

Making A Scene: Pathways for Chinese Language Theatre in Singapore

Gua Khee

Welcome to *Making a Scene*, an Esplanade podcast on how art gets made. I'm Chong Gua Khee, a theatre director and performance-maker, and today's conversation will focus on pathways for Chinese language theatre in Singapore through speaking to three local Artistic Directors of companies that are presenting work at the upcoming *Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts*.

First up, we have Oliver Chong of The Finger Players, who is also the Playwright, Director and Set Designer of *Transplant*. Hi Oliver.

Oliver

Hi. [laughs a bit]

Gua Khee

Koh Hui Ling of Drama Box, who is co-Artistic Director with Han Xuemei, and co-directing *The Dog Who Wasn't Useful* with Isabella Chiam for *Huayi*. Hi Hui Ling.

Hui Ling

Hi Gua Khee. [laughs]

Gua Khee

And, finally, wrapping up the power trio, Nelson Chia of Nine Years Theatre, who is the Playwright and Director of *Everything for You*. Hi Nelson.

Nelson

Hi everybody.

Gua Khee

Lovely. So, as someone who has worked with all three companies in one capacity or another and also followed all your works for many years, I think what is really interesting for me are your companies' shifting relationships with Chinese language theatre. So just to set some context for our listeners, Nine Years Theatre, which sort of started in 2012 with *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf*, also presented at *Huayi* actually, has from the very beginning been very clear about your interest in being a major player in the Singapore Mandarin theatre scene - so the writeup about your work notes that Nine Years Theatre is "currently the only company under NAC's major funding scheme that positions itself as a Singapore Mandarin theatre company". At the same time, it feels like [where] Nine Years Theatre used to have a brand of presenting classics in Mandarin, your focus in recent years has shifted to creating more original writing in Mandarin, starting from *First Fleet* in 2019, to *Electrify My World* in 2021, and of course *Between You and Me* in 2022, at last year's *Huayi*.

In comparison, for both The Fingers Players, founded in 1999, and Drama Box, founded in 1990, while Mandarin theatre was actually a core part of your identities, in the past decade, both companies have actually shifted away from the label of Chinese language theatre companies, and instead focused more on other aspects of your work. So in the case of The Finger Players, it's been about (and again I quote from the company's website), "fusing traditional and contemporary puppetry elements, and integrating other artistic disciplines into [your] visually-arresting productions" - although you do still present a number of works in Mandarin, such as *Every Brilliant Thing* at *Huayi* in both 2022 and 2023. As for Drama Box, it seems that your focus has really been about growing (and again I quote) as a "socially-engaged theatre

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company known for creating works that inspire dialogue, reflection and change”, and actually a lot of your recent works have tended to be in English or multilingual rather than Mandarin alone.

So that’s a very dense but also a very condensed overview for our listeners, and I think the main point to take away is really that all 3 companies have had a very nuanced relationship with Chinese language theatre over the years. As such, the first question that I’d like to pose to all 3 of you is - given *Huayi*’s focus as Esplanade’s Chinese Festival of Arts, how do you currently see your broader relationship with Chinese language theatre, either personally or from your company’s standpoint, if that’s slightly different, and how has that actually informed your work for the upcoming *Huayi* in terms of genre, style, or any other aspects? What are your thoughts?

Nelson

Okay, I think for Nine Years Theatre, as Gua Khee mentioned earlier, we kind of just realised recently, I think last year or this year onwards, as we were doing our strategic review, moving forward for the company, that under the NAC Major Grants scheme, we are the only company that positions ourselves as a Singapore Mandarin Theatre Company. Now, of course, the question is then what does that mean, and why is it significant for us, especially when I see the other companies are actually moving away from that label?

Again, we could say that these are just labels, but I think for Nine Years Theatre, where we’re coming from is- you know, from my encounters with a lot of international counterparts, especially regional partners in Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau, even Malaysia, Indonesia, I’ve realised that Singapore Chinese culture is really unique, at least to me. Because of our multiculturalism, right, and the word ‘multi’ in multiculturalism only makes sense to me meaningfully when all the individual ethnic identit[ies] are strong enough- has a strong foundation. I almost see it like a kind of Southeast Asian house, on stilts in a way, so that all these individual foundations need to be strong and hence colourful in themselves. So that when they come and interact with one another, the true ‘multi’ kind of nature will blossom in a way. Otherwise, sometimes we may just become different, but not really multi. That’s how I look at it.

So in the Singapore context, I feel that if Nine Years Theatre can do our part to sort of enhance and to strengthen the multicultural identity of Singaporean Chinese in a way through theatre, through our art, then that’s probably what we should continue doing, in a sense. So that when our production goes out into the international arena, we will be distinct and unique from any kind of Chinese language production from Hong Kong, Taiwan, the region and China, and hence, the Singaporean brand or label will then be recognized as distinct when compared to all these international counterparts. Yeah.

Gua Khee

That’s really interesting. I’m curious then how this idea of the ‘Chineseness’ within the multiculturalism feeds into the way you then approached *Everything For You* actually.

Nelson

Mhm yeah. *Everything For You* is the title of the production [laughs] that’s going to be in *Huayi* festival. This is a sort of a second installation of these original Mandarin works that we’re doing with *Huayi* festival, the first one being *Between You And Me* two years ago. So, for us, the multicultural sense comes from the fact that we speak a very unique Singaporean kind of Mandarin that is peppered with a lot of English and our colonial influences, our other cultures, you know, the Malay, the Tamil cultures, and our dialect cultures as well. Right? And also characters that come from all ethnic backgrounds. Yeah. Of course, you can say that that’s kind

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of a superficial level, but I feel that it is important in our effort to tell Singaporean stories on the stage as a Mandarin theatre company - I see that has been done a lot actually, in the English theatre scene. But what we hope to do this time around is to begin consolidating the new narratives and new Singapore stories for our Mandarin theatre, moving ahead.

Gua Khee

So I hear that the exploration is really more in terms of the Singaporean Chinese stories. And actually, in the storyline itself, there [are] also hints of different cultures mixing as well right? And I'm not going to do any spoilers [laughs], but the idea of the relationships that we have with people who are non-Chinese as well, something like that?

Nelson

Yes, definitely, I think the interaction is important. And to be really honest, I think one of the characters in the play said that, you know, what we are trying to achieve here is racist harmony in a way, right, because we're all racist in a certain way. Not in a bad way, but we all have our own ethnic background and our baggages, you know, and that is how we will position ourselves when we interact with all the other cultures, and we need to recognise that. That's how I feel. Yeah. Thanks.

Gua Khee

I think that segues nicely into Hui Ling and Drama Box's work actually, because I think Drama Box has really been leaning into that multiculturalism and multilingualism right, that a lot of the works have quite consciously been playing with different languages. Is that something that you want to share more about?

Hui Ling

Mhm. I think something slightly different with Nelson is that he's the founding artistic director for Nine Years whereas you know, I 'inherited' [laughs] it [Drama Box] as we continue on. So I think for a company that is like 30 years old, in the beginning years, it [Drama Box] was very focused on how the company began in terms of how Heng Leun and his friends came together from the NUS Mandarin theatre CCA to form the group. I think over the years, as we have been working in the public spheres, the community is not isolated to just being Chinese. I mean, we did a lot of public performances just purely in Mandarin, but we realised that we also were cutting off a very other big section of the audiences who were there passing by, and they want to engage with the work, but they are unable to understand fully.

So as we started moving on, working more with the community in co-creating the work itself, then we realised the beauty of the diversity. So I actually echo what Nelson says about, you know, because I myself am a Chinese, so I embrace my Chineseness and I think Drama Box, what we do is the looking at two things - the intersections of different things and as well as the gaps. So by the intersections, I think our approach towards the exploration is that me being a Chinese and then being in this larger community of diversity, of different background[s], cultural understandings and beliefs, you know, what is that communication, or the conversations that we can have, *because* we are different. And then it allows us to bridge understanding, or try to find other ways in terms of, you know, not just looking at differences, but also looking at similarities as well. So I think that's where, you know, Drama Box comes in, into looking at, you know, this beautiful myriad of diversity, and then trying to make sense of it all.

And just now I mentioned about gaps, because our practice is very much based on the philosophy of Theatre of the Oppressed and Pedagogy of the Oppressed, I feel, so many of the

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times we look at the places or people that [other] people seldom look at. So I think, between even Xuemei and myself now, I think that is an area that we will constantly be looking at, you know, are there certain communities or people that have been overlooked, or certain places that have been forgotten? And then we would use theatre as the form itself to bring this to light, so that more people can share it and spend some attention on that particular place, community or topic. Yeah. So I think that's how then we have segued, in a way besides the language itself, you know, into more concerns about the general environment around us. Yeah.

And I think that's also why I think this time round - a kids' show, which I've never ever done, honestly, yeah. Because I've always been working with teenagers, secondary school and above, for the longest time, but not for kids. So it was quite interesting for me, because it's something that I have not done before. And I got this opportunity to step into a new arena that I have not dealt with. And I think it's also a very different group of audiences that you're creating for. So the pitching of the languages, the design, because we're [Drama Box] very into participation right, so the design of the participation is also something that we can afford the time to really think about it. And I think also then working with a larger group of very good freelance practitioners out there, who actually have spent time looking into Theatre for Young Audiences, so like [we are] working with Isabella [Chiam] this time around as a co-director, so I think that is the excitement for me this time around in exploring a totally new arena and a new target audience.

Gua Khee

So I think with Drama Box's work, there's always been a lot of collaboration with practitioners and other disciplines as well. And I think that's something that feels very strong from The Finger Players' work in recent years, that there's been a lot of collaboration both locally and internationally, most recently with Joe Louis Puppet Theatre in Thailand. And for your work with *Huayi*, there's also going to be a collaboration with RUDRA. How does this feed into the way you think about Chinese language theatre and how does that feed into this particular work?

Oliver

Mhm. Perhaps I want to go back to your very first question, which is [a] very difficult question to answer - the broader aspects of Chinese language theatre in Singapore, and what about that, right? Because in The Finger Players, we have many different creators, so we function more like a collective. So the language that each creator chooses to use is up to the creators, which language is most comfortable for each individual creators. So for myself, I would prefer the Chinese language, and therefore I'm doing the Chinese language. For people like [Chong] Tze Chien, he might choose to do English language, so then it is up to the creator. So it's not really language specific to begin with, it is more just like what language do we prefer.

But personally, because of my more Chinese language theatre background, I have always been reflecting a lot about the Chinese language in the Singaporean context. I would choose to ignore or deny that I or Singaporeans do have an accent, but actually, we do have an accent. After having enough experience with people from China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Malaysia, Macau, in the region, I've come to accept that we really do have an accent. People like us, practitioners, we work with languages, so we thought that we would be more neutral, or more 'accurate', what we like to think, right, but actually, yeah, we do have an accent. And the nuances in the language is all coming from this multiculturalism of Singapore, like what Nelson was saying.

So coming back to the recent years, Finger Players doing more collaboration with people who are non-Chinese language based, it's not coming from a language standpoint, it's more coming from a 'working with these different disciplines'. Like Joe Louis, they are a traditional puppetry

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company. So I see a very nice crossover and meaningful crossover, when we [The Finger Players] are actually a contemporary puppetry theatre company. And then from RUDRA, because they are heavy metal, Vedic heavy metal, right? Something that's very original. And I thought a collaboration with them would be very interesting and inspiring when we are doing stories that are inspired from *Liaozhai*, which is [a] more classic piece of work. So the work is called *Transplant* right? So metal bands [and *Liaozhai*], how do you even put these two very unlikely components together? That's something that is very interesting and scary at the same time. So that's the challenge I put upon myself for this *Huayi*.

Gua Khee

I think what I really appreciate from what the three of you have shared so far, is really the sense that there is both the kind of companies' positioning, but also the very personal stakes in, I guess, both the language and also what the language relates to in terms of the larger culture and what is the, in a way, the Singaporean society that we want to see, right?

And I guess I'm then curious to probe a little bit more about this idea of the potential new pathways right, Hui Ling, you spoke about how this is really the very first time you're working with TYA and for Oliver, you're talking about how this is a very new collaboration in terms of thinking about *Liaozhai*, right, that you have actually done work around *Liaozhai* before, but I think this is the first time that it's been kind of like cross-cultural collaboration. And I guess for Nelson, it sounds like this idea of the Singaporean story is also something that is newer for you, and for Nine Years Theatre. How do you think each of these different threads of exploration is potentially a new way for people to engage with Chinese language theatre in Singapore?
Nelson?

Nelson

For me, I am anxious about the fact that the Singaporean Chinese culture, the multicultural identity of Singaporean Chinese is not very recognised and definitely not celebrated enough in the region and well, almost internationally as well. So I think we're so unique that we need to start to look at this very unique culture carefully and intentionally. So, for us, sort of consolidating what I call a kind of a new Singapore repertoire moving forward, it is important for us, you know, to tell our stories, our concerns about our society, about living with other races, our food, our government, all kinds of things. So that is for me, how I see Nine Years Theatre moving forward, using this as one of our genres moving forward.

I am also very concerned about the future, about artists creating in the Singaporean Mandarin [theatre scene], be it as a writer or director, and definitely actors. So when thinking about that, I sometimes feel that there is, in fact, a crisis. I'm not sure if I can call it a crisis, maybe I can, because I'm such a heavy stakeholders in the business in a way. And I realised that if, in 10 years', 20 years' time, if a lot of these companies, including Drama Box, Finger Players, Nine Years Theatre and many more, if we are gone, you know, will someone else be doing this work? So I think Nine Years Theatre, what we intend to do moving forward is to create our own actors, create our own creators, and definitely audience. So like Hui Ling said, something we have never done before. So going forward, I think Nine Years we're gonna try to start kind of like a young company. So there are many young companies in the Singapore theatre scene, but mostly in English, or multicultural in fact, but none specifically in Mandarin. So what we're trying to do is to groom actors who are confident enough and competent enough to perform in Mandarin, and [in] a Singaporean Mandarin way. So that's one.

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And secondly, we are also going into Theatre for Young Audience[s], how young? I don't know, maybe even to the nursery [level], we will try, we will try, to see where that gets us. The intention is to develop our own audience - young audience[s] who are confident to step into theatre to watch a play maybe largely in Mandarin, of course, in other languages as well, you know, to not to say that 'huh Mandarin theatre ah, I'm scared, you know, I may not understand, are there surtitles'. Yes, there are. [laughs] You know, so we need to start developing our audience for the future as well. Creators are a bit more difficult, because of the command of the language. So people writing in a Chinese language are difficult [to groom] or directing in the language is difficult to groom, so we don't have a lot of time, and I'm anxious about that and I'm concerned. So that's the work we would like to do going forward.

Gua Khee

What's really important is that all these different pathways are not like, 'oh, Nine Years is only doing one thing', you know, 'Drama Box or Finger Players is just doing one thing', but really, there are multiple possibilities for each company right. And what I'm hearing is that there is both that desire to create in a way a Singapore Chinese language 'canon', at some point right, as well as to kind of think about developing audiences from young and this reminds me actually of what Teater Ekamatra has been doing earlier this year, where they did an entire series called 'Creating Malay Language Theatre for Young Audiences', where they were getting practitioners from TYA to be running workshops for other people within the scene as a way of building the capacity - precisely what you're [Nelson] talking about right - for people to then start thinking about ah, what might Malay language TYA look like? I know that Nine Years has always focused a lot on actor education, and it sounds like the TYA or the youth wing is also one angle in there, are there also other plans in terms of other kinds of capacity development?

Nelson

Yes, also in terms of our actor training, which we have been doing for the past 10, 11 years. It is about time that we will try to consolidate and even start to document them into something that is unique, not only to Nine Years Theatre, but to Singapore, in a way. So how do we train Singaporean actors for the Singapore stage? So that's the work that I need to start doing. Finding time to do that, to write them [the learnings] down, to consolidate into a document. And further on, if we can, to develop the kind of pedagogy in teaching all these [actor training] works. So I think moving into the next 10 years, it is about time to consolidate all this knowledges and share it with a larger sphere of people.

Gua Khee

And I guess, with Oliver, thinking about The Finger Players, I would say that The Finger Players is actually in the middle of a lot of change and consolidation in some ways, right, with the shift from a solo artistic director to thinking about a board of artistic team members and I suppose a rotating cast of artistic directors. How do you think about your upcoming term with The Finger Players, and how does this feed into again, the idea of potential new pathways for Chinese language theatre in Singapore?

Oliver

We are not really thinking too much about the Chinese language as a company, but as an individual artist, I do. I think the sensibilities in the language that is Singaporean Chinese is something that is very interesting and challenging at the same time to manage because in the language, it reveals a lot about how this group of people think, right, by using that language, and then what is the Singaporean Chinese language is something that is very difficult to grasp. Because we are [a] very young country, and because we are multicultural, and of course there

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is the end of the spectrum way of interpreting this right, you can be very campy, Singaporean Chinese. It is not just that, like how Singlish is often camped, right, it is like 'oh, there's a *li la lo leh*, and then that's Singaporean'. But it is not just that. We Singaporeans, we know. And if we zoom into the Chinese language itself, that becomes even more difficult. How can we speak in a Singaporean Chinese language that Singaporeans can be proud of? And not think of it as [a] very lowly, cheap, non-cultured way of speaking. Because we did not even design that way of speaking our Chinese language, it has evolved over time and with our culture, with our growth as a nation.

Gua Khee

Yeah, this is making me think about your transcreation of *Every Brilliant Thing* by Duncan Macmillan with Jonny Donahoe, that was something that you adapted for *Huayi* in 2022 and 2023. And I think having watched it in English, I was pleasantly surprised by how local you made it feel. I think a lot of friends actually thought it was original writing because they didn't know that it was an adaptation. And I think that speaks to the success with which you were able to localise a lot of the references and be able to also deliver in a way that felt very authentically Singaporean, maybe that's something that you could speak a little bit more about, like what was your process in creating that particular work right, as a way of thinking about Chinese language theatre.

Oliver

Er... just be myself? Yeah, just be myself and be sincere about telling the story without thinking too much about the language I suppose, because of my background, I think it was easier. I do not need to try too hard to speak in that manner, because I'm really speaking as myself. So that was really what was going through my mind in terms of language.

Gua Khee

Nelson, would you like to say something?

Nelson

Because we are a young country, we are finding our way in terms of what is Singaporean Chinese-ness or a multicultural identity of Singaporean Chinese. So we are in the making, in a way, right? The fact that- the very fact that we're talking about this in English over here, right? There's nothing right or wrong, but the fact that we are doing it in English over here trying to talk about Chinese language theatre is unique. It is unique. It might not be even a discussion if we are people from Hong Kong or China or Taiwan on all these things. So the fact that I have to consider how to use surtitling in my production, what kind of language, do I want to keep it classical or kind of more localised, in a way, and to even consider that *is* also unique to us. The fact that we have to consider translation or transcreation, even in our program booklet, is unique to us.

Hui Ling

What Nelson just said inspired something or rather reminded something I felt when doing the current work with *The Dog Who Wasn't Useful* was that I realised when working with TYA, or Chinese TYA, sometimes the idea of education comes in, can you teach them a word or a phrase? You know, teach them a 成语 (cheng yu), you know, an idiom, can we teach them?

I enjoy watching TYA plays a lot, it's just that I don't create any, until now [laughs]. So when watching the others, I don't feel the baggage of having to teach something, but I think other Chinese-based TYAs right, there's this baggage of like maybe we can teach them a certain

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word so that they can learn this word. Then when they go home, you know, this is something great that, you know, they take away from it. So I think this idea of eh when you create a work, you still have to think of what I'm teaching them, or what they're taking away in terms of the word learning itself, is very fascinating to me. Yeah.

So that was something I think that has happened in the course of creating this current work itself, somehow I think we started thinking, eh maybe we put in some 成语 (idioms), then it sounds very *cheem* [complex], you know, then the kids can learn then quite fun. It's [*The Dog Who Wasn't Useful*] a very simple podcast, actually my son was listening to it, I found the story really funny, but also very meaningful. And I talked to Isabella about it, so we got the permission, we got to adapt the story into Mandarin language, which of course, the original creator, a Canadian, does not understand. So I mean, thank him for the trust in that. But yeah, when we're translating it, or rather adapting it to the Mandarin language, when we had to put the script together- It happens on the farm, so there is obviously a farmer, and then I decided to let the farmer speak with more 成语 in his language when he talks. I just think it's very cute and funny because we just assume that farmers are like, you know, aiyah they're not educated or whatever, you know, but it's kind of cute to do that?

And then we started thinking, yeah, maybe we should let the children learn a bit more. Okay, like, can they understand? So the linguistic ability, like what Nelson talked about, like how the newer and younger generation, maybe their capacity or ability to process the language, be it listening to it, writing in it, talking. That becomes a very conscious consideration when we had to do this work for this TYA audiences. You know, can they understand? Is it too *cheem*? You know, do we need to water it down a little bit? You know, and why do we want to water it down? Why do we need to make it easier? You know. But if it's too *cheem*, they cannot understand, then where do we - you know? So all these are very interesting conflicts. But yeah, I really wonder why as Chinese language [practitioners] that we have this baggage that we have to teach the language, as part of a theatre practitioner's work, you know.

Gua Khee

To broaden the discussion, it's really not just about Chinese language theatre right, I think just anything that is not in English has a little bit more of a baggage. So [Rolypoly Family](#) created this piece called *Letters Come Alive!*, which is, I guess, finding different letters in the architecture, and it's a dance, dance theatre performance, sort of. But recently, they also created a version called *Gerak ABC*. And there's an invitation to the audiences to learn new Malay vocabulary through the piece. And that was not as evident in the English version of the piece, right? The English version is really about just playing with the letters, playing with imagination, how I don't know- how might you pronounce the word 'aztlc' or whatever, right? And then people are just kind of like, oh, it's a nonsensical word. So you're *playing* with the language. But the Malay version [feels] really about [introducing], this is a vocabulary 'duduk', right, 'd for *duduk*', like 'sitting down'.

So I think there is something there about the nature of Singapore's multicultural fabric, and yet the very prominent place of English? I mean, the choice to record this podcast in English was also precisely to try and open up the conversation beyond just people who, you know, might go for *Huayi* or people who are interested in Chinese language theatre, but really to think about, how *are* we navigating all these other languages in the kind of theatre and the kind of arts that we do? I'm just thinking a lot about how a lot of children's books in Singapore now are really playing with Singaporean stories, Singaporean motifs, maybe a little bit of Singaporean

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language, and that also feels like an exciting pathway that, you know, in future, it might not be TYA adapted from a Canadian writer, right, but just really adapting local Chinese or local other language books for the stage.

And so maybe this brings me to the question that I would like to wrap up today's conversation with, which is, for each of you, what are your hopes and desires for Chinese language theatre in Singapore, whatever that means to you, and actually, what else do you think *Huayi* or other stakeholders in the art scene can do to really support these hopes for Chinese language theatre in Singapore? Hui Ling?

Hui Ling

At Drama Box, we work a lot with young people, so we're always thinking about, you know, I share the considerations Nelson had when he, or rather, now that he's gonna start his, you know, youth wing and the TYA work, that we need to give space because it takes a lot of time. Like the decisions we make here, we'll only be seeing the results in the next 10, 15 years.

But I also think that there is a huge group of people that we tend to forget, and that is the people who came before us. Yeah, so I do feel a lot of emotion, when I see a lot of our very, very good theatre actors and practitioners who are so fluent, not just in the language itself, but I think fully understanding the cultural context. I think that is more important or interesting for me in the Chinese language per se, or the Chinese-ness of who we are, and also very, very talented in their craft, and not having enough spaces to perform, such that we, as the next generation of theirs, get to watch it.

So if you were to ask me, I think while we are busy building and making decisions for the next 10 years, I think it will be wonderful if we are able to see more interactions, or bigger scale works in the Chinese language itself. That's my personal wish as an audience to watch, right? To have a larger scale theatre performances? And I say larger scale, because I think sometimes we do need that scale. And I mean, by the 10, 20 cast size, then you can have a very beautiful mix of the veterans right, with the younger, up and coming practitioners. Because I mean, actually, the three of us knew each other, especially me and Nelson, watching Kuo Pao Kun direct the veteran actors. And I think for me to sit in rehearsal to see how they work was very fascinating. So I feel that in current days, when we are doing our creation, we kind of lack that space. And actually the patience to just sit and watch a director work with a veteran actor and me just being one of the ensemble at the back, a grass or something. Yeah. So I really hope, or personally, I benefited a lot, I made a lot of friends from those times. And I really hope that we are able to see such performances come again, where there is a really great interaction and co-learning, from the veterans from the young people, as well as the young people from the veterans. I would love to see that yeah, so calling up to [laughs] *Huayi*, 'hello, hello', to do something like that? Yeah, I feel that we shouldn't forget this very wonderful group of people before us.

Gua Khee

That's a lovely hope, I'm thinking about Nine Years Theatre and *Red Sky* in 2016...

Nelson

Yes, stemming from what Hui Ling is saying. You [Hui Ling] are very right, I am concerned about people being left behind. Also, the fact that Nine Years is working with Esplanade, with *Huayi* festival to create this, hopefully, it goes a bit further and longer, kind of a series of Singaporean work is also because I realised that a lot of the older generation audience, they're

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not coming back to theatre anymore. And the younger one is a bit apprehensive sometimes coming in. So we're trying to create some more accessible works, good quality, accessible works to encourage people to come into the theatre, to recognise and again, I say recognise and celebrate the Singaporean Chinese-ness, in a way, together with all the multicultural aspects of our identity, so that more people will enjoy theatre, and coming into the theatre.

Since *Red Sky* and *Between You and Me* that we did two years ago, I have audiences coming to feedback to us that 'oh finally there is something that I can bring my parents to', in a way, and I want people to bring their family and their friends to come to the theatre and watching us, and then from there, they start to learn that oh there are also many, many different kinds of works created by all our local companies, and then they can enjoy even more works from there. Yeah.

If I may just also go back to a little bit of what I mentioned just now, I said that, for Singapore Mandarin works or Chinese language work, we use- we consider the use of subtitles and that is unique to us. But also we understand that there are- there are other works around the region, Macau and Hong Kong, they also use surtitling, and even in Macau, they use surtitles for Portuguese languages, right? [But] for them, they are catering to some minority people who speak Portuguese, or there are English-speaking people in the audience. But in Singapore, I don't think we're catering to minorities. I'm catering to a large part of my audience who do not speak the Mandarin language well or not at all. You know?

And it becomes trickier moving forward that we have a lot of new immigrants nowadays in our community, and we have to factor in how to collaborate and how to include them. Like Oliver say, do we have an accent? Yes, we do. And our Chinese accent sounds a bit different from the mainland new immigrants? And how do we negotiate that? That is another question moving forward - we should not be segregating, we should find a new way, there's a new Singapore moving forward. And then also about the Malaysian accent, how does that feature in our work in the future? So the question becomes bigger, bigger- bigger and bigger and more and more interesting. That's why I said we are still very young in the exploration, we have a lot to offer.

But first and foremost, Singaporeans need to realise that. They need to realise that they need to fight for the multicultural identity of Singaporean Chinese. So that's what I have for the future of Chinese language theatre, that we need to start to recognise the very different kind of levels and- and colours in the use of the Chinese language together with the other ethnic languages. For the fact that Oliver said, it's not just the li la lo and all these things. For me, that is what? That is localisation. What we are trying to do is to Singaporeanise it, right, not- not to just localise for- for entertainment effect, in a way, but to Singaporeanise it.

And that takes a kind of a larger perspective in the sense that we also have people in Singapore who speaks very good Mandarin, and who can handle very classical text. And then we have those who are very neutral, very nice-sounding, we have those who are very localised, we have those who speak like all of us, you know, I'll slip into English, I codeswitch, you know, and all those things and I speak to my daughters in Mandarin, they will answer me back in English, and then I'll force them to tell me what they're trying to say in Mandarin again, and back and forth. And that's how a Singaporean Chinese family interacts most of the time, and that should be special to our- to us and- and to what- who we are.

Oliver

I'm still thinking a lot about what Hui Ling was talking about just now, that we have that pressure of wanting to teach them the language, like the idioms, like to value-add as if the theatre piece

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itself is not enough, right, this pressure comes for all mother tongue theatres, I think, like you [Gua Khee] were also talking about. So I guess this is something that we need to work together (on), not only just us as artists, and also commissioners like Esplanade, *Huayi*, would also need to work together with us, to understand that we are actually aiming for something even higher, deeper than just the language itself. It is the sensibilities behind the language, the worldview. I guess, going back to the baggage again, this baggage that this generation, us four sitting here, have, because we have seen the olden days, right. But those are days gone, and will never ever come back, right?

And then moving forward, because we know that all this language reveals that worldview of the different ethnic groups in Singapore, and then placing them together on this small island, that's so beautiful, but if everything were to become English, English, right, and then that that nuances, that- the different shades of greys in this nation will be gone, and therefore that baggage, and then that baggage will also come together hand-in-hand with the pressure that the platform has given us, telling us that our mother tongue is not enough, we have to value add it by teaching the language itself as well. So to answer your question, the hopes that I have in the future, so I hope that a nice and meaningful platform like *Huayi* would go on for years and years, to also celebrate not only the Singaporean Chinese but also the Singaporean Malay, Tamil and all other CIMOs right. We always say CIMO in a negative light, but actually, it is beautiful - if we can understand them more than just on the surface of just that language, and then teaching that language is more than that. It lies more than skin deep.

Gua Khee

Yeah, I think what feels important is recognising that there are worlds within worlds, right? When you talk about CMIO, then within Chinese-ness, there are so many different worlds of Chinese.

I think there are so many threads that I feel like we could continue to kind of pull out and probe deeper, but I guess what I would like to leave this conversation with is really thinking about the beauty of this idea of like the worlds within worlds. And I think also the reminder that we are not alone, I think I *am* still very conscious of the Singapore Chinese Language Theatre Alliance that kind of emerged in 2015, and, you know, did a New Works Festival in 2019 - and that it's on hiatus now. But I think this idea that we don't always need to be in one collective body in order to work together, right? That in all your different capacities as companies, or as I suppose, as representatives of companies, because you are not the company, right, and also as just practitioners in your own right, that the different things that you're doing and thinking and talking to people about are different ways that can move towards that same path of really just finding a way to both anchor ourselves in this identity of, or to negotiate I suppose this identity of what it means to be Chinese and what Chinese language theatre in Singapore's contexts might be, while still being open and branching out and expanding to thinking about other races in Singapore and also other kinds of Chinese-ness within the world itself.

Nelson

Well, if I may add, for Nine Years Theatre, at least, we are always very careful that Chinese culture is the foundation of our work, but it's never the centre of our practice, right? I cannot speak for the other companies, but from my observation of all these other companies, I feel that we are all doing the same thing, you know. We are aware that we are not Chinese-centric, and we would like to negotiate, speak to, speak with and have a conversation with all the other ethnic cultures around us. And that is what I think, in a very concise way, what Singaporean Chinese is.

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Gua Khee

I'm thinking a lot about what Oliver said, 'just be myself'. Like, that *is* part of it, just recognising that Chineseness is part of the four of us as practitioners and therefore it inevitably colours the way we want to work and move in this world, and [also] that it's not the sole thing that guides us in how we want to move around. Thank you so much again, Nelson, Hui Ling, Oliver.

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