

# ARTS FESTIVAL REVIEW COMMITTEE REPORT

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## ***Executive summary***

Since the inaugural Festival of Arts in 1977, both the Festival and our arts scene have evolved significantly. The Singapore Arts Festival which was the mainstay for the participation in and viewing of international programmes, has served Singapore well. However, with a dynamic ecosystem of performances and productions year round, in a crowded arts calendar, ticket sales for the Arts Fest have been falling over the years. Furthermore, platforms for collaboration, commission and experimentation, which were an integral and unique part of the Arts Fest, are readily available year round. NAC therefore saw an opportunity to review the Festival's role in light of a changing environment and re-affirm its relevance to the community.

In June 2012, NAC appointed an Arts Festival Review Committee comprising 17 members drawn from the arts community, media and public agencies. A few key principles of the Festival came out strongly through the 7 Committee meetings as well as the 6 feedback sessions with other arts practitioners and the general public. These are:

- **Excellence** – there are many other events and platforms today to realise the instrumental value of the arts, such as community engagement and education. The Arts Festival should be positioned as the pinnacle platform for the arts, a platform for artistic excellence.
- **Autonomy** – In line with other arts festivals around the world, the Singapore Arts Festival should be run autonomously, ideally as an independent company, supported at arms' length.

The Committee makes the following key recommendations:

- **Festival purpose**
  - "To inspire diverse audiences through great artistic experiences"
  - 7 characteristics of the Festival that elaborate on its purpose: *Quality, Inspiring, Aspirational, Innovative, Engaging, Collaborative and Distinctive*.
- **Programming**
  - Works of professional quality should be the key consideration. Education and outreach activities should complement Festival programming.
  - Strike a balance between international and local works that audiences would not otherwise have the chance to experience.
  - Build sustained relationships with artists.
  - Keep the Festival ticket prices accessible to a wide range of audiences.
  - Stay annual, over 17-days in the months of May-June
- **Place**
  - Establish a permanent home for the Festival in the city, which will serve as the Festival Centre and allow for year-long programming.
  - A Festival Village is a good-to-have, but should only happen if budget permits.
  - Festival programmes may continue to take place at regular performance venues such as Esplanade, VT/VCH, SOTA and may also include site-specific events throughout the island.
- **Operating model**
  - Independent Arts Festival Company set up under NAC
  - Receives government funding but at arm's-length and is free to seek alternative funding sources such as Tote Board or other government agencies
  - Company should be responsible for its own financial sustainability

## ***Preface***

### **The Review Committee and its terms of reference**

On 5 June 2012, the NAC announced the formation of a 17-member Review Committee (see **Annex 2** for a list of Committee members), chaired by CEO NAC to review the Arts Fest's objectives, programming direction as well as possible activities in 2013 as a lead up to the Festival's return in 2014. NAC's reasons for the review are in **Annex 1**).

The Review Committee convened from July to November 2012 to fulfil the following terms of reference:

- i. Examine the role and objectives of the Singapore Arts Festival for the development of our arts and cultural landscape, and make recommendations by early September 2012 on the future Singapore Arts Festival, particularly in relation to:
  - a. Programming direction and structure
  - b. Operating model for the overall Festival
- ii. Based on the above, by end October 2012 to also propose possible activities in 2013 while the Singapore Arts Fest takes a hiatus, to prepare or build up a momentum towards the Singapore Arts Festival 2014.
- iii. Carry out consultations with members of the arts community and the general public to solicit their feedback on the future development of the Arts Fest, including its objectives, programmes and operating model as well as proposed 2013 activities by end November 2012.

### **Review process**

The Committee met once every three weeks to deliberate on the future of the Arts Fest. The minutes of its 7 meetings are in **Annex 3** of this report.

In addition, the Committee solicited views from other members of the arts community and interested members of public through 6 discussion and feedback sessions comprising. Feedback from these sessions were discussed at subsequent Committee meetings and incorporated into the Committee recommendations. The notes of all 6 sessions below are presented in **Annex 4** of this report:

- A breakout session organised as part of NAC's Let's Talk! session with artists and arts groups on 23 July. The session was attended by 20 artists and was facilitated by Committee member Ong Keng Sen.
- A workshop session was organised by Committee members Janice Koh and Ong Keng Sen at Theatreworks on 3 August with 29 invited members of the arts community. Facilitated by Donald Low, the session sought views on how they envisioned the Arts Fest to be and what could be done to improve the Festival.

- Four public feedback sessions<sup>1</sup> were also organised in the month of October/November in the four vernacular languages. NAC helped by publicising these sessions on their website and newsletter, and by sending the notice and invitation to artists and partners, as well as to the existing Arts Fest's volunteer and club members. The sessions were facilitated by Committee members who presented their interim ideas and recommendations for the public's views and response. A summary of these key ideas were sent to those who had registered to attend. A total of 96 attended these sessions. Feedback from the public were discussed at the subsequent Committee meeting and incorporated into the final recommendations.

This report presents the deliberations and final recommendations of the Committee. The Committee also agreed that individual members could make a "minority report" to reflect issues where there were dissenting minority views to these eventual recommendations. As the Committee reached a unanimous agreement on this report, none of the Committee members decided to raise a minority report.

NAC will consider the recommendations of the Review Committee and make a final decision in consultation with the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY) by January 2013.

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<sup>1</sup> 29 October Tamil session – hosted by Aravinth Kumarasamy, 30 October English session – hosted by Ivan Heng and Gaurav Kripalani, 31 October Chinese session – hosted by Kok Heng Leun and Choy Ka Fai. 1 November Malay session – hosted by Osman Abdul Hamid. All sessions were held at the Drama Centre.

***Recommendations of the Arts Fest Review Committee***

## ***Chapter 1: Purpose statement and characteristics of the Singapore Arts Festival<sup>2</sup>***

1 In recommending the purpose and objectives of the Arts Fest, the Committee felt that the Arts Festival in the past had been tasked to achieve too many different objectives, which sometimes conflicted with each other. These were just some examples:

- *Tourism* objective - seeking to increase tourism arrivals attending the Festival
- *Community* objective - seeking to have mass appeal through programming in the heartlands.
- *Artistic* objective - seeking to position itself as a creator of adventurous festival productions by commissioning new works to premier
- *National education and outreach objective* – seeking to develop audiences not just for the festival but for the arts in general through a range of activities not necessarily compatible with the overall festival programming

2 These multiple objectives resulted in the Festival not having a clear focus and identity. This assessment is in line with the feedback received from the discussion sessions on 23 July and 3 August, where participants felt that Festival programme had become “confused”, trying to do too many things at once, and bemoaned the lack of a distinct identity for the Festival.

3 As such, the Committee recommends that the Arts Fest be guided by a concise statement of purpose:

### **“To inspire diverse audiences with great artistic experiences”**

- The Festival is not a passive platform that presents, it should be a platform charged “to inspire”.
- The Festival recognises that there is a diverse spectrum of audiences and embraces this diversity. This is also a charge to the Festival to be actively engaging and developing different types of audiences. Focusing on diversity is also an important check against looking at attendance numbers alone, which is too limiting and simplistic a way of reflecting the Festival’s impact.
- The Arts Fest can do all this only with “great artistic experiences” in its programme and collaboration with artists.

4 In line with these principles, the Committee also recommends that every Festival should embody the following 7 characteristics. These are:

#### ***i. Quality***

- The Arts Fest should consistently feature works of professional quality.
- Focusing on works of great quality, regardless of the nature or genre of the work, satisfies both artistic integrity and audience experience.

#### ***ii. Inspiring and Aspirational***

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<sup>2</sup> Refer to Minutes of the 4<sup>th</sup> Committee meeting 5 September for insight into the discussions behind the purpose and characteristics of the Festival.

- The Arts Fest must inspire audiences
- Artists and other stakeholders such as educators are themselves a part of the audience and participants, and similarly should be inspired by the Festival's programmes.
- The Arts Fest should be a pinnacle platform for the Singapore arts community and international artists to aspire towards.

**iii. Engaging**

- Engagement happens at all levels not just through ticket-buying and attendance, or audience participation. It can also be by volunteering and giving to the Arts Fest.
- A successful Arts Fest is one where people will specially set aside time during the Festival period to attend its activities.
- Even for those who are not attending the Arts Fest activities, a successful Arts Fest is one where they know about the Festival, see it as an integral part of public activities in Singapore, and are proud of it.

**iv. Innovative**

- The Arts Fest should embody the spirit of innovation.
- This does not mean that the Festival only presents new and/or experimental works. Rather, the Festival's approach and attitude towards its programming, collaborations, marketing and education are to remain open to taking risks and better ways of doing something.

**v. Collaborative**

- The Arts Fest is a platform that encourages and champions collaboration at all levels, whether between artists, artists and audiences, between audiences, or across disciplines and genres.
- Collaboration should be done in an organic manner without compromising quality and experience.

**vi. Distinctive**

- As the national platform for the arts, there is a need for the Arts Fest to distinguish itself from the many other festivals.
- While being a multi-genre festival already differentiates the Arts Fest from other festival platforms, over time, it would be good for the Arts Fest to develop its own distinct identity through its programming and marketing.

## ***Chapter 2: Programming the Festival<sup>3</sup>***

### **2.1 Programming guidelines**

5 In terms of Festival programming, the Committee recognises that programming a Festival can take various directions: choosing between presenting ready-made works, classics versus commissioning new works; choosing to programme mostly local /Asian works versus international works from other parts of the world; programming a Festival that focuses on the performing arts or goes beyond into other genres.

6 The Committee wishes not to be overly prescriptive in its programming recommendations, and recommends instead that the Festival Director has the flexibility and autonomy to lead and programme a Festival that fulfils its purpose as articulated in Chapter 1. The Committee nevertheless came up with some broad guiding principles in this chapter to aid him in him/her in his programming decisions:

- In programming the Festival, the key consideration should be one of professional quality.
- Programming direction need not be dogmatic, and should strike a balance between international and local works that audiences may not otherwise have the chance to experience.
- To strengthen the Festival and grow future audiences, education and outreach activities should complement Festival programming.
- The Arts Fest should be grounded in the performing arts.

### **2.2 Place**

7 The Festival should have a Festival Centre, located in the city, to serve as a permanent home for the Festival, housing its office and ideally also featuring studio spaces for rehearsal, performance spaces to stage smaller works and potentially some F&B. The Festival Centre would allow for year-long engagement of the Festival (refer to **Chapter 3.4**).

8 The Committee considered the idea of a Festival Village, a transient pop-up development that is set up during the Festival period to enliven the Festival Centre. While it was welcomed as a means to allow some ground-up programming, post-show performances and opportunities for audiences to interact with artists in a more casual environment, the Committee felt that because of the high operational costs associated with building the Festival Village, it should only happen if budget permits.

### **2.3 Festival's relationship with artists and audiences**

9 In line with feedback drawn from the public sessions, the Committee acknowledges that the Festival should establish a stronger relationship with both audiences and artists. In this spirit, the Committee considered the advantages of a biennial model, and concluded that the Festival should

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<sup>3</sup> Refer to Minutes of the 4<sup>th</sup> Committee meeting 5 September for insight into the discussions behind Programming direction of the Festival.



still be held annually, to maintain a sense of momentum and also create familiarity and a sense of anticipation by the Singapore public.

10 To better attract student volunteers and reach out to students and families during the post-exam period, the Committee recommends that the Festival period be kept to the months of May-June. However the Committee recognised that this may not always coincide with the international touring schedules of foreign arts groups.

11 Additionally, the Committee recommends that the Festival should continue to be held over 17 days, or three weekends. The Committee felt that the current duration was an optimal one, which provided sufficient concentration of events and a maximum exposure of three weekends.

12 The Committee agrees with the feedback raised at the public sessions that the Festival should be kept accessible to the public, not just by providing free events but also in terms of a ticket pricing strategy that accounts for segments of audiences, such as students, for whom affordability is a key consideration. In addition, the Festival should look into its marketing strategy and may wish to consider undertaking research to examine the most effective way of communicating and reaching out to diverse audiences.

13 In being a Festival that supports arts development, the Committee recommends that the Festival should engage artists in a meaningful dialogue that goes beyond commissions. Through this dialogue, artists can contribute to shaping the Festival's programming, marketing and outreach efforts, making the Festival truly special and distinctive. The Festival should also play a more active role in nurturing artists, presenting works-in-progress at various other platforms over a period of time, before culminating in a quality work that can be presented at the Festival. This is in line with recommendations raised at the public sessions.

## ***Chapter 3: Operating model***

### **3.1 Current operating model**

14 The Arts Fest has been operated by a public sector body since its inauguration, whether by the then-Ministry of Community Development, or by the National Arts Council since 1991. In addition, 75% of the Arts Fest budget comes from government. In this regard, the Arts Fest does stand out from the Festivals surveyed (refer to **Annex 5** on other festivals).

15 For the last 3 years, NAC has moved towards having a dedicated Arts Festival team and General Manager. The Arts Fest has operated under a General Manager (GM), with a full-time team ranging 14-17 in number overseeing programming, marketing, partnerships and sales. The Arts Fest department is subject to all the operating rules and guidelines of the Council, including all finance and HR guidelines. It also draws on NAC's Finance and HR department for other corporate support. NAC's Corporate Communications and Marketing Services department also lends marketing and communications support, particularly in media relations.

16 With the current expertise, NAC can continue to operate the Arts Fest. This allows the Arts Fest to continue to tap on other resources within NAC, and will best ensure synergy with NAC's development or outreach strategies. However, there are several drawbacks to keeping status quo:

- Doing so does not build nor tap on the presenting capabilities of industry as expertise and resources kept within NAC. The close association with NAC as the organiser does not build greater ownership of the Arts Fest from the arts community. There is a missed opportunity, as our arts scene matures.
- Lack of necessary operational flexibility as the Arts Fest is subject to finance and HR rules of the Government.
- NAC also is moving away from being an event organiser, in competition with industry for sponsorship. There is increasing focus on the role of the NAC in developing and implementing policies, research and programmes that develop and promote partners, practitioners, schools/institutions and other stakeholders in the arts.

### **3.2 Recommended operating model and reasons for recommendation<sup>4</sup>**

17 The Committee considered three possible models, described in further detail in **Annex 6**, and recommended that the Arts Festival be run by an independent Festival Company (Festival Co.), appointed by NAC for the following reasons:

- The Committee believes in the inherent need for the Arts Fest to be as independent as possible in terms of artistic programming. The funding relationship between funder (NAC) and the Festival Co. should be at arm's length.
- The Committee is confident that the local arts scene has reached a level of maturity and has the necessary artistic and curatorial talent required to undertake this responsibility. Setting

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<sup>4</sup> Refer to Minutes of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Committee meeting 25 July for insight into the discussions behind Operating Model of the Festival

up an independent company will provide the opportunity to deepen the curatorial and organisational capabilities within the industry in managing a nation-wide festival.

- Setting up an independent company focused solely on running the Arts Festival will further allow for greater specialisation of skills, and operational nimbleness. There will also be greater clarity and accountability on the part of the Company for its outcomes.
- More importantly, the Committee feels that this model would support greater diversity in terms of programming within the arts scene than if the Arts Fest is to be organised by the NAC or the Esplanade. Independence will also better enable the Arts Fest to develop its own identity.

18 Having an independent company operate and run the Arts Fest and for it to be funded at arm's length by the government was also one of the key recommendations that came out strongly from the Workshop session with other artists on 3 August 2012.

19 The Independent Festival Company ("Festival Co.") could be set up as a Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) by the NAC, and registered as a charity under the Charities Act and seek to be approved as an Institution of Public Character so that it could offer tax deductions for the donations received. As a Company, it will be required to have its own independent Board of Directors to oversee matters of strategic, fiduciary and corporate governance. This Board could be appointed by the NAC and could comprise respected individuals from the arts community, as well as public and private sector individuals with the necessary corporate, legal and financial management capabilities.

20 The Committee recommends that aside from receiving funding from NAC, the Festival Co. can seek alternative funding sources such as the Tote Board and other government agencies where there is alignment of interest. This is particularly important if the Festival is to programme quality works while keeping them affordable and accessible to all.

21 In addition to grant support, the Festival will raise its own income through box office, sponsorships and donations. As an independent entity, Festival Co. will be responsible for its own financial sustainability. The Committee recommends that ticket pricing be kept in line with market rates, and effort should be made to keep ticketed events accessible to all.

### **3.3 Key personnel of Festival Co.**

22 The Committee recommends the following key appointments in Festival Co.:

- An Executive Director (ED) and team, employed on a full-time, permanent basis, to oversee the operations of the company and Festival. The ED functions effectively as the CEO of the Festival Co., managing the business of the Festival. He/she is responsible for raising income through sponsorship and box office, and works closely with the Festival Director in ensuring that the Festival is delivered on time and on budget. The team includes programmers/programme managers, ideally with background in various art form disciplines, as well as corporate staff.
- A Festival Director (FD) who sets the artistic vision and direction of the Festival. He/she will be responsible for programming the Festival, in line with its purpose. The FD reports to the ED. He/she will be appointed on a 5-year contract basis to oversee 3 Arts Fest editions. The

5-year appointment will allow the incoming FD sufficient lead up time to plan and prepare for his/her 3-year Festival programme, as well as some time after the Festival to hand over to the next FD. The Committee recommends this model of having a new FD every 3 editions to ensure fresh artistic perspectives, and allows for greater programming diversity and fresh perspectives with each FD. However, this model does not preclude a good FD from returning for another term, though no 2 terms should be consecutive.

23 Both the Executive Director and the Festival Director would report to the Board of Directors on matters of governance, and in accounting for the outcomes of the Festival.

### **3.4 A permanent home for the Festival (“Festival Centre”)**

24 The Committee feels that it would be instrumental if Festival Co. could operate from a Festival Centre, a permanent home that has rehearsal and studio facilities, and even F&B facilities. This could provide opportunities for year-long programming and deeper, more sustained engagement with artists and the community beyond the 3 weekends of the Festival. This would also help give stronger visibility to the Festival. In terms of location, a centrally located venue with a variety of spaces would be ideal.

### **3.5 Festival success indicators**

25 The Committee recommends that while quantitative indicators, such as the number of attendances, were necessary, these should not be the primary focus in assessing the success of the Festival. There should also be a basket of qualitative and longer-term indicators of the Festival’s impact on supporting the production of quality works and artistic development, such as international reviews, media coverage, and how the Festival has developed talent in the long run.

26 The Committee feels that with a company structure, it would naturally have to account for its financial sustainability, and hence there would be sufficient motivation for the Festival to balance its artistic and financial needs, i.e. through box office takings and sponsorships. As a charity and IPC, it would also need to adhere to a level of transparency in its activities and financial information.

## ***Chapter 4: Gearing up for Arts Festival 2014***

### **4.1 Possible approach for 2013**

27 With regards to programming for 2013, the Committee considered if NAC could initiate a smaller-scale platform to maintain a sense of momentum. However, the Committee took into account feedback from its consultations, to conclude that it would be more effective for smaller scale activities to be initiated and organised by the arts community during the Festival period of May-June 2013 instead. The Committee asked that NAC consider supporting these activities.

28 The Committee recommended that these activities in 2013 should not be branded under the Arts Fest, and this would ensure that the Arts Fest brand would not be affected and could be suitably re-introduced in 2014. If the Festival Co. was set up in time, it would also be at liberty to collaborate with these grounds-up initiatives.

## ***Chapter 5: Conclusion***

29 Over the course of 7 committee meetings and 6 consultation sessions with artists and the general public, the Committee debated at length the purpose of the Singapore Arts Festival, how it should be programmed, the role it plays for artists and audiences, and how it should be operationally structured. The Committee recommends that the Singapore Arts Festival is one that *“inspires diverse audiences with great artistic experiences”*, built on the principles of artistic excellence and autonomy.

30 The Arts Festival has been around for 35 years, organised by Government or agencies like the National Arts Council. The Committee believes that the Festival should not be burdened with the need to fulfil multiple objectives, but should instead focus on being the pinnacle platform for the arts by presenting works of great quality, particularly those that local audiences might not otherwise have the chance to experience. Having a Festival Centre will add to the Festival’s identity and enable the Festival to develop audiences and artists all year round. The Committee feels strongly that with a more established arts landscape and audience today, it is also timely for the Government to take a step back from the direct organisation of the Festival and for a Festival company to be set up instead.