

In Their Own Words: The Necessity of Struggle? Continuity and Change in Singapore Theatre

Interviewees

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Few art forms mirror life with the unvarnished directness that theatre offers. This panel discussion among four veteran practitioners applies the same stark honesty to the theatre scene itself. In line with this collection's theme, the discussion looks both back and forward. It celebrates achievements and points of pride, like the sector's ongoing professionalisation through skilling, salaries and contracts, the opportunities afforded by Singapore's unique multicultural mix, and the emergence of "next generation" practitioners. At the same time, the discussion was realistic, sober even, about challenges like pricing pressures and how to balance between community and national identities. Ultimately, panellists raised the critical issue of whether we can think of the arts—and theatre specifically—as part of critical public infrastructure, both shaping and shaped by broader national discourse.

1 Accelerating Professionalisation...

Nelson: In the 1990s, something quite significant happened: a springing up of professional theatre companies. Some are still around—TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, The Theatre Practice which had its roots even before the 1990s, Toy Factory and so forth. This was significant; suddenly a group of artists were coming together, starting their own companies. They had to figure out what to do and how to do it in the arts scene.

Thinking back, we were actually writing the playbook of how to do theatre as we went along: where to find money, how to set up a company, how to draft a contract, how to protect our actors. The issues were raw; companies were focused on making productions happen. There were many adventurous projects during that time, including experiments with outdoor theatre.

Some people say that nowadays, we are less adventurous. This is partly because back then, there were fewer rules. You want to do a production outdoors? Something site-specific in a particular theatre? You want to bring in water, sand? We were all figuring things out. It was a very significant time in our history.

Tze Chien: The idea of making a career in the arts was almost unheard of until maybe the late 1990s. That's a testament to how quickly we have evolved as a scene: from almost non-existent to a professional scene within 30 years.

Shaza: Teater Ekamatra [Eka] has found both professionalism and finances—two related issues—challenging. When we first started, it was difficult to expect volunteer artists to arrive on time for rehearsals while juggling full-time jobs. The whole sector struggled with this. For some companies with full-time actors, it might have been possible for everyone to be 15 minutes early, all warmed up and ready to go when rehearsals started. For us, everyone ended work at 6:30 and rushed to rehearsals starting at 7. We couldn't expect anything more beside the fact that they even turned up for rehearsals. This was two decades ago. Things have changed a lot since.

What I mean by professionalism and finances is that when you can't afford full-time artists, not only as part of the company but in the sector as a

whole, when you don't have a lot of Malay language-speaking actors in the scene, rehearsals tend to be at night.

Directors have full-time day jobs, which they have to finish before attending rehearsals. This affects the sort of work we put out, and the sort of fees we can afford to pay.

We've survived these challenges. It's part and parcel of running an ethnic minority theatre company or theatre in general. But it did feel unique to us for a very long time. It felt like a failure that we couldn't pay people well and consistently enough for theatre to be a viable career option.

This applies personally too. In our 36 years of existence, I'm the first full-time Artistic Director; we had more than 10 before me, but I'm the first on full-time payroll.

Some sacrifices can spur creativity, but sometimes the idea of sacrifice can be overly ingrained. When we tried to run the company full time, paying people properly was seen as obscene; paying ourselves relatively properly was something bizarre and uncomfortable. People asked, "What are you doing making money out of running a theatre company? You know this is not okay?"

I was falling deeply into that hole and sacrificing everything—juggling two other jobs in order to continue running the company. I felt that everyone before me had given up so much of themselves. Many of us still have incredibly good relationships with one another and the company, but several also have this massive bitterness about how much they've given up of their lives for the art. I feel for them because Eka is built on that pain, their tears, blood and sweat, but to what end? Ultimately, I felt that this pattern had to stop.

Ganesh: A full-time theatre practitioner does about 160 hours of rehearsal in a month. Compare that with many Indian and Malay theatre practitioners who used to do evening rehearsals. If each rehearsal takes three hours, covering the same 160 hours takes close to five months.

This can seem like a long process for the same amount of rehearsal, especially for part timers, driven by passion. Does that mean the quality is not good? I don't think so. Passion drives up the quality, but with much more resources spent, so there's a financial sustainability question.

What Ekamatra did 10 years ago is now happening in the Tamil theatre scene. People have started to study full time, embarking on more full-time theatre practice. We have full-time arts managers. That's definitely progress.

2

...But Also Price Pressures

Ganesh: Grants alone are not sustainable. Our sponsors, our donors must evolve too. There's an example of an Indian donor who gave \$500 for every play 20 years ago, and still gives the same amount per play today. It's very nice of him, but the cost of productions is increasing.

The national average spend figure by audiences is around \$30-40 per show. But that's the average. For Tamil language theatre, if I charge \$35 per ticket, audiences won't come. I suspect that the average spend right now for a Tamil language production is \$20 to \$30 at most. To match rising

costs, we also have to spend resources educating our people.

Shaza: Likewise, Eka didn't change our ticket prices for over a decade. This is wild when you look at costs, which have increased five-fold. Sensitivity to ticket prices can be very different depending on the socio-economic backgrounds of the community you mainly cater to.

I've run the company for 14 years now and people frequently tell me that I shot myself in the foot by wanting to pay people decently. I wouldn't even say we're paying people ridiculously well, but I would rather not create anything if we can't pay people properly. I understand that there are many different views on this.

during the strike [the dismantling of a set]—everybody got their payment. This helped everyone see that contracts protected them. This process of educating our artists is a big challenge, but it's moving in the right direction.

Shaza: We faced exactly the same problem. Some people stopped working with Eka because we became too serious, and that wasn't why they were there. When we started formalising contracts, some people found it weird and said, "You guys are not the Eka that we know. This is not us coming together to create something anymore." The move from passion to professional did lose us some long-term collaborators. Some have returned, but others no longer agreed with what we wanted to do.

3

The Challenge—and Opportunity—of Contracts

Ganesh: When we go to Indian artists who've been doing theatre for many years, we must remember that they came together out of passion. It's a passion-driven art. Back in the day, collectives and societies came together and performed plays for friends.

When we started to give out contracts, it was taboo. Artists started to worry. AGAM had to help them see the value of contracts. With some grants, after you finish a production, the grants come to you six months later. Instead, we made sure that on the last day of every production—before or

4

A National Theatre?

Nelson: Both professionalisation and spontaneity are part of the ecosystem. One of my teachers, Kuo Pao Kun, talked about starting a national theatre company in Singapore. He may not have been totally right, but it was a viable idea back then.

I have often questioned: Do we need a national company? Our theatre scene is so varied. We have all these companies, we are so colourful, so "multi" in many senses. Pao Kun's approach to this question was to suggest something structured and centralised, which everything else could then go against: questioning, pushing. Otherwise, we'd just have multiple different versions with no anchor, all merely nudging one another. Revolution

always happens because there is something unchanging, something big, to react to.

Tze Chien: It is very important for any country or culture to have a national theatre. It represents and signals national endorsement.

When Pao Kun first mooted the idea of a national theatre, the authorities at the time told him: we can't just have a Chinese national theatre or an English one. We need to include Malays, Indians, Eurasians. He couldn't move the conversation further. There were many questions to answer: What would this national theatre be as far as languages were concerned? Who would be the artistic director? Who would the theatre hire? Would there be a quota for each race?

We have not answered many of these fundamental questions even today. This filters down to how the funding pie has been shaped and carved out. Some companies struggle more than others. I think one elephant in the room has never been properly addressed: What is our national identity? In the 1980s, a national theatre meant having our own faces, our language, local actors on stage. Today, we have more diversity, but we are still grappling with the core issue: What is Singapore theatre?

5

The National Theatre Scene

Tze Chien: (on going beyond ethnicity, language and personality): How do we survive as a scene? Most companies depend on the personalities of

their artistic directors. Beyond these personalities, would the companies still exist? What will happen in 50 years; how many theatre companies will survive? Ekamatra is rare, having survived multiple personalities, but I can't say that for most companies in Singapore. With The Finger Players, there is a certain artistry that we are trying to inherit, which is why in the last five years, we developed systematic succession plans for the company to survive beyond any single artist.

Many theatre companies in Singapore are also based on language as well as ethnicity, at least that of the first generation. Beyond this, what are we inheriting? A certain methodology? Or a particular history, which can be baggage? The Theatre Practice has gone through one transition, from Pao Kun to Kuo Jian Hong. Ekamatra has gone through multiple iterations. The Finger Players is in its second generation. The Drama Box has begun handing over to the new generation. But these are all few and far between. We need to develop succession plans beyond personalities, ethnicity and languages.

Shaza (on evolving into an ethnic minority theatre company): Eka has had easily the most artistic directors of any theatre company in Singapore. I thought about it as a challenge initially, but after being involved for 20 years, I see how every artistic director had a different responsibility. Each responded to the zeitgeist, to what both the audience and artistic communities needed. Every artistic director ushered in a new phase. It's been exciting. When you're actually witnessing it, it's also scary.

In the last decade or so, we in the company haven't seen ourselves as solely a Malay theatre company. We see ourselves as an ethnic minority theatre company. Our works are primarily in the Malay language, but are not specifically about Malay

culture. They are about the experience of being Malay, of being an ethnic minority.

This nuance is not necessarily accepted by people from both sides of the community. Some in the Malay community feel that they are losing a theatre company, but to us there are other theatre companies that are more representative of Malay-ness. The idea that we cannot be labelled and boxed in specifically as a Malay theatre company might feel disconcerting. But for us, it is exciting.

I've found that the term "ethnic minority" has been rife with misunderstanding and creates much discomfort. I was determined to change Eka from being purely Malay. When Zizi took over, she wanted it to be a Singaporean company. I wanted it to be an ethnic minority company when Fared and I took over in 2014. For me, this felt most representative of us and our work. We believe that being an ethnic minority theatre company does not make us any less Malay.

Many conversations ensued: "People are going to be so scared. It's so political. It's such a scary term." I've always maintained that if people are uncomfortable with the term, it's their cross to bear, not ours. We know why we call ourselves "ethnic minority". And if it's politicised, so be it. After all, as a theatre company, much of our existence is political. But during COVID-19, conversations were happening around identity politics much faster than before. That allowed more people to feel comfortable about the topic.

This is ever evolving. One day we might call ourselves something else. This is part and parcel of evolution. For now, I think people understand when we consider ourselves and our work part of a political space or persons.

Ganesh (on the mission of AGAM): Our mission at AGAM is ensuring the longevity of Singaporean Tamil language theatre. If we don't do these language performances, who will? The performances have been around for something like 100 years and we need to take care of them. That doesn't mean we still need to perform only Indian epic productions like the *Mahabharata*. It's about using the language medium to bring our culture, and even other Singaporean art forms, to our audiences.

Tamil language is the medium with which we present the art form. What we are doing here is similar to any other language production, be it in English, Malay or Tamil.

Ultimately the work is about artists. There can be a Malay or Chinese person working on a production. In fact, my set designer is Chinese, my lighting designer is Indonesian, my stage manager is Eurasian. Language is just a medium.

Nelson (on the mission of Nine Years Theatre): Nine Years is the last of the professional Mandarin theatre companies, in a sense. There are smaller pockets of Mandarin theatre. Some focus on work for schools. But in terms of professional companies, at least under the NAC Major Company grant scheme, we are kind of the last on the scene.

Together with many predecessors and friends, we're trying to preserve something intangible, like other mother tongue theatre companies. As Shaza said, Eka is starting to call themselves an ethnic minority company. Drama Box is moving away from being a Mandarin theatre company. They just call themselves a Singaporean company, though they still do Mandarin works. Toy Factory and Theatre Practice have been calling themselves bilingual companies for the longest time.

So we decided that Nine Years Theatre would still call ourselves a Singaporean Mandarin theatre company. Singapore is important to us. It is the prefix; then we are Mandarin; then we are a theatre company. I'm proud that we still uphold the beauty of Mandarin. This is not to say that the others do not, but we have that background of training actors to speak the language properly, beautifully, effectively and powerfully on stage. We are emotionally attached to how mother tongue languages can be beautiful. They're worth preserving.

6 What Makes Singaporean Theatre Unique—Cross- Cultural Influences and Other Defining Qualities

Tze Chien: I think it's our ability to shift perspectives and paradigms—easily, naturally, organically. This is part and parcel of art-making and culture-making: we can take on multiple perspectives without losing our core principles.

This is something that connects us, other than food. But food is still a good analogy; we can have nasi lemak in the morning, chicken rice in the afternoon, then nasi goreng or chicken or fish curry at night. We have a wide palate for all these different tastes. Our tongues are used to it.

Similarly with our theatre, I'm proud of how we shift paradigms and simultaneously work towards bridging differences. Because of this, we can adapt and survive.

We sometimes don't give ourselves enough credit for how open we are to different cultures; how we are informed and influenced by other cultures and make that diversity our own. It's something very unique to us.

Ganesh: Many people do Tamil language theatre—in India, Sri Lanka and elsewhere. But when it comes to Singaporean Tamil language theatre, Tamil language is a medium, not the end in itself. We can present multiple art forms, like wayang kulit or Chinese opera, but with the Tamil language. This can only be done in Singapore.

We have a unique cultural resonance in Singapore. Audiences can relate to a play because they connect to its multicultural influences. This happens nowhere else in the world, I think I can safely say. When we bring a Singaporean play to India, audiences may not relate to our inclusion of the Malay language or other influences in the play. They may not really understand the blend of treatments, languages or styles.

But this is our uniqueness. This is where our audiences come together. It's the presentation that people connect to, whether they are Chinese, Malay or Indian. For example, Tze Chien and his team presented a retelling of the Indian epic *Mahabharata*. Others across the world have done it, like Peter Brooks with his 1989 film. But Tze Chien did a uniquely Singaporean version with *Kingdoms Apart*. There were many Singaporean elements—Indian, Chinese, Malay—which we connected with. That's Singaporean theatre.

Shaza: Our experiences are unique, and our theatre represents that: the tug and pull of being Asian with all the baggage that comes with it, but also being, for lack of a better word, quite Westernised. We hold both multiplicities in us—that’s the unique part. Our theatre is local and honest. I lived in London for quite a while and of course I watched a lot of theatre there, but I also really missed Singaporean theatre. There’s something in it that I miss when I’m anywhere else.

Nelson: I’ve come to realise, especially when I encounter international counterparts, that our uniqueness is our multiculturalism. This is similar, of course, to our neighbours in Malaysia. But it’s also unique in the sense that we are mixed in our language, our food, the manner and frequency of our interactions with other races, how we celebrate their festivals, how we eat their food like it’s our own. The frequency and intensity are very high, compared to other countries that are multicultural in different ways. Singaporean work embodies that multiculturalism or multiculturality. An English-language Singaporean play, despite being mostly in English, will also encompass other languages, other ethnic values, sometimes religious values as well. If there was only one kind of people on the stage, it would look weird to Singaporeans, unless the play was intentionally crafted that way.

Of course, we are still talking about English theatre, Mandarin theatre, Malay theatre, Tamil theatre. Some people say there’s no need to talk about these categories—we can all be Singaporean. I say the opposite. We should talk about these categories. It is all these individual cultures that make Singapore colourful. If we simply mix them together, then we’re not “multi” anymore.

Being “multi” means that we have very strong Tamil poetry, and very wonderful Malay novels and Mandarin theatre. They interact, push and pull against one another. That’s what is colourful—Singaporean theatre is that constant negotiation.

Nine Years fits in this constant negotiation process as a mother tongue theatre. But when we perform a Singaporean story, it’s peppered with English and Mandarin and Chinese dialects, and other languages. We are moving towards having characters of other ethnicities in our plays. We always use surtitles so that non-Mandarin speakers can attend our performances.

Working on mother tongue theatre might feel optional. But it is not. It is part and parcel of our lives. We see ourselves holding the fort, seeing how we can preserve and pass on as much mother tongue heritage as possible. We see a clear and present danger of losing abilities in, and appreciation of, mother tongue languages and cultures. I find it hard now to find playwrights or even artists who can work powerfully in Mandarin. Some novelists can write really well in Mandarin, but writing good Mandarin scripts for theatre is different. Some young people can do that, but only if they have a longer time horizon and are willing to spend the next five years building their skills and sensibilities. Five years is a long time nowadays. It takes determination to want to respond to how the scene needs more Mandarin playwrights.

Points of Pride in the Past 60 Years

Tze Chien (on making art as a Singaporean):

Expression and creation are privileges—not just an entitlement, but also a national duty. Many of us practitioners take these on as a form of national duty because we love the arts and our country very much. We love the people; we love our culture. We are proud of our culture; tapping into and expressing it becomes fuel for creation. As much as I enjoy working abroad, the idea of representing my country, embodying being Singaporean, is something dear to my heart. You can spot a Singaporean from miles away whenever you're abroad, right?

There are many cultures we have integrated into. We've created our own ways of art-making; our approaches are unique to us. I've realised this increasingly in the last couple of years: Singaporean artistry is very apparent in the global scene. There's something specifically Singaporean in how we manage art-making. I didn't realise it until I started working internationally. We've got something, despite our short history, very deeply ingrained and entrenched. It has a very strong foundation in mediating, understanding and knowing how to negotiate differences.

Tze Chien (on multiple moving parts): We should not take for granted how easily we can have conversations about art-making. There are many moving parts to making culture. It's not just about the artist or the administrators. It's about the

funding bodies, the national conversations around art. Being in such a small country, many of us working towards the same goals.

Being an artist in Singapore is very much about being a Singaporean, trying to understand who we are when we hear different languages and see different faces, colours, ethnicities. We're all reflections of each other. There are differences but also many overlaps that spur us to see ourselves in others. This is not often seen in other modernised cultures or countries. It is our burden but also our privilege. That is why we thrive in it.

Nelson (on service to the country): After many years in the arts scene, we have progressed to a level where many mature artists are thinking about cultural leadership, about where and how our work can impact more sectors and segments of society. Artists nowadays are not all just thinking about themselves and making works. They are aware of how they are impacting society. They are contributors to society.

Shaza (on artists as donors): Our artists are also our donors! This is very important to me. It's been my ethos as an arts manager and now as an artistic director. At first, I was very concerned because I thought—we need money from other people, not our own artists. But I also realise that they donate because they love us and believe in what we stand for. Hopefully, they believe that we treat them well. I think the humanity that we bring into creating art is important to them. I'm always incredibly emotional every time I look at the donor list and see that many of them are artists. I'm still concerned if they are our only donors, but also very proud.

Ganesh: I did a project in 2017, the “Digital Archive of Singapore Tamil Language Theatre”, with the

National Library. We spent a whole year digitising, transcribing and archiving all Tamil works from the 1930s to today. It's all in the National Archives now.

In some ways, it was a painful process. I met legends like S.S. Sarma. He did a world tour in the 1960s. But when I met him, all his works were printed in a book that sat in his home storeroom. Nobody else knew the works existed. But I'm also proud of that project. Nowhere else in the world could we have done such documenting. Not the US, not Sri Lanka. Our art form in Singapore is thriving.

A personal proud moment was in 2024, when we won the ST Life Award for *Twin Murder in the Green Mansion*, our adaptation of the British play, *The Play That Goes Wrong*, by Mischief Theatre Company. We performed it in Tamil. Before we signed the agreement, they asked us: Are you sure you want to do this? It's an expensive affair and you're sure you want to do this many showings? We said yes, paid the royalty, did the show, and were nominated in ST Life.

Why was this a proud moment? The Indian theatre scene, somehow or other, had never been nominated in the past. Winning was not just about AGAM or that play—it was unprecedented recognition for the Indian theatre scene *as a whole*. For artists, recognition is very important. When we got nominated, many Indian language theatre practitioners were proud. The entire industry came together, taking pride in that moment.

A final point of pride—we've been building our own black box. AGAM is effectively the first Indian organisation with our own black box, a 100-seater inspired by Kuo Pao Kun's black box at The Substation. Hopefully, this will lead to a proscenium theatre in a few years, and be a space for more productions.

Nelson (on innovations in performance): We're proud of something we started quite long ago, called the "Drink and Talk session". After every performance, if possible, we have a post-show dialogue. It's casual, held in the foyer of the theatre, and we serve tea or wine and sometimes tidbits to the audience. We casually chat with the audience about anything. They can ask questions, I can tell them what the play means, we can talk about Nine Years Theatre or about the arts scene, or about life in general. We do this as much as possible. I find it a really good way to engage audiences.

We've come to realise that our work is just a vehicle. The engagement with people, with the audience, that is the main point. We're trying to show audiences that they should not just come to a performance to consume art, but to be offered the opportunity to discuss art. They can voice opinions about what they like or do not like. The discussion can help audiences understand that each of them can appreciate and discuss art. There's nothing to feel shy or timid about. Art is not scary. Mother tongue theatre is not scary. These sessions have become a signature part of Nine Years productions, and our regular fans look forward to them.

The first time Nine Years Theatre presented a work—a Singaporean Mandarin play about Singaporean stories—on Esplanade's main stage was in 2022 (10 years after the company had been founded). The response was good. Two years later, in 2024, Esplanade asked if we wanted to create another work on the main stage. I suggested a sequel to our 2022 play because that had been very well-received. So, overall, the result was a two-part, large-scale Singaporean work on the Esplanade main stage. This was a big thing for us because for a long time, only foreign theatre companies could fill the main stage. We didn't manage to fill the house, but we still had a very

good response. This was a milestone for us: we had put up something on the main stage, and people had come and appreciated the work. Now, we are thinking about where we go from here.

8 Challenges of Representation

Tze Chien: In the Singaporean ecosystem, we have a certain national rhetoric about dividing and conquering, as much as it is about racial harmony and social integration between the different ethnicities. The notion of representation always gets politicised. Various groups or various languages are perceived as privileged over others, based on different politics and different social contexts.

As a Singaporean practitioner working with an evolving ecosystem, for instance with new immigrants and new languages, I think that our ethnic categories of CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) may no longer be the right construct in the next decade. We may have a new set of categories. But it is probably true that race, ethnicity and languages will always have the potential to be politicised.

I'll cite an example—my collaboration with Ekamatra. I had a conversation with Zizi, the Artistic Director at the time, and we created *Charged*, a play that is still talked about today. It explored what happens when Chinese soldiers allegedly kill a Malay soldier. This was a very

difficult conversation—one that was important outside the play.

The then-Media Development Authority (MDA) stipulated that we needed to have a talkback after each performance. The conversations during the talkbacks were so insightful, enlightening and powerful for everyone. They were conversations that we had been afraid to have before. We had circumscribed and limited such conversations because we were afraid of the aftermath.

I think this fear is translated into policy-making, down to funding. Many policies are very helpful, but some are crippling. A major frustration for me as a practitioner is that a lot of my material and creative impulses are still based on old boundaries of multicultural practices. That's how we were brought up by our predecessors, from Pao Kun to The Necessary Stage to TheatreWorks. Some issues have been happening on the ground since the beginning, but we can't take the conversation and practice further because of potential red flags. This fear doesn't allow us to creatively and insightfully tackle the subject of multiculturalism and community.

Shaza: My most massive gripe in life is the need to box us into neatly packaged boxes that do not wholly and accurately represent us. We don't discuss enough the burden of representation that is visited upon companies and their people.

Take Eka as an example. People don't realise how much is on our plate. For example, when we don't do director development programmes, it means there are no pipelines for future directors. When we don't do playwright development programmes, there will not be playwrights coming in, and not enough space for them to grow. If we solely look

at art schools like LASALLE [College of the Arts] and NAFA [Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts], then we also have to talk about socio-economic backgrounds. In addition to CMIO, we need to include other aspects. For instance, you cannot divide race from class.

9 COVID-19, Technology and Community Adaptability

Ganesh: I think post-COVID, people started to think differently and out-of-the-box to maximise resources and digital opportunities. A lot of innovation started happening.

Tze Chien: When it comes to the metaphorical space for creativity in Singapore, we are always aware that we are vulnerable to a confluence of factors—political, social, global. Singapore is just a little red dot in the grand scheme of things. We know more about the world than the world knows about us.

During COVID-19, transnational conversations could happen very easily. Those conversations made my colleagues and me realise that we are actually very quick and adaptable to change. We could do Zoom plays and digital theatre without lags. We knew that survival was key. This was a global crisis that threatened the existence and livelihood of performing artists. What could we do about it? You'd be surprised by how many

artists globally were stuck and refused to acknowledge that this existential crisis could cripple the scene because we didn't know how long we would take to recover from it. Many were stubborn and resisted change.

I'm very proud of how we responded. Of course we had some resistance as well, but practitioners in Singapore adapted and pivoted quickly. It's a testament to our adaptability, our ability to move with the times. To pivot so successfully and wholeheartedly for survival is a trademark of the Singaporean artist. We have been conditioned to think that way—that we are vulnerable to external factors. That has made us more resilient.

Ganesh: Let me also touch on the point of Zoom and digital theatre, which happened a lot post-COVID. I think we still have practitioners who are very worried about being replaced by digital technology. I don't think that way. Technology is just a tool with which we elevate our audienceship, our theatre methodology. The scene is evolving.

I agree with Tze Chien; our people have used technology correctly, embracing it especially during and after COVID. Now, many productions incorporate technology. We work more with virtual and augmented reality. That's a good thing.

We've also become even more attuned to social dynamics in Singaporean theatre. We cater to our current problems—the ageing population, inclusivity—which has meant broadening audience demographics since the pandemic. We're trying to bring all these into our performances, directly or indirectly.

Nelson: For me, everything is opportunity. Maybe I'm just a curious person. When I see social media, I ask: What is that? It could be a great opportunity. When I see technology coming in, I know it costs a lot. But I also wonder: How can we tap into the virtual space, including AI?

Key opportunities come from how technology has made us think and communicate differently. There are of course dangers to all this technology. But if you look at what it can help us do, I think the arts and culture can benefit a lot with greater awareness of how technology can be used.

We want to grow Nine Years. There's still a lot of room to grow. To go beyond old ways of thinking, we need more funding, more revenue and more people. With new technologies, we're also thinking of how to do things differently. How can we make things more efficient and effective, communicate differently, even regroup and work differently? Technology helps us to move beyond any single growth model. So we can think of growth in many different ways. For instance, we all use AI now in our work. Used properly, it can be very efficient, which helps us cut costs. These savings offer a glimpse of hope that we can maybe employ one more person. All kinds of things become possible.

Tze Chien: My hope is simple: to have our students know at least one artist very well. To be able to say, "Hey, I know this Singaporean artist; he or she's cool. I can talk about him or her. I know him or her by name". It's my small wish, but a very important wish for our future generations: to feel proud of our cultural makers.

Shaza: I hope that more ethnic minority stories become part of the national narrative. Not just at the extreme ends of successes and failures, but also everything in between: the good, the bad, the ugly, the messy. I hope more people see that any sort of theatre is part of Singaporean theatre, whatever language it's in.

I also find a general apathy in Singaporean society towards social justice. This may be because we are so incredibly stable. But now, with global political turbulence and instability, more people are understanding our part and our country's part in global politics. I feel that people are catching on to their complicity in some global issues. As artists, we can continue bringing issues up, combining social justice and art.

Ganesh: On Broadway and the UK's West End, theatre productions are part of life. I want theatre-going to be part of life in Singapore. With Tamil language theatre in Singapore, teachers have to bring students on excursions to watch productions. We have to convince audiences to come and watch a play. Attending a theatre production is a journey on its own, not as everyday as watching a movie. I really hope that in 20 years, on a Sunday morning, people will wake up and think, "I'm going to play football, I'm going to watch a movie, I'm going to watch a play". If this becomes common among most families, then the arts will have truly become essential business.

10

Hopes for the Future: The Arts as Essential Public Infrastructure

Nelson: One of the greatest challenges is perception. From my observations and encounters with friends, relatives, people around me, my audiences, people think of arts and culture as an afterthought, as something only “other people” do. Sometimes they make me feel that I’m only doing a personal passion project. I’m always a bit bemused by this. Shouldn’t all of us be doing things we’re passionate about?

But more deeply—what do they mean? I’m guessing they feel that I’ve given up something, perhaps the opportunity to earn a lot of money or to progress in other fields, just to work on theatre. And to a certain extent, it is true that artists in Singapore do what we do because of passion.

The truth is that passion is necessary but doesn’t get you very far. Artists in the 21st century should be thinking about how we are genuine, professional contributors to society, to the nation. Our work cannot merely be passion projects. We should have aspirations to serve our audiences, the people, and the country, as politicians, medical workers or even lawyers do. Our work and impact may be more abstract, but we are also serving [others]. The challenge is: How do we shift perceptions? We must first start to nudge them, however gently.

Second, we need to ask: What is the value of culture? Many countries and big cities are researching this, to quantify and help people understand that value, for instance, in improving healthcare, wellness, and societal cohesion, building communication, and fostering education. Arts and culture help with all these things, but their role is not articulated, not seen enough.

Thirdly, and this is more personal, I hope we can get people to feel proud about Singapore’s work.

Somehow, we still tend to think that international output is better. That can be true in some instances, but sometimes it’s because we do not engage with the arts often and deeply enough, so we do not recognise the deeper value of Singaporean artists’ works. To have people take pride in Singaporean works may be a real challenge for many Singaporean artists.

11 Advice for the Next Generation

Tze Chien: Enjoy the marathon. It’s a relay race—you’re always passing the baton on to the next person to run the next phase.

Shaza: Don’t be afraid to ask for help. A lot of people are incredibly willing to share. Just ask.

Ganesh: I love the cartoon *Ratatouille*, about the rat that can cook. As they say in the movie, anybody can cook. Similarly, anyone who wants to work in the arts, who’s passionate about it, can do it. But can you do it in a way that brings the art form forward? Tamil language theatre has been around for 100 years; can we take it to the next 100 years? This means doing the work passionately and doing it right. Governance plays a huge role. For our art forms to survive, some of us need to have business acumen.

Nelson: You need to have a plan. If you really want to make it, you need to have a plan because hope is not a plan. You can hope to be an actor, a director, an artist. Hope is good. Hope drives your

dreams, so keep dreaming. But you actually need a plan. And that includes you asking yourself: How much time am I willing to commit? How far am I willing to go before something becomes too much to tolerate? What is my risk appetite?

This all sounds a bit like investment, but after all, you are investing your life and time. In investment, people talk about risk, risk management, risk appetite, time horizons. In a career as an artist, you need to think about those things too.

I know a lot of young people don't like to be part of a single company anymore. They feel like they're being bonded, that they're under a lot of scrutiny from the National Arts Council, or that they have to report many things as part of governance. There are many more collectives now, a lot of artists moving around. But what's the underlying operating model? You've got to articulate it. □

About the Panellists



Nelson Chia is a leading figure in the theatre scene, known for his contributions to Singaporean Mandarin theatre and cultural leadership. As the Co-founder and Artistic Director of Nine Years Theatre (NYT), he has played a pivotal role in rejuvenating the local Mandarin theatre landscape and championing artist development. Beyond NYT, Nelson has helped shape arts education and policy, serving on advisory panels for institutions such as the Singapore International Festival of Arts and the Intercultural Theatre Institute. He was a founding member of the Singapore Chinese Language Theatre Alliance and has adjudicated the Singapore Youth Festival (Drama). Internationally, he was a fellow of the International Society for the Performing Arts and continues to serve on its Programme Committee. Committed to cultural exchange, Nelson has collaborated with organisations from New York, China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Macau. His work reflects a dedication to recognising Singapore's multicultural identity through theatre, and bridging tradition with contemporary storytelling.



Chong Tze Chien is a playwright, director, and core member of Singaporean theatre company, The Finger Players, where he served as Co-Artistic Director and Company Director from 2004 to 2018.

Chong's passion for theatre has earned him widespread recognition with his critically-acclaimed works, including *PIE*, published by The Necessary Stage, Epigram Books, and The Finger Players. As a playwright and director, he helmed *Oiwa—The Ghost of Yotsuya*, a 2021 SIFA commission. Featuring artists from Singapore and Japan, the production won five categories at The Straits Times Life Theatre Awards in 2022, including Best Director and Production of the Year. Beyond the stage, Chong's versatility is evident in his writing for feature films and television, contributing to platforms such as Channel 5, OKTO/Arts Central, and Vasantham Central. On a national level, he was the co-curator of The Studios: fifty, a 2015 Esplanade festival spotlighting 50 iconic Singaporean plays. He co-conceptualised and served as a writer for the National Day Parade (NDP) 2016.

His plays have been performed in the UK, Hungary, New Zealand, Japan, and Taiwan.



Shaza Ishak has been leading Teater Ekamatra since 2011, steering the company's artistic vision, strategy, and programming. Committed to the power of storytelling to drive social change, she is dedicated to advancing the ethnic minority arts scene in Singapore and beyond.

In recognition of her contributions to the arts and heritage sector, she received the inaugural *Tunas Warisan* (Special Mention Award) from President Halimah Yacob on behalf of the Malay Heritage Foundation in 2021. She holds a Master's in Creative Producing from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, supported by the NAC Arts Scholarship, the Goh Chok Tong Youth Promise Award, and multiple foundations; and a second Master's in Race, Media, and Social Justice from Goldsmiths, University of London, funded by the Chevening Scholarship. Shaza is also a fellow of the Eisenhower Fellowship and the DeVos Global Arts Management Fellowship.



Subramanian Ganesh has played a pivotal role in shaping Singapore's performing arts landscape throughout his distinguished 20-year career. A multifaceted theatre practitioner who excels in directing, acting, and lighting design, he has evolved from performer to visionary creator within the Tamil theatre ecosystem.

His collaborative approach has fostered relationships with every Tamil theatre company in Singapore, earning widespread industry respect. Under Ganesh's artistic leadership, AGAM achieved historic recognition in securing the first-ever Straits Times Life Theatre Award for Tamil Theatre (Best Ensemble, 2024).

His directorial portfolio showcases his artistic versatility with acclaimed productions such as *Othello* (2013), *Kullanari* (2014), *Duryodhana AR/VR* (2020), and *Pachae Bangla Rettae Kolaida* (2023). These works reflect his commitment to innovative theatrical expression that honours cultural traditions while embracing contemporary approaches.

With boundary-pushing creative vision, Ganesh continues to shape Singapore's diverse performing arts landscape, cementing his legacy as a pivotal creative voice of his generation.