

## WHY THEATRE & WHERE CAN WE TAKE IT TO?

1. **Theatre is multi-sensory and highly communicative**, bringing together literary, visual and audio elements that create an immersive and engaging experience that is unlike any other art form. Audiences can be transported into another reality, another dimension and encounter something which they would not in daily life. It is an effective avenue for stories to be told, feelings to be communicated, conflicts to be discussed and resolutions to be explored or found. It provides a platform for experiences to be shared between those involved in creating the work onstage and off-stage, as well as with audiences..

2. In the early stages of the scene's development in the 60s through to the 80s and 90s, the concern was for the development of a Singapore voice through theatre. This period saw the **establishment of what we see are major theatre companies today**, such as Kuo Pao Kun's The Theatre Practice and those set up by people whom he had mentored, including TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage. In the past decade, with the opening of more venues such as those in the integrated resorts, the scene has become a lot more diverse and busy with foreign shows including musicals and other blockbusters. There is also a stronger sense of an "industry" today, with major companies having established a "machinery" to create, produce, present, market shows. Practitioners are also juggling multiple productions at the same time.

3. Moving forward, for the scene to make the next quantum leap, there needs to be some **consolidation and specialisation of roles**. This is so that artists can go deeper and truly invest in the creative process to create quality works and for the scene to evolve a canon of local works that Singaporeans identify with and are proud of. Singapore theatre should also communicate to international peers and audiences. It is our aspiration for more local artists and works to be well-received and respected on the international stage.

## THE THEATRE SCENE TODAY

4. Based on NAC's Cultural Statistics, there were on average of 10 Theatre performances a day in 2012, with 300 ticketed attendances for each performance. At 158 companies, the Theatre sector has the second largest number of companies registered in 2012.

### *Base of established companies but growing pool of independent artists in need of nurturing*

5. Today, the theatre scene sees a base of professional companies with producing capabilities, supported through Major Grant<sup>1</sup>. We also see a base of established practitioners who, in their initial years, had worked their way through to set up these companies on their own. However, there is also a significant pool of independent artists who do not have enough access to the necessary platforms and to producers who can support

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<sup>1</sup> As at FY2014, this includes Teater Ekamatra, TheatreWorks, Toy Factory, Wild Rice, The Necessary Stage, Drama Box, The Finger Players, The Theatre Practice, Singapore Repertory Theatre, I Theatre, Cake Theatrical Productions and Checkpoint Theatre.

their creation and development. In recent years, there is an observation that artists do tend to form collectives who gather to collaborate on specific projects only. However, they lack the “machinery” or capabilities to produce their own show<sup>2</sup> and are distracted from their artistic roles. Hence, the work is not able to reach its full potential. Major Grant companies are the ones with the capabilities, “machinery” and resources to produce but are largely driven by the artistic vision of a single person which independent artists may not want to be confined by. Independent artists may also not necessarily want to formalise by establishing a company or society and be saddled with the administrative burden of doing so. It would also not be useful for a proliferation of companies and societies in a small scene where limited resources would be divided further.

*Continuing Education and Training (CET) opportunities are still limited and not a priority among practitioners*

6. Over the years, NAC had put in place scholarships and residency programmes,<sup>3</sup> and enhanced its training grants to address the need for training at the CET level.<sup>4</sup> However, a few issues remain:

- a) *Skill gaps in several areas still persist.* These include: playwriting, critical writing, technical, design and production management, producing, arts marketing and business development. In some of these areas, there are no structured training opportunities available locally<sup>5</sup> (e.g. producing, critical writing). Where they exist (e.g. playwriting), these efforts are often scattered and do not benefit from economies of scale;
- b) *Limited exposure outside of Singapore.* Other than structured training, practitioners learn from collaborating with others in the art-making process. In a small scene like Singapore’s, being exposed to different artistic impulses and working methodologies outside of Singapore becomes an important part of a practitioner’s development; and
- c) *Practitioners, especially independent artists still do not view training as a priority due to opportunity cost.*<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> In rare instances, some independent artists could be picked up by Major Grant companies to produce their show.

<sup>3</sup> The International Arts Residency (IAR) programmes were launched as part of the Renaissance City Plan 3.0 in 2008. This saw a range of residency programmes, master classes and mentorship opportunities being supported by NAC in collaboration with local and overseas partners progressively, and raising greater awareness of the need for training and nurturing talent. Examples of programmes include the La Mama (Italy) residencies for directors, playwrights and actors; Philippe Gaulier (France) residency and master class for actors; Suzuki Company of Toga (Japan) residency; Intercultural Theatre Institute (Singapore) Professional Diploma in Intercultural Theatre (Acting); The Substation (Singapore) Directors’ Lab mentorship programme; and The Finger Players (Singapore) Watch This Space mentorship programme for playwrights.

<sup>4</sup> The new Capability Development Grant has an expanded scope from the earlier Arts Professional Development Grant and its objectives are to encourage companies to think about the training needs of their staff, as well as play a role in nurturing less experienced practitioners or new entrants, and for individual practitioners to consider their own developmental goals and needs.

<sup>5</sup> Today, many people learn on the job while being guided or mentored by someone more experienced.

<sup>6</sup> Opportunity cost includes potential earned income from working on a production.

7. Moving forward, while the new Capability Development Grant is able to support a wide variety of training needs of the industry, the NAC will continue to source for opportunities that cannot be found by practitioners on their own, partner established companies and institutions in Singapore, as well as the new entities recommended below (e.g. Centre for text-based works) to put in place such opportunities.

*Need for a deeper creative process*

8. The scene today is an output-driven one, pushed by practical and economic pressures of high costs. Companies are thus pressed to do more shows so that there can be constant income generation to sustain overall operations. There is also a preference for new works, carried over from a previous period where evolving a Singapore voice and identity was a primary concern. As a result, creative processes and runs are short<sup>7</sup> without an iterative process of refinement. New works are staged as full-scale productions immediately and rarely restaged. Little value is given to the role of the dramaturge as a “third eye”, and little attention is placed on research, documentation and critical writing / discourse to give a work greater depth and meaning. There is insufficient qualified talent to go round the number of productions due to clashing schedules in a busy scene. Driven by the need to sustain or improve their livelihoods, practitioners become fatigued by the number of productions they take on and cannot dedicate themselves fully to each. As a result, the quality of many productions suffers and cannot compete with international acts (that have a dedicated team and years of development and refinement) in attracting audiences. As the scene develops, there needs to be some consolidation so that we produce less but with each production there is greater focus and dedication, as well as longer runs and re-stagings to build audiences and evolve a Singapore canon over time.

9. More can be done to support the development of text-based works to provide diversity. Text-based works are likely to have a longer gestation period than devised works due to an iterative refinement process, but these are the works which are likely to be restaged many times as they can be transmitted easily. In doing so, they improve over time or take on new meaning with different interpretations and become part of the psyche of a larger segment of society as people participate by staging, watching, or studying them. While there are some playwriting platforms today by the industry<sup>8</sup> or offered as part of tertiary education<sup>9</sup>, these are scattered and have no clear and sustained development pathway. As a result, some who have benefitted from these platforms give up after some time.

*Need for more programmed performing venues, especially mid-sized theatres.*

10. Theatre companies are in need of programmed venues that can take on the roles of producing, presenting and marketing their works, and bearing the associated financial risks. Today, companies undertake all these themselves, which distracts them from their core objectives of artistic creation. In particular, to complement the existing black box spaces in the landscape today, Theatre companies need mid-sized presenting venues so that they can

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<sup>7</sup> Typically works are produced in 3 – 6 months, and runs are only 3 – 7 days long.

<sup>8</sup> E.g. TheatreWorks’ 24-hour playwriting competition, Drama Box’s Blanc Space, Chong Tze Chien’s Watch This Space.

<sup>9</sup> E.g. NUS Dept of English Language and Literature’s programmes in playwriting: Introduction to Playwriting module and Advanced Playwriting module.

focus on and scale up their art-making. For some companies on an upward trajectory, they would benefit from their own dedicated performance venue so that they can grow as a producing house and develop works of a more significant scale that resonate with an international audience. Having a dedicated space with consistent programming would enable companies to provide regular job opportunities to practitioners, and improve the overall quality of the work. Regular programming with longer runs will also help the company to develop sustained education and outreach efforts to build up audiences and patrons over time. Such a venue will play a critical role in helping Theatre companies make the next leap and achieve artistic, audience, market and international recognition.

11. For independent artists, small programmed spaces with producing capabilities would be critical. So while there are quite a few black box spaces available today, most are for-hire and few are programmed spaces that support independent artists in a holistic fashion and with sufficient resources<sup>10</sup>.

### *Encouraging Interest in Local Theatre - at Home and Beyond*

12. The 2013 National Population Survey of the Arts revealed that Theatre still remains the most popular art form amongst respondents. However, it is paramount that we continue to look at ways to sustain and nurture this base for the future of our scene, starting at home with a good foundation at a young age, and then looking beyond to identify opportunities to play to a global audience.

13. *Young audiences may not be experiencing the best in theatre.* Induction into the magic of theatre at an early age sets the foundation for lifelong engagement. It develops supporters for the arts in the long term, whether as audiences or patrons, while a smaller proportion might become practitioners. Several initiatives have been put in place and ramped up in this area, especially with the additional funding under the Arts and Culture Strategic Review (ACSR). Examples include the Arts Education Programme (AEP)<sup>11</sup>, National Arts Education Award<sup>12</sup>, Artist-in-School Scheme<sup>13</sup>, Arts and Culture Presentation Grant<sup>14</sup> and NIE Specialist Diploma in Arts Education. However, a gap still exists in theatre performances for children.

14. There is keen demand for theatre for children especially in English and Mandarin, partly driven by parents wanting to expose their children to the arts for their personal development. There is also a small but active base of not-for-profit and for-profit theatre companies<sup>15</sup> that produce works to meet this demand. Funding support such as the Tote

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<sup>10</sup> Existing examples include TheatreWorks, The Substation and The Esplanade Studio Series. However, the selection approach vis target beneficiary, as well as the extent of support in terms of guidance, funding, use of space, producing and presenting services varies across programmes.

<sup>11</sup> The NAC-AEP is a database of quality arts education programmes which schools can purchase from professional arts groups and artists. The Tote Board Arts Grant supports up to 50% of programme costs.

<sup>12</sup> The NAEA is a national award conferred by NAC to recognise schools' efforts in promoting arts education. The NAEA framework developed together with the Ministry of Education encourages schools to provide holistic arts education for all students and affirms schools with good arts practices and programme.

<sup>13</sup> The NAC-AISS supports collaboration between individual schools and local artists / educators in developing arts education programmes customised for their students. NAC provides grants of up to \$10,000 or 30% of costs for up to 2 years.

<sup>14</sup> The ACPG is administered by NAC in partnership with the Ministry of Education and the National Heritage Board to support school groups in staging performances and exhibitions for public audiences.

<sup>15</sup> E.g. include: I Theatre, Singapore Repertory Theatre Little Company, Act 3 and 1n the Act.

Board Arts Grant as well as other initiatives and platforms organised by theatre companies<sup>16</sup> continue to fuel this demand. However, more can be done. There is a perception amongst some that productions for children are less professional and working in this sector is not as glamorous as other genres. Thus, fewer people want to cross over into this genre and some treat their work here as a stepping stone. The irony is that producing for children is a challenging and resource intensive process - children's theatre needs to be age-appropriate, educational and entertaining. There is also a lack of trained performers who are skilled in the forms that children are most taken by (e.g. puppetry), as well as playwrights, directors and designers who can create work for this group.

15. *Limited international presence and reach.* While many theatre companies have periodically presented their works on a range of regional and international platforms, these engagements are often opportunistic and on an ad hoc basis. The international networks that are established are also mostly specific to companies. These various efforts are important and should continue for companies to grow their markets beyond Singapore. To complement or supplement individuals and individual companies' efforts, there is scope to develop focal points by getting key local organisations (such as Esplanade and Arts House which organises the Singapore International Festival of the Arts) with a strong international standing to be intermediaries. Intermediaries could then help open doors, scale up international reach, build audiences, and broker collaborations.

## **A VISION FOR THEATRE**

16. Given that the Theatre scene has a significant base of professional companies and established artists, we believe that we can look forward to:

- a) Artists and companies that are able to stand their own, create defining works that can excite and resonate here and be respected on the international stage;
- b) A stronger Theatre scene in Singapore where there are active intermediaries who can facilitate greater collaboration across the performing arts sector to contribute to the development of the scene, including aggregating efforts in talent development, furthering the quality of local works and developing audiences;
- c) Opportunities for talented Singaporeans to carve out meaningful careers across the fields of theatre education, community engagement, performance, production, producing and management; and
- d) All Singaporeans being able to learn about, be enriched by and appreciate Singapore Theatre.

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<sup>16</sup> Examples include the Esplanade's Feed Your Imagination (FYI) platform, I Theatre's ACE! Festival.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### (I) Producing new Singapore stories, Re-telling older ones

17. Artists need to create, and that creative process is one that needs experimentation and space to fail, in order for a work of quality to emerge. With a sophisticated audience base that is well-exposed to the international arts scene and a need for more aggressive advocacy and promotion of theatre to make it a part of mainstream consciousness, we need to provide resources for artists to incubate and invest in developing quality works that can excite and resonate with audiences here and overseas. Our first priority is to develop incubation platforms to help artists to focus on the creation process, to tell new Singapore stories and giving older ones a new lease of life.

#### Establish a Centre for Text-Based Works

18. The need for supporting infrastructure that incubates new writing for theatre and playwriting talent was raised during several consultation sessions in 2012 and 2013. The future development of the Singapore theatre scene is dependent on our ability to create quality texts that can be developed into the next landmark production, which is a process-oriented effort requiring significant time and resources. A Centre can complement existing efforts by other industry players and work in partnership to become a focal point in the scene to play the following roles:

- a) Nurture talent and incubate content through programmes such as residencies, mentorships, workshops, readings and stagings, serving as an intermediary between creators, and producers and presenters to enable next-stage development of content created;
- b) Build public awareness and appreciation for Singapore theatre; and
- c) Be a focal point for research, documentation and critical discourse on the development of Singapore theatre.

19. The Centre will need to adopt an inclusive approach of embracing practitioners who want to pursue text-based works across all languages that Singaporeans use.

20. As the availability of a suitable space for such a Centre came up at 42 Waterloo Street, NAC took the opportunity to conduct an Open Call to identify partners who can jointly achieve the aims above through the space. Following the Open Call process<sup>17</sup>, the collective known as TAFY (2 & Fifty Years) was appointed as the programme partner to develop and manage the Centre. Launched in July 2014, the Centre, now known as Centre 42 is dedicated to the documenting, promoting, and creating of writing for Singapore Theatre.

#### A Programme for Independent Artists

21. A programme that supports the specific needs of independent artists (as described in the highlights of the Plan for the Performing Arts) creates a space for this group to explore

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<sup>17</sup> A 7-member assessment panel chaired by NAC and comprising established writers, programmers and arts practitioners interviewed all 3 applicants. Members of the assessment panel: Janice Koh (Actress & NMP); Clarissa Oon (ST journalist); Tan Tam How (playwright); Zizi Azah Bte Abdul Majid (Artistic Director/Teater Ekamatra and Playwright); Tay Tong (Managing Director, TheatreWorks), Jobina Tan (Deputy Director/Programming, the Esplanade).

new theatre methodology and ideas which will enable them to break new ground in their practice. Theatre (which combines visual, aural and literary elements) is naturally a form that attracts artists keen to work in a multi-disciplinary fashion, after having explored the depths of their individual practices. To complement Centre 42, this programme supports those seeking different mediums for creative expression.

### *Establish a Resident Company Programme*

22. NAC will look into establishing a Resident Theatre Company programme where companies have access to a performance space for an extended period of time. A programme like this would enable and develop the capabilities of major theatre companies to create, produce and present a repertoire of works that can have long runs and create visibility for themselves. It also enables companies to improve the quality of their programmes over time, build audiences through a more complete strategy that encompasses education and outreach programmes beyond main-stage shows, making it easier to attract patronage.

23. To address the scarcity of space, the programme can leverage existing performance spaces of varying sizes. For example, existing spaces such as the Drama Centre Black Box and Theatre, Victoria Theatre, commercial<sup>18</sup> venues, community-based performance venues, as well as education institutions with performance venues<sup>19</sup> can be activated for this purpose, whether throughout the year or for fixed periods of the year. Such partnerships can be mutually beneficial on several levels. For education institutions, such a tie-up would help strengthen the links institutions and their students have with the industry - while the company has access to space, students reap the benefits of working closely with and being mentored by arts professionals. Such networks and insight into the workings of a professional company will help prepare students for the industry in terms of skills and career expectations. For other venues, including commercial and community venues, theatre companies will be able to provide regular programming, create identity, attract footfall and generate vibrancy.

### *Actively promote arts writing and nurture arts writers.*

24. Research, documentation and critical writing are foundational to the development of the scene. However, with a small scene in Singapore, NAC recognises that very few can sustain themselves as a full-time arts writer. It is more practical to expect more people to have careers in other roles (whether within the arts or otherwise) while writing on the side. To this end, our priorities will be to take active steps to raise awareness and appreciation of arts writing, and to nurture aspiring arts writers. Young arts writers can be developed through mentorship platforms or workshops by existing arts writers, for example. An independent arts writing website could also be supported to aggregate online arts writing and serve as a safe space for young arts writers to practise their craft.

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<sup>18</sup> E.g. Genesis Theatre @ Fusionopolis or the soon to be re-opened Capitol Theatre.

<sup>19</sup> E.g. NUS Centre for the Arts, LaSalle College of the Arts, NAFA, polytechnics and ITE.

## **(II) Building the Next Generation: Theatre as part of holistic education**

25. The arts should be a part of family life. One of the ways in which children and families are able to experience the arts together is to provide them with access to quality, age-appropriate content. With the demand for and potential impact of such content, there is a huge opportunity to build the next generation who are our future patrons, artists and audiences.

### Theatre for Young Audiences

26. NAC would like to support practitioners and companies in developing more quality programmes and to expand the reach of such works to a wider base of young audience. This strategy covers three aspects:

- a) *A Tiered capability development* approach for practitioners keen to work in these areas (e.g. playwrights, directors, designers, actors, puppeteers) depending on their level of experience. E.g. foundational talks and workshops for newcomers; mentorships with local established companies for those with some experience; and overseas residencies and mentorships with internationally acclaimed children's theatre companies. NAC will seek out and anchor long-term partnerships with these companies.
- b) *A focused season / platform to draw greater attention and recognition.* There are existing platforms today targeting young audiences, each catering to different age groups, each with unique artistic visions and objectives. They also take place at different times of the year, which can be challenging for parents and schools to keep track of. While some practitioners had suggested aggregating these individual efforts and resources into a single, coherent, industry-led platform with a stronger identity and programme to develop audiences and build profile, this would require closer discussions with the industry on the implementation. It could also reside at a dedicated space for children's theatre (see below), where existing efforts could be collated into a widely marketed calendar of offerings for the year.
- c) *Dedicated space(s) for children's theatre* to provide consistent programming in an environment purpose-built for children - this will be the top-of-mind place(s) for parents seeking out activities for their children at any time of the year. Existing spaces such as those managed by public institutions (and built by government)<sup>20</sup>, housed within education institutions, or other commercial<sup>21</sup> or community-based performance venues) can be activated, repurposed or reconfigured as a dedicated space for children's theatre throughout the year or for fixed periods of the year. Both models can co-exist and locations spread out to various parts of Singapore.

27. The programming strategy of a space dedicated for young audiences should be vibrant, holistic and diverse, and feature both local and international artists. It can also host an annual children's festival. Besides performances, there should be pre- and post-show

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<sup>20</sup> Possibilities include Drama Centre black box, Goodman Arts Centre black box.

<sup>21</sup> E.g. Genesis Theatre @ Fusionopolis.



activities that can engage children and accompanying adults meaningfully. It can also be a resource centre for parents, educators and practitioners interested in engaging young people through the arts.

28. As a space, there will need to be some physical considerations. E.g. a designated space for school buses to pick up and drop off children, a safe waiting area for children away from traffic, availability of seating that is catered to children's physical build etc.

29. A creative and management team appointed to drive the development of the programming and manage the space will commission companies with a strong track record in children's theatre programmes to work within the space for a fixed duration each time to create, produce and present their works. Selected companies could also be located at the space as anchor tenants in order to create a focal point for this sector. NAC will consider the different working models in relation to the idea of the Resident Company Programme and seed this initiative in partnership with an identified industry partner(s). In the longer term, there is scope to expand this to become a Children's Arts Centre, incorporating not just Theatre but also other art forms.

30. NAC will pilot the recommendation in 2015 with interim spaces, where theatre practitioners who are active in this genre will be engaged to design and implement curated seasons of programmes, with the eventual aim of gradually building this programme up towards the dedicated Children's Arts Centre set-up.

31. In the immediate term, existing initiatives and platforms such as the Artist-in-School scheme, Arts Education Programme and training for arts educators will continue. NAC will also continue to work with MOE to facilitate greater communication between schools and theatre companies, bring about greater understanding and bridge expectations on the role of theatre in education, as well as channel schools' demand to quality shows and programmes.

## **CONCLUSION**

32. For the Theatre sector, its next stage of development is most contingent upon its ability to deepen its practice, for players to specialise in different areas, and for efforts to be consolidated so that more can be achieved collectively. While NAC's support remains broad-ranging as in the past, key game changing initiatives are those that will fundamentally change the way the scene creates art, and those that aim to capture young people's imagination for life. These include the structural pieces such as the Centre for Text-Based Works and programmed venues (Resident Company Programme and the Centre / Programme for Independent Artists); and Theatre for Young Audiences.