

Connecting the Arts and Life:

The Role of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

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In 2009, as the world battled an unprecedented financial crisis and tensions heightened with rising religious intolerance, we at Singapore's national performing arts centre decided we needed to do something reaffirming to bring calm and reflection to our people. We created a sacred music festival. We wanted to take sacred music out of the cloisters of different religious communities, put it on a secular platform and break down the barriers for people of different beliefs and faiths to be uplifted by great and stirring music. And the audiences came, totally struck by the common hopes and desires expressed in sacred music.

The festival, A Tapestry of Sacred Music, led one journalist to comment: "In this dour economic climate, a programme of sacred music that aims

to purify and rejuvenate couldn't have come at a more timely moment."¹ Since then, for one weekend every April, the centre is filled with spiritual sounds, ranging from the rousing vocal improvisations of South Asian qawwali² singers to the tranquil chants of Tibetan Buddhist monks.

This festival is just one of many in Esplanade's year-round calendar. It is a demonstration of our vision to be an arts centre for everyone, as we believe that the arts can break down walls and instil an awareness of our shared humanity. Aside from serving our audiences, our other key role is to provide a platform for talented and illustrious artistes from Singapore and around the world, creating a safe space for artistic creation and social discourse.



Fareed Ayaz at A Tapestry of Sacred Music 2016
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay



View of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay from Marina Bay
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Making people feel at home with the arts

Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay opened its doors on 12 October 2002. At that time, the arts were seen either as an exclusive or a fringe activity, and sceptics wondered if the arts centre would become a “white elephant”. The last thing we wanted was to be a glittering but empty shell, underutilised by artistes and irrelevant to the various communities it was meant to serve. We wanted to be a living arts centre, alive with people who feel at home here. To that end, we activated whatever public spaces were available for performances, workshops, talks, film screenings and visual arts installations to ensure that at any time, anyone at Esplanade encounters art of some kind. These non-ticketed or free performances and art installations are staged every day throughout the year.

Even at Esplanade’s Concert Hall, which is renowned internationally amongst artistes as an “acoustically perfect hall” and has been named one of the world’s most beautiful concert halls, we programme free performances. This is in keeping with our determination to ensure that everyone can claim the space as their own and attend a concert there. For one Sunday afternoon every month, we put on a free concert by homegrown music groups for anyone to enjoy. We take care to make sure that a significant chunk of what we do is well within the reach of everyone – 70 percent of our performances are actually non-ticketed or free! So regardless of your background, anyone can walk into and around Esplanade and experience a diverse variety of arts. Over time, this has had a positive impact on the aesthetic sensibilities of audiences and frequent visitors.

For the first twelve years or so, we worked hard to develop a culture of attending concerts and

performances, as well as the capabilities of the arts industry in Singapore to put on shows of the highest quality. To date, more than 34,000 performances have taken place at Esplanade, drawing an audience of 24 million patrons and 88 million visitors. In 2011, famed Taiwanese choreographer Lin Hwai-Min (b. 1947) – whose Cloud Gate Dance Theatre has performed several times at the centre – would remark:

“Esplanade brings in performances, the quality of which goes without saying, but I don’t know if you have thoroughly observed the behaviour of the audience at Esplanade. They are not only there to watch performances – whether it is the whole family having French cuisine, friends having beer together, (parents) bringing their kids to buy an ice cream, or just wandering around the centre; these behaviours, be it before or after performances, always seem natural and full of joy... A performing arts centre such as Esplanade is very rare elsewhere in the world. It represents an ‘ecosystem’ where arts & culture and life can coexist, and it’s teeming with life.”³

The making of a national performing arts centre

This essay looks at the strategies we took to serve our diverse communities through the arts and, in the process, make the arts a part of Singaporeans’ lives. This essay also explores the challenges that lie ahead; as Singapore changes, so must Esplanade think of new ways to deepen the roots of the arts in society.

It is now widely accepted that culture helps to build resilient and liveable cities. *Culture: Urban Future*, a report by United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO), a broad survey of the cultural practices of some 200 countries including Singapore, found that “culture lies at the heart of urban renewal and innovation” and is a “strategic asset for creating cities that are more inclusive, creative and sustainable”, as noted by Irina Bokova, Director-General of UNESCO.⁴

Singapore came to the realisation back in the mid-1980s that fostering a vibrant arts and cultural scene would help talented individuals feel at home here. In 1989, a high-level committee chaired by then Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong (1936-2002) produced the seminal Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts. It led to the establishment of several national arts institutions, such as the National Arts Council, and the plans to develop a national performing arts centre that became the Esplanade.

The Singapore government recognised that as with performing arts centres in other countries, Esplanade would require long-term funding to contribute to the goal of a creative, vibrant society. However, unlike other arts centres which are set up as public bodies, Esplanade was set up as a not-for-profit company with charity status, subject to the disciplines of both a business and a charitable organisation. This was to keep us on our toes, so we would not be overly reliant on public funding. As a result, the work of running Esplanade requires careful negotiation between social, artistic and financial considerations.

Festivals as the building blocks of our programming

The multicultural, multilingual nature of Singapore's society, coupled with the wide range of socio-economic groups and differing tastes, meant that Esplanade programmes must reflect this diversity. Early on, we decided that presenting arts events in a festival format gave audiences a certain focus and intensity of experiences, which translates into excitement and buzz. A festival can also contain a range of ticketed and non-ticketed performances, workshops for families, masterclasses for artistes, and talks for the curious that would allow people from all walks of life to come together. Each festival targets a different audience or community segment or is dedicated to one art form. In one year at Esplanade, you can participate in cultural festivals which bring together the various ethnic communities through the arts; genre festivals dedicated to specific art forms; family, children and youth programmes, as well as community outreach and free programmes. One would be hard pressed to find another arts centre in the world with such a broad remit.

Our cultural festivals are the bedrock of our annual calendar. These comprise: Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts which is held during the Lunar New Year period; Kalaa Utsavam – Indian Festival of Arts held in conjunction with Deepavali; Moonfest – A Mid-Autumn Celebration during the Mid-Autumn Festival, and Pesta Raya – Malay Festival of Arts, held during the Hari Raya Puasa period.⁵ We wanted to integrate our programmes with how communities in Singapore celebrate



Pesta Raya 2015
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay



Huayi - Chinese Festival of Arts 2016
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay



Kalaa Utsavam 2015
Photo Courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

key occasions. Collectively, these festivals create conversations about our identity and heritage, and at the same time provide opportunities for Singaporeans of different ethnic backgrounds to learn about each other's culture and connect with the region. The theatre productions in our cultural festivals have English surtitles so that they can be understood by the majority of Singaporeans. We also organise introductory talks and workshops on different facets of each culture, from traditional art forms to food. When we commissioned market research consultancy Blackbox to do a survey of our audiences in 2015/2016, we found that a growing proportion of audiences at our festivals were of a different cultural background from the art works headlining the festival.

At our genre festivals, we seek to whet the appetite of those totally new to an art form, while also offering more discerning fare for culture vultures. Our programmes cater to audiences with different levels of art appreciation, and in this way, we have seen our audiences grow with our festivals. Take the example of da:ns festival, launched in 2006. For the last ten years, the festival has presented premier dance companies from around the world and Singapore and nurtured a community of dance lovers – audiences, those who just enjoy dancing, and festival volunteers. At the 2016 festival, we had Batsheva Dance Company of Israel, which has won a following around the world for its sensuously explosive brand of contemporary dance. Arts-goers in Singapore are attuned to its work because the company had performed twice before at Esplanade. A reviewer in *The Straits Times* noted that Batsheva “brought the house down in rock concert style with its performance, *Decadance*. The audience lapped up every single moment”.⁶

At the other end of the contemporary dance spectrum, in terms of accessibility, was the

renowned Tanztheater Wuppertal Pina Bausch from Germany, whose performance at the same festival marked a return to Singapore after forty years. Its performance of a seminal work, *Nelken*, had some audiences scratching their heads at its non-linear narrative and spoken word fragments which overturn many expectations of dance. In the same festival, Singapore dance company Chowk's *The Second Sunrise*, a work commissioned by the festival, broke down boundaries between classical *odissi* (a traditional dance form from Odisha, formerly Orissa, India) and contemporary dance. By programming these different elements and perspectives, we seek not only to entertain but also to surprise and be thought provoking. At the free performances and outdoor mass dance sessions, people are exposed to hip hop, salsa, tango and a range of traditional dances from Asia.

Developing and supporting artistic talents

Behind the excitement of our festivals is another critical aspect of our programming – the relationships with both homegrown and foreign performers. Particularly for Singapore artistes and arts companies, through our programmes, we try to take their art to another level. Take our 14-year-old indie music festival Baybeats, with its focus on homegrown indie bands. Notable Singapore bands it has featured include Anechois, Disco Hue and Sphaeras, which have gone on to play elsewhere in Asia or open for prominent regional bands. The mentorship of bands and their showcasing at Baybeats are slowly but surely changing the perception among many ordinary Singaporeans that local music is “not good enough”. In 2013,

CNN Travel called Baybeats “Southeast Asia’s premier alternative music festival” and put it on its list of “50 greatest summer music festivals” alongside England’s famed Glastonbury Festival and Japan’s Fuji Rock Festival.⁷

Another opportunity for developing artistes is through the commissioning, producing and presentation of new work. At Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts in 2012, one reviewer cited *One Hundred Years of Solitude 10.0*, a collaboration between Hong Kong director Danny Yung (b. 1943) and Singapore’s Drama Box. She noted that while Huayi has “built up a following for the leading lights of Chinese contemporary arts”, what would “prove more significant for Singapore theatre” in the long term was that “Drama Box, a Mandarin theatre group known mainly for text-based plays, was able to hone its physical theatre skills on this wordless production”.⁸

These presentations and commissions are often based on an understanding of the artiste or company’s artistic development, built not only through Esplanade’s festivals. Instead, it can start from opportunities for Singapore musicians to play at non-ticketed performances at Esplanade’s Concourse or Outdoor Theatre, productions at our various cultural or art form series throughout the year, or through collaborations on festivals presented by the arts companies themselves. Over the years, we have partnered Apsaras Arts for Dance India, Era Dance Company for their Muara Festival, T.H.E Dance Company for their M1 CONTACT Contemporary Dance Festival, and The Necessary Stage for their M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

Embracing all demographics

In recent years, we have also heightened our focus on three groups of audiences: the young, seniors and underprivileged communities. With the young, it is not so much about building audiences for the future, than it is about how the arts are integral to children developing their sense of imagination, empathy, confidence and identity. At our cultural festivals, we programme workshops and performances for children so that our next generation can make their own connections with Chinese, Malay and Indian cultures. That aside, the little ones have their own festival tailor-made for them, Octoburst! – A Children’s Festival. With schools, our Feed Your Imagination series integrates the arts into various aspects of the school curriculum, while the Limelight series gives promising school bands and choirs the unforgettable experience of performing in our Concert Hall. There was so much more that we felt we could do, including developing the capabilities of arts practitioners who are passionate about young audiences, that in 2011, we set up a dedicated education unit in our Programming department.

At the other end of the age spectrum, seniors have special programmes dedicated to them at Esplanade, such as A Date with Friends. This is an annual festival of music and theatre performances celebrating the songs of yesteryear, delving into experiences that the elderly can relate to, and providing a platform for our seniors to perform. Every month, the Coffee Morning & Afternoon Tea performances of evergreen music provide an occasion for seniors to gather with friends, reminisce and enjoy being at the arts centre. Over the years, this series of concerts has even reunited

many musicians, including some currently living overseas. It is very precious to have our veteran musicians like The Stray Dogs, Black Dog Bone and The Meltones reconnect at Esplanade and to watch our senior audiences spontaneously clap, sing and even dance to their music.

We are also asking ourselves how we can be more inclusive, not only to different cultures and age groups, but to people with different needs and abilities. We believe that anyone, regardless of circumstance, should be able to feel the joy, inspiration and healing that the arts can bring. Since the early years of the centre, we have worked closely with voluntary welfare organisations (VWOs) to serve the underprivileged. In 2013, we formed a dedicated community engagement unit in the Programming department.

Every year, we reach out to some 10,000 VWO beneficiaries, including children, youth, those with special needs, seniors and migrant workers through arts performances and workshops. The numbers, however, do not tell the whole story of how the arts can touch lives. During our 2016 National Day Celebrations, we presented *Home, Sweet Home – A Migrant Worker Showcase*, where a group of Indonesian domestic workers collaborated with a Singapore vocal coach to put on a performance. They had an opportunity to work with a professional artist and share with Singaporeans, in a free performance at our Concourse, their longing for home through music. It was quite a moving experience for all, particularly when the Indonesian group sang Dick Lee's *Home*, a National Day song that resonates with many Singaporeans. "The first time we introduced the song *Home* to (the Indonesians), they were already crying, because it has such a deep meaning for them. Some have not been home for eight years," said Angelina Choo, their vocal coach.⁹

Working together with artists who have some training or background in community engagement, many of us at Esplanade have witnessed first-hand how the arts can impact the young, the elderly and the underserved in specific and helpful ways. Young children can hone their imaginative powers, language skills and empathy for the weak and vulnerable through theatre. Elderly participants of our arts workshops have told us that learning a new craft or art form helped improve their motor skills, boosted their self-esteem and made them feel young again.

Overall, it is about making sure that our arts centre is welcoming to all and leaves no one behind. In 2016, we started producing sensory friendly performances for children with special needs during our PLAYtime! series. These shows have been modified to be brightly lit and have no sudden or loud sounds that could alarm those with special needs, who can move around or leave the venue at any time. In a post dated 6 December 2016 on the Friends of ASD Families Facebook group (ASD stands for Autism Spectrum Disorders), a mother thanked Esplanade for "the strides (it) has taken" in accommodating those like her son, who are usually viewed as disruptive when they react in shock and confusion to various stimuli. "Inclusion starts with participation. Thank you Esplanade, for walking the talk with the genuine steps you have been taking," she wrote.

Going beyond our four walls

After fourteen years, Esplanade has reached a point where it is recognised as a national icon, and its fundamentals as a performing arts centre are strong. We have a diverse calendar that connects us

to schools, families, seniors and arts lovers, and we are constantly reaching out to underserved groups in society so that they too can be rejuvenated by the arts. We have solid venue management and programming capabilities, which we impart through different training programmes, and we have built up the international networks to pull off major presentations and co-productions.

Fundraising and partnerships are critical to our next phase, where we want to encourage more ownership of what we do from all levels of society. Every year, to supplement our commercial income, we receive grants from the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and Singapore Totalisator Board (Tote Board).¹⁰ However, there is also the expectation that Esplanade should be increasingly less reliant on public funding in meeting its recurring funding needs.

To do more, we hope that more individuals can contribute to our mission and activities. For example, our community engagement team is looking for sponsors and donors to support worthwhile projects. We have piloted some of these projects, such as a singing project for seniors with Tote Board's grants, and are ready to take these projects to even more beneficiaries. We have developed dance programmes for the elderly, and are ready to develop a new dance programme for children with special needs with a donor's support.

Each time frail or elderly VWO beneficiaries are hosted at Esplanade to performances and workshops, we need volunteers to assist our staff in making their visit a comfortable one. The time is ripe for deeper ownership of the arts and cultural scene among Singaporeans. Overall appreciation of the arts and culture is at its highest level since 2005 – with 41 percent of

the respondents to the 2015 National Population Survey on the Arts indicating their interest in it, up 13 percentage points from 2013.¹¹ But the economic uncertainties ahead may dampen the propensity to give, making it a challenge to woo corporate sponsors and individual donors.

Another challenge is engaging youth aged 13 to 26. We have built up one generation of arts-goers, what about the next? The reality is that Generations Y and Z – as millennials and today's teenagers have respectively been dubbed – have very different habits and expectations from older audiences. The latter may be accustomed to the house lights coming down during a performance, absolute silence, and certainly no photography. Enter young digital natives weaned on social media and smart phones, who want Wi-Fi-enabled and brighter spaces, as well as the freedom to snap images of the performance and share it instantly on their social feeds. To meet these new demands, we have relaxed our house rules for certain types of performances. For example, during free programmes held in the Esplanade Theatre or Concert Hall as well as ticketed school performances, photography without flash is allowed, and during curtain calls for many of our performances, we encourage audiences to snap and share their experience. In 2016, we also launched our Annexe Studio, a new raw performance and rehearsal space targeted at older teens and 20-somethings. Converted from a nightclub, the space is suitable for casual, late-night and open-mic sessions.

We also want to go beyond the four walls of the centre to engage digitally savvy audiences well before and long after a performance, as many arts centres elsewhere are starting to do. This entails using tools such as live streaming of shows in our venues, either online or on video screens in public spaces around Esplanade. We have a wealth of

content at our disposal; our archives, for example, contain everything from video recordings of performances and post-show dialogues to house programmes documenting the creation of a work. We are looking at how we can produce insightful behind-the-scenes or educational videos and other materials that can appeal to arts lovers and students. These materials can turn our Esplanade website into a content-rich arts resource, supplementing the actual experience of our festivals and programmes, as well as extending our reach beyond them.

Finally, we are looking at how we can better support artistic creation given the maturing arts scene in Singapore and Asia. Works created for mid-sized theatres currently make up about 80 percent of all works produced for major festivals. In Singapore, there is a lack of such spaces which can seat between 500 and 900 people. While there were mid-sized spaces in Phase II of the arts centre's original architectural blueprint, these have yet to be realised. To this end, Esplanade has launched a project to build a mid-sized waterfront theatre. Such a theatre would allow Esplanade to develop a wider range of programmes for the young, given that our existing venues are already fully utilised. It would also enable us to work

closely with both Singapore and regional artistes to create productions with touring potential, particularly in contemporary dance and theatre and in Asian traditional arts. Although we are already producing such shows in our small studios, there is a need to transpose these works to a mid-sized venue to reach more people and have greater impact.

Whether in aspiring to do more in engaging underprivileged communities, or striving to become a leading producer of new performing arts works in the region, Esplanade's vision and mission remain the same. We are a performing arts centre for everyone and we seek to entertain, engage, educate and inspire. We want to bring different communities together to express themselves through the arts, as well as find comfort, joy and introspection through it. Doing that effectively requires new strategies in our next phase of growth. The danger facing any institution is thinking that once you have arrived in a port of call, you can safely dock and drop your anchor. As we enter our fifteenth anniversary year in 2017, we at Esplanade are still on the move, because we know that more than anything else, we need to stay relevant to the artistes and audiences we serve. □

Notes:

1. Clara Chow. "Music of love, peace and hope" in *My Paper*, 30 April 2009, p. A24
2. Deriving its name from the Arabic word *qaul*, meaning "to speak", *Qawwali* is a Sufi devotional music with origins in ancient Islamic poetry that is popular in parts of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.
3. Wang Yiming. "Books circle" in *Lianhe Zaobao*, 4 December 2011, p. 21.
4. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. *Culture Urban Future: Global Report on Culture for Sustainable Urban Development*. Paris, 2016, p. 5.
5. The Esplanade's series of festivals coincide with some of Singapore's most important cultural celebrations. The Lunar New Year marks the beginning of the New Year according to the lunar calendar and usually falls in January or February. Deepavali (also known as Diwali), which usually falls in October, is the Hindu Festival of Lights which celebrates the victory of good over the forces of evil and darkness. It is also celebrated by the Sikh and Jain communities. The Mid-Autumn Festival takes place during the middle of the eight lunar month and is celebrated with displays of lanterns and the giving and eating of mooncakes. Hari Raya Puasa (also known as Hari Raya Aidilfitri or Eid) is a festival that marks the end of the Muslim fasting month of *Ramadan*.
6. Lee Mun Wai. "Gaga didn't quite blow the mind away" in *The Straits Times*, 24 October 2016, <http://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/gaga-didnt-quite-blow-the-mind-away>
7. Jade Bremner. "50 greatest summer music festivals" in *CNN Travel*, 10 June 2013, <http://travel.cnn.com/explorations/play/worlds-50-best-summer-music-festivals-008106/>
8. Clarissa Oon. "Rocky revolution road" in *The Straits Times*, 9 February 2012, p. C8.
9. Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. "Home, Sweet Home. Migrant Worker Project. (June – August 2016). Video. Singapore, 2016.
10. The Tote Board is a statutory board under Singapore's Ministry of Finance that manages the donation of surplus funds generated from the operations of the Singapore Turf Club and Singapore Pools. These funds are donated to the community and charities for activities that benefit the nation.
11. National Arts Council. "Population survey on the Arts 2015". Singapore, 2016, <https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/research/population-survey.html>