



**B**orn in 1963 in Singapore, Alvin Tan is one of Singapore's most prolific theatre directors and arts educators, and the founder and artistic director of The Necessary Stage (TNS). With a career spanning nearly three decades, Tan has evolved a body of artistic work, from plays which are text-based and in the style of New Realism to devised theatre that are intercultural and interdisciplinary in nature. A leading proponent of devised theatre, Tan is best known for his social anthropological approach in unearthing characters and humanitarian issues featured in his works, as well as achieving depth and understanding with his artistic collaborators, both locally and internationally. As an artist with a firm belief in the power of theatre for civic engagement, Tan has come to represent an inclusive and distinctive voice in Singapore's arts landscape.

Since founding TNS in 1987, Tan has led the company to be one of Singapore's leading theatre companies, staying true to Singaporean identity, language, and concerns. Tan has directed over 100 original Singaporean plays, many of which were critically acclaimed. They include *Still Building* (1992-1994), *Off Centre* (1993,

2007), *Completely With/Out Character* (1999), *Those Who Can't, Teach* (1990, 2010), *Mobile 2: Flat Cities* (2013) and *godeatgod* (2002, 2004, 2005), which was restaged with 7.84, a Scottish theatre company and toured to international theatre festivals in Hong Kong, Romania and Hungary. *Fundamentally Happy* (2006) and *Gemuk Girls* (2008) were awarded Production of the Year at the 7<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> *The Straits Times Lifestyl* Theatre Awards respectively. In 2011 he won Best Director for *Model Citizens* (2010) at the same award. Tan's pioneering work in arts education started in 1992 and has led to numerous Theatre-in-Education and Drama-in-Education programmes and plays, touring schools and reaching out to hundreds of thousands of young audiences.

Tan's intercultural approach to theatre practice, where the negotiation of cultural identities begins from the rehearsal room to the stage, has gained international breadth and reach. Tan has directed international collaborations such as *Mobile* (2006) and *Mobile 2: Flat Cities* (2013) with Singaporean, Japanese and Malaysian artists; *Crossings* (2012) with TRAFIK (Croatia); *Past Caring* (2009) with Tony Yap Company (Australia); and *Sofaman* (2009) with Theatre KnAM (Russia) in 2010.

Tan is a respected mentor and industry leader who has nurtured young artists such as Chong Tze Chien of The Finger Players and Natalie Henneidge of Cake Theatre. Alvin was instrumental in initiating empowering platforms such as the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival (2005), Theatre For Youth Branch (1992), Marine Parade Theatre Festival (2000), and Theatre for Seniors (2008) that have inspired and enabled different local communities to examine their stories and cultural identities through theatre. He has led trailblazing publications such as *Ask Not: The Necessary Stage in Singapore Theatre* (2004) and *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre* (1997) that facilitated the interflow of ideas and knowledge among arts practitioners and society at large.

Tan is a sought-after speaker at local and international conferences on intercultural collaboration in theatre practice, arts education and community development. He is also the recipient of the Fulbright Scholarship in 1998, the Young Artist Award conferred by the National Arts Council in 1998, and *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* conferred by the French Ministry of Culture in 2010.



## Alvin Tan Art and Social Engagement

By Clarissa Oon

To the casual observer, art and activism are inseparable in the works of socially-oriented theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS), and by extension its artistic director Alvin Tan. The subject matter of key TNS productions speaks of the desire to verbalise the unspoken and empower marginalised communities. Seminal plays directed by Tan such as *Off Centre* (1993), *Completely With/Out Character* (1999) and *Gemuk Girls* (2008) were born out of fieldwork with mental patients, AIDS patients and ex-political detainees respectively. Each was groundbreaking in its time. *Gemuk Girls* came at a time when former political detainees and opponents of the ruling People's Action Party were starting to tell their side of the story by publishing their memoirs; the play gave flesh to the thorny political and moral issues surrounding the detention without trial of such figures deemed to be security threats. By turns witty and moving, the confessional monodrama *Completely With/Out Character* marked the first public coming-out of a Singaporean with AIDS, Paddy Chew, who died shortly after performing as himself.



The largely controversial *Off Centre* humanised mental illness, unfolding as a critique of Singaporean definitions of success and 'normality' as well as the silence surrounding taboos such as insanity; one character contrasts, "the kiasu suicide. Get rope, bedsheets, poison, ... knives... everything also must have" with "the slow suicide - stay in Singapore". Coming in an era where such outspokenness in the public sphere was still rare and not without recrimination, the 1993 production had a sold-out run and was hailed by then Straits Times' theatre critic, Hannah Pandian, as marking "a new maturity in Singapore theatre, addressing an audience prepared to be challenged"<sup>1</sup>. The Ministry of Health, which originally commissioned the play, withdrew its funding because Tan and Haresh Sharma refused to tone down their depiction of mental illness. Thirteen years later, however, *Off Centre* became the first Singapore play to be selected by the Ministry of Education as a literature text for Singapore students taking their "O" levels.

While seeking out socially-charged material, Tan has also become clearer about the distinction between art and activism. His grappling with this has guided the theatre-making process of TNS. Founded in 1987 as a group of recent National University of Singapore graduates and drama enthusiasts, it grew into

a professional theatre company with full-time practitioners by 1992. Pre-TNS, Tan's nurturing personality and tendency to advocate for the disenfranchised could already be felt; he was an English Literature teacher in a secondary school before going full steam into theatre, and was involved in some advocacy and social work as a member of the Young Christian Students Movement. He learned the ropes of theatre from numerous school and campus plays, and during the early days of TNS, participated in theatre workshops conducted by the likes of local drama doyen Kuo Pao Kun and Brazilian activist and theatre theorist Augusto Boal. His first formal education in theatre came when he did his Master of Philosophy in postmodern theatre theory and practice at the University of Birmingham in 1996. In a 1997 essay, the director wrote of TNS' philosophy and its inherent tensions:

*"... our interest is in a 'social' theatre that challenges rationalised mindsets. We do not share the premise that art has to be autonomous, existing for its own sake. Of course, it is necessary to avoid being didactic (art only serving a social or educational function) lest we end up with propaganda theatre, one that is intolerant of differing perceptions. The challenge is to find ways to remain socially committed without having the work proposing a privileged viewpoint."<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>1</sup> Sharma, Haresh. *Off Centre*. Singapore: Ethos, 2000. 109.

<sup>2</sup> Pandian, Hannah. "Play Marks Maturity of Theatre." *The Straits Times* 3 Sept. 1993: L8. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Tan, Alvin. "A Necessary Practice." 9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre. The Necessary Stage, 1997. 267.

## CAREER HIGHLIGHTS

- 2011 Won Best Director for *Model Citizens* at the 11th Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards
- 2010 Conferred *Chevalier des Arts et Lettres* by the Ministry of Culture in France
- 2009 The Necessary Stage presented *Mobile*, its first intercultural theatre collaboration created with artists from Japan, The Philippines, Singapore and Thailand
- 2006 *Off Centre* became the first Singapore play to be selected by the Ministry of Education as a literature text for GCE "O" level students
- 1998 Awarded the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council

This 'privileged viewpoint' amounted to the liberal intellectual's uncritical championing of a minority voice, and in the process closing off other points of view. By this point, Tan was moving away from what could be considered the first phase of the company's development - the more direct, oppositional brand of theatre felt in *Off Centre* which countered government propaganda and deeply-ingrained assumptions of mainstream society. Towards the end of the 1990s, in an attempt to be less didactic, the company entered a second phase moving away from linear storytelling towards postmodern experiments with irony, camp, fractured narratives and subversive juxtapositions of scenes. The tenor of this phase is captured in *ABUSE SUXXX!!!* (2001). Ostensibly about physical and mental abuse, the production conceptualised by Tan and Sharma was devised with a five-member ensemble. It revealed the twisted intimacies between 'abuser' and 'abused' through scenes such as a bespectacled schoolgirl tearfully recounting what seems to be a straightforward case of sexual abuse by an older man, before breaking out into full-on sexual temptress mode, boasting of how she made use of her partner to obtain good grades and then turned him in to the police. The tendency during this period of TNS' development was towards caricatures rather than characterisation, and deliberate obscurantism. Art critic Lee Weng Choy suggested at a forum organised by TNS that *ABUSE SUXXX!!!* had reduced the "encounter with art to the dictatorship of the spectator - I get to make whatever meaning I like from whatever I see"<sup>4</sup>.

From the mid-2000s, TNS entered a third, mature phase that saw a return to a stronger authorial point of view and more defined characters, who nonetheless had complex motivations and were embedded within layered narratives. *Gemuk Girls* is a prime example. About three generations of a single, fictional, politically-involved Malay family, it is a critique of the positivist view of Singapore history which explains away these real-life detentions from the 1960s to the 1980s as necessary for political stability - "We have created fear - the best solution for progress", one character says sardonically<sup>5</sup>. However,



Alvin Tan (second from left) in rehearsal for *Crossings*  
Photo Credit: Tan Ngai Heng

<sup>4</sup> Lee, Weng Choy. "Kitsch and the Singapore Modern." *Focus* 21 Oct. 2002: 141. Print.

<sup>5</sup> Sharma, Haresh, *Trilogy*. The Necessary Stage, 2010. 166.



Encore *It's Love, Life!* (2013)  
Photo Credit: Delwin Lee



*Fundamentally Happy* (2006)  
Photo Credit: Caleb Ming / SURROUND



*Gemuk Girls* (2008)  
Photo Credit: Caleb Ming / SURROUND



*Model Citizens* (2010)  
Photo Credit: Caleb Ming / SURROUND

it also looks even-handedly at detainee Marzuki's estrangement from his family - the price he pays for his idealism and refusal to sign the false 'confession' that will secure his release - and granddaughter Juliana's desire to make a difference to the Malay community by joining the ruling establishment. The play left many audience members in tears, bagged Production of the Year at the 2009 *The Straits Times Life!* Theatre Awards, and was also warmly received in Malaysia which also has a history of detention without trial under the Internal Security Act.

Tan sees the company's artistic development as cyclical. He says that there is from time to time a "re-visitation of our past forms" which is not "rinse and repeat", but "using a similar form but (with) different permutations, making more mature artistic decisions"<sup>6</sup>. One example of such revisiting of past forms can be seen in the creation of *..... Can Change* (2010), a play consisting of three parts, namely, 'Singles Can Change', 'Homosexuals Can Change', and 'Marxists Can Change'. 'Homosexuals Can Change' originated as an episode from *ABUSE SUXXX!!!* and depicts without parody a gay Christian man earnestly trying to 'turn straight' and finding happiness in doing so. Juxtaposed alongside the other two vignettes in *..... Can Change*, 'Homosexuals Can Change' became less about self-flagellation than a provocative challenge to liberal political correctness. Tan's intention, as articulated in an interview, was to "criticise the liberals who only think that liberal thinking is superior and is the only way to go. Because, again, that does not respect difference... (Conservatives) have every right to have their conservative ideas in Singapore. But you can talk to them, continue to have conversations with them"<sup>7</sup>. It reflects Tan's view of theatre as a forum for dialogue and a democratic platform reflecting multiple points of view, even that which may be unpalatable to some.

The polysemic nature of this social theatre is partly also the outcome of a shift in TNS's relationship with the state. In 1994, a critical report in *The Straits Times* revealed that Tan and Sharma had attended a forum conducted by Boal, and painted them by association as Marxists. This was a serious charge as seven years before, a group of young social activists had been detained without trial under the charge of planning a 'Marxist conspiracy' to overthrow the Singapore government. But then-National Arts Council chairman Professor Tommy Koh wrote to the newspaper to defend the duo, and since the late 1990s, the theatre company has been a major grant recipient of the Council. This apparent reversal of fortunes was referenced in the self-poofting 'Marxists Can Change' vignette. Tan has commented that TNS's relationship with the government is no longer one of 'us' versus 'them', and that he does not feel it is tenable to hold such an exclusivist position:

*"From the year 2000, every time I speak in interviews, I have been sharing with everyone that it is not really about 'us' versus 'them'; because it is the post-modern era, so there are a lot of things that we overlap, and quite a number of things that we work with the government like arts education, arts festival etc...It's not like we are oppositional to the establishment all the time. Rather than taking that kind of simplistic opposition, we look at alternatives, if the government is north, we are not always south all the time, there is east, there is west, etc. So why don't we occupy these other positions rather than always feeling the obligation to take the direct oppositional stance?"*

In these remarks, Tan is drawing a line between art and activism and how what is black and white for the latter, is not so for the former. In a more recent interview, he noted of his theatre-making, "The works see an interaction between art and activism but there are areas where art is what I am accountable to and not the principles of activism."<sup>8</sup>

The other fuzzy distinction is identifying where Tan begins and The Necessary Stage ends. The company's collaborative methodology stems from Tan's activist side. He says "my activism guides me to redefine the social relations in the artistic process," and he prefers to "trust and respect" his collaborators rather than relying on "hierarchical measures"<sup>9</sup>. Broadly speaking, there are many authors of a TNS production - the text may be drawn from research interviews, improvised by actors or written by Sharma, and non-textual modes of meaning-making such as dance or video may also be deployed. Tan explains the "invisibility" of his directorial role in this way:

*"I like to be felt or experienced in retrospect. I see myself as someone lacking in an ostentatious disposition because I have an aversion for that...How I increasingly see myself is as an artist who can bring other artists together to work in a process where they have a say in how the work evolves. But that does not mean that Haresh and I do not have a final say. We do but we will negotiate and also fight for the integrity of the concepts from our collaborators if we really like them and believe they will work for the performance."<sup>10</sup>*

Tan's generosity towards others and his lack of ego are integral to the social engagement of TNS, as the art-making has an integrity that speaks for itself, rather than of him.

#### About the writer

Clarissa Oon has been writing about the Singapore arts scene since 1998. She is currently Deputy Editor of *The Straits Times Life!* section.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid*

<sup>8</sup> Oon, 'Alvin Tan'. Email interview. August 29, 2014.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *ibid*

## WORDS OF APPRECIATION

*"I wish to thank my parents for their constant love and support. As a student, seeing how I flitted from one interest to another, I recall my mother being a little worried. However, after obtaining my degree, she told me to get a job that would make me happy. She said, "You have only one life." Thank you for your patience, understanding and faith in my search that led me to the love of my life.*

*My deep heartfelt thanks and love to my long-time collaborator - playwright Haresh Sharma, whose steadfast creative partnership has inspired the evolution of The Necessary Stage's devising methodology that has been responsible for over 100 original works staged locally and internationally in the span of 27 years.*

*My thanks to Kuo Pao Kun and T. Sasitharan, from whom I draw creative stamina. To all the collaborators in The Necessary Stage's productions, thank you for inspiring and challenging me.*

*To my colleagues at the Bat Cave for your dedicated and enduring support, without whom there is no alternate bubble to wake up and go to. A haven for dreamers to work and play.*

*To the National Arts Council whose faith in our work has been most invaluable to our development over the years.*

*Thanks to individuals who went out of your ways to make tiny tweaks to schemes, making a huge difference to our practice in terms of opening up opportunities and possibilities.*

*Last but not least, thanks to all who have nominated me and who have honoured me with this award. It is my privilege and joy to receive this recognition.*

Alvin Tan