

In Case of Existential Threat, Redefine Your Existence:

Checkpoint Theatre's Lessons from the Pandemic

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The performing arts sector was particularly hard-hit during the pandemic as live performances ground to a halt. Local company Checkpoint Theatre, however, endured with a nimble turn to diversification as well as care for their staff, in addition to government subsidies, and thus provides a case study in adaptive capacity and resilience. In this essay, Huzir Sulaiman shares some lessons he learned from the past few years.

It was March of 2020, and I was on the phone with a worried National Arts Council (NAC) officer. Performing arts groups in Singapore were reeling from the impact of the rapid spread of COVID-19. Our account manager at NAC was concerned that Checkpoint Theatre would be plunged into despair at the closure of venues and the freeze on our industry.

“Well,” I said, with what must have seemed an inappropriate amount of chirpiness, “it’s just like the Japanese Occupation!”

“Er... how is that a good thing?” she replied.

“It’s not a *good* thing, but there’s no point in moaning and wailing about it. You do what it takes to survive. You learn Japanese. You trade rice on the black market. Don’t moan about the British surrender. Pick yourself up, adapt, and carry on. That’s what Checkpoint Theatre will do.”

Historians may find fault with my analogy, but it was psychologically useful. When everyone was talking about “unprecedented times”—

how we all came to hate that phrase!—it was comforting to realise there was an arguable historical precedent. The tribulations of 1942-1945 brought hardship and pain, and you had to be brave, flexible, determined—and lucky—in order to come out on the other side.

So this is what we did during the “Occupation” of 2020-2022, and what we learned from it.

When the pandemic began, Checkpoint Theatre was 18 years old, and was pursuing its mission of developing, producing, and promoting original Singapore theatre with ever greater vigour. It was a point of post-colonial pride for us to never stage a Western play—everything was a home-grown Singaporean work, and created in-house. We rigorously developed our plays with the creators, sometimes over two years, going from an idea and a blank page into a full staging, and often a publication or international tour. We received NAC Major Company Scheme funding, and had been commissioned five times by the Singapore International Festival of Arts and its predecessor, the Singapore Arts Festival. With five live productions planned, 2020 was slated to be one of our biggest seasons ever, in venues ranging from the Drama Centre Theatre to the Esplanade Theatre Studio to an intimate museum setting.

All the shows had to be cancelled, of course. Our cash losses for our March and April 2020 productions were close to SGD300,000, as we decided to pay every one of our freelancers their full wage, and the projected lost revenue for the rest of the year was about SGD700,000. There was no prospect of further ticket income, and no

idea how long the pandemic would go on. The closure of theatres meant that our remaining solely a theatre company would have posed an existential threat, a threat to our very existence. Rather than allow ourselves to be made powerless by the uncertainty of the situation and sit paralysed until theatres were allowed to reopen, Claire Wong and I—co-founders and Joint Artistic Directors of the company, and partners in life and art—resolved to come up with a creative and constructive response to this pandemic: a new way forward.

Beyond Boundaries, Into the Unknown

Over the years, we had increasingly diversified the nature of our work to reflect the multidisciplinary interests and skills of the artists with whom we collaborate. Beginning with the Singapore Writers Festival 2015, we had started to proclaim the cross-platform nature of our company when I curated *What I Love about You is Your Attitude Problem*, which featured 24 different events or performances we commissioned across a range of art forms, from works by singer-songwriters to monologues to installation art to drag cabaret to short films.

As we had been on this path organically, looking across different platforms and disciplines for some years, the pandemic provided a strangely welcome push for us to lean into that multidisciplinary, freed from the rigid season planning and mission

statements of a pure theatre company. Because we worked with living creators and always started with a blank page, their work could go into any format for which we could marshal the resources and expertise. Our colleagues—the full-time arts administrators as well as the Associate Artists of the company—embraced our new vision.

Within a month of the declaration of the pandemic, Checkpoint Theatre re-positioned itself as original Singapore storytellers across different media, disciplines and platforms. We leaned into a multidisciplinary approach to allow us to reach audiences in different ways. This decision allowed us to still create, practise our craft, and bring meaning to the lives of our collaborators and our audiences.

Our excitement grew through 2020 and 2021 as we moved forward on projects ranging from graphic novels to music to online films and podcasts. Amid the loss and grief that the sector was experiencing, we were grateful to have found a way through the darkness to reconnect with our impulse to create.

From the beginning of the pandemic to the time of writing this essay, Checkpoint Theatre had produced three audio experiences, four new online films, seven comic books in both print and e-book formats, four online conversations, a successful online fundraiser, playwriting masterclasses for eight writers, and dozens of digital school shows. Since December 2021, we have also staged four plays and held two live talks, but our commitment to our diverse artistic products continues, notwithstanding the reopening of theatres.

What we have learned and the way forward

Monetising digital content is difficult to begin with, and impossible when piracy is rampant.

As a company accustomed to sold-out shows, pre-pandemic, with ticket-buying audiences sometimes as large as 3,500 for a play, we were curious to see how our ticket sales would translate to the digital space. Our *free* online content garnered thousands of views, but our paid content saw a significant drop from what we had expected, to the hundreds. Studying this phenomenon over the last two years and seeking input from colleagues, we realised that, simply put, audiences in Singapore are reluctant to pay for online content, and seem quite happy to commit intellectual property theft.

NAC research shows that 63% of people expect online content to be free (National Arts Council n.d.). And when you couple that with the fact that 40% of Singaporeans admit to piracy, as reported in *The Straits Times* in 2017 (a figure I consider suspiciously low), the net outcome seems to be that if something costs money, it will not be bought, and it—or more importantly, something else—will be stolen.

To be clear, it is not my belief that digital products by Checkpoint Theatre or other Singapore artists are themselves being pirated; that would be somewhat flattering, albeit infuriating. But what happens is this: when the consumer is faced with a choice between a Singapore product made with limited resources and available quite cheaply (our online films were priced at SGD7.99), and

a big-budget American or Korean show that can be illegally streamed or downloaded, the Free Foreign will always beat the Affordable Local.

The remedy for this is two-fold.

First, Singapore artists need to “up their game” to ensure that their products provide some sort of edge that even the most skinflint, larcenous viewer is willing to pay for. We’re all certainly working on this part.

But in tandem with that, the Singaporean government should, through rigorous enforcement of its own intellectual property laws and high-profile prosecutions of offenders, discourage the consumption of pirated digital content, thereby creating a genuinely level playing field where Singapore creators can compete solely on quality. This will expend political capital, as anecdotal evidence suggests that many families in Singapore have a child with a hard drive full of illegally downloaded anime, and the electorate might not like to see them systematically hauled up before the courts and punished for intellectual property theft.

I’m sure the reader is now chuckling nervously and thinking about the contents of their own devices, or their nephew’s. But my point is very serious: unless and until piracy is comprehensively discouraged through robust prosecution, it will be impossible for Singapore creators to monetise their online work. Any much-heralded pivot into digital content creation will never be financially sustainable.

The K-pop group Blackpink has 48 million Instagram followers and 76 million Youtube subscribers. Yet when they released a long-awaited concert video at the height of the

pandemic, they only garnered 280,000 paid ticket buyers, largely assumed to be a consequence of widespread piracy. If Blackpink, arguably the biggest music act in the world at the moment, can't make money online, what hope is there for the rest of us?

And yet, there is a gentler alternative to relentless prosecution of piracy: generous and continuous subsidy for the arts, for which I will argue shortly.

Transformation needs time, an honest assessment of who we are, and state support.

In seeking to transform Checkpoint Theatre and broaden our practice, moving into many new product lines, I realised that many of the largest companies now in the media and entertainment sector took a very long time to get there, and sometimes started in unlikely places. We must remember that Disney only moved into live-action film after 27 years of concentrating on animation; it took them another 21 years to venture into theme parks. And for the first nine years of Samsung's existence, it sold noodles and dried fish. Even much less dramatic shifts require time to understand a new market, make mistakes, and correct course. In the arts sector in Singapore, we therefore need to allow ourselves time to transform, well beyond the grant-reporting cycles tied to a single fiscal year.

Part of the problem is a certain fuzziness of self-image. The major players in the sector are rightly classified as charities, recognised for contributing something to the public good, and eligible for donor tax incentive schemes and matching funding. These schemes are enormously helpful to us and gratefully utilised.

But arts groups are one of the few types of charities that can directly *sell* their services to their beneficiaries. We look like—and have come to be subconsciously judged as—entertainment *businesses*, even by ourselves. Animal welfare charities cannot expect stray animals to directly pay for their rescuing or feeding; those groups are dependent on indirect support. But arts charities are constantly confronted with a rhetoric that they need to be financially sustainable, part of that being an implicit pressure to directly monetise their product.

In the Singaporean government's superb pandemic response, the support schemes that were rolled out and adjusted in successive budgets, including raising the Job Support Scheme wage subsidy from 25% to 50%, and several substantial one-off grants, had a hugely positive impact on Checkpoint Theatre's viability. By reducing the daily anxiety of collapse, it allowed us to concentrate on telling Singapore stories in new ways, and making great art. We have done some of our best and boldest work precisely because we knew that we were cushioned somewhat from failure by a supportive funding structure that snapped into place in this time of crisis.

This does not mean that our transformation efforts were a failure. With our podcasts, films, music, and comics, we are slowly building a market, and they may very well be profitable one day—perhaps even massively so. That is certainly my hope. But it may take years, and we will continue to need state support.

I would therefore urge the arts sector to engage with the government in good faith, to rethink the now-widespread philosophy of sustainability, and to relook at how the arts should be funded as we continue to transform and embrace new

challenges. The pandemic has taught us that we can survive and transform when we have more state support and subsidy, not less.

Ultimately, people come first.

At one of the early online industry town halls in 2020, a senior government official said—not unkindly, but gently and factually—“We don’t expect all of you to survive,” no doubt reflecting the gloomy analyses of those days. That galvanised our desire to make sure that not just Checkpoint Theatre survived, but that all of our people would too. We needed to take care of them.

We have been told that Checkpoint Theatre set an industry standard right from the start of the pandemic. We paid our freelancers—actors, designers, technical crew—full fees for cancelled shows, partly because it was the decent thing to do, but also because if these brilliant, self-employed persons had to exit the profession due to economic hardship, the sector as a whole would suffer an irretrievable loss. I am glad many other groups followed our lead. Even as our war chest was depleted, our donors rewarded us by renewing, and sometimes increasing their support.

None of our full-time arts administrators were let go or had their salaries cut. We knew we had to hold on to them and take care of them, rewarding them for their hard work and belief in our ability to survive. Promised raises were honoured. Bonuses were paid, though Claire and I forewent ours in 2020.

We began a practice of morning online check-ins, which continues to this day, where we spend a lot of time on personal things: how are you sleeping; what have you cooked or eaten; what music are you listening to; how is your auntie doing, the one who had the fall? These “watercooler conversations”, such as you would have in a physical office, help cement our identity as people who care about each other first, long before the first work discussion of the day.

Mental health was and is a constant consideration. We make frequent, discreet accommodations for staff who are going through a difficult time with the pandemic. Early on, we resolved never to police online productivity. A midday nap is perfectly fine. Time out to deal with kids or ailing parents is perfectly normal.

Ultimately, the biggest lesson of the pandemic for Checkpoint Theatre was that if we put our people first, whether full-timers or freelancers, they would see us through each stage of survival and transformation.

It is 2022, and we are now in our 20th Anniversary Season. Our multidisciplinary transformation is fully embedded, even as we have returned triumphantly to the stage with the critically-acclaimed *The Fourth Trimester*, filling the huge Drama Centre Theatre with the laughter and tears of our audiences who have stayed with us all through this dark pandemic period. We are grateful for our audience’s support, for the loyalty and hard work of our team members, and for the constant care and support of government agencies. We look forward to an exciting 20 more years and beyond. □

About the Author



Huzir Sulaiman is the co-founder and Joint Artistic Director of Checkpoint Theatre. He oversees the company's development of new work, including plays, audio experiences, video, and comics. A critically-acclaimed and award-winning playwright, his *Collected Plays 1998-2012* was published in 2013. His work has been commissioned five times by the Singapore International Festival of Arts and its predecessor, the Singapore Arts Festival.

Recent directing credits include *The Weight of Silk on Skin* as part of Chamber Readings: Plays by Huzir Sulaiman (2022), *Session Zero* (2021), *Vulnerable* (2021), *Two Songs and a Story* (with Joel Lim, 2020), *Thick Beats for Good Girls* (2018), and *FRAGO* (2017).

Huzir has taught playwriting at the National University of Singapore's University Scholars Programme; at the NUS English Department; the School of the Arts; and other institutions. Huzir was educated at Princeton University, where he won the Bain-Swiggett Poetry Prize, and is a Yale World Fellow.

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