

Staying the course, adopting new mindsets: the arts in the time of COVID-19

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As the COVID-19 crisis unfolded, the National Arts Council in Singapore marshalled resources to support the arts sector, from galvanising artists and commissioning significant projects of scale to incentivising arts companies and artists to engage in training and capability building. Paul Tan shares insights from the agency's experiences and his thoughts on the way forward for the arts in the light of the pandemic.

At the point of writing, the COVID-19 numbers around the world are on an alarming upward trend. For sure, no country is out of the woods yet and the pandemic continues to pose a grave threat to humanity. With such a dynamic situation, it is impossible to predict when the global culture scene can return to any semblance of normalcy, with artists and audiences coming together. Concert halls are closed or underutilised, choirs and wind bands are not rehearsing and the face-to-face intimacy of a performance in a black box seems almost a distant memory. One dramatic headline capturing the grim zeitgeist was Broadway's announcement that it would be curtains down for New York theatres for the rest of 2020 (Paulson 2020).

Here in Singapore, the Dorscon Orange alert¹ announced in early February already created ripples of anxiety, within and beyond the arts and culture community. Initially, with minimal community transmissions, it appeared that the proverbial show could go on, and many performances did, albeit at reduced capacities. National Arts Council (NAC) was even able to galvanise leading artists to put out a public video with a “Stay Strong, Don’t *Kancheong*”² message, encouraging Singaporeans to observe safety measures while carrying on with day-to-day life responsibly (Figure 1).



Figure 1. Singaporean artists encouraging everyone to observe safety measures through a video message. Images courtesy of National Arts Council.

But as the cases of infection climbed in Singapore, it was soon clear that the risks of public gatherings in enclosed spaces were too high, thus resulting in further tightening of public-facing activities. When Circuit Breaker was announced in April 2020³, life came to what felt like a standstill.

Shows that had been months, even years, in the making were abruptly cancelled, tickets were refunded while schools and community clubs deferred their arts programmes. Independent freelancers, who form a substantial part of the arts community, found their gigs drying up overnight. It became quickly apparent that this was an unprecedented crisis, that the sustainability of livelihoods and arts companies was at stake; and alongside that, the important, soul-nourishing work of telling our stories and reflecting on Singapore's unique cultural identity.

Such a crisis requires an agile and sustained response from the larger community as well as NAC in its role as the government agency championing the sector.

Recognising the potentially disastrous impact of the pandemic motivated my colleagues in NAC to respond quickly. Working within the government, we were able to secure resources in the form of a SGD\$55 million Arts and Culture Resilience Package (ACRP) and at the same time, persuade decision makers that jobs in the sector warranted additional protection with the enhanced Jobs Support Scheme (JSS). As announced in Singapore's fourth budget for 2020, the Fortitude Budget, qualifying arts companies were able to get a higher tier of employment support similar to the retail and food sectors.

Arts freelancers, whose roles are as diverse as actors, curators, writers and stage managers, were

particularly badly affected as JSS was focused on keeping salaried Singaporean employees on their wage bill. Fortunately, some relief came in the form of the Self-Employed Person Income Relief Scheme (SIRS) launched by Ministry of Manpower and administered by National Trades Union Congress (NTUC). While the scheme was unveiled in early April and has been welcomed by all freelancers, there was still a need for the NAC to get an arts specific perspective and push out its own targeted initiatives and programmes.

Arts Resource Hub (ARH), set up by NAC in 2019, has turned out to be an invaluable resource for this. Even though ARH's co-working spaces had to close, ARH had become a platform for NAC to reach out to the community by conducting surveys, holding useful engagement sessions and pushing practical resources like online clinics and courses. It has provided NAC a direct line to the community, and insights from our surveys and conversations have found their way to refinements in the government's support schemes.

One key feature of ACRP was to incentivise artists and arts companies to productively make the most of the "down time" during the pandemic. It seemed an opportune time for artists to think about upskilling and to consider ways to deepen their craft and new modes of arts making or presentation. NAC's intention was simple: every economic sector faces an uncertain and possibly rocky future. COVID-19 aside, with technology developing at breakneck speed and changing consumption patterns, how would NAC persuade artists to consider new modes of delivery and new ways to sustain careers? What new capabilities were required? We debated how best to support training during this period, including commissioning courses to be conducted by veteran artists while encouraging other practitioners to sign up for new courses, some of them with training allowances.

That is how NAC came to launch two grant schemes early in the pandemic. The Capability Development Scheme for the Arts (CDSA) and Digital Presentation Scheme (DPG) were created in record speed to support this intent. In recognition of the COVID-19 crisis, funding quanta were set at a higher percentage of total project expenditure, even potentially funding projects in full. At the time of writing, there have been about 170 successful applicants for CDSA with 440 training opportunities provided for artists and arts workers and more than 250 successful DPG projects funded benefitting over 3,000 artists and arts groups. Readers may have experienced and enjoyed some of these offerings on mobile devices and laptops in the last few months.

NAC also made sure it commissioned significant projects of scale during this period, with an eye to providing meaningful gigs for our artists. These ranged from literary reflections in *The*

Straits Times to reproducing the works of over 350 visual artists on the city's Streets of Hope banners (Figure 2) and a month-long Facebook concert series "From the Living Room" (Figure 3). This popular series invited musicians and dancers to showcase their skills and craft from their homes in informal sessions hosted by actors. There are more of such commissions in the pipeline, including collaborations with other arts groups, media companies and government agencies.

While NAC has the resources to keep this level of activity going for the short and medium terms, there may be challenges in the long run, especially with the fiscal constraints the government will face in the coming years. Resources are finite after all. Thus there is, more than ever, an imperative to relook at the way culture is created, presented and supported. The whole populace must step up to sustain the arts, especially with the possibility of an enduring pandemic with no effective vaccine till 2021, and



Figure 2. Streets of Hope banners on lamp posts featuring the works of over 350 visual artists. Image courtesy of National Arts Council.



Figure 3. Home-grown Chinese string quintet StringWerkz performing in the “From the Living Room” series. Image courtesy of National Arts Council.

an explosion of global infections leading to more imported cases in Singapore. The responsibility of caring for the cultural sector in a crisis like this must be a shared one. In pre-COVID times, we must have laughed and cried in the theatre, raved over a favourite book or song, or taken immense pleasure in the arts and culture. In bad times, surely, we should then encourage our artists and find ways to keep the arts companies thriving.

At the start of this pandemic, there was criticism that artists were being pressured to jump on the digital bandwagon, that it was a drab substitute for live performances, and that there was a surfeit of hastily-stitched content from the archives being put online. A few artists also felt they were being nudged to say something when there was nothing to say, when more pressing life and death matters confronted frontline workers daily. Art seemed almost superfluous.

But as the months went on, two things became clear—when people are physically isolated and in low spirits, the arts, even if experienced via the screen of a laptop or mobile device, can bring much joy, relief and a sense of human connection. The arts, as many artists instinctively know, can be a balm to troubled psyches and revive weary minds. Stirring music and comic theatre from our Singaporean arts groups as well as virtual museum tours were just some of many options available at one’s fingertips.

The other realisation was that the arts can deal with difficult topics—it can chronicle pain, explore silver linings in dark clouds and celebrate things we take for granted. It can also help us see a crisis such as this pandemic in a different way and process our sense of loss and helplessness. In a poem commissioned to reflect on life in

Singapore during COVID-19, Amanda Chong writes movingly:

“Perhaps all this was to awaken us shapes
of suffering: the bruise encircling
a nurse’s mouth as she peels off her mask...

Our comfort feels like shame at first,
then swells into an unsettling need
for change. We must find the cracks
where light comes through, then prise
them wider.⁴

Of course, there is no doubt live performances are special—we can all recall how a stadium can be electrified by a rock band or how an audience is set abuzz by spectacular theatre—and we can only hope such performances can return to our cultural calendar sooner rather than later. But in the same breath, the online arts experience should not be summarily dismissed either. Such experiences can readily translate into meaningful arts education, development of new audiences and even internationalisation opportunities. A good online arts experience can also engender a sense of community, especially when a show is livestreamed and performers are able to interact with audiences. Such intimacy is unique and is a different experience from live performances in a venue.

Given so many unknowns with this tricky virus, who can predict when we can see full theatres and concert halls again? Till then, is it not necessary to think out of the box on how to deliver the

arts given this current health crisis, and the proscriptions on large gatherings? The answer may not be a simple binary of live versus online.

When shows reopen with reduced capacities and social distancing, there will also be a need to rethink business models. What will ticket prices look like, if capacities of performing arts spaces are reduced? What are the optimal ways to monetise the content that companies put up online? How will fund-raising change in the future? Challenging times are clearly ahead and everywhere there is talk of consolidations and closures. But crises often seed—even force—innovations, so we have reason to be optimistic. Certainly, NAC will be there to journey with the arts community, testing new solutions, building bridges with new partners and lending meaningful support.

Humankind and its leading artists have always adapted despite the vicissitudes of history, be it changing geopolitics, man-made wars, natural disasters or the advent of radical technology. Through the long lens of history, COVID-19 will probably be viewed in a similar vein. As society changes, along with new challenges thrown up by COVID-19, everyone will have to adapt. But with the collective efforts of Singaporeans, the arts community and cultural institutions, we can be confident our artists will discover new ways to communicate, to enthrall, and to provoke thought and discussion about contemporary society, just as their creative forebears did for millennia past. □

About the Author



Paul Tan is Deputy Chief Executive Officer of National Arts Council, the government agency championing arts by nurturing creative excellence and supporting broad audience engagement. Tan joined NAC in 2011 and currently sits on the boards of Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Singapore Symphony Group and Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. An accomplished writer and poet, Tan has also published five volumes of poetry.

Bibliography

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Notes:

1. DORSCON stands for Disease Outbreak Response System Condition, a colour-coded framework deployed by Singapore government to address disease situations. The Orange alert indicates severe but not widespread transmission, hence requiring more stringent measures of containment. The government announced DORSCON Orange on 7 February.
2. *Kancheong* is a Singlish phrase of Hokkien origin, which means anxious, harried or panicky.
3. The Singapore government announced a period of "Circuit Breaker" on 3 April 2020 to pre-empt the trend of increasing local transmission of COVID-19. During the Circuit Breaker, elevated safe distancing measures were implemented. Singapore exited the Circuit Breaker on 1 June 2020.
4. *Lamentations* by Amanda Chong, was first published in *The Straits Times*, July 6, 2020 as part of "30 Days of Art" series, commissioned by NAC.