

## ***Mandala***

In Source Theatre

8 – 12 October 2014, Goodman Arts Centre Black Box

### **Production information**

*Mandala* is a physical theatre production originally created by Beverly Yuen in 2007. After tours in Korea and Europe and several workshops, it was reimaged in a new production by Jacklyn Kuah in her new capacity as Artistic Director of In Source Theatre. Subtitled “*Journey through a voyage of reflection on urban life as the Mandala develops*”.

With performances by Eng Kai Er, Sirfan S Sulaimi, Sonia Kwek, Shana Yap and Bernice Lee Yixun, under the direction of Jacklyn Kuah and co-director/vocal accompanist, Beverly Yuen, the work developed with choreographic advise from Bernice Lee Yixun. It featured original compositions by musician and sound designer, Chong Li-Chuan, lighting by Hay Teow Kwang and costume designs by Yvette Ng.

‘Mandala’, from the Sanskrit word for ‘circle’, is a spiritual and ritual symbol in Hinduism and Buddhism, representing the Universe. In various spiritual traditions, mandalas may be used as a spiritual guidance tool, for establishing a sacred space, and as an aid to meditation and trance induction.

Founded in September 2001, In Source Theatre aims to develop and put in practice aesthetic principles and philosophy of humanism through physical theatre. The company believes in the full involvement of the actors in order to construct theatre as an interlude during which both performers and guests can strive for spiritual refreshment – whilst also raising aesthetic appreciation to higher levels.

Using physical and vocal training from the traditions of Grotowski, In Source Theatre strives to create lyrical works that elaborate and refine understanding of the complex combination of philosophical, sensual and psychological elements. With an emphasis on simple elegance and accessibility, In Source Theatre hopes to create timeless works that continue to build on elements of indigenous Asian performing art.

Website: [insourcetheatre.com](http://insourcetheatre.com)

Facebook: [facebook.com/InSourceTheatre](https://www.facebook.com/InSourceTheatre)

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

Mandala portrays the different stages of life through which a typical urban dweller may go. The children grow into adults as the rice mandala grows. From innocent children who enjoy the exploration of their movements and surroundings, they have grown to become adults who compete and fight for money, fame and status. They also start to desire: people, things and events in their lives.

These adults are so trapped in the urban life that they are overwhelmed by the stressful environment. At one point, they seek silence within and begin to reflect. They go through a contemplation process and decide to treat life differently and live life anew.

### **CAST**

Performer	.....	Eng Kai Er
Performer	.....	Sonia Kwek
Performer	.....	Bernice Lee Yixun
Performer	.....	Sirfan S Sulaimi
Performer	.....	Shana Yap

**PRODUCTION**

Artistic Director	.....	Jacklyn Kuah
Co-director/ Vocal accompanist	.....	Beverly Yuen
Choreographer Advisor	.....	Bernice Lee Yixun
Musician/ Sonic Designer	.....	Chong Li-Chuan
Lighting Designer	.....	Hay Teow Kwang
Costume Designer	.....	Yvette Ng
Costume Designer Assistant	.....	(Unidentified)
Production Manager	.....	Jacklyn Kuah
Stage Management	.....	Jodi Thiele, Nigel Fernandez (Funplay Workshop)
Lighting Engineer	.....	Huang Xiangbin
Lighting Programmer/ Technician	.....	Pek Limin
Lighting Technician/ Crew	.....	Sim Ming Hua
Dress-maker	.....	Fanny
Stage Crew	.....	Sharul Baggio Bin Mohamed Roslan

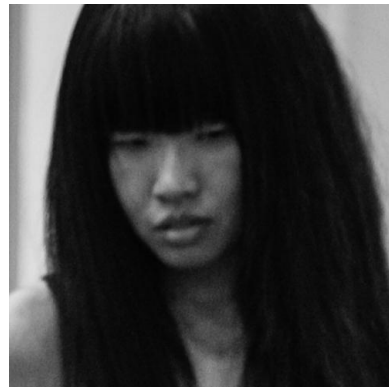
**MARKETING & ADMINISTRATION**

Branding & Communications Advisor	.....	Beverly Yuen
Marketing Manager	.....	Elizabeth Gan
Marketing Associate	.....	Sonia Kwek
Administrative Manager	.....	Chan Yi Wen
Administrative Assistant/ Archival Officer	.....	Lim Let Bee
Graphic Designer	.....	John Tan
Programme Editor	.....	Jaswinder Kaur Gill

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



Chong Li-Chuan



Costume Designer Assistant



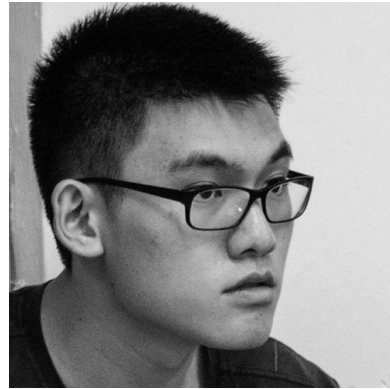
Eng Kai Er



Fanny



Elizabeth Gan



Hay Teow Kwang



Jacklyn Kuah



Sonia Kwek



Bernice Lee Yixun



Sharul Baggio Bin Mohamed Roslan



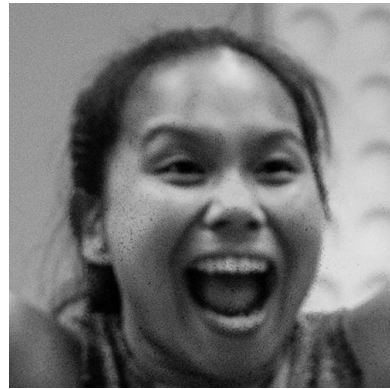
Yvette Ng



Sirfan S Sulaimi



Jodi Thiele



Shana Yap



Beverly Yuen

## PROCESS NOTES

From Mandala's programme (Text by Beverly Yuen):

### *Mandala - the stages*

#### **Birth**

##### 1. Breath

Emerge  
Sound. Breath. Melody.  
Beginning of life.

#### **Life**

##### 2. Childhood

Folk tunes sounded.  
Children  
As light as feathers,  
As curious as cats  
In action.

##### 3. Passage

Hectic sounds, busy images.  
Brushing through you, her and him,  
Travelling through urban life . . .  
Finding a way to live.

##### 4. Competition

For land I fight.  
For possession I fight.  
For fame I fight.  
For status I fight.  
I fight . . .  
To live.

To keep moving  
Ahead.

##### 5. Loss

Moving forward,  
What have I left behind?  
Dreams? Memories? Me?  
Loss. . .  
Fragmentation, disorientation,  
segregation, desperation . . .  
Lost in busy life  
Lost in desires  
Lost in words. . .

What have I lost in order to move on?

#### **Realisation**

##### 6. Distance

Are you there?  
I know you are there...  
And yet so far away.

##### 7. Silence

Silence is non-silence . . .  
What have you heard?  
Have you heard anything?

## **Death**

### 8. Dissolution

The social mask dies off  
The undesired self withers  
The old soul passes away  
I . . . see a new!

## **Resolution**

### 9. Ablution

I contemplate.  
I reflect.  
I live life anew.  
I am more alive than before.  
I live.

## **Rehearsal Notes**

### **In Source Theatre's *Mandala*, by Beverly Yuen**

#### **I. Introduction**

Rehearsal sessions for *Mandala* normally comprised three segments: 1) Training; 2) Improvisations/exploration; and 3) Rehearsals and fine-tuning of physical actions.

#### **II. Training**

Training plays an essential role in all IST's projects. While there are 'heavy' and 'light' roles, we do not see performers who handle the heavy roles/protagonist roles as the 'better performers' or the 'stars'. Every minute role is important and carries equal weight in IST's training and performance philosophy.

Training plays an important role in conditioning the body of the performers, building group synergy, and developing the performers' discipline, focus, and spontaneity within a structure. Ideally, the performers should not be chatting with one another within a rehearsal space, as casual contacts and talks in the space will deplete the focus and energy needed for character building and the continuity of work.

For *Mandala*, we did two key sets of training. One was Physical Training, while the other was Arising and Flaming. While both sets of training are physically demanding, the performers should go beyond the level of working on the forms. What they were going through was a psychophysical process and not just a physical one during training. For instance, when they executed an exercise, the exercise was executed with associations of memories, imaginations, or sensations.

#### a) Physical Training

Physical Training is a dynamic psycho-physical training which engages associations, memories and imagination to express alive impulses through the body. The main objectives of physical training are 1) to strengthen body flexibility and energies through play, imagination and associations; 2) to build spatial awareness by connecting to the environment and the partners; and 3) to work with primary body principles: center of the body, impulse for the action, directions in the space, different qualities of energy, change of balance, rhythm and tempo. The performers were asked to use 5 exercises that they could execute with aliveness and imagination during the physical training sequence. The source of Physical Training was from research work carried out by Grotowski and other theatre practitioners/scholars like Eugenio Barba and Richard Schechner who studied Grotowski's work closely.

In the tradition of work emphasized by Grotowski, physical training is essential. Grotowski asserts that performers cannot find "the essential of what is abiding, ancient and true" actions without "undergoing the most rigorous and committed training" (Schechner, 2001). Eugenio Barba (2005) pointed out that:

*The physical training exercises make it possible for the performer to develop a new behavior, a different way of moving, of acting and reacting, a specific skill. But this skill stagnates into a one-dimensional reality if it does not reach down into the depths of the individual – which we see as the spirituality of 'being' (p.88).*

To Barba, “the physical exercises are always spiritual exercises” (p.88). These exercises should not be “used only as the ABC of the profession, or for learning the skills necessary for certain characters, or for learning fencing, ballet, acrobatics, magic” (Barba, 2005, p.109). These exercises should be used as conditioning work for any performer, even before the performers are involved in any creation process, and before any work on characters or dance sequence. Each exercise is “a complete pattern, a design of movements” (Barba, 2005, p.109). Barba said that “in fact, in these movements, every point of arrival coincides with a point of departure”, and that “there are no pauses, only transitions”. Precise beginnings and ends must be structured for these exercises and there must be “leaps of energy in a score which is experienced as an organic flow” (Barba, 2005, p.112). The physical exercises have close connection with the actor’s “personal, intimate associations” (Grotowski, in Barba, 2005, p.114), and that “the invisible is the physic, mental process”, and “the visible is its physical manifestation” (Barba, 2005, p.157).

Thus, physical training helps a performer to find aliveness in one’s movement, sustainability of flow in energy and impulses, without a “dead pause”. Even a stop or a freeze on stage should be sustained as part of the thought patterns, inner process, intention or state of the character.

#### b) Arising & Flaming

Arising and flaming training structure was derived from IST’s research project Defining ‘Spiritual Theatre’: a Cross-cultural Study of Rituals and Traditional Body Forms in Singapore conducted from 2005 to 2008.

This structure incorporates elements from Yoga, Tai Chi and Silat, traditional songs and voice work, as well as the patterns and characteristics of rituals. It taps mainly on the individual’s meditative process that is seen in Yoga; the interactive component, and sharp energy from Silat; and the earthly and grounded elements from Tai Chi.

There are two segments to the training structure. The first part of the structure ‘Arising’ aims to prepare a performer’s mind and body for spontaneous expressions that are required for the second segment known as ‘Flaming’. In ‘Flaming’, the participants are encouraged to follow their body’s impulses, and express any forms that occur to them, in an instinctive manner. The ongoing flow from one body expression to another is alike a flame that burns on and on, without pauses.

The training works towards what Grotowski called “itinerary in verticality”, and also aims at finding a vocabulary of its own by engaging traditional forms from the various cultures found in Singapore. Grotowski (1995) explained the term “itinerary in verticality”:

*The point is not to renounce part of our nature - all should retain its natural place: the body, the heart, the head, something that is ‘under our feet’ and something that is ‘over the head’; All like a vertical line, and this verticality should be held taut between organicity and the awareness. Awareness means the consciousness which is not linked to language (the machine for thinking), but to Presence. (p.125).*

The training structure also adopts Grotowski’s belief that doers of a performance or training can connect with each other without using direct eye contact, but by using all other senses of the body. The doers should engage the whole being in connecting to the other participants or performers. They “acknowledge one another’s presence - simply, without sentimentality, just by looking at each other” (Wolford, 1996). The training also serves to awake the ‘physical power’ in the body (Lendra, 2001). The Hindu tradition refers this as the “sleeping energy” which “lies at the bottom of the spine”

(Lendra, 2001, p.327). This energy, when awakened, can “increase our awareness, sensitivity, and perception”, which is important in the performing arts (Lendra, 2001, p.327).

This training structure draws the essence from the traditional forms, but does not replicate them. For instance, for Yoga, the focus of work is on its meditative essence and the stretches involved in awakening the ‘sleeping energy’; for Tai Chi, the focus is on its groundedness, the intention of cleansing the internal parts of the body, and the release of tensions through making very subtle changes; for Silat, the focus is on the various types of kicks, and the interactive aspect of encountering a partner in action.

In both segments, performers also explore the work on sounds/songs while in action. They should work with sound resonance in an organic way while the body is moving within the group. Voices of different pitch could be discovered. The performers should also develop a way of improvising within a group, whereby they should be listening to each other’s voices while improvising with their own voice, in order to create a collective harmonious development of sounds during the training.

### **III. Improvisations & Rehearsals**

For *Mandala*, we first had the outline of the performance structure and then we worked with the performers to create actions for each segment collectively through the creative process of searching for actions individually, improvisations within group, and creating landscape and storyline collectively. The following are the improvisations and rehearsal process involved in each segment:

#### 1. Breath

##### *Improvisation by performers*

The performers were asked to look for alive sounds of breath which should have the quality of lightness, which signifies the beginning of life. At the same time, the breath should be rhythmic and melodious, and yet not to sound artificial. There should be a mix of high and low pitch sounds, and the low pitch sounds should have vibratory quality. Thus, the performers spent a few sessions just to discover the ‘voice’ of breath that is natural and yet light; rhythmic and melodious.

Thus, there was a technical aspect of it that the actors had to handle - how to produce breath-like and yet melodious sounds. They have to balance the line between creating “solid” song-like sounds and natural breath sounds.

##### *Music*

The musician and the vocal accompanist also worked with sounds/music to complement the sounds of breath made by the performers. Sounds of wind and sand were gradually created.

##### *Set*

As improvising, the directors and performers also visualized how the set could look like. We thought about having two clothes which merged into a huge piece to give the image of a cocoon where the sounds of breath emerged. We had this visual image that the creatures inside the cocoon were staying still initially, and gradually, sounds of breath were heard, coming from the cocoon. The sounds then became more and more audible, and the creatures broke out of the cocoon. During the exploration, we also thought about the technical problems for the set visualized. Gradually with more rehearsal sessions, we decided to drop the idea of having the cloth to create the image of a cocoon, but to use the performers’ bodies to create the symbolic form of a cocoon or a new born, to be sustained with alive and light body impulses.

#### 2. Childhood

##### *Improvisation by performers*

For the segment on childhood, the performers were told to simply play with each other, with different childhood games that they could remember. We explored games played at different ages - from 2 years old to teenage years. The performers also improvised segments of competition as a form of



game played as youths. The whole of a 3-hour rehearsal session was devoted to the exploration of 'play'. They also explored how bodies could be creatively engaged during a play session. A child, when playing, is never conscious of the body form or position, and thus a child is often open to getting into various awkward or unconventional body positions or ways of moving.

#### *Rehearsals*

Some of the actions found during the improvisations were kept for the final structure. The directors continued to fine-tune the actions of the play session for this segment. New actions were further developed during rehearsals and some actions were removed. The performers did not only explore the physical movements of a child but the voice of a child too. It was difficult for them to maintain a 'natural child voice' initially as they either tried to imitate how a child might sound like or superficially created the 'likeness' of a child. However, after many rehearsals, they started to discover the inner, natural voice of a child.

#### *Music/Voice*

The musician continued to work with the music while watching the rehearsals. The quality of the music was light, to help bring out the innocence and lightness of a child. The vocal accompanist initially sang Chinese dialect childhood songs as a child to support the segment. However, she later explored the possibility of singing Tibetan songs and Chinese dialect songs as an adult who was watching over the children. The latter association worked better as it provided more layers to the segment.

### 3. Passage

#### *Improvisation by performers*

Passage was one of the earlier segments that we worked with the performers. As the segment Passage is about our urban life, we thought it was a good starting point for the work on searching for actions and creating acting propositions<sup>1</sup> from there. The performers were to search for actions that represent urban life to them. Thus, they asked themselves the following questions: What is an urban life to me? What is a city? What is the place that I am living in? They were first asked to search for naturalistic actions. After they have searched for a series of urban life actions, they presented the actions to the director. The director then selected some of these actions, which the performers have to work with a much faster speed.

#### *Rehearsals*

While the actions were first improvised and presented by the performers, they were very alive. However, after repeating the actions for a few times, the performers started to lose interest in carrying out the actions, which was where the danger of performing seeped in. The rehearsals required them to search for the original intention of why they found and did the actions in the first place. They were also reminded not to lose the sharpness of their actions during rehearsals.

### 4. Competition

#### *Improvisation by performers*

Again, for the segment of competition, the source of inspiration first came within. The performers were first asked to explore what competition was to them, as individuals. They started to search for actions which signified competition to them individually. Thus, a competition could be an obstacle course, a dance contest, a sports event, or a fight to different performers. After the exploration, the performers started to put their actions within a group with connections and interactions between them.

#### *Rehearsals*

The director then continued to fine-tune and choreograph the segment for the final showcase.

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<sup>1</sup> "Acting proposition" is used by theatre master Jerzy Grotowski to mean acting segments.

### *Music*

The musician and vocal accompanist continued to explore the soundscape for the segment with electronic music as well as live percussion music.

## 5. Loss

### *Improvisation by performers*

This is a segment about being lost in urban life—metaphorically. The performers were asked to reflect on what they have lost in order to arrive at where they are at today, or what they have lost in order to gain. From there, actions of moving backwards developed.

### *Rehearsals*

Rehearsal process for this segment emphasized the need for heightened awareness while moving backwards as the performers should not knock into the props, set or fellow performers while in action. They should keep their associations while moving backwards instead of showing their fear of the action as a performer. This was one of the most challenging segments for the performers.

### *Music*

Vocal accompanist suggested that while in the state of loss, there could be a faint inner voice which represents the quest for spirituality, an inner calling or the inner self. Thus, she used a low-toned chant to accompany the modern fast-paced music used for the segment.

## 6. Distance

### *Improvisation by performers*

What does it feel like to be looking but not seeing? What is it like when you are facing someone and yet not connecting? The performers started to work creatively by not just creating physical actions this time, but texts and raps that highlight the distance between individuals in a society. You may be saying “hi” to someone but do not mean it, and you may be smiling at someone but thinking of something else... That is a segment where the performers searched for what it means to be fake or sincere or fake and sincere at the same time... From the improvised materials, the director selected some of them for further development during rehearsals.

### *Rehearsals*

The rehearsals focused on working on the rhythm needed for the rap, interactions and texts. This segment should be sarcastic, and yet fun; fake, at the same time, seemingly sincere. Thus, the tone and pitch of voice were highly important aspects for fine-tuning during rehearsals too.

## 7. Silence

### *Rehearsals*

For this segment, the performers were asked to “just walk” slowly. However, the challenge here is - how not to walk in general slowness but to maintain full awareness and mindfulness while walking.

## 8. Dissolution

### *Improvisation by performers*

Here, the performers were asked to search for actions based on the theme of ‘death’, which does not only mean a physical death. It also denotes the death of the undesirable self or habits.

### *Rehearsals*

From the actions found by the performers, the director incorporated them into the performative structure.

## 9. Ablution

### *Rehearsals*

This is a segment of synchronized movements which signify the cleansing process. This segment should be light, profound and contemplative. The co-director led the performers into a series of meditative synchronized movements. One of the performers, Eng Kai Er, was asked to choreograph a set of movements based on the meditative synchronized movements.

## **IV. Conclusion**

### Improvisations/Search for actions

From the training and improvisation sessions, the participants found concrete actions/acting propositions to work on. For instance, from the work of sounds, the participants found actions related to the sounds, and began to work on these actions as acting propositions. Some acting pieces also developed through the interactions with each other. While working on acting propositions, the performers were also aware of the tensions in their body and voice which may block them in executing the actions, and thus were able to 'release' these tension areas (e.g. at the neck, face, thighs, etc.) instantaneously as they were trained to be more aware of their body and the subtle changes that occurred within them. Through the training and rehearsals, the performers have developed deeper connection within Self, connection between Self and other people in the space, and connection between Self and environment.

### Repetitiveness of working on the same actions individually or as a group

The repetitiveness of working on the actions/acting propositions during rehearsals also challenged a performer to seek breakthrough in routines. Like any other performance structure, there is a danger for a performer to become 'dead' after going through the same structure repeatedly. However, it is important for the performer to renew his/her awareness, pay attention to the details of execution and continue to discover the 'unknown' in the familiar actions/structure.

### Incorporation of voice work and action/physical training

The incorporation of voice work and texts in the physical training/acting propositions demands a much higher level of focus, stamina, and control. Through the fusion of voice work and body work, the performers no longer work on the physical body and the voice separately. The body, movement and voice form a synergy and they are integrated in such a way that one no longer knows if it is the body that drives the voice or the voice that leads the movement. The unity of body, voice and the state of being is highly important for a performer, whether you are a dancer or an actor playing a character.

### From training to performance

Any exercise, movement or action should not begin from the external forms, but from an intent or association. The performers should search actively for the psychological state or motivation behind physical action or characterization. Thus, a performer should often connect the inner state of being with the external forms for all segments that they go through in a rehearsal space: training, improvisations, search for actions and rehearsals. While forms are what the audiences would be seeing, any forms without a rich inner stream are empty forms. An analogy is a beautiful vessel that contains the finest wine. While the wine is the life, energy and inner stream of a performer, the vessel is the form which is needed to contain the life.

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Co-Director: Beverly Yuen, 16 March 2015

General Editor: Aubrey Mellor, 18 March 2015