

## WHY TRADITIONAL ARTS & WHERE CAN WE TAKE IT?

1. Traditional Arts (TA) provides a shared experience for the community. Values and belief systems are often embedded in these art forms and passed down through generations; as such, they form a common language through which we can engage the various communities that make up our society.
2. On a national level, traditional arts also play a vital role in strengthening Singapore's personal and cultural identity. At the personal level, they provide a focal point to which Singaporeans can always return to, be it simply to explore their roots or to achieve a deeper connection with their communities. Culturally, by reflecting the unique characteristics and collective stories of communities in Singapore, they form the foundation of Singapore's rich heritage. In presenting traditional art forms to the public, these forms can also promote greater inter-racial understanding and national bonding.
3. Traditional arts are also a key component of the canon of original Singapore works. While rooted in longstanding traditions, they also have rich potential for adaptation to the present, providing a deep resource of inspiration and innovation for the development of culturally distinctive Singapore content.
4. Beyond their personal and national impact, traditional arts are a valuable cultural currency in the global economy. Global cities are distinguished not only by the state of their economies, but also by their cultural diversity and vibrancy. Traditional arts are an important facet of Singapore's distinctive identity encompassing the different cultures here, which differentiates us from other metropolises.

## THE TRADITIONAL ARTS SCENE TODAY

5. The Traditional Arts scene in Singapore, consisting of Chinese music, dance and theatre, Malay music and dance as well as Indian music and dance, is active at amateur and community levels and has a healthy base of players. According to NAC's grant statistics for FY2012, there are more than 100 active traditional arts (TA) groups in Singapore and the scene offers some 1,400 TA performances (19% of total arts performances) a year. An overview of the active traditional performing art forms is at [Appendix I](#).

### *Launch of Traditional Arts Plan in 2011*

6. In recognition of the importance of traditional arts and to ensure its growth at a sustainable level, a Traditional Arts Secretariat was set up within NAC in 2011 with the launch of a five-year Traditional Arts Plan<sup>[1]</sup>. The plan was dedicated to improving the quality of productions, growing potential peak companies as well as increasing the audience base and accessibility to the art form. The plan focused on efforts to develop people (talent and capability development) and audiences (development and outreach).

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<sup>[1]</sup> This 5-year plan has been succeeded by a plan for longer-term investment, in recognition of some of the enduring issues that are unique to the traditional arts sector, and the longer time required to develop this sector.

7. Over the past three years since the implementation of the TA plan, several champions have been groomed via the TA Seed Grant, a programme aimed at helping companies to professionalise their operations. Industry had provided feedback that given the low starting base of the traditional arts sector, more foundational support would be required to help elevate existing or new groups to a sufficient level of competency. A total of 10 traditional arts organisations have benefited from the Seed Grant (Traditional Arts) scheme, which was implemented in 2011 to develop new sector champions and groom industry leaders<sup>[2]</sup>. A complementary consultancy programme was also developed to support their desire to become more professional, stable and self-sustaining. The pilot programme was successfully completed in April 2013 with positive feedback from the groups and NAC has since commenced a second run of the consultancy programme this year.

8. Since 2011, NAC has co-organised several skills development programmes with partners such as The Esplanade Co. Ltd (TECL), Chinese Opera Institute, PERKAMUS and Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan. Programmes such as Chinese Opera workshops in conjunction with Esplanade's Moonfest, Malay Music Enrichment Course and a series of Chinese Dance workshops have been developed to equip practitioners with essential skills and to improve their techniques and practice. Most of these capability development initiatives have focused on enhancing artistic skills for individuals as well as upgrading of administrative and management capability of groups through seminars, workshops, short-term residencies and customised training programmes. Such efforts need to be continued to ensure a sustained development of the scene.

9. To promote traditional arts to a wider audience, NAC has also established partnerships with traditional arts groups on larger scale platforms like A Celebration of Chinese Dance, Muara and Oh! Bangau. Although there have been more interaction and opportunities for collaboration among the groups and practitioners, they have yet to demonstrate the ability to build a larger base of paying audiences. More collaboration and pooling of resources among groups themselves, as well as documentation and promotion of these efforts are needed for them to remain sustainable.

#### *Grooming new industry leaders and propelling growth*

10. To propel the growth of the TA scene, there is a need for strong leadership and more role models to inspire and drive the sector's development. It is also important for groups and practitioners to go beyond their own sphere and take a stronger interest in the wider sector. In addition, while rootedness in the traditional forms and laying strong foundation are important in this sector, it is equally critical for them to keep up with the fast changing environment around them in order to remain relevant.

#### *Lack of research and documentation and evolving parameters of traditional arts*

11. The lack of documentation inhibits artistic progress and hinders the sector from cultivating a deeper understanding and appreciation of these forms among its audiences.

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<sup>[2]</sup> This organisational funding scheme supports organisations as they work towards establishing sound administrative structures, contribute to traditional arts practices and development of young talent, increase awareness and appreciation of the form and reflect the diversity and vibrancy of Singapore's culture.

There are also larger issues of definition and ownership that the sector grapples with. The influx of recent migrants and changing demographics has given rise to new (and evolving) forms, rendering the definition of traditional arts in Singapore fluid and highly subjective. Given Singapore's unique cultural and ethnic make-up, a study of traditional arts must not only reference the traditions of source countries, but must also articulate how these forms have taken root and evolved in the Singaporean context.

*Lack of structured and institutionalised training programmes*

12. While continuous capability development of TA groups and practitioners is critical to the growth and sustainability of the TA scene, there is a lack of structured and institutionalised training programmes for many of the TA forms. This is attributed to the nature of the practice, where skills are often passed down through informal means such as rote learning and personalised coaching/ mentoring. In addition, many of the practitioners are also not technologically adept, and therefore unable to leverage on online learning or the benefits of new media trends.

*Renewed interest by younger generation and growth in community-based practices*

13. There have been an increasing number of young practitioners, especially in traditional dance and music. They have the potential to initiate change, generate interest in the art form and rejuvenate its practice. Due to the nature of traditional arts practices and its close links with grassroots culture and traditions, there is a high level of traditional arts activity at the community level. Although often of amateurish standards, these practices nevertheless provide huge outreach and engagement opportunities.

## **A VISION FOR TRADITIONAL ARTS**

14. Despite the challenges cited above, there is nevertheless growing interest in TA among the younger generation. This presents untapped opportunities to contemporise the form, raise artistic standards and rejuvenate the leadership in TA. At the same time, the proliferation of TA activities at the grassroots level also provides room to raise the profile of TA in the local arts scene. Given this, we believe we can look forward to:

- a) A stronger TA scene in Singapore, with more active groups that have a clear vision for their artistic direction as well as organisational capacity - and which are able to assume a leadership position within the sector;
- b) Opportunities for TA practitioners to grow artistically in their chosen career, whereby they have the opportunity to improve their skills, learn from other practitioners and explore collaborative/cross-genre opportunities;
- c) All Singaporeans being able to learn about, be enriched by, appreciate and/or participate in TA.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

15. For there to be a stronger TA scene and opportunities for artistic growth, we need to be able to develop the organisational capabilities of our TA groups, as well as nurture established and emerging talents. In addition, greater research and documentation will form a firmer foundation for TA practitioners to better understand and take their craft to the next level. For all Singaporeans to be able to appreciate and/or participate in TA, we must first create opportunities for them to be exposed to TA activities from a young age; and for avenues for TA to be made more visible as well as accessible. Given this, our strategies will focus on these 4 broad categories:

- (i) Nurture Talent and Develop Capabilities
- (ii) Research and Documentation
- (iii) Developing Audiences and
- (iv) Advocacy and Promotion

## **(I) NURTURE TALENT, DEVELOP CAPABILITIES**

12. While the TA scene today is vibrant, it is dominated by amateur and community groups and the capability of the practitioners is uneven across art forms. Greater support for practitioners to enhance their critical skills and techniques can help elevate and expand their practice. Within the next five years we will seek more capability development opportunities for performance skills, administrative capability as well as facilitation and pedagogical skills.

13. There is also a need to continue to groom sector champions who can take lead in pushing artistic boundaries and initiating ground-up activity such as dialogues and collaboration within the scene. We will continue to extend the consultancy programme to the Major Grant and Seed Grant TA recipients - to help boost their capabilities to take on a larger role as an industry leader to impact the TA sector. Outstanding individuals should also be given more opportunities to develop their leadership skills, for example, through existing NAC's programmes such as NAC Cultural Fellowship as well as other local and overseas platforms.

14. While formal training is important, we need to approach the sector in a more nuanced manner, curating training programmes in a way that encourage openness to participate and learn. We propose to start with learning and networking sessions to bring practitioners together for discussion, sharing and to encourage them to open up to issues beyond their individual practice. In particular, industry feedback has been that there is more room for collaboration in some areas. One example is collaboration between Chinese Music and Chinese Opera, as the two art forms are closely linked culturally.

## **(II) RESEARCH AND DOCUMENTATION**

15. Despite the long history of the traditional arts in Singapore, there is a dearth of research in this field. Over the next few years, NAC will adopt a more active approach in driving traditional arts research and documentation. For practitioners, this would help deepen and broaden their knowledge of their respective forms; as well as ensure the continuity of practice and passing down of knowledge to future generations.

16. NAC is thus embarking on a research study that will lay the foundation for future in-depth discourse and research on TA. The study seeks to understand how specific TA art forms were introduced, evolved over time and gained traction in the community, as well their current state in Singapore. Based on the outcome of this study, we could potentially expand the scope of the project to encompass more research areas, in order to have more comprehensive understanding of the scene.

17. One of the obstacles to the promotion of TA is the lack of quality visual content and stock documentation on local artists and practices. We would look into supporting TA groups to undertake initiatives to document their art form practices, history and evolution of the organisation, significant works and productions through visual documentation and recording, digital archival, publications etc.

18. We will also work with partners to address specific art form needs. One such example is the 5 basic forms of Malay music which could be documented for better access by the public. Such documentation, which can include audio and visual recordings, will serve as a starting point to understand and appreciate the forms. They can also be resource material for teachers and students. Similarly in the Chinese dance sector, which had pioneer dancers that contributed significantly to the development of the scene, but information on their contribution has been limited.

### **(III) DEVELOPING AUDIENCES**

19. To increase audience numbers and reach out to the younger generation, there is a need to renew public perceptions of TA as being 'dated', unimportant or irrelevant. Only when TA is seen as a legitimate and integral part of our arts and cultural landscape can it truly extend its reach to the younger generation, sustain interest and practice in it and expand its audience base. We propose to achieve this through the following:

#### *Flagship platforms to increase visibility of TA*

20. We will partner with major players to profile TA on important platforms. Such platforms allow TA practitioners to reach out to a larger audience base, as well as place TA within the larger arts and culture landscape. At the same time, art form-specific showcase platforms like MUARA (Malay Dance) help to deepen outreach and education efforts for audiences who already have a nascent interest in these forms. Going forward, we will seek out more collaborative opportunities with partners, to showcase TA.

#### *Impactful outreach platforms*

21. In recent years there have been major platforms and more outreach and education programmes initiated by groups; one such example is Singapore Chinese Orchestra (SCO)'s My People, My Music concert which brought the local Chinese music scene together through a large-scale platform involving more than 3000 musicians from schools and community-based Chinese orchestras. This concert reached out to at least 30,000 audiences. In addition, it also sparked media interest and generated not just news coverage on the event but also greatness awareness on the practice of Chinese music in Singapore. We will work with the SCO or other groups to programme more of such platforms.

22. Conversely, the Chinese opera scene does not have similar platforms that can galvanise audiences. We will work with the relevant organisations to reinstate platforms such as the Hong Lim Park Chinese opera series. This series, for instance, offered free performances and managed to attract a large public following, contributing in a significant manner to audience interest in the art form in the 1980s and 1990s. It also provided an aspirational point for local opera groups to work towards and to showcase their art on a more regular basis. Likewise, there has been feedback from the dance sector that platforms which took place in the 80s, such as the Dance Festival and Asian Performing Arts Festivals allowed companies and practitioners from all genres of dance to perform together and learn from each other. These had been impactful in terms of profiling and creating excitement for the dance scene. NAC will work with key partners in the scene to explore reinstating such common platforms.

### Customised age-appropriate programmes

23. Age-appropriate programmes help increase the accessibility of TA to the younger generation. For instance, in collaboration with Tian Yun Beijing Opera Society, a Chinese opera production was adapted and shown to for over 600 students from 4 primary and secondary schools. Companies such as SCO also has targeted programmes pushed out through its education and outreach efforts. We will continue to work with these companies and will also explore new partnerships to seed more of such similar projects.

### Cultivate the next generation of audiences by tapping on existing scheme and programme in schools

24. There is already an active and vibrant TA scene in schools, with 15 per cent of NAC-Arts Education Programmes being TA programmes. Going forward, we will work with MOE and individual schools to expand TA's presence, both in their main curriculum as well as in co-curricular activities through schemes like Artist in School, NAC-Arts Education Programme, Arts and Culture Presentation Grant and by working closely with Singapore Teachers' Academy for the Arts (STAR).

### More inter-generational activities to attract the young outside schools

25. The next generation of audiences need not only be cultivated within schools, but also through activities outside schools. We will work with partners to incorporate intergenerational, children's and family bonding activities. Such platforms provide an opportunity to engage younger audiences and may encourage them to go deeper and learn more about the art form.

### Stepping up International Development Efforts

26. TA groups such as Ding Yi Music Company, Siong Leng Musical Association, Nadi Singapura Ltd, Era Dance Theatre etc. travel frequently in the region to perform at various platforms. Such activities should continue and more showcasing at major platforms in the region and beyond should be encouraged. International exposure not only serves to build greater confidence in their own works but also bring greater awareness of their limitations. Exposure and exchanges outside Singapore will also lead to international collaboration. This will further accelerate the development of the groups. NAC could assist to develop practical information and resources to better equip the groups in their internationalisation effort. Workshops, online resources and toolkits to help the companies and practitioners in internationalisation could be organised and put in place in partnership with external parties. Incentive programmes could also be developed to encourage presenters based internationally to source for productions in Singapore.

#### **(IV) ADVOCACY: RAISING VISIBILITY AND PROMOTION**

27. Advocating for TA requires active promotion and engagement in order to make a meaningful impact on the public psyche. We seek to raise the visibility of TA in Singapore through the following:

##### *Making TA more easily understood*

28. As our younger generation do not understand or speak dialects well, in order to successfully promote TA forms such as Chinese opera, we need to make it more easily understood by our audiences. We will continue to support via our grants schemes, the efforts of Chinese opera groups to incorporate surtitling in their programmes, and step up our effort in helping the TA sector understand the importance of such aid in their productions to attract the young and new audiences. Anecdotal feedback from audiences has been that the presence of English and Chinese subtitles during shows have helped them to understand and follow plot developments, and have encouraged them to turn up for more of these shows.

##### *Documenting and celebrating our cultural Icons*

29. There is also a need to document the works of our cultural icons so that more people are aware of them and appreciate their contributions. We will work with partners to compile and document the journey and the works of the pioneer TA artists and the major players today, and profile them at appropriate platforms so that TA can capture more attention of the overall public imagination.

#### **CONCLUSION**

30. Apart from the continual deepening of artistic practice, the next stage of development for the Traditional Arts sector is most contingent upon the ability of key players to strengthen their organisational capacities, in order to be in a strong position to push artistic boundaries, galvanise the scene and to engage in successful collaborative efforts. NAC's support for TA is therefore targeted at skills and capacity-building. At the same time, we want to captivate the interest of younger audiences, and capture the overall public imagination by (i) making the form more easily understood and accessible, and (ii) integrating TA into mainstream platforms in the local cultural landscape. These strategies are undergirded by the research and documentation of TA forms, which will serve to better inform TA practice, as well as NAC's future policies for the sector.