, their posture is getting worse. The mind as well – it used to be more conservative, shy, but willing to participate. After some time, the mind slowly changes as well, and becomes more open and interactive. This is the intermediate stage. Previously, I had stopped teaching for 12 years, and when I got back to it, I was shocked. As one who is very particular about body posture, I immediately noticed that the posture of children nowadays is terrible, and their sense of rhythm as well. Maybe nowadays our children don’t sing as often. When I was a young child, I would always have the opportunity to sing with other children of different races and ages. Nowadays, children only know how to sing “Happy Birthday”. Naturally, their sense of rhythm would not be as good. This is very depressing. The sense of rhythm is very important. Our daily communication also requires a good sense of rhythm in our speech. Overall, children these days seem to have lost that sense of motivation, initiative and passion.

While Singapore is very rich in its ethnicity and culture, our children are leading lives that are very impoverished. While Singaporeans nowadays have the financial ability to go overseas, they merely just repeat what they do here in a foreign land. Our technology is also very advanced, and information gets to us quickly, but it does not mean that these children know more. They, on the other hand, need more life experiences. If they are merely repeating what they are doing all the time, then society starts to get more impoverished because it is stagnant. Therefore, one has to ensure that one's life is exciting. This in turn will lead to the individual becoming more knowledgeable, understanding, accommodating, expressive and communitarian. Nowadays, many individuals do not understand what it means to live in a community. Although activities like drawing and playing of instruments are usually solitary activities, these activities are integrated within a group setting in our arts education programme, so that children learn from one another. This helps them in their development, as they clearly comprehend what their "eyes, mouths, and ears" are needed for.

There is a saying that you can tell the future of a child when he is just three years old. My understanding is that, if you set the child on the right path of education at the age of three, then he will be set for the future. Do not think that the child would forget what he has learnt once he grows up. On the contrary, it is often what you have learnt at an early age that sticks with you the longest.

All of us have weaknesses, and as adults we often choose things to ignore or reject. Children, on the other hand, do not have the ability to do so. As such, I firmly believe that children should not be banished to a life just filled with examinations. If the arts also follow such a direction, then it would be a disaster. You can train children with the goal of performing on stage, but you must do it well.

To prepare the child to perform onstage, you must build his confidence. With confidence comes courage. Secondly, you must teach the child how to cooperate with others. Thirdly, the child must be taught how to deal with the audience, who are just like their examiners. It's easy to train a child's confidence, because they often do not know what fear is. I would often forbid anyone in my production to ask the child if he is scared. That is because, prior to asking, the child would not even have given a thought about it. Once you ask the child, you start to influence his/her thinking. For a child, you need to remember, you have to constantly be positive. Any negative thing you say would be encouraging them towards such negativity. As such, preschool education is not easy, but yet it is a very important one. Often, I would sit in and support trainee teachers in their classes before I gradually let go. This is because pre-school education is challenging, and also one that requires utmost

responsibility from the teachers.

E: In all these years, has the entire education scene improved?

W : The hardware has improved, and that is what Singapore is good at, but the software still needs much improvement. However, what urgently needs to be changed is not the school, not the teachers but the parents. If the parents do not endorse the competitive nature of things, then the school would not be able to find the motivation to do so. Instead, not only do the parents condone, they are even more passionate, exerting more stress on their children, especially because these children are helpless in the face of things. [Editor: Do they even know what to protest about?] Maybe they don't because their range of imagination and understanding has been severely limited. The rigour of wanting "standard answers" has led to the development of a "standard mind" within a child. Sometimes, I wish for the child to be a little more rebellious, but of course, you have to teach him how to be reasonable as well. [Editor: The perspectives that parents hold are often a product of societal influence, and in this case, the society's definition of success is severely narrow.] Yes. Many parents feel that good grades are a manifestation of their success in parenting. It enhances their image as a parent, such that nowadays, the tuition centres where children go for classes are seen as indicators of how trendy and current they are.

E : Some teachers feel that teaching has become a service-oriented career, and that the relationship between teachers and parents has evolved to be that of a service provider and a consumer. What do you think of that?

W : When a teacher caters to the consumer (which is the parent in this case), then education becomes a commercial product, and hence loses its initial integrity. Whenever I train teachers, I would tell them: "I don't care whom you have to face. If you have the title of a teacher, then you have a responsibility. Don't ask others for help when you are confronted with a problem, instead, think, and try your best to solve the problem. Ask me only when you have no solutions." This also pertains to how you should lead your life as an individual. By thinking first, even if you do not get an answer, at least you have an idea of what would not have worked in those circumstances. If the teachers do not even work their brains by questioning themselves, and are afraid of taking on responsibility such that they hope that the principal can advise them on every matter, then it's a very sad situation. I hope that more teachers would realise this about themselves. I have seen some children where they constantly fail in Singapore, but yet in America, they become physics professors at the age of 25. Our education system has restricted the development and the thinking capacity of our

children, such that they no longer see the value of knowledge. When I was studying, my only desire was to pass. At that time, we would just tell ourselves: “There’s no need for any grand ambitions; all we need is a mere 60 marks to pass the examinations.” So often, we would forget what we have learnt once we pass our examinations. What, then, is the point of studying?

Education should be tailored for every individual, so that his talents are not overlooked, and no one gets left behind. Often, due to the structural restrictions put in place by the education system, teachers do not have many options, but it does not mean that they cannot attend to the individual needs of every child. Teachers frequently scold weaker students, and cause them to feel discriminated. In my experience, I have mediated many instances of conflict involving parents and the school. To be honest, the child may have obtained good grades, but it does not mean that his development has been healthy. Neither does it mean that he is able to retain what he has learnt, nor is it a manifestation of his intelligence.



PROFILE

Learning empathy through an arts education: An Interview Koh Hui Ling

Translate / Wang Liansheng

Interviewer : Suhuai, Editor

Interviewee: Koh Hui Ling, Drama Box Associate Artistic Director

Editor: What do you think is the impact of an arts education on a child's development?

Koh : I think an arts education helps develop a child's empathy. The very fact that a student has to play a character of a background and age which is very much different from his/her actual persona, this will inevitably lead to a clash of value systems between the student and the fictional character itself. Hence it allows for the student , thereby allowing him/her to consider and learn about the different perspectives present. Nowadays, youths are in possession of more material objects, and of course better education – Therefore whenever we question them, they can always provide very adequate textbook answers. However, when you request of them to empathise with something instead, they are unable to do so. For example, I recall of an incident which happened when I was teaching at an all-girls school. The students had split into groups, and were tasked to choose themes which they would

discuss for their workshop. One group said, “We want to look at LGBT issues.” The teacher gave her approval, and then I went to ask the students, “What do you want to say with regards to this issue?” They said, “Everyone should be able to assert their basic human rights.” I followed up with another question, “And then what else?” They couldn’t answer. The school has given them a rational education, packed with information, but have neglected to teach them how to use their heart to feel, to truly understand why the LGBT community needs those rights. With empathy, they would then know how to deal with and analyse look at these themes, withfrom their heart. Another issue that I see plaguing the current generation is the concept of Media Literacy – the understanding of information. It also affects us adults, as we are no longer certain about information we obtain --- What exactly is the truth, reallyis the truth, exactly? So I wanted to know, how then should students dissect and deal with these the copious amounts of information? Nowadays, thisAnd this problem seems to be getting more and more acute nowadayssevere. The students are more inquisitive and have the ability google anything to get the answers they require. How then do they decide what the truth is? These are just some pointsissues which one can extrapolate gleam from learning aboutthe concept of empathy – The skill which teaches you how to understandHow should one go about understanding and look at an issue or an incident thoroughly.?

Editor : Do you feel that drama education has been more emphasized recently in schools?

Koh: To be honest, the National Arts Council has been trying their best, and their intentions to develop the arts are very clear too. However, it really depends on whether the arts had played a significant role in the lives of the school principals. This is because it affects the school’s culture. Even if NAC adopts a top-down approach, it wouldn’t go far without the support of those principals. For example, if a principal is an ardent supporter of the arts, the teacher will find it very easy to promote the arts in school. However, when there is a change in the principal after 3 or 4 years, and whereby the new principal is one who is more into the sciences, the work we had built up previously would be futilego to waste, and thus the teacher would also eventually give up. Currently, oOur relationship with the schools is growing from strength to strength, but there is still some distance to cover, and we definitely need more time in this aspect.

Editor: Even if the school and its teachers are very enthusiastic in introducing drama education into the school, would their requests be different from the rationale of such an education?

Koh: Maybe. Sometimes, I would ask the teacher. “What do you need us to do?” The teacher would say, “To get the students to speak mandarin.” In actual fact, these teachers just want to motivate the students to practise the language through another alternative. [Editor: Do they often want a very tangible result at the end?] Most of the time they do, and with us doing “Forum Theatre”, there is after all a product, so it is easier for us. As for those workshops without any tangible product at the end, we often have to liaise with the teachers clearly so as to manage their expectations. [Editor: Do they believe in the philosophy behind drama education?] Erm... most teachers only see us as part of a CCA, some even don't see as a CCA, maybe just an enrichment course. After all, the arts has always been of a lower hierarchy as compared to the usual classes. There may also be a difference between English and Chinese Drama. English Drama has an ‘O’ level module offered which is related to for it, Chinese Drama does not have an equivalent. Some schools are advocates of the module, and these schools are often more aware of theatre arts, but perhaps less aware of the workings of Chinese Drama. Most of the time, 98% of the teachers request for a product to be presented at the end of the workshops, even if it was an in-class presentation. I don't think this is a good thing, but it all depends on how you look at this presentation. If you are supposed to be doing a theatre education, and not drama education, then it's fine because a theatre education requires a finished product. So I don't deny the teacher's need for such a product. Sometimes, the teacher would want to find out if the students' writing or oratorical skills have improved, but I would just look at her and reply, “We are not the teachers here.” So whatever we can or cannot't do, and why we can or cannot do, we often have to liaise in detail with the teachers so as to manage their expectations. I can deepen the students' understanding of the emotional journey of the character, but whether he can write it out, it has to depend on the teacher's cooperation as well. We cannot think that we work separately from the teachers – that we are artists, and they, are teachers; in fact, we are both collaborators, complementing each other in the work of educating these students. We need to understand what the schools' ultimate objective is – is it something which I agree with as well? If the teacher's goal is to ensure that the student achieves 100 marks for his Chinese test, then I will say I cannot do that, because I really can't. However, if the teacher wishes to inspire the student and provide him different perspectives towards about life, such that he can be able to articulate it through his writing, then I can do that. Sometimes, as an arts practitioner, we have to be independent; other times, we have to work hand-in-hand with the teachers.

Editor : You have been involved in the field of arts education for more than a decade. What's the biggest change you have witnessed in the landscape sector of arts

education?

Koh: I think there is generally more acceptance now. Arts education is more common now, and people are more aware of the goals which theatre can help achieve nowadays. However, generally on the whole, things are still roughly the same. Haha.

Editor : What about the students? Have they changed? Are they more aware, accepting of theatre, etc now?

Koh : Now, students have more resources to attend extra-curricular courses. Some students hence have some concept and foundation in theatre. These students have also seen more productions, or have attended some form of theatre classes. What I have observed however, is that there is a real difference between English and Chinese Drama. English Drama encapsulates Literature as well, and since Literature is an ‘O Level’ subject, examinable subject, more emphasis is often placed on English Drama, and therefore its development is naturally faster. Many students who are involved in English Drama would also choose subjects related to it, or junior colleges with theatre studies for their tertiary education.

Editor: When you are teaching, how do you balance between encouraging a student to do what his/her intuition tells him/her to do and leading them to think beyond their limited experience and knowledge?

Koh : I see myself more as playing the role of a facilitator, not that of a teacher. As such, with regards to the concept of “teaching”, I stretch its definition to encompass a very wide meaning. Many times, I hope that I am playing a more inspirational role; I know what these students want to do, but we will also discuss whether others would agree with their actions. If the teacher says no, but the students still want to go ahead with the project, then we would have to go through many rounds of negotiation. We would sit down, understand what each party’s motivations are, weigh the pros and cons, and then come to an appropriate decision. These incidents are a routine every year. For example, students may want to do a play which has a strong moral message but may be slightly darker in nature, and the teacher may feel that such a play does not reflect well on the image of the CCA, and thus request for a more optimistic ending. This ending, however, may not be a true reflection of the students’ desires. It’s a pity that in many situations, the students then end up being oppressed, because they often rank the lowest within the hierarchy of the school system. However, I feel that the process of negotiation is an important one – the students may hold different opinions from others, but the more important learning point for them is that they

need to understand these contrasting opinions as well, even if they do not get to do what they want at the end of the day. If I do agree with the students, I will also help the students to articulate their position so that the school can understand them better. as well. [Editor: If the process of oppressing these students through the censoring of those sensitive topics can actually be a lesson to help deepen the students' understanding of these issues, then shouldn't it be a good thing?] Yes, I agree, it is precisely because of this process that the students often get a deeper understanding of these issues. I would often then try to look at things from such a perspective.

Editor: Can Forum Theatre in schools touch on political issues?

Koh: It depends on what the political issues are. If it is relating to governmental policies, then maybe yes, maybe no. We conduct the workshops, but the students are the ones who often hold the power to decide the direction of these workshops. Forum Theatre often has to touch on issues which are closely related to these students, and hence it seldom dabbles in political issues. However, I firmly believe that in inter-personal relationships, there are also often many instances of "politics". For example, recently, I was teaching at a Chinese school, and the school wanted them to visit a Malay school, and then vice versa. Actually, such a request by the school has many "political" layers to it and these layers can be explored with the students, even if the issues they are discussing for the workshop relates to the stress they face in the course of their education. We can explore through this lens of stress management, extending it from that of exploring the relationship between parents and child, to that of looking at the schools, or even the society's perception of what education is really about, thereby going into the "politics" of the issue. From an individual's perspective, through recurring questioning, we hope to broaden their mindset, and also perhaps to drive home the point that many things do not exist independently; They are a culmination of a multitude of reasons and happenings. If we are talking about value systems for example, they are often heavily influenced by the make up of the society as well, and hence would have a political slant to it as well. [Editor: So, essentially, we do not have any taboo topics?] I think there is no don't think there is a need for such a classification, even in today's times. For the more sensitive topics like race, religion or sexuality, we have to look at the school's level of acceptance. Some schools have a higher threshold, while for others, it would be a taboo. If it's a taboo, then we can explore why it is a taboo subject. So often, we are not really focusing on generating a tangible product for our work, but most of the time, we are trying to understand that particular issue on a deeper level, or essentially trying to figure out how our society functions. In the course of the workshop, we will also share with students why some of Dramabox's sour works have been censored previously when they were performed..

Editor : Last question, what changes would you want to see in the education system in 10 years' time?

Koh: No more examinations. From my experience interacting with teachers, many of them do want to engage more thoroughly in the work of education. However, due to the restrictions brought about by examinations, they simply do not have the time or energy to do anything beyond what is required of them by these examinations, despite having the desire to go beyond the classroom. Then you start to observe a trend – Many teachers who are fresh out of NIE (National Institute of Education) start out with so much passion, but then they will then lose steam eventually, and quit or become homogenized and assimilated within the system. At that point in time, they will just see teaching as merely a career. I wonder, “Are examinations the only way to assess a student’s understanding/knowledge?” An examination, in itself, does not present many problems – it is a useful tool to benchmark and assess a student’s understanding of a subject. However, when it becomes the final and only means of assessment, it becomes a scary thing. I have an 8-year-old nephew and he attends a school where they do not have examinations until he was Primary 3. The teachers however use continual tests and assessments as a means to assess the student, and to discuss the child’s development with his/her parents. There was once my nephew who insisted that his teacher taught him wrongly when he wrote down an incorrect answer to a test question. Then I talked with him for a long time. What exactly is the goal of these examinations? Is it a means to find out what you do know? Or in actual fact, a means to find out what you do not know? I think, if we take a closer look at examinations, it is really a form of assessment for one to find out how much you don’t actually know. The focus is not on what is right, but on what is wrong, because it is only through mistakes that we learn. At least this is what I believe in now.

I don’t think we should not have examinations, but I think the perception of examinations have changed. It has become a monster. This is also why drama courses can never be assessed, because it is simply too difficult to do so. In such a course, some students may “get it” within 3 months, others may take 3 years, how then do you assess the success of this course? [Editor: And within our assessment modes, we also request of the child to be an all-rounder, to be good at every single aspect, such that we neglect to look at the individuality of the student.] Yes, just like my two nephews who are currently in the “orthodox” system. The elder one is one who scores very good grades, but the younger one is the one who is more clever, because he is highly imaginative and creative. [Editor: Do you think the schools are killing the creativity of their students?] I think they are, even though everyone else is hoping that things would change. However, the examinations are still

present a part of the system. And it is no doubt the more convenient and effective way for parents to use as a tool in assessing their children's development. We are after all a country that prides itself on its efficacy of efficacy. The our system and the parents are an embodiment of that parents also embody this value very well. Hence, the Education Ministry is also not having it easy either. Where, then, do we begin creating the change we aspire? I have heard from a friend who was studying anthropology in Sweden that in Sweden, there is no classification of the schools or its students. They are not ranked or benchmarked. Everyone is placed in the same system together, and from there, you get to see every individual's potential and talents. I once spoke to a local teacher about this, and his reply was, "If we have such a system, the teacher would be very tired, and the more intelligent students would have to wait for the weaker students, and the teacher would have to constantly repeat his classes." Therefore, I would often think wonder about how the society, and the values system we were raised up on, have shaped our education system.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Theatre Education

Words / Huang Suhuai Translate / Wang Liansheng

The Founding Artistic Director of The Theatre Practice, Mr Kuo Pao Kun, left behind an immense wealth of literature for the future generations – In addition to the numerous scripts, there is also a large collection of critiques and essays. His essays and speeches were mostly published in the 80s and 90s --- More than 200 of them can be found within The Complete Works of Kuo Pao Kun collection. Once, after attending the Australian Arts Festival, Kuo immediately wrote 9 articles for Lian He Zao Bao. Similarly in 1986, after the conclusion of the Singapore Arts Festival, he wrote a 8000-word essay discussing the intricacies of the Arts Festival and its underlying purpose.

It is believed that if a practitioner only engages in performing and does not actively debate nor critique the society or culture he/she resides in, then the value of theatre-making is very much lost. Similarly, if an audience member is only interested in critiquing a theatre work and not interested in thinking deeply about the value of theatre in our society, then he/she loses the true meaning of being an audience. This is the motivation behind this Journal – We want to encourage theatre practitioners to think and analyse issues more thoroughly

through the writing, and to let the audience members gain more invaluable information about theatre and the shows they watch. Hopefully, this Journal will also allow reviewers to renew themselves through new ways of critiquing theatre, thereby furthering the discussion on the values and notions of theatre, so that the practitioners will be encouraged to create. Whatever it is, regardless of the means, they are all targeted at trying to get us to think and dig a little deeper at the end of the day.

For example, many theatre groups in Singapore, in addition to making theatre, actively engage in arts education and community efforts. And these are important aspects which we should think deeper about, because they are intertwined with our education system, and provide invaluable insights into our values and morals. This week, the Journal will look at arts education in the formative years, shedding some light on the philosophies of a couple of local theatre practitioners who are involved in arts education.

I interviewed the founder of Practice Performing Arts School, Mdm Goh Lay Kuan, and the Assistant Artistic Director of Dramabox, Koh Hui Ling. Through the interviews, I gained many new insights from these two arts educators of two very different generations. The Artistic Director of Practice Lab, Liu Xiaoyi, will also share with the readers his reflections after having participated as a teacher-mentor for a school competing in the Singapore Youth Festival competition. From his article, it also illustrates and consolidates what arts education in Singapore should be focusing and emphasizing on.

I hope that through these articles, you would also gain newer insights or develop the motivation to initiate change, whether you are a parent, teacher, policy maker, or an ordinary member of the society.

In addition, the Journal this issue will also feature a review on *The Bride Always Knocks Twice*, a summary of the three playwrights' reads and exchanges during the Playwrights' Lab, and a reflective piece written by one of the collaborators of *The Mother Hen Next Door – A Tribute*, Hung Chit-Wah, chronicling her experience while touring this highly intimate piece of work to various countries.

Regardless, as the first audience of this journal, I have learnt a lot from the articles within, and have also harnessed much more motivation to continue learning from the theatre scene. I hope you will also have the same experience, and subsequently join us in furthering our discussions on the local theatre culture and its relevance.

SPOTLIGHT

Lessons from within and beyond the theatre

Words / Liu Xiaoyi Translate / Wang Liansheng

This year, I created a short piece with the students of Nan Hua Secondary, entitled *The Tragedy of the Elephant*. The piece had the structure of a play-within-a-play, and tells the story of a group of students rehearsing for SYF. From there, they start to critically analyse the purpose of theatre and the rehearsal they are undergoing, whether it is for the judges or for themselves, and whether there is a benchmark to determine how excellent a performance is. In the end, the students in the play then began to debate with their teacher about the education and competition system, but alas, the play was eventually not approved of, and the students left the group unhappily.

I think this should be the first time the SYF competition saw a piece which openly criticized the competition. When the work was presented, there were many parties who participated in the debate. There were some who had reservations about the concept of a drama competition; some who were very interested in the debate; some who were also afraid of the message of the script. What was ironic was that what happened in real-life mimicked the scenes within the play. There was some conflict, with regards to different aspects of the

production and to different extents, among different stakeholders – the teachers, students, the school, and even with the education ministry. The students aligned themselves into different groups, and started lengthy debates and negotiations about the piece; the teachers and even the education ministry Ministry of Education expressed concerns about the issues which the play brought up and gave advice on what to edit, in terms of the script. As such, whether it is within or beyond the boundaries confines of the play, there were many interesting lessons which were taught and learnt, and it was an experience that was full of dramatic tension.

Different theatre companies or even different theatre practitioners may have their own philosophy when it comes to arts education. Similarly, the school and its students may have different expectations towards arts education as well. For me, the power of such an education lies in the fact that it allows for students to better understand him/herself, the society he/she resides in, as well as his/her relationship with the society itself. And to achieve this, one must have the ability to think independently. Students often lead a herd mentality lifestyle --- they read the same textbook, sit for the same exams, have the same standard answers for their exams, are governed by the same set of disciplinary rules, taught the same values, and perhaps even have the same future awaiting them. In such a uniform and consistent environment, how then do we prevent them from losing their sense of independence, and their skill of questioning? We want to protect such a mentality because we do not want them to be sucked into the banalities of a uniformed society, We want them to be responsible for themselves, and hence by having a clear learning how to enhance their understanding through of things from consistently questioning, they would then be capable of critiquing the society they reside in as well. Similarly, they will learn that individuals we are meant to be independent, progressing in his/her own right. progressing as an individual, in our own right.

In our rehearsal process, the students themselves faced much pressure from various parties. This allowed them to look at the problem from different angles. , and Hence it became very important for them to formulate their own stand, thoughts and their own methods of working. And as they faced conflicts resulting from their personal convictions clashing with external factors, this is also a lesson for them to understand similarly how an individual can struggle with the overarching hegemony. They then start to learn how to create change through their own actions, and this could be seen to mimic be a a small-scale rebellion. From there, they start to understand that they should not take things for granted, and that things are not immutable. As such, when such a conflict happened, while the students were anxious and furrowing their eyebrows in the face of adversity, I actually felt comforted. In

my opinion, the lessons they have acquired within these 4 months of rehearsals far supersede those 15 minutes which was the students have spent on stage merely in exchange for a prize.

At the end of the SYF performance, the students were very excited. I, too, could not contain my excitement. And just before I left the students, I said to them, “Do not merely remember the moral lessons what the script teaches you I have taught you for the performance; remember the lessons you have learnt within and beyond the while rehearsing for this playtheatre as well.”



REVIEW

Insights from The Bride Always Knocks Twice

Words / Zou Lu Translate / Wang Liansheng

Annually, whenever The Theatre Practice kick-starts its theatre season and meets its audience members with a new production, the “goodbye” we had for its last work is just as exhilarating as the “hello” we have when we see the new work. This is because I know, in the absence we had after goodbye, the company has been working diligently behind-the-scenes, and this often translates into the hard work, effort and progress the audience witnesses in its new production. This year’s absurdist play, *The Bride Always Knocks Twice* is no exception. It brings fresh insights and thought-provoking revelations, giving one much fodder to think about. How, then, should I critique this new work? Stepping out of the theatre, I had much difficulty coming to a simple conclusion with regards to this production. Much like a surface of a crystal, one may see cracks, others may see luminance; some may even feel lost confronting the multitude of lines on the surface of the crystal – And this is precisely why the brilliance of the work shines through. It is able to withstand various perspectives one has about it, and essentially, it is a work which breaks conventions while being imperfect, hence securing its status as a precious piece of work. And just as how rays of light enhances a crystal, the concern the audience members have for history also helps

them to better appreciate this work.

The *Bride Always Knocks Twice* was about a runaway bride who unexpectedly ventured through a door into a mysterious world which consisted only of women, and her entrance into their space sparked off the sharing of the forgotten tales of these women. In the marketing collaterals, it was mentioned that this play was a comedy, but yet it had 8 melancholic characters; it also mentioned how this was an absurdist play but yet it was painfully accurate in its depiction of reality. The characters in the play covered a span of 8 women from our island's history, each of a different background, each having a different story. Each of them is representative of a certain era, but definitely not a stereotype. The door in the play also referred to not only literally the door, but it was also intangible at the same time – It was a frame in which we enter and exit, both physically and metaphorically. Once you successfully make it through this door, time stops and all the troubles and unhappiness you have had in life instantly dissipate. This space is a safe place, but also boring, the initial security you felt would now turn into tolerance, conformity, cowardice and finally into self-deceit. The play covered stories and issues which these women face in the backdrop of our local history. In this play, they have no name, yet are characters which we can identify with --- epitomized by their costumes, make up, actions and speech. These women were unique to their era, and we question ourselves, “Is this because of the structural and behaviour impositions of the society then? If so, then who is the one imposing these rules?” The strengths of this play include invoking the audience to think deeper about societal issues, especially gender issues. These characters were archetypes of women who had been part of our history, even way before the discovery of Singapore in 1819. Chronologically speaking, the archetypes which had been chosen to represent women prior to the independence of Singapore, included the beautiful and innocent concubine of Shah Iskandar Shah, the critical yet solemn nun, the hunch-backed and overworked Samsui woman, the flirtatious yet caring movie actress. Archetypes of females post-independence who were featured in the play include the career women who had to juggle between work and family life, the Chinese woman who illegally worked as a masseuse on a study permit, a runaway bride who discovered that her fiancé has been unfaithful to her, and the righteous policewoman who accidentally revealed that she has been having an affair with her superior. These female characters had all undoubtedly faced some sort of unhappiness due to the circumstances of their lives. Our feelings towards these characters were also very complicated; at times we may be trying to empathise with them. Yet at times, we also felt a sense of disgust and pity, all because of the character attributes they displayed within the play.

The play made me think about the history of our island, be it through looking at history books, local literature or the stories of any iconic women of our times, so that the emptiness I felt after watching the play could be assuaged. In the early 19th century, the Chinese immigrants were mostly males. These were what the history books wrote: in 1853, there was a Xiamen businessman who brought his wife here to set up a family. It was then a very significant event. Subsequently, there were the emergence of the comfort women, Ma-Jies [house servants] and Samsui women, and also Dr Lim Boon Keng's first and second wife, who were all iconic females of their time. The very first article which chronicled the life of Singaporean female was written by Singapore's first female doctor, Dr Lee Choo Neo – The article was titled The Life of the Chinese Girl in Singapore, and described the life of a 20th century Singaporean female, and was published in an English magazine. After which, there were more iconic females appearing in the fields of education, social and community work. Our society has been progressing, with the leveling of the playing field for both males and females, such that we now witness more and more outstanding females in the political, business, technological arena. I often wonder, is it because the initial writings occurred at a time when we were not so aware of the power politics nor were we influenced by politics, therefore they were free to develop on their own such that they ended up being shallow, self-fulfilling and commercialised? And as such, many of the characters were also caricatures, and/or petty heartlanders who would only engage in shallow dialogues, which was a true reflection of the underbellies of the society then. This was also the problem of pop culture infiltrating our society; we are no longer asking for deep intellectual debates, but instead asking for instant gratification through shallow comical humour. In my limited reading experience, I have seldom found female characters with sufficient aesthetic quality within local works. Maybe this should be an awakening for me to change my learning methods of so as to better understand things in their raw, unrestricted form.

I savoured this highly iconic local play of history and realism just as I how I would savour Nyonya cakes with an authentic cup of Nanyang coffee, excited at how I can identify with those multilingual dialogue and local syntax, while being deeply intrigued by the rich flavours present. It was mentioned that only in theatres can we witness such a confluence of language, and it is an accurate reflection of the lives Singapore have, be it at kampongs, alleyways or at the market. This play may have seemed to be absurdist in nature, yet it reveals many truths, allowing for a deep discourse on our society, particularly gender issues. It allows us to better understand the society, be it the roles of females, their collective image, and even issues such as the declining birth rates, low marriage rates, etc --- these issues may seem universal, but they are also extremely pertinent for the Singaporean society. We have lost the concept of “home”, and that is because within the Singapore society, while we

are harping on progress and development, we have inadvertently neutralized the two genders. While we may want women to be of the same status as men, and be recognised for their efforts, I believe, at the end of the day, women are after all women. They play important roles within our society, and is a significant factor in measuring the quality of our society. The play puts on display the female characters present in the last century of our history, and serves as a timely reminder to remind us that within our history, there were still iconic females for us to take notice of. And how would that be in the future? It only leaves us very much in anticipation for the appearance of another such icon.

EXCHANGE

“Playwrights’ Lab” Book Club

Translate / Wang Liansheng

Note: Playwrights’ Boot Camp was a presentation where it condensed the process of a production by rehearsing and presenting within the same day scripts which the three participating playwrights each wrote over the course of one week. Prior to the presentation, the three playwrights also formed a book club where they read classic scripts and shared with one another their thoughts about the works. Here are some of their conclusions about these scripts they have read:

Reader: Liansheng

Rhinoceros in Love by Liao Yimei

Rhinoceros in Love looks at the modern day city dweller’s concept of love. In the play, the protagonist Ma Lu is obsessed with a female character Ming Ming, to such an extent, that he eventually kills his one-and-only companion, a rhinoceros, in order to prove his love for her. The playwright, in creating such a scenario, questions the increasingly rational society –

have we become so logical such that we have forgotten how to use our heart to feel, and hence truly experience life?

The Glass Menagerie by Tennessee Williams

The story tells of a mother who constantly nags at the protagonist Tom, because he often goes to the movies and loses himself within the fantasies of these fictional worlds. The mother also constantly reminisces about her glorious past. She wishes that someday Tom would help his sister find a suitable partner for marriage. He finally agrees, and brings home Jim, a colleague at work, but Jim has a fiancée already. In the end, after all these incidents happening, Tom chooses to leave his home for work, but is unable to forget the glass menagerie that his sister possesses. This script is full of symbols, and explores many different themes. The characters in the play are an embodiment of the nature of a glass symbol, so fragile and detached from the realities of life, only to be infatuated with their own fantasies, as if the playwright is trying to use them as a reminder for us readers to constantly live in the present, and not be oblivious to our surroundings.

A Doll's House by Henrik Ibsen

A Doll's House is a classic realism play, and tells of how Nora, the protagonist finds her true self in times of crisis. It was revealed that previously she had forged a signature for a loan to her husband's medical treatment. Nora's husband detests people who make loans, and hence upon realising the truth, he gets into a fit, and calls Nora a "criminal" and a "slut". From that incident, Nora then finally understands that she has been repaying her debts towards her family her entire life, so much so that she has forgotten how to live for herself.

Pulau - An Island Tale by Ng How Wee

Pulau is a non-realism play, and shares different stories through different scenes set in a fluid temporal and spatial dimension. The playwright, through such a device, attempts to look at the notion of being trapped. The little vignettes in the play include a confrontation with a play-by-the-rules administrative officer, a scene involving the chopping down of hundreds of old trees, and a sinking island – all these scenes are a stark reminder of the bureaucratic restriction, oppression, and entrapment we face on our little island state. In naming the play, *Pulau - An Island of Desire* [a literal translation of the title], I question, is the playwright also trying to remind the audience to continue pursuing their hearts' desires, or if not, they would forever be trapped on this island?

Reader: Suhuai

No Exit by Jean-Paul Sartre

“Hell is other people.”

This is a classic absurdist work, and talks about three strangers in hell, all enclosed within a confined room. They start to validate themselves through the lens and criticisms of others, and have a final revelation that hell is not about the physical torture brought about by the torture devices, but the emotional torment brought about by the opinions of others. This script thoroughly manifests Sartre’s philosophy on existentialism, and allows the readers to think critically about the concepts of “consciousness”, and “absolute freedom”. It left me quite an impact and provoked me for quite a period of time.

The Zoo Story by Edward Albee

“I’ve been to the zoo.”

A bench in the park and two characters –

An extremely simple set up, a seemingly illogical plot, absurd witty lines, and a monologue spanning 1/3 of a page – these are the elements which form the meat of the script.

I feel that *The Zoo Story* is a piece that metaphorically hints at the reality that we, as humans, are no longer able to communicate as we are gradually becoming increasingly apart. And the playwright’s choice of a bloody assault on one character over the bench is an awakening call for his readers – to awaken those who are still living in their fantasies, being all comfortable with their lives, trapped in the façade of their foolish misperceptions of men. These people are not unlike those caged selfish animals. This is my favourite out of the 4 scripts I have read as well.

The Other Shore by Gao Xingjian

“A location: From the world of reality to an imaginary shore”

This is one of Gao Xingjian’s most iconic works. Through an ensemble of actors presenting the work as a game, it provides layers to lead the audience into thinking deeper about the work. It uncovers the story of an individual lost in the collective consciousness of others and

the trials and tribulations of an individual's struggle against the society as well. The script is poetic and filled with abstract actions as well – the game moves from a muddled, unknown state to one which is cold, ruthless, manifesting the development of not only the writer's personal journey, but it also parallels that of the society he was residing in. The individual's desire for freedom in a uniformed state of consciousness and his dilemma to leave or stay within the society struck a chord in my heart. The play was written in 1986, and subsequently, Gao migrated to France.

Accidental Death of an Anarchist by Dario Fo

“Gossiping and lying are acts which are normal to man, but I am a mental patient.”

Through an immediate response to current affairs, the curious public is enticed into the theatre, causing a human traffic jam, and then they were subsequently released back into the streets after watching a round of mockery and criticism on these social observations, albeit this time round as an angry mob – This was the purpose theatre initially served, and should also be intention which modern day drama should reclaim. This piece not only places the spotlight on current affairs; it is also a critique that goes beyond merely the political aspect of things. Its witty dialogue, well-crafted characters and tight structure make it a classic that is set to last.

Reader: Chun Ying

The Room by Harold Pinter

There is an unspoken sense of anxiety and uneasiness in the banality of the conversation between the two elderly characters. The howling winds outside makes me feel that the room is comfortable, but not peaceful. If the weather outside is chilling to the bone, why then did the elderly husband still decide to leave this comfortable room? Who exactly is the wife Ross? What secrets does this room contain? Who lives in the dark, humid and cold basement? What relationship does the landlord, who does not seem like one, have with the room? The unexpected ending was startling, like a grip on my neck, and I was also almost unable to get my breath back.

Night, Mother by Marsha Norman

My most favourite script. The dramatic question of whether the daughter will commit

suicide was no longer of importance; the crux is now how the mother would prevent her daughter from doing so! So exciting! Just like the first script I read, *The Room* --- The playwright here capitalizes on the banalities of daily conversation, at times unimportant yet thoroughly related to one another, to conjure up a script which is full of dramatic tension. As layers and layers of underlying deep-seated emotions are opened up, more and more secrets are revealed, the audience is led to the fact that the terminally ill daughter inadvertently has to die, and the lonely mother has to live, no matter what. In the end, I agreed that indeed the daughter has to die, and felt deeply saddened for the mother who has to be living alone for the rest of her life. That night, it was as if the mother had died as well. The helplessness one feels towards the vicissitudes of life is deeply agonizing.

The Good Person of Szechwan by Bertolt Brecht

Bertolt Brecht has never been to Szechwan. But he is writing about Szechwan. Is he trying to have a distance in his writing intentionally? It really manifests so. The script also distances the readers with its interesting characters – The deities, a virtuous woman Shen Te, a rogue Shui Da (whom the lady transforms into when she is in a state of crisis), a romantic Yang Sun, and a group of greedy and insatiable townsfolk. The script oscillates between dramatic action and breaking the fourth wall to explain the story; it is poetic, but never emotional. In the end, as a reader, I was also very clear-headed during the process of reading, not very much invested, but instead, full of questions for the work and life itself – How can things be as such?

The Seagull by Anton Chekov

Previously, when I was a teacher, I had taught a work of Chekov's, and have always admired Chekov's style of humour, hence I chose to read his 4-act comedy, *The Seagull*. Actually, the image one has of a seagull would hardly convince the audience it would be a comedy, am I right? This is especially when the protagonist also killed the beautiful seagull in the play, and subsequently brutally shot himself to death. Where is the humour? I think this is where the brilliance of black humour is! The complicated human relationships – the you-love-me-but-I-can't, the you-loved-me-but-no-longer-do-so, the will-you-love-me scenes and dialogue all seemed very old-school but yet thoroughly relevant, seemed very hilarious but yet not at all funny as well. In the end, the seagull became a specimen, and no one had possession over it. This seemingly complicated script gave me a revelation. In simplicity we find complexity, and vice versa.

EXCHANGE



Can the Mother Hen fly? The Tour of The Mother Hen Next Door

Words / Hung Chit-Wah Translate / Wang Liānsheng

And so, the Mother Hen can indeed fly! 2012 saw a very hectic year for The Mother Hen Next Door – A Tribute. Pei Ching and I, along with our Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan counterparts, left our footprints in these countries, and shared with many audiences the fruits of our labour.

March --- It all began in Singapore.

The Mother Hen Next Door – A Tribute had its first stop in Singapore in a very small and intimate space --- the S4, which was the company's blackbox theatre space. This play was inspired by Kuo Pao Kun's Spirits Play, and as such, we were very grateful to be featured as part of the 2012 Kuo Pao Kun Festival.

Ten years ago, when we first created the work, Pei Ching, a Taiwanese actress, and I were separated in two lands. We could only rely on emails and the internet to make communication. At times, we felt like lovers in a long-distance relationship, unable to

understand clearly what the other party was saying. It was slightly painful at that time. This time round, however, Pei Ching came to Singapore at the end of 2011, and stayed here for 3 months. We finalized the script, and conducted our first phase of rehearsals. The first draft of the script touched on many political issues relating to China, Taiwan and Hong Kong, and its style of delivery bordered on being pedantic which gave us goosebumps. Subsequently, we decided to focus the script on the idea of humanity; hence we decided to explore what it means to be confronted with such iconic historical events, and hopefully invoke the audience to similarly reconsider the impacts of these incidents.

The Singaporean audience was rather unfamiliar with the Tiananmen and the Taiwan 2.28 incidents. However, this time round, we chose not to focus on politics but to utilize these political incidents as a tool to discuss humanity. And as such, the audience had the opportunity to re-experience the warmth of life in the now very technology saturated life of ours.

September --- We returned to Taiwan.

It was indeed a return because Pei Ching and I first created the work at the 2010 edition of the 3rd Taipei Fringe Festival and we were the crowd's favourite, hence we got invited back again for the 5th edition of the same festival. We returned back to Guling Street Avant-Garde Theatre, the same venue we performed in 2010. The venue is one of Taipei's most popular performance spaces, and since we were an invited piece, we thought ticket sales wouldn't be a problem. However, things often do not go as planned. The Taiwan Arts Festival had overlapping programmes with the Fringe Festival in September, and to add on to the problem, the Fringe Festival had more than 120 groups involved, with over 500 performances! Goodness! How then were we going to attract audiences for our performances?

As such, we started producing our own publicity materials, distributed flyers and contacted various media for interviews. We also invited some popular online reviewers to watch rehearsals and write preview articles for us --- All these in exchange for more audience members to enter the theatre and view our work. Luckily, with the blessings from the gods above, we had good reviews and our last three shows were completely sold out.

The Taipei Fringe Festival was not really an international one. Almost 98% of the participating groups were based in Taiwan. Even though we were invited guests, we still had to find a place to stay. However, what was "lucky" was that we could "choose" our

performance venue and we had just about “enough time” to set up in the theatre. Why do I say that? All performance venues in the Fringe Festival were balloted and each group only had 4 hours in the venue itself to deal with the technical issues. What?! A usual performance would require at least 3-4 days for preparations, how is this even going to be possible? Regardless, we tried our best to utilize this 4 hours fully. Looking back, I think, if I didn't have such a strong heart, I would have died! Yet, it was also this lack of resources which forced us to become a pair of theatre practitioners who were not only creative but also apt at dealing with administrative issues.

Macau may seem small, but this 12th edition of the Macau City Fringe Festival saw a confluence of theatre practitioners from 10 over countries, which culminated in 42 different works being performed. In addition to the usual performing genres such as drama, dance and music, there were also clown performances, environmental theatre, puppetry, workshops, lectures, videos, and exhibitions, which packed the 3-week festival fully. There was also a variety of performance venues, which included school halls, a corner of a billiard club, outdoor theatres or even a corner off a street. And we performed in a black box within the premises of Hiukok Theatre Group. It was a factory which was subsequently converted into a performing space.

What is the origin of such a performing space? Initially, Hong Kong and Macau were industrializing in the 70s and 80s. However, in the 90s, the factories were subsequently relocated to the North, which then led to many empty buildings. As such, ingenious theatre practitioners began to convert these spaces into rehearsal spaces as the rental for these spaces were much cheaper. Add in some lights, along with some sound equipment, and many chairs – Voila! This venue instantly becomes a performance space which can accommodate up to 50 people. While these spaces may have more limitations as compared to traditional performance spaces, they definitely do not lose out in its versatility.

Many of the performers were international artists, hence we had lodging arranged for us as well. We were put up at a youth hostel, along with the rest of these performers, and every night after the performances, we would open all doors and have conversations with one another that would last through the night. We would talk about our life experience, our trials and tribulations as a theatre practitioner, exchanging stories which would resonate with one another. It was definitely cathartic for all of us!

Conclusion

The audience liked the performance because they can relate to the portions which dealt with kinship and one's ideals. Some younger audiences were also stirred to reminisce about their loved ones, while others were inspired to question their own goals and ideals. What were their own aspirations? Theatre practitioners, on the other hand, gave us much feedback; some felt that the script has matured, whereas some felt we could even be more detailed, and could even explore the themes and issues more deeply. But the question really is, "When will the Mother Hen actually stop flying?" Maybe one day, when it has flown to Beijing, then its journey would have come to a complete resolution.





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