

The space(s) between us: Reflections amidst a pandemic on the role of an arts centre

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In the words of the author, “an arts centre thrives on closing distances”. What then, is the role of an arts centre in the time of pandemic and social distancing, and how can it continue to engage artists and audiences? CEO of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay Yvonne Tham discusses the centre’s experience and her thoughts on the way forward.

The world before the pandemic was one of closed distances. For instance, we were planning to present the Hamburg Ballet from Germany in April 2020 and the United Kingdom National Theatre’s *War Horse* in May 2020. These transnational tours for arts productions were not so surprising then. And during the “A Date With Friends” festival for seniors in early March 2020, audiences clapped to the music of their youth in our concert hall and outdoor theatre, and if they had reached out, they could even have held the hands of a stranger.

An arts centre thrives on closing distances—between people, cultures, worlds. In a darkened auditorium, our differences dim. Regardless of our backgrounds, we take on the semblance of a community. We learn, ponder, laugh and cry together. Even after the performance, we continue to possess this shared knowledge and experience.

The COVID-19 pandemic and its various phases of physical distancing therefore pose what is almost an existential challenge to Esplanade, whose vision is to be an arts centre for everyone. *Why does an arts centre exist if it cannot bring people together in its spaces? When our stages are dark, how else can an arts centre bring about a sense of community and place, to represent the*

needs of society? If we do not do so, who will miss all of this? Indeed, what is the measure of a national performing arts centre amidst a global pandemic that threatens lives and livelihoods?

These questions are not entirely new. Within the first six months of Esplanade’s opening in 2002, Singapore experienced SARS. Throughout that period, Esplanade had stayed open with live performances. We implemented thermal scanning, health declaration and contact tracing measures. We knew that our work in presenting the arts allowed people a means to find comfort during those trying and uncertain months.

As a result of that experience, we have always maintained, as part of our business continuity plans, a reasonable stock of thermal scanners, thermometers, personal protective equipment and “I’m Cool” stickers. But COVID-19 is a different virus in a more unpredictable world. Esplanade had to close its doors from April to June this year during the “Circuit Breaker”, a phase of elevated safe distancing measures. For the first time in our 18-year history, the centre was “dark”. As I write this in July 2020, under Phase 2 of Safe Re-opening, our public spaces can welcome visitors again. Most of our mall tenants are serving walk-in or dine-in customers and artists are returning to our venues for rehearsals and recording sessions, albeit with many restrictions. However, performances with live audiences are still not allowed.

Thankfully, most of my colleagues are not prone to being morose. Having to confront these questions have helped us challenge, clarify and chart the role of an arts centre for futures that, we now acknowledge, have always been uncertain.

A space for community

Upon learning of a possible closure of cultural venues in late March 2020, we quickly started to devise new ways of recording the works already in progress. This process was not unilateral. It was, as I observed of my colleagues working with artists, one of a community deciding what was best for the well-being of its immediate members, for the integrity of the work, and for the benefit of its extended members, the audience.

Esplanade had actually started on a journey to imagine and create a digital performing arts centre in late 2017. Then, we were all bemoaning the amount of time people, especially the young, are spending on their mobile devices. But we decided it was more productive to work with, and not against, this tide.

One of the first things we did then was to digitise our archival recordings. We also systematically invested in quality recordings of selected

performances, in particular our commissions and new works by Singapore and regional artists. We then relooked into our online and social media platforms, and started creating meaningful articles, behind-the-scenes videos, education kits for schools and families, and other companion content to better engage our communities. We had two aims. One was to reach someone who had yet to step into Esplanade or to experience the arts, by delivering interesting arts content to their mobile devices. The other was to provide information and tools for people to get the most out of their visit or performance experience. In October 2019, just months before COVID-19, we launched “Esplanade Offstage”, a site where people can access a rich array of content about the performing arts in Singapore and Asia. We are currently looking to enhance the level of interactivity and engagement on “Esplanade Offstage”.

The internet, however, is not short of content. So what do the arts and artists bring to the digital or virtual space that is unique, and vice versa? And how does it relate to our role as an arts centre? In answering these questions, we were guided by these three key aspects of the arts.



Figure 1. Recordings of previous Mother’s Day concerts were released online, reaching more than 70,000 viewers in the first week. Image courtesy of The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay.



Figure 2. Studio recordings from The Esplanade’s archive such as the performance of *Dark Room* by Edith Podesta were made accessible on the Internet as part of “The Studios Online”. Photo by Crispian Chan. Image courtesy of The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay.

The first is *access*. In May 2020, we released two archival videos of Esplanade’s free Mother’s Day concerts featuring songs from the 1950s-70s (Figure 1). These concerts were held every year for the public and beneficiaries of senior activity centres and homes were invited. With seniors being at a higher risk of contracting the virus, we shared these videos with our social sector partners for those in senior care facilities to enjoy amidst Circuit Breaker. Each year, these concerts reach over 3,000 people. In comparison, the videos drew more than 70,000 unique views in the first week.

While we are now looking to continue sharing online music concerts with seniors beyond the situation of COVID-19, we are also aware that digital access is not universal. This experience has also challenged our ideas of how else we can bring the arts meaningfully to people who, post-COVID, may still not be able to leave their homes or care facilities. We are exploring the possibility of a music truck with artists going out to seniors in care facilities around Singapore.

The second aspect is *critical reflection*. I deeply appreciate the level of critical thinking artists bring to our relationship with technology, even as arts centres have had to quickly embrace it. In this period of a global healthcare and economic crisis, performing artists have used technology to make and share powerful statements expressing society’s loss and fears. I do not doubt that performing artists, post-COVID, will continue to use technology in critical ways to develop their practice, reflect upon our human condition, or solve practical problems of production. I am reminded that the right use of technology can help the arts possibly reduce its carbon footprint, creating alternative approaches to sets, performance or even collaborations and tours.

The third is *community*. From April to July 2020, Esplanade curated an online season of Singapore theatre works, called “The Studios Online”, that were previously presented in our blackbox space, or could not play to a live audience because of the Circuit Breaker (Figures 2 and 3). Some of these plays were selected because they related to our human experiences of loss, grief and memory.



Figure 3. The new multi-disciplinary production *Lost Cinema 20/20* was commissioned by The Esplanade and streamed in the online theatre season. Photo by Crispian Chan. Image courtesy of The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay.

Each production was accompanied by articles, past interviews as well as live chat sessions with the artists. It gathered a community of theatre practitioners, theatre lovers, students and even those new to theatre. I believe these stories and conversations allowed both artists and audiences to process the loss of jobs, mobility, interaction with loved ones, or even lives to COVID-19, not alone, but as a community.

Whether as a physical space or online, these three aspects of the arts continue to frame how we think about our work. And while we have yet to fully understand how virtual communities differ, I know that we can never replace seeing, touching, smelling and simply being beside the body of another, or absorbing the sights, smells, sounds and electricity of a place.

A space for new norms

At “da:ns lab”, an Esplanade programme produced by Singapore’s Dance Nucleus, artist Alecia Neo

shared that she had first encountered the phrase “New Normal” in a caregivers’ support group. How apt. The pandemic is traumatic and leaves a legacy that requires long-term care and new forms of support.

Esplanade regularly supports the making of new artistic work. But beyond this, as a public space, we must also constantly look to setting new—and positive—norms of both social behaviour and industry practice.

Firstly, one example of a possible new norm in public facilities is the practice of staggered timings and booking ahead to avoid over-crowding. It requires us to respect our given time in a space. When performing venues re-open, it will call on individuals to be responsible, to abide by these new practices. Another example could be that to prevent queues from forming during intermission, audiences may be allowed to leave the auditorium at any point to use the restrooms. In many relaxed and family-friendly performances, this is already the practice. However, there will always be patrons who will be unhappy with the movement or noise

during a performance. If this is to be a new norm, perhaps we would become more accepting of this for a social good.

Secondly, the proliferation of digital content in this period has raised new questions about intellectual property and fair use or payment for an artist's creative output. In the same way, many observers have pointed out that it is not sustainable in the long term that artistic content is available for free. The music industry addressed this issue years ago with paid music downloads and, until COVID-19, had enjoyed renewed income via live shows.

In May 2020, Esplanade experimented with ticketing three online presentations of past productions featuring Singapore artists, with the option given to audiences whether they would pay and how much. Only 10 per cent of audiences opted to do so. Half of the audiences were new to the artist or even to Esplanade, and understandably, more reluctant to commit financially. While modest, the ticket proceeds were appreciated by all the artists involved. It was our first attempt. Two months later, Esplanade and the wider creative community were more aware of the need to create a paying culture for online experiences. Learning from the online broadcasts of sporting events, ticketing companies like SISTIC are also developing more interesting options for artists and presenters to create private online viewing rooms, simultaneous chat functions, and multiple camera views. When appropriately applied, these platforms could create new possibilities distinct from the live experience, and perhaps, better attract a paying online audience.

Thirdly, the pandemic has surfaced social inequalities around the world. In Singapore, how we relate to foreign workers in our midst has come to the fore. Issues of mental health, long

swept under the carpet, have also taken on new urgency under the strain of the pandemic. While Esplanade has always considered accessibility and inclusion as our cornerstone, we must always do more and better to include diverse voices, talents and needs.

On the international front, with most borders remaining closed, many arts centres and artists have taken to the online platform to connect and collaborate. Again, while this can never replace the experience of a physical meeting, it does point to the fact that we can, and should, find more sustainable ways to share our work.

Last but certainly not least, digital and broadcasting knowledge and skillsets are now a new norm for organisations. These are no longer unique to the marketing or the technology teams, but fundamental to everyone working at an arts centre. This underlies the need to constantly learn and make connections between disciplines as we seek new solutions. During this period, my colleagues have also given online classes exposing people across the organisation to stage rigging, lighting design, sound systems and various technical aspects of production, as well as practices in programming for and welcoming people who are elderly, on the autism spectrum, or visually impaired. I am most encouraged by this new open-ness to learning across disciplines. It feeds our human curiosity and creativity. Both these qualities are necessary if individuals and organisations want to survive in a world where global emergencies can quickly escalate to shut down entire economies and public life. Even though financial sustainability has always been a challenge for arts organisations, COVID-19 will further test those who do not accept or actively shape their own New Normal realities.

A safe space

I want to conclude with the idea of space of safety. I started this reflection with the importance of closing distances. Paradoxically, in a COVID-19 environment, the words “safe” and “distancing” have become synonymous even so.

For Esplanade, the physical safety of our public, artists, crew, contractors and staff have always been foremost. Even before COVID-19, at the start of any workday in our venues, there is a compulsory toolbox briefing for everyone that underscores health and safety practices. Today, these toolbox briefings include reminders about hygiene, mask-wearing and keeping safe distances. Equipment as well as surfaces in our public spaces are constantly undergoing disinfection. The number of artists allowed in each of our dressing rooms is restricted. Around Esplanade today, you will find sanitiser dispensers, stickers on the floor about safe distancing, and one-metre distance markers. This is over and above the thermal scanning and safe-entry registration at entrances.

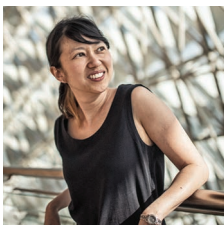
Beyond physical safety, the pandemic has also reminded us of the critical need for individuals to feel psychologically safe. This is the role of institutions, and cultural institutions provide a safe space for the values, traditions, conversations,

and resources that are deemed critical for society to continue into the future. A performing arts centre like Esplanade is no different.

When we were allowed to have rehearsals and recordings in our venues in July 2020, we started to do so for this one reason: to create a sense of continuity for artists. With it comes the assurance of some income, however limited; the assurance that the arts matter to society, even or especially in a time of crisis; and the assurance that they can practise their art in a physically safe environment. In the same way, our responsibility is to ensure we are ready at any time with the safe environment for live audiences to return. With it comes the assurance to people of some relief, comfort and inspiration through the arts; the assurance that the arts matter to personal well-being; and the assurance that they can safely connect with the artist and feel that sense of community again in a public space.

The space between us speaks of safety. There are times it stands in for psychological safety, and with COVID-19, it is necessary for health or physical safety. The space between us also speaks of our differences. We can celebrate the rich diversity of individual viewpoints and cultures, even if they may at times give birth to divisive energies. I maintain that our desire and efforts as an arts centre are always to close these distances, if not entirely achievable now, then in the future. □

About the Author



Yvonne Tham is Chief Executive Officer of The Esplanade Company Ltd where she is responsible for the overall management and programming direction of Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay. From 2014–2018, she oversaw the centre’s strategic and social objectives as the Assistant CEO. Prior to joining Esplanade, she was Deputy Chief Executive Officer at National Arts Council (2010–2014) where she oversaw the council’s strategic planning and capability development departments, as well as the development and implementation of policies and programmes for arts grants, arts education, community engagement, and arts infrastructure.