

# Public Theatre in Singapore

## *Present and Future*

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*I would like to say at the outset that I am totally incompetent to discuss public theatre in Singapore or indeed anywhere else. I have no experience in running a theatre company or an arts centre nor have I trodden the boards for the last twenty-plus years. Although I do occasionally partake of the offerings provided by some of the arts groups in Singapore, I cannot be considered as one of their enthusiastic and dedicated supporters who throng to each and every one of their productions. My sole link to the theatre is my good fortune to have a niece who is a playwright, among her other more esoteric and creative activities, and whose work for the theatre often drew gasps of admiration from an unschooled person such as I.*

Being a total ignoramus about the theatre allows me the privilege of choosing any of the theatre-related areas on which to build my case. This will allow me to avoid troublesome areas where my lack of knowledge could lead me into tricky debate from which I could not escape unscathed.

Over the past two years, I have been privileged to have been asked to take a role in the development of the Singapore Arts Centre, now formally named as *The Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay*. This is a real challenge as can be imagined. Although I have been involved in a somewhat marginal way during my checkered career in the development of office buildings, hotels, institutional buildings and condominiums, I have never attempted to build a theatre. *The Esplanade* has a total of five theatres of various sizes and you can imagine my consternation when I was asked to undertake this assignment.

These plans represent the outcome of a substantial amount of dialogue and interactive sessions with the arts groups, in Singapore. In addition, experts and practitioners in Asian performing art forms from Malaysia, Philippines, Thailand, India, China were also invited to share their visions, knowledge and experiences.

One of the most significant outcomes of such dialogue and exchanges was the confirmation that indigenous arts and theatre are in a dynamic state of change. This is reflected in the range of suggestions put forward by the artistes for facilities in *The Esplanade* and the ambiance, possible configuration and character of the working spaces they would like to have for their use. There were serious debates over the transition made by Asian performing arts from their traditional outdoor spaces into enclosed theatre halls and vice versa. There were suggestions for provision of meditation spaces where artistes could focus their thoughts and spirit before a performance. There were requests for variable sized proscenium and orchestra pits, forestage, thrust stage and a whole host of other combinations.

In terms of designing an arts centre for the next millennium, this flood of requests and suggestions may appear to be insurmountable obstacles. In the finite world of absolutes, as in structures and buildings, the amorphous quality of creativity often result in the building of a facility which does not meet any of the anticipated needs. There is a distinct danger of ending up with a series of multi-purpose halls.

It is important to understand why this plethora of suggestions occurred. When designing the Shakespeare Theatre at the Barbican Centre, the needs of Kathikali obviously did not figure high on the list of priorities. Similarly, the design of the Myerson Symphony Hall at Dallas, Texas, did not have to pay too much attention to the acoustical demands of instruments ranging from the nose harp to Korean drums. They have been designed to respond to fairly specific performance needs.

The perceived need of any theatre or performing space is strongly influenced by the cultural fabric of the society or community in which the facility is located. Where the fabric is mature, stable and predictable, the process of designing an arts centre would be aimed at meeting the working and patronage needs of a relatively homogenous artiste community and audience support base.

The relative simplicity of this is clearly not applicable to theatres designed for the Asian milieu, particularly in countries which possess significant proportions of migrant population from diverse origins and strongly influenced by decades, if not centuries, of foreign domination.

Foreign domination does not relate only to domination in economic and military affairs. Lifestyles and

indeed the attitude of the subjugated people underwent changes, some subtle and others quite startling in their eventual impact. Languages and cultures had been known to have disappeared and an entire people de-culturalised to the extent that apart from physical attributes, they bear no resemblance in any respect to the society from which they originally came.

The economic successes of countries in Asia over the last two decades have diffused into cultural consciousness. There is a greater sense of self-awareness and confidence. With this comes a heightened sense of identity and curiosity over origins and values. Questions are being asked and debates initiated on the rationalisation of some foreign cultures and values which could be alien to the beliefs and practices long entrenched in the philosophy and value system in this part of the world.

Expanding business interests in the region and globally have brought about a stark realisation of the importance of one's roots. Overseas Indians and Chinese seeking business opportunities in their respective lands of origin have been known to prioritize opportunities in their own provinces, districts and even towns from which their forebears originally came. Some might consider this a form of chauvinism, but it made a lot of good business sense to forge relationships with those who share the same language, dialect and values.

With such networking, an increase in awareness and interest in matters cultural, in the broadest sense, must inevitably occur. Under the supremacy of colonial masters, a performance of Teochew opera or Manipuri dances may be seen merely as an expression by the locals longing for a sense of identity in a foreign land. But if one has a number of factories or businesses in

Guangzhou or Manipur, such performances take on new and significant dimensions. The impact and relevance of such performances begin to strike much closer to the core and focus interest in their intrinsic worth, even if it is initially for material reasons.

This trend could similarly be observed at the international level. With prospects of becoming an economic power house of the 21st century, there has never been so much interest shown in things Asian by the Western countries than now. Western businessmen operating in South East Asia can be expected to increasingly speak Bahasa Malaysia or Indonesia. Some Australian education institutions are already teaching this language as part of their curriculum. They will increasingly speak Mandarin, Hindi, Tamil, Thai and Korean. Many of them are already proficient in Japanese. From conquest and domination, the name of the game has changed to immersion

and integration.

The impact on performing arts in Asia could be fundamental. There are still strong undercurrents of Western influence in almost all genres of performing arts in Asia. The overpowering influences of media, TV, cinema and video and the immense opportunities offered by satellite broadcasts and cable; they all, without exception, draw upon software from non-Asian sources and these, almost without exception, are based on Western icons and precepts. The great immortal works of Kurosawa, a giant in his lifetime, drew less box office than *Schindler's List*. To be financially safe, it is prudent to stay with products with mass appeal and a ready market. The just emerging fashion design houses of India are not likely to want to convert the world to the saris. They are instead targeting their creative design efforts to take on the top houses of Paris, London and New York and to excel at designs for the Western markets.

The Japanese car industry still holds much in store to pursue the title of "Europe Car of the Year" as an effective benchmark to gain market share in Europe. Although there is a "Japan Car of the Year," recipients of this award are not likely to cause a similar stir in the European or US car markets.

In many ways, the world has become increasingly internationalised. But the direction and impact of internationalisation are still strongly influenced by the forces of market and economic opportunities. As long as Western economies remain the key markets for Asian products and services, successful penetration of these markets will influence the lifestyles, thinking process and culture of the Asian exporting countries. The most evident of this phenomenon is in the dress code. The basic design of Asian apparel is loose-fitting and flowing and has evolved from the need to be comfortable in the climatic conditions and working environment in Asia. But today, shirt, tie, jacket have become the norm despite the unhealthy consequences that these

articles of clothing have on the users in this climate. Thanks largely to sushi and noodles, the fork and spoon have not yet replaced the chopsticks but they have made serious inroads into the way we feed ourselves in our homes.

These are not frivolous observations, because in many ways, appearances and lifestyles exert a strong influence over the thinking process and behavioural pattern. A number of countries in Asia have given this serious attention. The bush jacket and its derivatives have become the working dress in Malaysia and batik an accepted formal evening wear in Indonesia and Malaysia. The *barong tagalog* occupies a similar position in the Philippines and even Singapore is popularising the orchid shirt as a mode of Singapore dress. These are not symptoms of an extreme nationalistic viewpoint. Instead, they serve to demonstrate the diversities and richness of culture which they respectively inherited; an inheritance

which, with increasing confidence and economic well-being, could now be positioned to re-establish the identity of a people in a pragmatic and non-dogmatic way.

How do performing arts in Asia fare in this changing milieu? To address this issue, it may be useful to examine the evolution paths of Western and Asian performing arts in broad and generalised terms. There are considerable risks in doing this and if there are inconsistencies and inaccuracies in the reading of history, I would crave your indulgence on the ground that I am totally ignorant in these matters.

In history, the flourishing of the arts, including performing arts, generally owed the initiation of their upsurge to high level patronage during times of prosperity and stability. This created works

intended for the sole enjoyment of the ruling class. Mozart's delightful minuets and mazurkas, Handel's Water and Fireworks music, Strauss' waltzes; they are all created for this purpose. The great masterpieces of Michaelangelo were created for the all-powerful church at that time and the Shakespeare series on kings of England rang with sycophantic fervour. By contrast, latter artistes who broke with tradition and established doctrine, such as Gauguin and Cezanne had a pretty tough time persuading acceptance of their works during their lifetime. The enormous value their works command today could perhaps be facetiously interpreted as the pressure of scarcity value and even more facetiously as the challenge to any truly great artist to accept that his works only live after him.

Patronage of the arts created a number of dichotomies in audience and other support. The common folks of Asia and the West are not without their sources of entertainment. While the high and mighty had their retinue of artistes

and performers, the common folks had their story-tellers, minstrels, performing groups portraying great epics in legend and religion, puppetry and mime and a whole host of others. Many of these have long history and tradition and many stretched their vocations through passing on their skills and repertoire from generation to generation.

The performing spaces also varied greatly. While those pandering to the tastes of the high and mighty performed and worked in exclusive spaces, the proletariat entertainers worked in public places, in temples market places, unused open spaces and any place where they could set up shop. Theirs was a nomadic existence, moving on when audience support dwindled. Their repertoire could be limited but their audience were renewable as they moved from one location to another.

With migration of peoples in the nineteenth century from the grinding poverty of some Asian

countries to the new centres of colonial possessions in South East Asia, the performing artistes followed. They were either seeking opportunities amongst the new communities or at the invitation of such overseas establishments who wish to retain their cultural links and identities with the land they left behind.

The Industrial Revolution in the West gave rise to a massive redistribution of wealth and a consequential erosion of the power base of the high and mighty. It signalled the beginnings of new political thought and systems, the evolution of which continued to this day. Patronage of the arts was transferred from individuals to the state as the former lords and masters had both their fortunes and positions eroded under the onslaught of new governments.

Asia never had an Industrial Revolution as such. It bore the consequences of the Western Industrial Revolution but not the rewards. The energies unleashed by

the Revolution resulted in searches for new markets and new resources to feed the industries. Either by design or subterfuge, the expansion also brought about new ways of life and culture to new lands and peoples. Generations of Asians were schooled in Shakespeare and Milton; they knew more about the history and geography of Europe than their own and they learned to enjoy Verdi and Gilbert and Sullivan more than Beijing opera, *Kabuki* or *Mak Yong*. There are Asians who have taken to dressing up in some period European costume and singing arias with an awful Italian or German accent. And they consider that a part of their artistic heritage.

Theatres appear to have escaped, to some extent, the affliction of blind mimicry. As an effective means of communication with the masses, theatre was used extensively from the turbulent period early in this century as a powerful tool to influence ideological and social changes. Norway has its Ibsen and Russia its Pushkin and China its Lu



Shun. Even the Cultural Revolution of China was launched on the platform of a play by Wu Han (*Hai Jui Dismissed from Office*). The play itself was fairly innocuous but in the hands of a master strategist, it caused a decade of turmoil and took millions of lives.

It is clear that theatre in Asia has and must emerge from the set-piece of traditional and rigid disciplines to the more contemporary and relevant. This should not, however, mean that one is forsaken for the other. In the same manner that classical ballet, as a product of the French court has become a foundation, a discipline of the dance from which all modern abstract dance forms have continued to draw inspiration, traditional theatre must continue to exert a strong influence in understanding the depth and emotion of interpretation. In the West, the annotation as a Shakespearean actor on one's

resume adds a distinct dimension to one's skills and experience despite the onslaught of the Method School of acting which has spawned many other superstars.

In the process of evolving the theatre in Asia, a number of conflicts need to be addressed. Apart from the traditional, there is no modern Asian theatre which could lay claim to being a distinctive genre. Language and its use in theatre compels the establishment of a mindset upon audiences and their acceptance of the messages driven by the production. In my younger days, much younger days, I participated in Beijing operas translated into English but with the full paraphernalia and symbolism of a Beijing opera. It was a shameful travesty on Beijing opera and a mockery of my cultural heritage. The colonial masters, then wanted to show how broadminded and receptive they were to a cultural idiom they would never be able to grasp this side of eternity. Their thunderous applause was particularly painful to me. I had danced to their tune. Needless to say, I never performed Beijing opera again.

The use of the English language in theatre, as a possibly universal language in most parts of Asia, is highly seductive. With the language comes the natural, if not compelling, response to explore theatre derivations and forms expressed in this language. The ability to communicate creates comfort and assurance and through this the conviction among the culturally vacuous and hungry that whatever developments created by theatre using this language must be correct and appropriate. This is perhaps unavoidable. How could anyone be expected to respond differently if one speaks and thinks only in English and no other language. I mentioned earlier the spectre of deculturalisation under the colonial system. Is it any different on the one hand for Asians to warble with great feeling Gilbert & Sullivan's "*Tit Willow*," and on the other to produce theatre performances echoing trite and outrageous issues

just because it is currently fashionable in some obscure school of theatre in the West.

Theatres need money to survive. In Western countries and erstwhile socialist states, the responsibility to provide funding is in the hands of the State. In some instances, financial grants in all shades and colours have been dispensed with charitable generosity. Returns on money spent have never formed the core of any consideration in evaluating justification for financial largesse. Creativity of the artistes has become the sole *raison d'être* for providing the grants. No one questions creativity and its seemingly fragile and precious nature. It is considered a privilege to be allowed to give hard-earned money to creative people despite the fact that many productions could have bombed out at the box office.

Recently, many state authorities providing grants and subsidies to the arts have come under pressure to cut back because of unfavourable economic climate. Well-known orchestras, dance and theatre companies have to confront the stark reality of going out of existence. They have to explore new ways to improve financial performance in addition to the artistic. Their creativity has to be broadened to include finding ways and means to stay in business.

In Asia, the situation could be a little different. The prospects of an Asian Renaissance in culture and the arts increase with confidence and economic well-being. There is every reason to feel optimistic that the golden age of Asian culture could be on the cards. Perhaps it is possible to contemplate the likelihood of shaking off an alien culture and to replace it with a vibrant and lively culture not

replicated out of the mold of the old but distilled from the richness of the past with the essence of the future.

There is a spate of developments afoot in Asia. In Singapore, apart from *The Esplanade*, a number of new museums are being built or planned. Taiwan is building a new museum in Kaoshiung, Malaysia is building a new National Theatre, so is Brunei Darussalam. South Korea has opened a new arts centre, Hongkong has its Performing Arts Centre, India is planning the new Indira Gandhi Performing Arts Centre in Delhi, a number of prefectures in Japan are also planning similar projects, in particular, the Hyogo Prefecture which is planning an arts centre of the magnitude of *The Esplanade* in Singapore. There is nothing in the West within the next decade which could match the scale of development for arts facilities in Asia.

What are the lessons that Asia



could learn from the track record of the West? What could be the pitfalls and, most importantly, how would this new generation of Asian arts centres come into their own, establish their distinctive cultural identities and avoid being a poor reproduction of something elsewhere.

There are two key ingredients involved. The first is architectural form and the other, the user-friendliness of the facilities planned to respond to both the physical and emotional environment of artistes who work in the spaces provided.

Enclosed, environmentally-controlled spaces carry an inherent feeling of separation alien to Asian performances. Historically, such separations were created to denote exclusivity and high stations in life. But, arts centres in Asia must pay particular attention to how the ambiance of the traditional outdoor and public performances could be translocated indoors without undue

detriment to the quality of the performance. Merely building a hall of the appropriate capacity, sightlines, acoustics and intimacy, is not sufficient if one is to address the often conflicting demands of Asian and non-Asian performances.

As mentioned earlier, the first step in the preliminary design of *The Esplanade* was to get the performing arts groups in Singapore involved. Their suggestions were numerous and, as expected, often governed by personal likes and dislikes based upon previous unhappy experiences or inspired by a superficial reading of some facilities outside the country. Be that as it may, the requests and suggestions made were "dream" lists for a "dream" arts centre. Not all the wishes could be accommodated. But the important issue is that a certain presence of the arts centre began to form and eventually took on a distinctive personality.

A number of sacred cows in the lexicon of arts centres may have to be re-examined. Should the arts centre be operated as a commercial entity with similar responsibilities as a business? Should resident companies, if any, enjoy privileges and concessions in the arts centre which are inconsistent with good business sense? Should the pricing for the use of facilities be aimed at the highest that the market can bear? Under what conditions would it be appropriate for the arts centre to subsidize arts groups and assist them in their creative efforts and to what extent should the arts centre accommodate such loss leaders?

These are not easy questions. They establish in essence the way an arts centre should be managed in future. They also pinpoint the nature of arts groups' future operating posture; whether they would continue to be a cost centre

modern counterparts should consider resumption of at least part of that responsibility.

which society is obliged to bear or they should be allowed to rise and fall in the nature of all businesses.

There is no cut and dried answer momentarily and the issue is obviously emotional and highly subjective. But one factor stands out above all else. The days of generous and unquestioned subsidy may be over and not likely to return. It would be useful to put aside the temptation to cling to Western examples in support for the arts in those halcyon days and replace it by a new relationship which would facilitate a mutually beneficial engagement. Arts centres cost an enormous amount of money to build and even more money to maintain and operate. The public purse cannot be called upon to fund this expenditure perpetually and without limit, no matter how much value the society may be prepared to place on the arts. The artistes of old, the strollers, street performers, temple performers; they worked with what they have and paid their own way. Without being unduly harsh or critical, perhaps their

As I mentioned at the outset, I am completely ignorant in the arts. My association with businesses did not equip me adequately to speak on matters relating to the public theatre. However, my involvement in *The Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay* has given me the opportunity to view the arts, as a service product of *The Esplanade*, from the unusual perspective of a business person. I do have friends, many friends in the arts circles whom I admire greatly. They display a sense of conviction for their works which they pursue with a truly awesome passion. Perhaps this is needed to be successful in the arts. But this also creates a blind side in one's perception. A business person is never passionate or he would fall prone to misjudgment which could be extremely costly.

I believe in the great future that public theatre has in Singapore and the rest of Asia. It is the final stage of our maturity as viable and stable societies. The strategy that was responsible for the economic successes of Asia was not replicated from the West. But this new strategy worked. Without prejudging any particular issue in the future of public theatre in Asia, there is every justification to adopt a fresh and uncluttered vision to ensure its long term viability and contribution to society. I am confident I have enough years left in me to see the full flowering of Asian arts.