



KOK HENG LEUN

KOK HENG LEUN (b. 1966) is an exemplary theatre artist who has contributed widely as director, playwright, dramaturg, educator, and artistic director of multidisciplinary community arts projects. He is committed to socially engaged frameworks which generate platforms for participatory and co-creative processes, often developed in collaboration with marginalised communities. These projects show art as a poetic medium of expression, critical reflection and aesthetic exploration in everyday life.



Heng Leun rehearsing with the performers of 'Tanah.Air 水•土: A Play in Two Parts', 2019.
Photo courtesy of Zinkie Aw for Drama Box

Heng Leun graduated in 1990 with a BSc majoring in Mathematics from the National University of Singapore, where a passion for theatre was fuelled by his involvement in Mandarin language theatre. That year he co-founded Drama Box, a leading Singapore theatre company, where he served as Artistic Director from 1998 to 2022. Under his forward-looking leadership, the company has evolved from a focus on Chinese-language theatre to developing multilingual, multidisciplinary, site-responsive and durational initiatives. Collaborating with artists and stakeholders from sectors including heritage, health and policy-making, he innovates new approaches to dialogic performance, spearheading seminal projects such as 'Project Mending Sky' (2008, 2009, 2012), 'IPS Prism' (2012), and 'Both Sides, Now' (2013-present).

He also builds opportunities for actor training and theatre education, which are integral to the enrichment and growth for practitioners. He encourages deep relationships with community and context, an appreciation of history, and respect for difference. Critical productions that embody these motivations include 'Drift' (2007), 'Trick or Threat!' (2007), 'It Won't Be Too Long' trilogy ('The Lesson', 'The Cemetery: Dawn', 'The Cemetery: Dusk') (2015), 'Tanah.Air 水•土: A Play In Two Parts' (2019), and 'ubin' (2022).

Through his practice and pedagogy, Heng Leun has inspired fellow artists and students, locally and abroad, to continually review the role of the arts in society. Renowned internationally for his ability to spearhead contextually grounded processes that are inclusive and adaptive, he is frequently invited to direct, dramaturg and teach in varied spaces. Key projects include 'Dragon Ladies Don't Weep' (Asia TOPA, Australia, 2020), 'Nüwa' (Shanghai Puppet Theatre, China, 2018), and 'Xiao Di Bao' (Centre for Applied Theatre, Taiwan, 2011).

As Nominated Member of Parliament (2016-2018), Heng Leun championed the importance of the arts sector in contemporary urban society, addressing issues such as social justice, cultural equity and gender parity. During his term as Artistic Director, Drama Box won the Advocate Organisation of the Year award at the 2016 Singapore Advocacy Awards. Heng Leun has also received the Young Artist Award (2000) and Cultural Fellowship (2014) given by the National Arts Council, Singapore.



SPARKING A GENUINE CONVERSATION

BY CORRIE TAN

When Kok Heng Leun engages you in conversation, he turns his entire body towards you. He leans forward, nodding, eyes wide. He mirrors your surprise, your delight, your frustration, your fear. You feel yourself coming into focus. But his deep attention isn't a scalpel; nor does it demand more than what is given. Rather, it's a shared experience of sculpting mutual engagement. His curiosity is disarming. You find yourself offering up responses that expand the borders of what a conversation can be. You find a bit more of yourself.

This is what Heng Leun does. His artistic practice is undergirded by what it means to engender conversation — on an intimate scale and on an (inter)national scale. His work is animated by a genuine, infectious curiosity, a deep empathy for marginal and overlooked communities and spaces, and a commitment to making performance relevant and accessible.

As director, dramaturg, facilitator and educator, Heng Leun has centred communities and how we might care for one another and the spaces they inhabit — whether these are the soil we tread on, the neighbourhoods we traverse, or spaces for civic and civil discourse. How might people on opposing sides of a debate engage each other with compassion and respect? How might we rethink the power dynamics between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed”? His work reiterates a sensitivity to the human and more-than-human beings that make the world we live in, and how we might continue to sustain and repair these relationships.



'ubin', 2022.

Photo courtesy of Arts House Limited

Heng Leun studied Mathematics at the National University of Singapore and was about to pursue a teaching career. Then he attended a talk by the late giant of Singapore contemporary theatre, Kuo Pao Kun, and found himself drawn into a completely different universe.¹ After a stint at the former Ministry of Community Development in 1990, he cut his teeth volunteering as a stagehand and crew member at The Substation.² He spent a year as programme executive at the independent arts space. These years of arts administration equipped Heng Leun with the tools to become an intermediary adept at engaging with artists, bureaucrats, politicians and the public, and the vocabularies each group requires.

He then joined theatre company The Necessary Stage, known for its incisive sociopolitical commentary. There, he learnt about the participatory art form, forum theatre, now a methodological cornerstone of his political and community engagement. He has often returned to work with The Necessary Stage, including co-directing a trilogy of hard-hitting plays — 'Manifesto' (2016), 'Underclass' (2018) and 'Opposition' (2022) — which take on the intertwined themes of artistic autonomy, inequality and dignity.

In 1998, Heng Leun became the artistic director of Drama Box, a post he maintained until early 2022. His work with the company is perhaps his most well-known. In its early years, Drama Box focused on a Chinese-language audience, but Heng Leun and the team quickly realised that the diversity of their audience demanded a diversity of linguistic and cultural approaches. While their Chinese-language foundation remains, it is woven through with the multilinguality of Singapore's population. Heng Leun's legacy includes the company's commitment to community-building, meticulously researched social issues, and a great tenderness for the publics and ecologies it connects with.

Heng Leun's work addresses the *space* of performance on several levels: the *dialogic space* of performance, where audiences engage each other in conversation and debate; and which propels them into the *space for civic participation* that extends beyond the stage. Forum theatre founder Augusto Boal envisaged a performance space in which the public's role could be redefined, discarding their role as a passive spectator and becoming an active 'spect-actor'.³ Audiences are encouraged to intervene in a performance and consider how characters make different decisions, or engage with power dynamics in a way that might alter an undesirable outcome.

Watching Heng Leun facilitate is like watching a masterclass in the dramaturgy of public conversation. Down-to-earth, humorous and patient, he invites audience members to consider their own positionalities, reflect on their biases, and assess what they might have done differently. Heng Leun has facilitated in conventional theatre spaces, outdoors, and even on radio, where listeners would call in with their responses. His forum theatre work has



Heng Leun (second from right), with fellow alumni from NUS's Chinese Society Drama Group, having decided to form Drama Box, 1990.

Photo courtesy of Drama Box

since been used to train community and grassroots leaders. Heng Leun believes that well-structured participatory processes allow “people [to] be both responsible, as well as very imaginative”—and bring us closer to a mature society that can weather the strain of dissension without having its social fabric ripped apart.⁴

Heng Leun and his collaborators are transforming these forum theatre and dialogic principles into methodologies tailored to each community and site. This can be seen in the ‘It Won’t Be Too Long’ trilogy: ‘The Lesson’, ‘The Cemetery: Dawn’ and ‘The Cemetery: Dusk’. In 2015, Drama Box staged the first iteration of ‘The Lesson’ in their portable GoLi theatres. The premise: an MRT station will be constructed in a fictional housing estate. Audience members must reach a majority vote on which local site must make way for this station, ranging from a halfway house to a columbarium. They go through rounds of voting and facilitated debate, considering various dimensions of land contestation and how these policy decisions affect their lives. ‘The Lesson’ fleshes out decision-making and advocacy processes for a Singaporean audience who may never have felt the agency to change their outcomes.⁵ Having witnessed many iterations of ‘The Lesson’, I have always been surprised by the possibilities and permutations of the work, and how its creators hone its expansive methodology.⁶

This has continued with ‘The Class Room’ (2019), which borrows from real-life state policymaking around inequality and poverty. Participants collectively figure out which social plan (with challenging conditions attached) might suit a group of low-income families.⁷ Watching an audience of teens and adults problem-solving together, I marvelled at Heng Leun’s hands-off approach to the participants’ abrasions and struggles, allowing them to work through their conflicts.

In Heng Leun’s work, *everyday practices of navigating the city and its spaces* can be both a deeply political act and a joyfully surprising one. Heng Leun cites Michel de Certeau’s ‘The Practice of Everyday Life’ (1980), thinking through the tactics available to the average citizenry to reclaim their political autonomy. Another conceptual influence is political geographer Edward Soja’s “thirdspace,” which considers how people live in and experience their physical and built environment. Many of Heng Leun’s large-scale community projects have taken up residence in that intersection between public space and the imaginative space. The performance and art installations are woven into the everyday rhythms and desire paths of residents, perhaps most prominently in ‘Both Sides, Now’ (2013-present) which tackles taboo conversations around end-of-life care. Most of these productions are free of charge, and demonstrate how art can be both relevant and accessible. These works spend years in a single location, rather than a few pricey evenings in a formal theatre space. They invite the public into a work, and offer them a place to stay.



‘Underclass’ by Drama Box and The Necessary Stage, 2018.

Photo courtesy of Tucky’s Photography

A final performance space Heng Leun has devoted his energies to is *ecological space*. ‘The Cemetery: Dawn and Dusk’ (2015) is a diptych that remains one of the most powerful and moving productions I have ever experienced. ‘Dawn’ took place at daybreak in Bukit Brown Cemetery. We woke up at 4am and made our way to the cemetery in darkness. As the sun came up, we witnessed dance/movement artists perform — adjusting to and interacting with the serendipitous and near-magical choreographies of the natural world. The audience was given the day to sit with this atmospheric experience, and at night we filed into a black box space to witness ‘Dusk’, a verbatim piece put together from the interviews, speeches, press releases and news reports about the contentions over the cemetery. The performance articulates land contestation through movement, music and the elements, but also through testimonies of all those invested in the site — be they the state, individuals or heritage groups. To me, ‘It Won’t Be Too Long’ is an exemplar of what it means to work with a contested environment, and to offer audiences an experience of both education and awe.⁸ Heng Leun continues this dedication to the overlooked histories of land. ‘Tanah•Air 水•土: A Play In Two Parts’ (2019) turned its gaze to the dispossession of indigenous Malays and Orang Seletar. Most recently, his work ‘ubin’ (2022) foregrounded the narratives of islanders living away from the Singaporean mainland, and how we might reimagine and re-wild our relationships with bodies of land and water.

One refrain in these works is to contemplate how we can act as stewards of the land and sea we tread on and move through, not unlike the sustainable and sacred relationships indigenous people have established with their natural environment. This stewardship is, to me, a key aspect of Heng Leun’s cultural leadership. It considers how leadership is meant to be renewed — and that a large part of leading is also letting go. Heng Leun’s tenure as Nominated Member of Parliament for the Arts (2016-2018) allowed him to champion the importance of the arts in civic life. He rendered visible the challenges faced by the arts industry, but also addressed wider concerns around building an inclusive and empathetic society. His attention to continuity, whether as NMP or as former artistic director of Drama Box, speaks to his dedication to the harder work of sustaining infrastructures and relationships, not just for the right-now. Heng Leun’s work as a cultural leader has always been about empowering others to continue, challenge and improve on the work that he has done.

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Corrie Tan is a theatre and performance studies researcher, dramaturg, educator and critic from Singapore.



'The Cemetery: Dawn, part of the trilogy *It Won't Be Too Long*', presented at Singapore International Festival of the Arts, 2015.

Photo courtesy of The Pond Photography

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WORDS OF APPRECIATION

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Thank you President Halimah, Minister Edwin Tong, National Arts Council, and the Cultural Medallion Specialist Panel, for acknowledging and supporting socially engaged artistic practices which have become synonymous with Drama Box.

Socially engaged practice is about creating an open space for dialogue and acts of repair, intervention and imagination. In this deeply reflective and collaborative venture, I am thankful to:

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My work is never complete without the community and the audience who have participated to create, voice, animate, vote and intervene to make changes: you are an inspiration and a part of this practice. Thank you.

Lastly, to my family: my late father, my mum, my brother, Hong, Wenyi and 小马. Thank you for being there, always.