

Perspective Shift: The Transcendence of Language, Culture, Identity, and

Methodology in Singaporean Theatre

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Singapore, as a multicultural society, is characterized by its complex linguistic environment, comprising English, Chinese (Mandarin), Malay, Tamil, and their various dialectical offshoots. This linguistic diversity is further enriched by the emergence of Singaporean English (Singlish) and Singaporean Mandarin (Singdarin) over the past few decades, making it a quintessential example of linguistic fusion.

This diversity in language not only shapes daily communication in Singapore but also profoundly influences cultural and artistic expressions, particularly in theatre production and critique. Discussing "English theatre," "Chinese (Mandarin) theatre," "Malay theatre," or "Tamil theatre" within Singapore's multicultural and multilingual context undoubtedly presents intricate and challenging topics.

The Purity of Language is Long Gone

Take "Chinese" as an example: the term in Singapore can denote China, Chinese culture, Chinese ethnicity, or the Chinese languages. Therefore, in such a multicultural context, "Chinese (Mandarin) theatre" transcends mere linguistic concerns and touches upon complex issues of identity, cultural heritage, and social structure.

Since the 1980s, with the shifts in Singapore's language policies and the gradual professionalization of many theatre groups, an increasing number of theatre practitioners come from bilingual backgrounds (English and their mother tongue). Their evolving cultural identity and awareness have blurred the traditional language-based distinctions within theatre. Kuo Pao Kun's 1988 play, *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, was pioneering in its use of multiple languages on stage. The play depicted the communication gap between a mother who spoke only dialects and her children, featuring dialogues in Chinese (Mandarin), English, Malay, Tamil, and various Chinese dialects.



***Mama Looking For Her Cat* (Photo by Goh Bong Hiang, courtesy of The Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre)**

In this context, some argue that discussing "Chinese (Mandarin) theatre" in Singapore is a fallacy, as the multilingual capabilities of theatre practitioners have rendered linguistic boundaries obsolete—"Chinese (Mandarin) theatre has long ceased to exist." Others contend that, precisely because Mandarin is increasingly marginalized in Singapore, it is crucial to protect and develop Chinese (Mandarin) theatre.

Indeed, "pure" linguistic forms are rare in Singaporean theatre. Most creators are accustomed to blending and switching between languages (code-switching) in their works to reflect the multilingual reality of Singaporean society. Paradoxically, productions performed exclusively in standard Mandarin often spark debates or even controversies in Singapore: "Singaporeans don't speak like that." For example, Nine Years Theatre, founded in 2012, initially produced a series of works in standard Mandarin, attracting audiences but also igniting debates about the positioning and development of Chinese (Mandarin) theatre in Singapore. Other theatre groups, such as The Theatre Practice, The Finger Players, Drama Box, and Toy Factory Productions, continue to explore the representation of a multilingual environment within their artistic directions.

Seeking a Voice Amidst Multicultural Interweaving

In the realm of arts education, Singapore has begun exploring new positions for Chinese (Mandarin) theatre and Singaporean Theatre within its multicultural context.

For instance, the newly established Bachelor's Degree in Contemporary Chinese Theatre at Nanyang

Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA) is not merely about teaching the craft of Chinese (Mandarin) theatre. It also addresses the challenge of understanding and practicing Chinese theatre in Singapore's multicultural society. The curriculum includes courses on dialects and accents, as well as training in Taiji and traditional Chinese opera, emphasizing a return to the historical roots of Chinese physicality. It also involves the study and research of Southeast Asian traditional arts and intercultural theatre. The Theatre Training and Research Programme (now Intercultural Theatre Institute), co-founded by Kuo Pao Kun and T. Sasitharan, was also pioneering in integrating Asian traditional art forms with Western theatrical methods.

These initiatives represent an awakening and reassessment of Singaporean theatre's self-awareness: what unique advantages and challenges does Singaporean theatre education have compared to that of other regions? How can Singaporean theatre find its own voice amidst the interweaving of multiple cultures?

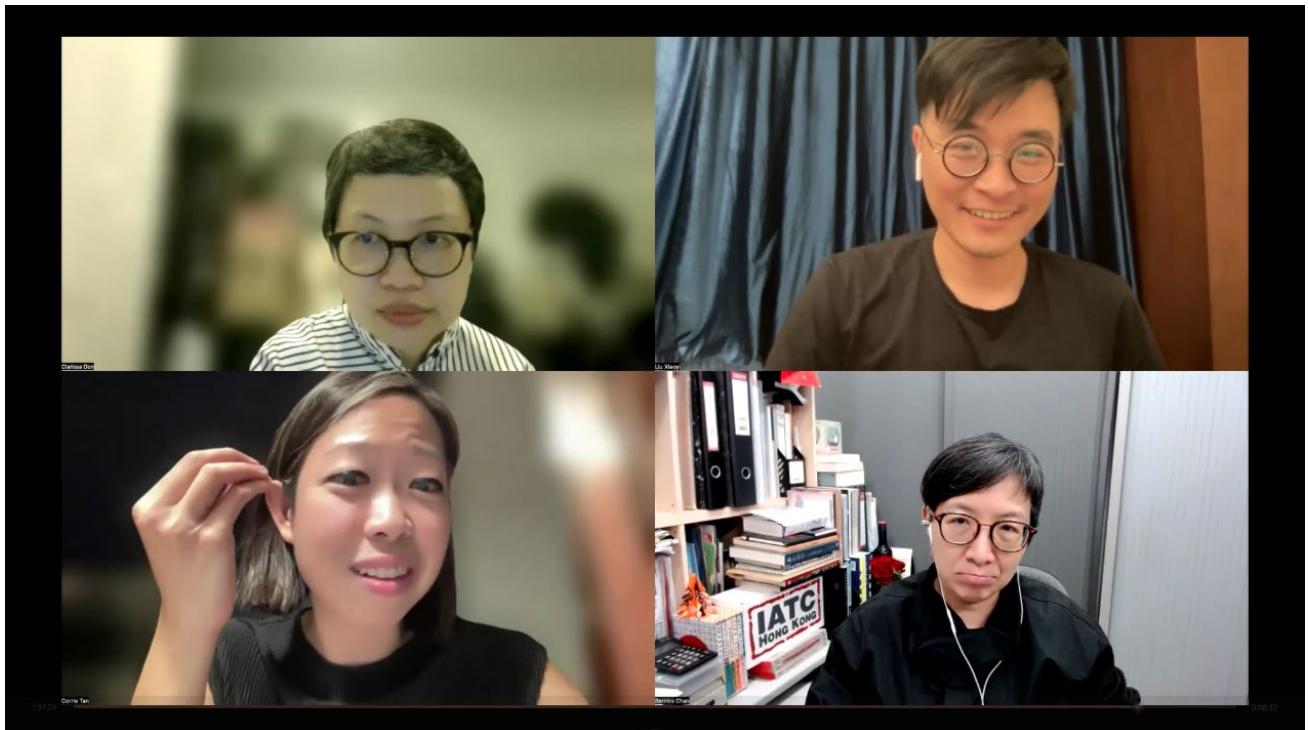
The Shifting Roles of Critics

The multilingual and multicultural environment also shapes Singapore's unique theatre criticism ecosystem. Imagine documenting and critiquing a performance in English that features other languages or multiple languages—how does one navigate the complexities of translation, interpretation, and power dynamics?

Singaporeans engage in constant cultural exchange within their daily interactions, frequently integrating the linguistic systems of their interlocutors. This linguistic exchange brings about a shift in perspective, which in turn inspires the crossing of identities and methodologies.

While the code-switching seen in spoken language is rarely replicated in written form, practices like translation of performances, subtitling, and the language choices in reviews and archival processes continue to challenge critics and researchers. Criticism is not merely an interpretation and judgment of artistic works; it is a complex dialogue that crosses different cultures, languages, and art forms.

This interwoven nature of Singaporean culture means that its art criticism often exhibits a notable "transcendence." Critics are not only observers of works but also play multiple roles—as translators, facilitators, dramaturgs, researchers, educators, and archivists. Through these roles, they deeply engage in the artistic creation process, forming a mutually enriching relationship with artists.



“Critic’s POV: Focusing on the Asia’s Contemporary Performing Arts – Singapore” speakers: Clarissa Oon (Top Left) and Corrie Tan (Bottom Left); the Moderator and Guest Curator: Liu Xiaoyi (Top Right); Bernice Kwok-wai Chan (Bottom Right) (Photo provided by International Association of Theatre Critics (Hong Kong))

The practice and research of Singaporean critic Corrie Tan blur and challenge the boundaries between creation and criticism. As a critic, Tan collaborates closely with artists, sometimes serving as a dramaturg and facilitator during rehearsals. Her approach demonstrates how criticism can become part of the creative process, and how creation, in turn, can critique itself. This symbiotic relationship underscores the inseparability of artistic creation and criticism.

Archives and documentation play an equally crucial role in Singapore’s art criticism. Clarissa Oon, formerly a critic and now in charge of communications and content at Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, reexamines how documentation and criticism build archives for artistic works and how archives can be a tool for criticism and research. Her work shows that archives are not merely tools for recording the past; they are integral to criticism. By analyzing and deconstructing these documents, critics can redefine and reinterpret artistic works, even influencing future creative approaches.

Documentation is merely the first step; what’s more crucial is how these records are critiqued, and how this critique is subsequently analyzed. This multilayered approach to criticism not only amplifies the impact of artistic works beyond the confines of time and space but also transforms criticism itself into a creative endeavor.

Artistic creation is always in dialogue with its broader environment. This dialogue forms the foundation of criticism and fuels the creative process. By transcending the boundaries of language, culture, artistic forms and methodologies, Singaporean critics are forging a new path in

criticism—one that does not merely document the past, but actively constructs the future.

Conclusion

Singapore, as a port city, embodies openness and flexibility—traits evident not only in its economy but also in its culture. Singaporean theatre practitioners continuously ponder: what defines Singaporean theatre? What constitutes Singaporean culture? How can Singapore maintain its uniqueness while engaging in dialogue and fusion with other cultures in a globalized context? The distinctiveness of Singaporean culture lies not just in its diversity but in its transcendent and interwoven nature. This openness, adaptability, and global perspective are the very elements that hold the potential for the contemporary development of Singaporean theatre and its criticism.