

Case Study of Singapore: Performing Arts and The Role of Cultural Policy at the City Level for *Putting Culture First: Commonwealth Perspectives on Culture and Development*, Edited by Andrew Firmin, Commonwealth Foundation, 2008 (published)

## **PERFORMING ARTS: THE ROLE OF CULTURAL POLICY AT THE CITY LEVEL CASE STUDY SINGAPORE**

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### **Background and History**

Singapore was a British colony from 1824 to 1959, during which it fell under the control of the Japanese during World War II from 1942 to 1945. It became a self-governing state within the British Empire from 1959 to 1963 and subsequently joined the Federation of Malaysia until 1965.

Singapore became an independent nation on 9 August 1965. Upon its freedom, the collective national goal was to achieve economic excellence and racial harmony alongside other immediate issues. As most Asian societies reach a comprehensive level of achievement, especially Singapore, its first challenge to attain the developed country would be economic.<sup>1</sup>

Performing arts can be broadly generalized according to the four main races in Singapore. Table 1 exemplifies the more popular types of traditional performing arts in Singapore under the respective cultures.

Table 1: Traditional Performing Art in Singapore

<b>Language</b>	<b>Types of Performing Art</b>
Chinese	Chinese Dance, Chinese Orchestra, Chinese Opera, Dragon Dance, Lion Dance
Malay	Malay Dance, Malay Orchestra, Wayang Kulit
Indian	Bharatanatyam, Carnatic music, Choir, Hindustani music, Khatak, Indian Orchestra
English	Ballet, Choir, Piano, Symphony Orchestra

Contemporary theatre and dance, a much-felt presence only in recent decade, represents a relatively more modern, ethnically diverse culture both behind and front of scenes.

Singapore is a city-state located at the southern tip of the Malay Peninsula. It has a land area of 707 square kilometers, 4.58 million population comprising 75% Chinese, 13.7% Malays, 8.7% Indians, 2.6% Others<sup>2</sup>. For historical reasons, the national language is Malay. English is the official language of administration. English is the first language taught in schools and the official language medium for other subjects.

<sup>1</sup> *Can Asians Think? 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition*, Pp. 31, Kishore Mahbubani, Times Edition, 2004

<sup>2</sup> Singapore in Figures 2008, Singapore Board of Statistics

## **Cultural Policy and Governance**

Singapore is largely influenced by the British system in terms of policy making and governance, even post-independence.

The first report on arts and culture was published in 1989. The 1989 Report of The Advisory Council on Culture and The Arts aimed to “promote widespread interest and excellence in the pursuit of the arts in our multi-cultural society, and to encourage cross-cultural understanding and appreciation.” The thrust of Singapore’s cultural development is to realize the vision of a culturally-vibrant society by 1999.<sup>3</sup> A key recommendation was the tripartite relationship between the Government, corporate and civic organizations and the public to ensure the development and continuous encouragement of the arts<sup>4</sup>. In a sense, the first report built strong foundation and ample quality hardware for subsequent artistic plans to evolve.

Arts in Singapore were accorded low priority until the late 1970’s.<sup>5</sup> Significant recommendations to improve this situation included the establishments of a national performing arts agency (National Arts Council in 1991), National Heritage Board in 1993, a world-class infrastructure (the Esplanade in 2002), increased practicing facilities, improved music and arts education, increased access to performing arts education and performance for the public and audience development among other issues. Through these combined factors of infrastructural, governmental and educational support, the number of performances has tripled from 1997 to 2007<sup>6</sup>.

The National Arts Council (NAC) was set up in September 1991 to spearhead the development of the arts in Singapore. It is now a statutory board (at arm’s length) under the Ministry of Information, Culture and the Arts (MICA) with the mission “to nurture the arts and make it an integral part of people’s lives in Singapore”<sup>7</sup>. NAC provides funding, arts facilities and organizes key annual arts festivals and events.

For more reasons other than survival, arts and business has always worked hand-in-hand for our small city-state. The 1989 report has already identified arts and culture as a positive impact on the economy, drawing experiences from economic studies/reports from UK and New York.<sup>8</sup> It also highlighted other areas of key importance of culture and the arts such as personal enrichment, quality of life and nation building.

The second report, entitled Renaissance City 2.0, is part of the Creative Industries Development Strategy published in 2002. The new term ‘creative industries’ encompass three broad groups: arts and culture, design, media. Its vision is to develop ‘a vibrant and sustainable creative cluster to propel the growth of Singapore’s Creative Economy’ with objectives of attaining 6% GDP contribution by year 2012, and establish a reputation for Singapore as a New Asia Creative Hub<sup>9</sup>. Similarly, Renaissance City 2.0 researched on case studies from UK, US, Europe, Hong Kong and Korea on how to harness the economic potential of our creative industries.

The report has identified various areas that related government agencies such as Singapore Tourism Board can work towards collaboratively with MICA and NAC. One of these areas is cultural tourism. Different areas are themed to distinguish their unique culture. This helps to congregate the arts for targeted audience/visitors, enhance outreach capabilities at the same time preserve multi-racial, multi-cultural facet of Singapore.

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<sup>3</sup> Report of The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, pp. 5, 1989

<sup>4</sup> Report of The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, Letter addressed to then First Deputy Prime Minister, 1989

<sup>5</sup> Creative Singapore: Report of the Committee to Upgrade Lasalle & NAFA, pp14, 1998

<sup>6</sup> Arts Statistics 1996-2007, National Arts Council, <http://www.nac.gov.sg/sta/sta01.asp>

<sup>7</sup> National Arts Council website, [www.nac.gov.sg](http://www.nac.gov.sg)

<sup>8</sup> Report of The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, pp. 12, 1989

<sup>9</sup> Creative Industries Development Strategy, pp. v, 2002

### **Education and Audience Development**

Up till the early 1990s, music education in public schools faced many challenges due to the lack of trained teachers, quality of lessons and lack of parental support solely because music is a non-examinable subject.

A specialized programme did and still exists for the more musically inclined. The Music Elective Programme (MEP)<sup>10</sup> admits students who are top academic performers and is only offered in selected secondary schools and junior colleges. Music education taught in private institutions or homes flourished more rapidly. No schools offer any dance subjects, and only one secondary school offers Theatre studies.

In terms of degree and postgraduate programmes, National University in Singapore (NUS) offers theatre studies only. Music degree programmes was recently introduced with the launch of Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music in 2001. The Conservatory provides degree courses predominantly in western classical music performance and composition. Lasalle College of the Arts, and Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts offered diploma courses for performing arts up till the early 1990s. The Report of the Committee to Upgrade Lasalle & NAFA<sup>11</sup> was published in 1998. A 2-phase model was outlined to reposition Lasalle and NAFA as world-class arts institutions to contribute to the development of arts in Singapore, and also enhance the overall competitiveness of the economy.<sup>12</sup> Both institutions were approved polytechnic-level funding from government and the opportunity to conduct degree level courses upon the necessary accreditation.

The School Of The Arts, Singapore (SOTA) is the first independent pre-tertiary arts school to offer a combined arts and academic curriculum for 13 to 18 years old<sup>13</sup>. Launched in 2006, SOTA serves to bridge the arts education gap at pre-tertiary level and exercise an integrated curriculum programme.

Most students who wish to pursue a higher education in dance, theatre, music and arts management usually do so in UK, US or Australia universities.

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<sup>10</sup> Ministry of Education, <http://www.moe.edu.sg/education/programmes/elective-programmes/>

<sup>11</sup> Creative Singapore, A Renaissance Nation in the Knowledge Age: Report of the Committee to Upgrade Lasalle & NAFA, 1998

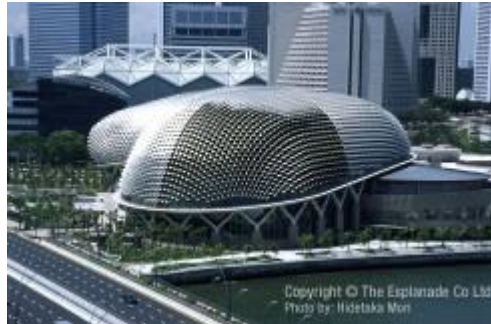
<sup>12</sup> Creative Singapore, A Renaissance Nation in the Knowledge Age: Report of the Committee to Upgrade Lasalle & NAFA, pp.8, 1998

<sup>13</sup> Report of the Committee on Specialised Arts School, March 2004

## Infrastructure

Cultural infrastructure in Singapore is meticulously planned and implemented. This includes not just performing arts venues and facilities, but overall urban planning.

Before the 1989 paper was implemented, the only venues available for performing groups are the Victoria Theatre, Victoria Concert Hall, Kallang Theatre and Drama Centre. Larger symphony orchestras and world-class performing groups were unable to perform here because Singapore does not have a suitable concert hall. With the launch of the Esplanade in 2002, Singapore now boasts of a world-class performing arts venue. A purpose-built performing arts centre, it comprises a 2000-seat theatre, a 1600-seat concert hall, several recital rooms, theatre studio, rehearsal studios, exhibition space as well as outdoor venues<sup>14</sup>



Source: Esplanade Website, Image Gallery, [www.esplanade.com](http://www.esplanade.com)

Arts belts are created, each with their own ethnic identity. There are three arts belts altogether – Chinatown, Little India and Waterloo Street. These provide arts housing to numerous arts organizations at the same time add vibrancy and identity to the areas.<sup>15</sup> The Arts Housing Scheme started in 1985, providing disused government buildings at a nominal rate as a short-term solution for various arts organizations. NAC, Urban Redevelopment Authority, National Heritage Board and Singapore Tourism Board have worked together in the conservation of buildings, urban town planning, potential arts tenants, arts-housing scheme, audience support and international promotion. In addition, the government agencies have also created ethnic quarters to preserve the traditional art forms. Urban renewal efforts are being carried out by URA to create a Arts, Culture, Learning and Entertainment district.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Esplanade – Theatres On the Bay, [www.esplanade.com](http://www.esplanade.com)

<sup>15</sup> National Arts Council, <http://www.nac.gov.sg/fac/fac0301.asp>

<sup>16</sup> Draft Master Plan 2008, Urban Redevelopment Authority, [http://www.ura.gov.sg/DMP2008/plans\\_to\\_reality/transformation.htm](http://www.ura.gov.sg/DMP2008/plans_to_reality/transformation.htm)

## **Funding**

The most direct and beneficial impact of Singapore's cultural policy is government support. This comes in two forms – successful implementations and funding.

In the 60s, most performing troupes and ensembles were often supported by community businesses, clans or businessmen of similar cultural background. Government funding for traditional arts and amateur performing groups were extremely limited. In 1987, total funding for the arts was about \$9.4 million, out of which only 38% was from the government.<sup>17</sup> This situation changed to a certain extent with NAC's new guidelines and public funding offered at different levels. NAC offers structured financial assistance with grants, scholarships and schemes tailored for different types of studies, art genres, overseas projects and international collaborations. National arts festivals and events – Singapore Arts Festival held annually, Singapore Writers Festival, Sing Singapore – are mainly organized by NAC in partnership with local sponsors.

At the community level, Community Development Councils (CDCs) offer partnership opportunities for amateur groups, schools as well as homes to bring about awareness of the arts in community bonding and social cohesion.<sup>18</sup> To build 'Creative Towns', ie. arts in the heartlands, CDCs plays a core role in facilitation, funding, marketing and creating platforms.

Launched in 2005, Creative Community Singapore aims to provide opportunities for Singaporeans from all walks of life to express their creativity and creative energy for community benefits, supporting projects which essentially incorporate arts, culture, technology, and of course, business.

Other sources of public funding include the Singapore Totalisator Board, Singapore International Foundation, Community Development Councils, National Youth Council, Singapore Tourism Board and Embassies. In terms of private funding, the government is encouraging private donors to work with various government agencies on tri-partite partnerships with arts organisations.

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<sup>17</sup> Report of The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, pp. 19, 1989

<sup>18</sup> Community Development Councils, <http://www.cdc.org.sg>

## Key Lessons

### Lack of Cultural Indicators

Due to the lack of more sophisticated cultural indicators, arts statistics <sup>19</sup> do not reflect detailed excerpts of Singapore's arts scene, such as information on audience profile, private sponsorship and comparative statistical studies. For instance, total ticketed attendance in Figure 1 does not differentiate between the types of performances, eg. professional or amateur groups, overseas or local, schools, etc.

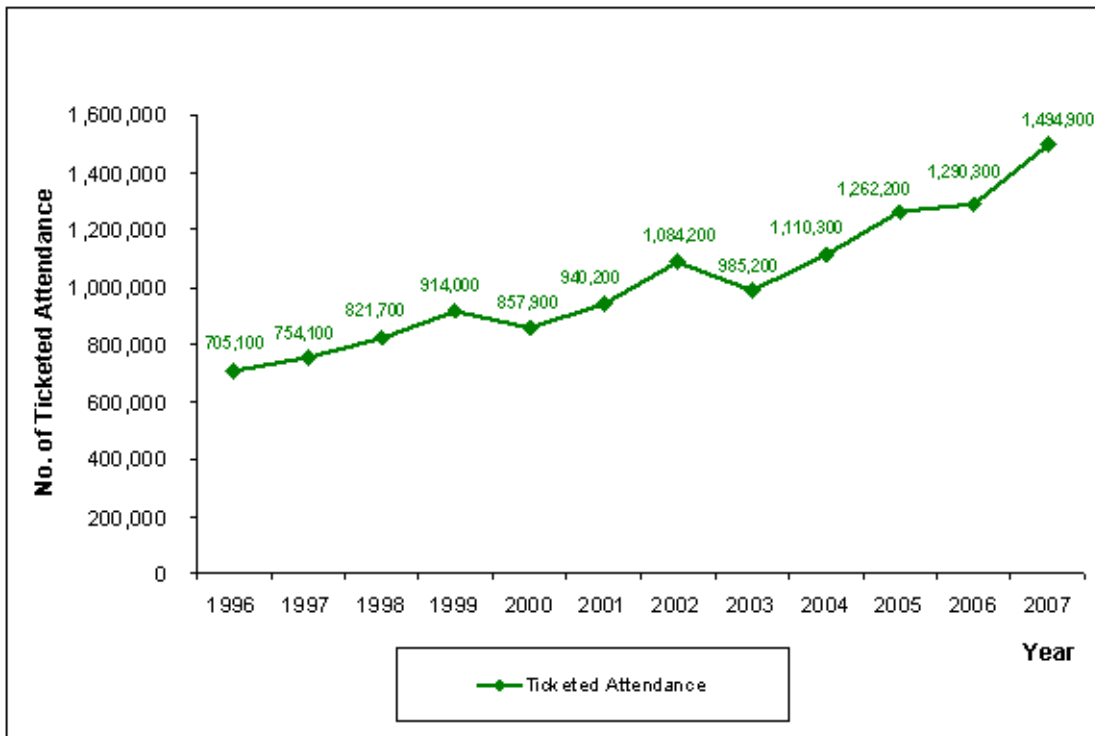


Figure 1: Ticketed Attendance

### Technology and Performing Arts

Undeniably, technology and new media has impacted Singapore's arts scene, even with traditional performing arts such as Chinese orchestras and Bharatanatyam Indian dance. When new media forms are adopted as tools to enhance rather than take centre-stage, performances are created tasteful yet in sync with modern technology. Reversibly, this could be a contradiction for audiences who are yet to be educated in new media staged-arts. Interactive media, on the other hand, is the perfect instrument in engaging the young and new audiences on an informal basis, ie. not a sit-down event.

### Policy Making

Policy making process is never an easy or fast task. Many closed door discussions, focus groups and consultations with stakeholders are conducted whose plausible suggestions are evaluated to resolve outstanding issues. The NAC do conduct regular advisory sessions with musicians, artists and dancers to obtain their feedback on ongoing programmes and policy regulations. The response and extent to which suggestions are noted or applied is debatable and irresolute. This may discourage real interactive public participation or even full attendance when such sessions are held.

Cultural policy makers and civil servants are typically the political headship of the country. Most of our leaders are trained in economics, sciences or engineering, with partial experiences as well as education in the arts. The trend is slowly changing at the middle to lower management levels, but decision-making is still very much at the top.

<sup>19</sup> Arts Statistics 1996-2007, National Arts Council, <http://www.nac.gov.sg/sta/sta01.asp>

### Over-emphasis on Monetary Benefits

Self expression, personal enrichment, quality of life and nation building are the key importance of culture and the arts, as highlighted in the 1989 Report of The Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. This emphasis has changed. Renaissance City 2.0 reiterates the economic power of creative talent and human capital to such extent that it neglects the unquantifiable benefits of the arts. It is an open fact that Singapore uses monetary benefits and multiplier effect to justify its support for the arts. For every \$1 million of expenditures on arts & cultural activities, the arts and cultural industries generate a multiplier of 1.66.<sup>20</sup> This is even higher than that of the banking and petrochemical industries. Energies are diverted to the bidding and organising of prestigious international events, such as 2008 Formula 1 Singapore Grand Prix and the 2010 Youth Olympics. Special artistic works are commissioned; performance festivals and other creative platforms are organized concurrently.

This prominent shift in emphasis questions the fundamental continuation of our arts and culture. Do we pump money only into worthy investments with high returns? Is funding for the arts a profit-making investment? Do our arts organizations exist only because they create jobs?

### Identities of Singapore

History has led Singapore to who we are now: a cosmopolitan, technologically advanced, safe, developed city-state for both locals and immigrants alike. At major Singapore-held international events, commissioned support for local traditional performing arts has been minimised to make way for contemporary performances. Though contemporary performing art does symbolize a fusion feature of our multi-racial society, the unique identities of our traditional cultures feel somewhat amiss at these international events. As of true contemporary arts, the significance and important intentions are left to the audience's self interpretation. This entails potential misrepresentation of first impressions, firstly, of a people's culture and secondly, concluding standards of Singapore's arts scenes.

In Singapore's task to position ourselves on par with global cities, we fast forward our economic as well as artistic growth to match. The focal point should be reaching wider in terms of globalisation, yet growing deeper in each of our own identities. For Singapore, ultimately, is not London or New York.

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<sup>20</sup> *Creative Industries Development Strategy*: Renaissance City 2.0, pp. 10, Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts, 2002

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