

**TRANSCRIPT
OF**

FEAR OF WRITING?
The Development of Political Theatre in Singapore

A forum presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay
as part of *The Studios: fifty* season (2015)
9 May 2015 at library@esplanade (Open Stage)

Featuring playwrights Robert Yeo and Tan Tarn How,
and theatre directors Ivan Heng and Alvin Tan
Hosted by Janice Koh

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Notice:

This document is transcribed from a video recording of the event.

Edits have been made for coherence and clarity, following a series of clarifications with the panel.

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Janice Koh (JK): Hi everybody – hello. First of all, thank you very much for joining us today for what I hope will be an afternoon of a provocative 90 minutes of discussion and hopefully heated debate on the topic of the state and development of political writing on the Singapore stage. My name is Janice Koh, and I will be the moderator of this forum.

Well, you know, in the history of theatre, there is a very long tradition of performances and plays that critically examine the issues of the day and raise political consciousness, that provoke and encourage social change. So whether or not it's early Greek dramas to the historical plays of Shakespeare, whether it's Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, to the plays of David Hare and Carol Churchill—there have always been playwrights and dramatists that feel that theatre has a moral duty to address the state of society and to serve as a platform for reflection, debate and change. It is no different in Singapore and despite our very short history of theatre development, barely 50-60 years, I think we have had more than our fair share of plays that have courted controversy because of their political comment and content.

How has political theatre changed in Singapore over the last few decades? What impact has it had on audiences and society? What is the role of—relationship between artists, the state, and our audiences? And in a place such as Singapore, where artistic content continues to be regulated through funding and licensing, how have our theatre makers continued to be heard and found strategies to reach out to their audiences?

Thankfully for me, but more so for you, I won't be answering any of these questions over the next one and a half hours. Instead, I am very privileged to be joined by some of the most notable troublemakers – sorry, theatre makers [audience laughter] in Singapore. They are multi-hyphenate talents, please, ladies and gentlemen, help me warmly welcome Robert Yeo, Alvin Tan, Ivan Heng, and Tan Tarn How.

[audience applause]

Just a quick note, if anyone here is from the ISD¹, please raise your hand, it would be nice to know where you are and we can look at the hidden camera while we're doing our little forum. Thank you.

Okay, I'm just going to quickly kick off with a question to Robert because being the most experienced amongst all of us here, could you maybe, Robert, tell us a little bit about what it was like writing political plays in the 60s and 70s and what kind of impact did it have on audiences back then? Was it what you expected?

Robert Yeo (RY): Thank you for making me the first speaker. I see that having black and white hair is a privilege, it's fashionable too, and so I get to speak first, thank you Janice.

Uhm, yeah, I just want to make a few brief statements to perhaps set the stage for our discussions. The first point I want to make about politics of theatre, or theatre's politics, is to say we have a national theatre and it's been around with us like 60 years and it's an occasion for celebration because the first person to actually talk about a national theatre was

¹ Abbreviation for Internal Security Department.

THE STUDIOS: *fifty*
Fear of Writing? The Development of Political Theatre in Singapore
9 May 2015, library@esplanade (Open Stage)

Lim Chor Pee who wrote what I think was the first Singaporean play in English. Let me make it clear that we're talking about plays in English. There are plays written in the other 3 languages, and I am less acquainted with them. But Lim Chor Pee, in 1962, wrote a play called *Mimi Fan* which is part of The Studios: *fifty* celebration, and he made a very important remark. He said, "a national theatre cannot hope to survive if it keeps staging foreign plays."

So the most important thing about national theatre is first of all we have to write and stage our own plays, an enterprise that started in the '60s. That's the first point I want to make.

The second point I want to make is that the first few political plays addressed the question of speaking truth to power. In other words, you'd address themes that have to do with who has the ultimate power in Singapore, and who decides on the fate of plays, do they get performed or not. And the first play, I think, in that series, is probably Goh Poh Seng's *The Moon is Less Bright*, because in that play, which was staged in 1963, he had... The Tay family, farmers in Punggol somewhere awaiting the Japanese occupation. And he had in that play, a firebrand, a Marxist called Ah Seng, who joined the anti-Japanese forces. So that, I think, was our first political play, overtly political play, and other plays followed, like mine. I mentioned, my play, *Are You There Singapore?*, which for the very first time mentioned Lee Kuan Yew and the Barisan Socialis and made the censors rather nervous. But anyway, my more overtly political play was *One Year Back Home*, and I may talk about it briefly later, Janice.

The third point I want to make is to talk about the relationship of plays to the censor. Plays in Singapore have to be licensed. In other words, before you get the play performed, you must have a license. The dilemma that I faced, which Tan Tarn How faced, and playwrights faced all the way, is this: if you have a play that is sensitive, and it goes to the censor, the censor will come back and say, "I want you to make the following revisions and if you agree, we'll give you your license. If you don't agree, sorry, your play doesn't get staged."

JK: Was that back in the '70s and '80s?

RY: Yes, it was! I thought I might use it as an occasion to digress, to talk about my play, *One Year Back Home* which was staged in 1980, but it took me one year to get the license. Okay, one year. I started to ask for a license in May 1979, sorry, July 1979, and nearly one year later, I got the licence and I'm going to leave you something which is very revealing.

[Reads from a book] 26 May 1980, from Miss Leong Soh Har and she was the Controller, Undesirable Publications, okay: "Dear Mr Yeo, please refer to your letter dated seven-four-eighty. We have no objection to the revised script of *One Year Back Home*."

That was the situation. Let me just say this: my negotiations with the Ministry of Culture then went all the way up to the Acting Minister for Culture, who later became the President of Singapore, Ong Teng Cheong. And he said to the deputy secretary, who was dealing with me, "Why is Robert Yeo, in 1980," it was the election year, "playing with politics?"

And I said, “Michael², tell the minister that I applied for a license last year!”
You know, that was the kind of situation that I faced.

Alright, I want to move on very quickly to my last point, so that later on I can say something more about *One Year Back Home*. My last point is this: the ultimate between theatre and politics, is this: when a theatre company like Third Stage³, for instance, in 1987, and some of you may or may not know about the so-called Marxist Conspiracy, the ultimate contest is when a theatre company is closed for reasons that are more political than theatrical.

I could go on, but I think it’s time for me to sort of stop and I hope that what I’ve said provided a framework for me to have the pleasure of listening to my other panellists. Janice?

JK: Thank you, Robert.

Alvin, do you have any response to what Robert just said, especially in light of the work that The Necessary Stage has been doing over the last 30 years—

Alvin Tan (AT): Not yet... Twenty...

JK: Twenty...?

AT: Seven.

JK: 27 years? And how things—how do you feel things have changed, up till today?

AT: I think it’s just become more sophisticated, the censorship, it’s not—as the artists work on it, we inevitably school or educate the censors. That’s my story *lah*. When we started, we did this play, *Off Centre*⁴, which is on mental illness, and there was a lot of difficulty having it staged because it was first commissioned by the Ministry of Health and then when they read the script, they freaked out. They had about eight or nine reasons that they didn’t want it to go on, and we politely just told them, maybe they can withdraw the funding, because we spent nine months researching into it and interviewing different people.

JK: These were not the censors, this was Ministry of Health?

AT: This was Ministry of Health, yeah, that’s right, and we went on with the play, and what’s interesting is that it went up again to Parliament, and they were discussing how come a theatre company is able to stage the work without the \$30,000 commission, whether the money was coming from outside the country. I think they didn’t understand what *passion* was about and that a lot of us just tightened our pockets and just went on with the work. And then, at that time, because the censorship appeared in the papers, there was a lot of—it was full house. And it was box office success as well as critically acclaimed.

What I’m trying to say is that years later, censorship does not go that way anymore. It goes into censorship through funding. It will affect your funding, which is what happened to our

² Michael Loke. Deputy Secretary, Ministry of Culture.

³ Third Stage was a Singapore theatre company formed in 1983 and de-registered in 2005.

⁴ Premiered in 1993.

play, *Mardi Gras*⁵, which is a play about LGBT and our—we were dreaming of Singapore's first gay parade, and a year later, there was funding cut across the board for every theatre company, but we had the highest funding cut and Haresh⁶, who was the playwright, wrote in a 12-page letter to ask why, why, because we fulfilled all the points, and we had a closed door meeting with NAC⁷ and they pointed it out, that it was *Mardi Gras*.

It was problematic because we were preparing for a restaging, and not only that, but a sequel, *Top or Bottom*⁸. We went on with it and the censors at MDA⁹ came to watch and they felt this is fine, because it's about death and straight people grieve as well. The first one was promoting gay lifestyle, that's why it was more controversial. And the second play, *Top or Bottom*, is about grief and death but the characters just happened to be gay. So it's very difficult because you don't know where the lines are drawn, yeah. I think it's just, uh—later, we had another work called *Sex. Violence. Blood. Gore*¹⁰, where, two days before opening, they wanted us to take out three scenes. Normally, it's one line or one word, but three scenes is a bit disgusting, so we were like, okay how do we do this, because we paid for the down payment at Jubilee Hall.

So we went on, we went on—at that time it was PELU¹¹, the MDA wasn't around yet, so we went on and we put up the PELU's letter at the foyer and in the theatre, the General Manager read out the letter to the audience and then the play began. And in those three scenes, it went on fast-forward. We didn't censor, it went on fast-forward, and the blocking and all that. And we played Gloria Gaynor's *I Am What I Am* over that. As they were leaving, we distributed the extracts of the scene, so... the authorities were not happy.

We were called in, because they said that, legally, you did not do anything wrong, but you're being cheeky and the space might close up. And I said, yeah, but, you know, you don't want a non-profit group to not go on, right? It's getting tax payers' money and if we don't go on, that's not cool, right? So we should go on. Jubilee Hall, we paid quite a lot, we should go on. But how do we go on, when the play has three scenes out? The audience—because it's marketed as cutting edge and whatever whatever, and when they come, the product is not according to how it was publicised. So then, you will feel cheated and the reputation of the company will suffer. So we have to code censorship into the work, because the work has been tampered with and the title is *Sex. Violence. Blood. Gore*. and censorship is violent, so I guess we just had to use the idea of economics, which is the language that people can understand here.

So that was just left like that. I think, later on, when we learnt—after that, we went overseas to study and all that because we felt that we were so easily framed as Marxists, because we got in trouble with forum theatre as well, right. So after studies, when we came back, I think we went into more inter-culturalism, like *Fundamentally Happy*¹² which was about

⁵ Premiered in 2003.

⁶ Haresh Sharma. Resident playwright of The Necessary Stage since 1990.

⁷ Abbreviation for National Arts Council.

⁸ Premiered in 2004.

⁹ Abbreviation for Media Development Authority.

¹⁰ Premiered in 1999.

¹¹ Abbreviation for Public Entertainment Licensing Unit.

¹² Premiered in 2006.

paedophilia and a Muslim family; *Good People*¹³ (2007), about consumption of marijuana through a brownie because the person is dying and wants to alleviate her pain in a hospice, and she was caught in the urine test and she faced death penalty; and *Gemuk Girls*¹⁴, which was, uh, we interviewed ex-detainees of Operation Spectrum and then created a play which was about the impact on the family of people being detained. So these were very sensitive issues, and actually, would not have seen the stage. But what we did, our strategy, was for *Fundamentally Happy*, we invited the Malay Muslim people to come for our preview, which was 3 months before opening, and we invited MDA to come as well. The Malay Muslim friends who watched it felt it was – yeah it does happen in the family, in their community, but it's sensitively dealt with, and they hoped it would be staged so they can discuss it in a public domain. And it's not just harping on the Malay people, but it's about human condition, because in the play, what we did was to show the—how trauma is causing selective memory.

So it influences the strategy of our theatre composition as well, and the play was allowed to be staged, with a rating. So we found, I think, as much as we schooled the censors, the censors also schooled us in order to focus on what we still want to do and want to say and find new innovative ways of saying it. This is a quote from Pao Kun¹⁵, actually.

The other play we did, was *Still Building*¹⁶ which was about the collapse of Hotel New World, an ISD officer went to watch it with his friend, came out, and said, "I don't know what you're trying to say, but what my friend told me is that you're trying to say that if Singapore is not careful, like the building, it will collapse."

So I got a meeting with Tommy Koh, who was then the Chairman of NAC and I said, "I would like to thank the ISD for having a Marxist perspective to my work, but intention is different from perception, and you are politicising my work, it is not necessarily political".

Like in *Off Centre*, they were concerned about a person, the protagonist, breaking down in the army and they said that Ministry of Health cannot sponsor another play that puts another ministry in a bad light. You are politicising my play – I'm just telling a story, and I'm talking about bullies, so I don't understand what's happening.

So, anyway, we went more into gender politics, ethnic politics, nationality, cross-cultural, intercultural work. We went into politics that were not state-related. We found an opening and we find that, I don't want to let the state be in my play all the time, because I just feel that the state is already in our lives most of the time, so I don't want to give my art more presence, more of a state presence than the work. After that, we went into interdisciplinary characters, also because of the memory of Pao Kun's *0Zero01*, which was interdisciplinary exploration and it was, for me, an artistic work that was very important. But because it has not gotten into trouble with the government and the state, it's not highlighted at all, and interdisciplinary practice is also about politics of the different disciplines and I'm more interested about the social relations of artists and how we work in a collaborative manner which is anti-hierarchical. So I don't want to just transform society and defy the government,

¹³ Premiered in 2007.

¹⁴ Premiered in 2008.

¹⁵ Kuo Pao Kun. A Singapore playwright, theatre director and art activist. (1939 – 2002).

¹⁶ Premiered in 1993.

I want to, within my own vicinity, make a different reality, and that means that a different work will emerge from there.

JK: It's quite interesting how—because both Robert and Alvin, you both talk about the presence of the censors in the art-making. And Robert, you didn't really mention the intricacy of details of your discussion with the government officers, but as we can hear from Alvin's presentation, there is multi-layers of negotiations going on which ultimately then affect the directorial decisions and even programming decisions of *The Necessary Stage*. I mean, during the time that you were writing *One Year Back Home, Are You There, Singapore?*, how detailed were these discussions? How did it—I mean, it's the one—it's the play that we're reading right now. I'm now very interested to read the other play, the one that—there was the writer's cut! Because the published version is the censored version, right?

RY: I'll give you an example very briefly. I recorded, in this book called *The Singapore Trilogy* which publishes my three plays, discussing with an official from the (Ministry of Culture). He summoned me for an interview and he said, bring your play, and I did. So I went to see him at his desk, and when I entered the room, I saw my play, *Are You There*, with a lot of red underlining, you know. So when I started the discussion, he pointed out to certain names and phrases in my play, and Lee Kuan Yew, cannot mention him, Communism, Marxism, Mao Zedong, Che Guevara, cannot, cannot. You know, it was that kind of thing. So I said, what about the good things I say about the PAP?

“Well that, can.”

The discussion went on like that and I knew that I cannot discuss the play with this kind of person, because he was treating my play, a work of art, as a political document, like it was a piece of propaganda. I said, no way I can discuss a play, this work of art, with a civil servant who is not trained to read a play. And then, I knew that I had to appeal beyond the bureaucrat to the political person in the Ministry of Culture, and then I wrote to the secretary. And that's how my play eventually ended up on the table of the then-Acting Minister for Culture. So that was the process of negotiation that I had to go through, back in 1980.

JK: And did that process change the way you wrote plays thereafter?

RY: Well, I had to make revisions, okay, but interestingly enough, after agreeing to certain revisions... oh, this is very interesting, maybe I shouldn't reveal this. Maybe I should talk about it later.

You know what I'm going to say? Well, I mean, you know, on the night of the performance, during rehearsal, we restored the revisions. And I really don't know if the censors went to the performers to say “we asked you to delete A, B, C, and D, and then you put it back?” Yes we did put it back. I'm not sure if they noticed it.

[audience laughter]

JK: Alvin, I sense that you feel it is important to expose the process of censorship to your audience, why is that?

AT: I think if we don't, then it remains invisible. If it's invisible, then they will then judge the work according to what they see and—

JK: And think that was your original voice?

AT: Yeah. So I think that's really problematic; it's not doing justice to the creativity of the work or the actors on stage, yeah.

JK: Ivan, perhaps this is a good time for you to jump in, I think you have a very interesting relationship with the state and your audiences, this tripartite relationship [laughter]. Would you like to comment on what we've discussed so far, your perspective?

Ivan Heng (IH): Well, we're all in bed together, actually.

[audience laughter]

No. I think to just go back to first principles, I am a theatre maker, and theatre has to do with conflict resolution, and drama is based on conflict. Conflict denotes a struggle, and that struggle can, well, it is always between opposing views, and it's always about power. It can be gender, it can be because of class, it can be because of race. And in particular to today's forum, we talk about struggle with the state. So rather than, uh, in Alvin's strategy of saying, look, the State is everywhere so let's just not give it anymore time and space, we say, the state is everywhere and we have to struggle with it.

So with our work, we take a hard look at the State and we take on the State head on, not least because the state has a finger in every pie in Singapore, and in some cases, it is very oppressive. So we see the theatre as a place where people can gather. People from the community can gather to share experience, and in sharing experience, we negotiate difference, we identify injustice, we give a voice to the marginalised, we celebrate who we are as a people, we celebrate our diversity, and that includes the diversity of voices, and this is the thing that theatre does well. We try to do it with a lot of humour because, you know, a spoonful of laughter helps the medicine go down. So, if we think in terms of the political work which addresses issues concerning the state and society, or that questions morality or traditions or stereotypes or assumptions, then every piece of work in *Wild Rice*, including the pantomimes, are political. And, in fact, I'm very happy to share with you that, you know, one of the reasons why we had our funding cuts from 2010 to 2012 was because one perm sec said to us directly at a private meeting which I don't mind making public, that we were sneaking in political messages into our pantomime and it was a family show. I said, you don't understand, it's satire, and basically, it's giving the little person a voice, a chance to laugh at authority. You know, satire laughs at its own defeat. But of course, that didn't sit very well.

In many ways, we've decided to confront the issues concerning the State head on. One of the first most political plays that we did was *Animal Farm*¹⁷. And of course *Animal Farm* is not about Singapore but Russia, and the animals revolting against Russia, but of course our

¹⁷ First performed in 2002.

animals spoke with a Singlish accent. So we had a Boxer who spoke like a taxi driver and Clover was an “auntie”, and it was suddenly very interesting because, I mean, a play has to land, and our job is, to hold up a mirror to society. I think that in making it land, our play, rather than talking about freeing itself from a (communist dictatorship), ours talked about this same cycle of oppression, revolt, freedom, corruption, and then oppression in terms of the decolonisation of Singapore. And therefore, the actual freedom fighters, the pigs who fought for freedom, then became the new colonial masters. And just to quote Vincent Wijesingha¹⁸, “Actually, we had more rights as colonial subjects than we have as Singaporeans today.”

In 2006, we presented what was then known as one of the most overtly political plays, Eleanor¹⁹ wrote *The Campaign to Confer the Public Service Star on JBJ*.²⁰ That play wanted to look at the new Singapore and the old constraints because PM Lee Hsien Loong was brand new, the sun had risen, so to speak. And in his inaugural speech, he said, and I quote, inaugural Prime Minister’s speech, listen carefully:

“We will continue to expand the space in which Singaporeans have to live, to laugh, to grow, and to be ourselves; our people should feel free to express diverse views, pursue unconventional ideas, or simply be different.”

Uh-huh. [audience laughter]

“We should have the confidence to engage in robust debate so as to understand problems, conceive fresh solutions, and open up new spaces. We must give people a second chance, for those who have tasted failure may be wiser and stronger among us. Ours must be an open and inclusive Singapore.”

We took him at his word, and we did the play.

[laughter]

Now, many people, of course, felt that, you know, we were actually pulling the punches because it was not the real JBJ, because JBJ did not actually make an appearance in the play. So, you know, there was kind of a sense that *(it was a cop out, but Eleanor Wong wasn’t actually writing about JBJ, but our fear of anything political)*.

When we finally did *Cook a Pot of Curry*²¹ and we let the Singapore flag fall to the ground, Eleanor Wong said, basically that she preferred the days of allegory, of political allegory, when theatre had this, you know, sense of allegory rather than the overt, blunt instrument, an approach that we have begun to take.

¹⁸ Dr Vincent Wijesingha is Singapore academic and civil activist.

¹⁹ Eleanor Wong. Singapore playwright and poet.

²⁰ Joshua Benjamin Jeyaretnam, more commonly known as JBJ or J.B. Jeyaretnam (1926 – 2008). He was a Singapore lawyer and politician, a leader of the Workers’ Party (1971 – 2001), and the first opposition politician to win a Parliamentary seat in the 1981 elections.

²¹ Premiered in 2013.

I, myself, and Alfian²², kind of disagreed with that, because I think that's just kind of making a virtue out of a necessity. It's a dance with the censors when we should actually just say what we want to say. And if they want to censor us, let them censor us. Let's let them do their job and not be... dancing with them, you know. So we've gone ahead to continue to push the envelope.

So in 2011 and this play was conceived *before* the watershed elections, Alfian came to me and said, "I think we need to do something about elections, I want to do a verbatim piece of theatre." Some months before the elections, he said, "I want to ask Singaporeans three questions: why do you vote, what issues influenced you, and what does citizenship mean to you?"

So he started to work interviewing people in 2010. In the meantime, the watershed elections happened and suddenly, every single constituency could vote. We didn't expect that! Everyone could vote except for the constituents in Tanjong Pagar. So what happened was that suddenly, people realised they had a stake, and they had a say in how our country will be run. Suddenly, kind of almost before and after the elections, we had to convince the interviewees that actually the idea of your vote being secret doesn't mean being kept secret from each other, but that it was kept secret from the government. And they began to have the courage freedom to speak their minds! And so from the transcript of these real interviews, we had a script that actually chronicled the momentous event that not only rocked the boat, but continues to create ripples even today. Today, with the elections again just round the corner, we're again filled with a kind of paranoia. Again, we've become again a bit nervous to say what we really think about what's happening. So I find, personally, that we are starting to constrict the space.

But verbatim theatre, in a sense, hands the theatre over to people. The strategy is actually one that has been used in quite a few places all over the world such as Britain, which has a very strong political theatre tradition. Verbatim theatre is really about *vox populi* – the people's voice.

We are fond of saying that we have no censorship – that today, the approach is not to censors but issue advisories, right? The question we should ask is who actually gives the advisory? It's not us. They are advising *you* and they're telling *you* how to think about a piece of work. They are prescribing to you, and closing that space of how to deal with a piece of art, and I think it's very problematic, because essentially they're warning us and saying that theatre artists are dangerous, so let us just give you that advice before you see a play. I think that really is very patronising. It compromises the possibility for really honest conversations, and thinking about how we want to progress as a community. And I will stop there, thank you very much.

JK: Thank you, Ivan. For those of you who may not know this, or who have not always been clear about this, under the MDA classification guidelines for a license, there are many things that you can or cannot do or say, but one of them is, and I read off here: sensitivity to the

²² Alfian Sa'at. A Singapore writer and playwright.

national interests. They've put here that Singapore is a multi-racial and multi-religious society, so the content should be sensitive to the concerns of different racial and religious groups and the prevailing community expectations of what is necessary to safeguard racial harmony and religious harmony, and content should not undermine public order, national security or stability. That's pretty general, and similarly, the National Arts Council funding guidelines does specifically state that the NAC has to prioritise funding away from projects that might undermine the authority or legitimacy of the government or public institutions, or threaten the nation's security and stability.

I think, I believe we're one of the few countries in the world that continue to have these guidelines for licensing and funding. Tarn How, is there something that you would like to add to what, you know, our previous speakers have spoken on so far, from your perspective, especially given the fact that you've been writing for a long time and plays like *Lady of Soul* and *Undercover*, all the way to, more recently, *Fear of Writing*, all touching on, that comment on the politics of the day. How do you feel things have changed, or not changed?

Tan Tarn How (TH): Hmm, before I came, I was praying that I would not be last, and now... [laughter] It's hard to come after that.

JK: But you chose that chair. You could have been first.

TH: Just some general notes. It's good to see such young people—I've never seen such young people, and young-ish people as well in the audience, and I would like to acknowledge the presence of Russell Heng here, who is a political playwright as well, and his plays are being read in *The Studios: fifty season: Half Century, Comrade Mayor, (...)* *Lest The Demons*, (and) *Half Century*. Of course, the other political playwright and, actually, the curator of *The Studios: fifty* is Tze Chien²³, standing behind there, his works are also political in nature and we would like to thank him for arranging this (forum).

So, what's interesting is the fact that... how, even though you're not political, sometimes they politicise you, right. And a very interesting case is the case of the play²⁴ by The Theatre Practice recently, a Chinese *wu xia* musical, and one of the characters is—I apologise to those people who don't know Chinese, one of the characters is called *Muzi Wudi*, which means the four characters, *Mu* (木) is wood, right, *Zi* (子) is son, and *Wu Di* (无敌) is without enemy or unrivalled, you know. And somebody in the audience said, *Muzi* when you combine into one word becomes the surname *Li* (李), right, and there was an investigation into whether it was a subtle message, and it was during that particular period²⁵. [Audience laughter]

²³ Chong Tze Chien. Playwright, theatre director and Company Director of The Finger Players.

²⁴ *Legends of the Southern Arch* 《天门决》 by The Theatre Practice (2015)

²⁵ "that particular period" referred to a period of National Mourning from 23 to 29 March 2015, following the passing of Singapore's first Prime Minister, Lee Kuan Yew. His surname, written in Chinese character, is *Li* (李).

I don't know whether to laugh or to cry or to say, wow, have things changed, have things not changed? So the answer is there.

I think that Ivan talked about struggles with the state, but I would like to distinguish two kinds of struggles. The struggle with the state and struggles with yourself as an artist, and to then draw (out) the difference between fear and censorship, in the sense that, in some way, censorship reduces fear because in censorship, you're in negotiation with the state, so they're willing to accept and to talk to you, right. They're not coming and knocking on your door at 2am in the morning, right, or writing you a letter to say "please turn up." There's a contrast between fear and censorship that is a difference between the struggle with the state and struggles with ourselves as artists. (...) Censorship (in Singapore, happening) behind the scenes is documented, if you're interested, in the website called Arts Engage website. It's a Google website. If you Google "Google site Arts Engage", you will see the proposals by the artists, (...) documenting how censorship occurred. It occurred in a way so behind the scenes that other artists do not know that other artists are being censored. It is only when we make a call for cases that we realise all these things are going on, that it's happening behind the scenes. They've become very sophisticated in managing it.

I think... I want to paraphrase that we should not be allowed to say or write everything that comes to our head, we should not be allowed to call for murder or arson or (things of that) sort, but the limits matter, and the limits are actually the points of contention. Where's the limit, right?²⁶ [sic] In other words, there're laws, which prescribe the limit²⁷, and (there are) unjust laws.

Now to ask the question: is there any fear?

When I thought about it, there are two categories of fear. There's the fear of losing x or suffering y, of losing our job, of losing our standing and reputation, or status, of losing our freedom, of suffering funding cuts, the ones that Alvin and Ivan faced, of not getting a scholarship, of not getting that promotion, of not getting into university, of our children not getting into university for some little reason, of getting red flagged or blacklisted, of being censored, of being censured, of getting into any kind of small mess or inconvenience in our already complicated enough lives that do not need any more complications.

And then, there's the second category of fear, which is the fear that arises from and which can result from the first category, the fear of writing, of painting, of creating, of producing plays, movies, of directing, of acting, even in certain plays, or making videos about dead people...

And these things extend beyond the field of arts but to everyone, of coming together to do things, of sharing causes, of being seen to do things, of being seen to be with certain people, certain kinds of people, of having certain friends, or publishing online, on academic journals, of speaking in Hong Lim Park, or in the classroom to your students or to your fellow students, of suggesting alternatives, of resisting, of expressing the precious things that deep down

²⁶ "Where are the limits, right?"

²⁷ Tan Tarn How intended to mean this as " (...) there're laws, which prescribe *reasonable* limits, and there are unjust laws."

inside... This is a category of fear of *living* according to what we truly believe in. It's the fear of *being*. I think not everyone fears everything, right? I think there are a lot of people, fearless people. Not everyone has fears in the first category, the fears of the consequences.

Furthermore, not everyone fears to do things in the second category because she fears things in the first—that despite the fears in the first category, they are not afraid of doing things in the second category, (not afraid *to be* because of fear of the consequences). And I think there are precious few, in this country, of this kind of people, and... So it just makes me sad that that is the present state of affairs, that things might have changed, and I think the most sophisticated thing that they've done is that they've wise up to the fact that—the Chinese proverb called *sha ji jing hou* (杀鸡警猴), kill the chickens to frighten the monkeys, and I think that strategy has worked wonderfully, that they target certain people, not always publicly, but quite effectively public – more effectively publicly, and then, everybody falls into this. And I think there's a state of a fear of writing in Singapore, or fear of being. Thank you.

[applause]

JK: Tarn How, you've got a licence for *Fear of Writing*, no cuts, right?

TH: This has not been really publicly told, and I don't know whether, like Robert, I should say it, right...

JK: Just make sure you look at the hidden camera first.

[audience laughter]

TH: So what happened was that *Fear of Writing* was a play I staged—TheatreWorks staged in 2011, and it is a play within a play. The play in the centre deals with the political situation in Singapore and the struggles of a playwright who is trying to write a play. He's afraid to write. (The play also) traces, the movement, words, understanding, (the struggle for) clarity of an ordinary Singaporean, but who did not arrive at this state (of clarity) because of what he is and what society is.

JK: So in the play you talk about the repressions of academia, you touch on the hypocrisy of media, we talk about political detention as well...

TH: Yeah, Chee Soon Juan²⁸. And so this play is framed by two other bits. The first bit is the—played by Janice, the producer and the director coming to say that this play has not been awarded the licence. So therefore, the play is cancelled, and you can get your money back, so we're reconvening it as a private party. People who decide to leave can claim back their \$20. Then the middle of the play starts (...) The end of the play is a staged raid by MDA, saying that this (performance) is unlicensed. So (in reality) we got a license (for *Fear of Writing*), but we only got a license for the centre bit.

²⁸ Dr Chee Soon Juan is a Singapore politician and currently the leader of Singapore Democratic Party.

[audience laughter]

So on the night when—the first night when the play was staged, the people on Facebook wrote saying, “MDA is raiding, MDA is raiding,” you know.

Of course by the end of the play, they knew that it was not true, but MDA saw the Facebook post and called Tay Tong, the producer, Managing Director of TheatreWorks and said, (...), “Why is there a raid [sic]²⁹? We didn’t raid!”

[laughter]

So anyway, the play continued (and a few months later) he was asked to go and see MDA over a three or four hour meeting, and to write a report saying what happened, but they did not close (the play during its run).

JK: That’s interesting because I think that’s one of the few plays where the audience was deeply invested in whether or not they chose to stay on and already that’s where it all begins, you know, the contract to stay on then implicates them at the end when they realise that they weren’t sure if they were participating in something illegal. Having performed in *Fear of Writing*, it was extremely shocking and moving, as a performer and an artist, to be part of that show, because every night, we received audiences, literally, some of them quivering in fear that they were caught possibly participating in something illegal, which actually was not. Or the uncertainty in their eyes when they had to hand in their IC³⁰s—that’s part of the play, yeah, that they had to hand in their ICs just for record.

We experienced, each night, people who would burst out in anger, people who would start calling their loved ones at home to “please come and get me.” There were people who would call their embassies because they were afraid that they might lose their employment pass. So I found that hugely moving, because it kind of made visible the invisible fear, not just of artists, but of the everyday man who was just participating in something as innocent as buying a ticket and just watching the show.

Robert, you didn’t have a chance to talk about your plays *Are You There, Singapore?* and *One Year Back Home*. I’m now very interested to find out what the audience—how your play impacted the audience at that time compared to now.

RY: If I may read something from *One Year Back Home*...

JK: Sure.

RY: ...to give you an idea. I’ll read something from *One Year Back Home* to give you an idea. In 1980, although I wrote the play in 1978 as I narrated just now, it took me about (11 months) between applying for a permit and performance, okay. And here is this character called Fernandez, it’s based on a friend of mine whose name is actually Michael Fernandez and spent nine years, in Changi. He was my research material—you do research when you

²⁹ “Why was there a raid?”

³⁰ Abbreviation for Identity Cards.

write plays, you know. So that's interesting... and here is Fernandez rehearsing his election speech, okay, and he talks to someone called Soh who is from the Barisan Sosialis, and it goes like this:

"Eh, hello Soh, come in, you're just in time to hear my election speech."

I think I should stand up. More effective.

JK: Yeah, yes.

RY: "People of Singapore, I'm standing for election because I believe that someone has to speak up for some sections of the population. No one is doing that today because there is not a single MP in the opposition."

This was before Jeyaratnam was elected.

"Now you may say that the present MPs are speaking out for the people, but I can tell you, they are not! They are speaking for the PAP. For the continuation of PAP rule! The continuation of PAP is what I call PAP-ism, P-A-P-I-S-M. Now, what has PAP-ism done for us? I admit, that PAP-ism has done us a lot of good. It has given us a standard of living second only to the Japanese in Asia. It has given us HDB, but it has also given us this cheap fund mess! It has given us people who put all their savings to buy houses they cannot afford from people who want to make as much money buying and selling houses and apartments. Who is taking care of the interest of the people? Not the PAP. PAP-ism has been good... Until now. Now, after 12 years in power, the PAP has become insensitive to the needs of this section of the population."

And so, what do you think? This was in 1980, and you can imagine that it's not so easy to write something like this in 1980. My experience of it was, well, I had a licence, so I think, you have a licence, you're safe, but on the second night when I was sitting in the audience and watching the performance, and there were lots of people gripping their seats listening to speeches like the one I'd just read to you. I looked out at the corner of my eye and I saw a great burly person coming into the auditorium and I said to myself, "Oh my goodness, the ISD, they were coming for me."

But as it turned out, it wasn't the case, because I had a licence, and so I guess, in the end, I felt I was protected. That was my experience, but it was nervous. It was nervous. That's all I have to say for the moment.

JK: Well before we open up to the audience for questions. Perhaps there might be many from the audience. My last question to the panellists and any one of you, or if all of you want to take it, what is the future for political writing on the Singapore stage? What is the change? Is it... Have we been disciplined, have we been schooled, has it had any impact, do people care if we can't say it the way we want to say it?

Have we become so creative that, in a way... you know what I mean, have we become so creative in our strategies that it's become an art form in itself?

TH: We can continue to write and the audience will continue to come, but I don't think it changes things very much. And looking at *Lady of Soul's* first staging in 1993, it—people tell me it's relevant today, and so it hasn't changed. I think what has happened is that the audience has, in a way, sort of appropriated political theatre, political work in general, that it has become a monetary transaction, entertainment. The most they will say is, "Oh, this is quite daring", but they don't feel that it really has anything to do with their lives, outside. So, there is now what is called the fifth wall between the theatre and the world outside. Both are real worlds, right, because they connect with another. But for the audience, the theatre is not real, it's entertainment. You come, you have some laughs, you have a bit of thrill sometimes, then you go back, you go to Newton Circus, hawker centre, you have your char kway teow³¹, tomorrow morning you go to work and life goes on. So I don't think that theatre changes (things), and I'm just a bit despondent if it is worth doing it anymore, or worth doing it the same way. In a way, we've got to find new ways of reconfiguring the theatre experience that it does not become a trip to the movies to see *The Avengers*, right.

JK: Ivan?

IH: I...

TH: Not that a trip to *The Avengers* is a bad thing, yeah, I do it too, you know.

[audience laughter]

IH: After watching *Cook a Pot of Curry*³², I met a young man who's very active on Facebook, a political commentator, and he said, "Oh, I'm a bit disappointed, because everything that has been said in the play, I've seen or heard on social media."

And I asked him, "Did you look around you? Did you feel what people were feeling? It's quite different from sitting in front of your computer screen at 2am in the morning alone, being a keyboard warrior, no?" Upon reflection he said, "Yeah, actually I did feel less lonely. I did feel part of the community. I did feel that I belonged."

And I think that this is where this idea of the appeal of a national theatre comes in, because the word "nation" is quite different from the word "island," "state," you know, "country." The word "nation" implies a sense of imagined belonging, and I think, if there's one thing that the theatre does, is to give people a sense of belonging, a sense of "that's me on stage, that's my story, this is where I belong, this is where I have a stake."

I think that when people came to *Public Enemy*³³, a lot of them were kind of shaken because they realised that it doesn't just... it doesn't really just end anymore with the state, but it's become bigger than the state. The people and the majority are actually having a very big and oppressive voice today. I mean, we see how someone like Amos Yee is being lynched by the modern mob, and it made me think of Dr Chee Soon Juan, who has been framed in

³¹ Singapore fried rice-cake noodles.

³² Premiered in 2013.

³³ Performed in 2015.

many ways as a public enemy for his acts of civil disobedience, and he only broke the law because he had no choice! He wanted to make a change, but there was no change, and he had to break the law and do what he wanted to do. In researching for the role, I found listening to his speeches on Youtube very inspiring, given the benefit of hindsight - some time, some space.

I want to something about theatre as entertainment—I love this word, “entertain”. Some people say, “Oh Wild Rice? It’s entertaining theatre,” in a kind of patronising tone. But I like the word “entertain”, because it comes from the word “entretenir”, an archaic French word, which means to hold and to embrace, and to hold together.

I think that if a play is good, it can hold you and hold a community together. It is magic if you are there, being part of the audience. Nothing beats it because your attention is held as an audience, and hopefully that gives you an understanding of the problems but also the possibilities of our times - because theatre really allows you to see outside yourself, see things that you have never imagined, beyond your own personal biases and prejudices. I feel it strongly especially when I act —when I’m on stage, it’s a powerful feeling. For that reason, I feel encouraged... Thank you all for giving me the courage and the inspiration and the motivation to continue doing what we do, thank you.

TH: Can I ask a question of Ivan? I think that there’s a difference between a play being entertaining and entertainment, and I think that, definitely, *Animal Farm*—my story with *Animal Farm* is that I love it so much, I wanted somebody else to see. We went to the ticket—I begged him for a ticket, he said no ticket, then somebody came and then he fainted, and then I said, “Wow, I’m so lucky! Oh no, I shouldn’t be thinking that!”

[audience laughter]

So finally, the person could not go—he got well, but I got the ticket. It was entertaining, but it’s not entertainment; political theatre to its core, right. So, is there a difference between the experience, the theatrical experience and the political experience which political theatre wants to create in addition to the experience of theatre? Do you feel that, definitely, when you watched *Animal Farm*, wow, you know, goose pimples, you know, it’s like, “Wow, this is so us!”, you know.

JK: Yeah, that’s interesting, I think I have a similar question because why, when we think of political theatre, do some of these plays that we’ve been mentioning come up, but not necessarily as often, let’s say, the plays from Third Stage, which was specifically a political theatre company, because we’ve not really talked about the plays that were staged by the Third Stage. When we talk about the history of political plays in Singapore, what is the difference between that kind of theatre and the kind of theatre that, say, Wild Rice has been doing, which touches on political themes?

IH: Actually, the Third Stage—the plays from the Third Stage are now going to be featured in *Another Country*³⁴, the next play that we’re doing, and, I mean, when I’m reading some of

³⁴ Premiered in 2015.

these scripts from Third Stage, wow, I mean, it was really bang on. I mean, really, it was really holding a mirror, you know, to society, and I don't know why we don't talk about it, but I think it was because of the arrest that Third Stage was made to look like the enemy when actually, they're doing the same thing that Wild Rice is doing, or that Alvin is doing, or that Tarn How or Robert was doing at that time. But they became the enemy because it became dangerous. So, I think it's kind of interesting to kind of look back at some of these works and say what was it trying to say about its time? It's not just about government, but about people. The Third Stage was talking about the social, a critique about our society and the way we treat each other.

RY: I think Third Stage was very brave in the sense that they spoke the truth to power and they were saying to the government, don't give us an agenda, there are things we consider important: maid abuse, living conditions in HDB, and we want to be able to talk about it as we see it. And they were doing the sort of things that, if you, some of you may recall that there was a Drama Advisory Committee from 1977 to 1992 which I chaired, and the state people would quite often show me plays and ask whether they were okay, if they met with the kind of plays that I would support.

JK: So, Robert, you were on the other side, you were on the other side of the chair. From submitting play to vetting plays!

RY: Well, not so much vetting plays because my role was completely an advisory, you know. I mean, I don't approve of this, but I would talk to someone like Souk Yee³⁵ who wanted an opinion from me, and I gave her an opinion, and I said to her, I would like to see you write plays that have the following ingredients: one, write what you want and don't let the government give you the agenda. Secondly, I said, don't be afraid to push the boundaries.

And I put these ideas in an article that I wrote called *Towards an English Language Singaporean Theatre* and the paper was presented in a P.E.N. conference³⁶ in Manila in 1980s. I think the play, that particular article is reasonably well known. And at the same time that I wrote the article, I had written *One Year Back Home* which was considered dangerous, do you know what I mean?

So you could say that I was—I don't know whether you can say that I was on the other side, I was trying to promote the theatre that speaks out and I saw Third Stage doing just that. And when they were taken in for political reasons, that was very scary for me, very scary for me.

JK: Well then, how did that change the way you—did it change the way you made theatre or art?

³⁵ Wong Souk Yee. A Singapore playwright. Wong was

³⁶ Second Asian Writers Conference organised by the Philippine Center of International P.E.N. Cultural Center of the Philippines (1981).

RY: Well I continued to press for greater freedom for theatre practitioners. Later on, I was asked to chair another committee called drama... something committee³⁷, I cannot remember. One of the things that we did was to give the licensing authority back to the theatre group, and we said to the theatre group, "Okay, don't come to us to get a licence to say, can I do this play?"

"You decide, because you're mature enough, whether you can do this play or not." So we did that. And I must say this, I haven't spoken about this. When I was chair of that particular committee, I realised that the people in PELU who were vetting the plays, I haven't met them, so they were sort of faceless people. And I said to the person I was working with, I think it was probably Liew Chin Choy³⁸ (...) I said, "Can we invite these officers from the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit?"

And at that time, they were graduates, more sophisticated than the person, the civil servant, who looked at *One Year Back Home*. I said, "Come to my committee, so that we can meet you, so that you will not be faceless, and tell us what are the principles you use in the judging of plays?"

Which is what I did there, I was trying, if you like, sort of to get to know the people who were in charge of censorship, okay, that's what I tried to do. But I think six months later, I lost my job, my advisory job, okay, it was completely advisory. So that was my experience, I think it was 1982.

JK: Thank you; Alvin, any last words before we open up for Q&A?

AT: I guess, mine, I'm looking more at engagement rather than just entertainment, and you can engage the audience in many different ways, entertainment being one of the ways and one of the strategies. And I'm also—I've been looking at Amos Yee and all that, I think we have a problem with addressing our own diversity and our own difference. I think we have no voca—not no, no. We have very little vocabulary and capacity to begin with that. I am thankful that in the past, with the AWARE saga and the migrant workers at Serangoon Gardens hostel saga, the government did not come in prematurely. Actually, they allowed civil society to discuss the issues and the themes. I am also thankful that on Facebook, you know, when we are talking about Amos Yee, the government doesn't come in to prescribe to us how to think about it. Maybe not yet, I don't know. But I think our problem is with the people, that's why my take is not with the state only. So, we have plays like... people who are different from us, like *Off Centre*, we can't reintegrate them, until today it is relevant, sadly so, because reintegrating people with mental illness is still not improved.

And we have this play called *Model Citizens*³⁹ which is about 3 women – one is a Nanta graduate who is married to an MP; and the other one is Wendy, who is a Peranakan woman, whose maid is Mellie, Indonesian maid, right, and she wanted to get married to a Malay guy and the Malay guy went to a meet-the-MP session and stabbed the MP out of frustration.

³⁷ Robert Yeo was referring to the Drama Review Committee, National Arts Council, which he chaired from between 1992 to 1995.

³⁸ A Singapore arts administrator.

³⁹ Premiered in 2010.

This was inspired by the throwing of the acid thing, right. Okay, so, later on, when the Peranakan woman, Wendy, talks to Mrs Chua, who is the Nanta graduate, Mrs Chua asked her, "So, when Mellie is free, do you give her a day off?"

Wendy says, "Yeah, if she's free, I'll give her a day off."

And Mrs Chua says, "Aren't you afraid that she will just go to Geylang and do some sex work?"

And Wendy said, "Well, I'm hoping that she will go to another person's home and get extra money, she's going to get married, and she's earning \$300 and the husband-to-be is earning \$900."

And Mrs Chua says, "Yeah, that's what I don't understand, I don't understand, when people can't afford it, why would they get married?"

And Wendy says, "Uhm, what do you mean? You mean, poor people can't get married?"

Mrs Chua says, "Since my MP husband's been in the hospital, I've been going through his files, and there's an endless request for handouts. Where do you draw the line, right? Aren't you accountable to society? That if you can't afford, you don't do the things that you can't afford."

Wendy says, "But aren't rich people supposed to help the poorer ones?"

And it goes on, right? Because my mom brought me up to pay my debt the next day. She said, don't protract your debt; she also said, don't spend more than you earn. But at the same time, I can understand the Peranakan lady, Wendy, who would talk about a bit of her welfare idea, right, and the play is not resolved, right, on stage. The playwright, Haresh, does not privilege one viewpoint over the other. Now, these are cultural sensibilities of difference, and these are the things that will confront and implicate the audience, because when they watch, they are thinking, I can identify with it also, but what's wrong with that? Okay, this disturbs the audience, and what Pao Kun has inspired me for was to say, when you write, you write from a disturbance. So, for me, this is something we have to deal with, and it's not about the state, it's not about Father. The more we depend on hierarchy and how the Father wants us to think, the weaker we are as a community. So, my mission for artistic engagement is this: is don't talk just about the state; be reflexive, and talk about ourselves and how we can't manage our own difference. Look at Amos Yee. On my Facebook, I have a long engagement, long thread. LGBT and IKEA. I got scolded by lesbians because my talk, when I wrote out on the status update, I wrote "Some of us will not shop at IKEA and some others who want to shop at IKEA, that's fine, right? We do not discriminate against them."

Someone wrote to me and said, "What do you mean? Explain yourself? You mean, boycotting IKEA is extreme? It's systemic discrimination against us!"

I said, "You can choose that position, but I want to choose a moderate position because I still want to reach out to people who might not understand."

They said “Oh, okay,” and I said “yeah, if we don’t accept our own diversity even within the LGBT, then we are done for.” So that is my point about politics and cultural politics.

JK: I think that’s a good point to end off, I think, at the end of the day, whether or not political theatre is effective is how it reaches out to the audience and to our audiences as opposed to reaching out to the state or talking about the state or relationship with the government necessarily. Thank you, thank you Tarn How, Ivan, Alvin, Robert, for all your views. We can open up the floor to questions from anyone over the next 15 to 20 minutes, so, if anyone’s dying to ask a question, just raise your hand.

Come on, four prominent troublemakers up on stage, no questions?

Oh sorry, theatre makers! [audience laughter] I keep making that mistake, I wonder why.

Ah, yes!

Audience 1 (A1): How do you think we should, uhm, produce—we have a breed of new, young theatre goers who are interested in political theatre in Singapore. How do you think that can be done?

JK: Theatre goers or theatre makers?

A1: Young theatre goers, and possibly makers as well. How do you think that... I know this is quite a tough question but for sustainability, I think we need to produce or start having young people being engaged or start... in all this. So, how?

JK: Do you think young people today are engaged in politic—in political writing for the stage, interested to watch political plays on the Singapore stage? Ivan? What do you think? [panellists chuckle] Alvin? Anyone, anyone?

AT: I... Yeah, I really think you should do it. As in... Because your experience will be different from ours because when we started it, we did not say “we want to be trouble makers.” We started because we were exploring and exploring, doing research, doing research, and in the process, the work became controversial. Yeah, that’s our starting point, you see, so when you start, what is it, you see? Is it just political theatre and that’s your aim? Yeah, then maybe you should then read and talk to people from Third Stage and all that, then it’s a different starting point, yeah. So I think you need to ask yourselves why and what’s your starting point because that’s going to fuel and sustain you. It’s exactly what you say, it’s not just about a material sustainability, not just about funding. It’s also about your ideology and your vision, you know, because if you do something and your audience can identify with it, you funding might come from crowd sourcing, from audience that believe in you. Then, can you survive without NAC funding? I mean, I’m looking forward to see a group that will actually do that. But is that, will that help you be more... be able to be, you know, have more autonomy? Because there are groups that have started as private limited companies, but they still cannot escape the MDA. So then, I think you need to just know the history and then find your way because younger people with younger vision might have

younger—might have different strategies and different resources and different way of saying things that you are struggling with.

IH: Actually, I started doing theatre because I was interested to find out about myself and how I—where I stood, who I was, and I started actually with Alvin and Haresh, The Necessary Stage. We were in university together and we would just rehearse anywhere. In corridors, in people's living rooms, and it was just making theatre. Okay let's just do it, you know. I think it's much more difficult now, funny enough, because I know that one group had to pay NUS \$10,000 to rent a theatre, and how are these young people going to pay \$10,000? And this is a problem now because the space is actually owned by the state. You know, I think that's another space that is very difficult.

AT: Actually I'm interested (to add)...

IH: Yes. Why don't you talk about that?

AT: No, no, it's just that the—you know, it's getting more sophisticated. Through the grants scheme, the venues are also state-owned, there are more power to curators and programmers...

JK: I think that perhaps more now than ever, there is an economic censorship going on, so the lack of space for fringe is an economic obstacle. So, in the past, where you could get a space, open spaces, for example The Substation, far more easily, I think now, the audiences are becoming more sophisticated, are expecting more, and as an amateur group or a young theatre group wanting to say something different, cutting edge, edgy, is a huge financial risk and that straight away curtails the number of people who want to do this. I think looking forward, that's actually quite a problem, I should think, because there's less – people become, you know, potential artists actually become more risk averse. What do you feel, yeah?

Any other questions?

Yes, over there at the back, the lady at the back.

Audience 2 (A2): Good evening, how do you think political theatre is being portrayed in Singapore such that it curbs the development or keeps it going?

JK: Portrayed where?

A2: To the public, portrayed to the public.

JK: Well, how do you think it's being portrayed to the public?

A2: Yes.

JK: I'm sorry, I'm just asking that question back to you. How do you think it's being portrayed to the public, as a member of the public?

RY: I'm not sure, if I may come in, what do you mean by how political theatre is portrayed?

A2: Like, uhm, how is it being...

RY: The government doesn't portray political theatre...

A2: How is it being...

AT: They do. National Day is.

[Audience laughter]

RY: I'm not talking about that kind of theatre, I mean, something that takes place on a stage. How does the government portray that? I'm trying to...

A2: Yeah, that's why I would like to hear from...

JK: Well, do you have a—maybe it might be helpful if you shared your view first.

A2: Uhm, I don't have a... I don't have any political background or something so I can't really answer that question.

IH: What have you watched? What have you watched?

A2: Nothing.

IH: Okay. You must come to the theatre, ya? I think you must come to the theatre because theatre is about being present. I can't explain to you the experience of theatre unless you are in the theatre, or have been in the theatre and have been part of it, because people come to the theatre as strangers and they leave as a community, because they've witnessed something together. Theatre builds communities. I think that you have to come to the theatre and experience it for yourself, because at this point we don't even have a place to begin talking, yes?

RY: The excitement of theatre is that it's real, you see real people, maybe your friends acting, you know. And maybe after you've seen that, you can talk about...

JK: But, just to extend, I mean, if I wanted to extend her question, uhm, how do you think—any of you can answer this, theatre that touches on political issues is being portrayed in mainstream media? Do you find the way it is covered in the media differently from your other plays?

AT: I think the thing is that political theatre is demonised, and so it becomes something that is...

JK: ... already red flagged.

AT: Yeah.

JK: Before you even step in to watch it.

AT: Yeah, so it's like "Who's Afraid of Political Theatre," that's what I was thinking one day, which I've had a conference on this because it's so demonised until—I mean, political theatre is a genre in other countries! And here, it becomes so difficult to just practice and put out there, yeah.

IH: I think that, uhm, actually, the most political plays actually sell out first, because it's rare that we actually have some kind of discourse, political discourse, which is intelligent and multi-faceted. You'll find that the theatre makers give you different points of view, and often, we, like Alvin says, want to disturb you so that you think. I mean, there's isn't just a single response to a play... With *Cooling Off Day*⁴⁰ or *Cook a Pot of Curry*, some people said that we're too easy on the PAP, or that we are apologists, and I think it all depends on their experience and where they are coming from. I mean, it's very interesting.

But I think political plays are popular also because our mainstream media has failed to grapple with our existing realities. And because theatre makers are writing new plays that are of the moment and they are being performed in the present, in the now, the theatre really serves the community.

AT: I think it's all the interrelated ecology, you know, the media also affected academia as well, so, you know, the journals and the writing, the political writing, it's not enough. Like recently, Corrie⁴¹ wrote something on cultural diplomacy, right, it was like, wow, I haven't seen this kind of writing since Sasi⁴² and Tarn How, who were journalists, or Hannah Pandian⁴³. When we got into trouble, Hannah brought me to the newsroom, interviewed, sat me down, and typed, and then stories got canned, that kind of thing. But you know, now, the stories that come up in *The Straits Times* don't seem to deal directly, you know, that kind of critical analysis. It's all interconnected, and theatre companies also cannot flourish, because the importance and significance of political theatre is not written and regarded in a more serious way.

TH: I think, if I may, I think that the issues about political theatre or political art in general is, I suppose, related very closely to the malaise of politics in Singapore in general. So if I may put on my other hat as a researcher in policy, we found that even though the young people are different from the older people in terms of political interest, you know, consumption of alternative media and political participation, they're not that different. They're only slightly different. So, you have a big, big group of people who are really not interested in political issues and so if politics doesn't resonate to them, and they come to political theatre, there's no political lens to see through, I think. Well, I suppose the performance, the sharing, and the community might transform them, but they don't even come to political theatre in the first

⁴⁰ Premiered in 2012.

⁴¹ Corrie Tan. Arts Journalist for The Straits Times.

⁴² T. Sasitharan. Co-founder & Director of Intercultural Theatre Institute (ITI).

⁴³ Hannah Pandian. Journalist. Former theatre critic for The Straits Times.

place. And I think the other problem is that, and this is an international issue that theatre and art is no longer part of national conversations. I mean, in the time, let's say in the '60s in Britain, right, during the time of *Look Back in Anger*⁴⁴, for example, and of Joe Orton, theatre is part of the national conversation because it bears on the political issues of the day and is discussed in the newspapers in political ways. So, one of the issues that we have in Singapore is whether a play is reviewed. They always say, "Oh, it's very well produced," or, "Not very well produced."

Then, secondly, they say, it's daring or not daring, but they never, well, seldom, they almost never delve on the truth of otherwise what is raised there. That is, like, immaterial. (...) The intellectuals also seldom write about it as public intellectuals. Theatre, even though it is very active and very vigorous, it is in a world isolated, a small little world isolated from what is happening elsewhere.

RY: Could we, Tarn How, as theatre people, do something about it and not depend on media like *The Straits Times* to give us that kind of, uh, power over us? I mean, could we do something about it? We depend on *The Straits Times* and other media to tell us about our plays, you know.

TH: We do what artists are very good at, we complain. I've complained to *The Straits Times* and said, you know, "Why are you doing this?"

But they're not interested because the readers themselves are not interested.

JK: That's an interesting point that we didn't actually touch on in our presentations, that the efficacy of political theatre has to extend is sort of followed through when it has repercussions in the wider media and is consumed by people other than those who actually step into the theatre. And if that does not happen, if that does not resonate beyond the four walls of the Black Box, for example, then you have been... this efficacy has been curtailed.

IH: On top of that, they write to the forum page...

[audience laughter]

... and complain about you based on the synopsis that you have written, yeah.

JK: I know we are now running out of time, but we can take one last question.

Okay – 2 questions – okay, 3 and then we'll see who wants to take what.

Audience 3 (A3): From what I have gathered, the censorship system has widely been changed in the past couple of decades and would you say that... Has it become more difficult to... Do you think that writers have adapted to the system and if so, do you think that it has become more difficult or more easy to put on a more blunt political play?

⁴⁴ Premiered in 1956.

JK: Okay, thank you. The guy at the back, yes.

Audience 4 (A4): Actually, I have 2 questions. One is, do you think that political theatre is actually focusing too much on the politics of state rather than the politics of society. And the second question is do you think political theatre is quite elitist in nature, in the way that it speaks the language of the elite, the rich and educated more than the other sections of society?

JK: Good questions, thank you. And finally, yes.

Audience 5 (A5): I guess my question is more about the creative process when you write a play, for example, you would have a topic in mind, whether it is mental health or politics, and I guess some of these issues which... at one level, it's not really political, but it could be political in how it affects people and all, even mental health, right, so when you write about these issues, do you have a particular stakeholder in mind or do you just think about the issue? What I mean by stakeholder would be like, oh, you know, if you have the government funding in mind, where are your considerations? But there's also the audience, you know, the people in Singapore who may or may not come and watch your play or write about it, blog about it. So what is it that you have in mind when you start?

JK: Okay, thank you, so... Anybody on the panel can take any one of the questions.

RY: I'll take the first question. I think when you write, at least for myself, I don't think of whether or not I'm going to get money, whether or not I'll be able to pass through the censors and so on. I just go on writing because I have certain things in mind, and if I feel that I want to push the envelope, then I do it, and if one of the consequences is that I am not able to get the funding, so be it, I'm not prepared to compromise my artistic principles in order to get money. If I cannot get money from A, I'll try and get money from B. If I cannot get through the bureaucrat, I'll speak to the politician to the government. That would be my stand. I'm not sure if I am able to answer any of the other questions, but partly, I might have answered your question, to the gentleman at the back.

JK: Does anyone want to take the question about whether or not political theatre is actually elitist and actually speaks to quite a small group of people?

IH: We wanted to stage *Cooling Off Day* in Jalan Besar Stadium –

[some audience laughter]

We couldn't do that. So I thought we'd stage free performances with the *Alfian Sa'at: In The Spotlight* season. That's always our impulse, to make thing affordable and accessible. Let's think about this. About \$20 out of your \$100 ticket goes to the government. That's just theatre rental and ticketing. And from that, you've got to pay artists, and all else.

So, actually, we're not for profit. So how do we make it work? I think that's the one thing, and I think through the support of sponsors and through NAC grants, uh, they grant us... Actually, NAC's grant is now 7% so it just covers our GST. [some audience laughter] So the rest of it

actually has been raised from angels, from sponsors, from ticket sales, and this is how we make it work. And so, we charge an average of \$70 a ticket, but because you have a OCBC card or whatever, you can go to see a theatre production. And I tell you, if you saw the production values of *Public Enemy*, or *The House of Bernarda Alba*⁴⁵, you will be seeing the equivalent of a West End or on Broadway production for \$54, Sing⁴⁶, and that you would have to pay, on Broadway, at least USD\$100 to catch a show like that with actors of the same calibre. So I mean, I think that for most of us, let's just say we're not commercial. We're not *The Lion King*, we're not *Beauty and the Beast*, so I think we're trying to not be elitist – we want to make quality theatre that's accesible and affordable.

But, to go back to this idea of *Cooling Off Day*, we wanted to stage it outside for free. So since it was at LASALLE⁴⁷, I thought "Let's stage it outside, on the green" because it's like open, right? And MDA said, "Okay Ivan, we can't because it's in the open," and I said, "So what?"

We have to offer an advisory, and I said, "What would you want to warn them? That, ladies and gentlemen, a political play is being performed here so we must warn you that you might step into a place where you might hear political things?"

And MDA was prepared to listen, I said, listen, okay, it's LASALLE, so the green is in the centre. Basically, you know, we can put two ropes, two velvet ropes, two ushers here, one here and one here, and they will warn the audience, "Excuse me, this is going to be a political play, ah, watch out."

And actually, to MDA's credit they said, okay, we'll come down and see it. After coming to look at the space, MDA said yes, we allow you to perform it on the green in the outdoors, free. But then, three days before the show went on, it was the police. The *police* came back to us and said, "You are in a residential area, you have to take it indoors."

So, yes, it would be nice to stage things in Hong Lim Park, it would be nice to stage things for free, but ultimately, **(it's quite difficult)**.

JK: Yeah, and having said that, I was part of the reading of *Cooling Off Day* during that festival. Eventually, the reading was done indoors, at a café, and it was performed over two weekends, and each time, it was so full, it was so full that people were literally lining up the doors and windows, that's how packed it was, and I think, despite the fact that this was a restaging of a play that was already, by that time, maybe three years old, there is still a hunger to hear the words and I think therefore, it is not elitist if it's a good play. If the words continue to resonate.

We have (Audience 3)'s final question, which is, is it any easier to...

TH: May I?

⁴⁵ Performed in 2014.

⁴⁶ Abbreviation for Singapore dollars.

⁴⁷ LASALLE College of the Arts. An arts educational institution in Singapore founded in 1984.

JK: Yes, Tarn How, sure.

TH: There are actually also theatre companies who go to, I hate the word, heartlands. Drama Box, right, and it relates to your first question, very socially engaged theatre about race, about death...

JK: About migrant workers...

TH: About migrant workers, right at the heartlands, and they are having this thing called the GoLi which is this sort of semi-open (space)... So it is not elitist at all. Anybody can come and walk in, accidental encounters with theatre in the heartlands, right? And I suppose the project that The Necessary Stage is doing with the *Project Fifty Hundred*, the alternative celebrations of Singapore of which Alvin and I are involved in, which involves cleaners, the unseen cleaners of Singapore which will be staged as a play by TNS next year. So I do not know whether it will be ticketed or not, but it really concerns social issues and... But it is a political theatre as well.

JK: Thanks, Tarn How. Alvin – please respond, but if you can take (Audience 3)'s question about whether or not is it easier today than before to get your play through? Thanks.

AT: Okay. The elitist one... To answer that as well, I think it's also the characters on stage, whether we do cover characters from a different demographic, from marginalised communities as well, and their voices, and when we do devising work, actually, they get represented. Like we did *Completely With/Out Character*⁴⁸, which was Paddy Chew, the first Singaporean that first came out with his HIV status. So, there's... in that sense, theatre bridges, because there's all kinds of people that came for the show. Social workers and all, because it was a fringe show, and he intended it to be. So he was reaching out to people who did not come to theatre, actually, your non-theatre goers. So there are these other strategies, but I'm not talking just about state politics lah. But in Paddy Chew's play, *Completely With/Out Character*, he's also talking about his struggle, his personal struggle in trying to get his CPF money, right, and how to use that for his medication. So there are, there are all these different ways. The other one we have was *Complaints Choir*⁴⁹, where we invited a couple from... I can't remember where, Europe, to come over and they did a workshop which is like a series of complaints and they were supposed to present it at various places in Singapore, outdoor and indoor, and suddenly, the police told us that we can't go on because you can only go on in one indoor place, which is in the Arts House.

JK: I mean, yeah, just to give everybody a context with regard to outdoor theatre, which is very important when it comes to wanting to democratise theatre, there is a guideline with regards to that as well, so based on MDA guidelines, it cannot have any advisory or rating, that means, only G-rated, so called, plays can go outdoors, and if you had a play that might touch on topics of a sensitive nature which tends to be political themes, whether it is race, religion, national security or otherwise, those tend to have advisories, so straight away, they would not have been allowed to go outdoors. And then, your access point to the peoples,

⁴⁸ Premiered in 1999.

⁴⁹ Premiered in 2008.

THE STUDIOS: *fifty*
Fear of Writing? The Development of Political Theatre in Singapore
9 May 2015, library@esplanade (Open Stage)

your access point to people on the street, the aunties and uncles, won't have a chance to engage with those topics unless they go in to a theatre and buy a ticket.

AT: *Complaints Choir* was just one line about CPF, and the problem was that there were foreigners in the Choir.

JK: Okay, yes, I've been told to, uh, finish up here. We didn't answer (Audience 3)'s question, is it okay, guys?

IH: I have an answer to (Audience 3)'s question. So, *Geylang*⁵⁰, which is opening on Wednesday, still hasn't got its licence. It's played by young people, quite a fierce piece, so I can understand, but it's not been given its licence yet. *Another Country*⁵¹ has not been given its licence even though the tickets are on sale, and last – and yesterday, I received an email from an MDA officer which basically asked me this question, which says, and I quote directly, "I have a question. Could you clarify how the entire performance will be presented?"

[audience laughter]

So actually we've not progressed much at all. We're in the same state. We don't have a licence, just as Robert didn't have a licence when he first wrote his play. My answer was, "It will be performed on stage."

[audience laughter]

"Words will be spoken by the actors, from the stage to the audience. It will be performed with humour, intelligence, and heart. It will be performed and interpreted with great sensitivity and empathy, (with respect to) the fifty writers who have written these texts. It will be performed with great love for our country, and for our closest neighbour, Malaysia."

That's it.

JK: And on that note, thank you ladies and gentlemen, thank you Tan Tarn How, Ivan Heng, Alvin Tan, Robert Yeo.

⁵⁰ Premiered in 2015.

⁵¹ Premiered in 2015.