

## ***Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]***

The Necessary Stage

26 – 28 September 2014, SOTA Drama Theatre

### **Production information**

The relationships of mother and son, of teacher and protégé, collide in The Necessary Stage's *Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]*, an interdisciplinary and intercultural production written by Haresh Sharma and inspired by the writings of Nobel Prize winner Rabindranath Tagore and his acclaimed poetic work of the same name.

Directed by TNS' Artistic Director, Alvin Tan, the production featured movement by French-Laotian choreographer-dancer Olé Khamchanla, Jereh Leong and Raka Maitra, a renowned Odissi classical/contemporary dancer, and vocals by Hindustani singer, Namita Mehta. The set design was by Wong Chee Wai and lighting design by Adrian Tan, accompanied by interdisciplinary sound artist Bani Haykal and multimedia artist Brian Gothong Tan.

The cast of eight actors, singers and dancers starred Vasantham Star's Ebi Shankara and Life! Theatre Awards nominees Sharda Harrison and Padma Sagaram. An original work developed through various workshop stages, exploring and integrating the tensions between traditional and contemporary, poetic and realistic. The TNS creative process is collaborative: devising and improvising before scripting, with input from all members of the production.

Founded in 1987 by current Artistic Director, Alvin Tan, The Necessary Stage aims to create challenging, indigenous and innovative theatre that touches the heart and mind. Producing an average of two original plays a year and with a history of over a hundred productions, TNS has also curated and organized the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival since 2005.

### **(Synopsis and Theme)**

Will you fight for freedom knowing the inevitable loss ahead?

A mother pins her hopes upon her son, unknowingly hindering his own dreams.

A teacher struggles to accept her protégé whose ambitions steer her away from tradition.

A writer drawn to his muse faces the reality of their unresolved chapter.

These works raises many questions such as: For whom do we live our lives?

What happens when traditional practice has no host to carry it forward, as practitioners become indifferent to the canon and want to forge new practices?

How do we approach truths put forth by the authorities of science, politics and economics?

*Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]* is about the dilemma of Savitri, an Indian traditional dance teacher, whose obligation to carry on the heritage handed down to her by her father is smashed when her chosen disciple opts to leave the dance academy to pursue her journey in Vancouver. Priya, the dance disciple, has other plans. She knows what she doesn't want but only has a sketch of what she wants - enough to prompt her to leave India, propelling her out of Savitri's shadow into the unknown in search of her story. It was only upon meeting Jeremy, a contemporary dancer, in Vancouver that her vision took flight.

### **CAST**

Dancer	.....	Olé Khamchanla
Dancer	.....	Raka Maitra
Dancer/ Performer	.....	Jereh Leong
Performer	.....	Sharda Harrison
Performer	.....	Padma Sagaram
Performer	.....	Ebi Shankara

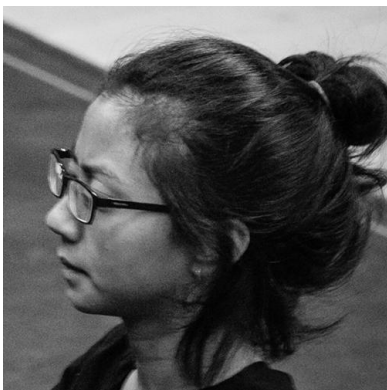
Vocalist	.....	Namita Mehta
Voice Over Talents	.....	Timothy Chow, Christopher Fok, Bani Haykal, Namita Mehta, Kamini Ramachandran, Ebi Shankara

## PRODUCTION

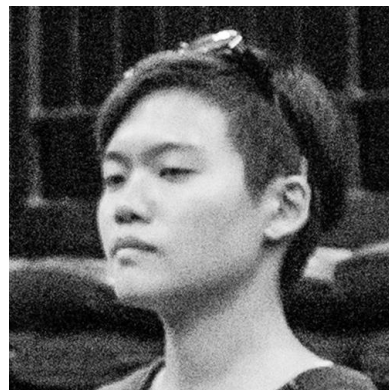
Playwright	.....	Haresh Sharma
Director	.....	Alvin Tan
Assistant Director	.....	Felipe Cervera
Set Designer	.....	Wong Chee Wai
Lighting Designer	.....	Adrian Tan
Multimedia Designer	.....	Brian Gothong Tan
Sound Artist	.....	Bani Haykal
Choreographer	.....	Olé Khamchanla, Raka Maitra
Dramaturg	.....	Charlene Rajendran
Research Assistants	.....	Christopher Fok, Bernice Lee, Sim Yan Ying, A Yagnya

Production Stage Managers	.....	Jason Ng, Azyyati Binte Alias
Multimedia Operator	.....	Yusri Sapari
Sound Engineer	.....	Soundwave Industries
Translator	.....	Chan Sze Wei
Make-up Artist	.....	Haslina Ismail
Make-up Artist Assistant	.....	Nur Jana Shah
Wardrobe Mistress	.....	Lim Zhiying
Crew	.....	Ayda Noor, Abdul Ameer Bin Syed Abdul Ghani, Samuel Tan
Project Manager	.....	Irma Ruslan
Photographer	.....	Caleb Ming (SURROUND)
Photography Assistants	.....	Collins Kajengo, Marina Sinitsyna, Linh Trinh
Graphic Designers	.....	Bryan Wong, May Lim (Qu'est-ce Que C'est)
Photographer (for programme booklet)	.....	Tan Ngiap Heng

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



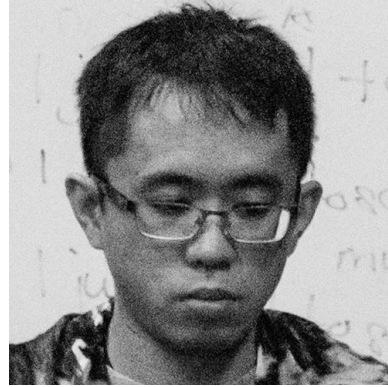
Azyyati Binte Alias



Chan Sze Wei



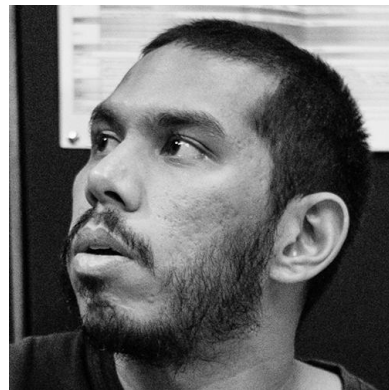
Felipe Cervera



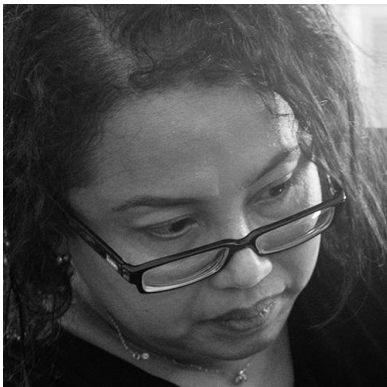
Christopher Fok



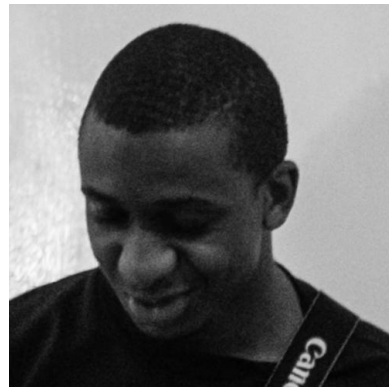
Sharda Harrison



Bani Haykal



Haslina Ismail



Collins Kajengo



Olé Khamchanla



Bernice Lee



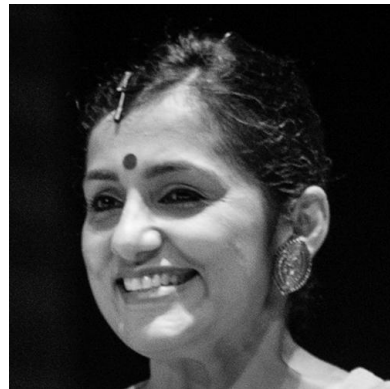
Jerah Leong



May Lim



Lim Zhiying



Raka Maitra



Namita Mehta



Caleb Ming



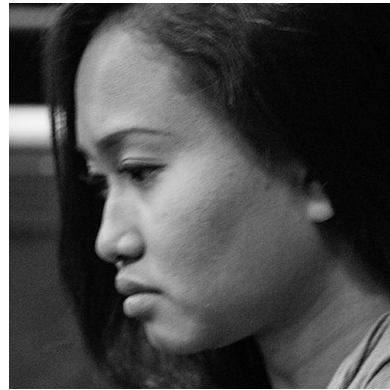
Jason Ng



Ayda Noor



Charlene Rajendran



Irma Ruslan



Padma Sagaram



Yusri Sapari



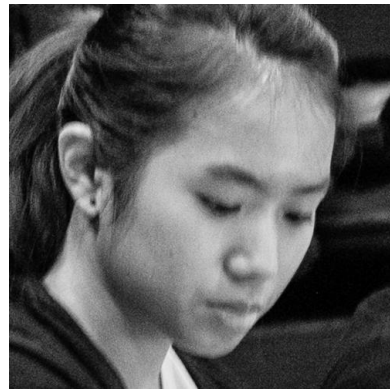
Nur Jana Shah



Ebi Shankara



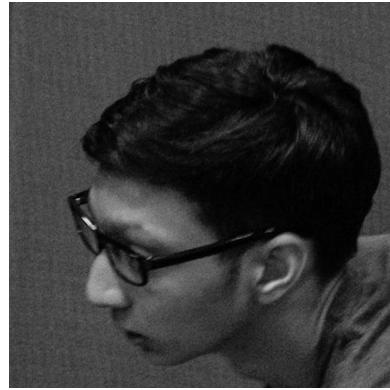
Haresh Sharma



Sim Yan Ying



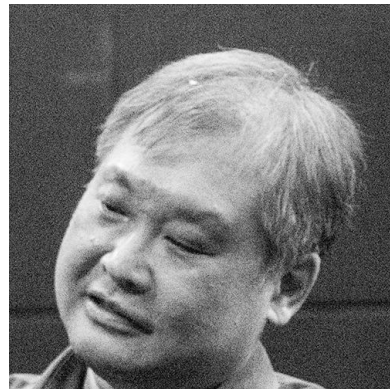
Marina Sinitsyna



Abdul Ameer Bin Syed Abdul Ghani



Adrian Tan






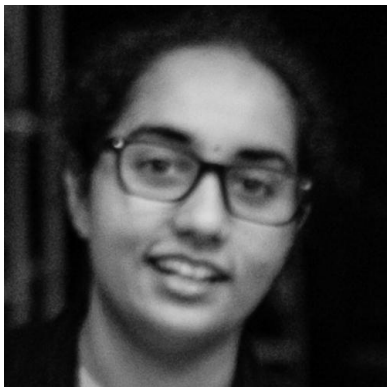
Alvin Tan



Brian Gothong Tan



Samuel Tan

 <p>Linh Trinh</p>	 <p>Bryan Wong</p>
 <p>Wong Chee Wai</p>	 <p>A Yagnya</p>

## PROCESS NOTES

### **From *Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]* programme, by Alvin Tan:**

Before Phase 1 began, Olé (choreographer) met up with Sharda (theatre actor), Jereh (contemporary dancer), Raka (Indian traditional dancer) and Bani (sound artist) for a three-hour workshop to ascertain artistic synergy. There was. So we moved to the next step. Olé resides in France and all other Singaporean artists have varied work schedules, making planning rehearsals a nightmare. But we were able to use the limitation to our advantage.

Olé couldn't attend Phase 1. So we worked with Bani to pin down the first draft of the sound score. Bani then left town for a residency during Phase 2, which Olé was able to attend. So we dedicated Phase 2 to choreography, using Bani's recorded sounds.

Since it is a new work, drafting the full runs gave Haresh and the directors the chance to glimpse the 'full' play, which was great for improvement purposes. The designers were also able to evolve their designs collaboratively.

Namita, the classical Hindustani vocalist, joined us in Phase 3. Bani and Namita met thrice before Phase 3 and began to find a working relationship. During rehearsals, time was allocated for their creation process, just as the choreographer needed time with the performers.

For Phase 3, the interaction of the disciplines began to intensify. Bani revised his sounds and music in response to Olé's evolving choreography, the dancers' moves and Namita's singing. Olé's choreography needed some adjustments from Namita's singing. Bani's music and Namita's singing in turn inspired the performers' delivery. Likewise, the ways in which the scenes develop from the directors, actors, multimedia and lighting designers further affect Bani's music and Namita's singing. As they are performed live, these changes will continue till and during the run of the show.

Once, as Olé was revising the epilogue, he called out multimedia, lights, sound and set cues whilst dancing in it. Then Haresh cued Namita to sing. Namita, already at her station, paused the activity and enquired: What is happening here? How long shall I sing? She then conferred with Bani and Ebi as she explored the latter singing with her. In the meantime, Olé started to detail his dance moves at another part of the room. Many rehearsals comprised such fragmented sessions, responding to the needs of the scene. Some were for training whilst others were for exploring interaction possibilities.

For Namita's creation process, I realised that it was important for her to know the song's duration and her emotional response to the scene as both factors affect her delivery. Olé, after completing the design of his dance moves, requested for Namita to quicken the pace of the song towards the end of it, such that the epilogue ended in a sort of a frenzied dance.

Once all the processes were addressed, we got back to composing the second draft. When the cue came, Namita sang the song, Bani played his music, Ebi accompanied Namita and Olé danced to the climax of the song.

Throughout the process, we had to be patient with one another - sometimes working separately on our own, sometimes in small groups, and sometimes as a whole company when we were ready to bring all the elements together. We had to care for our respective parts and then for the larger whole.

Pursuing the new inevitably involves some form of transgression. So do we honour tradition by preserving it as it is, or is modernising it (keeping it relevant) a more meaningful tribute?

Yet, before anything, we have different personalities, working styles, working relationships and schedules to negotiate. From the outset these challenges could already be discouraging. But if practitioners want it enough, we would embark with faith and mutual respect, creating the rules as we go along.

For *Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]*, we invited Dr. Charlene Rajendran to dramaturg the process. Part of her job scope was to observe and comment on how the disciplines interact throughout the work.

A team was set up to support her task. Thanks to Yagnya, Yan Ying, Christopher and Bernice for intensely taking detailed notes of all that happened in the rehearsal room for all three phases. Charlene had access to these notes and we would have occasional dramaturgical meetings to fuel Haresh's rewrites.

Special thanks to Sze Wei, the dancer-translator for Olé, without whom it would not have been so smooth. Thanks to Felipe for training and directing the cast with me. And thanks as well to our whole production team that pulled everything together on schedule so artists could co-create in conducive environments.

Learning from and coaching one another was such a steep learning curve as we were doing that whilst composing a new work. But there is something about exploring the interaction of the different disciplines to achieve an artistic outcome that stimulates the imagination, which drives the work that makes all the challenges worth the while.

Yet, this is not TNS's first interdisciplinary work. We have worked with Brian and Bani in several productions. Although *Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]* has its fair set of challenges, the collaborators are experts in their fields, open and with highly intuitive faculties, so that processing this ambitious work has been more inspiring than difficult.

As we explore intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches, we uncover and discover the complexity of our practice. We are aware of the obstacles and the challenges we face, but we are also aware that we have to overcome them, and we can only do so if we keep at it.

Singapore is indeed the playground for such a practice as we have been brought up in an environment of difference. We must quickly come to recognise that it is our strength and our potential, and that we have to fight to celebrate it. As Tagore has propounded:

*I have always felt and said accordingly, that the great gift of freedom can never come to a people through charity. We must win it before we can own it.*

### **The Necessary Stage's *Gitanjali [I Feel The Earth Move]* Phase III Overview Report, by Christopher Fok**

#### **Dance:**

- Choreography
  - Initial choreography created between Sharda and Jerh for the lover's duet between Nandini and Jacob is accepted with more changes done to the later half by Olé, who eliminated more of the complicated lifts as Olé's choreography has a tendency towards simplicity and emotional clarity.
  - On hindsight, a lot of rehearsal time went into getting a physical vocabulary in the dance between Sharda and Jerh, about half of Phase III was spent doing this before the full cast was present.
  - Olé has the overarching authority with regard to all movement sequences or physical theatre portions. There was a conscious intent to create movement that elucidate character or plot while conflating conflict within that physical gesture, i.e. Nandini's swinging of her left arm back and forth during her speech about miscarriage, alluding to the ticking of a biological clock and the violent swinging of her arm to portray her frustration as well.
  - Group movement sequences are taken from prior creation during phase II without much edits.
  - Dance duet between Jerh and Raka for Jeremy and Priya is choreographed between the two with minimal input from Olé.

#### **Music:**

- Indian Classical versus Contemporary Creation (Electronic, Drum, Voice and Guitar)
- Bani was present for the whole of phase III, with delays in using a drum set until the later half of phase III.
- Namita and Bani took cues from one another in terms of the beat, there was more negotiation that went on between them both with what sections she would sing and what he would play and when those two elements would come together.
- Alvin Tan, the director mostly left the creation process to both of them only giving input to whether the music suited the mood at the moment.

#### Direction:

- Negotiation between Assistant Director, Director, Playwright and Dramaturg.
  - In negotiations of power in the process, there was no set hierarchy with the Director at the top. There was mostly a horizontal negotiation of power, between Director and Playwright, with Assistant Director and Dramaturg on a second tier. This negotiation in direction did seem to end up determined with the script, thus the power mostly lay with the playwright and his own handling of the script which would ultimately influence the rest of other players in their decisions.
  - Assistant Director handled rehearsal sessions with the actors when the Director isn't around, Felipe was more involved in layered acting, giving more pointers about acting than Alvin did. While Alvin handled the overall arc and tone of the show.
  - Haresh, the playwright interjected a few times about acting as well, and handled the voiceovers between Gandhi, Tagore and Einstein.
  - Charlene, the Dramaturg took a very distant role in Phase III, only having a few consultation sessions with the main creative team in the following weeks, she got her constant stream of information about the show through daily updates from her research assistant. The bulk of her contributions happened during the initial Phase I and II.
- Intercultural versus Interdisciplinary. Maybe not such a strict dichotomy.
  - Intercultural communication between Indian classical art forms and values with contemporary art forms and values.
    - There is a conversation of the dynamic between tradition and contemporary creation that happens within the second scene. This is the argument between Savitri and Priya which ends with Priya leaving for Canada.
  - The interdisciplinary conversation was prominent in two facets. Between the way dance and theatre interacted and the contemporary music played and the Indian classical singing.
    - Dance and theatre, there was a need to find a balanced and holistic vocabulary between Sharda who is a physical theatre and movement actor and Jereh who is primarily a contemporary dancer. This is exemplified by Jereh dancing a solo as Jacob, in which Nandini appreciates his contemporary dance as a manifestation of young love and joy, but her continued dancing with him in the duet devolves into a movement of conflict instead of a dance. This is seen by the pushing and overpowering of Jacob on the floor by Nandini.
    - For the interaction of Indian classical singing and the contemporary accompaniment by Bani. Bani took a more complementary and supporting stance towards Namita's singing because her singing was to be foregrounded, therefore there were a few rehearsals in which Bani was very concerned about the leveling of the drums and other looping sounds so that Namita's singing would not be overpowered. However, in his own personal capacity, Bani composed original soundtracks for the show that were separate from the Indian classical singing portions, but he made sure that there were specific motifs that would be recognisable in those later collaborations. A specific example would be the bowing of the guitar, wherein he used a violin bow to play notes which he looped and harmonised. A sound motif repeated in Nandini's miscarriage scene.

#### Playwriting – Haresh:

- Change of the character Nandini from a depressive character, to one who is clinically depressed which creates a completely different character trajectory for Sharda to embody.

- Haresh had also restructured the play twice during the phase. Lifting the ensemble movement piece from Part III to Part II and also complicating Part IV by combining a few scenes and reducing the repetition of Savitri's wheelchair scene from two separate scenes into one. Part IV's play on time and space is something Haresh tinkered with to give the play more complexity while also taking into account staging of the actors on the provisional set that they had constructed at The Necessary Stage's blackbox. So that the actors and crew would be comfortable working with the screens and the moving truck/set pieces.

#### Process:

- Scene by scene go-throughs according to availability of the actors and the other performers.
- Padma, Jereh and Raka acting training.
  - All three are given intense acting lessons. With Padma, there is a line-by-line recitation and emotional plotting of the character through all the scenes. For Jereh, there was a need to train him in voice projection, despite the wireless mike and enunciation of lines. For Raka, there is a need to train her acting through movement because it is what she is comfortable with, she doesn't need much training in emotional delivery of lines due to her clear diction and understanding of the text.
- Absence of Namita, Olé and Designers till later portions.
- Restructuring of the script by Haresh twice
- The last two weeks before bump-in incorporated the whole cast and the inclusion of the designers and most of the staging took the week of bump-in to be familiar with that too.
- Move of the piece from rehearsal venue to stage at SOTA with the new inclusion of the full set: multimedia and lights.

#### Overall final performance:

- The multimedia and texts helped contextualise most of the show, with the lights crafting spaces for the characters to exist in, due to the liminal nature of the stage, wherein time and space segued into one another, moving from India, to Canada, to Singapore, sometimes in the space of one scene.
- The muted colour scheme of the set helped make the costumes more vibrant, the blank canvas and absence of defining structures other than the screens allowed projection and lights to create time and space. One notable feature were the gobos of a skyline with Nandini and Shankara sitting on the bridge. Screens were used to project public announcement posters at the Canadian building that Priya was teaching and dancing in.

Researcher: Christopher Fok, 17 November 2014

General Editor: Aubrey Mellor, 07 January 2015