

MINISTER'S ENGAGEMENT SESSION WITH MAJOR COMPANIES

5 August 2021 – Minister for Culture, Community and Youth Edwin Tong and Ms. Goh Swee Chen, Chairman NAC, hosted an engagement session with over 80 arts leaders from 46 Major Companies (MCs), to discuss challenges faced and shifts undertaken as a result of Covid-19, explore what is needed to enable the scene to become more sustainable and vibrant and as well as how MCs can leverage on collaborations with partners and each other.

Participants were invited to go into four breakout groups for discussion, co-facilitated by the following co-facilitators. Q1 and Q3 are addressed by all four groups, while Q2 is different between the first two groups and the last two groups.

Arts Co-facil	NAC Co-facil	Questions
Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director, Drama Box	Tay Tong, Director, Visual Arts	Q1: What is your take on how the arts scene has changed since the onset of COVID-19?
Dedric Wong, Assistant Conductor, Ding Yi Music Company	Aruna Johnson, Director Literary Arts	Q2a: What are key interventions needed to enable the scene to be more sustainable and vibrant? Q3: How can NAC continue the conversation with the MCs?
Charlotte Nors, Managing Director, Singapore Repertory Theatre	Melanie Huang, Director, Industry and Business Transformation	Q1: What is your take on how the arts scene has changed since the onset of COVID-19? Q2b: How can MCs leverage collaborations with others, e.g., private sector players, for-profit organisations and other MCs?
Mae Anderson, Chairman, Art Outreach	Linda de Mello, Director, Citizen and Sector Engagement	Q3: How can NAC continue the conversation with the MCs?

These were the key points that came up from the breakout discussions:

Q1: What is your take on how the arts scene has changed since the onset of Covid-19?

- There was general agreement that many arts groups have largely been on “survival mode” over the last 18 months. Besides concerns over funding and financial viability, participants raised the need to also address issues like mental health of arts workers, loss of talent from the sector, and loss of artistic motivation.
- It was however acknowledged that most artists and arts groups have become resilient and innovative during this time in response to rapid changes in Safe Management Measures (SMMs). This has been despite abrupt changes and the lack of a clear roadmap for reopening as well fragmented / conflicting information from different agencies which have caused challenges and confusion on the ground.
- The pandemic has accelerated the pivot to digital modes by many artists which has enabled them to continue engaging audiences. Many have also found opportunities to collaborate with international partners digitally during this time. However, artists are concerned over the loss in

quality of works in the digital medium, particularly as there is unevenness in the way artists have embraced technology. Digitalisation also comes with rising costs (e.g. copyright) and there is a sense of digital fatigue both in art making and from our audiences, while increased competition from free international digital offerings has posed challenges in monetising local digital offerings.

Q2a: What are key interventions needed to enable the scene to be more sustainable and vibrant?

- Participants called for a clearer roadmap of support in tandem with the reopening of the sector. For example, further extension in venue hire subsidy (as opposed to an immediate removal of such subsidies when SMMs are relaxed) would provide sufficient buffer for arts groups, and insurance for artists/arts groups to deal with changing SMMs as the sector steps up activity levels in the months ahead.
- More can be done to look into adjacent roles that artists/arts groups could play in the wider ecosystem and sector, that could potentially create new pathways and job opportunities during the pandemic.
- There was acknowledgement of the need to harness more support from private and community sectors. Fund-raising has been more challenging in the past year, and the arts sector would have to step up efforts to attract support.
- Participants noted the need to support the large number of Self-Employed Persons (SEPs) in the arts sector. While the SEP grant was a timely relief measure, there could be refinements to benefit more SEPs. There was acknowledgement that MCs played a key role in sustaining SEPs as major employers.

Q2b: How can MCs leverage collaborations with others, e.g., private sector players, for-profit organisations and other MCs?

- Most participants agreed on the merits of partnerships and collaborations e.g., between international and local artists, MCs with corporates providing in-kind support for technology, MCs working with other MCs to reach out to more audiences or fundraise together, arts practitioners coming together to learn and be more creative. Some participants called for a rethink of funding models for MCs, and suggested corporates and foundations could support capacity building and provide funding for operating costs (as opposed to programmatic funding), and in-kind support such as for space.
- Technology should not be considered a privilege, and there is a need to ensure artists have access to technology and can be equipped with skills to harness it. Some participants suggested the idea of a “digital playground” that was not driven by KPIs and could support the learning of artists and arts groups in terms of technological inaugurations. Corporate partners could come in to provide in-kind support for technology.
- Some participants did caution that while collaboration brings value, there is a need to ensure that funding and KPIs continue to provide for the uniqueness and individuality in the arts.

Q3: How can NAC continue the conversation with the MCs?

- Participants highlighted the need for regular communication with NAC to be updated in a timely manner on developments, and to raise their concerns in working towards solutions. They requested for mutually respectful and constructive conversations where their inputs would be factored into NAC's operational plans and strategies.
- They identified the need for NAC to facilitate conversations with other stakeholders such as government agencies like PA or MOE. This would enable the arts community to work with NAC in advocating for the arts and in highlighting the sector's concerns.
- Participants also acknowledged that beyond working with NAC, they could come together in self-organised ways as a community to share resources and best practices.

Minister's and Chairman NAC's response

- Minister reassured participants that MCCY and NAC were well aware of the difficulties that had been posed by re-calibrated reopening plans and changing SMMs at short notice.
- Plans for reopening earlier were derailed by emergence of recent Covid-19 clusters, but with the strong growth in vaccination rates, Singapore was on track to target 80-85% vaccination in 1.5 to 2 months' time, and with this, the arts sector can look forward to increased audience capacities for vaccinated audiences, ease of restrictions of backstage crew, onstage performances and digital productions. Minister shared that the arts community could look forward to some positive announcements within the next few days. He encouraged all to work closely with NAC on the revised rules so as to bring back more arts programming and audiences in the months ahead.
- Minister affirmed the need for NAC to have regular and open communications with MCs. He urged that these be outcome-driven, particularly in the areas of funding, education, and technology. While NAC could do more on its part, Minister recommended that the sessions could be positioned as a partnership between NAC and MCs, where representatives could come together in smaller groups to address top key points from today's session and co-solution. He noted that in responding to the Covid situation, the arts sector had shown itself to be highly resilient and innovative. NAC's relief measures would be sustained to support transformation efforts and to ensure the sustainability of the sector including SEPs.
- Chairman summarised the session into three key blocks of issues to be worked on:
 - Planning the road to recovery, in terms of opening the sector safely and the infrastructure support required and duration;
 - Strengthening and broadening the arts ecosystem through upskilling and collaboration;
 - Relooking the assumptions that are fundamental to the arts ecosystem (e.g., space, funding, measures of success, changing audiences, as well as addressing the potential and challenges of technology)
- Chairman noted that NAC could consider the approach of facilitating an Alliance for Action (AfA) which would bring together the MCs, private and people sectors to identify problem statements, possible immediate actions and later develop longer term solutions.
- Chairman said that NAC would share with all participants the documentation of discussions for their reference. She closed the session by thanking Minister and all participants for a fruitful and constructive time together.