

*the first comprehensive attempt to document and discuss the evolution of Singapore from 1945 to the present. I congratulate IPS and Terence Chong's book.*

**Tommy Koh**

Former Chairman of the National Arts Council, National Heritage Board and the 1991 Censorship Review Committee

*most comprehensive and meticulously assembled collection of in-depth arts policies and institutes. For a theatre practitioner who is deeply concerned behind the policies that influence our arts practices, this book is a must-read to artists, civil servants, politicians, scholars and anyone else who wants to know how the arts in Singapore have evolved through the years. From the historical to the arts' instrumental role in nation-building, this book provides a critical analysis of our existing and most influential arts policies. As for artists, this book will help them to reclaim our role in contemporary society.*

**Alvin Tan**

Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage, and 2014 Cultural Medallion winner

*In addressing the gap hitherto in our understanding of Singapore's arts scene, this book bridges that gap with a "multi-angulation" (not just triangulation) of the most thoughtful and authoritative independent voices on the subject. Where the three most important considerations are location, history, and the three most important factors of this book are that it is enlightening, informative, and fun. This is everything you ever wanted to know about the state and its arts policies, were afraid to ask, or more accurately, didn't know where to look. I mentioned that I found it enlightening?*

**Chew Kheng Chuan**

Chairman of The Substation Ltd, and member of the Intercultural Theatre Institute board

*Singapore's key arts policies and art institutions which have shaped the country from the 1950s to the present.*

*In this volume critically assess arts policies and arts institutions to provide an overview of how arts and culture have been deployed by the state. The book is chronologically to cover milestone events from the forging of 'Malayan' to the 'anti-yellow culture' campaign; the use of 'culture' for tourism; the National Arts Council on Arts and Culture, the Renaissance City Report, the National Day of the Arts, and others.*

*What Singapore is a 'cultural desert', this volume is valuable reading for policy makers who seek an understanding of Singapore's cultural landscape. For readers interested in Singapore's arts and cultural policy.*

CHONG

THE STATE & THE ARTS  
IN SINGAPORE

S700.95957090  
CHO

# THE STATE & THE ARTS IN SINGAPORE

## Policies and Institutions



TERENCE CHONG  
Editor

ISBN 978-981-3236-88-2



World Scientific

## Chapter 4

# Presenting Culture and Nationhood: The Singapore Arts Festival

Venka PURUSHOTHAMAN

### Introduction

It is not an erudite observation to say that cultural activities over a course of period become institutions in their own right. The Singapore Arts Festival (henceforth Arts Festival) is festival *par excellence* in the Singaporean arts calendar with a complex history dating back to the 1950s. In my early writings on the Arts Festival, I have asserted that it remains the “most important artery of cultural production in Singapore” (Purushothaman, 2007) as it has become an institution that continues to provide a critical platform for the development of discourse and an expression of cultural self-representation at both the national and international level. It is against this backdrop that this chapter looks at the development of the Arts Festival from 1959 to 2017. It frames the Arts Festival as a critical institution through which the government fosters policy directives for nation-building and socialising a migrant society into a community.

Arts festivals are not merely calendared events coalescing social and communitarian energies, but also national and international entities serving as sites of contestation and interpretations of the status quo by both professional and amateur arts groups and companies. Festivals are a set of planned activities that seek to highlight, communicate and create dialogue with

various publics regarding critical ideas in art. In this regard, the centrality of a festival in fostering community spirit and promoting national interests cannot be undermined. While festivals may celebrate the arts, they often contain a carnivalesque ethos that makes spectacular the cultural collectivism of a community. Festivals become signifying systems of socio-cultural practices that seek to support and critique social structures, stabilise or problematise identities and boundaries of sense.<sup>1</sup>

The Arts Festival is a model of creative enterprise with most Singaporean artists or arts groups having participated in it at one point or another. Through its strategic programming of building capacity of local arts companies and individuals, and audience-building exercise, the Arts Festival has served and continues to serve nation-building; encourage the professionalisation of arts companies; develop major fields of creative practice with a Singaporean voice ranging from literary arts, film art, performance and experimental art, integrated arts and technology to simulcast global performances. Aptly, the notion of the nation remains central to any new endeavour to refashion Singaporean society and the Arts Festival is a critical discursive platform for shaping of a self-representative identity for a nation in a fast globalising Southeast Asia. Critics have seen this socio-cultural agenda for the arts emboldened within cultural policy development in Singapore with the aim of transforming a population of philistines into cultural connoisseurs and to gentrify the city into a global city for the arts (Koh, 1989; Kwok and Low, 2002; Chong, 2010). With the close link between state enterprise and cultural rootedness, the study of the Arts Festival cannot but only be read through prevailing cultural policies, which serve as gatekeepers of social access and political agency.

### **Making a Ministry, Creating a Festival**

Singapore in the 1950s and 1960s was a milieu of change as decolonisation and cultural discovery of a new community of migrants was fast entrenching itself. The arts in Singapore were a tool to communicate with largely

<sup>1</sup> Alessandro Falassi's 1987 essay "Festival: Definition and Morphology" foregrounds the structural notions of festivals as institutions in that festivals are as much ritual and social events at once (Falassi, 1987).

disparate and illiterate migrant communities the idea of multiculturalism as a cornerstone of an emerging Malayan Culture — a key instrument of the decolonisation process of the British in Southeast Asia (Hack, 2001). The 1950s were invariably colourful and vibrant with the looming of a Cultural Revolution in China, as well as with the introduction of cinema and its attendant production houses coupled with a newfound nationalistic fervour in Malaya. Many schools and individuals working in the arts integrated localised themes into the weave of multiculturalism, as seen in the many school productions of the time, for example, *The Kampong Story* by the Chinese High School (1953), community cultural festivals (*Aneka Ragam* for example) and the art of the famous Chinese and European trained artists — Georgette Chen, Liu Kang, Chen Chong Swee, Chen Wen Hsi, and Cheong Soo Pieng. The natural osmosis between ethnic communities was most pronounced in this period as the migrant population was stumbling to find its own ways of dealing with life in a new territory.

The Arts Festival, organised in 1959 at a cost of S\$20,000, aimed to bring the arts of Singapore to the people of Singapore; to stimulate new ventures in the arts; and to lay the foundation for making Singapore an international cultural centre for Southeast Asia (Sullivan, 1959, p. 3). This laid the policy groundwork for the Arts Festival as a simple but significant enterprise for Singapore. Staged from 1 to 8 April 1959 and officiated by Governor Sir William Goode, it embodied the multidimensional cultures present in Singapore and Southeast Asia. Held at numerous public venues such as Victoria Theatre, Victoria Memorial Hall, Drama Centre at Fort Canning, the Padang and Hong Lim Green, the Arts Festival comprised a mélange of programmes by different ethnic community groups; school-based concerts and performances; and local exhibitions and those partnered with foreign government agencies such as the United States Information Services sponsored exhibition entitled "Twentieth Century Highlights of American Painting", featuring the works of young and emerging artists Edward Hopper, Jackson Pollack, Georgia O'Keefe, Thomas Eakins and John Sloan. The Singapore Film Society curated three award-winning films, *Wayang Kulit* and *Timeless Temiar* (Malayan Film Unit) and *Rekava* (Sri Lanka). The function of this Arts Festival was to find a common ground for a nation comprised of a disparate migrant generation seeking to locate and produce its own culture especially in a linguistically and

culturally diverse society that was at once Asian, postcolonial, multiethnic and multicultural. It was also a policy response to ensure that the migrant community was able to foster new imaginings of their community through the arts and later counter the moniker of Singapore as “cultural desert” articulated by Sullivan (1959, p. 3).

In 1959, Singapore gained internal self-governance and Lee Kuan Yew, as leader of the People’s Action Party (PAP), set out to develop a new nation out of the colossal colonial enterprise (Harper, 1999). A Ministry of Culture was set up with S. Rajaratnam, a former journalist and key member of the PAP, appointed as its first Minister. He contended that a “Ministry of Culture was set up in the belief that the shaping of Malayan culture should be a conscious, deliberate and organised effort. There is nothing foolish in a people wanting to plan their cultural evolution” (Rajaratnam cited in Chan & ul Haq, 1987) and felt that culture in Singapore is a matter of “practical politics” (Rajaratnam, 7 September 1960). Rajaratnam was a visionary who imagined Singapore as a global city. He argued that “if we view Singapore’s future as a Global City, then the smallness of Singapore, the absence of a hinterland, or raw materials and a large domestic market are not fatal or insurmountable handicaps ... for a Global City, the world is its hinterland” (cited in Chan & ul Haq, 1987).

The Ministry of Culture was critical to several initiatives that supported the development of a new nation. First, the formation of the People’s Association in 1960 — a government community wing that looks at social and cultural activities as tools of nation-building — marked an ethnicity-based social agenda otherwise known as multiracialism (CMIO — Chinese, Malay, Indians and Others) that became a determinant of cultural production in Singapore for two decades. Koh (1989) notes that the spirit of this period was fuelled by the excitement of the time in itself, which was confronted with the end of colonialism, questions of national and cultural identity and relationship between the individual and the government. Second, investment in arts and cultural infrastructure: The site of Fort Canning Hill was earmarked as a civic and cultural hub and saw the rapid construction of the National Library (1960), the 3,420-seat National Theatre (1963) in King Georges V Park complementing the Van Cleef Aquarium (1955) and the Cultural Centre (1955). The development of the National Theatre captured the national consciousness of the community. Built at a cost of S\$2m through

donations by the public, it became an iconic symbol of a communitarian “ideal of a harmonious development of a diversity of cultures within the framework of national unity” (Abisheganaden, 2005, p. 187). Third, the introduction of the Music for Everyone series in 1968 aimed at presenting affordable concerts — by Singaporeans and foreign artists visiting Singapore — and inspiring a new generation of artists, the series reached out to a considerable generation of Singaporeans through the educational system well into the 1980s. Its focus on content made it “break down the visible and invisible barriers surrounding ‘concert-going’” and brought people into formal venues in informal ways (p. 187). It was this spirit of “breaking down”, fuelled by the excitement of the time itself, which was confronted with the end of colonialism, that questioned national and cultural identity and the relationship between the individual and the government (Koh, 1989). But more importantly, it was a critical instrument to socialise a larger uneducated migrant community.

### Arts Festival for the New Nation

It is amidst this proliferation of cultural activities that the second Arts Festival named Southeast Asia Cultural Festival emerged. Organised to affirm Singapore’s location within the milieu of Malaya and Southeast Asia, the Arts Festival (8–15 August 1963), coinciding with the opening of the grand National Theatre, was built to serve nation-building through self-expression in multicultural Singapore and to foster goodwill amongst Southeast Asian countries. Approximately 1,500 artists from 12 neighbouring countries participated in a pageantry of Asian culture, representing a “Southeast Asian cultural renaissance” (Southeast Asia Cultural Festival programme guide, 1963, p. 187). The planning started 2 years ahead of its execution in 1961 by a festival committee chaired by Lee Khoo Choy, Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Culture, and supported by pillars of the Singapore arts scene, notably Zubir Said (composer of Singapore’s national anthem), Wee Kim Wee (President of Singapore, 1985–93), Paul Abisheganaden and K. P. Bhaskar. They whipped up support for what Abisheganaden called the “mother of all festivals” (Abisheganaden, 2005, p. 245). While little evidence of its outcomes is available, the landscape was set to change dramatically.



Scholars of Singaporean culture agree that in the 1960s and 1970s, while arts played an instrumentalist role in political participation and the organisation of a migrant society, the arts for its own inherent contributing values, aesthetics and ethos were not a national priority (Chong, 2010, p. 132). Chong (2010) cites a proclamation in 1966 by then Minister of State for Culture, Lee Khoo Choy that “the days of Art for Art’s sake are over. Artists should play an integral part in our effort to build a multi-racial, multi-lingual, and multi-religious society where every citizen has a place under the sun” (Lee, 1966 cited in Chong (2010)). In 1967, Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee, at an event at the Victoria Theatre, provided instructions to theatre-makers. He said, “...themes of the plays should be in keeping with the realistic life in Singapore and its multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious spirit. Second, they must discard the crazy, sensual, ridiculous, boisterous and over materialistic style of the West. In the same way, the feudalistic, superstitious, ignorant and pessimistic ideas of the East are also undesirable...and provide noble, healthy and proper cultural entertainment for the people” (Goh, 1967 cited in Chong (2010)). Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, this ethos of an emerging politico-cultural landscape was reinforced by proclamations by politicians in public events but critically it commenced a discourse of framing the West as decadent and that Singaporean youths had to be kept away from yellow culture (Kong, 2000). The arts increasingly came to be framed within this state apparatus as a means of managing racial and social harmony and projecting a unified front to an otherwise sceptical world.

If the arts had at all withered by this juncture, the late 1970s ironically saw a pronounced government’s patronage of the arts. There are two reasons for this. First, political overtones found in the arts were seen to be fractious of a new nation and second, the value of culture as social glue was gaining slow but ready acceptance by the government. The period 1977–1979 stands out for several significant initiatives in the arts. The most important was the appointment of visionary Minister, Ong Teng Cheong (also President of Singapore from 1993–99), to the Ministry of Culture. Under Ong, the Ministry established specialist committees to promote dance, visual arts, literature, music and drama in the four official languages. The Ministry invested in an assistance scheme for the production of plays and inaugurated the Drama Festival that year with the aim to generate

greater interest amongst the public in traditional and contemporary drama and theatre. English-language theatre in particular thrived in forums such as the NUS-Shell Short Play Competition and the Drama Festival (1978–1989), which were wholly sponsored by multinational company Shell (Oon, 2001, pp. 82–84). This spawned a generation of young local writers who began to express cultural identity through their plays. Another key idea was the mooted of a symphonic orchestra by then Deputy Prime Minister Goh Keng Swee to build on the rising confidence of a young nation. A group of people, especially academic and composer Bernard Tan, swiftly realised this the following year in 1978, and the Singapore Symphony Orchestra inaugurated its first concert under the baton of maestro Choo Hoey in 1979. In the same year, the Cultural Medallion Awards for achievements by artists and cultural promoters was introduced by Ong, which have become the highest arts honours in the country to date (Purushothaman, 2001). Ong also suggested the establishment of the Singapore Cultural Foundation to be the fundraising and arts funding arm. The Foundation was the first endowment schema that allowed donors to enjoy tax exemption for supporting the arts. It also served to promote the arts through an arts calendar and was instrumental in showcasing Singapore theatre in Edinburgh in the eighties. The final landmark initiative under Ong’s directive in 1978 was a proposal to build a performing arts centre, which was realised as the Esplanade — Theatre on the Bay in 2002. These events staked the government’s claim in shaping and investing in the arts.

Amidst these developments in the late 1970s, a group of music enthusiasts and music education inspectors of public schools, who were working with the Ministry of Education’s extra-curricular arm known as the Young Musicians’ Society, approached Mobil Oil Singapore Pte Ltd to sponsor a concert in 1975. Mobil was enthusiastic and counter-proposed an arts festival, run along the lines of the international Llangollen Eisteddfod to enhance the local cultural scene. Seizing the opportunity, Mobil and members of the society drew up a master plan for the Arts Festival with the inclusion of Asian arts to reflect multiracial Singapore (Purushothaman, 2007). The Arts Festival (24–30 April 1977) was conceived as a “people’s festival” — a celebration of the arts for the people by the people — and cost S\$120,000 fully borne by Mobil. Organised around a competition, 1,300 participants and 77 groups performed in

seven nights of sold-out shows. The competition element for the various art forms was modelled after the school music competitions that paved the way for the Festival formation. This solitary event created a ripple effect leading to the present Arts Festival.

The following year the Ministry of Culture co-organised the Arts Festival together with the Ministry of Education and Radio and Television Singapore (Ong, 1978, p. 1). Organised at a cost of S\$150,000, it was held from 11 to 17 December at the Victoria Theatre involving more than 2,000 participants and 100 groups. The aim of the Arts Festival was “essentially to encourage the development of the performing and visual arts in Singapore” (Ong, 1978, p. 1) and it showcased the inaugural performance by the Singapore Festival Orchestra and Chorus (SFOC) conducted by maestro Choo Hoey. Unlike the latter-day Singapore Festival Orchestra, formed in 2007 with professional musicians from various orchestras and freelancers in Singapore, the SFOC comprised the combined strength of the Asian Youth Orchestra, the Singapore Teachers Choir and the Singapore Youth Choir (Abisheganaden, 2005, pp. 179–180). For the SFOC’s performance, Leong Yoon Pin, one of Singapore’s well-known composers, was specially commissioned to write a choral work set to the English translation by A. C. Graham of four poems by Chinese poet Tu Mu. The Arts Festival also saw performances by established groups such as the National Dance Company, Ping Hsieh Peking Opera Troupe, Singapore Ballet Academy, Singapore University Madrigal Singers, Kampong Glam Community Centre Li Hwei Dance Group, Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society and a visiting troupe from the Philippines programmed alongside the winners of the competition. The competition aspect of the Arts Festival continued to provide local groups an opportunity to improve the quality of their performance but these competitions were in danger of anointing a particular aesthetic sensibility in a very young society engaging with the arts in a critical fashion. For the first time, the Arts Festival introduced a visual arts thread to its programming, featuring artists from member countries of ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations).

### 1980s: A Language of their Own

The 1980s embodied a cultural milieu of self-reflexivity. There was a consolidation of cultural activities, and this was based on the belief that

cultural activities expressed the cultural ballast of a young third world nation aiming to be first world (Koh, 1989). But at the same time, it was increasingly evident that an idiom of internationalism was becoming a common leitmotif in local cultural discourse.

As the Ministry of Culture developed projects to energise the arts and culture landscape of Singapore, several individuals carved a niche for themselves as artist-mentors and champions of the arts. Playwright and theatre director Kuo Pao Kun who was earlier incarcerated in the late 1970s “bounced back into prominence in the 1980s with plays that examined the destruction of culture and cultural memory in the wake of a statist modernity with totalizing impulses, and the possibility of trans-ethnic understanding. He also broke the mould of single-language theatre and created plays (e.g. *Mama Looking for Her Cat* [1988]) that encompassed a range of languages spoken in Singapore” (Wee, 2003). Equally influential was visual/performance artist Tang Da Wu, who returned in 1979 to Singapore after 20 years in London. He led the establishment of The Artists Village in 1989, which was committed to organising the energies of young artists around contemporary art practice. Tang, who is credited for introducing performance art to the Singapore scene, located The Artists Village in the rural enclave of Sembawang away from the fast urbanising, corporate Singapore as a form of critique of the change Singapore was undergoing (Wee, 2003). The third individual was a de la Salle brother, Joseph McNally, an artist-educator who started a private arts institution dedicated to contemporary art practice and education known as Lasalle College of the Arts in 1984.

But these developments were marked by the need to find a Singaporean language and voice that was inalienable from the social and cultural context of the people (Jit, 1993, p. 22). Multi-lingual explorations, particularly in the English language theatre were taking root and Singaporeans at once felt at home. This contributed to a growing confidence with the arts amongst Singaporeans who mobilised themselves around artistic practices, ideologies and artist-mentors. Initiatives such as in visual arts — The Artists Village (1989); theatre — ACT 3 (1984), TheatreWorks (1985) and The Necessary Stage (1986); and dance — Singapore Dance Theatre (1987) brought artists into the world of arts as professional practice. At the same time, the need to organise and expend creative and ideological energies through a professional company was driven by the need to find a

Singaporean language and voice that was inalienable from the social and cultural context of the people (Jit, 1993, p. 22). For example, multilingual explorations, particularly in the English-language theatre, were taking hold and Singaporeans at once felt at home. Jit (2000) notes that the quest had begun with the staging of key productions such as playwright/director Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* (1985) and Stella Kon's *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1985) directed by Max Le Blond. Both productions amazed Singaporean audiences for their verve in engaging with theatre, text and Singaporean identity as spoken in local patois. They went on to be staged overseas: *Emily* in Edinburgh and *Coffin* in Malaysia and Hong Kong. The newly found international respect for these directors' works gained them places in the Arts Festival, which was beginning to trigger a Singaporean voice onto the international stage.

The Arts Festival in this period sowed the seeds of internationalism by bringing the world of arts to Singaporeans while focussing on having something for everyone to underline their accessibility. The Arts Festival sought a programming balance of international exposure for Singaporean audience and artistic celebrations that were nationalistic in flavour. On another level, this approach also saw the incorporation of different art forms such as film, literature and visual arts into the Arts Festival and the development of a credible home grown arts scene.

The 1980s kicked off with the Arts Festival bearing a robust international portfolio of performances with participation of the University of Adelaide Ensemble (Australia), Vienna Boys' Choir (Austria), Shiratori Ballet Company (Japan), National Korean Dance Company (Korea), Musica Sveciae Chamber Orchestra (Sweden) and Circle Repertory Company of New York (USA). The 10-day 1980 Arts Festival was organised at a cost of S\$290,000. The competition approach to organising Singaporean participation in the Arts Festival had been waning, and different approaches to enabling and empowering Singaporean artists and arts groups were needed. This Arts Festival saw the final year of the competitive component introduced in 1977. Furthermore, theatre was introduced as a thread of programming. The first two Festivals featured music and dance, with a strong focus on the former primarily driven by the interests of the members of the Young Musicians' Society. With the event coming under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture, the programming

began with an engagement with other art forms that had an appeal value to different sectors of the community.

The full realisation of the Arts Festival as an international and professional entity came about in the 1982 Arts Festival held from 10 to 19 December. Costing S\$1.7m, the budget grew as new corporate sponsors such as Singapore Airlines and the then Singapore Tourist Promotion Board entered the Arts Festival platform to further Singapore as a destination for international business and travellers. In his message in the Arts Festival's programme guide, then Minister for Culture, S. Dhanabalan, articulated the objectives of the Arts Festival: first, to "feature some of the best talent from Asia and the West...[as] an excellent opportunity for Singaporeans to widen their horizons and enjoy some of the best artists in the world" and secondly, "by bringing internationally renowned choreographers, musicians and theatre directors, local artists have a yardstick by which to measure their own work, gain inspiration and acquire new techniques" (Dhanabalan, 1982, p. 5). The growing internationalism revealed that Singaporean organisers had much to learn from experts in festival programming, directing and management (Purushothaman, 2007). This led to the appointment of Australian Anthony Steele, former artistic director of the Adelaide Festival, as consultant to the Arts Festival.

Steele's objectives were clear. First, to broaden public appeal, he programmed a good mix of culturally diverse productions and performances to provide audiences an opportunity to savour the arts from around the world. To further draw out audiences more inclined toward leisure activities such as going to the cinemas, he introduced as the Festival Film Week as part of the festival offering. The Arts Festival was advertised "It's your show. Be in it!" Festival workers dressed in T-shirts bearing the tagline walked the streets of Singapore to advertise the festival and invite the public to participate. Second, another notable achievement of this Arts Festival was the use of multiple theatre venues for staging productions. Eight major venues well known to the public were selected and used and these included Victoria Theatre, Victoria Memorial Hall, National Theatre, World Trade Centre Auditorium, Drama Centre, Singapore Conference Hall, DBS Auditorium and the National Museum. This made the arts more accessible to audiences — especially those living and working around the vicinity — by getting closer to them rather than invite them to

a specific location. Third, to build and inject as high as possible a level of professionalism in Singaporean productions, Steele and the Arts Festival invited renowned practitioners from elsewhere to work with Singaporeans to build capacity and to present top class productions with Singaporean talents. This saw choreographer Padma Subramanyam (India), director John Tasker (Australia) and playwright David Henry Hwang (USA) work with Singaporean artists and arts groups in productions such as *Valli Kalyanam* (Indian), *The Samseng and the Chettiar's Daughter* and *FOB* (English), respectively. Other collaborative projects by ethnic theatre and arts companies led to the production of *The Little White Sailing Boat* involving 13 Chinese groups, *Puncak* involving four Malay groups and *Kalaa Sandhya* comprising four Indian groups, all in 1982. This act of bringing groups together during the Arts Festival was indeed significant: it forced fractious arts groups to work with one another, provided funding for small and fledgling groups, and encouraged large established groups to be inclusive of others. On one level this brokered capability development, while on another it resonated with the government's push to bring about social cohesion amongst a disparate group of individuals into a community and, ultimately, a nation. Mahizhnan shares that this approach worked to bridge partnerships and relationships between rival arts groups (Mahizhnan cited in Purushothaman (2007)). It ensured that within each ethnic group "no single club or society was solely responsible for a production but that the best available performers have been selected in that the Arts Festival can give Singaporean artists the chance to give their best in the context of a festival of international standard" (Steele, 1982, p. 13). Some Singaporean productions were successful while others not in this experimentation. However, by presenting these types of works the Arts Festival "had committed itself to boosting the arts scene by generating local works" (de Souza, 1988, p. 15).

The 1984 Arts Festival coincided with the 25th year of self-government and featured 49 performances and more outdoor activities. Costing S\$1.8m, the Arts Festival was moved from the traditional month of December to June and recorded a 94% attendance, reaching out to 88,000 people. A song entitled "The Finer Side of Life", written by Mary Tan, was introduced to promote the Arts Festival and it was performed by the National University of Singapore Choir at an open-air event on the opening day of the Arts

Festival. The practice of organising local groups into a single production, which began in 1982, continued with *The Oolah World* (Chinese) directed by Kuo Pao Kun, Han Lao Da and Hua Liang, and *Ramanatakam* (Indian) choreographed by the Dhananjayans from India. For the first time, the Arts Festival introduced a Peranakan (Straits Chinese) play, *Pileh Menantu*, and drew record audiences. *Bumboat!*, an English-language musical directed by American Tzi Ma and Singaporean Lim Siau Chong presented vignettes of contemporary Singaporean life in a series of stories conceived by a group of writers — Michael Chiang, Catherine Lim, Jacintha Abisheganaden, Rebecca Aquilla and Kate James and weaved by Dick Lee's composition and musical direction.

This Arts Festival boasts two other firsts: the introduction of a computerised ticketing system and the introduction of a festival fringe. The first-ever computerised system was the brainchild of Robert Iau, chairman of the Arts Festival programming committee. With his interest in computers and representation in various computer and technology-related bodies in Singapore, he encouraged computerisation as a way forward for the Arts Festival as early as 1980. The fringe programme, the second major initiative of the 1984 Arts Festival, began cautiously with a mix of community and amateur group performances, open rehearsals and workshops by arts companies performing at the Arts Festival. It had a modest budget and featured 12 groups in 34 performances at 13 venues including housing estates. As the fringe programme grew in the subsequent years, the primary aims came to be articulated as these: to create greater awareness of the Arts Festival; to add colour and vibrancy to the Arts Festival; to promote and encourage more participation from Singaporeans; to bring the Arts Festival to people in the suburbs; and to showcase original and experimental new works by Singaporean artists (Leo and Elangovan, 1988, pp. 136–137).

Organised at a cost of S\$2.3m under a new artistic director, Singaporean Dr. Robert Liew, the 1986 Arts Festival featured 28 productions, the inaugural Writers' Week and a growing fringe. A key feature was its ability to look outward and display a tighter aesthetic programming, which showcased the likes of Merce Cunningham Dance Company (USA), Houston Ballet (USA), Ellis Marsalis Jazz Quartet (USA) and the Beijing People's Art Theatre (China). On the Singaporean front, 23 Chinese theatre groups



collaborated in *Kopi Tiam*, directed by Kuo Pao Kun and Lim Kim Hiong. The 1986 Festival saw the introduction of Festival Fringe featuring cutting edge and experimental works; the Writers' Week to foster literary activity in Singapore.

The year 1988 marked the 10th anniversary of the Arts Festival. Themed "City Celebrations", a visual spectacle of colour and movement opened in the Marina Centre and harbour comprising fireworks, processions, sculptures and hundreds of performers, from artists to skydivers and mountain climbers to water skiers, as well as a procession of lit sailboats. In the name of getting bigger and better by the year (in budget and number of days and productions), programmes over 5 weeks were organised at a cost of S\$3.7m with 42 international and local productions. The programming was eclectic featuring numerous international groups and renowned artists such as the Pilobolus Dance Theatre (USA), Sardono Kusumo (Indonesia), Kathak Kendra with choreographer Birju Maharaj (India), Georgian State Dance Company (USSR), the Academy of St. Martin-in-the-Fields (UK), Rumillajta (Bolivia), Grammy-award winner Cleo Laine (UK) and Marcel Marceau (France).

Added to this, the Arts Festival Fringe was organised at cost of S\$500,000 with 280 performances at 90 venues involving 4,200 artists, warranting its own programme guidebook. The Arts Festival saw its Fringe infiltrating public spaces from the public zoo to shopping malls, from public parks to community town centres, from night markets to off-shore lifestyle islands such as Sentosa and from lunchtime concerts in the central business district of Shenton Way to the central commercial district of Orchard Road, enlivening the city with a strong echo of cultural pride. Presenting live events in informal, accessible and inexpensive environments, the Fringe strove to break down traditional boundaries between art and audiences, encouraging open exchange between artists, art and the public. Audiences were invited to experience the work of established artists alongside that of emerging artists in a vibrant and exciting Arts Festival atmosphere. The Fringe reached out to all including children with the introduction of a mini-fringe for children in the ages of 1–15 years organised by theatre company ACT 3.

On the local front, the Arts Festival presented the inaugural performance by Singapore's first professional ballet company, the Singapore

Dance Theatre, which was formed by Goh Soo Khim and Anthony Then in 1987. The Singapore Dance Theatre performed works by internationally acclaimed choreographers Goh Choo San (Singapore/USA), Graeme Murphy (Australia) and Gener Caringal (the Philippines). Theatre was themed around social matters. Experimental Theatre Club's *Two's Company* or *Peter's Passionate Pursuit* directed by Max Le Blond, *Arwah* (The Man Who Was), a Malay play directed by Lut Ali, *Nirangal Marukindrana* (Colours Do Change), a Tamil play directed by E. S. J. Chandran, *Kapai-Kapai* (The Moths), a play performed by 15 Chinese drama groups and co-ordinated by Feng Naiyao, Xie Zhixuan and Kuo Pao Kun, and finally a musical comedy, *Beauty World*, commissioned for the Arts Festival and presented by TheatreWorks, all engaged with issues and themes that were pertinent to Singaporean audiences.

### **Disappearance of Culture and the Emergence of a Cultural Industry**

In 1986, the Ministry of Culture disappeared. As a formal self-standing entity envisioned by Rajaratnam in the 1960s, it represented all things social and cultural and saw the arts as a valuable means to weave the fabric of a society. The Ministry had laid the ground for the transformation of Singapore's cultural landscape and development of a cultural and creative economy in the 1990s. The Ministry and its activities were absorbed into the folds of the new Ministry of Community Development, which oversaw the arts alongside sports, recreation and community service, thus framing the arts within the ideals of community and community development. The significance of this was to link community development with cultural affairs. S. Dhanabalan, the Minister-in-charge, announced a 5-year plan for cultural promotion that married the emphases on highbrow and community arts (Koh, 1989, p. 714).

The 1980s were indeed a time of dynamic growth and investment in the concept of an Arts Festival. With no substantive funding systems in place, with the exception of the availability of support through production grants, the Arts Festival was coming of age with the invaluable place of the arts in everyday life was getting entrenched socialising a nation into a community. The signal for developing the arts as part of community development and

nation-building came with the establishment of a Cultural Development Committee in 1980 to realise the government's election manifesto of that time to make Singapore a "City of Excellence". The agenda was to "take Singapore beyond being a developed society in the economic sense; it is also to be a society culturally excellent" (Koh, 1989, p. 713).

Bereson (2003), in her analysis of Singaporean cultural policy in the 1980s, argues that the focus on the arts and its ability to add to the cultural and economic vibrancy of the city-state were rooted in the public statements of political leaders. She identifies the emergence of the concept of a "renaissance" as a discursive principle to organize all subsequent ideas about arts and culture in Singapore. She notes that at the opening of the 1980 Arts Festival, the Minister for Finance, Hon Sui Sen, posited the notion that once a society has succeeded economically, it could then be allowed to indulge in artistic expression, stating that "an arts festival takes shape finally when a society is mature and ready for one". In this speech, he also recognized that what he termed "supporting services" such as "media, cultural facilities, transportation" would enhance the artistic register. Into that mix he also poured patronage, which at that stage was seen to be a completely private responsibility whether that be from "a well-endowed company or institution, or from wealthy individuals". Furthermore he embellished upon the concept of "renaissance" ...by stating that "they were assisting at a birth or a renaissance from the marriage of rich cultures making up Singapore's multi-faceted society" (p. 2).

Subsequent ministerial statements hinted at the groundwork that was being laid for the cultural renaissance that was to emerge in the 1990s. In 1984, S. Dhanabalan, Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Culture, highlighted the value of patronage in the commissioning of artistic works and the development of artists, while in 1987, Wong Kan Seng, Second Minister for Foreign Affairs and Minister for Community Development, propounded the value of the arts and artists in nation-building and the creation of a national identity. More importantly, Wong expressed the need to develop a culturally vibrant society through the engagement of stakeholders such as the government, artists, artistic communities and business (Bereson, 2003, p. 3).

The 1980s established the Arts Festival as a professionalised endeavour. Supported by policies of nation-building, the Arts Festival showcased

emerging expressions of culture; professionalised the arts; and encouraged a migrant population to become cultural consumers. It was a period of unadulterated celebration of the arts where experimentalism thrived. The process of acknowledging the growing cultural capital of artists, the need to organise the resources of highly fractious and splintered community arts groups, and the promotion of the professional arts company in the 1980s laid the ground for the government to evince an emphatic approach to developing Singapore not only into a culturally vibrant city (social cause) or a site of a global arts economy (economic cause), but also for the emergence of a creative economy.

1989 was a watershed year for the arts in Singapore with the release of the Report by the *Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (ACCA Report, 1989).<sup>2</sup> The ACCA Report agilely drew its reference from the less known *Economic Committee Report* of 1986. The 1980s paved the way for the development of the arts as a creative enterprise and a critical node of the economy for the 1990s. But importantly, it sowed the seeds to cultural transformation of Singapore beyond the imagination of Singaporeans and the rest of the world fulfilling Rajaratnam's vision of a global city. In this regard, the Singapore Arts Festival, in the 1980s, fulfilled this twin role of building a nation and showcasing a nation and this was possible by the strong policy frameworks that supported the institutionalisation of the Arts Festival.

### Arts in a Global City

The 1990s began with a promise to make Singapore a "global city for the arts" by 1999. Amidst crippling financial crisis (1997) and potential isolation from the rest of the world as a site of disease (SARS) and potential terrorism, the arts in Singapore saw unprecedented government investment unimaginable by many Singaporeans and cultural observers. From arts centres, arts councils to musicals and circuses; from arts festivals to pop stars; from food festivals to shopping festivals; and from gay parties to bar-top dancing, Singapore opened up to the possibilities of the creative world in ways that were deemed fictitious in a city known for its fines and

<sup>2</sup>For a discussion on the ACCA Report, see Chapter 5 in this volume.

authoritarianism. Under the leadership of Prime Minister, Goh Chok Tong, the government's ambitious road map for the arts was crystallised in the ACCA Report, which articulated a clear correlation between art, commerce and national identity in Singapore. This document was a natural progress from the expressions of cultural promotion in the mid-1980s and sought to measure growth in Singapore through three key precepts: a creative and gracious society; excellence in unique multilingual, multicultural collective art forms; and the creation of an international centre for the arts. The global city premise sought to make Singapore an investment base and a leading arts and entertainment destination for foreign talents and visitors, fulfilling the larger vision of becoming "one of Asia's leading renaissance cities in the 21st century" (*The Sunday Times*, 18 May 1997).

The period was characterised by several trends: strong government desire in ensuring the arts fulfilled the larger economic imperatives of the country; internationalisation of the arts; unprecedented proliferation of artists and arts companies; and the emergence of the *avant-garde* and post-modern formations as a core expression of the arts. The ACCA Report objectives were to be realised through a set of strategies focusing first on audience development. Singaporeans were encouraged to develop an interest in the arts and culture to improve their aesthetic sense and enhance their quality of life. Second, the policy of communitarian participation through the allocation of more leisure time made it conducive for Singaporeans to partake in the widespread cultural activities as amateurs or professionals. They were encouraged to take part in extra-curricular activities at the workplace, community centres, factories, social clubs, trade unions, clan associations and religious institutions. The aim was to infiltrate layers of the society to encourage participation. Third, the policy aimed at investing in the professionalisation of the arts by building a strong pool of cultural workers (artists, arts administrators, arts entrepreneurs). To achieve this swiftly, the ACCA Report suggested attracting foreign talents to help nurture professional groups. Fourth, the policy emphasised the need to improve the infrastructure of existing venues and build new venues. This particularly focused on performing arts venues, museums and libraries. Fifth, the policy recommended the increase in cultural activities providing Singaporeans with opportunities to view and experience performances, exhibitions and art in public places. This

cultural consumption was further widened to incorporate the preservation of historical buildings with architectural and heritage value for all to enjoy. Finally, the Report sought to develop a body of Singapore works that reflected multicultural traditions and artistic endeavours (pp. 25–26). All these I would argue framed the arts within a world of high culture and high aesthetics with the aim of transforming a population of philistines into cultural connoisseurs, a project that began as far back as 1959.

The 1990 Arts Festival — helmed by Tisa Ho, today the executive director of the Hong Kong Arts Festival — began with the promise of putting itself on a path of continuously growing bigger and attempting to outdo the previous year. This was largely due to its own engine of success built around a population hungry for ideas, excitement and entertainment in a rather utilitarian Singapore, and the government's pre-occupation with "vibrancy" as a key to attracting investors to Singapore. In this regard, the Arts Festival began to "perform" spectacles with ever-increasing obsession to reach more people and it began to stage blockbusters that would heighten its positioning in the global arena. This was enshrined in the objectives of the Arts Festival just as the newly formed National Arts Council (NAC) in 1990 took over as the new cultural impresario of Singapore.<sup>3</sup> The NAC sought to [a] provide an occasion for Singaporeans to celebrate the arts; [b] create an arts event of high standard and visibility to promote widespread interest and awareness of the arts; [c] present mainstream, experimental, and *avant-garde* works of the highest artistic standards by Singaporean and international artists; [d] aid the development of local talent and encourage new local productions through commissioning working for the festival; [e] facilitate exchange of skills and experience between invited foreign artists and local performers through workshops, master-classes, lectures, and other training activities; [f] increase the knowledge, understanding, and practice of the arts amongst Singaporeans; and [g] develop Singapore as an international centre for the arts and enhance its attractiveness for both visitors and residents (Peterson, 1996, p. 113). The objectives were precise and in alignment with developing country, that is to harness the people as one nation through access to the arts (mainstream, experimental, community events); to build capability

<sup>3</sup> See Chapter 7 in this volume for a discussion on the establishment of the NAC.

through knowledge transfer (workshops, lectures by international artist and arts groups) and position Singapore as centre for the arts (publicity and access). These objectives do not deviate from Sullivan's 1959 objectives in that idea of Singapore was still in the making.

In seeking to measure success of the arts through a series of scientific instruments, the NAC for the first time published, in the 1990 Arts Festival's programme guide, their estimated audienceship target of 400,000 even before the Arts Festival started. With a budget of S\$5.6m, festivities were in the air as more corporate sponsors were roped in to support the arts as the city-state celebrated its 25th anniversary of independence. Programming was building on an international palate of who's who, such as Alvin Ailey American Dance Theatre (USA), Sankai Juku (Japan), The Houston Symphony (USA) and Boys Choir of Harlem (USA). The noticeably strong American fare started during the tenure of US-trained Robert Liew as artistic director and it continued primarily because the US arts industry was far more readily available with its highly developed business of touring and presentation. The inclusion of the Great Moscow Circus as an associated event of the Arts Festival was again aimed at achieving an audienceship target rather than linking a critical/aesthetic connection to the Arts Festival. A significant introduction of the 1990 Arts Festival was the New Music Forum to encourage and present new Singaporean Western repertoire. Composers Er Yenn Chwen, Leong Yoon Pin, Joe Peters, Phoon Yew Tien, John Sharpley and Bernard Tan kicked off the series with an ensemble put together for this showcase conducted by maestro Lim Yau. Unfortunately, this series did not attract the audiences and had a relatively short lifespan in the Arts Festival.

The Arts Festival under the tenure of Liew Chin Choy, a civil servant, from 1992 to 1999 grew in significance as the event of the year. Increased corporate sponsorship and relentless campaigning by the STB saw the Arts Festival increase in sheer scale and size. According to Peterson (2001), the NAC, through the Arts Festival, was furthering the growth of tourism and the development of Singapore as a regional arts centre; making the city an attractive place for investors, "signalling its emergence as a world-class city"; and promoting creative thinking which has been highlighted by the government as an essential ingredient to Singapore's long-term economic success (p. 167). Liew drew up objectives that clearly mapped an arts

festival that was growing in multiple directions. These objectives were to provide not only "an occasion for Singaporeans to celebrate the arts" (p. 168) but for artists and international visitors as well. He programmed a range of mainstream, experimental and *avant-garde* works of high standards in order to aid development of local talent and encourage new local productions and creative exchange between Singaporean and international artists. Visibility and public awareness of the arts were key drivers of his vision as they served to enhance "the attractiveness of Singapore for both visitors and residents" (p. 168).

Building on this ambitious order, Liew imprinted his programming style by locating the Arts Festival as a people's festival with street parades and extravaganzas throughout the city-state's public spaces. The 1994 Arts Festival cost S\$5.5m featuring 114 performances over 35 days (27 May–3 July) and 106 groups featured in 295 events. By 1996, over 70,000 alone would gather to view the parades along the main commercial belt, Orchard Road (*The Straits Times*, 28 May 1996), as Liew contended, "success is measured by attendance" (quoted in Peterson (2001, p. 176)). In keeping with the need to make the Arts Festival a national event, commemorative stamps were issued for the first time in the Arts Festival's history along with large-scale media launches of the event over the Internet and in Malaysia. The 1996 Arts Festival cost S\$7.3m to organise and drew an audience of over 300,000. True to his vision, Liew programmed blockbusters in order to showcase top-class productions to make visible the arts to the Singaporean public and to spotlight Singapore as a centre for world excellence in the arts. The likes of Tito Puente Latin Jazz All Stars, Royal Ballet of Flanders (1994); Joffrey Ballet of Chicago, Paul Taylor Dance Company, Kronos Quartet, Marcel Marceau (1996); Twyla Tharp, Cloud Gate Dance Theatre, St. Petersburg Philharmonic Orchestra, Royal Shakespeare Company (1998); and Trisha Brown Company, Robert Lepage and Ex Machina (1999) provided an opportunity to set benchmarks for the determination of artistic standards for Singaporean arts groups, shape public perception in the understanding of the arts and help bridge access and aesthetic enterprise. Liew explains that through organised master-classes between visiting artists and Singaporeans, the Arts Festival hoped to facilitate skills and knowledge transfer for a fledging industry (Purushothaman, 2007).

Critics (Jit, Kuo cited in Peterson (1996, pp. 114–115)) and especially the media opined that while the programmes in and of themselves were top-class, the Arts Festival was in dire need of artistic vision and direction to set apace a *Singapore* arts festival. While the Arts Festival fulfilled NAC objectives, they were obfuscating to the audiences who were left alienated (Peterson, 1996, p. 115). The view was that the supermarket approach to programming (that is buying products from other festivals and through recommendations of programming and steering committees), though valid in the 1980s to excite and enthuse the public, was not an appropriate model for a festival in a fast globalising 1990s.

Singapore, from the late 1980s to mid 1990s, was a furtive site for the discussion and debate on the concept of Asian values and the Arts Festival's Western-oriented programming was perceived to have sidelined Asian art forms, particularly the traditional arts, and this raised concern amongst ethnicity-based arts groups in Singapore. Asian productions rarely fared well on ticket sales during this period. This is largely due to a large diet for western programmes created by the government cultural policy to open the cultural and sector to the world to make Singapore a global city. Large-scale western productions of musicals such as *Les Misérables*, *Cats* and *Phantom of the Opera* and major visual arts exhibitions such as *Tresors*, were the order of the day in fulfilling this global vision. Fed on this diet, Singaporeans were developing a mild allergy to all things in its backyard and favouring to programmes from established countries. This accounts, for the lukewarm response to Singapore-made production such as *Scorpion Orchid* or the traditional arts.

In response to these local and regional concerns, the NAC launched a biennial festival celebrating Asian performing arts in both their antiquated and contemporary forms. The Festival of Asian Performing Arts (FAPA) organised in 1993, 1995 and 1997 was smaller in scale and budget and it amalgamated other smaller festivals that pre-existed. These included amongst others the Traditional Theatre Festival, Young People's Festival, Drama Festival and Dance Festival. Some of Asia's best performing arts were presented at the Festival: Lin Hwai-min's Cloud Gate Dance Theatre (Taiwan), Sabri Brothers (Pakistan), Yokohama Boat Theater (Japan), Malavika Sarukkai (India), Sardono Dance Theatre (Indonesia), Ravi Shankar (India) and Shanghai People's Art Theatre (China). Local

productions were given ample opportunities to showcase their traditional craft while others branched out into experimentation as seen in *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995) written by Kuo Pao Kun and directed by Ong Keng Sen. FAPA gave birth to the Festival Village — a platform to present social and ritualized practices and performances reconnecting urban Asia to its village roots. Accessible and appealing to all, Festival Village became a critical introduction to the ensuing main festival programming.

FAPA, however, was plagued with problems of audienceship. The first Festival fared badly at the box office, forcing festival director Liew to admit that Singaporeans had far more discerning tastes when it came to matters of Asian arts in an interview with *The Straits Times* (27 November 1993). Many were able to pick out the difference between an artistic enterprise and a variety show. Adding to this, FAPA was perceived to be a poor cousin of the main Arts Festival. This and the less than ideal attendances continued to plague the 1995 Festival and the organisers and the parent Ministry were in discussion to discontinue the Festival after its third season in 1997. The third FAPA grew in scale and size and saw a new emerging artistic director, Goh Ching Lee, who was then a senior deputy director at the NAC, resuscitating the last and curating the most successful of the three festivals. Under her artistic direction, FAPA started a process of experimentation with diverse and multidimensional works to explore a new and contemporary Asia as seen in productions such as *Workhorse Afloat* (1997) by TheatreWorks, *Bunga Mawar* (1997), a locally written Western opera, and a new theatre company's, Action Theatre's, presentation of *Chang & Eng — The Musical* (1997) directed by Ekachai Uekrongtham. This FAPA revealed a nascent manifestation of an artistic direction to festival programming which was to realise its full potential in the new millennium.

With the eventual demise of FAPA, mirroring the downward spiralling of the economy due to the Asian financial crisis of the late 1990s and the flailing principles of Asian values unable to ingrain itself into the social psyche of Singapore, the 1998 Arts Festival made a conscious last-ditch effort to have more Asian artists, hence a higher Asian content, resulting in 47% Asian and 53% non-Asian groups participating in the Festival. Besides this, tickets were made available through the Internet for the first



time in the Festival's history. In attempting to keep an upbeat front during the economic recession, it partnered world-renowned music festival WOMAD to open the Arts Festival. WOMAD, presented as a continuation of the Festival Village, raked in the crowds, with extensive media coverage citing it as the event of the year.

The tail end of the 20th century saw a battered Singapore caught in a melee of regional economic problems. The Arts Festival presented a more circumspect programming with a smaller budget for 1999, being the first form of the merged Singapore Festival of Arts and Festival of Asian Performing Arts, and was also the first form of the annualised Arts Festival renamed Singapore Arts Festival. With the global economy in doldrums, the Arts Festival was scaled down, with community extravaganzas such as the street parade being discontinued and fringe and community arts reduced in scale and scope. Despite good ticket sales and audience, the Arts Festival needed to respond to the global dynamics of economic spirals, the deconstruction of Asian Values and an increasingly discerning audience. The Arts Festival needed to transform from a national festival into an international festival befitting a renaissance city.

### **Arts Festival in a Renaissance City**

Towards the end of the 1990s, the vision of Singapore as a global city was morphing into Singapore as a renaissance city. At the end of the 20th century, Singapore was characterised by a global city brow-beaten by crisis and a population awakening to a new understanding that the often well-managed city-state too was fallible. The economic plans of the 1980s assumed that the vision of charting Singapore into a global city with Swiss living standards would go unchallenged by external and internal conditions. Unfortunately, these did surface in the form of the Asian financial crisis and the collapse of the dotcom industry; the outbreak of avian flu and SARS; acts of terror in 9/11 and the Bali bombings; and natural disasters such as earthquakes and the tsunami affecting hundreds of thousands of people across Asia. A picture of Asia becoming a site of economic crisis, disease, terrorism and calamities was quickly displacing the vision of a new Asian renaissance.

The government developed and issued the *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*, 2000 (RC Report) with the sole "intention to chart Singapore cultural development into the twenty-first century" (Lee, 2004, p. 289). The RC Report had twin aims: First, it reiterated previous positioning to establish Singapore as a global arts city that would be ideal to live, work and play (for both Singaporeans and expatriates) conducive for a creative and knowledge-based economy. Secondly, it sought to provide cultural ballast to Singaporeans to strengthen national identity and more importantly, a sense of belonging. In fulfilling these aims, the government pledged S\$50m over a period of 5 years for "software" development of the arts, which aims to transmogrify the harsh physical infrastructures into "incubators for the arts" (Chang & Lee, 2003, p. 133) and in the process "strengthen the Singapore Heartbeat through the creation and sharing of Singapore stories, be it in film, theatre, dance, music, literature or the visual arts" (RC Report, p. 4). Lee (2004) in his critique of this policy purports that this investment is a "tacit admission of Singapore's 'cultural lack' marked by Singaporeans' inability to understand or appreciate the fullness of the arts, as well as an attempt to further shore up the economic potential of the arts" (pp. 289–290). The RC Report admits that Singapore, while has done economically well, falls short in cultural development and cultural indicators (talent pool, facilities, activities, audiences and arts funding) and aspired to benchmark itself to Hong Kong, Glasgow and Melbourne in the short and medium term (5–10 years) and in the long-term benchmark against London and New York (RC Report, 4). This benchmarking exercise is instrumental in propelling Singapore into the league of first world nations, which support a creative and vibrant culture that keeps them competitive in the global economy. In this regard, six key strategies were proposed: develop a strong arts and cultural base; develop flagship and major arts companies; recognise and groom talent; provide good infrastructure and facilities; go international; and develop an arts and cultural "renaissance" economy. While these strategies espouse cultural development and communitarian participation, central to the policy's intent is the economic impact of the arts on society or what Kong (2000) calls the "hegemony of the economic". The RC Report does not shy away but clearly lays the ground for the economic

imperative of the arts by citing the success of cities such as New York and London in creating wealth through the arts. The RC Report concludes “good facilities and amenities help attract talented people and create a congenial environment for investors and businesses” (RC Report, p. 12).

With this policy backdrop, the year 2000 was a turning point for the Arts Festival. It saw a leadership change in the artistic programming of the Arts Festival with the appointment of Goh Ching Lee, who ran the most successful third edition of FAPA, paving the way for the Arts Festival to transform from a domestic national event into an international festival befitting a global city. The Arts Festival Goh envisioned sought to throw the Arts Festival on its head to “inspire, challenge, surprise” (Liu, 2002, p. 3). It did this by embodying a confident, edgy Asia, entrepreneurial and innovative in spirit. It began to explore risk, through international collaboration, and define the production and circulation of new artistic practices in the global arts market. The 2000 Arts Festival was themed *New Inspiration* with an objective to deliver an international Arts Festival with an Asian flavour. According to Goh, this objective was mapped out in the late 1990s but it did not materialise. Hence, the new theme resonated with the belief that the change in festival director was a watershed moment in the history of the Arts Festival. This Arts Festival broke away from previous conventions of festival programming by focussing on concocting collaborations, celebrating interdisciplinarity and presenting world premieres by international artists paved the manner in which other new players in the arts such as the Esplanade drew reference from. This focus set the tone for all the subsequent festivals. The annual Arts Festival created a greater urgency to be programmed innovatively for an increasingly discerning audience that was spoilt for choice where matters of leisure were concerned.

From 2000 to 2009, the Arts Festival was faced with several challenges. First, the Arts Festival was plagued by a stagnating budget that hovered around the region of S\$6–7m including programming and marketing costs. The budget had remained the same since the 1990s and had not corresponded to the changing global cost index for presenting productions and as such the Arts Festival was unable to be effective in being “all things to all people” given the pressure on its limited resources. However, rather than communicate its limitation, the Arts Festival still drove a “something for everyone” philosophy while seeking to articulate a clear identity for its

core programming. Second, the cultural milieu had changed drastically compared to the prior decades when the Arts Festival was the only event of major significance on the arts calendar. With policy shifts, as shown earlier, a vibrant arts scene had meant that there were new players in the field. New and small-scale festivals based on specific genres and/or themes sprouted with a narrower scope but deepening access, such as Hua Yi (traditional and contemporary Chinese arts), Kalaa Utsavam (traditional and contemporary Indian arts), the Singapore Fringe Festival (independent and experimental artists), Mosaic Music Festival (jazz and world music) and others. Amidst this, the challenge for the Arts Festival was then to remain the only multi-genre, multivenue international festival of significant scale and scope of a longer duration. With these two challenges, Goh had to rechart the festival map over several years.

The new Arts Festival’s approach was unabashed: setting the tone as to how the subsequent years would be and seeking to prepare audiences to think out of the box — quickly, in keeping with globalisation. Goh’s programming unapologetically put audiences on notice to catch up with global changes in artistic expressions or be left behind. She also put the Arts Festival on a pathway into artistic commissioning and collaboration between Singaporean and international arts groups. The Arts Festival began an adventure in being a cultural entrepreneur by working with world-renowned experimental artists, co-commissioning with other festivals and capitalising on cultural Memoranda of Understanding (MOUs) made between the NAC and its counterparts elsewhere in the world. To reflect its contemporary nature, old approaches and concepts such as the Homecoming Series, Festival Village and Festival Fringe were slowly phased out and replaced with events that represented new developments in the arts. Several features stand out in the Festival’s direction from 2000 to 2009: works that innovate and experiment; works and collaborations that cross time zones, disciplines and countries; works that reimagine tradition and contemporise Asia; and works from under-represented countries. In mapping these features, the divide between contemporary/tradition, modern/post-modern and local/global was taken to task, broken down and recast. Investing in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural encounters, the Arts Festival promoted Singapore’s potential to interlocute and interface with the East and West. Unlike the prior decade, when the Arts Festival

had to be mindful to balance the multiethnic and multicultural dimensions against the need to ensure a local/international and Asian/Western content, the globalised new millennium freed the Arts Festival of these politicised divides and it sought to promote and celebrate contemporary expressions in whatever form they may take. With very clear determinants from the outset, the Arts Festival developed a largely Asian and contemporary character (60% contemporary:40% mainstream; 60% Asian:40% non-Asian) which has garnered the Arts Festival a strong branding and international profile as a “bold” and “progressive” festival.

Beyond showcasing performances, the Arts Festival revved up its energy in generating multilateral networking with other international arts organisations and inaugurated the General Meeting of the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals (AAPAF) and hosted the international gathering of the International Society for the Performing Arts in 2003; World Dance Alliance; 10th Annual Conference of the Performance Studies International; and the Asian Arts Mart. In 2007, the Arts Festival inked a strategic alliance with an international festival partner, the Edinburgh International Festival, to support mutual touring and co-commissioning.

The Arts Festival invested in commissioning and working with artists to create a body of work for the global marketplace that is made-in-Singapore and this led to an unprecedented number of premieres. This facilitation positioned the Arts Festival as an engine of new intellectual property for the arts market and positioned Singapore as a place of artistic creativity. On the other hand, these commissions exposed the Arts Festival to risk: risk of alienating the audience with works still in progress; risk of massive financial losses if the work failed; and risk of producing bad art. Notwithstanding these concerns, the commissions often became robust talking points for the media and the arts fraternity. Some of these commissions include: *Hot Water* by theatre director Robert Wilson (2000) — the first time Singapore commissioned an international work, in partnership with Musikfest Bremen; *Desdemona* by TheatreWorks (2000) — co-commissioned with Adelaide Festival; *Apocalypso* by composer Kelly Tang (2000) — performed by an international orchestra, Warsaw Philharmonic; acclaimed local playwright Kuo Pao Kun's *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole* and *No Parking on Odd Days* (2000) — the first time they were presented in four languages, with four directors and casts;

*Occupation* by Huzir Sulaiman (2002) — joint Malaysia/Singapore production on the Japanese Occupation; *Sandakan Threnody* by TheatreWorks (2004) — co-presented with Melbourne International Arts Festival and Brisbane Festival; *Geisha* by TheatreWorks (2006) — commissioned in association with Spoleto Festival and the Lincoln Center Festival, New York; and *Optical Identity* (2007) — a collaboration between Scottish theatre company Theatre Cryptic and Singaporean Tang Quartet. These international commissions or co-commissions became “world premieres” locating Singapore as a global site for new and innovative works. But it drew its fair share of domestic critics. A number of national dailies were filled with commentaries from editors to theatre reviewers and letters to the press deriding the Arts Festival for investing public funds in productions that do not make sense and that it was too risky a venture. These risky yet innovative ventures marked the Arts Festival as a trailblazer of globalisation and world attention was directed towards Singapore and the Arts Festival started to brand itself as a global arbiter of taste and this was evidenced in various marketing themes that were used to frame the Arts Festival, thereby encouraging and prodding audiences to engage with the Arts Festival. Beginning with *New Inspiration* (2000), *Fill Your Senses* (2001), *Move With the Flow* (2002), *Impressions* (2003), *A New Season Blossoms* (2004), *The Season of Brilliance: One Season. Many Faces* (2006), *Metamorphosis* (2007), etc. These taglines served on another level to remind audiences, arouse their desire to see/experience new things and create a fantasy world of the arts. Falling into the realm of lifestyle marketing, these festival taglines (some more effective than others) were essentially aimed at engineering a consumptive demand for aesthetic goods, that is, the productions. Desire for the arts is a critical element in making audiences cross from want to need to consume. The imagery of the taglines became signs of lifestyles and preferences signified through advertising campaigns.

During Goh's tenure as festival director, the Arts Festival was tightly curated towards interdisciplinary and multimedia works to establish an identity, a new brand for the 21st century. Post-2004, the Festival created room for traditional art forms and embraced some mainstream events (ballets and symphonic music) to meet the demands for greater box office receipts and to widen participation. With regard to wider accessibility, the

Arts Festival continued its tradition of creating an extensive outreach programme. But with smaller budgets, it further sought to involve a variety of arts, business and community partners to maintain broad reach. Introduced in 2000 was Waterloo Arts Alive! featuring various Singaporean arts groups housed in the restored buildings in the Waterloo Street Arts District, with performances and activities by Young Musicians' Society, Dance Ensemble Singapore, Chinese Opera Society and Chinese Calligraphy Society. Large-scale events were co-presented such as Singapore Street Festival: Street Revolution! (2002), the first youth street festival in partnership with the National Youth Council and the Orchard Road Business Association. Another major initiative, Asian Showcase (2005), was introduced with the intent of bringing back the experience of traditional street performances of the various ethnic communities such as cross-talk, bangsawan and Indian folk theatre while POPagenda Singapore in 2006 was a mini-festival of pop music featuring local and regional artists. The Arts Festival partnered the community development councils in 2007 to boost their community arts festivals. These diverse events replaced the more traditional fringe and spectaculars and complemented a renewed approach to presenting community-based events.

2007 marked the Arts Festival's 30th anniversary. Branded as *Metamorphosis*, the programming was designed around a set of works that would confront and bridge different genres and traditions (*Sacred Monster* by Akram Khan and Sylvie Guillem), reimagine theatre classics (*The Dollhouse* by Mabou Mines, *Romeo and Juliet* by OKT/Vilnius City Theatre) and new visions of music (Tan Dun's *The Map & Paper Concerto*, Arnie Roth's *Play! A Video Game Symphony*). Twenty-two productions and 496 performances and activities costing S\$6.4m reached out to 718,500 people. Overall house for ticketed curated and commissioned shows edged over 81%, outdoing the previous year's statistics. With a clear drive to reach new audiences through outreach and innovative programming, more than 400 activities were organised with an army of 1,300 artists penetrating suburban neighbourhoods, underground subway systems and public hospitals and parks, reaching out to 688,000 people. From the grand aerial opening *Dreams of Flight* by La Fura dels Baus (Spain) to *Project: Eden*, a public installation by visual artist Donna Ong (Singapore), to the phantasmatic closing performance *Time Out* by antagonist theaterAKTion (Germany), the community was encouraged to

experience contemporary arts in a fun manner. Family Funfest was introduced to provide educational and engaging arts activities for the entire family. This was further enhanced with a tie-up with two suburban community arts festivals — the North East Dance Festival and the South West District Arts Festival, which provided the Arts Festival an important vehicle to reach out to communities that would otherwise not come to the city centre to engage with the arts.

The 2008 and 2009 were at the extreme ends of a continuum for Goh. Her programming for 2008 was artistically one of the more complex and most fulfilling for her as an artistic director (Goh, 2012). However, it racked in poor ticket sales drawing the national dailies to call the festival a flop (Goh, 2012, p. 190). Goh however, turned the tables by programming a more popular yet critically extroverted fare in 2009 involving innovative performances by Shaolin monks and conceptual ideas drawn from Asian tangram. This surpassed the 90% mark for audienceship and ticket sales. Ending on a high note, Goh concluded her tenure as the festival's director and resigned from the NAC. The 10 years of the Arts Festival under Goh — complex and sophisticated as it was — corresponded with an increasingly confident Singapore. As a free port for the arts, it accessed ideas far and wide, drawing accolades for its experimentation and innovation. It placed Singapore as a centre for ideas.

Peterson's (2009) report card on the Arts Festival under Goh foregrounds the that Singapore was "poised to become an arts hub" driven by similar economic drivers as finance and transportation and become "a cog in the wheel of economic development" (pp. 112–113). He argues that the Arts Festival "runs the risk of offering a kind of global nothing" by failing to genuinely engage with Singaporean arts companies thereby not grounded in the lived experience of Singapore (p. 128). Lim (2012) extrapolates these comments as worrying as they do not, at least for her, represent the collective interests of what Singaporeans enjoy but a top-down inculcation of what they should see and experience and create a milieu that profiles the city-state as a global city for the arts. Lim opines that the top-down global city positioning privileged foreign performances and productions at the price of local arts development (p. 316). There is some validity in this. The Singapore arts sector, I argue, had remained a collection of amateur and part-time hobby communities and through the Arts Festival many of them professionalised.

They would be disadvantaged when compared to international touring companies with decades-long professional full-time practice and companies; second, various local dance and theatre companies (Singapore Dance Theatre, TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, Theater Ekamatra, Sri Warisan Troupe, etc.) were provided with both co-production and commissioned opportunities to present new works. Peterson (2009) does layout the rationale of the Arts Festival and its global positioning which is tied to economic imperatives. But this is not at the price of the local productions. In actual, many of the companies mentioned above toured as part of international joint festival commissions, thereby fulfilling the government's vision to go global.

### Communitarian Ideals

If policy continues to drive artistic and curatorial practice, the period 2011–2013 is an exemplar of how the Arts Festival becomes a victim of policy manoeuvres. *The Arts and Cultural Strategic Review* (ACSR) Report (2011) propositioned a paradigm for the arts from one that was plugged into a global ecology to one that served national concerns.<sup>4</sup> This period saw the appointment of Benson Puah, the Chief Executive Officer of The Esplanade — a seasoned venue manager — double hatting as Chief Executive Officer of the NAC. Under his tenure, the NAC moved from a downtown prime arts precinct location to a suburban east of the island as an anchor tenant of a placemaking strategy. Symbolically, the NAC was “closer” to the ground. Second, the Arts Festival and Singapore's participation in the Venice Biennale were suspended. Citing falling audienceship and costs respectively, the aim it seemed was to rechannel funds for community engagement.

The Arts Festival continued and the NAC appointed Singapore Biennale general manager Low Kee Hong as general manager of the Arts Festival. Low was appointed to organise three editions of the Arts Festival from 2011 to 2013 and he bannered it as a creation festival and a people's festival. Akin to the communitarian ideologies found in the 1950s to 70s, these Arts Festivals titled *Between You and Me* (2010), *I Want to Remember* (2011) and *Lost Poems* (2012) were introspective renditions that seem to

take stock of the arts by focussing on artists and their concerns; and the creation and circulation of their works. It had a conversational mode as Low sought to engage with audiences, through a year-long programme of education, who otherwise would not go to see arts events. The final instalment in 2012, presented 14 ticketed and 66 non-ticketed productions comprising more than 500 artists and groups from Singapore and across the globe. Showcasing local and international acts, the Arts Festival sought to take audiences into exciting new venues, pushing the boundaries of traditional performance through productions such as *The Flight of the Jade Bird* by Mark Chan and *Lear Dreaming* by TheatreWorks. The three editions were small in scale and focussed on works from Asia. While this may seem to fulfil the intent of ACSR, the three editions continued to be plagued by low audiences and ticket sales (the 2011 festival registered an all time low of 48%) unable to match the high achieved during Goh's direction. But this paved the way and in a strategic manner, justified the NAC to suspend the Arts Festival.

In 2012, the NAC formed a 17-member Arts Festival Review Committee “to examine the role of the Festival in today's context [especially with the large number of festivals on the island] and make recommendations with regards to its programming direction and operating model” (Arts Festival Review Committee Report, 2013). After extensive consultation, including the public, the Report recommended that the Arts Festival's purpose should be to “inspire diverse audiences through great artistic experiences” characterised by quality, inspiration, aspiration, innovation, engagement, collaboration and distinctiveness. On programming, the Committee reiterated past approaches but emphasised that education and outreach activities should complement programming. If at all bold — not in the aesthetic or critical realm of art-making — the most significant recommendation of the Committee was to establish an independent Arts Festival Company under the NAC which its own permanent home in the city so as to build sustained relationship with the artists and their audiences. The Committee also recommended that the company should be responsible for its own financial sustainability. It is therefore critical to appreciate that the future of the Arts Festival remains carted to the instrumental nature of governmentality and less so with the critical shifts in aesthetic and artistic systems.

<sup>4</sup> See Chapter 21 in this volume for analysis of the ACSR Report.



The NAC and Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth accepted the recommendation and international *avant-garde* theatre director Ong Keng Sen was appointed as Artistic Director of the Arts Festival for four editions: 2014–2017. Significant in this appointment is that the NAC, for the first time, appointed an artist to curate the Arts Festival. A bold choice but the former director of the National Museum, Lee Chor Lin, a civil servant, was appointed as the Chief Executive Officer of the Arts Festival Limited company to oversee the festival.

### An Artist-Curator's Festival

The appointment of Ong Keng Sen was a bold and risky move for the government. While the previous director Low Kee Hong was also a theatre practitioner, Ong remains Singapore's most decorated theatre director and greatest Singapore cultural export in contemporary arts. He is globally recognised as a leading theatre-maker of 21st century cutting-edge practice and much sought after for his critical views on arts development, theatre practice and emerging practices in the arts.

As an artist-curator, he envisioned four editions of the Arts Festivals that would be deeply connected to the community through the arts. Ong's vision was built around audience and artists. Where audiences explore "new experiences and ponder on the complexities of global and Singapore issues; humanity; sexuality; media; violence in our relationship with each other and with nature; memories that shape our future, politics, socioeconomics and even seemingly mundane issues that affect our own backyards" and second, where artists as community are "inspired to explore and push new boundaries" (Online Citizen, 12 September 2017). In a direct response to the ASCR Report's recommendation on community engagement, Ong sought to "convince Singapore audiences that art is for everyone" yet that "art is accessible without dumbing it down" (*Straits Times*, 9 September 2017). The four editions were critically themed to explore issues deep and near to his heart: *Legacy and the Expanded Classics* (2014) reviewed meta-narratives of society through the arts; *Post-Empire* (2015) analysed colonial and postcolonial Singapore to mark the 50th anniversary of post-independent Singapore; *Potentialities* (2016) sought to bring out creative opportunities amongst artists and their

communities and *Enchantment* (2017) explored hope in the wake of a complex global environment.

His signature practice of weaving the unconventional and paradoxical with the celebratory and exploratory became popular and controversial. For a start, he stretched the festival calendar from its historical 4-week June period to almost 11 weeks, June–July (pre-event O.P.E.N) and August to September (main events). This durational change was aimed at building communities of practice through viewing and engagement for the public and the opportunity for artists to reach out to a wider community. In this regard, he established O.P.E.N. (open, participate, enrich and negotiate) — a platform for public discourse with civil society through bite-size creative projects. Half of his programming was homage to the Singaporean arts community and doyens such as Goh Lay Kuan and Shantha Bhaskar were invited to participate in dialogue about their history of practice and produce new works. He brokered young and emerging artists from Lasalle College of the Arts to learn, work and perform with emerging and established artists such as Chinese theatre director, Wang Chong and one of 20th century's seminal choreographers, Bill T. Jones and his company. He encouraged the public to become art-makers and artists to open their world to the public in *Open Homes*. Traditional festival boundaries of theatre, music, dance, film, and literature were broken and repropounded around ideas, concepts and themes that would allow maximum audience engagement. While some programmes were successful in reaching out, others were not. But Ong's intention was to allow for the creative process to work through the community. Furthermore, as an artist-curator he led by example and produced a new work for each festival establishing ways of experiencing his vision and leading by example the thematic principles of each edition. These include *Facing Goya* (2014), *The Incredible Journey of Border Crossers* (2015), *Sandaime Richard* (2016), *Trojan Women* (2017).

At the end of his tenure, the Arts Festival had regained international confidence in Singapore's ability curate and commission cutting-edge and innovative practice. Locally, it rebuilt its audience base from approximately 20,000 in 2014 to 218,000 in 2017. While ending on a high note, Ong expressed deep disappointment. News media headlined the successful Arts Festival as "Ong Keng Sen Disappointed after 4 years as Art Fest

Director” (*Straits Times*, 12 September 2017), and “Art v Government at Singapore Festival: ‘I fear once I leave, they will punish me’” (*Guardian*, 9 September 2017).

Ong’s critique is less about the Arts Festival and more about the bureaucratisation of the arts. The Arts Festival Review Committee Report recommended the establishment of the arts festival independent of the organisation of the NAC. I have argued “this is to facilitate it to be adventurous, develop artistic and financial partnerships and set up a thriving hub for its artists and audiences” (*Straits Times*, 12 October 2017). The festival, under Ong, did this reasonably well through the range of programming appealing to new audiences as evidenced by the steady growth in audiences. “However, transforming a 40-year old national event into something independent is a complex task. It is not merely about hiving off an entity but working through structural systems, processes and resources. Inevitably issues such as licensing and funding had to be worked out” (Purushothaman, *Straits Times*, 12 October 2017). But evidently this was not the case.

There were two major incidences. The first incident emerged when Ong and the CEO Lee Chor Lin of the Arts House — which was established to run the Arts Festival — sparred over control of content, public information and approvals. It should be noted that both were members of the festival review committee. The textbook Adornian relationship between the artist and the bureaucrat was played out in public. The media had a field day with eyebrow raising headlines colouring the dailies: “The War of Art: SIFA art director in a public cat fight with Arts Festival CEO” (SBR, 19 March 2014); “SIFA CEO and Artistic Director Officially Hate Each Other” (Mothership.sg, 18 March 2014); E-mail Spat Between SIFA CEO and Artistic Director” (*Straits Times*, 18 March 2014). In his email, Ong said, “I have been providing materials but nothing has come back to me for review. We have consistently asked to see how the artistic information is being presented.” He added: “I don’t think you should be treating the festival director in this way. I am not just your content provider. The direction of the festival was given to the festival director by the NAC. It was not given to the CEO of Arts Festival Ltd, the holding company.” (*Straits Times*, 18 March 2014). The NAC stepped in to assuage the situation. The CEO stepped down in December of 2014.

The second incident emerged when the Arts House as the holding entity was established to run the Arts Festival. In this regard, rules and regulations applicable to private arts organisations applied and the Arts Festival from 2015 was subjected official clearance and licensing. This was played out in both national and international media as Ong went public.

The Arts Festival had to apply for licenses for more than 90 productions through the submission of finalised scripts to the authorities. For the 2015 festival, two foreign films did not clear the authorities while in 2016, Swiss director Milo Rau’s *Five Easy Pieces* — featuring seven performers between the ages of 8 to 13 years telling stories around a convicted murderer and paedophile — was classified by the authorities R18+ viewable by a mature audience. In another instance, the Arts Festival organised a public forum dealing with issues such as LGBTQ, ageing and plurality, the authorities deliberated at length with the festival team before it was allowed. For the 2017 festival, Ong commissioned a work on award-winning graphic novelist Sonny Liew. Liew became famous in Singapore when the NAC withdrew funding for his novel, *The Art of Charlie Chan Hock Chye* for providing a contrarian narrative of Singapore thereby undermining the “authority or legitimacy of the government and its public institutions.” (Reuters, 17 June 2017). The Arts Festival proceeded to entertain the bureaucratic system and finally did stage the play after a protracted discussion.

In contextualising his experience, Ong stressed in a *Straits Times* interview (12 September 2017) that “Singapore kept evolving in the opposite direction. It became starker and starker that what I was doing was against the grain.” He felt compelled to “alter his vision for certain events to allay official fears.” Ong became a vocal critic of bureaucratic interventions. “As an independent artist, I can survive censorship. But censorship destroys a city, the ability to imagine in a city. When you dam thought processes in a city, you’re not going to find someone inventing something new because they’ve been told not to think outside the box.”

Looking from a broad perspective, this provocation should serve as an enabler to speed the set-up of the Arts Festival into an independent entity with its own governing team. This is the start of a complex disentanglement

of the Arts Festival from being an instrument of governmentality since 1977 to one that is independently run “arms length” in the 21st century similar to other international festivals. This is no easy task and subsequent artistic directors would have to deliberate on and facilitate unknottting the entanglements entrenched as they may be. Governing teams and boards have to be bold and clear in their visions. This is because national arts events engage various publics into order to support nation-building and it is in government’s interest to actively support such events. All festivals and events supported by the government will deliberate and negotiate their relationship with their benefactor. Festivals programme from the perspective of arts inspiring and shaping ideas for the community while governments from the perspective of engaging and entertaining audiences and their interests. This may be at odds at times, but they share common interest in celebrating the arts and creating vibrant community spirit.

Another consideration to be noted is that arts festivals are a composite of artists, ideas and productions. Festival directors make choices, but they do not make a festival. The godhead approach to festival directors has long passed and it is important to acknowledge the fact that arts festivals are made up of the energy of the various productions and performances and their audiences. The future of SIFA is in its ability to organise, energise and stay relevant to both its artists and audiences; not whether it is safe or not.

## Conclusion

The beginning of the chapter rendered the power of festivals to energise communities. The location of the Arts Festival in the 21st century with its deep and rich archive of nation-building and cultural development mapped through aesthetic renderings has been critical to the success of modern Singapore. The trope of policy to drive and shape artistic, aesthetic and critical ecologies for an emerging nation is challenging. The Arts Festival has been a site of celebration, contemplation, contradiction and containment. It presented culture and nationhood to Singaporeans. People and cultures have followed through the veins of the Arts Festival and yet, the question as to what is ahead and beyond the horizon is eminent.

## Note

Sections of the cultural history of the Singapore Arts Festival rendered in this essay appeared first in *Making Visible the Invisible: Three Decades of the Singapore Arts Festival* (2007), Singapore: National Arts Council Publication and subsequently in my PhD work on cultural policy and festival cultures in Singapore.

## References

- Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts (ACCA). (1989). *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts*. Singapore: Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts.
- Abisheganaden, P. (2005). *Notes Across the Years: Anecdotes from a Musical Life*. Singapore: Unipress.
- Bereson, R. (2003). Renaissance or Regurgitation? Arts Policy in Singapore 1957–2003. *Asia Pacific Journal of Arts and Cultural Management*, 1 (1), 1–14.
- Chan, H. C., & ul Haq, O. (1987). *The Prophetic and the Political. Selected Speeches and Writings of S. Rajaratnam*. New York: St. Martin’s Press.
- Chang, T. C., and Lee, W. K. (2003). “Renaissance City Singapore: A Study of Arts Spaces” in *Area*, 35, 128–141.
- Chong, T. (2010). The state and new society: The role of the arts in Singapore nation-building. *Asian Studies Review*, 34, 131–149.
- de Souza, J. (1988). The Singapore Festival of Arts: Looking back on a decade. In *Singapore Festival of Arts 1988 Programme Guide*. Singapore: Ministry of Community Development.
- Dhanabalan, S. (1982). Message. *Singapore Arts Festival Programme Guide*. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.
- Falassi, A. (1987). Festival: Definition and morphology. In A. Falassi (Ed.), *Time out of Time: Essays on the Festival*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press.
- Goh, C. L. (2012). Strategic intent with artistic integrity. In K. Deventer, & C. L. Goh (Ed.), *Inside/Insight Festivals*. Belgium: European Festival Association.
- Hack, K. (2001). *Defence and Decolonisation in Southeast Asia: Britain, Malaya and Singapore 1947–1967*. Richmond, UK: Curzon.
- Harper, T. N. (1999). *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Jit, K. (2000). No parking on odd days. In K. P. Kun (Ed.), *Images at the Margins: A Collection of Kuo Pao Kun’s Plays*. Singapore: Times Book International.

- Jit, K. (1993). The larger context of arts development in Singapore. In W. C. Lee (Ed.), *Art vs Art Conference*. Singapore: Substation.
- Koh, T. A. (1989). Culture and the arts. In K. S. Sandhu, & P. Wheatley (Eds.), *Management of Success: The Moulding of Modern Singapore*. Singapore: Southeast Asian Studies.
- Kong, L. (2000). Cultural policy in Singapore: Negotiating economic and social-cultural agendas. *Geoforum*, 31, 409–424.
- Kwok, K. W., & Low, K. H. (2002). Cultural policy and the city-state: Singapore and the “New Asian Renaissance”. In D. Crane, N. Kawashima, & K. Kawasaki (Eds.), *Global Culture: Media, Arts, Policy, and Globalization*. New York: Routledge.
- Lee, T. (2004). Creative shifts and directions: Cultural policy in Singapore. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 10 (3), 281–299.
- Leo, J., & Elangovan, K. (1988). Letter from the fringe. *Singapore Festival of Arts 1988 Programme Guide*. Singapore: Ministry of Community Development.
- Lim, L. (2012). Constructing habitus: Promoting an international arts trend at the Singapore Arts Festival. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, 18 (3), 308–322.
- Liu, Thai Ker (2002). “Message” in *Singapore Arts Festival*. Programme Guide. Singapore: National Arts Council.
- Ministry of Culture. (1963). *South East Asia Cultural Festival Guide*. Singapore.
- Ministry of Information and the Arts. (2000). *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*. Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts.
- Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MICA). (2012). *The Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review*. Singapore: National Arts Council.
- National Arts Council. (2013). *Arts Festival Review Committee Report*. Retrieved from <https://www.nac.gov.sg/docs/news/arts-festival-review-committee-report.pdf>.
- Ong, T. C. (1978). Speech at the launch of Singapore Festival of Arts 1978. 9 June. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.
- Oon, C. (2001). *Theatre Life! A History of English-language Theatre in Singapore Through the Straits Times, 1958-2000*. Singapore: Singapore Press Holdings.
- Peterson, W. (1996). Singapore’s Festival of the Arts. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 3 (1), 112–124.
- Peterson, W. (2001). *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*. CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Peterson, W. (2009). The Singapore Arts Festival at thirty: Going global, glocal, grobal. *Asian Theatre Journal*, 26 (1), 111–134.
- Purushothaman, V. (2001). *Narratives: Notes on a Cultural Journey. Cultural Medallions Recipients, 1979–2001*. Singapore: National Arts Council Publication.
- Purushothaman, V. (2007). *Making Visible the Invisible: Three Decades of the Singapore Arts Festival*. Singapore: National Arts Council.
- Rajaratnam, S. (1960). Message. *Singapore Indian Association Annual Cultural Night Programme Guide*. Singapore.
- Steele, Anthony (1982). “Message” in Singapore International Festival of Arts. Programme Guide. Singapore: Ministry of Culture.
- Sullivan, M. (1959). *Singapore Arts Festival 1959 Programme Guide*. Singapore: Singapore Arts Council.
- Wee, C. J. W.-L. (2003). National identity, the arts and the global city. In D. da Cunha (Ed.), *Singapore and the New Millennium: Challenging Facing the City-State*. Singapore: Institute of Southeast Asian Studies.