

**TRANSCRIPT  
OF  
*ACTING SINGAPOREAN*  
*Back Story and Fore Play***

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

Featuring playwright Alfian Sa'at,  
and actors & theatre directors Aidli 'Alin' Mosbit, Claire Wong, and Lok Meng Chue.  
Hosted by T. Sasitharan

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**T. Sasitharan (TS):** Good afternoon everyone, welcome to this forum on this series on Singapore theatre and what we're trying to kind of get our heads and our hearts around today, with the help of the panellists, is this idea of the Singaporean, Singaporean-ness. What are the qualities, what are the characteristics, what are the markers of Singaporean-ness in theatre, in our representations of theatre, in the way it is written, in the way it is played, the way it is performed.

Now, before I introduce the panellists, I just want to say that this may not seem to be such an urgent question today, because, I think to some extent, over the last 50 years, given the trajectory and history of Singaporean writing in theatre, and I don't just mean writing in English, but writing in the vernaculars, the vernacular languages of Singapore.

Some of the issues or concerns about this representation of Singaporean-ness resolved itself in the performance, but what we're trying to do today with this discussion and the constitution of the panellists is important for this, is to try and look at how the playing of Singaporean—what are the kinds of narratives, the back stories, the memories that the playing imply or presume? And what's involved, for instance, in actually acting the character? The transitions, as it were [sic], from the page to the stage, when the actor is performing this character, or the persona, or the role, which we recognise as Singaporean.

Now, I have with me, and it's a great pleasure, to welcome Lok Meng Chue, Claire Wong, Alfian Sa'at, and Alin Mosbit, who together, represent an enormous experience in both the writing of the Singaporean and the playing of the Singaporean, not to mention directing the Singaporean, producing the Singaporean, presenting the Singaporean, and performing the Singaporean. So all of these sort of modalities through which we have shown Singaporean-ness on stage, depicted Singaporean-ness on stage... It's very important that we can see ourselves, either to love it or to hate it or to berate it or to embrace it or to reject it, all of these are legitimate responses, but there must be something there for us to respond to, and I would like to invite the panellists to speak about their memories, their understandings, their working of this notion of 'Singaporean' through their own practice, whether it be as a writer, director, actor. So perhaps, we can start with Meng Chue.

**Lok Meng Chue (MC):** Because I'm the oldest.

[Panellists laugh]

Good afternoon. Thank you for taking the time to come and listen to us and share with us what this means, "Acting Singaporean."

Two words, "acting" and "Singaporean". Acting is easy lah, just be the character in the play, and all that. But a Singaporean is as diverse as each and every one of us in this room. That, for me, has always been the case. The Singaporean who takes notes at a forum [gestures to an audience member], the Singaporean who uses the... [gestures an L-shape and holds it to her forehead] and all that.

I think it was never a problem, with me, about acting Singaporean. In fact, as I was sharing with the panellists just now, I somehow had the right to put my grandmother on stage, or my aunties, or the *makcik*<sup>1</sup> that I buy *epok-epok*<sup>2</sup> from on stage. Suddenly, they were just, on the stage, people by people in my life. And I'm not formally trained in theatre, so I've never really considered the more theatrical aspects of it. But it was just making it *real*, and that, for me, has always been a very enjoyable experience.

Then, during the actual working through the productions themselves, we would critique each other, "Eh I don't think he will speak like that lah, this one got Sec Four<sup>3</sup> education meh? Speak a bit better." So we kind of talked about what it meant to be a Singaporean, it was really worked through in each of the productions. I guess this, just in a nutshell, would be my experience.

Claire?

**Claire Wong (CW):** Okay, I think, for me, I had a different experience from Meng Chue in terms of acting Singaporean. I've got... three hats, I suppose, in terms of discovering or developing the Singaporean voice on stage. I started my career as an actress in the '80s. Then I also became a director in the early 2000s. Finally, I've been mentoring the next generation, new generation of playwrights. So I think I've seen different perspectives of what it means to be Singaporean and creating original Singaporean characters and Singapore stories on stage.

I remember when I started acting, it was very much, you know, going up there and pretending to be White because we're acting in a Neil Simon play or a Noël Coward, or a Tom Stoppard play, you know, and I still, to this day, remember the shock I had when I first played my first thorough-bred Singaporean role, which was Ivy Chan in the very first production of *Beauty World*<sup>4</sup>, and I was standing there and speaking like I do, off-stage, and it was a very... Quite epiphanous, really. I still remember it, and was like, "Oh my God, it's so interesting!"

I had to act Singaporean, or in that case, Malaysian, coming to Singapore. But it was very, very empowering and certainly, I think, the idea of the '80s was, for me, about us claiming the stage for ourselves as actors and as writers and as directors. And then, later on in the course of my directing work, (character development is something I work through very) thoroughly. I suppose the process has been, like what Meng Chue has shared, working out the back stories specific to the character, living in a specific time in Singapore, be it growing up in the '60s or growing up in the '80s. Very different times—how that would impact you as a very specific Singaporean character.

And then, when working with playwrights, and [to T. Sasitharan] we were just talking about this as well, I think a very important starting point about having a Singaporean play, because

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<sup>1</sup> A term of endearment, derived from Malay language, translating to aunty.

<sup>2</sup> A type of Malay pastry.

<sup>3</sup> Colloquial way of referring to Secondary Four, an education level.

<sup>4</sup> Premiered in 1988.

it does start with the text, and I think it's interesting, so we'll probably talk more about this. But it is, I feel, generational? Because in the '60s and '70s, the kinds of work that Singaporean writers were writing, the kind of English they were writing with, through to the '80s and the '90s, and then 2000 till now, I think there are very distinct shifts. Very simply, in the '60s and '70s, they were still writing in proper English, and then the '70s, the '80s, bilingual writers started coming up: Kuo Pao Kun<sup>5</sup>, Alfian, who could write both English and a different mother tongue freely, comfortably, confidently; and then in the 2000s, the younger writers coming up and feeling even more freedom to also incorporate different languages within an English play. The play that I directed Meng Chue in, a few years ago, she played the grandmother who only spoke Hokkien, and Neo Swee Lin<sup>6</sup> played the daughter who spoke English and Hokkien, and then the granddaughter who understands Hokkien but only speaks English. So that's a play that was written by Faith Ng, one of the first plays of hers that I directed. And that is another kind of Singaporean-ness that we are now representing and quite comfortably and confidently just taking for granted, I feel.

So it has been very interesting, I think, for us, from the older generation, to see how we have claimed this space. I always talk about claiming the space because that's what it is, isn't it: claiming our place on this stage, claiming it with our imaginations, our dreams, our fears, and making it our own.

**TS:** I can assure you that this configuration [gesturing to the panellists seated] was not pre-planned. So if you see the division, the ethnic division, of the panellists [panellists laugh], two Chinese and two Malays with an Indian in the middle, I think it really is an indication of the kind of identity complexities we tend to associate with Singaporean-ness, the idea of Singaporean-ness, whether it is socially real, or on stage. And I think that's one of the difficulties we need to navigate and so... on to you Alfian.

**Alfian Sa'at (AS):** So my first foray... I started playwriting maybe around the late '90s, and I think by that time, what was interesting was that part of the whole project of identity politics had been sorted out. We were very confident in using Singlish on stage. So I think there weren't all those anxieties about speaking a very correct form of English on stage. In the sense, if you don't do that, then the literary quality of your work suffers in some way and you're going to be judged negatively. We didn't have that kind of cultural cringe by that time.

But what was interesting during that period also was—okay, we're using Singlish on stage. This is a marker of Singapore identity, but then *what* Singlish?

I think that was the next stage of exploration. When Singlish was first used on stage, it was really quite a seachange, when people started recognising, hey, you know, this is something we hear in daily life and suddenly, you put it on stage and it becomes legitimised. I think that's the idea about theatre suddenly becoming the mirror, right, to you, to society, recognising yourselves in all these characters. So that was interesting.

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<sup>5</sup> Kuo Pao Kun. A Singapore playwright, theatre director and art activist. (1939 – 2002).

<sup>6</sup> Singapore actress.

But then, there was also, in the early years, this tendency to use Singlish as a kind of marker for the lower class, for comic effect, so you have the *ah beng* and the *ah lian*<sup>7</sup> who spout a few lines of Singlish, guaranteed laughter from the audience, you know. I think that was a bit of a laughing *at* rather than a laughing *with* kind of situation. So, when I started working with The Necessary Stage<sup>8</sup>, for example, I was very excited by the idea that they were going to put working class characters on stage and trying to reflect the way they speak, but not in a kind of... They're not the 'other' anymore, you know, they have a centrality in those plays. Their subjectivities are to be respected, they might speak a certain kind of English which is a bit broken, but no less articulate.

And I think that was a very interesting moment there, because you're trying to find the poetry in that, you know, in sentences that were broken, in a syntax that wasn't really quite proper, but in those kinds of fragments, you find a certain kind of lyricism in the vernacular.

And I'm not going to sort of dig up old feuds, but I will anyway [panellists laugh] – there was this sense, in (The Necessary Stage), that, you know, people at TheatreWorks<sup>9</sup> [Meng Chue raises her hand and nods], their Singlish, all very, um, middle class and above.<sup>10</sup>

**MC:** Not mine.

**AS:** Not yours... [panellists laugh] So there was this impression that the Singlish is a bit stilted, they're trying a bit hard but they can't really do it, because, you know, most of them were trained as lawyers, wherever they come from, very rich middle class backgrounds, eh. They wouldn't understand how people in HDBs spoke. Uh, it's like Eric Khoo doing *12 Storeys* like that<sup>11</sup>. [panellists laugh]

(At The Necessary Stage) there was that kind of, "we the more authentic". We're closer... And then we do devised theatre also, with people who actually come from those kinds of backgrounds, you know, so we're able to sort of capture the rhythms of the way they spoke, et cetera.

**CW:** Middle class Singaporeans are real people.

**AS:** Yes I know [panellists laugh], I know. Absolutely. But there was this impression that (the Theatreworks kind of Singlish) was dominant during that time. (Anyway when we created characters at that time we had two choices. Either we stayed true to how the character speak, so they will speak vernacular languages like Malay or dialects, or if we want them to speak English then we find a way to invent that language. Something that might have

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<sup>7</sup> *Ah beng* is a Singlish term referring to a stereotypical representation of an uneducated male ruffian, belonging to a "lower class" in society, especially of Chinese ethnicity. *Ah lian* is the female counterpart.

<sup>8</sup> A Singapore theatre company, formed in 1987.

<sup>9</sup> A Singapore theatre company, established in 1985.

<sup>10</sup> The panellist expanded this discussion later on in the session, as transcribed on page 8 onwards.

<sup>11</sup> Eric Khoo is a Singapore filmmaker, who is also the son of banker & magnate Khoo Teck Phuat (1917 – 2004). One of the films he wrote and directed, *12 Storeys* (released in 1997), depicted the struggles and hardships faced by the working/middle class.

English vocabulary but has the syntax of another mother tongue. We can call this ‘Singlish’ but I think it’s also this illusion we create where something has English words but the melody and the rhythms of Malay)<sup>12</sup>. So I think that was my journey lah, during that time.

**Aidli ‘Alin’ Mosbit (AM):** I will continue from there, okay.

My preamble is going to be very short, because this is how I feel about playing or acting Singaporean. My first Singaporean—really, the first, true, *true* Singaporean play, was *Off Centre*<sup>13</sup>, which has just, you know... Which was just produced last week<sup>14</sup>, and I was 19 then. I played the character of *Mak*<sup>15</sup>. So, through the years, and that has been about 23-odd years or so doing theatre, I would like to tell you that I have, in my own way, single-handedly represented and misrepresented Malays in so many ways.

Okay, I am Malay-Muslim, woman, Singaporean, and I have played so many numerous *makcik* characters, from *makcik*, from, you know, your HDB<sup>16</sup>... you know, all the way to a Malay MP ala Halimah Yacob<sup>17</sup>. I have done it, okay, so, I have actually, in my own way, captured the whole entire Malay demographic. If (you are a) Malay, Muslim, woman, most probably, I have done your character. [p anellists laugh]

So, hence, all I can say is that, uhm... Okay. When I was first doing it, I remembered consciously thinking about, “Is this right or not? I’m 19, I’m playing some *mee rebus*<sup>18</sup> *makcik*,” you know. But all I can say is that the feeling is right. It’s a gut thing. The feeling is right, and you just go ahead and get it done. So, then, I was not trained yet, was young, I wasn’t even in school yet, so I wasn’t trained yet, but I knew exactly how it feels and through the years, that’s how it has been. I have always been led by that first, that guttural feeling of what it means to be, if you have to play a Singaporean character, yeah, how do you play it, how do you feel like Singaporean. So, there you go, all of you, have a thought about it and then have questions, ask questions, yeah, thanks.

**TS:** Yeah ...

**MC:** Uh, can I give a little example from an actor’s point of view. One of the iconic characters that I played in *Beauty World*, Wan Choo, the cleaner—and also answering this accusation about playing for laughs. She’s just a cleaner, and I think about the cleaners in my life, my auntie, my grandaunt, all that, and they always listen to Cantonese opera. So, you know, she opens the act, and she’s mopping, very cold, right, the playwright never say sing a song or whatever, but as a busybody actor, I put in my two cents’ worth, I sing a bit of Cantonese

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<sup>12</sup> This segment in parentheses is a rephrasing by Alfian to lend coherence to the point he was making during the forum.

<sup>13</sup> Premiered in 1993.

<sup>14</sup> Aidli Mosbit meant to say that *Off Centre* was re-staged as part of *The Studios: fifty* season the previous week, from 23 to 26 April 2015.

<sup>15</sup> Mother, in Malay.

<sup>16</sup> Abbreviation for Housing Development Board, a statutory board regulating public housing in Singapore. Mostly, the term is usually used to refer to public housing flat.

<sup>17</sup> Halimah Yacob is a Member of Parliament in Singapore, and a member of the ruling People’s Action Party.

<sup>18</sup> A type of Malay noodle dish. Literally “boiled noodles”.

opera, [acts and sings].

Wah, audience laughed the first time I played it. What are they laughing at ah, really, seriously, from an actor's point of view, I didn't know what they... For me, it is an entry point into the character. This character sings, listens to and sings Cantonese opera, snippets of it, when she's working, it wasn't funny, you know. But after awhile, the funniness was not nice. I remembered reflecting on like... They're laughing *at* me. I was an untrained actor at that time, I didn't realise that they were laughing at the character that I had created. I had to learn that heartbreaking lesson, but it was very important. And then, immediately after that, I spoke English, as written by Michael Chiang, but of course, not so proper lah, but none of these "*leh lah lors*"<sup>19</sup>. It was just vernacular, just something that I heard, so that was part of that early development experience.

From *Beauty World* in 1988 to Faith Ng in 2011, 12 [sic]<sup>20</sup>, I played a completely different character that spoke in complete Hokkien which I'm very comfortable with, but as an actor, when I received the script, I said, my God, the years have passed. This here is a young playwright, (telling me), "*Nah*"<sup>21</sup>, play a character that speaks completely in Hokkien."

You know, that kind of development, from '88 to 2011. And it was very interesting, because at one of the Q&As, a student, right, a VJC<sup>22</sup> student or something, I can't remember which JC student, at a Q&A after the show, they asked a question to me, and I broke out in English *lah*, and then they all clapped. And then Claire later told me, "Meng Chue, you should have just kept on the Hokkien *lah*, you don't..."

So, for me, it's always—I don't look at it... For me, personally, it's a joy ride, you know. And a lot of arguments, a lot of mistakes made along the way...

**TS:** Yeah, yeah, if I may cut in, you see, this association that we have between ethnicity and language, if you were to remember *Lao Jiu*<sup>23</sup>, the first playing of *Lao Jiu* which you mentioned earlier in our earlier discussion when K. Rajagopal<sup>24</sup> ...

**MC:** Oh yes!

**TS:** ...played a character. He was a nurse and he was taking a phone call. Of course, we all know that. We all knew that Rajagopal speaks Mandarin.

**MC:** Yes.

**TS:** He speaks Chinese well, and so –

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<sup>19</sup> Common linguistic particles used in Singlish.

<sup>20</sup> Lok Meng Chue was referring to another play she acted in, *wo(men)*, which was written by Singapore playwright Faith Ng, which premiered in 2010.

<sup>21</sup> "*Nah*" is a Singlish particle. In this context, the sentence means, "Here, go play a character that speaks completely in Hokkien."

<sup>22</sup> Abbreviation for Victoria Junior College.

<sup>23</sup> Premiered in 1990.

<sup>24</sup> K. Rajagopal is a Singapore filmmaker, who was also a stage actor.

**MC:** He took second language Chinese<sup>25</sup>.

**TS:** And so, this was an Indian-looking actor playing a male nurse who was speaking on the phone in Chinese. And it was, of course, *Lao Jiu*, almost the iconic Chinese play about the Chinese world, and here was this Indian character speaking in Chinese, and it was at the same. It was a moment which was iconoclastic at the same time, and affirmative, you know what I mean? Because this was the kind of complexities that we were familiar with in our stage, in our world, and actors were able to do this convincingly. And so sometimes, when we tend to play on the associations that are familiar, it also happens that directors and actors and writers tended to break these associations, as it were, to surprise the audience. It happens on both sides of the coin here. Anyone else wants to talk about the question of language and ethnicity?

What about... let's focus on the acting, alright?

**CW:** What about language and class? This idea of code-switching, I think is a very important hallmark of Singaporean-ness, which is something we also talked about in our earlier discussions within the panel before we came. We all understand what that means, code-switching, it's very Singaporean, right? Because we accept it, that some of us will speak properly when we're in a certain situation, and when we're giving directions to, let's say, a taxi driver who, you know, can only understand certain road names if they're pronounced a certain way, we do it! And it's accepted. So I think that is something that is a very instinctive reaction that we have, "Oh that's real, that's authentic!"

So I suppose it's interesting for me, Alfian, you talked about this "the early divides" between certain English theatre companies and it goes on, I mean, I think the question still is being asked today. We constantly ask ourselves, what is authentic? What is authentic English? What is authentic Singlish? Is your Singlish more authentic or mine, you know? I think code switching is part of that: we can have a character who can speak very properly in one situation and then break out. In the early days it used to be for comic effect, but now I think we have accepted it as yeah, that's how we are. We tend to question if it is the other way around, actually, I feel now that we question a Singaporean character who doesn't (sound local)—who speaks an American accent or a very British accent, because then we ask ourselves, "Oh why is she speaking with that British accent? Did she study somewhere else? Did she not grow up here?"

I think we're very sensitive to accents in our everyday life and therefore on stage as well, now.

**TS:** Apart from this issue of language and different classes as represented by language, what about the fact that theatre in Singapore, as far as I'm concerned, has always been a kind of platform where the marginalised, the people who saw themselves outside the mainstream discourse of what it means to be Singaporean, whether it means you are

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<sup>25</sup> "He took Chinese as Second Language." Singapore's education system offers Chinese, Malay or Tamil as options for second language lessons.

Chinese, English-speaking, heterosexual, you know, person. The space for characters who are not within that spotlight, that was also a space which Singapore theatre as we look back on it now, allowed people to have. Would anyone want to take up that issue?

The question, for instance, of the representation of political dissidents on stage. I remember when I was playing Michael Fernandez in Robert Yeo's play<sup>26</sup> and I was cast as the Indian dissident, there was some people in the audience who felt that was proper because most political dissidents who opposed the PAP in a forceful manner at that time were seen to be Indian, alright. Yeah, so, in a sense, I was almost playing a stereotype. But what the play allowed to happen was the voice of these dissidents to be heard on stage, and because the voice could be heard on stage, it was legitimising. It enabled people to hear this voice, you know what I mean? And so in that way, that's another way in which theatre legitimises people or minorities or the marginalised, you know. The complexity of what it was to be Singaporean became more apparent over the years, yeah.

**AS:** I think sometimes it is problematic, though, as a playwright, to assume that we can always authentically and confidently represent the Other. So I think there are some areas where you really need immersion and where you really need research to really bring these people into the fold of the theatre, and I think sometimes we just need to guard against a certain kind of arrogance where you think you can represent anybody out there, like migrant workers, for example, in Singapore. You want to have a domestic worker on stage, yeah, I think you really, *really* need to know one. You really need to enter that world. Not to say that you cannot use your imagination, of course not. But be very, *very* careful about these kinds of really marginal experiences. It's great to include, but I think, if you want to write about sex workers, migrant workers, transgender people even, and not just to do a play about camp or drag, you have to really look at these kinds of real transgender experiences. I think it's hard to represent everyone *lah*. But at the same time, I think it's important to also to try...

**AM:** I remember one of the characters that had tried, I think, we actually tried to incorporate someone whom we don't really see a lot of. It's the character of (Habiba) in *Fundamentally Happy*<sup>27</sup>. In *Fundamentally Happy*, in Haresh<sup>28</sup>'s play, I played (Habiba). This is post-9/11, post-Mas Selamat getting caught<sup>29</sup>. There is always that kind of anxiety about a Malay-Muslim person in hijab and Malay-Muslim men in full religious wear with his *kopiah songkok*<sup>30</sup> on. You tend to have—you know, *feel* about that. It's just profiling. But when that character comes on board and you see that character having, yeah, the same kind of nuances, the same kind of life experiences as you are in Singapore, as a Singaporean, then you realise how, you know, our lives are not really that different. It's just that life experiences and how this person has been played, this—it is actually an eye-opening experience for a lot of people because they have never had any friends who could talk to them the way (Habiba)

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<sup>26</sup> *One Year Back Home*, which premiered in 1980.

<sup>27</sup> Premiered in 2006.

<sup>28</sup> Haresh Sharma. Resident playwright of The Necessary Stage.

<sup>29</sup> Mas Selamat was one of Singapore's most wanted fugitives who was first arrested in 2003, escaped in 2008 and recaptured in 2009. He was first detained under the Internal Security Act for allegedly conspiring to commit terrorist acts in Singapore.

<sup>30</sup> A religious headgear for Muslim men.

had been portrayed. So I think, again, being that character that has never, maybe, occurred in the psyche of theatre, being there, being put in the forefront, I think it's nice, because, suddenly, you feel that "Oh, okay, not any different than us," you know.

**MC:** From an actor's point of view, my own experience, I think one of the hardest characters that I've had to portray was a comfort woman. We always have this joke amongst ourselves that you don't have to be raped to be a rape victim, you know, I mean, you don't have to have been raped in order to portray a rape victim. But I think Alfian had hit the nail on the head by saying it's a lot of *research*. It's a lot of digging into yourselves, a lot of talking to people, it is actually finding the humanity in each character. A comfort woman also eats, sleeps, shits, you know. Of course, she's had a very traumatic experience that I've been very lucky not to have had, but I think it's finding that humanity in yourself and a lot of imagination a lot of belief in the character that you are playing and what the character is doing in the play that has helped towards, not authenticity, but a theatrical reality to show, to share with the audience. I think that's been my personal journey.

**CW:** But I suppose your original point, Sasi, was that... The fact that we've accumulated, up to now, this multiplicity of characters from various backgrounds, various... You know, we are very, very diverse. And legitimising them and therefore—actually not just legitimising them but, you know, theatre being a mirror of Singapore as she is now or as she was in 1970, 1985...

This was something we talked about. We're sort of the alternative national archives. We portray other versions of history, you know. Singaporeans' lives, their dreams, their fears, their successes, their failures...

And going back to the idea of accents and English as she's spoken, because, Alfian, like you said, be it a playwright or an actor portraying a character on stage, your job is to do the back story and create someone who is believable, who is convincing, who is real. So the maid, you know, like in *Ilo Ilo*<sup>31</sup>. Anthony<sup>32</sup> obviously wrote something very real, he did a lot of research so the maid character in *Ilo Ilo* was very real, very authentic. And I think that that's very interesting, like now, in the same way we had to find ourselves on stage in the '70s speaking English and then freely speaking dialect, code-switching; now, I think it's interesting for me, I want to find the Singaporeans who are Filipino, who speak English because they are Singaporean-Filipinos or they're Singaporean-Bangladeshis or Singaporean-PRC or NRI<sup>33</sup>s because that is now the new face of Singaporean-ness, and I think that is the Other. The Other that is to come in the next 10 years, maybe, when we begin to see those characters in the same way that the maid in *Ilo Ilo* was a major character.

I think on stage, we will probably begin to see that; we don't just see the Filipino maid just coming on for comic effect, you know. They're real people with their own story to tell, and

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<sup>31</sup> A Singapore film released in 2013.

<sup>32</sup> Singapore filmmaker. Director of *Ilo Ilo*.

<sup>33</sup> Abbreviation for Non-Resident Indians. The NRI is a status conferred to Indian nationals who have resided in Singapore for more than six months by the High Commission of India, to facilitate various official local applications.

someone we understand and we're familiar with. The question of identity in Singapore and therefore in Singapore theatre is constantly evolving, and we are constantly, I think, as theatre makers, wanting to tell that story, wanting to capture the moment in time, because it's so specific. We talked about this: how we act Singaporean, how we write Singaporean. It really is so specific to the times and it's going to be very exciting, I think, in the coming decade.

**TS:** So, we've spoken in terms of language, we've spoken in terms of ethnicity, and characters, and roles, but there also seems to be some elements of themes or context which are peculiarly Singaporean, like *Cooling Off Day*<sup>34</sup>, right, there's a sense in which that whole phenomenon, the whole phenomenon, is associated thematically, socially with a particular kind of Singaporean consciousness. If you take an extreme example, like *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*<sup>35</sup>—I mean, sure, that's almost a mythic play, but there is a particular connection to Singapore, not just because it was written by a Singaporean, but somehow, when you are a Singaporean, you read the play and you see, oh yeah, I see this, I see what is involved here in being eunuch, in not being able to generate myself, and yet... And all the confusions of identity that are inherent in that play. In these kinds of thematic rubrics or this kind of thematic context, what are some of those things that have struck you? I mean, like, you know, *Fundamentally Happy*, for instance. The play could probably be played in many different countries. But when it is played in Singapore, it has a particular resonance, and I'm thinking about the kind of resonance that only Singaporeans would be able to pick up, you know what I mean? The way in which a play is received, the way in which we can see it, or read it, also would make it Singaporean, which means, of course, the audience is an active participant in the way in which the Singaporean-ness is going to be ultimately acceptable or not, definable, what we take it to mean, how it should be, whether we accept it or not, you know. I think it's that matrix that we need to think about – it's not just what is projected, but what is received by the audience that we need to think about. Are there any other final comments before I can open it up to the audience?

**MC:** It works the other way as well, you know, Sasi.

**TS:** Go ahead.

**MC:** For example ah... when we performed *Beauty World* in Japan, there's a line in *Beauty World*... Because this girl has come to look for her father, right, and suddenly, the moment of disclosure: he was a Japanese soldier. When the first time it was uttered in Japan, we all went [inhale]. We found a connection with the audience! You know! It was quite magical, not planned. But, like what Sasi said, there is definitely that connection with the audience.

**CW:** Yeah, thematically, yup, it's true, I think. I just... Thinking about themes and how it is, you know, we always say that the work is complete only when you put it on stage and the audience... The dots in the circle are joined, right? So very much depends on what the audience brings in, their worldviews and their perspectives.

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<sup>34</sup> Premiered in 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Premiered in 1995.

I just want to add that it's exciting for me now, as a theatre practitioner, that we can also bring out work that is unapologetically Singaporean, overseas. I've two recent examples of working with Singaporean plays and the other, the non-Singaporeans... One play is *Cogito*<sup>36</sup> which is written by Huzir Sulaiman<sup>37</sup>, and that is a play about identity, and we're working with a Japanese theatre company to translate it into Japanese. And that is... it's been very interesting because of the layers of language and how that affects the translation and it's a translation that's not from page to page, but we're working on the floor with Japanese director, Japanese actors, because we believe that the play is really a living thing. It's one thing when it's translated from page to page, but when you bring it in to the rehearsal floor and when you translate on the floor, something else happens, you know.

And the questions of hierarchy and class that are very strong in the play, *Cogito*, get translated differently when we understand how the Japanese view the social classes and the kind of formal Japanese that they have, it's so complex, you know, how they speak to each other depends on how close you are to each other.

So that's very interesting, our Singaporean-ness and the world that we were trying to portray in that play. We got the Japanese actors over to give them the idea of how, you know, the rich live in Singapore, the working class... Many, many layers of translation. Then the second example was when we brought a reading of a play called *For Better or For Worse*<sup>38</sup> which is a play written by Faith Ng, and we presented it in Sydney at the National Play Festival, and the characters, 2 middle-aged, Singaporean husband and wife, spoke just completely Singaporean English, and it truly resonated. I didn't translate anything, I brought my actors over. The only bits that I had surtitles was when the son went to see his mother and he spoke to her in Teochew. But otherwise, it was really pure Singlish and we had white Australians completely relating to the play. Faith, she had this blonde, blue eyed girl coming to her the next day and say she was so moved because she said that the play was about "my" parents. So I think that's another exciting thing that we need to proudly claim, you know, that the more authentic, the more specific, the more real your characters are and thoroughly Singaporean and Singlish, it really translates and we don't have to, you know, apologise for that. We have this space that we've claimed.

**AS:** So I just wanted to just add to what you just said about thematics. Sometimes I'm asked, as a writer, what is there to write about in Singapore? And I always find this to be a very strange question and my answer is, "Read the newspapers. Read them from cover to cover. Whatever they left out, you write."

And this is the situation that we're in, in Singapore, when you have almost total media control. You know that the way certain stories are being told, are being angled, et cetera, serves particular agendas, and you have to try to locate all other ways of talking about things that they're leaving out, you know, the experiences of LGBT people, for example, the experiences of political detainees... so many of those things are left out.

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<sup>36</sup> Premiered in 2007.

<sup>37</sup> Singapore playwright.

<sup>38</sup> Premiered in 2013.

**AM:** That reminds me of the experience, *your* experience, of working on *Causeway*<sup>39</sup>. When you write, you had to write about the Malay experience from both the Malaysian and the Singaporean contexts. I remembered, you were quite—quite, I think, having a debate within yourself, right? So what exactly is the Malay Singaporean and what's the Malay Malaysian, yeah?

Finally, when we got the cast together, the Malaysian and Singaporean casts, that's when the Malaysians say, "Ohhh! Singaporean like that!" Then it occurred to us, "Oh yeah, that's the *Singaporean* experience." But then, after that, the Singaporean then went over, "Yeah, but aren't you Malaysians like that?" Then they will go, "Nah, KL-ites<sup>40</sup>..."

Wow. You know. So now...

**MC:** Different from the Penang-ites<sup>41</sup>...

**AM:** Yeah, different from the Penang-ites. So, that for me is also interesting because yes, the Singaporean experience, like what Claire said, you can uproot it and put it anywhere, people will still recognise it and not only that, people can relate to it, there's always that resonance. But at the same time, as much as, you know, we think of that, we do have sometimes that consciousness, that "Will they know? Will they understand?"

Yeah, so there's always... What do you think?

**MC:** *Emily*<sup>42</sup> travelled to Edinburgh before half of you all [to the audience] were born. It was a sold out show, I think, yeah.

**TS:** We are much more confident about that, but the anxiety is always there, maybe it should always be there, I think that's the point. There should always be a sense of deference, a sense of humility, a sense of respect and a fear that you might not be representing them properly. But as you put it, Alin, the misrepresentation is also important! Because that misrepresentation is the space where the actor or the writer or the director is able to question, is able to open up something where the work can become imaginative, creative, and innovative. Otherwise, it will never be that way, it will just be some kind of photographic representation of reality, and it will never actually—can never actually aspire to be theatre, let alone art.

Okay, I'm going to stop at that stage, and open it up to the audience and to invite you to ask questions, please, of the panellists. Make some comments, disagree with us, whatever you want.

Yes, hang on a second, I think we need to record this, yeah.

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<sup>39</sup> Premiered in 1998.

<sup>40</sup> Referring to locals of Kuala Lumpur.

<sup>41</sup> Referring to locals of Penang.

<sup>42</sup> *Emily of Emerald Hill*. Premiered in 1984. It was performed in Edinburgh in 1986, as part of the Commonwealth Arts Festival and the Edinburgh Arts Festival Fringe.

**Audience 1 (A1):** [inaudible]

**TS:** Yes it is, welcome to Singapore.

[Audience and panellists' laughter]

**A1:** Okay, so, thank you for doing this, it's... The title is really interesting, it's a little bit like looking for the Singapore dress, for Miss Singapore, isn't it? So it's quite complex. Um... Maybe that last couple of comments covered it, but I'm not sure... And my question is one around censorship, or self-censorship. "Acting Singaporean" sort of has that particular element to it, in the sense that maybe what is actually left out is really some of the key points.

So, I want you to comment on that again. The censorship, and particularly the self-censorship. You know, what you think should not be said because it doesn't fit guidelines or it's going to get you in trouble or it's going to take up too much time. And so therefore, one, you assume that the audience can get it, you assume that the subtext will hopefully drive you there. To me, that's quite "uniquely Singapore", to use a terrible phrase, but you kind of touch on that towards the end, that it was through, in your plays, that, you know, you had people thinking out loud, looking at each other, questioning, and somehow you hope that the audience got it. Right? Is that—that seems to be a very big challenge!

**TS:** Ah, yeah. Uhm, well yeah, I mean, look. Being Singaporean, one of the tactical skills you learn as a Singaporean, I think, is to negotiate censorship, right, I mean, you have to negotiate what you can and cannot say, how you can play a character, and being Singaporean. In my sense, the sense that in the early years when I started acting, we would take the script and sit in front of the censor and go, line by line, and ask if this is admissible or can we say it this way, or is that expletive, really an expletive or does it just sound like an expletive because what the actor really means, is *this!*

[Audience and panellists' laughter]

It's not, it's not... It's not 'fuck,' but it's something else! It really means something else, right? So what can we say and what can't we say, and you go through these negotiations all the time! And then of course, as an actor, you know that the police can come and watch a performance. You are told that you have to remove these lines and if your play goes on that night, and you forget and you slip, because you've learnt the lines, and then suddenly in the middle of the text you're supposed to take out a sentence, and you forget, and you're terrified at the end of the performance. Am I going to get arrested, is somebody going to come and drag me away? And then you relearn your lines for the next night.

So these anxieties and fears are part and parcel of the way in which Singaporean-ness is staged. It's not just about authenticity and truth and being true to the character or situation, but precisely what's allowed, what's the framing that's going to be allowed. It's one of the anxieties we—I carried as an actor. One of the reasons why you're always afraid is whether

you're representing it properly. Who is going to accept it? Who is going to reject it? And is that important to you, you know, these questions are always on your mind.

**AS:** I think there's been different sorts of tactical negotiations over the years. And I think there are different phases of how artists respond to censorship. So you will see that let's say the '80s, '90s, if you want to talk about the political, one approach is the allegorical. So you're using metaphor, parable, and all that, and you hope that you're carrying out a kind of secret complicitous conversation with your audience, you know, nudge nudge wink wink, "you know what we're referring to". You're speaking in code, basically. And of course there is a certain pleasure in that, I guess you realise that you're speaking over the head of the censors, hopefully. You're just having all these kinds of communication with the audience, a privileged one.

But then, after a while, as theatre practitioners, we realise that it's a very privileged communication, you're probably addressing people who are already clued in, people who are already sort of converted, so you need a more direct language, I feel. So I think, over time... So, like, for example, I did *Cooling Off Day*, it was really speaking to people, getting interviews from them, and then really putting what they said into the play, directly, you know, without a lot of editing.

And I feel that somewhere along the way, as we mature as a society, we need to speak, be able to speak about politics, not through metaphors about the garden and gardener, weeding and pests and whatever, but, you know, we have to speak about it in a more direct way.

**MC:** Eunuchs.

**AS:** Sorry? Eunuchs – yeah eunuchs and castration and all that, right. Which is a very powerful and devastating metaphor. But I think, for me personally, I was a bit tired of that and I was like, okay, let's not play cat and mouse anymore. Let's not play nudge and wink. Let's try to address this directly and see how the censors would respond. That said, though, I think part of the game is also, when we hand in a script for them to vet, it's just text. And I think there is always some manoeuvring space in what later comes out as performance, right? Because directorially, the design, gesturally, there's so much stuff that you can (do to create meaning).

And for the question of self-censorship, I don't know. It's a very insidious thing. You don't know how it will affect you. And I can't tell you myself because it operates on a subconscious kind of level. But I will say that over time, as a playwright in Singapore, my script has had less and less stage directions, so all of it is quite clean, it's just text, because I realise, at the end of the day, that when I put too many stage directions, it sort of fixes the script in a certain way. If I leave them out, then I have a lot more manoeuvring space at the end of the day, and so does the director. He can come in and, "Okay, we can't say this, but we can *perform* this in some way."

**TS:** I suppose, just to add to that, it is ultimately, I think, the way theatre negotiates censorship is language. It's got to be reflected in language and whether the language is able to rise above the, you know, the demands of censorship. What cannot be said, finding a way to say what cannot be said. And that's a challenge not just for the writer, because it is performative. Because it's theatre, because it's performed in some way, it becomes a collaborative challenge that the actor, the writer, the designer, and the director have to confront, you know. I think, we... Ultimately it's in the language that the audience hears, the language that the actors speak and how it's going to be read and how it's said and how it's read that this thing sort of plays itself out.

Self-censorship will always be there, but I think to be aware of it, to be conscious of it, and to work against it, is something that we as artists have to be responsible for.

Another question?

**Audience 2 (A2):** It's a little bit related to the language, I think because I do find that language always affirms identity, in a way. It always constructs the identity but is it in the interest of theatre, as playwrights and actors, to blur identity or create—use theatre as a space where you do not need to construct or create identity because it happens, our roles in life are kind of pressurised with that to a large extent anyway. If you would use it as a space to counter the construction the identity. And if so, then how is language used in this sense?

**AS:** Yeah, I think we've been talking a lot identity politics, right, in this conversation that we have, so we're talking about markers like ethnicity and class, and other kinds of markers lah, sexuality, religion, et cetera. But I think, of course, I believe, there are a lot of plays being made in Singapore where language is not so deterministic, yeah. I think if you look at plays by Cake<sup>43</sup>, for example, you have a lot of, what I would say, very open kind of texts that activate your imagination. They're not anchored. They're sort of like a bit free flow thing kind of text. I think there are some aspects of *Descendants (of the Eunuch Admiral)* also that has got that kind of quality, right, that really gives room for you to imagine what exactly those words might refer to. They're multi-referential. So I think there are some plays that kind of deal with that kind of polyphony and all that and they're not too caught up with the idea of using language as identity.

**Audience 3 (A3):** I have a question for Miss Meng Chue. Just now you mentioned that you've played a cleaning lady, the role of a cleaning lady who sings some Chinese opera at the beginning. And so, what is the taboo or you said, the audience actually laughed at the character. What is the taboo, I don't quite understand...

**MC:** Oh, no, no, no. It was a personal thing, because I thought they were laughing at me, but I realised later that they were laughing at the character I've created, so there wasn't a taboo or anything, just my own personal growing up experience, you know. It was okay, it was okay, very popular, very... No taboo at all, no need to censor, yeah.

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<sup>43</sup> Cake Theatrical Productions. A Singapore theatre company formally established in 2005.

**A3:** Okay, okay, because I just don't understand that—what's so funny about the character if she sings in... Yeah.

**MC:** I think maybe, from my point of view—maybe Claire is dying to say something also, um, because, you know, you go to a theatre, and you... It's like a *proper* space. This was the early days, I'm talking about the '80s, right, yeah. And there was... You don't hear Cantonese opera suddenly in an English play. What's a Cantonese phrase got to do with an English play. So that's why to the audience, it's like, "Eh, I heard this at home, my grandmother hears this!" Suddenly, there was a moment of identification. I think in those early years, it was celebrating the Singaporean on stage. "Eh, *Army Daze*<sup>44</sup>. Why are they talking about my brother, my son on stage, you know, his life what!"

But yet, when you see it on stage, it gives it a kind of legitimacy, and that was the beginnings of, like, hey, there's something about our lives, about being Singaporean, that's worthwhile sharing with the audience. I think that was the beginnings of that whole identity, celebrating the Singaporean, and what is a Singaporean, and all that.

**CW:** Yeah, it was one of the first Singaporean musicals; it was such a landmark because before that, you had *Oklahoma!* You've got only Western musicals, and because also that particular play, musical, was inspired by the black and white TV shows, the Cantonese TV shows. So I think what Meng Chue was talking about was just the sheer delight. For me, it was the sheer delight of the audience, very palpable, they were so excited to see a Singaporean play—a musical, more so, you know. It was very significant in terms of that relationship between the theatre makers and the audience, I feel.

**MC:** I think also, they mentioned about musical... one of the earliest Brechtian musicals, *The Threepenny Opera*, was adapted. We haven't even talked about adaptations, which is kind of a bit popular these days. It was kind of adapted because it was this German underworld and all that, right, and it was adapted, and the title was changed to *Samseng*—who in the world got *Samseng* except maybe Singapore and Malaysia, *Samseng and the Chettiar's Daughter*<sup>45</sup>. Who knows what a chettiar is – put up your hand.

Ah, you see, minority, the marginalised. Chettiar is a money lender. So, it is very Singaporean!

[At audience member] Sorry, you a-ha moment there, ah?

So it was the beginnings of. Those were the '80s, I think.

**A3:** Yeah, because I feel very interesting, because I am from Hong Kong, so just now the scene—audience would also laugh, but in a very different context and reasons. Thank you.

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<sup>44</sup> Premiered in 1987.

<sup>45</sup> Premiered in 1982. Based on John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* (1782).

THE STUDIOS: *fifty*  
*Acting Singaporean: Back Story and Fore Play*  
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**AS:** I also think audience laughter is very complex, right, because there is that laughter of recognition sometimes, you feel validated. You feel, oh, that's something from my mother, my grandmother. But there's also laughter as a defence mechanism sometimes. There's uncomfortable, nervous laughter, all kinds of laughter.

**Audience 4 (A4):** Two years ago, I think, MDA<sup>46</sup> introduced some kind of a self-censorship scheme, right? And then, I think one response I heard was that you can't create and censor at the same time, it's opposite things. So what happened after that?

**TS:** As far as I know, I think they decided not to pass the bill, where they wanted companies to essentially self-censor –

**CW:** Self-censor, self label –

**TS:** Yeah, yeah. They called it self-classification, so you can't do that now. I don't think they've gone ahead with it, yeah. I think this is complex, because it doesn't only involve theatre. It involves film, and music, and the whole, sort of, entertainment industry. And industrially, it may help perhaps the filmmakers or film distributors or concert organisers to be able to do this, but I think for the theatre companies, when we met MDA, we were quite clear that we felt that this would be a step back, it would not—it's counterproductive, yeah, so I don't think that's going ahead.

**CW:** There was a raised hand over here, just now...

**Audience 5 (A5):** I think, this question, how much related, I don't know, I just ask Sasi. So as Singaporeans, whether it is Malay theatre, Chinese theatre, Indian theatre, as a director, as a play writer, and actor, how much it will work [sic] reach the audience? Audience as in Malay, Chinese, how much level it reached?

**TS:** That's a good question because, I think, for a long time, the idea of what constitutes 'Singapore theatre' was an open question. The assumption in the beginning, and correct me if I'm wrong, yeah, the assumption in the beginning was that it had to be English-language theatre, that if it's Singapore theatre, it has to be English-language theatre, because that somehow reflected the lingua franca in Singapore.

Singapore was—you know, the lingua franca was the English language. But, I think, over the years, it has become more complicated. It has become much more complex. But from the point of view of the audiences, there are very few people who watch theatre in Singapore in all four languages. That's a fact. There are people who watch Tamil theatre, people who watch Malayalam theatre, people who watch Hindi theatre, Bengali theatre, just within the Indian community. Then you have Chinese theatre, largely Mandarin theatre or bilingual theatre. Then there is Malay theatre. And there are divisions between English theatre done in Malay, Malay theatre that incorporates English, so it's very, very complex.

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<sup>46</sup> Abbreviation for Media Development Authority.

But there are also— there's also been a phenomenon where playwrights like Alfian, Elangovan<sup>47</sup>, Pao Kun<sup>48</sup>, who straddle both languages, and so they have an audience reach which tends to be wider and more complex, you know what I mean?

There are, I think, a very small group of people who are beginning to see theatre in different languages, either because of the presence of surtitles, or because there are *no* surtitles. I think people are also beginning to watch performances just for the watching the performance itself. You may be familiar – for instance, like Nine Years Theatre, when they do a classic play like *Twelve Angry Men*<sup>49</sup>, you know the script, you can watch the performance even though it is in Chinese. It does not affect the way you want to appreciate that play. So that phenomenon is also beginning to happen. So the way in which language is mediating performance, how it informs performance, how the audiences are beginning to read performances, it's beginning to change, beginning to shift. It's no longer so clear as it was maybe 20 or 30 years ago. But as far as the reach is concern, I still think the greatest reach is for English language theatre. I hope I've answered your question.

**Audience 6 (A6):** Hi, I'm curious, over the years, right, so for now, when you put up a Singaporean play, right, how often do you have to market it as a Singaporean play? Because when you do that, you're saying okay this is something you have to take notice of, so it comes from a—I won't say a disadvantageous position, but it's like the fact that in the library, there's a Singapore collection, right, how come those books aren't always put in the literature section itself? So how often, now, do you have to market it as a Singaporean play?

**MC:** Only when it works with you *lah*. Like the first Singaporean play... Uhm... With 10 minutes nudity. You know, I think marketing is in a whole ball park by themselves. So, if you want to use "Singaporean", you want to use 'naked'. You want to say sex sells, you know. Or does it? This is an authentic title that I just saw recently. They want to use it, that's up to them.

**CW:** I think the landscape is such that Singapore theatre-goers do know which companies tend to do Singapore work or adaptations or non-adaptations, just a non-Singaporean text. I think, however, there is, I feel, also, a growing sense of value that there are people who are very excited about original Singapore work. So I think, you know, our company, Checkpoint Theatre, focuses on original Singapore work only, and we... I suppose it's about following the work and the development of the writers whom we groom and develop. So there is a certain interest about that, in that. So we do, we do make that a point in our marketing. But then of course there are other companies that do both, you know, so if you're doing a classic, then you will push the classic, because it's about reaching out to the audience segment. But I think that audiences now are quite familiar with the terrain, and they do know whether it is a new play, an old Singapore play, a new Singapore play, or an adaptation or a straightforward staging.

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<sup>47</sup> Singapore poet and playwright.

<sup>48</sup> Kuo Pao Kun (1937 – 2002). A Singapore playwright and theatre director.

<sup>49</sup> Performed in 2013.

**TS:** May I just ask – are you asking whether we should do it or are you questioning the need for it...

**A6:** Whether you should.

**TS:** Whether you should, right, right.

**CW:** It depends. How do you interpret a Singaporean play, now, or a Singaporean production? I mean, that's interesting for us to hear from your perspective, as people who come to this talk.

**Audience 7 (A7):** Actually for myself, I saw a play by Haresh, and my second language is Chinese, then there's this Malay character that maybe for about a paragraph or two speaking Malay. I felt kind of cheated, like, I can't get it, because I don't know, and everybody's laughing and all that, but I don't know whether there should be a surtitle or should there be a warning that three sentences are coming in Malay and just know that if you want to fully experience it, you won't get it. So that was my thing about... I just felt that I don't get it because there's this part that is in Malay.

**AM:** I hope that I can answer that. One of the things that I know that Haresh has always, you know, championed is that kind of works. And also because if you find someone else laughing and if you don't get it, this is what—we talked about it, and then Haresh said “*Ah la*, just ask that person, to ask, [turns to Alfian sitting next to her] what was that all about? Then have a conversation, you know.”

**MC:** No talking in the performance, mah.

**AM:** Ya la but that one not Ivan Heng so don't worry. [Audience and panellists' laughter]

So, okay, yeah, most probably you have to do that, or... yeah, just ask and maybe that person say, “Ok, maybe later I tell you the joke.” And then yeah, you have a new friend! Don't worry, and most of the time, if that happens, right, and you feel like you've missed out on something, don't have that kind of feeling. Don't feel cheated, okay, because ...

**MC:** Did you ask for a refund? [Audience and panellists' laughter]

**AM:** Because you can always go back to it, and refer to it and then somebody else can help you.

**CW:** That's also quite interesting for me, because I did a performance called *Recalling Mother*<sup>50</sup> a few years ago, and it's a play where I act with another Singaporean Malay actress. She and I, we performed this piece about our mothers, so we speak English, Cantonese, and Malay. We first did that as a work-in-progress for an international festival, i.e. all foreign theatre practitioners, most of whom would not have understood any Malay or

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<sup>50</sup> Premiered in 2006.

Cantonese. We didn't do any surtitles, and they completely responded to the piece. They weren't worried about not being able to understand the language because they could understand the story, the emotions. And then we did it again a few years ago, with a Singaporean audience, a lot of feedback forms. Very interesting, again, you know, you can see the non-Singaporean feedback forms and the Singaporean feedback forms. There is a certain anxiety, I find, amongst the Singaporeans, "I didn't understand!!" So, that is being a Singaporean audience, I suppose. It's interesting that maybe it's about... Because that's the world we live in right? You hear these languages that you do not understand and I suppose it is entrusting yourself to decide what is being said.

**AS:** I find also that's usually, like, usually in Hareesh's scripts, even though there'll be untranslated chunks here and there, from the response of the other characters, you can sort of sense the meaning of it. But I also want to comment that, when you go to theatre, one of the things that you develop over time as audience members is empathy. If you're a minority in Singapore, (not being able to access certain languages, or some signs, or during a roadshow)<sup>51</sup> is actually a daily experience. You do hear a lot of Mandarin in many places which you can't access, and you learn to live with it somehow. (So when you're from the majority, coming to the theatre and being confronted with these 'unintelligible' languages makes you understand what minorities experience)<sup>52</sup>. Or you learn to think, "Okay, but these sounds are meaningful to someone, this isn't just noise, you know."

**AM:** You learn to deduce things, you know, slowly.

**MC:** It's like when you travel to another country, right, you just have to make do *lah*, you know. And I think, to me, "I don't know", "I don't understand" are the 3 most powerful words I know because it makes me go and find out. But if the play is not interesting enough then I don't want to find out *lah*, so your play must be good *lah*. "What was that about?" or "Why so funny?" Then go and find out and make new friends, right?

**TS:** Any other questions, any...

**CW:** Comments?

**TS:** Okay, if not, just left for me to say, thank you. Thank you to the panellists, thank you Meng Chue, thank you Claire, Alfian, Alin. Thank you very much, thank you.

**CW:** Thank you, Sasi.

**MC:** Thank you, Sasi.

**AM:** Thank you.

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<sup>51</sup> This segment in parentheses is an edit by Alfian to lend coherence to the point he was making during the forum.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.