

Cooling Off Day

Wild Rice

10 - 14 August 2011, Drama Centre Theatre
Featured in The Man Singapore Theatre Festival 2011

Production information

As part of the Singapore Theatre Festival 2011, *Cooling Off Day*, written by Alfian Sa'at and directed by Ivan Heng and Jo Kukathas, was originally staged shortly after the General Election 2011. Rare in Singapore, *Cooling Off Day* is an excellent example of the relativity new form of theatre known as 'Verbatim Theatre', what the Americans call 'Documentary Theatre', where the text consists of real words spoken by real people, collected and edited by the writer and then performed by actors.

In the electrifying months leading up to the watershed 2011 General Elections, and in the tumultuous months after, playwright Alfian Sa'at interviewed Singaporeans to discover their responses to these searching questions. Boldly putting aside concerns about secrecy, the interviewees opened their hearts to share what they honestly felt and what they truly believe.

An ensemble of six of Singapore's most versatile actors, play a range of real-life characters, aged from 17 to 70. The result is a playful and poignant piece of testimony theatre that proves how political views are not just the "hot air of coffee-shop talk" but are revealing of both people and a nation.

(Synopsis and Theme)

Why do you vote?

What issues influenced your vote?

What does citizenship mean to you?

Covering a wide social and political spectrum, the candid interviews capture the GE experience through the voices of individual Singaporeans – from election candidates to pro-establishment civil servants; from taxi-drivers to teachers; from diehard opposition supporters to young people casting their virgin votes. From the transcripts of these real-life interviews emerges a script that chronicles the momentous event that not only rocked the boat, but created startling ripples that are still widening even now.

The private clashes behind the public debates... the personal convictions behind the party politics... even that unforgettable moment as they finally stood alone in the polling booth with pen in hand, poised to make their mark. These interviews – some hopeful, some fearful, some hilariously frank, some achingly honest – form a portrait of Singaporeans confronting the real meaning of democracy and rediscovering their role in shaping the country's future.

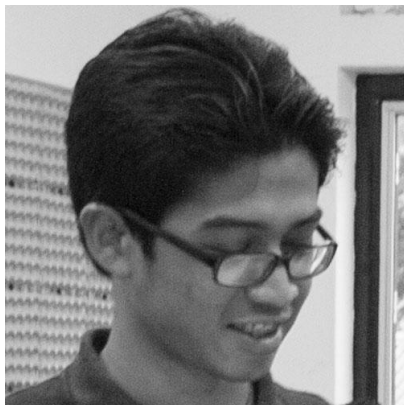
CAST

Performer	.....	Jo Kukathas
Performer	.....	Najib Soiman
Performer	.....	Neo Swee Lin
Performer	.....	Rodney Oliveiro
Performer	.....	Peter Sau
Performer	.....	Tan Kheng Hua

PRODUCTION

Playwright	.....	Alfian Sa'at
Directors	.....	Ivan Heng, Jo Kukathas
Set Designer	.....	Ivan Heng
Lighting Designer/ Technical Manager	.....	Teo Kuang Han
Photo/ Multi-Media Artist	.....	Chris Yap
Hair Designer	.....	Ashley Lim
Festival Team Artistic Director	.....	Ivan Heng
Festival Team Dramaturg	.....	Alfian Sa'at
Festival Team Producer	.....	Tony Trickett
Production Manager	.....	Koh Bee Bee
Production Co-ordinator	.....	Phua Yun Yun
Stage Manager	.....	Keira Lee
Assistant Stage Manager/ Props Mistress	.....	Mirabel Neo
Video Operator	.....	Samantha Chua
Wardrobe Mistress	.....	Nurhidayah Mahadi
Assistant to Director/ Stage Assistant	.....	Barney Gopalakrishnen
Stage Assistant	.....	Fang Lu

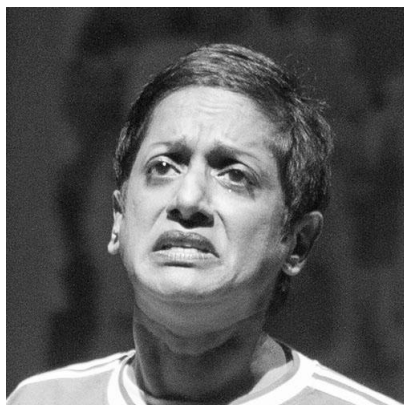
Photos of Cast and Production (appearing in the documentary photographs)



Barney Gopalakrishnen



Ivan Heng



Jo Kukathas



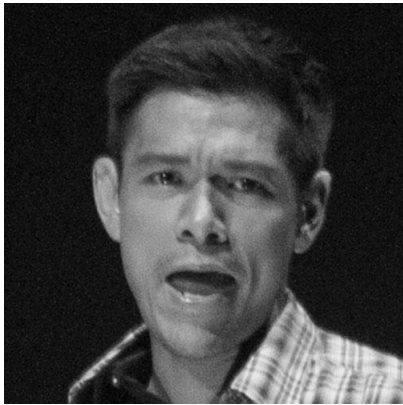
Keira Lee



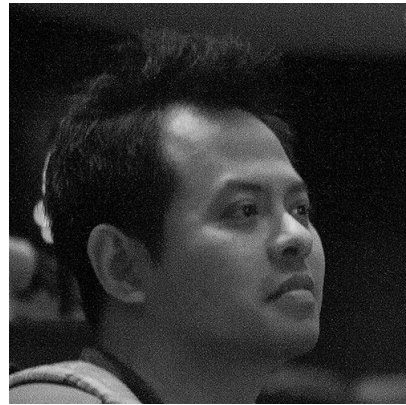
Mirabel Neo



Neo Swee Lin



Rodney Oliveiro





Alfian Sa'at



Peter Sau



Najib Soiman

 <p>Tan Kheng Hua</p>	 <p>Teo Kuang Han</p>
 <p>Chris Yap</p>	

PROCESS NOTES

Wild Rice's *Cooling Off Day*, by Barney Gopalakrishnen

Features and process

As part of the Singapore Theatre Festival 2011, *Cooling Off Day*, written by Alfian Sa'at and directed by Ivan Heng and Jo Kukathas was originally staged shortly after the General Election 2011. Rare in Singapore, *Cooling Off Day* is an excellent example of the relatively new form of theatre known as Verbatim Theatre, what the Americans call 'Documentary Theatre', where the text consists of real words spoken by real people, collected and edited by the writer.

By definition such plays are "constructed from the precise words spoken by people interviewed about a particular event or topic". Though first explored by Britain's Joint Stock theatre company in the 1970s, the best known examples of this form include the famous USA work, *The Laramie Project* by Moises Kaufman & Tectonic Theater; *Talking to Terrorists* by Robin Soans; the UK plays, *My Name is Rachel Corrie* by Alan Rickman and Katharine Viner, *The Permanent Way* by David Hare, *Black Watch* by Gregory Burke and the National Theatre of Scotland; and Australian plays, *Aftershocks* (the first Australian play of this form, 1991) by Paul Brown and the Workers Cultural Action Committee, and *Embers* by Campion Decent.

Cooling Off Day was unique in bringing the political voices of ordinary Singaporeans onto the stage and important in adding depth and breadth to the political debate in Singapore. It recorded the thoughts and feelings at a particular time in history and revealed how closely governance is related to the ordinary lives of its citizens. The production was led by distinguished directors from Singapore and Malaysia who gathered together a versatile ensemble of well-known actors to perform the soliloquies of multiple different real-life characters from all walks of life and from a wide range of ages. From taxi drivers to first-time voters and to election candidates, these “real-life participants” were extensively interviewed, from which their monologues were selected and edited by the writer in collaboration with the two directors.

Though the content of each monologue was distinct and varied, the dramatic structure depended totally upon the arrangement of the order of monologues staged. An order that not only allowed one monologue to lead into or contrast the next or previous, but also built theme and content and tension to climax and then to resolve the work. The recorded monologues were transcribed by the writer before rehearsals; and the cast undertook appropriate research on each interviewed character. Actors listened to the audio recordings, but as the characters were not videoed, the actors had freedom in not needing to imitate the real people – except with well-known public figures, when their physical mannerisms needed study along with characters’ voices, speech patterns and vocal idiosyncrasies. Some actors chose to listen to certain of the voice recordings, others did not - especially in cases where a noisy atmosphere made listening difficult. Further, a few of the interviews were conducted by the performers themselves – notably, several that were in various Chinese dialects and one in Malay. These interviews were of people the actors knew personally and were shaped and edited in rehearsal by the actors and directors.

Thus the rehearsal process involved a lot of research and home study by the actors. First steps involved close study of the content and what is implied in words, some imitation of rhythms and essential traits, later modified as the actors took ownership of their roles. Rehearsal also required trialing various ordering of the material as the work developed more humour or more edge. The playwright was available in much of the rehearsal period and attending all the run-throughs, available to the actors while also shaping the material with them. Unique in the writing is the absence of dialogue and the absence of onstage dramatic conflict; dialogue was sometime found within the monologues - where actors also have to voice other characters’ conversations or quotes – but conflict was to be found only within characters themselves and within their hopes, dreams and fears. While the work consisted largely of monologues, the first half ended not with a sketch on the elections by well known Singaporean satirist, Mr Brown - this sketch being seen as his 'voice'. As AD of Wildrice Ivan Heng attended much to the big picture and design and sound elements as well as the dramatic shape and relevance, whilst Jo Kukathas, with her wealth of experience in political satire and comedy, assisted the actors in their characterisations.

The work was sparsely presented on an open raked stage as a centerpiece, coupled with rows of chairs on both sides, all in white. To that was added the aids of projection, the multi-media works of Chris Yap, and with some props. *Cooling Off Day*’s staging created an intense atmosphere under open white light, echoing Brechtian principles of presentation that encouraged audience to both identify with characters and objectify their content; the performance aspect was emphasized by being able to see the actors waiting their turn at the sides, and then stepping into character in front of the audience’s eyes – a prime feature of Brecht’s reminder that we are in a theatre. Focus on each character followed another of Brecht’s principles: that of putting the human being under a microscope to examine it closely, thus leading to an understanding. Such work also called upon the audience to use their imaginations to picture what the characters described; though Shakespeare calls upon audiences to imagine (Chorus to *Henry V* – “when we speak of horses, imagine that you see them...”). Modern theatre usually supplies everything for the viewer; thus *Cooling Off Day* brought further innovations to contemporary theatre in Singapore.

Cooling Off Day serves as a theatrical reflection of the 2011 General Elections. It played to full houses almost every day when originally staged and there is talk of a revival. As a creator of new work, Wildrice has made something of importance to the nation, deserving publication; whilst Alfian Sa'at has added to his growing reputation as “chronicler of our times”.

Note: The work was indeed successfully restaged in the SOTA theatre in 2012 and was given a further airing 'tikam tikam' style for three nights during the Alfian Sa'at In The Spotlight Festival at Lasalle in 2013.

Researcher: Barney Gopalakrishnen, 2011

General Editor: Aubrey Mellor – with contributions from Jo Kukathas, 2 Oct 2013