



**Esplanade  
Presents**

**The Studios**

An Esplanade Commission

# ALBIZIA

An Immersive Performance Installation

by Robert Zhao Renhui (Singapore)

31 Aug – 3 Sep, Thu – Sun ————— Esplanade Theatre Studio  
Various timings

# About Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay

Esplanade is Singapore’s national performing arts centre. It hosts a year-round line-up of about 3,500 live performances and activities presented by Esplanade, its partners and hirers. As an arts centre for everyone, Esplanade also creates opportunities for seniors, youth, children and underserved communities to experience the arts. More than 70% of the shows that take place each year at the centre are free for all to enjoy.

Esplanade also brings the arts virtually to audiences in Singapore and beyond, through its diverse range of digital programmes on *Esplanade Offstage*, an all-access backstage pass to the performing arts and guide to Singapore and Asian arts and culture, with videos, podcasts, articles, quizzes and resources.

The centre works in close partnership with local, regional and international artists to develop artistic capabilities and content, push artistic boundaries and engage audiences. Esplanade supports the creation of artistic content by commissioning and producing new Singapore and Asian work for the international stage. It also develops technical capabilities for the industry nationally.

Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay is operated by The Esplanade Co Ltd (TECL), which is a not-for-profit organisation, a registered Charity and an Institution of a Public Character. The Charity Council awarded TECL the Charity Governance Award – Special Commendation for Clarity of Strategy in 2016 and 2022, and the Charity Transparency Award from 2016 – 2019 and 2022. Esplanade is Singapore’s first Dementia-Friendly Arts Venue and a certified Dementia Go-To Point, as well as a Guide-dog Friendly centre.

TECL receives funding support from Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth and its Community Programmes are supported by Tote Board Family, comprising Tote Board, Singapore Pools and Singapore Turf Club.

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# *The Studios* turns **20** this year.

Over the last two decades, Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay's *The Studios* has been a space for inspiration, innovation, and imagination. We have presented an eclectic collection of more than 160 productions that has asked artists and audiences to reconsider possibilities in contemporary theatre and performance. We have heard stories that invite us to reflect on the human condition and what it means to live. We have had the privilege of meeting so many artists and audience members who have grown along with the season, many of whom have become firm collaborators and colleagues.

What next then? After 20 years, what role does *The Studios* play in the Singapore theatre scene? In what ways can the season evolve and respond to a wildly different world? What do we want to talk about and how do we want to talk about it? How does our physical infrastructure at Esplanade shift the programming of the season? It has been an exciting few years of research, reflection, brainstorming and prioritisation as we think about the possibilities ahead. What firmly remains, however, is our commitment to enable and collaborate with performance and theatre-makers to create work that challenges our notions of what art can be and do.



From 2023, *The Studios* will be expanding.

At the most fundamental level, the season is moving beyond its intimate home in the Esplanade Theatre Studio to include presentations in the recently opened Singtel Waterfront Theatre at Esplanade, opening up the possibilities for art-making and performance. This shift is mirrored in the expansion of the geography of the programming, inviting both Singapore-based and international artists to congregate in these spaces and exchange ideas, perspectives and stories—an ever more essential dialogue in an increasingly insular and polarised world.

Once started, this exchange and dialogue has the potential and momentum to continue beyond the venue's physical confines. The suite of companion programmes that are presented alongside the performances are an invitation to deepen our engagement with the artistic work and the issues raised. They are designed to engage not just the intellect, but our senses and emotions, taking advantage of the myriad ways that people process and access information. Through these interactions, we hope that *The Studios* can become a space where we are provoked to think, make sense of and hopefully, make good of our collective human experience at this time.

Photo Credit: Robert Zhao Renhui

## 2023 – 2025: Land

Our overarching theme for the next three years of *The Studios* is **Land** and it emerged in the simplest of ways. As the Singtel Waterfront Theatre was being built, we found photos of the Marina Bay area that showed how dramatically the landscape here had changed over the last 20 years. Between this visual reminder and the current local and global discourse, it felt urgent and fitting to look at land as our thematic focus for the next three editions.

Land is immediate and tactile. It is simultaneously our physical landscape and a symbol of our sense of identity and belonging. It encompasses a vast number of today's pertinent issues, including global development, climate change, land rights, displacement and migration, duty of care and responsibility to our environment and the people around us. Yet, it is deeply intimate and personal, drawing our attention to our roots and history while inviting us to think about the future and what we have to do.

For 2023, we turn our lens inwards and examine our relationship with land under the specific theme of **Landings**. How much do we know about the land on which we reside—its history, its natural character? What does it mean to us, and to what extent do we understand what we are trying to protect or preserve, particularly in Singapore where urban re-development is analogous to progress? What is the cost of this progress and what do we give up or have we given up, in order to move ahead?

Taking place from 28 Jul to 3 Sep 2023, the six productions and the accompanying companion programmes in our 2023 season are a starting point to examine some of these complex questions. For this, we are ever privileged and grateful to build this conversation with **Silke Huysmans and Hannes Dereere, The Necessary Stage, Joel Tan, Tan Shou Chen, Robert Zhao**, as well as **Dr Natalie Pang, Yong Ding Li, Esmonde Luo, Rachel Chin**, and **Danial Matin**.

And to everyone who has joined us over the last two decades, thank you for your support and trust. It means the world to us and we are incredibly excited to start this new chapter with you.

**Lynn Yang**

Producer

The Esplanade Co Ltd

## Artist's Message

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Easily recognised as one of the tallest trees in Singapore, the Albizia tree is one of the most common and visible trees in our city. There are several ways to talk about this tree. I can talk about its forgotten history from 1870. I can also talk about its status as an invasive species in Singapore. Or perhaps I can talk about the way non-human species have interacted with this tree.

But I want to concentrate on something else, something that is so obvious to us all but we often fail to see. The form of the Albizia. This is a very tall tree. It is easily the most visible tree in the secondary forest. Sometimes when you encounter them in a grove, as I had, they form beautiful crown islands known as crown shyness, a phenomenon that is as mysterious as the encounter itself. Its branches break often and litter the floor with a layer of its leaves and branches. Look harder and you see a host of termites, beetles and ants breaking the sticks and leaves down, adding a new layer of substrate to the soil. Stay any longer and the ants will start crawling up your shoes and bite you, forcing you to move on. Urging you to get away, as though you don't belong there.

It is hard to try to form a connection with a tree, to treat a tree like an equal, a 'you'. With this show, I urge you to try.

**Robert Zhao Renhui**



## Synopsis

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*Albizia* is an immersive performance installation created by artist Robert Zhao Renhui.

Videos, photography, and sound are woven into an immersive natural setting that recreates one of several secondary forests that fill Singapore's landscape.

Inspired by ecological research that reclaims these "second-tier forests" as precious opportunities to reimagine the future, *Albizia* invites us to consider the potential for life and regeneration in these forests on the margins of our island.

(1hr, no intermission)

In English, with English subtitles.

Advisory: Do dress comfortably as you are free to move around the space for the duration of the experience.





## Programme Notes

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A plantation fails.

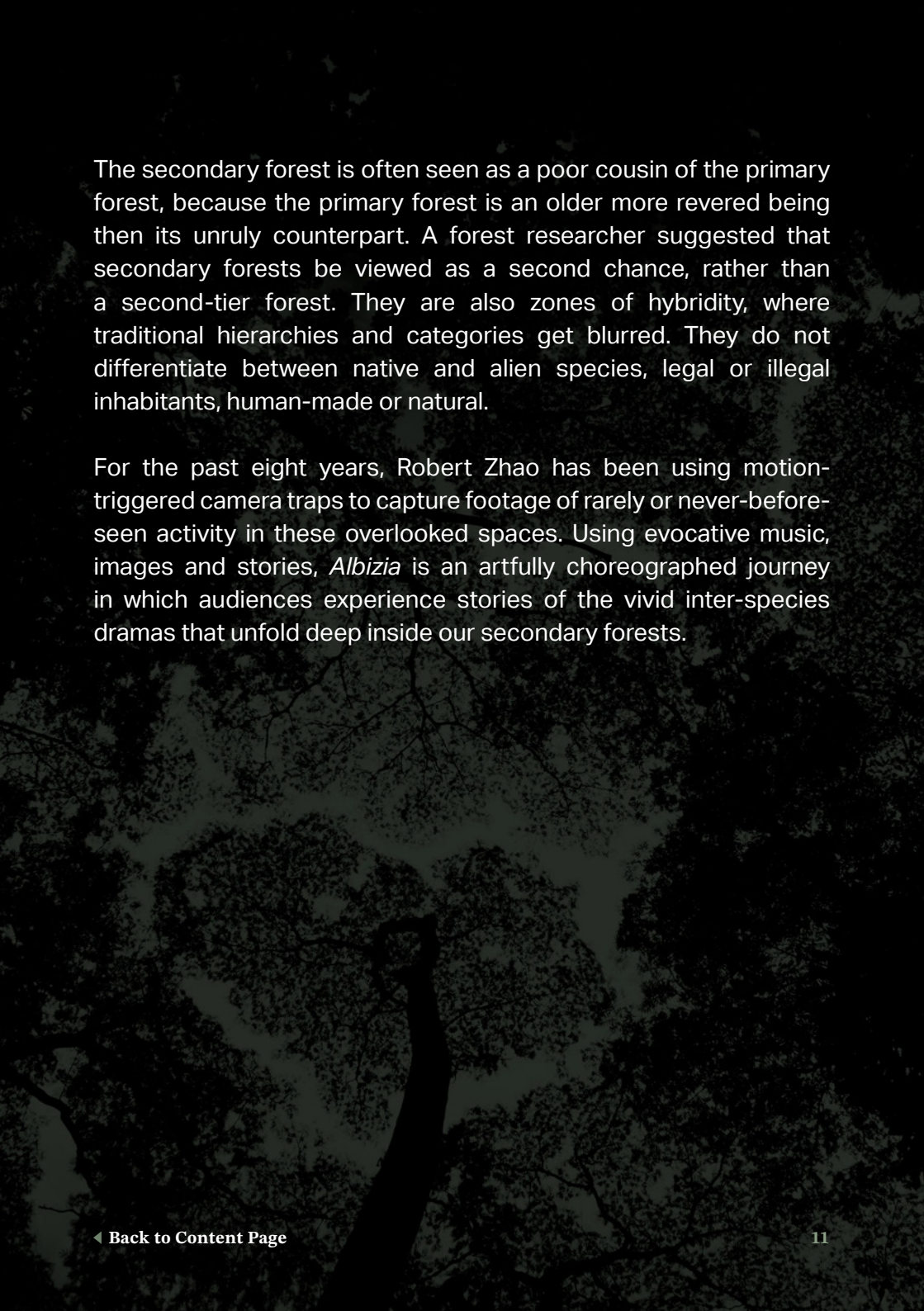
A *kampung* is relocated.

A colonial military barrack is demolished.

The land is laid to rest.

The *simpoh ayer* plant is one of the earliest plants to move in to clothe the landscape. It flowers and fruits everyday, trying its best to attract birds and insects to come. Slowly, other plants start growing over the rubble and disused paths. Rainwater cracks the concrete banks of an abandoned drain, widening it into a river. A forest grows over the land, providing food and shelter to various denizens and activities. An owl, a monitor lizard, an illegal migrant, a rave party.

A secondary forest is a forest that has emerged from a landscape that has been disturbed by human activity. They can be as old as a century or as young as 10 years old. The host of species that is found in the forest is a mix of native and alien species. Albizia trees are often the tallest trees in a secondary forest, providing food and home for many species.



The secondary forest is often seen as a poor cousin of the primary forest, because the primary forest is an older more revered being than its unruly counterpart. A forest researcher suggested that secondary forests be viewed as a second chance, rather than a second-tier forest. They are also zones of hybridity, where traditional hierarchies and categories get blurred. They do not differentiate between native and alien species, legal or illegal inhabitants, human-made or natural.

For the past eight years, Robert Zhao has been using motion-triggered camera traps to capture footage of rarely or never-before-seen activity in these overlooked spaces. Using evocative music, images and stories, *Albizia* is an artfully choreographed journey in which audiences experience stories of the vivid inter-species dramas that unfold deep inside our secondary forests.

## Biographies

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### Artist

### Robert Zhao Renhui

Robert Zhao Renhui (born 1983, Singapore) is an interdisciplinary artist who explores the complex and co-mingled relationships between nature and culture. Working in installation, photography, video and sculpture, Robert is interested in the multifarious beings and objects that constitute the living world, and whose experiences and knowledge enrich our collective existence.

His work has been exhibited in international group shows such as Gwangju Biennale 2023; Busan Biennale 2020; Singapore Biennale 2019; Asia Pacific Triennial, Queensland, Australia, 2018; Jiwa: Jakarta Biennale, Indonesia, 2017; 7th Moscow Biennale, Russia, 2017; 20th Sydney Biennale, Australia 2016; Les Recontres d'Arles, France, 2015. Amongst his more recent solo exhibitions in Singapore are *The Nature Museum*, commissioned by Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) and *The Bizarre Honour*, realized for OH! Open House, both in 2017. In 2018, *The Nature Museum* was also conceptualized and staged for the Fast Forward Festival in Greece. Robert has been selected to exhibit his work at the Singapore Pavilion at the 60th Venice Biennale in 2024.



## Associate Producer **James Jordan Tay**

James Jordan Tay started his career as an events and theatre production manager with Orangedot Productions in 2002. He has since managed various commercial, artistic productions, festival openings, corporate dinners, social events and school musicals. Since 2014, he has produced various multi-media productions for Brian Gothong Tan, starting from *Sublime Monsters* and *Virtual Children* to the latest being *Metazomia* by T:>Works. He was SIFA's Head of Artist Liaison from 2015 to 2017. Tay has also produced four editions of The Enabling Festival focusing on dementia awareness and caregiving.

Tay is also a wedding consultant, founding partner of The Tiffin Gallery and an adjunct lecturer at School of Technology for the Arts, Republic Polytechnic.





## Dramaturg Joel Tan

Joel Tan is a Singaporean playwright based in London and Singapore.

Recent work in the UK includes *No Particular Order* at Theatre 503; *When The Daffodils* at the Orange Tree Theatre; *Living Archive* at the Royal Court; *Ghosts In The Blood* for Audible UK; and *Augmented Chinatown* with Chinese Arts Now. He is under commission with the Royal Court, Headlong Theatre, and the Almeida Theatre.

In Singapore, his plays have been produced by leading theatre companies like Checkpoint Theatre, Wild Rice, and Pangdemonium, and several are available in a collection, *Joel Tan Plays Volume 1*, published by Checkpoint Theatre. He is a Creative Associate with Centre 42's New Writing Development Programme, and runs its Professional Development Residency for playwrights.

His play *Love In The Time Of The Ancients* was a finalist for the 2019 Papatango Prize, and *No Particular Order* was shortlisted for Theatre 503's 2018 Playwriting Award. Joel was one of the 503 Five in residence at Theatre 503, and was part of the 2020-2021 Royal Court Writers Group. He was an Associate Artist with London's Chinese Arts Now and Singapore's Checkpoint Theatre.

Joel also works inter-disciplinarily, and has collaborated with visual artists, poets, musicians and dancers as a writer, director and dramaturg.





## Sound Designer & Composer **George Chua**

George Chua is a multidisciplinary artist based in Singapore, active since the late nineties. His prodigious output spans across dance, performance art, digital art, and experimental electronic music. As an explorer of the other worldly potential of sound, he has no interest in developing a singular style or genre of music. Apart

from his solo work and performances, his collaborative interests include live improvisation with sound, unconventional strategies for soundtracks and sound design for film and theatre. He has created music for the film and video works of Kent Tan, Robert Zhao and Ho Tzu Nyen, among many other luminaries in the art scene. He has been using the modular synth since 2014 and in 2016, he performed in Tokyo Festival of Modular. His latest album *Smokescreen* was released under Ujikaji Records in 2020.

[georgechua.bandcamp.com](https://georgechua.bandcamp.com)



## Lighting Designer **Elizabeth Mak**

Elizabeth Mak is an interdisciplinary theatre artist and designer. She has worked internationally on Broadway and elsewhere in the US, Europe, and Asia. Major designs include project *SALOME*, *Nanyang the Musical* (Singapore International Festival of Arts); *The*

*Chinese Lady* (The Public Theater); *Miss You Like Hell* (Baltimore Center Stage); *already there* (Kennedy Center); *Tiny Houses* (Cleveland Playhouse, Cincinnati Playhouse); *Square Root of Three Sisters* (International Festival of Arts and Ideas); and *Rain and Zoe Save the World* (Jermyn St London).

She is a resident designer with Albany Park Theater Project Chicago (Ofrenda, Port of Entry), a member of IATSE Local USA 829 and Wingspace Theatrical Design Inc, a graduate of Harvard College and Yale School of Drama, and represented by A3 Artists Agency. She is also the founder and artistic director of Rainshadow Studios, a Singapore non-profit dedicated to making climate impact art.

[elizabethmak.com](http://elizabethmak.com)



## Set Designer

### Allister Towndrow

Allister Towndrow is an accomplished set designer and props master with a decade of experience in the local theatre industry.

He completed his studies in Technical Theatre Arts from LASALLE College of The Arts in 2013, and since then, he has built an impressive portfolio of work in various roles, including set designer, scenic coordinator, set carpenter, props master, technical crew, art handling and installation, set dressing, and more recently, puppet maintenance and fabrication.

Throughout his career, Allister has been involved in numerous successful productions, such as *Indices of Vanishment* (RAW Moves), *RENT The Musical* (Pangdemonium), *FUN HOME the Musical* (Pangdemonium), *Lord Of The Flies* (Sightlines Productions), *The Golden Record*, as part of NUS Arts Festival 2017, *The Severing Sword* (Nam Hwa Opera with Toy Factory), *Lost Cinema 20/20* (Brian Gothong Tan for *Esplanade Presents: The Studios*), *Make Hantus Great Again!* (Teater Ekamatra), *Angel Island* (Singapore International Festival of The Arts).

Allister is honored to be working on this immersive experience with Robert and the rest of the creative team who have made this project successful.



## Technical Manager & Qlab Programmer **Terence Lau**

Terence Lau is a technical theatre professional and educator with over two decades of active engagement in Singapore's theatre and dance scene. With a strong passion for both the arts and education, Terence has worked with

several renowned arts companies, including Dream Academy, Sing'Theatre, Singapore Lyric Opera, TENG Ensemble, T.H.E. Dance Company, The Necessary Stage, and Wild Rice.



## Stage Manager **Jasmine Khaliesah**

Jasmine Khaliesah is a recent graduate of LASALLE College of the Arts' BA Arts Management programme. She continues to explore and learn about various types of stage management work through the freelance opportunities she receives.

## Credit List

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Artist

**Robert Zhao Renhui**

Technical Manager

**Terence Lau**

Associate Producer

**James Jordan Tay**

Stage Manager

**Jasmine Khaliesah**

Dramaturg

**Joel Tan**

Logistics Manager

**Daniel Tham**

Sound Designer & Composer

**George Chua**

Assistants to Robert

**Ge Xiaocong**

**Hong Shuying**

**Lewis Choo**

**Noah Lee**

Lighting Designer

**Elizabeth Mak**

Set Designer

**Allister Towndrow**

Assistant to Set Designer

**Abdul Alim Bin Ani**

Actors

**Umi Kalthum**

**Yazid Jalil**

Assistant to Technical Manager

**Lee Wai Siang**

Landscape Company

**IT Meng Landscape and Construction**

Set Construction

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Special Thanks

**Adeline Chia, Haeju Kim, Joyce Ho, Kang Min Ngo, Yong Ding Li, Yazid Jalil, Senses AVL & the fantastic team from Esplanade.**





“For me, documentary becomes art at either extreme: extreme self-erasure of the artist or extreme self-implication.”

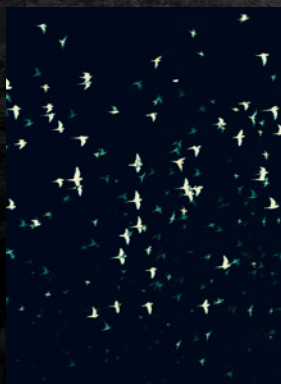
**Robert Zhao Renhui**



Robert Zhao and another featured artist from *The Studios 2023*, the Belgian duo behind *The Mining Trilogy*, talk about their documentary practices and how art can intervene meaningfully in pressing environmental issues. Only on *Esplanade Offstage*.

## Also Happening in *The Studios*

# LANDINGS



### **Birdwatching at Choa Chu Kang**

by Robert Zhao Renhui and Yong Ding Li

Witness the phenomenon of the long-tailed parakeets coming to roost in Choa Chu Kang and reflect on the confluence of natural ecosystems with urban Singapore.

**9 & 10 Sep 2023, Sat & Sun, 6.30pm**

Meeting & Return Point: Block 431  
Choa Chu Kang Avenue 4, S680431

**Tickets at \$18**



### **In Conversation:**

### **Urban Living & Secondary Forests**

by Robert Zhao Renhui and Yong Ding Li

Hear from artist Robert Zhao and experts of forest ecology about living close to nature and the value of secondary forests.

**2 Sep, Sat, 6.15pm**

Esplanade Studio 219

**Free, by registration**



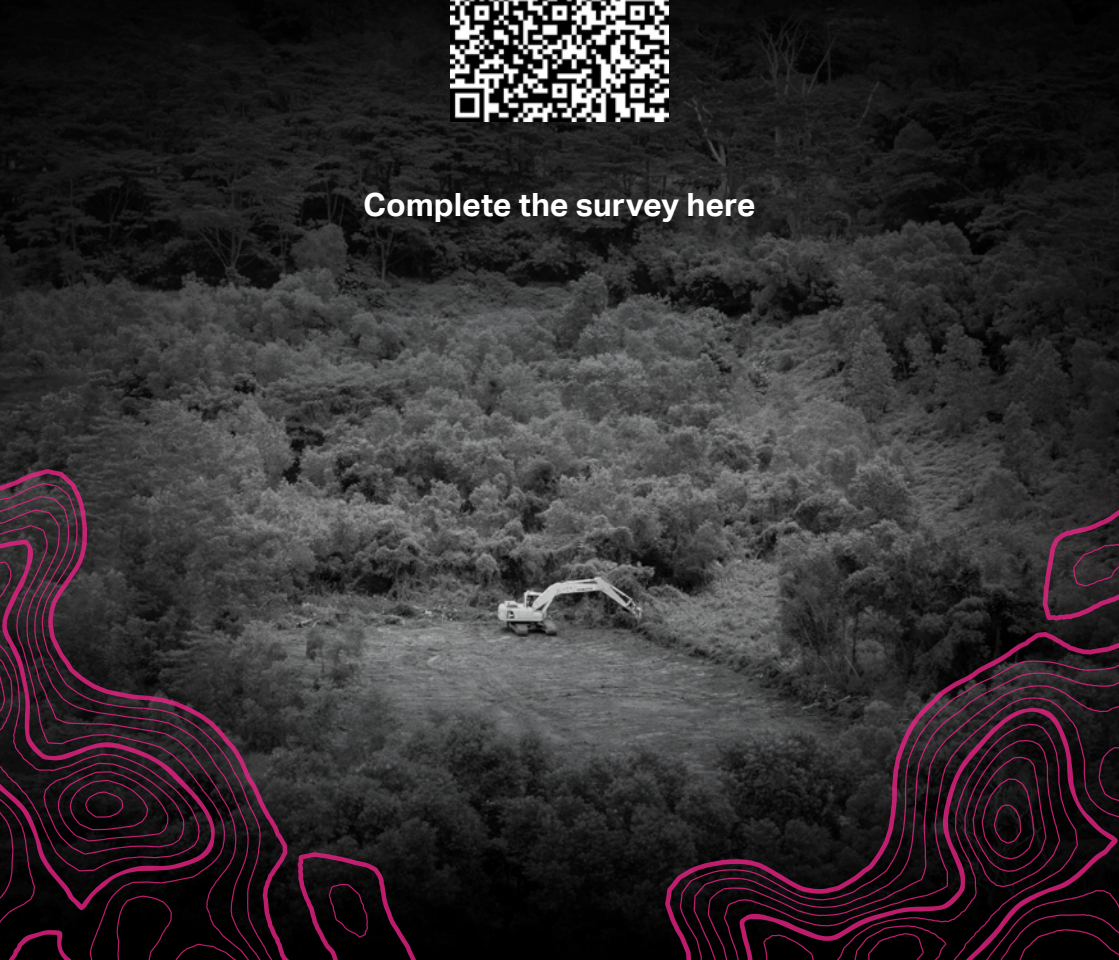
# THANK YOU

for joining us at *The Studios 2023*.

Please take some time to share your  
feedback with us. Thank you.



Complete the survey here





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# LAPSE

by — **Melati Suryodarmo**  
(Indonesia)

One of the most prominent artists from Southeast Asia  
premieres a new dance creation that explores systemic  
breakdown in societies.

**13 – 15 Oct 2023, Fri – Sun**  
Fri, 7.30pm | Sat & Sun, 5pm  
Esplanade Annexe Studio

**\$20<sup>^</sup>**

Limited Concessions: \$16

This production is presented as part of *da:ns focus – Connect Asia Now (CAN)*, a weekend that spotlights contemporary dance works by Asian artists focusing on distinct voices and creative impulses from the region.

**BOOK NOW**  
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# Mari Kita Main Wayang

Let's Stage A Play  
BY FELIX CHIA



ADAPTED BY ZULFADLI RASHID · DIRECTED BY ALVIN TAN

**17 – 19 Nov 2023, Fri – Sun**

**Fri, 8pm | Sat & Sun, 2.30pm & 8pm | Singtel Waterfront Theatre at Esplanade**

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[www.esplanade.com/mkmmw](http://www.esplanade.com/mkmmw)


**\$45, \$60\*<sup>A</sup>**



<sup>A</sup>Limited concessions: \$48


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*to our Esplanade partner, arts benefactor, donors and sponsors for believing in our vision to be a performing arts centre for everyone. They made all these possible!*



# 2,976

activities took place at Esplanade.



## 1,891

Non-Ticketed



## 821

Ticketed

# 2,062,549

People attended our activities at the centre.



Non-Ticketed

## 379,989

Ticketed

## 72,756

\*Figures for Esplanade's activities from Apr 2021 to Mar 2022.



## 465

Activities

## 7,522

Participants

We believe that everyone should be able to experience the joy of the arts, including children, youth, seniors, migrant workers and individuals with special needs. Our community engagement activities bring the arts to those in need.



### Your contribution\* will make a difference.

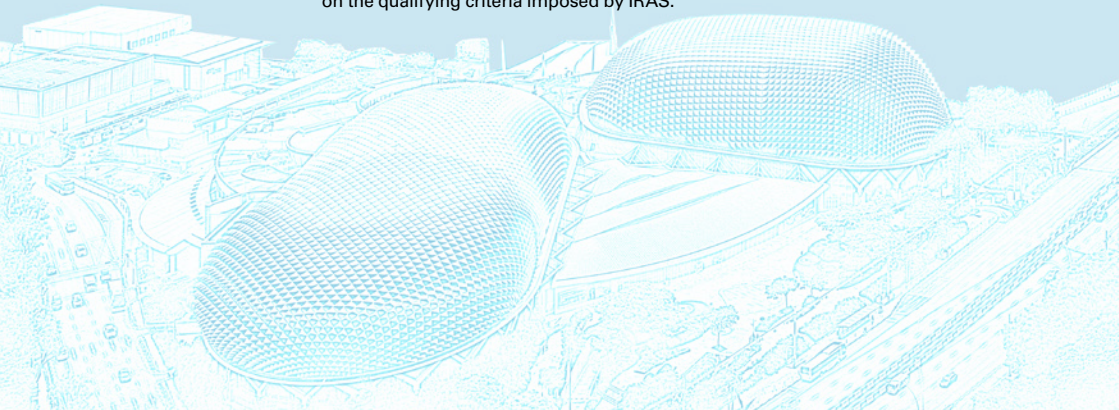
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Esplanade –Theatres on the Bay is a charity, a not-for-profit organisation and Singapore’s national performing arts centre.

We seek to entertain, engage, educate and inspire through the arts. We thank everyone who has helped us bring joy, inspiration and positive impact to Singaporeans from all walks of life by supporting the arts and Esplanade.

Our heartfelt appreciation goes especially to our Donors and Sponsors, for their steadfast belief in our mission and for their generous contributions.

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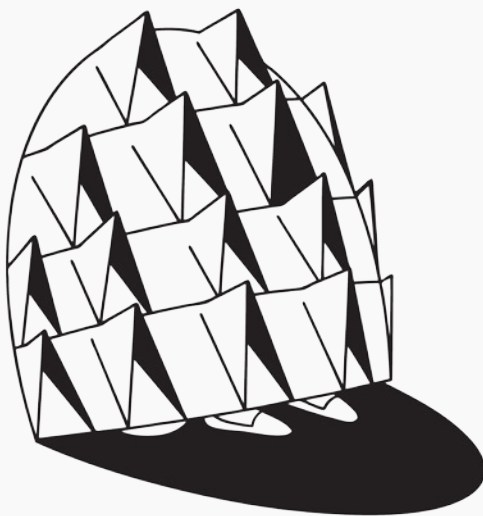
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