

MEDIA RELEASE

***Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* by Zai Kuning
will be presented by TheatreWorks in April 2018
*Exhibition returns from 2017 Venice Biennale***



Artist Zai Kuning represents Singapore at the 57th Venice Biennale.

SINGAPORE 1 March 2018 – The exhibition *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* by multi-disciplinary artist Zai Kuning, commissioned for the Singapore Pavilion for the 57th Venice Biennale in 2017, will be presented by TheatreWorks from 12 April to 13 May 2018. This exhibition is supported by the National Arts Council and the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth.

The work, which represented Singapore at last year's Venice Biennale, is a culmination of Zai Kuning's ongoing body of work that investigates Malay history and culture, through the lesser-known narratives of the *orang laut* (sea people), *mak yong* (ancient Malay opera) and its ancient maritime Kingdom. The various presentations of the work over the years – from Singapore, Hong Kong (2015), Paris (2015), and Venice (2017) – have successfully profiled Malay cultural history and Singapore's relationship to the larger Riau Archipelago on the global stage. In particular, over 165,000 visitors worldwide experienced the exhibition during its successful showing at the Singapore Pavilion at the Venice Biennale from 13 May to 26 November 2017.

"Haunting, mysterious, full of magic and beauty", as described by commentator Karim Raslan in the South China Morning Post, is Zai's re-imagined vessel of the Srivijayan Empire – an artistic re-imagination of the voyage of Dapunta Hyang Sri Jayanasa, believed to be the first

ruler of the Malay Kingdom in the 7th Century.

For the homecoming of this highly-acclaimed work at 72-13, Singapore audiences will experience a multi-disciplinary exhibition tracing the 17-year journey that Zai Kuning has taken since he first set off in search of the *orang laut* during a residency at TheatreWorks (Singapore) in 2001.

The upcoming exhibition will be accompanied by public programmes such as weekly guided tours, live performances by Zai and collaborating musician Mike Cooper, talks by archaeologist John N. Miksic and art historian T.K. Sabapathy, as well as the screening of a new film that captures Zai's extraordinary sojourn in search of our regional history. The programmes also offer an opportunity for Singaporeans and visitors to be fully immersed in the work, and for audiences to better understand the multi-faceted issues of identity, culture, and history in Southeast Asia that the work explores.

Tay Tong, managing director of TheatreWorks, shares, "The presentation of *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* by TheatreWorks / 72-13 is a culmination of a journey we started with Zai Kuning in 2001. TheatreWorks offered Zai a residency that supported his research on the *orang laut*, and there were no expectations of any specific outcomes for that residency. What we knew then was that we were supporting a passionate artist with a dream, and TheatreWorks believed that this dream would ultimately be realised."

Mr Tay added, "Over the years, we see a deepening of Zai's vision and through the various strands of his art works and performances, Zai shared his dream. He uncovered a myriad and complex cultural map of the Riau Archipelago, which very much influenced the cultures and history of what is today recognised as present day Southeast Asia. The process of research and discovery is very much a part of TheatreWorks' artistic journey through the years, and something we passionately share with Zai."

Commenting on the exhibition's return to Singapore, Zai Kuning said, "I was very happy when Tay Tong, managing director of TheatreWorks, came to the opening of the Singapore Pavilion at Venice Biennale. He was the first to persuade me to bring the work back to Singapore. Art historian, Mr. T.K Sabapathy, pointed out that my work is one of the first instances in the visual arts world to bring out such an old history of this region for discussion. I am happy that many Singaporeans will now have an opportunity to see and gain from it. Now with some pressure and pleasure, we will install the ship again and have audiences in this region see the work and talk about our collective history. I sincerely hope that we take a more serious attitude to our knowledge of the past, so that we are better informed in our understanding of the present. Thus the title of the work, *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge*."

Paul Tan, Deputy Chief Executive, National Arts Council, says, "*Dapunta Hyang*, a work nearly two decades in the making, has unfolded the rich and largely-untold histories of Singapore and Southeast Asia among international audiences. Now that Zai's journey has come full circle and returned home to where it all started at TheatreWorks, we encourage Singaporeans to visit the exhibition – one that is critical to our understanding of the region we are in, even while inviting reflections on the complexity of our cultural identity."

Interested parties can join the conversation via Facebook and Instagram **@NACSingapore**, **@Theatreworks Singapore**, **@theatreworkssg**, and hashtags **#dapuntahyang**, **#NACSingapore** **#theatreworkssg**. More information can also be found on the website here: <https://dapuntahyang2018.wordpress.com/>.

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About TheatreWorks

TheatreWorks, established in 1985, is an independent and international performance company based in Singapore and is unique for its reinvention of traditional performances through a juxtaposition of aesthetics. TheatreWorks has two main red lines in its work: the first is the creation and presentation of inter-disciplinary and intercultural programmes, and the second being documentary performances. TheatreWorks reflects a concern with negotiation, synergy, and artistic sharing between individuals and societies. TheatreWorks has consciously created its home, 72-13, to have more diverse and inclusive dialogues. TheatreWorks intends to share the transcendental potential of art through innovative contemporary performances engaging audiences with uncommon alternatives.

About the National Arts Council

The National Arts Council champions the arts in Singapore. By nurturing creative excellence and supporting broad audience engagement, our diverse and distinctive arts inspire our people, connect communities and profile Singapore internationally. We preserve our rich, cultural traditions as we cultivate accomplished artists and vibrant companies for the future. Our support for the arts is comprehensive – from grants and partnerships to industry facilitation and arts housing. The Council welcomes greater private and corporate giving to and through the arts so that together we can make the arts an integral part of everyone's lives. For more information on the Council's mission and plans, please visit www.nac.gov.sg.

EXHIBITION OVERVIEW & PUBLIC PROGRAMMES

Title: **Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge**

Dates: 12 April – 13 May 2018

Opening hours: 12pm – 7pm (Closed on Mondays)

Venue: TheatreWorks
72-13
Mohamed Sultan Road
Singapore 239007

Guided Tours

Every Saturday at 3pm

April 14, 21, 28

May 5, 12

Talks

Title: Three Mountain in Malay History

Speaker: Prof John N. Miksic

Thursday 19 April, 7.30pm

Title: Symbolic Content in *Dapunta Hyang. Transmission of Knowledge*

Speaker: Prof T.K. Sabapathy

Thursday 26 April, 7.30pm

Music Performance by Zai Kuning and Mike Cooper

Title: Chronicles of Amnesia

Friday May 4 and Saturday May 5, 8pm

ARTIST PROFILE

Zai Kuning

Zai Kuning was born in 1964 in Singapore, to a wedding singer family. He spent his childhood in a *kampung* (village) by the beach, immersed in an environment of traditional and classical Malay music. When he was seven, his family moved into a high-rise apartment. Zai found himself drawn to the *kampung*, and kept returning to it until it was demolished for redevelopment. The displacement of the individual and the community has thus resided close to his heart, and is explored in his wide-ranging art practices.

As an artist, Zai resists convenient categorical claims. Considered one of the most versatile artists working in the region, Zai has pioneered a practice spanning sculpture, installation, painting and drawing, experimental sound and music, video, film, performance art, poetry, dance and theatre. Zai also values collaboration, and has performed and created works with artists of diverse practices including Kuning Sulaiman, Kuo Pao Kun, Tang Da Wu (Singapore), and Tetsu Saitoh (Japan). Zai's research on *orang laut* (sea people), the first people of the Riau Archipelago, took flight as a residency project with TheatreWorks (Singapore) in 2001. Since then, his encounters with *orang laut* and other islanders, including performers of Malay opera *mak yong*, have become a staple in his work exploring human environments, ethics, religion, culture and history.

Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge is a culmination of his 20-year exploration of these themes and geographies. For this edition of the work, Zai journeyed to Mantang Island (Riau Archipelago) and Phatthalung town (Thailand), as well as the once-vibrant trading cities of Palembang and Jambi (Indonesia), to uncover the history, landscape and influence of Dapunta Hyang's Srivijaya empire.

Zai graduated from LASALLE College of the Arts–Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology with a BFA in 1996, majoring in ceramic sculpture and has participated in notable group exhibitions including *Who interprets the world?* at the 21st Century Museum of Contemporary Art, Kanazawa, Japan (2015); *Secret Archipelago* at Palais De Tokyo, Paris, France (2015); *Not Against Interpretation* at the Singapore Art Museum (2013); *Welcome to the Jungle: Contemporary Art in Southeast Asia from the Collection of Singapore Art Museum* at the Yokohama Museum of Art, Japan (2013); Singapore Biennale 2011: Open House (2011); The 3rd Fukuoka Asian Art Triennial, Fukuoka Asian Art Museum, Japan (2005); and The 2nd Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art, The Queensland Art Gallery, Brisbane, Australia (1996). His recent solo exhibitions include *Ombak Hitam* at Ota Fine Arts, Tokyo (2016); *Dapunta Hyang: Transmission of Knowledge* at the Esplanade, Singapore (2015); *IMMIGRANT: The Question of Moral* at The Substation Gallery in collaboration with Vichukorn Tangpaiboon (2011), amongst others. His artwork is collected by the Singapore Art Museum, the Fukuoka Asian Art Museum (Japan), M+ (Hong Kong), and Kadist Art Foundation (France, USA).