

## WHY DANCE & WHERE CAN WE TAKE IT?

1. Dance is a non-verbal form of expression through physical movement that lends itself well to participation at different levels. With Singapore being a multicultural society that is receptive to global culture, the **styles and genres of dance practised in Singapore are wide ranging**, comprising both traditional and contemporary forms **catering to different levels of engagement and practice**. While a small group makes dance their career, there is a larger pool that practises dance at the recreational level for its physical, social, emotional and educational benefits. The genres include the following:

- a) Contemporary Dance which is driving the growth of Singapore's professional dance sector;
- b) Ballet which has a huge catchment for children aged 3 – 12 years;
- c) Chinese Dance which has a small base of mostly amateur groups;
- d) Malay Dance which has a small base of active amateur groups;
- e) Indian Dance which is characterised by a few major training institutions and their performing groups;
- f) Urban / Street Dance which is popular among youths and characterised by commercial studios offering dance classes; and
- g) Other popular / social forms (e.g. social and ballroom dancing, Flamenco, line dance, belly dance and pole dance) which are popular recreational activities among Singaporeans.

2. Dance has the capacity to allow for expression of feelings and ideas through movement. It enhances social bonding, promotes self-confidence and a sense of self-identity. The practice of dance also instils discipline and responsibility. As a physical activity, it promotes health and well-being; helps develop coordination skills, posture, strength, stamina, flexibility and mobility. Culturally, it reflects our diversity, our values and traditions.

3. There is now **greater visibility** for dance with more programme offerings by our arts centres such as the annual Da:ns Festival organised by the Esplanade, and regular performance seasons by many of our local companies. At the recreational level, the interest level for dance has grown. We have many enthusiastic participants and serious practitioners taking dance classes and attending dance performances. At the professional end, we see a growth in the pool of players and an increased number of dance organisations.

## THE DANCE SCENE TODAY

### *Raising professionalism of the sector is key to propel artistic growth*

4. The professional dance scene is at a critical stage of growth as the companies work towards building their repertoire and stabilising their operations. These dancers and dance companies are now making their mark internationally with opportunities to perform at prestigious venues and festivals. The professional dance sector has grown exponentially in the last five years. There is an increase in the confidence level of the practitioners and they

are engaging in greater risk-taking in their practice. Many of the companies are gradually professionalising their operations; building a regular performance season, as well as venturing overseas. However, as most of these companies are still their initial stage of development, it is important to **continue to support them in their organisational development** and allow them time to find their footing.

5. With a growing scene, and the formation of more dance companies, there are now **more employment opportunities and options for dancers**. There is a growing pool of young dancers trained in contemporary dance entering the scene. It is critical that these graduates are adequately equipped to move on to a career in dance. Comprehensive curriculum and practical experience provided by the training schools are important preparation for these young graduates. **Strong links between the arts training institutions and the professional dance sector** would also help our dancers secure jobs and make a smooth transition into their career. For those who want to pursue a teaching career either in schools or private dance studios, equipping them with the pedagogical knowledge and skills is critical.

6. The career span of dancers is short. Providing continuous education opportunities and options for retraining will help dancers better plan and build up their skills and knowledge to take other roles in the industry or related industries at the appropriate junctures. This will allow them to continue to contribute to the scene in a different capacity.

7. Many dance companies and practitioners have raised that it is necessary and timely for Singapore to have a **neutral entity that could bring the players together for regular dialogues and drive initiatives that can push the scene forward**. NAC has begun discussions with intermediaries to ramp up their efforts to take on a larger role in the local dance scene. Intermediaries can facilitate dialogues and exchanges among the players, provide resources and support for the independent dance sector, and set industry benchmarks to drive greater professionalism in the scene. They can also helm initiatives for advocacy and audience development.

8. In a developed dance scene, there is always a substantial pool of independent artists who practise outside the realm of company structures. These artists are actively pursuing a creation track while juggling other jobs as dance instructors, educators, or production and technical personnel. To thrive as a freelancer and secure performance opportunities, it is critical to be well connected to the scene and to have strong networks. While there are opportunities for independent practitioners to create and present their works both locally and internationally, these are few. Artistic performance and creation opportunities, and **infrastructure and support for independent practice in Singapore are not as developed** as compared to cities such as Hong Kong, Berlin and New York. Many of our independent artists have thus decided to base themselves overseas.

#### *Build up on Research and Documentation for dance*

9. **Research and documentation is an area that is severely lacking for dance** in Singapore. This includes documentation and archival of our dance history, important personalities in dance, landmark dance repertoires, as well as critical analysis and discourse of our dance development. Currently, teaching of Singapore dance in the training institution

is limited; it is often covered in brevity in relations to the history of South East Asian dance or Western Dance. This could be attributed to the lack of proper resources to support the curriculum. The information on the history of our dance scene in the public domain is also lacking which can be an obstacle to develop comprehensive curriculum on local dance for schools. There have been some efforts by the National Library Board (NLB) and the National Archives to document the lives of our local practitioners and some of their works. NAC will take a more systematic and comprehensive documentation to plug the information gap. We will explore if the arts institutions here would be keen to include research and academic writing as a component of their lecturers' professional development as this would help to build up resources and academic papers that can potentially support the teaching of dance history of Singapore. NAC will explore partnerships with institutions such as NLB, National Archives, NUS Southeast Asian Studies Department etc. to drive research in the following areas:

- a) History of dance in Singapore
- b) Documentation of key practitioners and their works
- c) New trends and development of Singapore dance
- d) Consumption trends and demographic studies of dance participants and audience

*Need to encourage the creation of distinctive and diverse content*

10. While our dance scene has grown, there is still much to do in the creation of distinctive works of high quality. We have a stable but small pool of choreographers, who are creating new content and there has been a surge of works produced over the last decade due to the growth in the scene. This is an encouraging sign. But the scene can do with more **epic, ground-breaking works** so that we can continue to push our artistic boundaries and inspire more of such works to be created. We acknowledge that choreographers need more space, time and resources for their creative work. More groundwork would be needed to hone the skills of our choreographers, etc., and provide the appropriate resources and platforms for such works to be developed and produced.

*There is opportunity to cultivate broad base of dance enthusiasts into audience and advocates*

11. **Increasing the size of audiences for dance has remained a challenge.** Given the niche nature of some of the more contemporary and experimental dance forms, as well as the large number of competing events, most of the dance companies have chosen to perform in smaller black box venues. Compounding this, most dance companies (with the exception of the Singapore Dance Theatre) put up no more than 3 performances for each production, unlike the more established theatre companies that are able to sustain longer runs of more than a week.

12. There is a significant base of students learning dance as part of their co-curricular activities in schools. There is also a large pool of recreational dancers taking classes in private studios and community centres and an increasing level of interest among the youths for urban dance forms. These are our potential audience base and advocates for dance. If

we continue to strengthen their foundational skills and understanding, it would help them sustain a lifelong interest in dance beyond school both as hobbyists and audience.

13. With the audience base in Singapore being limited, there is a need for our dance companies and practitioners to look beyond our shores for performance opportunities. Companies such as Singapore Dance Theatre and T.H.E Dance Company have successfully built a regular touring circuit in the region, such as in Malaysia and Indonesia. Such efforts need to be expanded and NAC would work on entering into strategic partnerships with overseas partners. To help dance companies develop an international presence and touring network, there needs to be practical information and resources. NAC will work with partners to organise workshops, and produce online resources and toolkits to help the companies to be better equipped for touring abroad. Incentive programmes will also be explored to encourage presenters based internationally to source for productions in Singapore.

## **KEY DIRECTIONS MOVING FORWARD - A VISION FOR DANCE**

14. Given the positive development in the dance scene we can look forward to:
- a) A vibrant dance scene, with stable, high calibre and creative companies and practitioners producing works of good quality;
  - b) More opportunities for talented Singaporeans to carve out meaningful and fulfilling careers in dance;
  - c) A diverse, abundant and readily available pool of quality dance activities that is accessible to all; and
  - d) A conducive and supportive environment that allow the dance scene to develop and grow.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

15. In view of the current stage of development, and considering the challenges and opportunities of the dance scene, we would like to recommend a series of strategies to move the scene to the next phase of development:

- (i) Profile dance as a career;
- (ii) Support growth of independent sector; and
- (iii) Develop audiences by reaching out to the everyday person.

## NEW STRATEGIES FOR NEXT 5 YEARS

### (I) PROFILE DANCE AS A CAREER

16. Pursuing a career in the arts is always perceived as a risky path. Although there are more taking the plunge, the lack of a clear career pathway and information has deterred many from pursuing this path. This impacts dancers greatly, in particular, as the career span of dancers is short and the physical demands of this art form put them at risk to injuries that could further shorten their performing career. A small number of them may continue to dance till their forties but most retire from performing in their mid-thirties. At present, many dancers move on to teaching once they retire from the stage. However, most do not have a clear career transition plan in place.

- a) Bridge dance graduates to the professional scene: Moving from the school environment into the professional scene can be a daunting experience. To help our dancers cope with this transition, both the training institutions and the employers can play a part. A closer link between the two can be fostered. For example, a more structured approach can be taken where the artistic personnel of the dance companies are invited to teach and choreograph as part of the core programme in the schools and training institutions. Preparation of the students for auditions and coaching them in the writing of their curriculum vitae would also be helpful. Formalised internship programmes between dance companies and training institutions would also enable students to get a better understanding of professional standards and expose them to the works of different companies. For those keen on an independent career, the institutions should also provide guidance on the resources and network available.
- b) Support dancers in career transition: Dancers typically go through at least 2 careers in their lifetime – first, as performers, then in another role either alongside or after the end of their performing careers. As the first few generations of dancers retired from the stage, it was observed that many were not prepared for the transition and did not know what other work was available. Many also did not have much savings to explore other options. In comparison, dancers from more mature dance scene overseas are more aware and well prepared for the change. They pursue further training and acquire new skills as they prepare for a new career. To address the issue of career transition for local dancers, greater priority and flexibility can be given through NAC Arts Scholarships and Capability Development Grants for dancers to retrain and acquire new skills. For instance, NAC had supported a couple of retiring dancers for postgraduate studies in dance education and choreography under the NAC Arts Scholarship scheme. The current Capability Development Grant can also support short term arts-related training courses.
- c) Provide resources for aspiring young dancers: There has been an increase in the number of young people wanting to pursue professional/vocational training in dance. However, due to the lack of information many end up choosing inappropriate courses and programmes that do not maximise their potential, but may jeopardise their employability. Making informational resources easily

accessible would help these young dancers and their parents to understand their strengths and preferences, and provide them with options for a fulfilling career in dance. For those who are interested in dance but do not intend to pursue professional practice, there could be options for them to continue with their dance studies alongside other subject majors. This is a possible route to train expertise for dance in areas such as business administration, critical writing etc.

- d) Raise awareness of dance as a career: Career talks and sharing by employers and experienced practitioners would allow aspiring dancers and students to better understand what the professional practice entails. In the long term, the vision is for a dance intermediary to provide career counselling service could help to guide dancers in making more informed choices and point them to possible options and resources.
- e) Raise awareness on safe dance practice: There has been interest from the medical sector to offer dance screening and injury treatment for professional dancers in Singapore. NAC has facilitated dialogues and consultation between medical professionals and artistic directors, dancers as well as full-time dance students, to find out more about their needs (physical therapy, athletic cross-training, injury prevention and detection etc.) that the medical sector can support and supplement. NAC will continue to work with them to develop comprehensive resources, guidelines and manuals on dance medicine for the dance community as well as the public.
- f) Strengthen artistic leadership: The rapid growth of the dance sector in the recent 5 years is similar to the period when the Singapore theatre scene gained prominence in the 1980s. With visionary and strong leadership at the helm, many of theatre companies have evolved and progressed since their formative years, and are presently leaders and key players in the scene. It is imperative for dance to have strong artistic stewardship as the companies move towards professional and semi-professional status. With reference to the Rural Retreat organised by DanceEast UK, an international think-tank looking at the future of dance, a similar leadership programme, could be developed for artistic directors of dance companies in Singapore; NAC will work with partners to develop such a programme that aims to broaden perspectives, and better prepare these leaders for challenges ahead.

## **(II) SUPPORT GROWTH OF INDEPENDENT SECTOR**

17. In view of the range of dance genres and practitioners in the sector, a dedicated space and programme to support the art-making process and professional development is necessary. Constant generation and exploration of new ideas, concepts, and artistic practice is critical for Singapore's emerging dance scene. A conducive space for dance practitioners where ideas are valued and risk-taking is celebrated would encourage our artists to push boundaries and create work of high artistic value.

18. This space will provide independent practitioners, in particular, with a place to collaborate, access training opportunities, and share ideas. While a few dance companies

have allowed freelance dancers to participate in company classes, there are currently limited training options for professional independent artists. Access to regular classes is critical for the upkeep of their dance technique and for strengthening their capability and artistry.

19. The Dance Studio at the Goodman Arts Centre (GAC) is an ideal space that can host these independent practitioners. There is potential to leverage their creative synergy of the resident artists and arts companies for collaborations and exchanges. This space would also tie in well with the GAC Black Box, which is also frequently used by the dance community for their performances. This could raise the visibility of independent work and artists, and over time, carve out an identity for GAC as a space for dance.

### **(III) DEVELOP AUDIENCE BY REACHING OUT TO THE EVERYDAY PERSON**

20. The potential for dance in Singapore is significant. At the recreational level, the interest level for dance has grown. We have many enthusiastic participants and serious practitioners taking dance classes and attending dance performances. It would be apt and timely to ride on this momentum and initiate a national platform to celebrate dance, reach out to the everyday person and make dance a visible part of mainstream consciousness.

21. A day dedicated to the celebration of dance across the nation could be introduced where NAC could take lead in the marketing and publicity campaign working in collaboration with the dance community to reach out to both the commercial and non-profit dance sectors. Initiatives and programmes could include a one-off grant that is extended to dancers or dance group that participate in this celebration, to offer free performances, workshops, mass dance sessions etc.

22. Initiatives and programmes could include a one-off 'Celebrate Dance Grant' that is extended to dancers or dance group that participate in this celebration, to offer free performances, workshops, mass dance sessions etc.

## **CONCLUSION**

The next stage of development for the dance sector is contingent upon the ability of various players to collaborate to bring the scene together and to promote awareness of dance. It is also critical to build the capacities of different groups of dance artists and to provide career support. The key initiatives proposed aims to change the way the dance community creates art and interacts with one another.