

**TRANSCRIPT
OF**

OFF CENTRE (2015): POST SHOW DIALOGUE

Presented by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay
as part of *The Studios: fifty* season (2015)
23 April 2015 at Esplanade Theatre Studio

Featuring performers Ebi Shankara, Ellison Tan Yuyang, Erwin Shah Ismail, Joshua Lim,
Myra Loke, Neo Hai Bin, Neo Swee Lin, Siti Khalijah Zainal,
And director Oliver Chong
Hosted by Karen Tan

Transcribed by Vanessa Teo

Published on 29 July 2016 on www.esplanade.com

Notice:

This document is transcribed from a video recording of the event.
Minor edits have been made for length and clarity.

Every attempt has been made to ensure the factual accuracy of statements made during the event. Any transcribing error, omission or mis-transcription is inadvertent. The statements, views and opinions expressed during the event and within the transcript do not reflect the official standing or position of The Esplanade Co Ltd.

This transcript is made available for personal or research use only. No part of this transcript may be reproduced or transmitted in any form by any means without prior written permission and proper attributions. All copyright and intellectual property rights within this document, without limitation, are retained by their respective owners.

Off Centre is written by Haresh Sharma, resident playwright of The Necessary Stage.
It premiered in 1993.

For more information, please contact slicia@esplanade.com.

Karen (KT): (...) My name is Karen, and I think we're all a bit stunned. I was just thinking to myself how I have no idea how I'm going to moderate this dialogue session, because I think we all need a lot of time to think about what we've just seen and what we've just heard and so forth. But it's a very necessary dialogue I think we have to have, and it has to do everything with theatre, everything to do with why we do theatre, and here the cast come out one by one...

[Audience claps; cast walk in]

This is Ebi, Erwin... why don't you all take a bow. Siti, Swee Lin, Ellison, Joshua, Myra, Haibin... take a bow.

(...)

So yes. This is a very necessary dialogue that we have to have with the cast and with the director. Haresh can't be here tonight, and he's the writer, of course. Because as theatre makers, it is very important that what we say nowadays has a lot of resonance with people. It's all fun and fine to do happy, flippy, (kind of frivolous) work, but it is also very important to do work that leaves you very quiet and stunned. And hurt and in pain. There's a reason why Oliver has chosen this, obviously.

Off Centre was first performed in 1993. That's 22 years ago, that's probably about the time some of you have actually been on this earth [audience laughter]. Of course, the circumstances with which the piece was written and the piece that was put up then, is very different from now, but you've chosen to do it now. So there's a line that repeats throughout, which is, "What do you want me to do? What do you want us to do?"

So what did you want to do?

(...)

Oliver Chong (OC): Um I thought I... wanted to help mental patients to do—that's why I'm doing this. But then, um, we visited IMH¹ because TFP² has a community project that's worked there. So I went there and I saw the patients there. And when I left the hospital, I feel very weird. I feel... Actually, I, I... don't think I can do anything for them. And I don't think I can call myself any... I don't think I am any better than other people, I can't say that I, I do community service work, I am a good person, I do a play for them, I don't think I can say that at all. So at the end of the day, it's not that at all. For myself. Yeah. I hope it give somebody something so that it can help them [sic].

(...)

¹ Abbreviation for Institute of Mental Health.

² The Finger Players. A theatre company in Singapore.

THE STUDIOS: *fifty*
Off Centre (2015): Post Show Dialogue
23 April 2015, Esplanade Theatre Studio

KT: This was actually commissioned by the Ministry of Health at that time, and there was some controversy³ and so on and so forth. Has anybody from there come? What do you think has changed in Singapore or not changed since it was first done? Did you watch it 22 years ago?

OC: First staging. Old Drama Centre.

KT: Okay, anybody here saw the first staging? Any of the cast? Anybody here saw the first staging? Not born (yet), right? [laughter] You see, what's amazing about this SG50 series⁴ is that there are these works that are coming out that nobody knew had been written. Unless it was a school text, and that's always kind of accidental. But it's a very, very important piece, *Off Centre*. I mean, a quick round of hands here. Who is centre?

Who is off centre?

[A few cast members raise their hands]

Who is more left, and more right?

I mean, how do we define these things? These things are things we always say, right? "*Aiya*, we're all crazy." You know, "No one's normal."

We use these phrases so freely, but what does it really mean. Is there anybody here who would like to say anything about what you'd just seen, or would you like to ask anything, just so that we can keep this going on—yes please?

Audience 1 (A1): You said something earlier about being able to help the people who are sick, or men—off centre, sorry, I just wanted to say that my mom was diagnosed with the same thing (Saloma⁵) had, which was a chemical imbalance. I just needed to say that this piece helped the people who are helping them more than the people who we think need their help. It was very helpful to me, to see that people understand, or you're sharing so that people can understand. Just wanted to put that out there, thank you.

KT: Thank you very much for that, thank you.

[claps]

I just want to ask the cast. You know, you guys work very hard, and it's a long stretch for you emotionally. It seems like not a very clever question, but just something I really am curious to know is how has this piece changed you? What have you learnt about yourself, actually, with this piece. And Haibin, because you're at this end, you shall start.

³ The Ministry of Health had commissioned *The Necessary Stage* to produce the work, but later withdrew the grant given for the production due to differences in expectations for the play.

⁴ Karen was referring to *The Studios: fifty* season, presented in conjunction with Singapore's commemoration of its 50th birthday.

⁵ The lead female character in *Off Centre*, played by Siti Khalijah in this staging.

Hai Bin (HB): Okay. When I was doing this show, I was doing research work. So I borrowed this book from the library, it listed all the symptoms of the different kinds of mental illnesses. And then, as I read, I go, “This one I have. This one I also. Ah, this one also. *Jialat*⁶!”
[laughs]

So, it really brings me to question what she has just questioned as well. What exactly is off centre and who are really centre? Maybe every one of us is not. There was this famous Japanese director called Tadashi Suzuki who insists that the whole world is just crazy, it’s a mental hospital. When we do plays, we are doing plays where people go off-centre, but plays is also derived from our world [sic].

Let’s just leave it hanging there. [laughs]

(...)

Erwin Shah Ismail (ESI): Coincidentally when we were rehearsing for this show, I was on a bus one day and I was seated in a really crowded bus. I saw this lady about maybe six, seven metres away from me at the front, and she was essentially having her eyes closed, she was having a conversation with herself. Rather vigorously, too. And then there were two schoolgirls who noticed her and, well, honestly, they were laughing. They were perhaps embarrassed by it, but they were laughing.

From afar, I felt troubled. I think when I was a kid, I probably would laugh too, but I think with age, I saw it differently and coincidentally, while doing this play, I felt very—I definitely felt differently about it. I would—I mean... Had I been closer, or had I had the opportunity to perhaps speak to the girls in private, I don’t know if I would, but I keep asking myself that question. So yeah, I guess that’s how I felt about having a direct experience. Yeah.

Siti Khalijah Zainal (SK): I’ve definitely learnt to be a more patient person. A deeper level of understanding, I think, towards mental patients.

When I first got the script, I was honestly quite confused. You know, I feel very emotional, I feel so much for Saloma, but at some points, as Siti, I feel very angry. I’m like, “Come on, Saloma, snap out of it! Move on, you know, it’s not that bad!” But this is Siti speaking, you know!

We had these discussions with Ebi and Oliver. And the more we read, the more I’ve realised how much of a selfish person I am. And then, the trip to IMH that we made, made me open my eyes even wider and made me realise that I’m such a privileged, privileged person. I don’t know how lucky I am, just looking at their faces and their excitement, you know, when they get to see a performance and receiving like, cookies which, like you know, they’ll probably only get it once in six months! That really just slapped me, you know, back to... Back to the script and really understanding her fully. Just like what Oliver said, I don’t know that by doing this play, whether it has helped anyone, but it really has helped me grow and

⁶ A Singlish expression that translates to “Terrible!”.

feel as a person in terms of level of understanding and it has really taught me to be more patient as a person.

Ebi Shankara (ES): It's a bit of the play, actually. From what Haibin said, when I first got the script and I read it, just like what Siti said, too, I was confused with regard to it. But during the process of the rehearsals, I discovered a lot of things, very similar to Vinod⁷, that I had, that eventually prompted me to want to go learn more about schizophrenia and mental illnesses. Then, suddenly, like what Haibin said, you kind of start to see things that, hey, I used to do this kind of thing, or, is this what I do? Is this considered the OCD⁸, or is this considered... You know, am I off centre? I questioned myself a lot of times throughout this play. I am off centre. But then again we don't know what off centre is, right?

And touching on Erwin's point: when we see people who talk to themselves, to the voices in their head, sometimes—I mean, as far as I've known, I've never laughed, but I've always been intrigued. You will stare. I will stare. I have, actually. And you start thinking to yourself, I've always thought to myself, who are they actually talking to? What do the voices sound like? Does it sound like them, does it sound like an entirely different person? I've always questioned that, and that's the kind of question that we also grapple with.

And, I didn't have the chance to go down to IMH because I was sick that day, but from what they said and from what we worked on and everything, it has been a very big play in my life and has been a very different experience, because I think I have learnt a lot about myself as a person. And this play is very close to my heart because personally, there are instances where I have been, when I was much younger or even my adolescent years and growing up, I have always kind of... kept in the dark, because you're not very—it's not something you speak about?

So, somehow this play gave me a voice, I felt. In the process, like what they said, I don't know if we can help anybody with it. I'm happy that you said we can help people, who *can help* those who are affected, and I'm just really honoured to be given an opportunity to do so, and I think Oliver has really really helped us through this process. He has really been extremely, extremely wonderful—

SK: Patient.

ES: And patient, yes, very patient. Extremely wonderful in looking out for us in this process and everyone else in the cast.

(...)

Ellison Tan Yuyang (ET): I was just talking to Siti the other day and I was just telling her, I don't know how people trust us as actors to do this. Like, (we had two months of rehearsals, how do you) trust that we can do this well? How can the audience sit through two and a half

⁷ Name of the lead male character in *Off Centre*.

⁸ Abbreviation for Obsessive-compulsive Disorder.

hours and believe in us for that two and a half hours, that we are who we are on stage? I think that as a person and as a practitioner, this has taught me to never ever take this faith that the audience has in us for granted, as well as our co-actors. And also, that it's very easy to just reduce people's pain, and people's sorrow. Just try to be nice *lah*. Yeah. I'm very rude so I will try to be less rude in the future.

Myra Loke (ML): Personally, it's quite personal [laughter]. But...

KT: You don't have to say if you don't want to, okay? You don't have to. No pressure.

ML: I guess this is the first time that some of my co-actors and some of my friends would hear this, but personally I've been diagnosed with bipolar depression. So it is kind of like a revisit and also, uhm—cause, during the rehearsal process there are a lot of times where Oliver would question us, and stuff like that. I mean nicely *lah*. [laughter] It helps me to revisit and to face it because—I mean, the reason why most people don't know is because maybe a part of me didn't want people to know? And I guess it helps me and helps, I hope... Yeah, I'll be able to face it I guess. [laughter]

Joshua Lim (JL): Um, this play, um, not a very big change, I think, but it made me realise how actually I'm unable to care as much as I would like to? Or as much as what the world thinks people should do?

Um, okay. Nobody has heard this before also, [audience laughter] but my mom is... I'm slowly losing my mom to, uh, mild cognitive, um, impairment. And I just realised how... I turn away from helping. And... it's like, society—we stare or we laugh at these people. We turn away, I don't know.

I think everyone is... All of us are on a spectrum, actually, and it's not like... Maybe we're all just people. Some people are just more... For example, weight. Some people are just heavier, some people... So, in terms of mental health, some people are just more healthy than others! You know, so acceptance from society, from whatever... And then because this question is for myself, what I have discovered, so that's what I have discovered. I've discovered that I'm not as good as I thought I would be. But hopefully it ignites something in myself and perhaps anyone over here.

As what the gentleman over there also mentioned, it's also for the caregiver. Well, this term is very familiar to me because—wow, this is really like confession. My dad was also diagnosed with cancer a few years ago, and you know, the term caregiver, my mom was already his caregiver and during that time, I also just turned away and got caught up with my university studies and I used that unknowingly, now, perhaps on hindsight, unknowingly I just used that as an excuse to stay away from home and stuff like that.

So hopefully it creates an awareness within myself and people will come in contact with the script and perhaps watch this show, thank you.

THE STUDIOS: *fifty*
Off Centre (2015): Post Show Dialogue
23 April 2015, Esplanade Theatre Studio

OC: Okay, just want to share something. *Off Centre* is not just about mental patients. It's also about people who are less privileged as well. And I think, in no way is there in the writing nor in this production, that *Off Centre* is calling out to people to ask for you to sympathise with them. It's not about that. It's empathy that we are asking for.

KT: Thank you for all that, I mean, it's not meant to be like an Opera moment, right, but I think what struck me very much in the piece was that this is Singapore, and Haresh⁹ was writing about a small piece of Singapore life, 20 years ago. And to him, it was very strong and very prevalent, this presence of people, and I cannot—we cannot just see people with mental illness. It's just people, and they're Singaporeans, and really, they're around us all the time. I think what is very tragic, in that sense, is that it's... We can't watch this and go, "Oh it's different now, and that's the tragedy of living in Singapore," or, "That's the tragedy of the human race and humanity." I don't know how you all feel about this. But is there anything that you want to—you know... Yes yes?

JL: Actually I'm quite struck that this seems to be more relevant today than 22 years ago. It just shows how much progress we have made since then.

[Ebi laughs]

KT: I mean, there is that moment where a chance of rehabilitation—I mean... quick poll: would you give a job (to someone) who was from IMH, or would you give (it to) a person who has a former conviction thing?

Who would give a job to the ex-convict?

Who would give a job to the ex-IMH person, with or without this play you've seen?

The rest of us are not sure because we actually are not sure then what the differences would be, right? Because of the prejudices I think, and I don't know whether during the piece itself there were moments where we just felt ... That's just, you know, that's just all in their head, literally, and they can think for themselves...

(...)

Audience 2 (A2): Just picking up on prejudices in modern Singapore, I do think that some things have changed, slowly, but surely. For example, insurance nowadays, medical insurance, they are starting to cover psychiatric insurance as well. I was privileged to talk to someone in the child guidance clinic in IMH, and they're saying that they will keep very (inaudible) closely with the SAF¹⁰ to actually link up their services with the SAF so that the boys that are going into the service, they are flagged out, they know who they are, and so that they can be transferred to the "lighter" services. So I think that things are slowly changing, but of course mindsets are hardest to break. I hope that my sharing this, you get a sense that things are moving, slowly, but still moving.

⁹ Haresh Sharma. Resident playwright of Singapore theatre company The Necessary Stage. He wrote *Off Centre*.

¹⁰ Abbreviation for Singapore Armed Forces.

KT: Thank you, thank you for that. I suppose changing the mindset should be the key phrase. I think that's also the responsibility of theatre making? Often we claim that we enjoy going to the theatre, we have a passion for it, it's changed my life, it's made my—I guess sometimes it's a matter of taking another step forward and saying, "Okay, then what do I do then with what I've seen?"

We know of little plays that happen on the border, let's say this is just a really strange but true situation where on the border of Thailand, in small villages, they have forum theatre run by small little village people. They do it at the bus station to prevent parents from sending their daughters into prostitution to Bangkok. So they do this sort of theatre in little, little bus stations to try to change parents' minds about how they should not sell their children to prostitution. And that's very far away from what we have, right, where we are right now. Or is it *not*, you see? So I guess, in some ways, as a practitioner with my colleagues here, the challenge then for you all as an audience, cause I guess it's only a post-show dialogue, right, I guess what do you take with you to move on, you know. I guess it has come to a point where we can't just sit and say, "Okay, sorted." It's something else as well.

(...) It is very late and we are very appreciative that you all stayed on and I think the cast here is going to have to take a final bow. Please give them a round of applause.
