

Intercultural Interlocutors: Tay Tong and Faith Tan

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With Singapore's geographical location and cultural dislocation in Southeast Asia, the country has been ripe for artistic collaborations that reframe its relationship with the region. Singaporean arts managers have become intercultural interlocutors of sorts, connecting Singapore and its neighbours through the performing arts.

Independent performance company TheatreWorks, formed in 1985, has long been at the fore of these intercultural negotiations. Its arts space 72-13 is not only dedicated to the development of contemporary art in Singapore, but also to the evolution of a broader Asian identity, and acts both as an incubator for artistic experiments as well as a centre for research and development for processes across disciplines and cultures. Tay Tong, who joined the company as a producer in 1989 and eventually became its managing director, produced TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project¹, led by the company's artistic director Ong Keng Sen since 1996. The project has acted as a catalyst for cultural exchange for artists from the region and the rest of the world, and a stepping stone for new company initiatives such as the Curators Academy² (2018). Since 2002, Tay has managed and directed the Continuum Asia Project³, doing capacity-building work in Luang Prabang, including reviving the Laotian Pharak Phalam, a traditional dance-drama form, and brokering exchanges between Laotian and Asian youths. He is also director of Arts Network Asia.

Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay is Singapore's national performing arts centre and one of the busiest arts centres in the world. It often works in close partnership with local, regional and international artists to develop artistic capabilities. It has presented more than 37,000 performances and drawn more than 26 million patrons since its opening in 2002. Faith Tan is the centre's

head of theatre and dance, and has been with the institution since 2003. She steers its flagship da:ns festival, which enters its 13th edition this year. Esplanade has supported over 300 new works from Asian artists in the last five years, and invested in a number of capability and knowledge development programmes. These include da:ns lab, an annual platform for dance practitioners to reflect on key issues surrounding their creative practice. Esplanade also co-presented the first Asian Dramaturgs Network in 2016 with Centre 42, a Singapore incubation space for text-based work.

Tay Tong and Faith Tan discuss Singapore's place in Southeast Asia and some of the work that has gone on behind the scenes of their projects. This interview has been edited and condensed for clarity.

Corrie Tan: How do you think Singapore tends to position itself in relation to the rest of the region in terms of the arts – and how do you think that relationship has evolved from the time you first started working as a producer?

Tay Tong: I've always felt that we can't really talk about Singapore without looking at its position in Southeast Asia. Singapore is very much a part of Southeast Asia not just geographically, but also historically. We are so porous as an island state, so much so that our Southeast Asian neighbours are, in a sense, our hinterland for trade, for economics, for any kind of development.

Back in the 1970s and up to 1990s when we first did the Flying Circus Project, there was a sense – from my point of view – of some kind of a snobbery towards our Southeast Asian neighbours, despite the fact that we are all bound together by ASEAN. In terms of the arts, we were not looking so much towards our Southeast Asian neighbours. There was very much a positioning of Singapore in



Pesta Raya: Serentak! Sedunia! by Artisari Gentari (2017)
Image courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

relation to Europe, to the more developed Asian countries in East Asia and in North Asia, and to North America.

I remember that in 1991-1992, when TheatreWorks wanted to do an ASEAN season – it bombed. At the time, we were so used to having a ready audience. One of the plays was *Trip to the South* by Tony Perez, and it was directed by Nonon Padilla – a Filipino play directed by a Filipino director working with Singaporean actors. The other work we had was by Arifin C. Noer from Indonesia, and he directed Singaporean actors like Lim Kay Siu and K Rajagopal. The third work was with Malaysia's Five Arts Centre, which brought down a three-weekend festival comprising visual art, installation art, and performance. Then there was a Singapore Season that was largely made up of new Singaporean writing. But the audience were not quite ready for the ASEAN season, so the only success was the Singaporean work. But that never stopped us. Culturally, Southeast Asia is so rich, and there was so much that we young Singaporean

practitioners did not know about. We wanted to engage because we didn't feel culturally adequate; we are a very young country, but their cultures go back centuries.

Faith Tan: Speaking from a position of how Esplanade relates to the region, it is important that we work closely with Southeast Asian artists and producers to stay connected to developments within the varying scenes, and respond by supporting projects that resonate within our programming or address a critical need. We do so through many annual festivals and platforms, where we are increasingly supporting new productions from the region. These platforms include Pesta Raya, our Malay festival of arts which explores both the traditional and contemporary face of the Nusantara (Malay Archipelago), and da:ns festival, where we have taken a leading role in commissioning and creating work with Southeast Asian contemporary dance artists because there has been a void of such regular support.



Pesta Raya: Tarian Malam by Nan Jombang Dance (2012)
Image courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

The position we take is a long-term one. For example, Esplanade’s relationship with Thai dancemaker Pichet Klunchun began in 2007 with the presentation of one of his smaller productions. This marked the beginning of many years of working together, from showcasing his classical Thai Khon dances for free in our outdoor spaces, to commissioning full-length productions. This continued support enabled him to form a full-time dance company, and tour productions internationally. Being able to present his work regularly allowed us to develop audiences, and we’ve taken care to contextualise and inform audiences of not just an artist’s productions, but the context of their practice too. With Pichet’s last work at Esplanade, we created a pre-show talk by his dramaturg on the history and key points of Pichet’s career thus far, as well as an exhibition of Pichet’s drawings of dance poses that form the foundation of his dance from his classical roots.

It is hoped that through the steady work we do, we can continue to keep expanding local audiences’

support and interest in artists’ works from Asia, contributing to a dynamic and supportive ecosystem between regional artists and audiences.

Corrie Tan: Tay Tong, when the Flying Circus Project was first conceived in 1994, how did negotiations begin in order to get funders and partners on board?

Tay Tong: We approached many potential corporate partners and public institutions and we drew a blank. There was no support. But the Japan Foundation had started a special section called Asia Center. Back in 1992, the Asia Center had brought TheatreWorks’ *Three Children*, as well as *Beauty World*, to Japan on tour. We approached them for support, and they eventually supported the first edition. For Japan, it was part of their cultural diplomacy push, but we were more concerned about how we could harness the richness of Southeast Asia. In the 1990s, Singapore was a bridge between Southeast Asia and a bit of the rest of the world, because we were able to

function in particular languages and we had the potential to make inroads into the region. You'd get North American or European contacts who would ask, "Can you tell us more about Southeast Asia?" There was a desire for knowledge – it wasn't just TheatreWorks who wanted to harness all that was available in Southeast Asia; other people were also thinking along the same lines.

The Flying Circus Project was very good for Ong Keng Sen, and therefore the company, including myself, benefited from it. There was the need to do research. We called on contacts in Southeast Asia to say, "Hey, we're going to do this programme – who should we meet? Who is interesting in Southeast Asia, doing contemporary work? Who are the traditional artists who are interesting?" From that, we developed a list of artists. But at the same time, having that conversation made us realise that we Southeast Asian practitioners and arts workers didn't really know each other. That question stuck with us.

Sometime in 1999, Keng Sen convened a meeting of peers, including the late Krishen Jit, Marion D'Cruz, Amna Kusumo and Teresa Rances⁴. We all came together and realised that, yes, we didn't really know each other, and that we only really got to meet fellow Asian and Southeast Asian artists when they were all doing residencies in places like New York. So, what could we do? How could we find a way, and find the resources, for us to get to meet each other? And beyond meeting each other, how could we make work together? That's how Arts Network Asia started. A proposal was written up for Ford Foundation Jakarta, and they managed to pull funds for it. This started with micro grants, which included mobility funding for people to do research etc., but we also supported collaborative projects [among artists and cultural workers]. It was ground-up, and there was no political agenda, because it was non-governmental funding.



Publicity image for TheatreWorks' 2013 edition of the Flying Circus Project.
Image courtesy of TheatreWorks (S) Ltd

Arts and culture have allowed us to cross borders that even cultural diplomacy couldn't, such as going into Myanmar. There was no way an official agency could get into Myanmar in the 1990s, because there were so many sanctions on the country. But through arts and culture, through people-to-people exchanges, we could begin to understand the country and have a two-way conversation: inviting their artists out, as well as us going in. For the 1998 Flying Circus Project, Myanmar was one of our countries of focus. That relationship continued, and in 2013 the Flying Circus Project went back to Myanmar after it opened up.

Corrie Tan: How do you balance nurturing long-term relationships with artists and practitioners over the years with giving a platform to new relationships or emerging artists?

Faith Tan: For me, the starting point of a relationship with an artist is to get to know them and their work as much as I can – understanding the conditions, trends, and significant issues

(including political or socio-economic contexts) that impact their dance-making. For example, within dance in Southeast Asia, it's important to understand how tradition, ritual, and hierarchy were integral to their history, and impact dance-making today. I travel to attend performances and festivals, have lots of conversations with people working in dance across Asia, watch rehearsals, works-in-progress and productions live or on video.

This allows me to look at dance within a context and understand all the conditions impacting artists. It allows me to go beyond finding a “good show” for Esplanade, and to understand what the artists need, and respond with a support system that is fluid, tailored to their individual strengths as well as the gaps. I'm not interested in providing a grant of financial support and leaving it up to the artist to figure the rest out. I'm interested in ascertaining what other kinds of support would help to elevate the process and ultimately the production.



Publicity image for TheatreWorks' Continuum Asia Project in Laos.
Image courtesy of TheatreWorks (S) Ltd

While I have established long-term relationships with some artists over the 15 years I've been working with in dance, I also keep looking for artists I don't know, or are emerging, to connect with. I may see them in programmes I watch when I travel, or their names may come up in conversations with practitioners, producers, dramaturgs and artists who work in this region. I often ask people if they have seen any exciting new works or artists they liked. Within Esplanade, we've taken a responsive approach to the platforms we have, meaning that if a project or artist comes up, regardless if they are emerging, mid-career or established, if there is a need to present their work, we would respond by finding or creating a platform.

Tay Tong: Singapore, even in the past, was seen as the place with the resources and the money – “Oh, you're developed, you could do this, you could bring it in for us” – and we were very careful about that. This is not a top-down working relationship, it needs to be on an equal plane. With the Continuum Asia Project in 2002, for example, it was important for us to be invited into Laos by Laotian artists. Keng Sen was in Luang Prabang to do research for the Flying Circus Project, and we were looking at Laotian artists to bring over to Singapore. The traditional masters were saying to him, “Look, we are all getting old, there are no younger people doing this, how can we continue?” This question stayed with us, and later on we had the opportunity to write to the Rockefeller Foundation, who supported the programme for two years, and we also had additional funding from Ford Foundation. We were invited in because they had no state support. In the end, we were able to do two particular strands of work, and one of them was excavating the nine episodes of the Pharak Phalam with the masters, a passing on of this art form.

One of the most important things I've learnt is that you must treat others with respect, and on an equal playing field. At the end of the day, you're talking about people-to-people engagement and encounters. We've always made sure that everybody has the same terms. When we first did the Flying Circus Project, everybody stayed in the same hotel or hostel. There's no preferential treatment. Then you gain people's trust. And participants understand that when they're doing explorations in the Flying Circus Project, for example, and we say that this is an open space, it's an equal space – they believe that. Keng Sen creates an equal space in the studio, but my job is to create an equal space outside of the studio.

Corrie Tan: Faith, what are the current needs or gaps that you see in capability development for dancemakers both in Singapore and the region?

Faith Tan: I recently attended a brainstorming session with colleagues from Asia and Australia to discuss a Dance Network for Asia, where we listed all the platforms for performance presentation, funding, and residencies or process-based support. There was a long list of platforms for presentations and festivals, but a very short list for funding bodies and research grants across Asia, and an even shorter list for dance residencies and process-based support for dance within Asia. If there is no funding for research, how will dancemakers who aren't able to get international support or have such mobility be able to develop a focused contemporary practice within Asia and stay in Asia? As it stands, dancemakers often don't invest in longer processes for research, having become accustomed to operating under limited resources, and the expectation to keep creating “finished” productions.



A session during *da:ns lab*.

Image courtesy of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay.

I feel more grants and initiatives to support dance research, process and residencies would be highly beneficial to dancemakers across Asia. In Singapore, one exciting recent development is the National Arts Council's Dance Nucleus, which supports process-based critical research for independent dance artists. The Esplanade's *da:ns lab* was also created in response to this need, and every year we shift its focus according to what is urgent. In its first year (2015) we focused on identifying what independent practice means, and in our third edition last year we examined artistic practice in relation to the ongoing global political crisis. With the support of the National Arts Council and Goethe-Institut, we were able to invite six dancemakers from Asia to be participants. It's important for performing arts institutions like Esplanade to be able to create spaces not only for presentations, but also for other parts of the creation process that are inclusive to artists beyond our own country, especially when there is a great need for it.

Corrie Tan: How do you think policymakers in Singapore and Southeast Asia can help to make artistic collaborations on the ground easier, whether in terms of funding, infrastructure or mindsets?

Faith Tan: The challenge that institutions, funders and policymakers often have is to justify the use of the funds to support art, and thus establish clear outcomes from an investment. Sometimes risk-taking and failure in an outcome-based system is hard to build in. However, if we see each contribution we make as a small but essential step that collectively, over a very long time, is essential to moving dance forward, then we accept that there are no grand, instant outcomes that will come out of one project or one platform.

In Asia, funding conditions are also often limited to the country's artists who have nationality there; however given the way some contemporary artists work now, living in several cities, I believe adopting the style of funding that I've seen Goethe-Institut take – where it supports artists who are based in and work significantly within Germany, in spite of their nationality – is a useful one that also attracts talented artists from beyond one's country to invest in another location. In this wider sense of collaboration, I feel this would open up the movement and flow of ideas and dialogues within dance, and create different energies and possibilities for creativity.

Tay Tong: Can we imagine our Southeast Asia, our ASEAN, as something like the European Union? If I make a work in Brussels, for example, I can tour it very easily across Europe. Why can't we do that in Southeast Asia? I'd like to convince Singaporean policymakers that we can be an enabler for the region. If we can build capacity in other countries, there will be returns by way of opening up new markets for the kind of art that we would like to share. The Singaporean market is saturated, and if we don't begin to see the outside world as our next market, our hinterland, we're going to collapse.

One of the things I really want to do is to show Singaporeans good models of practice in Southeast Asia where artists and arts groups have no or very little government support and resources, but they make things work. Why is it possible for them, but not possible for us? I feel like there's something to be learnt there. There are still certain kinds of experiences that we can share. For example, we are a bit more organised in terms of funding, in terms of infrastructure, and to a certain extent, management support. We can give that kind of advice. But I think the region doesn't need Singapore as a bridge any longer. The rest of the world is going directly to our Southeast Asian neighbours, so that role is no longer available for us, it's no longer sustainable.

I hope that Singapore will continue to adopt the sense of openness that has always been the success of the country: being open, being porous, and not being protectionist. The world has become so much more complex, more intricate, and more expensive. We can no longer do this kind of work by ourselves. On the ground, we can work with artists and colleagues to get a buy-in, and we can build connectivity. But then we need policymakers to talk to their colleagues and neighbours and get them to think in the same way.

Corrie Tan: How do you see your role as a producer continuing to develop, when it comes to navigating regional connections for practitioners or audiences?

Tay Tong: I really believe in the value of the internationalism of the arts. I'm speaking generally here, but I think that one of the issues with Singapore is that we are so well-off compared to our neighbours that we've become entitled. And, sadly, that sense of entitlement leads to insularity and navel-gazing. The reality of the situation is that if you take away these resources, how do you

compete with our Southeast Asian colleagues? They are often much hungrier and much savvier when it comes to navigating the complexities of the international scene. I really want to find a way to encourage more of our Singaporean artists to put themselves out there.

Faith Tan: As an arts venue, we connect artists and their productions to audiences in Singapore. One of the challenges is that while the programmers and producers understand the context of the artist's work, Singaporeans coming to watch a performance may not. It's important that audiences have a dialogue with the work and understand its significance beyond what they see on stage. Therefore the team at Esplanade has been thinking hard about how we can deepen this conversation with the audience meaningfully, going beyond the post-performance talk. For me, this is the next stage of audience appreciation, and is key to getting more people invested in supporting and talking about Asian artists. □

Notes

1. The Flying Circus Project, established in 1996, is a long-term, process-based programme exploring creative expression in Asia. The inter-disciplinary, research and development programme consists of performances, screenings, conversations, laboratories, workshops, talks and engagement by visiting artists.
2. The Curators Academy is a programme that brings aspiring curators in Southeast Asia together, with an emphasis on developing a context and “growing” performance that engages and interrogates the politics of the local. The academy is interdisciplinary, with a focus on performance. Participants engage in dialogue with invited trainers, and the first edition of the academy included lectures, performances, discussions, and artist talks and presentations.
3. The Continuum Asia Project is an Asian arts exchange project in Laos that engages the local youth, elder master artists and international Asian artists.
4. Husband-wife duo Krishen Jit and Marion D’Cruz were two of the original founders of the Five Arts Centre in Malaysia; he was a dramatist, practitioner and academic, she is a pioneering contemporary dancer-choreographer. Amna Kusumo is a pioneering arts manager from Indonesia and founder of the Kelola Foundation. Teresa Rances is an arts administrator from the Philippines and programme director with the Asian Cultural Council.