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## A New Pulse for Seniors in Community Theatre

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### Introduction

Singapore became part of a worldwide pandemic in January 2020. The fear of an unknown virus, the loss of lives and livelihoods became the norm. Seniors, defined as persons over sixty, were identified as the most vulnerable group, dying not only from the virus but also of complications from age-related ailments. Vaccines were a year away and social interactions were minimised. For the community theatre group The Glowers, comprised of seniors, the pulse of training, rehearsing and performing, weakened. While stage performances took to hybrid theatre, livestreams and videos on demand, The Glowers lacked the resources and more importantly, the knowledge to do the same. To feed their love of learning and performing on stage, the group returned to a genre they grew up with -- the radio play. This article outlines briefly how a radio play is produced and more importantly, articulates how a new pulse for The Glowers is a new way of learning and rehearsing for an online audience. It also gives an insight into how the group increased digital fluency, shares strategies for working with those showing signs of physical and cognitive decline and affirms that the benefits of drama in ageing still exist in the difficult times of the pandemic. It ends with a look at how ageing affects an artist and the reasons for finding a new pulse.

### Background

The Glowers Drama Group began in 2008 as a ground-up community drama group for seniors (figure 1). Its aim is to provide a platform to showcase the talents of seniors, help them stay mentally and physically alert and active, and expand their social network. The Glowers was founded by local actress Catherine Sng who runs the group like a club. Members, as group participants call themselves, are between 55 to 80 years old, with Sng herself in her 70s.

The Glowers have a regular meeting and rehearsal room in the Kampong Glam Community Club where they meet weekly to play drama games, do improvisation or rehearse for upcoming performances. Being an interest group,<sup>1</sup> the Community Club provides them rent-free space for their practice. In return, The Glowers provides residents in the area with simple performances on special occasions like Mother's Day and National Day. At other times, they create larger-scale performances that

<sup>1</sup> Besides bringing people of similar interests together to forge friendships, interest groups are sometimes allotted free time and space at government run Community Clubs.



Fig. 1 Members of The Glowers Drama Group, 2018.  
Photo: Shamus Choy

are staged at local and international arts festivals. For these projects, the group works with directors like Jalyn Han, Pat Toh, Serena Ho, Ace Chew and Jeremiah Choy. Members audition for roles and commit to a rigorous rehearsal schedule. Those not cast often volunteer to look after props and costumes, manage ticket sales, do front-of-house duties or simply sit in on rehearsals to learn from the process.

The Glowers have built a repertoire of plays often involving a mix of Mandarin, English and local Chinese dialects like Teochew, Hokkien, Cantonese, Hainanese and Khek. The content they create satisfies their own needs to tell personal stories and to share them with other seniors who miss hearing dialects being spoken. The Glowers' reputation for creating multilingual performances steeped in nostalgia has led one of their pieces, *Kampung Chempedak*, to be presented at Singapore's Silver Arts Festival 2016, an arts festival targeted at seniors. This play about villagers being resettled into the city also struck a chord with audiences outside of Singapore. It has been staged at Malaysia's George Town Festival<sup>2</sup> as well as Japan's 2019 Gold Theatre Festival, a festival started by Yukio Ninagawa featuring people over 55 years of age with no performing experience. The effect of performing overseas has given the group a new sense of confidence and a stronger belief that the stage has a place for seniors. It has also brought them closer as a group as they've had to watch out for signs of ageing in each other. On the trip to Japan, one of the cast, R,<sup>3</sup> who had early stages of dementia, started having more pronounced symptoms of forgetfulness and disorientation. While I learned all her lines in case I had to replace her, Sng provided guidance to the other actors in R's scenes on how to get the flow of the playback on track. Group members also took turns to look after R outside of rehearsals, including her in their outings and meals. This sobering incident made me want to find out more, not only about dementia but

<sup>2</sup> A Malaysian cultural festival with international artists in a UNESCO world heritage site.

<sup>3</sup> Names are anonymised to protect the identity of the seniors.

how ageing affects the cognitive functions of the brain. It was a timely move as COVID-19 and its restrictions on live performances tested the group's ability to switch from familiar in-person rehearsals to the almost foreign practice of online rehearsals.

### The Onslaught of COVID-19

In March 2020, group activities involving senior citizens were suspended and performance venues lowered their curtains. Many theatre companies quickly went digital. Some screened performances meant for archival and documentation purposes, while others experimented with hybrid performances where a limited number of live actors perform or interact with video projections of actors performing at other venues.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Kapadia, "Podcast 95"

The Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) 2021 programmed live streaming and videos-on-demand to cater to audiences watching from home. A community group like The Glowers does not have the experience nor the inclination to do anything close to a hybrid production or even something that requires live streaming because they lack the resources and technical know-how. During this time, The Glowers were in early discussions for *Chap Lau*, the sequel to *Kampong Chempedak*, when the rhythm of in-person Friday afternoon meetings came to a halt. Meetings went online but were restricted to a handful of those who knew how to use Zoom. The group did not see the chance of a stage production and were losing their purpose to stay involved in the arts. As producer and playwright for *Chap Lau*, I felt there was still a possibility for the play to take another form, one that members of The Glowers could relate to and could give authenticity to their stories. My proposal to adapt *Chap Lau* from a stage play into a radio play was readily accepted by the members. Sng and I decided to work with Liow Shi Suen as studio director. Liow not only had years of experience, she was also a student of the late Lee Dai Sor, a renowned radio storyteller of the 60s and 70s. Lee Dai Sor was a celebrity that many members of The Glowers had spent hours listening to. *Chap Lau* was going to be an old school radio play set in the 60s replete with sound effects, music and a host of colourful characters. However, this shot in the arm for the production came with side-effects: the lack of funding and resources, digital challenges, ageing issues, and working within a new genre. *Chap Lau* not only became a radio play but a vehicle to express the issues in artmaking faced by seniors like The Glowers during the pandemic.

### The Making of *Chap Lau*, the Radio Play

*Chap Lau* is a generic name for government-subsidised flats found in Singapore in the 60s. Against this setting, listeners follow the neighbours of *Kampong Chempedak* to see how they adjust to life in a newly created housing estate. One of the plot points is a neighbour starting a tontine and getting into trouble when one of her subscribers defaults on payment. Tontines, a way of managing savings and accessing cash have been illegal in Singapore since the 70s due to the lost savings from dishonesty.<sup>5</sup> The tontine was a reminder of a forgotten part of our social history and an illustration of how the kampong spirit<sup>6</sup> never left the residents of *Kampong Chempedak*. Reminiscent of radio plays of the 60s, each episode starts with a narrator introducing the episode or

<sup>5</sup> Tan, "This is What Our Grandparents Did to Manage Risk and Save Money."

<sup>6</sup> A sense of community found in kampongs or villages where everyone looks out for each other.

providing a verbal flashback of the story. The episode ends on a cliff-hanger and closes with the narrator's commentary or a reflection of the characters or incidents.

Methods of adapting the play for radio included revising lines to help listeners visualise scenes or characters, incorporating sound effects to heighten imagination and allowing music to suggest emotions. The audience had to see in their heads what they heard. Every sound effect from distant traffic and children's voices that help create the environment of a town, to the kind of footsteps that marked a character, had to be specified in stage directions for the audio engineers to include. Characters entering scenes also had to be described in passing dialogue, just enough for listeners to be able to imagine what they looked like. Restrictions we faced included a two-week window of use of the recording studio, the inexperience of the group in recording a radio play, and the ever-present fear of constantly changing Safety Management Measures<sup>7</sup> (SMM) which restricted group sizes.

During auditions, Liow was looking for voices that would create mental pictures of characters. Actors also needed to show a fairly large range of vocal expression and carry out instructions to adjust vocal quality. A cast of twenty-two actors was chosen from auditions. It was a large cast because we wanted to include as many members as possible who were willing to undergo training and commit to daily rehearsals. Eight of the cast were bilingual and took on roles in the English and Mandarin versions while the other 15 spoke either Mandarin or English. Only two actors were below 60 years old. The oldest was 80 and one actor was wheelchair-bound.

During the first read of *Chap Lau*, we realised that while characters speaking in various dialects provided the authenticity of how people communicated in the 50s and 60s worked on stage, it caused confusion in an audio play. There was no meaning-making provided by the actors' body language or subtitles, the use of too many dialects caused a lack of coherence and the pace of the story suffered. Liow translated my English version into Mandarin and in both versions, we retained exclamations or grumbling in the background by characters in the various dialects. We still wanted dialects to make a connection with older audiences<sup>8</sup>. The story was spread over ten episodes each lasting ten minutes. Listeners had a choice of listening to either an English or Mandarin version of *Chap Lau*. With two versions as well, *Chap Lau* could cater to a larger audience and perhaps include younger listeners who were unfamiliar with the dialects.

Myct Boon designed the key visual– a candy-coloured sky and neon-orange flats that represented an idyllic time in the process of change, and the black and white photos sprinkled in the foreground tells us about people and stories of the past (figure 2). These photos were personal items provided by members of The Glowers as a way of including those who were not part of the radio play. The eye-catching visual was also designed to hook nostalgia loving audiences over online platforms like YouTube as well as for advertising and promotional purposes.

<sup>7</sup> In Singapore, besides wearing masks and social distancing, Safety Management Measures include restrictions on the number of people in confined spaces like rehearsal rooms, studios and performance venues. Restriction numbers can vary quite quickly in response to the number of COVID-19 cases.

<sup>8</sup> The use of Chinese dialects declined in 1979 with the start of the Speak Mandarin Campaign. The then-Prime Minister, Lee Kwan Yew, saw the use of dialects as unprogressive and causing a lack of cohesion in society (Yeo).



Fig. 2 Key visual for *Chap Lau*, 2021.  
Photo: Myct Boon

We also wanted music to help tell the story and we decided to work with local composer Julian Wong. Our brief to him was to compose a tune that could be used as the main theme as well as include variations that express feelings such as falling in love, regret, and contentment. Liow was quite specific with transition music and incidental music to heighten emotions. She either sang or used other music references as examples for Wong. In total, *Chap Lau* had two variations of theme music, fifteen pieces of incidental music and over twenty sound effects. Although it's billed as a radio play, *Chap Lau* was going to appear on online platforms and ultimately be promoted in senior homes and activity centres. Its purpose is not only to entertain but act as a resource to ignite conversation or design other activities.

### Finding Funding and Resources for *Chap Lau*

Singapore's National Arts Council (NAC) provides partial funding for the creation of new works of art but funding for the stage version of *Chap Lau* had to be withdrawn in place of a new proposal for a radio play. I wasn't sure if the project would get any funding at all as, during this period, other artists had many good ideas for creating new works of art with technology. My applications to NAC and the Oscar@sg fund managed by Temasek Foundation awarded funds amounting to only 57% of the cost. Sng and I had to take a pay cut and The Glowers had to dip into company savings to make up the shortfall. Although it was a significant financial strain all-around, we appreciated the fact that, like us, both funders, saw the value in the simplicity of *Chap Lau*, and how it served two groups of seniors. The first being The Glowers, who could continue their learning and practice and the second, older audiences distanced from the arts. Both groups had not been forgotten. The Institute of Technical Education (ITE) also supported us with two



weeks' use of studio and equipment and we also worked with an intern from their Performance Production course and two alumni who were our audio engineers.

## Overcoming Digital Challenges

To many people, Zoom has become as commonplace as a phone call. However, when we started auditions and rehearsals in March 2021, one challenge was that some of the cast didn't own computers. They relied on their mobile phones to view the other participants as well as read off a shared screen. This slowed everyone down as some had failing eyesight and most were not familiar nor dexterous with the use of the functions of Zoom. We resorted to delivering printed scripts and only utilising Zoom's camera and microphone functions.

The next hurdle was getting cast members to go online efficiently. Some could not negotiate weak Wi-Fi signals and others had problems locating icons and functions on Zoom. During auditions and early rehearsals, there were many gaps of silence because microphones were muted or people didn't realise someone was talking to them. "My turn?" was a constant question. Perhaps these actors needed the visual cues that could only happen in a face-to-face session. One lady, S, expressed her frustration and despair saying, "My mic's not working, everything is not working... I can see, but I have to scroll. I give up! When I'm ready, I'll come back to you."

Unfortunately, S never re-joined the project. Perhaps she feared making mistakes and was daunted by a learning curve she could not keep up with. Research suggests that a way of bridging the digital or the grey divide is to increase motivation to use technology. While the novelty of *Chap Lau* seemed enticing to some, a general skills deficit and a dislike for technology, believing it to be inconvenient<sup>9</sup>, is another reason why some seniors seem to stay away from online learning.

<sup>9</sup> Martins Van Jaarsveld, 3

One of the reasons for this inconvenience is pointed out in the e-article *Online Learning for Seniors*. Notess and Lorenzen-Huber quote Keates and Clarkson who say that "Web designers prefer to design for people like themselves, rather than for people in a different stage of life with very different wants and needs." They go on to add from Ito, O'Day et al. that, "Designers are also inclined toward the new and cool, so web-based interfaces change all the time and require constant re-learning. Crossing the digital divide is something that has to be done many times, not just once."<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Notess and Lorenzen-Huber 4

To make up for a digital skills deficit and to build familiarity with Zoom, a basic protocol was created:

- Click link to get online
- Turn mic on for speaking and off for silence
- Speak one at a time
- Leave meeting and rejoin when Wi-Fi is patchy

While these seem like basic skills, the repetition of these steps created dexterity and confidence. With over sixty full-day rehearsals before them, it meant the cast could go online successfully and do very simple troubleshooting on their own.

Two months into rehearsals, an actor, BY, shared that Zoom enhanced her learning experience:

Sometimes we can't see everyone on Zoom, yet we have to direct our feelings towards the character of the other actor. When Shi Suen (Liow) teaches us different techniques for radio, we not only have to listen, but watch. Our mouths have to learn her actions. Last time, we never knew how to do this. Rehearsals are convenient on Zoom – we don't have to leave the house, yet we can learn.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> BY

BY, and others like her gained a new sense of confidence from the dexterity and familiarity with Zoom which fed her desire to learn. This desire to learn is representative of The Glowers who are almost seen as models of active ageing. But sometimes, ageing gets in the way of learning.

### Overcoming the Issues of Older Adult Learners

In the critical review *Ageing, Drama and Creativity*, Rickett and Bernard found seventy-seven publications that highlighted better health and well-being, improved group relationships and opportunities for learning as benefits of drama. Evidence also suggests the power of dramatic engagement encourages empathy, reflection and transformed views of the self and others.<sup>12</sup> This evidence is not new and we see it in almost every arts project with seniors. In times when people could move freely between destinations and social groupings had no headcount restrictions, arts engagement could do all of this. However, with the spreading virus and the constant public messages to stay home, a sense of listlessness started growing in the group. While the novelty of *Chap Lau* provided a purpose for learning and an outlet for creative expression, the effects of ageing were more pronounced in the group now than when I first started working with them 12 years ago. When the idea of the radio play was presented to the group, many questions related to physical decline were raised. The first being whether getting to the recording studio had obstacles like stairs, enough seating and proximity to toilets. These seniors prioritised physical safety and well-being before committing to a project.

<sup>12</sup> Rickett and Bernard 44

The second was the worry of how they were going to learn enough over two months to be able to record *Chap Lau*. The online article *How Seniors Learn*, states that older people may have:

- A slower speed of mental processing, meaning they may take longer to recall information and complete tasks.
- Less working memory, i.e., less cognitive resources to manipulate different types of information simultaneously.
- Less ability to focus especially on specific information and to eliminate distractions.
- Less cognitive flexibility, which means they may lack divergent thinking or are less able to generate alternative explanations or solutions to a problem.
- Less capacity to draw inferences from information. It becomes more difficult to read between the lines and to draw conclusions from evidence.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Stevens 2

The article further explains that what the individual deems as useful information would be committed to memory and that repetition helps speed up understanding.

The point on lesser cognitive flexibility to engage in divergent thinking stood out for me. During rehearsals for *Chap Lau*, some cast members were less keen to explore the variety of ways to say lines or run a scene. Some found it tiring to look deeper into lines to consider subtext, inference, subtle humour or even sarcasm. Their response after a few tries would always be “just tell me how to do it and I will do so.” I wondered if it was due to a gap in communication between myself and them, or whether they held onto a didactic learning style from their youth, where the tendency was to repeat what the teacher said. The other possibility could be that a combination of the lack of cognitive flexibility, ability to focus and working memory was already starting to set in. Table 1 (below) sets out the age-related issues we faced during the making of *Chap Lau* and the strategies we used to solve them. It does not apply to all seniors because everyone ages differently.

Issues	Strategies
1. Age-related physical changes in vision, hearing, motor dexterity.	1. In scripts: generous font size of sixteen, sparing use of coloured fonts. In recording venue: Flat walkways, lift access, seats, nearby toilets, ample volume of sound playback.
2. Slower mental processing	2. Chunk information clearly and succinctly, allow time for actors to manipulate information to make meaning, use repetition and recap strategies.
3. Less cognitive flexibility to change judgements, analyse information, engage in divergent thinking and draw inferences.	3. Use of good references and modelling. Encourage exploration by saying, “I do it this way, but I don’t expect you to follow me.”
4. Miscommunication	4. The cast consists of some who are effectively bilingual and some who are more conversant only in English or Mandarin. In every rehearsal, there are constant translations. Checks for understanding and clearing misinterpretations can provide a better working environment for all.
5. Declining motivation to learn	5. Meaningful training leading to performances that can be seen, heard and appreciated by an audience. Pep talks, expressions of love and concern during and out of rehearsals.

Table 1

Identifying ageing issues as well as strategies for this group of seniors helped the cast transition from online rehearsals to in-person recordings in the studio.



## Working With a New Genre

The demands of a radio play are different to that of a stage play. Everyday movements like walking, running, and having a meal, have to be translated into sound, and voices have to take on different energies for the microphone. Four workshops were held to bring about greater awareness of the nuances of speech. There was also practise in vocalisations to suggest emotions and attitudes. Sighs, small laughs and expressions of scorn or delight, used together with text make dialogue come alive. Liow also had to work at breaking patterns of speech, for example, dragging the final sounds of words. To help create mental images of characters and their style of talking, the cast had to fully physicalize their characters through their actions, listen to their character voice, and then replicate the voice without movement with lines from the script. Auditions and rehearsals were open to all actors, including those not involved in the production, as an open source of learning. We were surprised that this open access was so popular. Each scene had no more than eight actors rehearsing and often, we would have an equal or greater number of nonperformers listening in. One reason for this could be that with staying home being the norm, these sessions provided a camaraderie that comforted the members. Another possibility was that video conferencing now seemed less daunting, and the third reason was that they were motivated to learn as they had an experience which satisfied their interests and needs.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Knowles et al. 40

When the time came to move into the recording studio, there was much excitement within the group. Instead of the stage that they were so familiar with, the new performance space was a music studio in ITE Central's Centre for Music and the Arts. There was a virtual orientation that included photos and videos on senior-friendly routes to the studio, eateries and toilets. To allay fears of getting lost or being late for call-time, a day was set aside for a physical meet-up on how to get to ITE Central from a train station.

Once in the studio, time was spent introducing the language of recording. For example, terms like "in points," which is where the actor has to start recording, and "out points," where the line has to end. They also had to practice how to vary distances from the microphone to create illusions of space or intimacy or how to place their hands lightly over their mouths to create muffled voices. One of the earlier problems was that the actors tended to rush their lines because they could not see and respond to fellow actors face-to-face. While they could see faces over Zoom, they could not in a studio where they were always facing a mic. They also had to get used to leaving gaps for sound effects and music that had yet to be inserted.

A safety buddy system was set up whenever there was a need. In figure 3, the lady with the blue chair in front of her used it as a support for standing. Due to weak knees, her initial preference was to sit. However, she chose to stand during recordings because she felt she performed better. Liow positioned the younger male performer behind her to provide help if needed.



Fig. 3 Set up for studio recording of *Chap Lau*, 2021.

Photo: Peggy Ferroa

The two weeks of recording were a happy time for the group. Even with restrictions, they managed to celebrate a birthday and have home-baked bread and cakes during breaks. They were enlivened by the new experience of being in a radio play that held the promise of reaching a new audience. After almost a year, The Glowers came back as a physical group and had a small dose of happier, pre-COVID-19 days.

### Feedback on the *Chap Lau* Experience

In the past, The Glowers gathered feedback about productions in a very casual manner—over a meal or a big group discussion at one of their Friday sessions. This time, with the group already familiar with accessing links, they were asked to fill out an online survey. This was a means to hear individual thoughts as opposed to a group setting where responses could be influenced.

The survey also wanted to find out if the cast saw the benefits of online engagement as well as how learning the ropes of performing in a radio play impacted them. The book *The Adult Learner* explains that, “experience is the richest resource for adults’ learning; therefore, the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience.”<sup>15</sup> Likert scale questions that scored high in positive responses were about the enjoyment of the experience, the learning of new performance skills and the newfound confidence in rehearsing online. Written responses to the open-ended questions gathered more information about the scale questions and encouraged further expression about the experience. Here are some examples:

<sup>15</sup> Knowles et al. 40

老师在我们未正式进入录音室前，非常详细的教导与示范如何运用我们自己的声音去演绎角色的性格与感情，这是我最享受与受益的部分。(Before we officially entered the recording studio, *laoshi*<sup>16</sup> demonstrated in great detail how to use our voice to interpret the characters and their feelings. This is the part that I enjoy and benefitted from most.)<sup>17</sup>  
[...]

<sup>16</sup> *Laoshi* means teacher in Mandarin. The Glowers members use this term for Sng and all practitioners who work with them.  
<sup>17</sup> LXR

Firstly, I was amazed at the rehearsals and practises via Zoom, all at the individuals' homes. Then the actual recording at Recording Studio at ITE Headquarters. Amazed at the facilities provided, working with young ITE students who were patient with seniors. Very fruitful and happy experience.<sup>18</sup>  
[...]

<sup>18</sup> AN

可以跟一群好久未见的好朋友再聚在一起切磋分享录制的过程和心得乃一大乐事。(It's a great pleasure being together with a group of good friends whom you haven't seen for a long time to discuss and share the recording process and experience.)<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> BC

I was heartened to realise that what Rickett and Bernard found about the benefits of drama— better health and well-being, improved group relationships and opportunities for learning<sup>20</sup> —still holds true even in the time of a pandemic.

<sup>20</sup> Rickett and Bernard 44

Public reception to *Chap Lau* was warm. It was selected as a digital highlight at the Silver Arts Fest 2021 and all episodes were broadcasted on NAC's Facebook over two weeks. There were also two dialogue sessions, one in English and the other in Mandarin where cast members and the creative team shared their experiences of the making of *Chap Lau*. A request also came for us to edit the Mandarin episodes down to five minutes to be broadcast over four time slots on the Mandarin radio station Capital 958. Although we have no way of knowing how many tuned into *Chap Lau*, we do know that Capital 958 has the highest reach for people over 55 years of age and in December 2020, had a weekly listenership of 906,000.<sup>21</sup> At the time of this publication, *Chap Lau* has already garnered 108,102 views on NAC's Facebook page even though we do not know how many viewers sat through each episode. The Lions Befrienders, a social service agency that provides friendship and care for seniors, has also requested for *Chap Lau* to be put on the 7,000 MP3 players owned by seniors under their care. The latest broadcast addition for *Chap Lau* is on the CARA, a mobile phone app that provides support for dementia patients and their caregivers. Links to all episodes and dialogue sessions of *Chap Lau* can be found on <https://linktr.ee/chaplau> (figure 4) where they will develop their own following. The episodes will be there for as long as the website hosts us.

<sup>21</sup> Channel News Asia

## Closing Thoughts on a New Pulse

The longevity of *Chap Lau* and its mind-boggling audience numbers far exceeded my conservative estimate of five hundred listeners when I submitted the proposal. This number was already more than the three hundred or so audience we would have had in a two-day black box run. While healthy numbers make funders very happy and the cast very proud, what really matters is the lived experience of increased

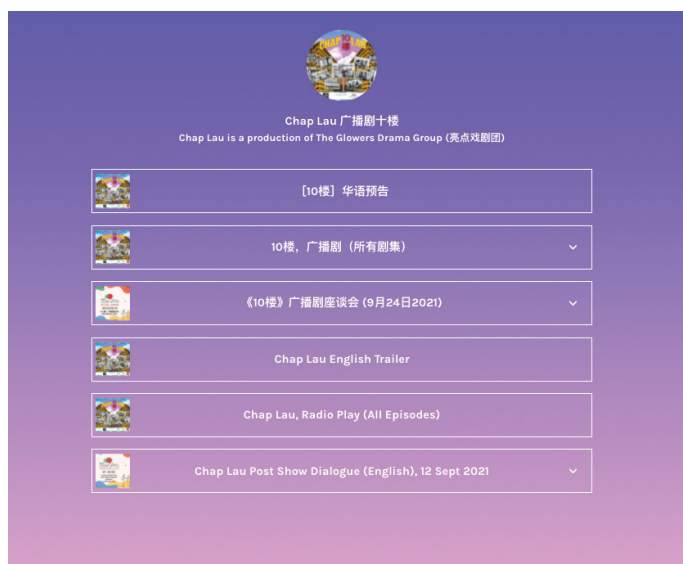


Fig. 4 *Chap Lau* links on Linktree, 2021.

Photo: Peggy Ferroa

digital literacy and the experimentation with new ways of art-making. As Knowles et al. remarked, “the most potent motivators are internal desires like increased job satisfaction, self-esteem and quality of life.”<sup>22</sup> I can see another rendition of a radio play. Not for the sake of riding on the coattails of this success but to provide another opportunity for those who did not have a chance to take part in *Chap Lau*. They too should have the chance to experience this satisfaction. However, as the world continues to fight new variants of the COVID-19 virus, the seemingly healthy seniors in The Glowers continue to age. Many are already physically slower, a little more forgetful, less patient to get things right and more prone to life-threatening ailments. During the production, one cast member dropped out because he was diagnosed with cancer, even as another two, who also has cancer, carried on with rehearsals and recordings. The production was bookended with the sudden death of an active gentleman, WS, who was in his late 70s, and the demise of B, a spritely eighty-year-old lady. At times like these, I often wonder if I am doing the right thing in giving people advanced in age enriching experiences and opportunities for learning. However, when I look back, I remember the utter joy of WS when the cast of *Kampong Chempedak* celebrated his birthday on stage just before a show in George Town. I also remember B’s determination and delight in getting an expression right for her character, Rita, a sexy dancing girl who was a fraction of B’s age. *Chap Lau* was probably B’s last production, but it did not matter to her. She, like WS, both lived well through the arts right till the end. It brought them happiness, friendship, and performances for their families to remember them by.

I too, cannot help but think of my future with my own ageing affecting the way I work. After reading *How Seniors Learn*, I started to blame myself less because I saw that slower mental processing, less working memory and the decreased ability to focus on my work were part and parcel of the ageing process. When I started writing this article, I

<sup>22</sup> Knowles et al. 68

watched a documentary, *10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki*.<sup>23</sup> Chronicling the decade prior to the Japanese animation director's retirement, it held up a mirror to my ageing and creative process. Like him at sixty-two, I struggle with mental blocks, anguish over creative decisions, and lose confidence, feeling totally embarrassed whenever physical and cognitive functions fail me. His struggle creating his last and most difficult piece of work at seventy-two saw his mental blocks, anguish and frustration at his work exacerbated. He recognized his own ageing and the fact that he was starting to feel distant from his work. Perhaps the pandemic makes it more urgent for me to question the meaning of my work and my future – what is *my* new pulse? Just before the submission of this article, I read that Miyazaki was coming out of retirement (yet again) at the age of eighty. His new film is based on a novel by Genzaburo Yoshino called *How Do You Live?*. He cites his reason for making this movie as, "... because I do not have the answer."<sup>24</sup> Perhaps, a new pulse for me does not necessarily mean one that beats stronger and faster, but one that beats differently to accommodate an ageing body in these uncertain times. To repeatedly ask myself *How Do You Live?* will help me find better answers to the purpose of my work. It will also help keep my new pulse going.

<sup>23</sup> "10 Years with Hayao Miyazaki"

<sup>24</sup> Bisset

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