

ADN

THE ROLE OF DRAMATURGS
IN ASIA

TRACING A STORY/LINE

Re/View

YOUR ROOTS ARE SHOWING:
Asian Dramaturgies and (Hi)stories

ATTENDING TO THE 'OFFENSIVE':
Dramaturgical Work in Theatre and in Life

ON DRAMATURGY AND BODY POLITICS

Vol. 2



ASIAN
DRAMATURGS'
NETWORK

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Review

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ADN Re/View (Vol. 2)

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EDITORIAL NOTE

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To take on dramaturgical skills and capacities in order to make the world ‘a better place’, is a challenge that may seem daunting, but is no less pressing.

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In 2019, when [reflecting on the work of Asian Dramaturgs’ Network \(ADN\)](#) and varied questions that had emerged across multiple sessions, Daniel Teo (one of the Co-Editors of *ADN Re/View*) noticed a spike in the number of times the word had been used or ‘searched’ in recent years. He asked if this might signal the possibility of a “dramaturgy of everything”, and suggested that if dramaturgical thinking is “synonymous with possessing a critical lens”, and if art “draws its inspiration from humanity and society”, then a dramaturgical perspective “as a proxy of these” will result in a “betterment of the world through a deep examination of its structures and relations via an aesthetic frame”.

More than just a lens for viewing (or *re/viewing*) the world, this places a responsibility on dramaturgy to reinvent norms and create alternatives that serve hopeful outcomes. Teo highlights Australian dramaturg David Pledger’s idea that “dramaturgy as a word is a prism, through which you can enter from multiple directions” and the value of this potential is the renewed vision with which to imagine possibilities and generate positive change.

Dramaturgy as a process of hope that improves the way we live, by looking closely and differently at how we live, is perhaps more salient in 2021 than ever before. Much remains precarious as a result of a global pandemic, climate change, economic inequity, food insecurity, political volatility etc. In his 1991 hit song *Heal the World*, remixed in 2020 to respond to the pandemic, the late Michael Jackson croons about healing the world and making it 'a better place'. To take on dramaturgical skills and capacities in order to make the world 'a better place', is a challenge that may seem daunting, but is no less pressing.

→ [We suggest that you now pause and listen to [the 2020 remix](#).]

ADN Re/View (Vol. 2) considers how 'tracing', in relation to 'mapping' in *ADN Re/View (Vol. 1)*, offers a frame to work with when making sense of how dramaturgy affects our lives – in performance-making and in the everyday. In tracing the ways dramaturgs think about their work and articulate key approaches in their practice, we observe lines of connection and disruption, moments of synergy and separation.

Whether the discussion is about history, tradition, gender, sexuality or race, the performance work that is referred to by the varied ADN presenters provides a resource from which they extrapolate or theorise ideas that matter to them. Traces of these works, appearing as video footage, photographs or texts, give a glimpse of what they refer to, describe and reflect on.

But it is their memory of these works and how they embody a discussion of the related ideas that stirs an energy of engagement for audiences present, which then percolates in the room where the ADN session occurs. Sometimes there is laughter, sometimes silence, sometimes a murmur. And as presenters and audiences return to the room for subsequent

sessions, the various lines of thought start to cross and connect, forming outlines and contours of larger discussions.

The transcripts and video recordings that ADN has put together capture some of these, but we acknowledge that the corporeal knowledge built between bodies and across spaces is not available for capture. Perhaps this is why the editorial team have become more present in the selection and shaping of material for this volume. Co-Editors Daniel Teo, Chong Gua Khee and Dominic Nah have incorporated their experiences while putting together the articles, attending to how this too is a dramaturgical process. This led to our attempt to create a semblance of stories being told across and within different sessions in the organisation of the volume, with suggested breaks and pauses in between. After all, a transition or intermission can sometimes be the most potent part of a performance experience.

→ [We encourage you to note the gaps and fill them in as you please.]

Continuing to trace notions of 'Asian', following on from ideas in the previous volume, we admit the difficulties of dealing with the word, noting that its currency is not to be denied. Perhaps like the word 'dramaturgy', we can think of the word 'Asian' as a prism through which to imagine possibilities. This emerges in "Your Roots Are Showing: Asian Dramaturgies and (Hi)stories", where Teo examines the *Dramaturgy in Asia: Of Roots & Traditions* session in 2017, and the stories presenters pieced together to make sense of their particular notions of 'dramaturgy' and/in 'Asia'. Teo highlights how Peter Eckersall, chairperson for the session, reminds us of cultural theorist Chen Kuan-Hsing's proposal of 'Asia as Method', a call for the intellectual work of deimperialisation. This inter-Asia cultural studies perspective is meant to enlarge the conversation about knowledge-building in the

Asian context, and Eckersall provokes ADN to consider how it might be poised to do likewise.

While this serves as a critical reminder that Asia is much more than a geographical terrain, there is no denying that some notions of 'Asian' have been hijacked to serve narrow essentialist purposes, such as the 'Asian Values' discourse widely propagated in the 1990s. It bears repeating that the placeholder of 'Asian' in ADN is intended to provoke options, and to not limit discourse to the historical traditions that are entangled within. Depending on where one is, and why the word is used, what is 'Asian' and being 'Asian' can mean many different things. And when we tell our stories, our roots tend to show.

Janet Pillai's keynote text, "The Role of Dramaturgs in Asia", underlines the importance of context when working through the demands of becoming a dramaturg. She emphasises the need for dramaturgs to build relationships with context and understand the framing of context when responding and adapting to material, people and circumstances at hand. Recognising the connections between micro- and macro-dramaturgy in her own practice and that of other Asian-based practitioners, she identifies varied forms of dramaturgy that appear in the Asian context, some of which are tied to Western artists and philosophers.

While a dramaturg's work is layered with contextual insights and interrogations of contextual meaning, Pillai reiterates the capacity to be flexible and open to chance as desirable. Since audiences are always changing, the dramaturg's ability to work with this flux and play with the 'making' and 'breaking' of meaning enhances the engagement. In her words:

A dramaturg acts to engage with the social, political (or metaphysical) realities of the time and place; to interpret or promote discourse or viewpoints within a society, to

intervene and bring awareness or create change... The role is shaped by several variables; the context, the content, the type of performance, the audiences, the intentions, creative relationships, components and elements. This also depends on how you want to connect to your audience.

When negotiating the complexities of difference, particularly among audiences of varied socio-political backgrounds, the question of what makes sense and what gives offense becomes pertinent. In "Attending to the 'Offensive': Dramaturgical Work in Theatre and Life", Chong Gua Khee grapples with some of the controversies that arise when performance-makers challenge boundaries and meet with objection and consternation. Drawing from perspectives articulated at the *Difference and Deference* session in 2017, Chong reflects on what happens when a performance hits a nerve. She engages with how thresholds for staying with a performance, choosing to leave, or taking action to prohibit the work, affect the way performances are created.

Admittedly, the limits of what is permissible and acceptable remain in flux, changing in relation to social, political, cultural and personal norms. Hence, the risks taken by practitioners who seek change, and the courage they embody when confronted with censure, are important dimensions of dramaturgical consideration. What happens to a person when faced with the dilemma of whether to meet a discomforting performance or avoid the restlessness it stirs? How do performance-makers navigate their choices when faced with volatile terrains of response? When audiences are left feeling troubled or made to feel at odds with what happens on stage, it could help to trace the implications of decisions taken and intuitions discerned.

→ [To continue this line of thought, we suggest reading "Kei Saito: Encountering the Audience" on page 92.]

As editors of this E-zine, we are also at times challenged by the material being worked on, and have to question how responses are mediated through bodies and beings/ becomings. Dominic Nah incorporates his corporeal positionality, sometimes uneasily, in putting together ideas and frames for “On Dramaturgy and Body Politics”, reviewing the perspectives from two sessions in 2017 – *Dramaturgies of Female Performance* and *Gendered/Queer Dramaturgies*.

Working through questions and interruptions that arise from speakers and audiences present at the sessions, Nah notes how some of his later observations about these ideas have been at odds with earlier responses. Like Teo and Chong, he takes on a reflexive approach of looking within while looking without, acknowledging his subjectivity as part of the dramaturgy he develops for shaping the material. An editorial task reveals itself to be a dramaturgical process.

Just as on the street, in the workplace, at home and in the theatre, a dramaturgy of sorts is woven throughout a consciousness of how varied selves are performed in a ‘presentation’ of the self, as sociologist Erving Goffman has proposed. But perhaps more importantly, how the body is expected to perform and what it takes to per-form and re-form these expectations remain complex dramaturgical engagements for performers and performance-makers, as well as anyone interested in the theatre of everyday life.

Indeed, notions of dramaturgy and the role of dramaturgs are no longer limited to the discourses of performance, let alone theatre. Apart from sociologist Erving Goffman’s dramaturgy of everyday life, more recent concepts such as corporate dramaturgy, dramaturgy of science, eco-dramaturgy and medical dramaturgy, point to a proliferation of dramaturgical practices across varied disciplines. Does this

hint at dramaturgy becoming a ‘catch-all’ term that can serve multiple functions, while maintaining its roots in the histories of performance-making?

Despite the odd naysayer, the organising team, speakers and participants of ADN seem very comfortable with expanded notions of dramaturgy, with conference themes evolving from *Mapping the Terrain* in 2016 to *Dramaturgy and the Human Condition* in 2019. The kinds of conversations that occur at ADN indicate wide-ranging curiosities relating to such realms, and much more. We make links to how brain theory affects audience reception, consider the impact of the environment on our staging choices, and listen to the sounds of water as therapy. And, perhaps most importantly, we try to curate our food and drink encounters with care.

➔ [We suggest reading “Janice Poon: A Very Simple Meal” on page [38](#).]

With ADN tracing dramaturgies beyond the boundaries of performance-making, could we eventually incorporate practitioners from disciplines that include business, physics, culinary science and neurology? Will we invite chefs, neurologists, marine biologists and shamanic healers to participate in future dialogues, in our bid to understand how dramaturgical thinking in the Asia-Pacific context far exceeds the conventional realms of performance? Who knows? After all, to come back to the notion of dramaturgy and betterment of society, Michael Jackson points out that there isn’t just one way to heal the world, but “there are ways to get there / if you care enough for the living”.

CHARLENE RAJENDRAN
Lead Editor

YOUR ROOTS ARE SHOWING ASIAN DRAMATURGIES AND (HI)STORIES

Daniel Teo

You don't always get it right the first time. An earlier analysis of the transcript of the roundtable session *Dramaturgy in Asia: Of Roots & Traditions* sought out similarities between the four speakers' presentations. This first attempt parsed the words of the roundtable speakers – Anuradha Kapur, Charlene Rajendran, Marion D'Cruz and Kentaro Matsui – into excerpts that could be grouped thematically.

While a thematic analysis seemed like the right route to take, a problem soon emerged – the excerpts lost valuable nuance when removed from the original presentations. In their allotted time, the four speakers covered a lot of ground – they skimmed through the performance heritages and contemporary cultural environments of their respective countries, and delved into their personal histories and lived experiences of creating work to varying degrees of detail. In attempting to separate out and re-organise these multiple but brief touchpoints, the



The *Dramaturgy in Asia: Of Roots & Traditions* roundtable at ADN Meeting 2017 in Yokohama, Japan on 17 February 2017. (L to R) Chair Peter Eckersall, Anuradha Kapur, Charlene Rajendran, Marion D'Cruz, Kentaro Matsui, and translator Tomoko Momiyama.

thematic analysis unwittingly created a reduction of these rich and complex histories, which seemed grossly at odds with how the roundtable discussion had been framed.

Chairperson Peter Eckersall opened the *Dramaturgy in Asia* roundtable by highlighting the difficulty of the session's theme, specifically with the words 'dramaturgy' and 'Asia'. While 'dramaturgy' – its definitions, histories, theorisations, and traditional and contemporary practices – has been and will likely continue to be debated in ADN, tossing 'Asia' and 'Asian-ness' into the hat greatly increases the complexity. As Eckersall said, "[Asia] is] perhaps a more problematic term than 'dramaturgy', in that it is a term that has a lot more currency in many, many different contexts and locations, be they political, economic, cultural, historical. And an attempt to

discover a kind of 'Asian dramaturgy' might risk certain kinds of homogenisation."

The parsing and categorisation of the presentations were, in essence, an exercise in homogenisation, and the resultant excerpts lacked something vital in the work of dramaturgy – context, specifically geographical, environmental, socio-cultural, political, historical, and personal. Indeed, Janet Pillai in her keynote address (presented in this volume) cites Marianne Van Kerkhoven's frames of 'micro-dramaturgy', concerned with a singular production, and 'macro-dramaturgy', which deals with the larger context in which art is produced. Dramaturgical work demands a rootedness in context, and 'dramaturging' the *Dramaturgy in Asia* transcript seemed to require a respect for the entirety and integrity of the (hi)stories told by the four speakers. Their presentations represent very individual and unique ways in which they have brought together their micro and macro-dramaturgies.

This second version exhibits the edited transcripts of the four speakers' presentations in full, so that readers may experience and engage with the richness of the stories told. While some parts of the text are in bold to suggest points of interest, ideally, each speakers' presentation should be wholly read as a story in full.

★ ***Dramaturgy in Asia: Of Roots and Traditions* took place 17 February 2017 during the ADN Meeting at the Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama (TPAM). The speakers were Anuradha Kapur (India), Charlene Rajendran (Singapore/Malaysia), Kentaro Matsui (Japan), and Marion D'Cruz (Malaysia). The roundtable discussion was chaired by Peter Eckersall (New York/Australia).**



Anuradha Kapur presenting at ADN Meeting 2017 on 17 February 2017.

ANURADHA KAPUR

I'm going to present a sort of wilful history of some of the practices that have happened in India over the last some years. Willful because I'll zigzag and not present chronologically. Instead, I'll annotate practices that are in discussion all the time in India – roots, traditions, and modernity: women's theatre work, gurus, shishyas, and pedagogy, among others.

Dramaturgical thinking – the action of translating and materialising ideas, and the effect and affect of staged geometry, architecture, costume, colour, the shape of the body, and the attributes of heroes and heroines – is part of ancient manuals in India, such as the *Natyasastra* (200 BC to 200 AD). The *Natyasastra* clearly proposed, for instance, that nearness and distance, colour and shape, stance and gesture, makeup and object, produce a scheme of relationships between actor, spectator and play materials. In countries that have long traditions of performance such as India, the need to critically

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annotate these continuities becomes a call, instead, for pointing up ruptures, interruptions and disalignments within these supposed continuities. Otherwise, we tend to write up a history that says that what is described as happening in ancient texts is also how it happens in today's world.

To put a performance in the discursive field, as also the body as figuration in the discursive field, is possibly one of the ways of annotating dramaturgy. The 'interruptions' that I'm suggesting within notions of dramaturgical tradition become all the more important when the past as memory and the past as transmission

66 In countries that have long traditions of performance such as India, the need to critically annotate these continuities becomes a call, instead, for pointing up ruptures, interruptions and disalignments within these supposed continuities. 99

becomes something that supposedly gets communicated to a student, a pupil, a *shishya*, as if without mediation. The *guru-shishya* relationship is often represented as a sort of beam from the *guru* that reaches the pupil without disturbance. I'll come to that in a moment. The interruptions I propose are like pulling the brake, as [Walter] Benjamin would say, to stop the uninterrupted flow from guru to shishyas and see why we need to critically annotate certain historically 'given' terms like guru, shishya, knowledge and tradition. I think it is important to ask how, why and when ancient texts and terms become important to us in contemporary practice.

And it looks to me that one of the interesting moments

in modern Indian theatre comes in the 1980s or so when a corpus of work by women directors comes into collision with what is seen as 'dominant' modern Indian dramaturgy. Some of the practices of women theatre-makers critically highlight the prescriptions that make certain forms and materials acceptable or unacceptable for the stage.

The 1980s questioned all sorts of roles in theatre-making and produced a certain sort of re-materialisation of these roles, even a sort of counter-narrative, as it were. As I said earlier, mine is a wilful re-reading. One of the counter-narratives is about the relationships enacted within pedagogical traditions. The guru and the shishya, the disciple and the teacher – this kind of teaching methodology in one sense promotes the idea of reproduction in teaching. When this reproduction is questioned, a slew of further questions arise: what is family lineage, what is patronage, who is a patron, who is included and who is excluded from this process of reproduction.

An example that a very dear friend of mine and a music scholar, Vidya Rao, gives is about a tradition of music called *thumri*, which was practiced primarily by courtesans of the 19th century, in North India. Now a very established 'tradition', it was not always so. For instance, it was not allowed onto Indian radio till the 1930s. Even after independence in 1947, when you entered the radio station, you had to show a paper saying that you were not from a courtesan family. This music tradition was learnt by many men and sung by many men, but nobody in their lineage is marked as having been taught by a woman. So this understanding of who is a guru began to be reappraised in the 1980s.

Women's theatre works are about spectatorship as well: any spectator must navigate a field of knowledge because theatre knowledge does not come to the spectator unmediated, without interruptions, and without questions. Putting the

spectator centrally into the argument is asking: what does this kind of dramaturgy make the spectators do?

A fast-forward – some of this work has an interest in mixes and hybrids. It has an interest in bringing up the idea of figuration, especially that of women in and for performance; of forms preferred learned, shaped and transmitted by women and why. The example that I gave you of *thumri* points to that.

The idea of the production of gender is brought up and therefore the idea of identity, and therefore the idea of India, and therefore the idea of Indian-ness, and therefore, of the nation. I would suggest that, in the 1980s, these questions undid some of the sutures that had held together beliefs about Indian-ness and the nation. How can we talk confidently about what "Indian" dramaturgy is when Indian-ness is not something automatically drawn up from one's roots?

What destabilises the position of the guru – the transmitter of knowledge – is collaboration, devising and multi-authorship. Collaboration becomes both form and method and women theatre-makers have practiced it by working with collectives and collective creation. The lineage of a guru, which is made up of ideas of the Past, Memory, Embodiment and Continuity, is supposedly passed through the body of the guru to the pupil. While reimagining the role of the guru or pedagogue, what comes to be discussed also then is the role of the guru as the single fount of knowledge. Since the 1980s, theatre-makers as teachers seek to be in the classroom without taking upon themselves the burden of too much knowledge or of being entirely secure about the depth and width of their 'wisdom'.

When I began directing and as we were working a lot with devising at the drama school then, I was asked: Have you done your homework? Do you want us to do everything? Why wouldn't you tell us what to do? Indeed, there is a fraught

relationship between the acquisition of knowledge via a guru and collective work. And it is not to say that such questions are not asked now. They are asked even now.

There was an interest, at that time, in popular forms that questioned the categories of high and low art. And there has been an interest which is continuing till today, in melodrama, in the baroque, in excess, excess in costume, colour and objects. Melodrama questions the theatre and roots as also the modernist mise-en-scène that favours simplicity if not austerity.

There have been lots of arguments about women and the theatre of roots, analysing what roots the women directors of the 1980s had, if any. When a claim on the past is put forth, the corollary is to ask why do certain pasts become more official than others.

On another plane, by bringing in objects of the everyday – for instance, cooking tools – working with actual everyday material, the material of labour in a woman's life, onto the stage produced a certain kind of poly-dimensionality – that involved the senses of touch, smell and taste. And this poly-dimensionality began to be seen as subversive to that kind of austere modernism that was part of the 1950s Indian performance languages, post-independence.

Gender destabilisation, masquerade, spectatorship, and the figure of the guru have flagged the debates about contemporaneity and modernity in Indian theatre. I'm not marking the 1980s as some kind of originary moment, but I am marking it as a moment that brings together certain volatile questions. Asked again and again is the question: **How to figure, compose, and present a woman onstage?** How, indeed.

Here then to remember Gayle Austin's terrific words: "The emperor has no clothes, but the empress has no body." So with that, we begin and we end. Thank you.



Charlene Rajendran presenting at ADN Meeting 2017 on 17 February 2017.

CHARLENE RAJENDRAN

I want to talk about multiplicity and negotiating difference because I come from Malaysia and Singapore. I think it's fair to say I come from both now. I have lived in Malaysia most of my life, but the last 15 years have been in Singapore. And when I was born they were both one country. That tells you how old I am. I also had a strong relationship with Singapore while I was growing up because my aunt, with whom I was very close, lived there.

Anyway, these two societies are a particular kind of Asia. They are Southeast Asia, but even within Southeast Asia they operate with a certain kind of plurality, mixture and difference. Officially, both countries have a similar multiculturalism policy, where we are all defined by our race. And if you're Malay or Chinese or Indian quite clearly, even if you're of mixed ethnicity, there's a certain notion of some sort of originary

66 **Krishen Jit and Kuo Pao Kun both commented on and wrote about the significance and value of artwork... in this way they were dramaturging performance in relation to society, nation, politics, culture, and the region.** 99

culture that you come from. But then there are some of us who are 'Other'. Although I have an Indian surname, because my grandparents are from Sri Lanka, I am officially 'Other'. This is because at the time there was a political process in which the Sri Lankans in Malaysia said, "We're not Indian [in terms of the nationality]." There was also a certain snobbery around this choice which pertains to issues of class. Admittedly that's now become a lot more porous.

And these things stay with you obviously. Because when you fill in a form, you still have to specify your race. In Singapore, I have to fill in these forms as well. In Malaysia, you must also identify which religion you belong to. So you're officially of a certain race, and a particular religion. In Singapore you have the option of being a 'free thinker' when it comes to religion. In Malaysia, there isn't that option. So the kinds of performances that emerge in these contexts are imbued with these kinds of official negotiations of difference. In which there are classifications, parallel streams that officially don't intersect, except in food and sometimes clothing, where you are allowed to have mixes and fusions. Otherwise in the official arena, you present Chinese, Indian or Malay culture, modern and classical, as separate.

So I turn to two theatre practitioners, both pioneers, who consciously questioned this in their work. They sought to rethink how the nation needs to resist this way of thinking by offering live performances on stage that reconfigured these ideas of rigid, fixed, essentialised difference. They were Kuo Pao Kun from Singapore and Krishen Jit from Malaysia, sadly both of whom are no longer with us. They passed too soon within a couple of years of each other. **I think they offered frames for thinking about how contemporary performance has tried to navigate through this notion of difference.** Interestingly, I think the 1980s [as Anuradha just highlighted for India] was for Malaysia and Singapore also a moment, or a decade, when certain things were marked. Certainly in the work of Krishen and Pao Kun.

When Krishen co-founded Five Arts Centre [an arts collective in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia] in 1984, he made a complete shift from doing Malay-language theatre towards doing English-language theatre that allowed for that mix. And in Singapore, Pao Kun's detention and then release [in 1976 and 1980 respectively], was followed by his shift towards doing theatre that was less socialist and no longer primarily in the Chinese-language. It became oriented towards a different kind of hybrid that emerged. This led to the flourishing of [theatre in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore in] the 1990s. So much so I think we look at the 1990s as a golden time. But really, what happened in the 1980s was foundational towards that happening. Of course the financial boom that occurred in the 1990s made a big difference in terms of how funding would affect that productivity as well.

One of the things that both Krishen and Pao Kun did is that they created work which changed the landscape of performance. Pao Kun was a playwright and a director, and Krishen was a director and critic. **They both commented on and wrote about the significance and value of artwork. Not necessarily their work, but about what they were seeing, what they were thinking. And in this way they were dramaturging performance in relation**

to society, nation, politics, culture, and the region. They were making links, because they saw a gap in a certain kind of scholarship. There weren't theatre studies departments at the time in Malaysia and Singapore. And they recognised the need to have discourses that were emerging from this contemporary frame. And in their writings, there's constant reference to this question of how to navigate difference differently.

There are two ways in which they offered frames, if not lenses, for understanding how new dramaturgies are still present and still being built upon these ideas. Pao Kun talked about something called 'Open Culture'. **And for him, Open Culture is defined as being rooted in one specific culture, but not necessarily the culture that you are racially defined by.** It can be any culture of your choice. But being rooted in a culture is not about going back to an originary moment, as much as **it is about learning the vocabulary, the philosophy, the ethos and therefore being deeply soaked in one culture, whatever that culture may be. And from that position and groundedness of being, in a way, then being open to all other cultures and taking them on with the capacity to negotiate.**

Pao Kun talked about how it's not about bilingualism as much as it is about biculturalism. **Multiculturalism then is not about having separate things that exist in parallel, but intertwine.** I think that's in many respects a push that Pao Kun was making towards acknowledging that, yes, there are these very strong entrenched cultures that operate politically, socially and personally in people's lives, be they Chinese, Indian etc. Because the 'Other' doesn't really work as an other, except in relation to what locates it beyond a boundary. But nonetheless, there is so much more at work and operating in these relationships and tensions. And as a result, the neglect of these things leads to a very authoritarian way of understanding culture.

So Pao Kun's play *Mama Looking for her Cat* (1988) is

significant. Different languages are present in the play and no subtitles are offered to assume that there's one dominant language with which to navigate through this. At the time, English is gaining prominence [in Singapore]. In the play, there are two older citizens who are dealing with displacement from their families and their societies because of the English-language policy. One speaks Chinese, the other speaks Tamil, and they understand each other. So there's a metaphor, there's a symbolism obviously about the human being's capacity to navigate difference despite linguistic distance.

Krishen offers the notion of 'multiculturalism within the body' and talked about how his work had been persistently trying to excavate this. And for me, it's very interesting that it's an excavation rather than a layering on, like another patina. It's so distinctly not a melting pot. And I think that's a way in which Singapore-Malaysian Southeast Asian kinds of difference were being navigated in Krishen's work.

So excavating this 'multiculturalism in the body' for Krishen also involved issues of language. But not just languages such as Malay, Chinese, English, but the different Malay languages, the different Chinese languages and the different English-es. Even within Hokkien, different kinds of Hokkien. Within Malay, different kinds of Malay – formal, non-formal, street, Kelantan, Penang etc. And Krishen consciously learnt Malay in the 1970s, and became more fluent in it than most Malaysians. He read it like a scholar, spoke it like a scholar, and wrote in Malay as well. He learnt the language as a politic of becoming Malaysian that I think is very, very significant.

He has been criticised for endorsing a certain elevation of Malay rights, but in the 70s, it was a very different period. I think he did it as someone who grew up in a Punjabi-speaking home, had an education in English, probably spoke bazaar Malay or street Malay, but then realised, "If I'm going to be viable, I've got

to have language that I can wield. So I'll learn it, no big deal – in fact, it gives me more power.” **For him, language was not just something you grow up with, something that's just natural and just there. It's also a political choice. So the multiculturalism that is excavated I think relies on this intent and discipline. And for me that's a dramaturging of life that then translates into performance-making. It's not separate. It's intertwined.**

‘Multiculturalism within the body’ is exemplified in a range of Krishen's work. But the one that perhaps stands out for me is a performance called *A Chance Encounter* (1999) which happened in the late 1990s. It was a devised work with two actors. Both very strong, confident, talented women – Faridah Marican and Foo May Lyn. Their life stories intertwine with the two fictional characters [they play], who meet each other at a cosmetics sales counter in a busy shopping mall. [They speak a variety of languages, to depict who they are as actors and as characters. And while they are from very different social and cultural backgrounds, they find connections that are deep and which confront them about their roots, and histories.]

I think these kinds of stories that were performed, like *Mama* where the old Chinese lady and the Indian man talk, and *Chance Encounter* where the elderly Malay woman and the Chinese cosmetics salesgirl meet, are the kinds of stories that emerge when these dramaturgies [of difference] informed choices and options for performance-making. Thank you.



Marion D'Cruz presenting at ADN Meeting 2017 on 17 February 2017.

MARION D'CRUZ

I thought I would talk about what I call ‘**strategies of invisible dramaturgy**’ in the work of Five Arts Centre. And I use the term ‘invisible dramaturgy’ referring to the lack of a designated person who acts as the ‘dramaturg’, but dramaturgy is going on.

I have two examples. The first is **co-direction**. So Five Arts Centre was formed in the 1980s, and since then there have been a number of significant projects that have been co-directed. One of the first was Ong Keng Sen and Krishen Jit co-directing in the 1980s. The first project Krishen and Keng Sen co-directed was *Three Children*, and Claire [Wong, who performed in it,] is here. And before that time, I don't think Krishen had ever co-directed. But I think it's interesting looking back on that process right now.

Three Children is a Malaysian play written by Leow Puay Tin. And the discussions that went on between Krishen and Keng

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Sen into the wee hours of the morning in Krishen's hotel room, where I would be a fly on the wall, would be – looking back now – that process of dramaturgy. And there were more hours of

that discussion than there were hours on the rehearsal floor. And it was a fascinating dialogue that went on between the two, which should have been recorded but unfortunately only sits in my memory. *Three Children* was done in 1988, and then remounted again in 1991 when it toured to Japan.

Krishen was very particular with who he would co-direct. In 1995, he did a big project called *Skin Trilogy* which involved six visual artists, and to get that project going, he worked in collaboration with a visual artist. This was not co-direction, but he brought in Wong Hoy Cheong to sort of curate the visual arts section of it, and Krishen was directing. So the visual artists had installations in the gallery and then the performance happened all over the National Art Gallery of that time.

And having established that relationship in 1995, Krishen and Hoy Cheong went on to co-direct *Family* in 1998, which was a site-specific event that happened in an old abandoned house in Kuala Lumpur. Again, this is a Leow Puay Tin play, which was performed all over the house and had multiple scenes going on at one time, parallel texts, so that the audience had to choose where they were going, and so on and so forth. And I think *Family* was recently done here in Japan. So that also was many, many hours of discussion between Hoy Cheong and Krishen, which – again, looking back now – seems

I use the term 'invisible dramaturgy' referring to the lack of a designated person who acts as the 'dramaturg', but dramaturgy is going on.

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to me like a dramaturgical process that was going on.

And the third example of co-direction was something I did in 2012 called *Dream Country* as part of the Singapore Arts Festival at that time. It's a very long story how the project happened, but [Low] Kee Hong [the General Manager of the Singapore Arts Festival] was responsible for that. It was based on a piece that I had done in 1988 called *Urn Piece*, and the original version had three dancers coming out of three large urns filled with water. The Singapore [Arts Festival] version had 35 performers coming out of 35 urns, an outdoor performance.

We had six directors working on it. And four of them are in the room! How bizarrely wonderful is that? [Laughs] So I came up with a scheme where four directors were picked in Singapore, all women. The performers were also all women. And each director worked with a group of seven or eight performers. And then there were two of us from KL – myself and Anne James. There was a kind of structure given where [the Singapore directors] would work [with the performers], and then [Anne James and I] would come down and look at the material. Eventually, the six of us put the 45-minute performance together at the Esplanade, outdoors. The directors who are in the room are Claire Wong, who's at the back. Natalie [Hennedige], who's right there [in the audience]. Charlene [Rajendran] is here [on the panel]. And myself.

So again, looking back at that whole process, the amount of discussion, negotiation, fights, tempers, tears, alcohol – all of which went on in that process. So I was trying to think this morning – was I the dramaturg in that process? Which I will leave it at that. Maybe Natalie and Claire will say I was the negotiator to keep the peace and to keep everybody safe! [Laughs] Ombudsman? [Laughs] I can't even say that word! But again it was six directors working in that collaborative way. So

the idea of co-direction for me is a scheme that has been happening within Five Arts Centre, and I'm sure in many other places, and inbuilt into that is the dramaturgy.

The second example I want to talk about is something new that's been developing in Malaysia, and I think especially in Japan, and maybe other places. That is the **creative producer**. So, in the past, the producer sort of served the vision of the director or the choreographer. The choreographers and directors say, "Jump!" And the producer asks, "How high?" At least that's how I've worked as a producer, and you just deliver, deliver, deliver and you try and make the vision of the director happen, as a good producer.

But in the last few years, the idea of a creative producer, who's not just the person who's going to make your work happen, but is going to, in a sense, work with you and give you creative input. That person is not a co-director, but a creative producer. And I have worked with June Tan as a creative producer, and she's in the room as well.

And this piece of work would not have happened without June. It was a bizarre thing that I came up with called *2 minute solos*, which entirely describes what it was. But I had this kind of idea and I said, "Eh, June, I want to do this." Then there were discussions with June and her asking me all these questions and saying, "Okay, what about this? No, let's do this and let's put in these people and not this person." And so on and so forth. That eventually led to the event happening in 2013 and 2014. So I think that also is an interesting strategy that's happening. The creative producer – and then the question would be then, **is that creative producer also doing dramaturgy in that process?** Thank you.



Kentaro Matsui presenting at ADN Meeting 2017 on 17 February 2017. To his left is translator Tomoko Momiyama.

KENTARO MATSUI

I'd like to start from my experience serving as a producer at Setagaya Public Theater. In 2005, we created a piece called *Hotel Grand Asia* with artists from Thailand, Malaysia, Indonesia, Philippines, Singapore and Japan.

In the two-year process of this creation, we had workshops where we shared different stories and myths from different countries, and from this experience we started to realise that we share in common these different stories of myths that had animals as the characters. Also, even if there may be differences between Southeast Asia and East Asia, if we look closely, we share the same influences from China and India, before BC.

As a result, we decided to have excerpts from *Mahabharata*, the Indonesian version, in the piece. And other participants

from different parts of Asia, did not know this version of the *Mahabharata* from Indonesia existed.

Now, we move into Japanese theatre. As you must know, we have traditions of *Noh* theatre, *kyogen* and *kabuki*. *Noh* and *kyogen* developed in Japan, but before it became *Noh* and *kyogen*, the influences and the stories actually came through the Korean peninsula from India and China. These stories didn't really change, but were incorporated to become *Noh* and *kyogen*. And this is not something that I researched, but this is something that I read.

So Japanese theatre – not only theatre, but Japanese culture, actually – is a continuous sort of translation of things that came from the continent. It was a process of translation and also appropriation of the influences that came from the continent. If we look at *kabuki*, we use the instrument called the *shamisen*, and this instrument came from China through Okinawa. Without the *shamisen*, it wouldn't

be *kabuki*. So it's not only theatre, but also, musically, we have these influences from the continent.

In the Meiji era, which is about 140 years ago, we shut ourselves off from the influences of Asia and we started to take influences from the West and translate these influences.

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So in the 20th century, we started to translate plays by Shakespeare and Ibsen, and these plays started to be performed, and this became modern theatre in Japan. So what we do here through translation is actually to come up with new ways of expression, but by translating foreign materials.

Also, when we started having this modern theatre in the beginning of the 20th century, not only did we translate these plays, but also this concept of 'actress' was born. One of the founders of modern theatre in Japan, Osanai Kaoru, worked with *kabuki* actors to realise Ibsen's *John Gabriel Borkman* and in the play, the female character was performed by a *kabuki* female impersonator, which is basically a male playing a female role. And then, we had an actress called Matsui Sumako who played Nora in Ibsen's *A Doll's House* and Ophelia in *Hamlet*, and she became the prototype of an actress in modern theatre in Japan. The starting point of this was a Japanese woman playing a Western woman. And this process of making your own theatre by appropriating Western theatre continued on until the 60s.

In the late 60s, the underground small theatre scene started to blossom. The main driver of these underground small theatres was very much a response to Western theatre. They were the ones that decided to go back to pre-modern theatre in Japan, so they started to study and practise the forms of *kabuki*, *Noh* and *kyogen*. By the 80s, creating new forms of theatre by studying or translating foreign theatre started to grow less.

Just like the example that I shared with you in the beginning about *Hotel Grand Asia*, the collaboration project we did at Setagaya Public Theatre, **since the 90s, the ways**

for us to create new ways of theatre in Japan has been to collaborate with people from overseas.

Also, we had in the closed discussions yesterday about this concept of specific expertise for the dramaturg, so that's sort of also another way where we try to incorporate methodologies from overseas, and then revolutionise ourselves.

Concluding Thoughts

The four speakers painted very different, very unique pictures of practicing dramaturgy in Asia, unique not only to the locales of the speakers, but unique to each speaker as well. Eckersall brought up Kuan-Hsing Chen's concept of 'Asia as Method' when highlighting that the roundtable (and ADN as a whole), which seemed intent on a sort of deimperialisation of Asia (and Asian dramaturgy). Deimperialisation could be accomplished through, in Eckersall's words, "an enlarged conversation among Asian scholars, Asian artists, Asian cultural practitioners, and so on and so forth".

It is interesting to note how the speakers chose to narrativise their country's performance histories, including where they decided the starting point should be, and how those histories linked to practices in contemporary times, whether they be legacies or resistances. For instance, Kapur and Matsui, who hail from India and Japan respectively, presented their country's art-making histories from millennia prior. Against this backdrop of longstanding, deep-rooted traditions and disciplines, they presented how art is made in more recent times. Consequently, contemporary practices in their countries appeared as repetitions of, or responses and resistance to, history and tradition. Rajendran and D'Cruz spoke about the relatively young Southeast Asian countries Malaysia and Singapore, who became independent only around the mid-20th century. Rajendran

and D'Cruz specifically highlighted particular challenges that emerged when making art within their multicultural environments, such as negotiating identity and language politics in the context of imagining the nation.

All speakers cite the 1980s as a seminal decade in history for contemporary art-making and dramaturgical practices, which may reflect the broader developments in history, society, politics and culture across Asia and the world at the time. But the similarity may also be due to the fact that all the speakers were at formative points in their artmaking careers during or just after the 1980s. This suggests that perhaps not only should stories be received within a context, they cannot be divorced from their storytellers as well.

The ultimate quandary is that while the four speakers bring very unique perspectives, backgrounds, memories, and knowledges of what it is to practice dramaturgy in Asia, their stories do not and cannot constitute what is a definitive Asian dramaturgy and its history. The never-ending quest to trace what is Asian dramaturgy should not unearth clean boundaries and clear markers, but instead reveal a complex, ever-shifting web of dramaturgies and art-makers, with parts that continue to elude and obfuscate.

A dramaturg's journey is rarely straightforward and clearly mapped out in advance. Serendipity creates opportunity. Unimportant moments leave indelible marks. It is only in retrospect that a dramaturg might trace a clear route. Even then, the path might turn out to be more like an assemblage or network of potentialities. We have heard several dramaturg/ing stories at ADN gatherings. Speakers share experiences, anecdotes, moments, from working on significant projects. Sometimes over a meal, after a performance, or while in transit.

In Vol. 2, you'll find a series of three dramaturg's stories captured at past ADN proceedings. We hope they lead you to think about your story. Here is the first one:

TRACING A STORY/LINE

JANICE POON: A VERY SIMPLE MEAL



Janice Poon presenting at ADN Conference 2019 at The Arts House in Singapore on 25 May 2019.

I started my teaching career quite recently. I joined the Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts (HKAPA) less than two years ago and the very first mission that I was assigned, which is still in the discussion process, was to establish a new dramaturgy major.

Before that I was, like most of you here in the room, a practicing artist. I've been a playwright and a practicing dramaturg for quite a long time, almost 20 years now. And to be honest, I'm quite a private person. But after I joined the Academy, I had to deal with more than a hundred students walking along the corridor back and forth, some of them coming into my room and asking me questions. And it was really overwhelming.

But then, seeing all those faces in the corridor everyday, I couldn't help asking, what can I give them beyond knowledge? Will these students be artists one day? What kind of artists would they become?

As a dramaturg, I always thought I could be a production dramaturg. Ever since I started practicing dramaturgy, I've been an institutional dramaturg. But now my question has become: **Can I be my students' dramaturg?** That's one of the questions that I've been thinking about in the past year. And because I was given the mission to establish this new major in dramaturgy, I started to think about how dramaturgy can be taught from how I learnt dramaturgy in my own way.

I started encountering or learning dramaturgy when I established the first literary department for a theatre company in Hong Kong. It was in 2006 and I was a

one [wo]man band when I did this.

Back then, I learnt from a master who was a very experienced dramaturg in Beijing. His name is Lin Kehuan and we all called him Mr. Lin or Master Lin. And I remember how he taught me dramaturgy.

One day, he invited me to his home when I was travelling in Beijing. He prepared a meal for me. What he prepared was a very, very simple meal that any ordinary Chinese person in Beijing might eat. It was marinated cucumber, steamed rice and some pork with soya sauce. A very simple meal.

During his preparation, he introduced me to a special kind of vinegar that he used to marinate the cucumber. And the soya sauce was from a special factory from which he ordered it. And he also told me how he used a special grain to make the plain, steamed rice.

During the meal, we talked. We didn't talk about theatre. We didn't talk about dramaturgy. We just talked about anything that came up. Like our concerns, and how I am doing in the theatre company. He told me about his recent writing, the books that he planned to write before he retired. And after that meal, he sent me back to Hong Kong and honestly I didn't learn any methodology. I didn't learn how to become a dramaturg. But that meal means a lot to me.

It gives me a kind of mental or psychological support and energy, and it has become my metaphor of how I can become a dramaturg. So while I'm dramaturging - whether I'm in a theatre production, or being a teacher in an institution or academy - that experience is really, really important to me.

Recently a theatre director invited me to be a dramaturg for a theatre production and she asked, "Is there any methodology that you work with as a dramaturg? How can I, as a director, understand the work of a dramaturg? Is there a methodology that you can teach me or show me?"

I introduced her to a whole bunch of books and I said, "Okay, read this."


She found those books on Amazon and in libraries and she read some of them. Then she said to me, "Oh that's very helpful but, how can I apply what was written in the books into my dramaturgy in the upcoming production?"

In Asia, specifically in Hong Kong, we've been talking as if dramaturgy is a new thing and not many people are practicing it. And ever since people in the industry heard that we are launching a new major in dramaturgy [at HKAPA], the first question they ask is: "How will someone get a job with this degree?" Or they will say: "Well,

they're not going to get a job because there will not be any budget to include a dramaturg." Or "If there isn't enough budget the dramaturg is the first one to be cut from the production team".

Then I thought about when the video artist became indispensable in a production. Or when the lighting designer or sound designer became indispensable in the history of theatre. **I believe dramaturgs will become indispensable in theatre productions very soon.**

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 This story was edited from a presentation at a panel titled [Dramaturgs in Asia: Struggles and Strategies](#), which took place during ADN Conference 2019 on 25 May 2019 at The Arts House, Singapore.

THE ROLE OF DRAMATURGS IN ASIA

Janet Pillai



LEFT: Janet Pillai presenting her keynote address at ADN Conference 2019 at The Arts House on 25 May 2019.

RIGHT: Critical responses following Janet Pillai's keynote. (L to R) Ness Roque, Ken Takiguchi, Felipe Cervera, Janet Pillai, and moderator Lim How Ngean.

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Dramaturgy should be viewed as an adaptive process that is able to respond to place, people and use.

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Janet Pillai

Janet Pillai is a researcher, scholar and arts practitioner whose interests lie in the field of arts and culture education, as well as research and publication. Pillai worked for most of her career as a young people's theatre director, focused on collaborative and integrated arts processes, before moving into community-based arts and cultural sustainability. She is a member of [Five Arts Centre, Malaysia](#), a dynamic collective of artists, activists and producers, dedicated to generating alternative art forms and images in the contemporary arts landscape.

Pillai began her career in the teaching and practice of children's theatre in the 1970s. Her pioneering work involved collaborations with Malaysian performing artists and the young participants, resulting in more than twenty-five major productions, and an online resource called the [Arts Education Archive Malaysia](#).

In 2007, she founded [Arts-ED](#), a non-profit organisation in Penang, which provides place-based culture education for young people. Pillai served as Associate Professor at the Department of Performing Arts in University Sains Malaysia until 2013.

Pillai is currently an independent researcher and consultant in the area of cultural mapping, community-engagement, and arts and culture education. Her work entails research, training and programming with varied organisations and institutions (universities, NGO's, local government agencies, artists and planners) interested in community-engaged projects and place revitalization through the arts.

Pillai has authored five books and numerous articles on arts, culture and heritage education and cultural mapping. She also contributes as an expert resource person in regional organizations such as UNESCO Bangkok, APCIEU Korea, and GETTY Foundation.



The text is an edited transcript of a keynote address presented on 25 May 2019 at ADN Conference 2019 titled *Dramaturgy and the Human Condition*. ADN Conference 2019 was held at The Arts House, Singapore, as part of the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA). The text also draws from a similar presentation on 16 November 2019 in Kuala Lumpur, as part of [a workshop on dramaturgy](#) presented by Five Arts Centre, Malaysia. Critical responses from Felipe Cervera, Ken Takiguchi, Ness Roque are edited excerpts from the transcript of a post-keynote session on 25 May 2019 titled [Critical Responses to Keynote](#).

This talk presents an expansive and flexible notion of dramaturgy and its function, using a post-modernist and post-dramatic framework. I draw from ideas and experiences that I've had, as well as theories that have crossed my path.

Simply defined, dramaturgy is the theory and the practice of crafting or weaving together a performative/performance work. The process involves an interrogative or interactive process of engagement with ideas, spaces, processes, materials, mediums, artists, performers and potential audiences. The process may involve research, discourse, content analysis, exploration, interpretation, translation of ideas, composition and communication. Bearing all this in mind, the dramaturg plays the role of bridging a divide between theory and practice, creation and reflection, for the purpose of meaning-making through, or of, a performative event. And I prefer to use the word 'event', for reasons that will become evident as we go along.

Dramaturgy can also involve responding creatively to the larger socio-political milieu through the crafting of

performative/performance works that actively respond to, or reflect on, the context at hand. I will comment on micro-dramaturgy, which is the dramaturgy of artistic productions, and macro-dramaturgy, which responds to the larger socio-political reality. It is important to take a step back and look at the interplay between micro- and macro-dramaturgy as this can be a pathway to cultural reform.

When I was a student in university, I met the scholar Richard Schechner. That was in the late seventies and it was really an eye-opener. I think that his contribution, and that of other people after him who worked on the field of performance studies, has provided tools for us to work on our notions of what is the performative. We now draw from these methodologies and analytical tools to study all aspects of performance, and this includes the exploration of dramaturgy. So it's good to keep in mind what we mean by performance, beyond what we know of it within a conventional theatre building. I want to consider dramaturgy in traditional and contemporary performance genres, which include the ceremonial, cultural and political, as well as other kinds of

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It is important to take a step back and look at the interplay between micro- and macro-dramaturgy as this can be a pathway to cultural reform.

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events. So the role of the dramaturg is to look at different performative contexts and how the practice of dramaturgy actually transcends time and place quite easily and smoothly.

DRAMATURGY OF CULTURAL REFORM

In Europe, the term dramaturgy was introduced by German philosopher, writer and critic, G.E. Lessing, in his compilation of essays on dramatic theory. These essays were written while he served as dramaturg in Germany's first national theatre. Note however, that Lessing's position as dramaturg at the national theatre was created as part of a scheme to galvanise a distinctively German dramatic literature – he chose particular writers and scripts and critiqued style with the intention to use theatre as a process of cultural and social reform. This is an example of macro-dramaturgy at play.

Lessing's essays inspired a legacy of institutional dramaturgs in Europe. These institutional dramaturgs practiced micro-dramaturgy, selecting and working on specific scripts together with the director – as epitomised in the relationship between dramaturg Friederich Schiller who worked with the writer and director Johann Wolfgang von Goethe.

FELIPE CERVERA:

What strikes me about Janet's keynote is that the trajectory of the argument addresses the question of decolonisation, decolonial thought, and so on. Yet it uses what seems to be a very canonical history of Western theatre as the genealogy of dramaturgy. This is Artaud, this is Brecht, this is Lessing. And these guys were spending time doing theatre, trying to understand how dramatic structures work.

But if we move that concept to Asia, then it becomes related to issues of development. I'm sure that Janet did not mean to frame dramaturgy in Asia as a developmental tool, but as a creative tool. But it's interesting to have a moment of meta-analysis and be a bit more critical about the ways in which we write the histories of dramaturgy.

How we speak about dramaturgy is also dramaturgy. Janet started by referencing her encounter with Schechner and, indeed, the trajectory of the argument that she had was very Schechnerian in the sense that performance was a key concept to understand other cultures. (cont'd p.44)

(from p.43) Hence, the encounter with the other can be understood as a dramaturgical moment.

Thinking further: How dramaturgy can be a mediator between lineages of performance-making and lineages of society-making in Southeast Asia, but do so without framing performance practice here according to a historical teleology that marks European theatre and performance theory as the natural result.

So when we begin to unpack these historical trajectories of how we speak about dramaturgy, the point is not so much about finding what dramaturgy means in Asia, but to understand the relational ontologies that may define what dramaturgy is at any given point. In that sense, I also think that we can spend some time talking about the performativity in the dramaturgical practices. And here I'm using performativity in the Foucauldian sense, as a system of normativity of behaviour.

So, once we begin to think about the performativity in dramaturgy, the question is who can be a dramaturg? Who is allowed to be a dramaturg? And within the office of the dramaturg, what is allowed in the behaviour of dramaturging at any one moment in time and in any given place?

Their work entailed casting actors and mediating the interpretation of dramatic literary texts for audiences. So the dialogue between the director and the person who was dramaturging the text now began to be more fluid, and the two would actually move between theoretical reflection and practical exploration on stage before they actually created rehearsal pieces or a coherent performance.

I am particularly interested in Lessing's underlying dramaturgical discourse and practice, which was to engage in cultural reform and produce a theatre that was relevant to German society at the time. This idea of the dramaturgy of cultural reform appeals to me, and this is where I will interject with one of my own experiences.

When I first started to work professionally in the theatre in 1979, it was as a trainer and director in Teater Kanak-Kanak (Children's Theatre, TTK), a theatre programme for young people aged ten to sixteen. This was from 1974 till 1984, at the Kompleks Budaya Negara (National Cultural Complex, KBN) in Kuala Lumpur. There were two people who instigated or initiated this programme. One was the Director of Culture at the time, Ismail Zain, and the other was a

famous theatre director and critic, Krishen Jit. They brought me on board, and kind of mentioned - and I shared this vision with them - that they wanted to develop a kind of Malaysian children's theatre.

In the 1970s, Malaysia had drawn up a National Cultural Policy and set up a National Cultural Complex (Kompleks Budaya Negara, KBN). It had also founded the University Sains Malaysia in 1969, where I studied, which by the 1970s had begun to produce performing arts graduates. This context of policy, place, and human resource allowed for a dramaturgical scheme to produce a contemporary Malaysian children's theatre linked to tradition. At KBN where the TTK program was located, the young performers would observe and imbibe the traditional arts that were being practiced in the location, while being fed with contemporary and modern theatre training methods from instructors like myself who had newly graduated from university.

I relied on an ensemble approach for performance making. Admittedly this ensemble approach also arose from observing Krishen direct theatre in the mid and late seventies, when he was making ensemble-type theatre based on experimental and modernist scripts. A similar practice of co-creative agency and co-authorship was adopted when I, together with artist-collaborators, facilitated workshops or training sessions for the young people or devised performances with them.

As a young director I worked more intuitively than objectively. There was no tradition of script writing or acting for children at the time, so performances had to be devised and acting vocabularies drawn from theatre games, improvisations, films on Asian arts, observation of street life and instruction from traditional performance teachers in KBN. Drawing upon these eclectic materials and vocabularies, the participants

devised scenes that would articulate what one participant [Charlene Rajendran] called “a Malaysian sensibility and a semiotic of their location”.

At the time I had no idea what dramaturgy was, but my job was to orchestrate and structure the improvisations created by young people and weave them into a performance. Krishen as ‘mentor’ would attend showcase sessions of works-in-progress, ask probing questions and suggest dramaturgical possibilities. Krishen would also have very long, abstract talks with me over dinner. Very, very convoluted, big picture kinds of things would emerge in our conversations.

Looking back, I would say that Krishen’s interventions went beyond the level of micro-dramaturgy. If we zoom out a little, we can see a macro-dramaturgy at play – where Krishen Jit and Ismail Zain consciously framed the context for the development of an identifiable Malaysian children’s theatre by placing the Teater Kanak-Kanak programme within KBN and hiring university graduates like myself, and Elizabeth Cardoso before me, as instructors. This move on their part was catalytic to the development of a Malaysian children’s theatre that encouraged a fusion between modern developmental theories of play (as carried out by myself, a young graduate) and traditional play (as carried out in the cultural performance traditions performed at KBN).

In retrospect, I believe that there were two levels of dramaturgy simultaneously at play. The first was the micro-dramaturgical assistance provided by a mentor to a new director, in this case by Krishen to me. The second was a macro-dramaturgical practice that Krishen and Ismail used to frame the context for the development of an identifiable theatre for children, which articulated a Malaysian ethos. I find the relationships between that smaller dramaturgy and larger

dramaturgy very interesting. And certainly a mentor, an older person like Krishen, would have had it in mind, even though I hadn’t got there. I was working more at the production level, attempting to integrate elements from the traditional performing arts into a modern context with a vague intention to make a localised form of children’s theatre.

In 1994, Marianne Van Kerkhoven defines micro-dramaturgy as that which deals with a production, and macro-dramaturgy as that which deals with the social relevance and function of the theatre. She raises questions about the complex relationship between the dramaturg’s position in individual productions and his/her duty to the social context. In her words:

We could define the minor dramaturgy as that zone, that structural circle, which lies in and around a production. But a production comes alive through its interaction, through its audience, and through what is going on outside its own orbit. And around the production lies the theatre and around the theatre lies the city and around the city, as far as we can see, lies the whole world and even the sky and all its stars. The walls that link all these circles together are made of skin, they have pores, they breathe.

DRAMATURGY OF OTHER REALITIES

Traditional Asian theatre was to inspire some of the dramaturgical experiments of 20th century European avant-garde theatre practitioners such as Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. These theatre rebels overturned the cultural rules and norms of naturalistic

KEN TAKIGUCHI:

The role I want to highlight is the dramaturg as gap filler. Janet highlighted Artaud and pointed to how his encounter with ‘other’ cultural forms led to his developing performance that would awaken the audience’s unconscious. And I think that it is the reason why we like to do ‘intercultural’ theatre projects. (cont’d p.48)

(from p.47) I believe this is a very basic motivation we have in growing these practices. We know that a significant and deep encounter with the 'other' really opens up the unconscious. Not just of the audience, but also the creator.

But in the process of intercultural theatre-making, we can find a lot of gaps, especially perception gaps, on many different levels. And some gaps are very fundamental. Sometimes we don't have a shared understanding of what we call 'intercultural' or what we call 'collaboration'.

We have to be sensitive about these gaps and we have to constantly fill these gaps in the process of intercultural theatre-making. Sensitivity to these power relationships is also very important. As a dramaturg I have to struggle to set the ground for the discussions among the collaborators, and provide the information they need, and the multiple perspectives to be considered.

language that I can get inspired by". And this chance encounter with the way Balinese dance used music and movement was to reinforce his own very European notions of performance, and search for a performance language that would awaken the unconscious dimension of audiences.

Artaud went on to develop a dramaturgical strategy that would create a visceral assault on audience senses through an arrangement of sound, light, image, gesture and words. He

theatre and used spoken text, the body and mise-en-scène to jolt spectators in a black box type theatre out of their passive state. Meaning-making through movement, sound and visuals did not necessarily relate to reason or the intellect, unlike with literary text. Much like dance, performance relied on the materiality of the body and body language to make meaning. When Artaud attended a performance of Balinese dance at the Dutch Pavilion in the Paris Colonial Exposition in 1931, he was struck by how the performance appealed intensely to the senses; how gamelan music and dance movements created a "concrete physical language" and "intense stage poetry". He responded instinctively and resonated with the feeling that was created by the gamelan music and dance movements. It was a kind of concrete, physical language. But it was not his intention to do cross-cultural work. It was more like "Oh, there's another

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intended for the assault to shock audiences on a sensorial and physiological level to confront their "double" or the dark forces of their inner reality. So conceptually he was borrowing those elements from the Balinese dance. If we do not see it as borrowing, we can consider that perhaps he was inspired by it. This period was also back-dropped by Freud's publications and theories about the human psyche, more relevantly, the influence and consequences of the unconscious in our actions and social relationships.

I want to compare Artaud's dramaturgical strategy with that practiced in a traditional healing ritual called *Main Puteri*, performed in rural areas of southern Thailand, and in Kelantan, a north-eastern state in Peninsular Malaysia. The ritual of *Main Puteri* is enacted to correct an imbalance in a person's *angin* [psychic energy] or *semangat* [life essence]. This imbalance is believed to be the result of a spirit possession. The exorcism ceremony that is held to remedy this condition is led by a *bomoh* [shaman], who also acts as an intermediary to summon spirits into his own body. This is done in order to identify the one that has caused the illness. The bomoh then acts as a healer to appease and cajole the spirit causing the illness to cease disturbing the patient. In many ways the bomoh is 'winging it'.

In this metaphysical context, the bomoh, assisted by the *minduk* [spirit interrogator], utilises live dramaturgy to create a performative space that facilitates a passageway between the animate and inanimate realm, and to weave a play between protagonist (patient) and antagonist (spirit). Elements of music, movement, chant

LIM HOW NGEAN:

Something that struck me was this idea of winging it. I love that phrase, because in our seminars we often talk about serious discussion, or the dialogic, or a kind of considered critical response that we want to engage with as dramaturgs when we deal with the creator, and the artwork. But there are times and instances when we have to wing it. (cont'd p.50)

(from p.49) How is this winging it then? Not something willy-nilly, not whimsy, but couched within context. The context is there, and the research before going into any project is also there.

As a nervous dramaturg, I do a lot of research before even stepping into a rehearsal process or before engaging with the project.

So this winging it is not a mindless winging it. There is a body of knowledge that you have tried to absorb, and you try to perhaps improvise and catalyse and synthesise for the purpose of this particular project that you're working on. Thus, it looks as if you're winging it, but it comes with that embodied practice and learning.

modal elements and plays with languages, mediums and beliefs familiar to his audience to restore order.

Performance – theatrical, ritual political or everyday social – is a culturally-bound phenomenon tied to the historical, social, economic, scientific, aesthetic and political milieu from which it emerges. If performance is meant to be impactful or generate meaning for an audience it needs to connect with, reflect upon, prod or challenge the cultural context in which its audience resides. In this sense, dramaturgy facilitates an adaptive response to the immediate context.

and dialogue are manipulated in a very loud and visceral manner to induce trance or an altered state of awareness, as well as to prod and guide performers.

In 1979, researcher Paul Chen describes how the *bomoh*, *minduk* and music ensemble provide a conceptual framework that allows the patient to organise his/her chaotic symptoms so that they become comprehensible and orderly, thus drawing the patient out of his/her state of morbid self-absorption and heightening his/her feelings of self-worth. Involvement of family, relatives and friends further enhance group solidarity and reintegrate the sick individual into his/her immediate social group. **In this instance the shaman acts as interlocutor to address the dialectic between the animate and inanimate world and the chaos resulting from a breach between the two realms. As a dramaturg-cum-performer he brings together multi-**

DRAMATURGY OF DISRUPTION

We have seen how for traditional theatre, in Asia and elsewhere, the roles of the dramaturg, content creator, director and performer may be less distinct or at times merged. While in the West, Lessing's initial definition confined the dramaturg's role to the desk - to read, select and edit scripts – this role was to evolve towards allowing the dramaturg to participate in the process of theatre-making. Brecht played the role of dramaturg, playwright and director. He researched historical and political content, experimented with aesthetic and technical aspects of production and introduced new acting techniques. Brecht's dramaturgy basically put a focus on giving shape to the social function of theatre.

Brecht's epic theatre was focused on how to communicate Marxist principles to the audience. He was looking for ways in which the theatre could play a critical role in revealing and critiquing attitudes, emotions and behaviours, which he saw as products of historical processes and institutional norms that should be changed. He was against naturalistic theatre because of how it led audiences to passively accept the realities of the ruling class as unchangeable.

In 1935, at a demonstration of Beijing Opera by the actor Mei Lanfang in Berlin, Brecht discovered how stylization allowed the Chinese actor to hold himself at a distance from the character being portrayed. This inspired his dramaturgical technique of *verfremdungseffekt* [alienation effect], in which he used alienating devices in acting, scenography and dramaturgical structure to disrupt a viewing experience, and force spectators to stop empathising with the characters from time to time. He wanted to activate critical thinking in audiences so he employed dialectical dramaturgy as an

instrument to prod spectators to confront and acknowledge their social and political reality.

He noted how Chinese traditional acting embodied his notion of the

estrangement effect, providing a technique that facilitated critical viewing and reinforced what he was already working towards – the need for performance to encourage political and analytical thinking. This approach to disruptive viewing was meant to facilitate audience engagement in social inquiry during the performance.

Dramaturgy facilitates an adaptive response to the immediate context.

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NESS ROQUE:

What I'm going to share is my appreciation of the expanding definition of dramaturgy or the role of the dramaturg. Because I was recently part of a project where I didn't think of myself as a dramaturg.

Nobody called me a dramaturg, in part because it was not a performance work. It was more of an arts-based environmental education and disaster risk reduction project. The project was called *Art for Resilient Communities* implemented by Salikhain Kolektib, then known as Prodix Artist Community.

This was a community-based work that my husband, a sculptor, was spearheading (cont'd p.53)

PARTICIPATORY OR CO-CREATIVE DRAMATURGY

In developing countries across Asia, Africa and Latin America, socially orientated forms of 'people's theatre' began to emerge in the 1960s and 70s as a reaction to advancing capitalism and a growing demand for civil rights. This movement included a rejection of institutionalised control and hierarchical structures within the theatre and gave birth to more democratically structured ways of making theatre – effectively ones that were more process-based. All the collaborators – directors, designers,

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producers and actors – would have a say in creating content, and deciding how to communicate the material using the combined knowledge, skills and imaginations of the group.

Across the Asian region three trajectories of people's theatre emerged in this period – theatre for, by and with the people – the latter two utilizing participatory dramaturgy to empower citizens through their active involvement in the making and presentation of the work. Participatory forms of theatre included 'theatre for development', 'popular theatre' and 'theatre for education'. Some companies in Asia that pioneered the approach of participatory dramaturgy were PETA (Philippines Educational Theatre Association) in the Philippines, KUNCI in Indonesia, Black Tent Theatre in Japan, and Alternative Living Theatre in West Bengal, India.

Cultural workers or animateurs mobilised ordinary citizens from communities and worked collaboratively with them to devise performances in which these participants identified and analysed their socio-economic problems, critiqued the mechanisms of their societal structure and used popular culture to communicate their analysis

(from p.52) with other members of our collective. I was at first part of the project as a finance manager, and my role was just allocating funds. But when we went to the community, there was not much for me to do, because I was just giving out the funds for buying things. So I had a lot of free time and found myself doing a lot of dramaturgical work. [Audience laughs]

At first I would not have acknowledged it as dramaturgy because it was not a performance work. But then after hearing Janet's talk, and reading what she wrote, I was like, "No, actually, I was doing dramaturgical work."

I think the language of being a dramaturg is useful when I go into communities, because I wouldn't use the word 'directing' community interaction with them. It sounds a bit more controlling. But to think of myself as a dramaturg of this interaction is a lot more open. Kinder.

I would say my role for this project was to design the time that we were spending together, and co-design and co-facilitate the interactions within the workshops and also "behind the scenes." In a way, this dramaturgical role was a natural extension of my responsibility as the person managing the finances-- decisions like how long we could stay in the area, even what kind of food we were serving also had an impact on our relations with our (cont'd p. 54)

(from p.53) community partners and participants. This included being sensitive to the social actors and agents in that situation. Because there are a lot of things to consider - there's the head of the village, there are the teachers, there are the *barangay* [village] health workers, etc. And we have to navigate our interactions with them. And so that was what I found myself doing in that work.

Thus, I immediately related to what Janet was talking about in terms of participatory dramaturgy, because even in this mapping project, our collective facilitated it in such a way that we asked them what they wanted to see in the map. (The method we did was based on Participatory 3D Mapping as practiced by the Philippine Geographical Society, who were also our collaborators.) If they didn't want a political map, then we didn't do it. So we asked them what they wanted to see. If they wanted to see the school, they put the marker of the school. They wanted to see where the waterfalls are, so that's what we put in the map. If they wanted to see the political delineations of their villages, that's what we did.

I think that was a participatory kind of dramaturgy. Determining what this sculpture was going to contain, the meaning and interaction that they wanted to have with it after we left this object with them.
(cont'd p.55)

and solutions to community audiences. Participants played multiple roles as observers, researchers, facilitators and performers, while cultural workers or amateurs facilitated social mobilisation, group dynamics, theatre skills and post-performance dialogues with audiences. This dialogical and co-creative art-making process draws the community into social interaction and negotiation, leading to the creation of a public commons for dialogue and conscientisation.

In the late 70's, I was studying sociology at undergraduate level in Universiti Sains Malaysia in Penang, and became very interested in the participatory theatre forms of theatre taking place in Southeast Asia, from a sociological perspective. Later in 1984, when I was exposed to Asian and Western theatre at graduate level at the University of Hawaii, I became intrigued by the cross-influences, borrowings and permeability of forms between eastern and western participatory and co-creative dramaturgical approaches. When I founded Arts-ED (an NGO dedicated to arts, culture and heritage education with young people) in Penang in 2000, my inclination was to apply these participatory and co-creative

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dramaturgical strategies. On the one hand this happened quite naturally as a result of my interest and exposure to the theory and practice of participatory forms of theatre. On the other hand, it was the extraordinary setting of Georgetown in Penang which was catalytic to the adoption of new dramaturgical strategies.

The organisation Arts-ED is located in the inner city of Georgetown, a historical site settled by a multicultural diaspora of peoples from Asia. Upon discovering that the rich heritage of the site was being threatened by development pressure and outmigration of younger families, Arts-ED began to work with residents, artists and heritage organisations on site to help residents retrace, recover and regenerate lost skills and narratives. The work involved intergenerational research and skill learning, co-creation of new works or designs and promotion of the cultural assets.

Through these projects I was able to further the process of participatory dramaturgy where artist-collaborators and young participants researched, devised and shaped creative works together, while approaching the adult residential community as a traditional source of knowledge and skills transmission.

DIALOGICAL DRAMATURGY

Socially engaged arts practice and community engaged arts practice are more recent forms of arts practice with a strong social function, which strive to involve civil society directly in decision-making, problem solving and co-creation. Many hybrid manifestations of this practice can be found all over Asia today both in urban and rural settings, which utilise both

(from p.54) It's pedagogical dramaturgy because we wanted to discuss environmental issues with them. And this was also a collaboration with an environmental scientist. Dialogical dramaturgy because it was a dialogue between a community and us.

participatory dramaturgy and dialogical dramaturgy. It was while conducting research in Japan on community-engaged arts in 2013 that I discovered the use of dialogical dramaturgy which encourages members of communities to negotiate the complexities of interests and perceptions, build consensus and shape collaborative projects.

In Japan, the growth of community-based arts initiatives is associated with its post-industrial and post-modernisation history. Issues such as large-scale natural disasters, industrial pollution, an aging population and the degeneration of rural economies have been the main impetus for revitalisation policies since the 1980s. These policies, supported by municipalities, universities and local government encourage initiatives that originate from within communities and encourage self-determinism and autonomy.

Small-scale art projects in Tokyo and Osaka such as the *Toride Art Project*, *Yanaka no Otake* and *Cocoroom*, tend to focus on connecting communities with their locality and improving communication and conviviality among residents. In these projects a mediator coordinates the interface between stakeholders, artists, place and community. **The artist as dramaturg frames an art project employing a dialogical dramaturgical process that is able to draw the community into social interaction, and enable them to negotiate and co-create. Projects are designed to create new solidarities between migrants and locals, rural and urban, young and old.**

One of the initiatives in the *Toride Art Project* involved an old apartment block predominantly occupied by a retired population, where there was little communication between residents. The project kicked off with the aim of first improving conviviality between residents. For a start, the artist created the idea of a talent bank or [tokuino bank](#), in which members

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The artist as dramaturg frames an art project employing a dialogical dramaturgical process that is able to draw the community into social interaction, and enable them to negotiate and co-create. 99

of the community identify a talent that they possess which they can 'bank in'. This might be repair skills by a computer technician or engineer, or haircutting skills by a hairdresser, and so on. If a person banks in a talent, he/she then gets to withdraw somebody else's talent. Like an exchange of sorts, but using the metaphor of a banking system. Throughout the year, residents in the apartment block, many of whom had never spoken to each other, could actually bank in and bank out talents. This physical exchange of favors was a very performative form of sharing that brought residents into intimate contact and reciprocal relations. The talent bank project in conjunction with another community co-creation project that involved rehabilitation of a void space into a community-run café, transformed community relations.

CONCLUSION

Sociologist Erving Goffman adapted the term dramaturgy from the theatre and used it to examine micro-sociological human interactions in daily life. Human interactions, he argues,

are diverse and dependent on time, place and audience. He describes humans as social actors who take on and play various established roles on cue, even selecting clothes, accessories and props appropriate to the setting and audience. Similarly, the arena of politics and business has also been associated with 'performance'. Crafting of the political event or business presentation is critical to image or impression management, and dramaturgy is seen to be at work in the orchestration of the text, action and mise-en-scène to get the right message across.

I'd like to end by saying that **I think that the examination of dramaturgy demands a more expanded and flexible approach, and I don't think it's wise to use positivist forms of categorisation based on genre or authorship or regionalism.** Although those categories may be useful for descriptive or analytical purposes, in reality they are very restrictive. They defy space, time and context, deny the process of change and chance, thus limiting the use of many mediums by which meaning is created and communicated. Performative traditions are a phenomenon found in all geographies. The examples that I have drawn from show how performance is impacted by the ideological, historical and socio-political contexts from which they emerge. **Dramaturgy should be viewed as an adaptive process that is able to respond to place, people and use.**

Artaud's and Brecht's chance meetings with Asian performance that acted as a catalyst in rethinking their dramaturgical strategies points to how a dramaturg is constantly involved in the dynamic process of response and adaptation to the period, to the milieu, to material and mediums, and to the creative relationships between collaborators and their crafts. Dramaturgy allows for a reorganization of the artistic sphere. In Worthen's terms: "Dramaturgy arises at the politico-aesthetic nexus of performance: between its conception and its execution,

between its practices and its purposes, between its aesthetic and artistic aims and its action with and through the audience".

A dramaturg acts to engage with the social, political (or metaphysical) realities of the time and place; to interpret or promote discourse or viewpoints within a society, to intervene and bring awareness or create change. The role calls for an understanding, and sometimes a breaking, of boundaries and cultural codes, semiotics and philosophy. Hence, the role of a dramaturg is not so easily defined. The dramaturg has been described differently in different circumstances; objective observer, interpreter, interlocutor, creative mediator, coach, intervener, broker, curator, etc. The role is shaped by several variables; the context, the content, the type of performance, the audiences, the intentions, creative relationships, components and elements. This also depends on how you want to connect to your audience. Something that is planned quite consciously by the maker, and how he/she wants to relate to the spectator. It's about making or breaking meaning.

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[TRACING A STORY/LINE]

LIM HOW NGEAN: AN ACCIDENTAL DRAMATURG



Lim How Ngean presenting at ADN Lab 2018 at Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, Indonesia on 7 September 2018.

I fell into the role of a dramaturg by accident in 2009 when Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay in Singapore was launching a platform for young choreographers. Tang Fu Kuen, a dramaturg and scholar, recommended that perhaps I should dramaturg with a particular young choreographer. I did not know what I was doing at that time. Having said that, it's now 2018 and I am still struggling to understand what I'm doing.

I have clear ideas sometimes and sometimes I don't. Clear ideas come when I am working on a particular project. I do believe that the role of the dramaturg is one that has to be experienced, even though there are lots of theories, concepts, philosophies related to the term 'dramaturgy'. There are also theories and concepts behind the term 'dramaturg'. But one really learns best by doing the work.

The dramaturg is more than just a first audience; a dramaturg is an informed audience that has the care of criticality for the performance. The dramaturg gives feedback and commentary that are important to the work. I feel that this criticality is what makes the dramaturg's presence beneficial. The ongoing feedback becomes a consistent part of the creative process. And it is like having someone who is helping to watch over, like "jaga" [Malay word for 'care about'] the work.

A dramaturg is also someone who looks at the big picture. The role of the dramaturg doesn't end with the end of the performance, but it carries on post-performance. From dramaturgy that has expanded from theatre - because I am an arts dramaturg - I look at dramaturgy from several aspects other than written texts, such as "gerak tubuh" [Malay for 'body movement'], the physical vocabulary, "pola gerakan" [Malay for 'movement pattern', or

"pola lantai" [Malay for 'floor pattern']]. There is still some kind of narrative that is sometimes used in choreography. Then there is a larger concern for the aesthetics of the performance - from lighting to sound, to set and scenography.

I have worked mostly with Pichet Klunchun, a contemporary Thai choreographer, in the last few years. He has training or foundation in a classical Thai form called "Khon", which has very strong similarities with some of the classical vocabulary and styles of the classical Indonesian dance dramas.

For Pichet, the dramaturg is the watcher who observes the choreographer and the work under creation, then gives feedback from different perspectives. Comments from the dramaturg are important because they can help the choreographer focus and stay ontrack. The dramaturg is 'the third eye' for the choreographer. For Pichet, the premise was very simple - he needed someone to talk to. He needed a sounding board.

The thing about being a dramaturg is that we question a lot. With Pichet, I had the privilege and luxury of someone always questioning me. Then, I had to either give him my point of view, or to return a question with a question in a playful way.

If I ask my choreographers a question,

I do not expect an immediate answer. The questions are usually for them to reflect and to think. Therefore, time is needed when working together so that there is time to distill ideas and to grow the ideas. Often, I ask Pichet questions and I will tell him not to answer. And he won't. But because he is a sharp artist, a sharp man, and very intelligent, I will sometimes get answers a week later. In fact, he is being playful again when he won't even tell me the answers unless we are back at the studio. So, my understanding of the dramaturg is informed by what we are doing in the studio.

I've just started working with Eko Supriyanto, who has recently started incorporating a dramaturg in all his works. He has a different opinion from Pichet, although along the same lines. Eko's idea is that the dramaturg is his partner in the creation process - his artistic partner that he can trust in considering critical feedback, giving responses to the work that they are doing and to the processes that are happening. He talks about how we will get into lengthy discussions about all areas and aspects of the performance or the creation that he is going into. He covers it all - choreography, vocabulary, music, and scenography.

These are some of my ideas that I am still trying to formulate around how we

can talk about the role of a dramaturg and what it means to do dramaturgy.

* * *



This story was edited from a presentation at the ADN panel titled *The Role of the Dramaturg in Performance-Making: Case Studies and Critical Reflections*, which took place on 7 September 2018 at Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

ATTENDING TO THE 'OFFENSIVE':

DRAMATURGICAL WORK IN THEATRE AND IN LIFE

Chong Gua Khee



The Difference and Deference – The Question of Culture roundtable at ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 in Adelaide, Australia on 2 October 2017. (L to R) Chairperson Kok Heng Leun, Edwin Kemp Attrill, Alfian Sa'at, and Annette Shun Wah.

In the past decade or so of being an avid theatregoer, I've found myself fidgeting at times in my seat and wondering in exasperation, "How much longer will this performance go on for?" In these moments, I always think back to a question that a university professor once asked my class: **What would make you walk out of a theatre performance?** I've since forgotten what the module was about (Sorry, professor!), as well as the context in which this question was posed. But it left such a deep impression on me because I couldn't comprehend then how someone might answer the question. As a young theatre student, theatre felt so sacred. At that point, I couldn't imagine or accept that there might be legitimate reasons to justify this seeming insult to the performers and everyone else involved in the production. Wouldn't my walking out offend them?

Since my graduation though, I've encountered a broad range of productions and practitioners, both as an audience member and as part of the creative team. Theatre has become more ordinary in one sense and more special in another. In the process, I've come to realise that there *are* actually many valid reasons why someone might walk out of a theatre. Perhaps

boredom is sufficient justification, and certainly self-care warrants taking action. For instance, if what they see on stage – be it in terms of content, stylistic treatment, or usage of special effects – is triggering an anxiety attack, leaving is in fact a helpful way to protect their wellbeing.

I also imagine that for some people, walking out is an entirely valid response when a production is deemed offensive. Which raises the question: **what makes something 'offensive'?** **Why might a performance be intolerable, unacceptable and unfit for viewing?** Is it because it performs intentionally derogatory or disrespectful perspectives? Or is it because a different or contrary worldview is portrayed, particularly in a context accustomed to fixed frames of what is permissible?

For productions that are regarded as objectionable and perhaps wounding, audiences often do more than just walk out of the theatre. They might lodge complaints with authorities or create a public outcry. For example, at the 2017 Asian Dramaturg Network (ADN) [Satellite Symposium themed *Dramaturgies of the Social and Cultural*](#), Alfian Sa'at, one of the speakers at the roundtable [Difference & Deference – The Question of Culture](#) talked about [the play *Talaq* and the huge controversy that arose surrounding its staging](#):

Elangovan, a playwright in Singapore, who is an Indian, but also a Hindu, wrote this play [*Talaq*] based on interviews with this particular actress – Nargis Banu. She's an Indian Muslim, and she talked about the domestic abuse that she suffered at the hands of her husband, as well as how her husband tried to use certain Islamic verses to justify this abuse. When *Talaq* was first staged in 1998, in Tamil, it was done to little fanfare, and was actually well reviewed. However, in 2000, they wanted to translate this work into both Malay as well

as English. **And that's when all hell broke loose, because of concerns from the minority Malay-Muslim community about not airing your dirty linen to a wider public.** As a result, the license [to stage a public performance] was not granted for this second staging, and there was even a huge confrontation [between the theatre company] with the police.

Clearly, for some, any public scrutiny and discussion of private or domestic concerns feels inappropriate, and therefore the attempt to stage *Talaq* was regarded as a form of disrespect, if not hostility. Apart from the production being shut down, the theatre practitioners involved in *Talaq* also received death threats, which is unfortunately not uncommon when people feel offended or attacked. Across different times and spaces, countless people in theatre and other professions have been blacklisted, detained, or even murdered just because their work was perceived to challenge prevailing societal or cultural norms around sensitive topics such as race, religion, sexuality or gender.

Why then persist in such work? To answer this, I turn to Janet Pillai's keynote (presented earlier in this volume), in which she says the following about the role of dramaturgs, but which I feel is applicable to all arts practitioners:

A dramaturg acts to engage with the social, political (or metaphysical) realities of the time and place; to interpret or promote discourse or viewpoints within a society, to intervene and bring awareness or create change. ... It's about making or breaking meaning.

Dramaturging the 'offensive' may be a necessary part of dealing with difference, particularly in situations where sensitivities are high around certain topics. In a world that

is becoming increasingly polarised, it feels especially important that the arts is not only a space to continue sharing marginalised voices, but one where these stories are told in ways that make it possible for unusual perspectives to be understood, if not connected with, by those who might otherwise be averse to such views. This may sound like a tall order, but in Pillai's keynote, she offers a dramaturgical framework that supports arts practice seeking to do so. Specifically, Janet highlights two levels of dramaturgy to consider in a production – the “micro-dramaturgy, which is the dramaturgy of artistic productions, and [the] macro-dramaturgy, which responds to larger socio-political reality”. She also emphasises that “it is important to take a step back and look at the interplay between micro- and macro-dramaturgy as this can be a pathway to cultural reform”.

To better illustrate these two levels of dramaturgy, as well as the interplay between them, this article draws from the rich presentations at the earlier-mentioned 2017 roundtable [Difference & Deference – The Question of Culture](#), where the speakers shared evocatively about their approaches and experiences with staging productions that offered windows into alternative viewpoints. The roundtable was moderated by Kok Heng Leun, and the three featured speakers were (in order of speaking): Annette Shun Wah, Alfian Sa'at and Edwin Kemp Attrill.

Firstly, to get a sense of what micro-dramaturgy at play looks like, it is helpful to zoom in on Kemp Attrill's presentation, as he gave various examples of dramaturgical choices in productions by his former company [ActNow Theatre](#). For instance, he said the following about ActNow Theatre's 2017 production [Zero Feet Away](#):



Edwin Kemp Attrill speaking at ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 on 2 October 2017.

Zero Feet Away was ‘an experiment in virtual intimacy’, and we designed a mobile phone app [for the production] that enabled the audience to have anonymous communication with us on stage about their sex lives. The structure of the performance was basically the artists in the space sharing their own stories about being on Grindr, or having sex, or what it means to be gay or queer in Adelaide in 2017. We then asked the audience questions through this app like, “What’s the best sex you’ve ever had?”, “What’s the worst sex you’ve ever had?”, “What’s your sexuality?”, or “What’s something that you’ll never tell a stranger?”.

In *Zero Feet Away*, as in all the things that we [ActNow Theatre] do, we look at difference through focusing on diversity and similarities. So in this piece, we’re asking simple questions to the audience, but you get this feed of responses that shows the diversity and the similarities across the people in the space.

For an example of macro-dramaturgy, Shun Wah's presentation was insightful – she spoke not only to the macro-dramaturgies at play for the company she belongs to, but also her own macro-dramaturgy as a practitioner:

Contemporary Asian Australian Performance is the name of our company, and I think that immediately signifies the kind of cultural difference we are trying to grapple with. It was started by actor Rick Lau and dancer/choreographer Paul Cordeiro because they and their colleagues couldn't get work [in the Australian arts scene]. **They wanted to create opportunities so that artists of Asian background were not excluded from the work that was being made in Australia.**

But for me, it's always been about a lot more than just having stage time.

For me, it has been about presenting authentic stories and deeply thought-out characters that reflect who we [Asian Australians] are in the substance of the work. So people who go to the theatre all the time can find some stories that they've never encountered before, told in voices and perspectives that they've not encountered before. And for people who've never been to theatres before, because they didn't think that there was anything



Annette Shun Wah speaking at ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 on 2 October 2017.

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there that related to them, they can hear a story that is similar to their own being told in the public sphere, which is incredibly powerful and gives a sense of empowerment.

Finally, as a full 'case study' of the two levels of dramaturgy and how they inform and influence each other, it's useful to examine Sa'at's presentation in detail, as he spoke at length about these two aspects. In this first of two excerpts, Sa'at meticulously traces the various contexts and backdrops against which *Nadirah* was staged, and also highlights his own personal context for creating *Nadirah*, from which his macro-dramaturgy for this work can be discerned:

(Context of Islam in Singapore and Malaysia)

At this point [the 2010s] in Singapore as well as Malaysia, the Muslim communities in both countries are actually quite hostile towards what they see as minority progressive strains of Islam.

I know we are aware of conservatism in Islam, and people talk about Wahhabism for example, but I think there's less focus on how these ideas are actually distributed and circulated in society. Petrodollars are certainly responsible for the export of certain puritanical forms of Islam, but within the community, certain ideas spread as well due to anti-colonial sentiment. So in many ways, the rejection of liberal Islam is also a rejection of what some people believe is Western liberalism or things that are emanating from the West that they feel are threatening the core of Islam. **This, therefore, makes it very difficult to critique Islam within Islam, without being seen as a Western stooge.**

(The Malay-Muslim community in Singapore)

In Singapore, the Malay-Muslim community is also a minority community, so there are all these questions about self-image, about performing under a majority gaze. The community is often pathologised in Singapore and seen as a problem community – it's the most economically depressed community in Singapore, and there are social problems as well, like a high prison population, drug problems. And with Islam, there's also the affiliation with terrorism. So although [Singapore is a multi-racial society and] you have the Indian and the Chinese communities [alongside the Malay community], the Malay community is the one that is seen as an underclass. As a result, the community always wants to, in a sense, project their best selves. So the space for diverse representations is always very limited.

(Malay theatre in Singapore)

People who do Malay theatre in Singapore who try to push for certain progressive ideas in Singapore have faced challenges. One such person is Alin Mosbit [a playwright and director]. Her 1993 play *Kosovo* looked at the Bosnian crisis as it was unfolding, and had these characters who were nuns. And Alin had Malay actors acting as nuns. So no problem, right? It's acting. You're putting on a character and [taking on] the character's habits. But she also got them to make the sign of the cross on their bodies, and this was a huge controversy, because to perform this gesture is in a sense to exit Islam and to take on another religion.

Mimesis and representation has always been a big debate within Islam. So a lot of Islamic art is anionic, which means that it's non-representational. There are



Alfan Sa'at speaking at ADN Satellite Symposium 2017 on 2 October 2017.

big issues with representing the human figure, with representing even the Prophet in Islam. So most Islamic art is calligraphy or geometric patterns, plants, foliage, but not representational figures.

So how acting is located within Islamic art has always been very contentious. More conservative factions among Muslims don't actually see a separation between the actor and the character. So if you do certain things on stage, you sin. That's that. Because it is your body. There is no way in which you can dislocate yourself, even if you are playing a character. So that [having Malay-Muslim actors in *Kosovo* making the sign of the cross] was a big controversy.

(Personal context for creating *Nadirah*)

From this sort of backdrop survey of what we are dealing with in Singapore, I want to discuss *Nadirah*, a play that we [Sa'at with Teater Ekamatra] did in

Singapore in our attempt to carve out a space for progressive or liberal ideas in Islam.

Nadirah was actually inspired by a filmmaker from Malaysia called Yasmin Ahmad, who's an interesting figure in Malaysia, as she's been trying to carve out a space for both multiculturalism and liberal Islam as a response to ethno-nationalism in Malaysia.

In 2009, she passed away very suddenly, and in my grief, I thought, 'OK, I really needed to respond to this in some way'. I eventually decided I would look at her back catalogue of films, and try to write a play based on each of her films, as a kind of way to give them an afterlife. So [creating] *Nadirah* is my riff [as a playwright] on her film *Muallaf*, which in Arabic means "the convert", and you can see even the publicity [of *Nadirah*] quoted [the \[publicity\] image \[of *Muallaf*\]](#).

In this second excerpt, Sa'at speaks to the plot of *Nadirah* and outlines the micro-dramaturgies at play. Significantly, as he unpacks the specific dramaturgical choices and strategies that were employed in *Nadirah*, Sa'at relates them back to his macro-dramaturgy and the larger socio-political realities that he had earlier traced, pointing to the important but complex



Publicity image for the first staging of *Nadirah* (2009).
Image credit: Teater Ekamatra.

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interplay amongst the two levels of dramaturgy and these larger socio-political realities.

(The plot of *Nadirah*)

The crux of *Nadirah* is Nadirah's mother, Sahirah. Sahirah is actually a Chinese woman who married a Malay-Muslim man, and then converted to Islam. The man decides to have a second wife, which is allowed within Islam, and Sahirah says no and gets a divorce. Under Sharia law, because Nadirah is less than eight years old at that point, Sahirah gets automatic custody. However, the judge [in that custody trial] was basically saying, "You are a new convert. I don't think you can raise your child in the Muslim manner." So for fear of losing custody, Sahirah raises Nadirah as a very staunch Muslim, sending her to madrasahs and so on. So we have a situation where the mother is not so Muslim, but the daughter is very Muslim. In university, Nadirah is the vice-president of the Muslim Society, and she plans all these interfaith meetings with the representatives of other faith organisations.

And then Sahirah meets this man who's a Christian, who doesn't wish to convert to Islam. This becomes the inciting incident in the play. It's an interfaith relationship that we're looking at. And we find Nadirah actually struggling to reconcile this idea of the interfaith in public, and then in private, she has to deal with her mother's interfaith relationship.

(Dramaturgical choices and strategies in *Nadirah*)

Form

In creating *Nadirah*, **we asked ourselves: what kind**

of a play could we do to reach certain sectors of the Singapore audience? It was a very deliberate [dramaturgical choice] to work with social realism [as a form]. I know some people will say, “Oh, but that’s such a conservative form. Why are you trying to communicate to conservative audiences with a conservative form, you know? Why not challenge them? Why don’t you use more experimental [forms]...?” But we really did feel, with our understanding of the demographics of the audience, that social realism was something that they were familiar with, that they responded very strongly to narrative, and that they would not feel alienated from the start.

Language

We were aware that to do the whole play in Malay would be very transgressive, so *Nadirah* was performed in a mix of both Malay and English. That was quite important, given some of its ideas – there are certain things that are so difficult to address in Malay. For example, we don’t even have a term for “homosexual” in the Malay language. All the terms are slurs. So to be able to discuss homosexuality given that kind of linguistic background is very difficult.

Setting

The main character, Nadirah, is vice-president of the university’s Muslim Society, and she plans all these interfaith meetings with the representatives of other faith organisations. With her character, it was important for us to go from the public [sphere]—where she wears a hijab—to the private and domestic sphere, where she takes it [the hijab] off. And this was important because

of the idea of mimesis and representation in Islam that I spoke about earlier, that if she [Nadirah] doesn’t wear the hijab [onstage], it would mean that she’s a bad Muslim. But we wanted to show that within a domestic setting, where it’s just her [Nadirah] and her mother, it’s realistic that she doesn’t wear a hijab. So this shift [of settings] addresses issues about performing Islam and performing Muslim-ness in private as well as public contexts.

Characters

We wanted to play out religious freedom [in the play *Nadirah*], but we knew from the start that to do a play about a Muslim person who denounces the religion or who wants to convert is really going to be a very sensitive flashpoint. Apostasy is one of those taboos in Islam, it’s blasphemy, we would be seen as advocating for something that was very unacceptable to the wider community. So we had to be very strategic. So Sahirah as a character – a Chinese woman who converted after marrying a Malay-Muslim man – became a kind of liminal figure, who in a sense had one foot in and one foot out of the religion. That made things a bit more palatable for our audience. Of course, we have also been criticised for not pushing the envelope hard enough, that this was a kind of cop-out compromise. But we felt that this was really the only way for us to initiate that kind of dialogue, rather than have people getting defensive from the start.

Similarly, it was very important that within the play, we also had a character who’s a so-called liberal feminist Muslim, who suddenly has this change of heart and puts on the hijab. This was another way for us to not appear so strident and mono-dimensional in trying to advocate

for a kind of liberal Islam. In the play, the characters represent a whole constellation of issues in the Muslim community, and each also represents different aspects of the debate, to show various viewpoints and give the audience a sense that their viewpoints are also given space on stage.

At the same roundtable session, a participant who had watched *Nadirah* when staged in Singapore articulated how unforgettable the production was for her as a Chinese-Singaporean who had then recently converted to being Muslim:

I just wanted to give a personal response to *Nadirah*. So actually, I'm a Muslim convert. I married a Malay boy. I went to watch *Nadirah* at quite an interesting point in my life – when I just got married. But before that, I went through the whole “Oh, why can't we just get married because you love me? Why can't we have a civil marriage?” Anyway, it was about a year and a half after we got married, when I was trying to figure out my position as a convert in the family, and trying to navigate between my Chinese family and all that, that I actually went to watch *Nadirah* on my own. It was one of those interesting things that I couldn't get my usual theatre *kakis* [buddies] to go with me, because they weren't really interested for whatever reason. I couldn't get my husband to go [with me as well] because he wasn't really interested. I think we were still at a point where he didn't want to get into a conversation about it.

And watching *Nadirah*, I felt it represented what could be me. For me, a divorce was never an issue, because I never believed that two people have to stay together. But what happened onstage made me think about, “Oh my god, what if I have children? Then what's going to happen

to my kid?” and all those questions. But there was also a scene towards the end that really touched me, and that I remember up to this day – I loved the way that it represented all the different voices in the show. So this was a dining table scene between the mother and the daughter, and the daughter was really trying to convince the mum. Like, “Why do you want to go through [with] this civil marriage? Don't you love me? Don't you want to see me in heaven after we die?” And she [the daughter] left the table. And the mother said to herself, “Aren't the two heavens the same? Why isn't it the same heaven that we will go to?” And that really affirmed in myself these ideas around religion, and **I decided that I can go on a journey to learn about Islam and reconcile the two families.**

From this audience member's perspective, it is evident that the labour and attention to micro- and macro-dramaturgies did create a complex and affective performance. It also suggests that this dramaturgical framework can indeed assist practitioners when thinking through the charged work of addressing difficult and complex topics in a way that feels more inviting, and less hostile or alienating.

This being said, while arts practitioners can try their best to treat sensitive topics with care and nuance, the decision to attend a potentially challenging performance ultimately lies with each would-be audience member. This is a decision that may take significant effort. For instance, it matters that when the audience member's friends and husband were reluctant to watch *Nadirah* together with her, she decided to watch the production anyway. Her own willingness to engage with probing questions about a difficult situation enabled the production to speak to her and other audiences who are most closely connected with the dilemmas of the play. When

audiences meet practitioners in their efforts to challenge the norm and unsettle the status quo, many possibilities can open up. But it does take work to be or to remain open and porous, and to find ways to sit with all aspects of the production rather than just walking out of the theatre the moment we are challenged by different perspectives.

Still, by collectively and consistently engaging in these attempts to make sense of what might at first glance seem incomprehensible or counterintuitive, I am hopeful that when the curtain falls and people leave the theatre, practitioners and audiences alike walk out not with anger or frustration, but with new clarity or questions about their own lives, and renewed determination to 'intervene and change things for the better' – a key aspect of Pillai's articulation about the role of a dramaturg. Indeed, as the audience member expressed, regardless of whether we identify professionally as dramaturgs or not, we are each already dramaturgs of our own lives:

Actually, I was telling [someone at the ADN symposium] earlier that this whole dramaturgy thing is all over my head, I don't get it. But as I hear everyone, I realise I'm dramaturging my life, because I am constantly trying to navigate this relationship between the two families. I'm trying to be a good daughter-in-law, but also constantly trying to still be a good daughter to my mum, so that she doesn't think 'I've lost her to the Melayus [Malays]' and all. **Even if I don't actively do this [dramaturgy] in my creative practice, I realise that oh my god, I'm doing this [dramaturgy] in my life anyway.**

By extension, we are invariably dramaturgs of the social spaces that we live in, which begs the following questions:

What issues or perspectives do we find 'offensive' in our societies, and why do we find them so? What do we need in order to better support ourselves and each other to attend to and grapple with difficult topics, be it in the theatre or in our own lives, so that we can collectively walk towards a more abundant and plural way of living in our world?

[TRACING A STORY/LINE]

KEI SAITO: ENCOUNTERING THE AUDIENCE



Kei Saito presenting at ADN Lab 2018 at Cemeti - Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, Indonesia on 7 September 2018.

The discovery of dramaturgy for me came in a subtle way from the presence of the audience. In 2006 I moved to Tottori, having been born and raised and started my working career in theatre in Tokyo. Tottori is a prefecture with a very small population in the western part of Japan. The company I joined is called Bird Theatre Company.

It runs a theatre space called Bird Theatre, an old kindergarten building and a school gymnasium, which had been turned into a theatre space. This is in a small town called Shikano.

The company also runs an annual Performing Arts Festival. In its first ten years, the Bird Theatre Company was most successful in building a relationship with the audience. Many of the company members - including myself - came from outside the Tottori region, but we lived there and based ourselves in that region, as part of a professional theatre group but also as a resident community.

The Bird Theatre has become a place where the audience would come and spend time to experience something different from their daily life. We got to a point where we could consider almost everyone living in Tottori - approximately 600,000 people as it's not a huge region - as potentially our audience, even though they had not stepped into a theatre yet.

Normally, the audience would only see works by Bird Theatre Company. But during the festival, they would see works by other artists or other companies from other regions in Japan or other countries. Not only would they watch theatre

performances, but they would see dance or circus acts as well.

Having seen the company's work throughout the year, such experiences at the festival offer them something different, adding to their experience. Most of the audience are not regular theatre-goers but they will come to see a show that has been programmed. Not because they know about the production that they are going to see, but because that is what's on at Bird Theatre. Through these encounters, the audience meets a different kind of world than the one they encounter in everyday life.

I feel that there is a dramaturgy in this process. The festival programme is not curated within clearly defined frames. But the journey the audience goes through via their experiences at Bird Theatre results in a meeting of different worlds. In this sense, I think of it as a dramaturgical process.

In the year 2017, after I became a freelancer, I had several opportunities to work at different venues and festivals across Japan. My roles were different each time, depending on each work. And I became more aware of dramaturgy and the role of the dramaturg.

One such opportunity came when I worked for the Asian Contemporary Dance Festival in November 2017. The festival was held in a place called Shin-Nagata, an area of Kobe City. It was programmed and organised by Dance Box, who were active in that area. One of the projects that I was involved in during that festival was a creation of "Peaceful Life" - by a director called Jun Tsutsui - which was also a part of a larger project series called "About Dances in Shin-Nagata".

This project - from my understanding - tried to explore the different ways of life in the Shin-Nagata area of people from different generations and with different cultural backgrounds, and how their bodies and their lives are expressed through dance. This particular performance focused on the lives of Koreans living in Shin-Nagata, and tried to recreate onstage the ritual called "jesa", which is conducted to calm the spirits of those members who have passed away.

Although Jun Tsutsui, the director and producer of Dance Box, had been working on the project for some time, the research for the piece was still ongoing alongside the actual creation of the piece when I started working for the project. Due to this, we still didn't

know who would be performing in the piece two to four weeks before the performance.

My role in this piece was best described as a production manager. I dealt with many things - contacting people to interview and deciding who to interview; arranging hostels and meeting with the technical crew; organising cooking classes for "jesa" dishes; and some karaoke lessons.

Every practical decision-making process, whether as a production manager or as a producer, had some kind of dramaturgical journey. Partly because of the journey this work was going through, and the director being very open to discussions and having patience for the different 'ingredients' of the creation to develop. Deciding who to meet for an interview could affect who would be performing in the piece and therefore, the structure of the work itself. Also, making choices about what props to use, for example, could lead to the question of cultural authenticity.

Dramaturgy is very much about a way of articulating why I like the particular work or why I didn't like the particular work. It's because I never really felt confident in talking about what I thought. For example, it's a struggle when I like the work and everyone else says that it wasn't very good, or it was really bad. People


very often tell me that I'm not being honest or being too polite.

When I tried to find a kind of dramaturgical structure within the work, it helped me to understand why I liked the work and why I didn't like the work. Professionally speaking, this method strengthens my work as a producer to support the artists and develop their relationship with the audience.

From the producer's perspective, the dramaturgical process does not end in the creation of works. Whenever a work is finished in one sense, it is not finished in another sense - whether in writing or in physical rehearsals. It continues to happen during the performance and when it encounters the audience.

Hence, the ultimate and very simple question involving dramaturgy for me is to ask, what is a good work? While we all know that there is no singular answer to that question, and performing artists are live art, the value of the work is constantly changing. For me, dramaturgical work involves constant assessments of such values. These values may change when we encounter different groups of audiences and these changes need to happen from both ends, from the side of the artist who creates work and from the audience side as well.

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 This story was edited from a presentation at the ADN panel titled [The Role of the Dramaturg in Performance-Making: Case Studies and Critical Reflections](#), which took place on 7 September 2018 at Gemeti - Institute for Art and Society in Yogyakarta, Indonesia.

ON DRAMATURGY AND BODY POLITICS

Dominic Nah



The *Dramaturgies of Female Performance* panel at ADN Meeting 2017 in Yokohama, Japan on 16 February 2017. (L to R) Natalie Hennedige, Eisa Jocson, Ruhanie Perera, and Shinta Febriany.

**“Performers can stop giving impressions
but cannot stop giving them off.”
– Erving Goffman**

In the past few weeks, while working on the framing of this article about dramaturgy and body politics, I have noted multiple instances in which the human body has been clearly regulated and policed:

I read about androgynous and transgender athletes at the Tokyo Olympics 2021 being smeared with online abuse about their looks and bodies, tainting their achievements and efforts;

Close female friends confided about being left shaken from street harassment with male drivers and passengers catcalling, laughing and pointing at them from their cars and lorries;

I stood looking in the mirror at the flab on my torso and sighed while my mother insinuated I should start losing weight.

I mention the last example not to trivialise the matter of body politics, but to consider both the interpersonal and internalised ways that we police the bodies of ourselves and most often, that of others.

Across screens and stages, streets and homes, it seems we make a daily sport of observing, judging and imposing ourselves on each other's bodies. No wonder we expend much conscious and unconscious energy brooding over our physical (re)presentation, making personal and social interventions, and advocating for fairer, safer and more just ways that a multiplicity of bodies can co-exist in our societies.

I imagine the personal and political stances we develop on body politics invariably influences our working processes, manifests in our artistic creations, confronts other contesting perspectives: be they majoritarian or marginal ones. It would be prudent here to consider how several artists and dramaturgs have considered them in their artmaking:



In the panel discussion on *Dramaturgies of Female Performance* held on 16 February 2017 at the Bankart Studio NYK 2F (Library), I observed four main considerations emerging from the discussion of experiences in dramaturging female performances, which broadly include:

1. addressing female body politics in context;
2. staging interventions that reappropriate and reclaim the female body from disempowering ideologies;
3. foregrounding male vulnerability and resisting outright condemnation of patriarchal characters;
4. managing pressures of censorship and self-censorship.

In addressing female body politics, the panellists shared a commitment to situating their artistic interventions in varying contexts. Eisa Jocson's concern with the female body producing (in)tangible labours attends to spatial contexts, extending to how the familiar female body in one context (from her home country of the Philippines) is transplanted to another (in Japan):

"I'm interested in the movement of the body, both in micro and macro space - in which micro I mean movement language and macro space meaning movement of the body into certain geography, let's say, migration. And it's grounded on socio-cultural economic political conditions, and historical formations. And I'm specifically interested in the Filipino body in the service industry."

"The first time I went to Japan and asked the question, what was the relation between the Philippines and Japan? And I realised that it was these Filipino entertainers that kind of mediated a certain relation, and they're actually called "chabayukis" which means entertainers or people working in Japan, basically. And this has a very negative stigma, both in Japanese society and in Philippine society. These Filipino entertainers are repositories of hybrid identities that perform and negotiate their Filipino identity in relation to or in negotiation or in appropriation of the idea of femininity in Japan. So the challenge here for me was to place my body in a foreign context, with foreign movement languages."

- Eisa Jocson

Shinta Febriany's approach of "leaking" the body and discomforting audiences stems from grappling with audience expectations in a deeply patriarchal society – for her in South Sulawesi, Indonesia:

"The other work that talks about the relation between male and female is titled *Story of Body*. The actors - male and female - "leak" the body, as in they show parts of the body that they previously wanted to hide.

For example, like scars on the belly, post-operative scars, and scars on the arm, birth mark on the buttocks. And such things were not really - still not perceived well by the audience, because they still felt that it's not appropriate to show such things to other people.

But for us it was important to create theatre that makes an audience understand what they had experienced."

- Shinta Febriany

"It's a patriarchal society - the patriarchy remains strong in Makassar. That's why making theatre was still very hard for women in the beginning. So the involvement of women to perform on stage at the time was still considered as showing her own sexuality, so the audience still expected to see young beautiful women, with big breasts."

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I inhabit a body that carries considerable privilege in Singapore: cis-heterosexual male, ethnically Chinese and able-bodied. It is clear and apparent to me that my body type and identity is policed and placed in relative danger at a lower frequency than others: be it in everyday life, artistic or social (mis)representation. But here I am wary of entering an apologist's tone for my own set of privileges. I think of the masculinist defending the right of men to discuss their being victims of toxic ideals of masculinity and the patriarchy, without being shushed, shut down or silenced for already occupying too much space as a perpetrator. I am careful not to slip into thinking about the Cis-Het Man's Burden too: championing a progressive yet potentially condescending manner of needing to address body politics.



The panellists also shared their practice of staging disruptions and interventions, primarily by using re-appropriations to reclaim the female body within male-dominant narratives. In particular, Natalie Hennedige's appropriation of *Hamlet* by William Shakespeare in *Ophelia* (2016) features the re-centering of Ophelia, who is arguably the female foil to the male lead. In part, Hennedige makes use of metatheatrical reframings to refract and disrupt gender power dynamics:

“Now Shakespeare’s Hamlet spends much of the play talking about madness and suicide. None of those things happen to him, and both happen to Ophelia. The first thing I wanted to do was to give Ophelia - to have for her - her version of the “to be or not to be” question. Which is to live, or to die.”

“The other thing that I did with the piece was to set this Ophelia in the space of the theatre where Hamlet is the writer-director, the auteur, and Ophelia is the actress. [...] Hamlet was the creator and here was Ophelia the actor-creator, trying to wrestle away from the all-consuming auteur, so with that we were able to do these - able to give her these other lives. So she was a revolutionary fighter in one scene, a little scene of course he breaks the scene quite quickly. Here we have Ophelia as the writer, Hamlet here being quite distraught about a bad review.”

- Natalie Hennedige

Natalie Hennedige speaking about *Ophelia* at ADN Meeting 2017 on 16 February 2017.



What is crucial to note is that in order to embody these re-appropriations, it necessitated deliberate choices in casting for Hennedige:

“The first thing that I did was to cast this role. And it was very important who embodied the role. And I knew it couldn’t just be anyone who could act.

I wanted - well, there were a few people I thought of - and the person that was very close to what I was trying to find in this work was a Malaysian actress, Jo Kukathas, who’s middle-aged and embodies certain energies that I felt was important in the work.

I casted her against a young Hamlet, a young virile Hamlet, and that was important. Remember I talked about that painting, and she’s a beautiful pale young thing that’s dead and beautiful in a pool of water.

And I wanted for our Ophelia to have gone through more things. I wanted - that was the imagination - that she needed to go through these other journeys, so we imagined different things for her. At the end of the play, I return her back to Shakespeare, and she dies.”

“They are lovers in this piece, but the disconnect - the apparent physical and age disparity between the actors - will do something in the way that you perceive the work.”

- Natalie Hennedige

Just as Henedige stages a disconcerting yet empowering reversal of canonical characters, so too Jocson turns to the late-capitalist ideal of the white princess in popular culture, hijacking and puncturing the fantasy elements embedded in these idealised images of the female:

“Happyland, refers to Disneyland, and in the local context an infamous slum in Manila called Happyland as well. This is the uber title of the project, which is about Filipino labour, performance of happiness, and production of fantasy within the global entertainment empire of Disneyland.

It’s a three-part series, and it’s basically two Filipino performers hijacking the white-skinned princess, or the archetypal model that dominates narratives of children while excluding their context, bodies, and histories. These two Filipino performers basically programme her movement and speech into their own bodies, hijacking the narratives of this princess, and using this narrative to speak their own context.”

– Eisa Jocson

Compared to Jocson’s project of seizing existing tropes and displacing dominant metanarratives of ideal femininity, here Ruhanie Perera’s reframing of impasses of the female performing self and body as productive sites of resistance emerges as an introspective counterpart:

“So in my own practice I think it has become more and more interesting for me to revisit my starting points as a response to the different kinds of silences I dealt with – to start looking at my body, where it gets stuck, what questions I have with my own manipulations as a performer, and through that to see myself in relation to a larger

collective of women (artists/activists) struggling with their own bodies, and positioning themselves in ways that refuse a gaze, or creating sites of resistance through different strategies of working with one’s body.”

– Ruhanie Perera

This extends to the management of external pressures of silence and addressing the multiple vulnerabilities of the performing self, ones that ripple outward from the self to wider contexts once more that constrain and challenge the female artist and subject. For Perera, this arguably coalesces as a dramaturgy of silences in the Sri Lankan context, in terms of context, character and censorship in *My Other History* (2011-2012):

“For me, there was the silence of the context – in order to make the story speak, the choice that we made was to approach the performance as an exercise in naturalist playing. We didn’t want any kind of estrangement from this story that was located in the specificity of time (post-war), in our lives as young people committed to a particular kind of utterance, but also in our lives as a theatre company working with storytelling praxis that also had implications for our aesthetic. We didn’t

want abstraction as form to affect distance from story/lived experience. And, even with the clarity of that choice, I couldn't work. I struggled with bringing a character to life. I was suddenly, you know, sitting there, bawling my eyes out, frustrated, but I was also finding ways for these same tears to communicate in performance, to create certain layers of affect, even if that was what I was struggling with in rehearsal."

The other silence was the silence of the character, there was no woman in the original story that was posted online that was the starting point for *My Other History*. At the time, my collaborating partner Jake Oorloff was still writing a draft with the working title *Going Home*, and we started talking about a woman who wasn't written yet, and we went back and forth on who she was going to be, and how she was going to articulate herself as a character. And then somewhere I got frustrated, and I said, okay I'm going to go out and start doing interviews

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[...] I started with one woman, we had tea together, and she told me how she left home with her family. And then I spoke to another woman, she made dinner for us, and taught us how to make puttú and aubergine curry. And another, who told me stories about different pieces of jewellery that she owned. Another told me how she never wanted to go back, even though she now lived on the borders of the village she was displaced from. Eventually I had these strands of narratives, and also a sense of a person. The writing process absorbed all of this experience, in particular four key events from the interview process built the narrative memory of the character that was being written."

"[...] in Sri Lanka, a performance/film script is submitted to the Public Performance Board (PPB) that issues a certification, which in the theatre context is referred to as a 'license' to perform at a public venue. Even after the license is issued it can be revoked - and while the certification process

ostensibly works as a review process for ascertaining the suitability of the work for different audience categories, there is a censorship mechanism that works through what is phrased as the 'parametres of decency' in the PPB guidelines document [...] So there was now this third layer of silence that we had to deal with in performance, where the license was withheld until the writer/director (in this particular instance) agreed to the suggested cuts made by the PPB. And then the question became how do we artistically indicate that the performance had been censored? We didn't rewrite anything, we left the gaps, the stilted silences - at some points you knew there was text that was clearly missing, the actor stayed silent, and the jumps that took you from one section to another was implication enough that something had been taken out. On every performance run, the playwright/director informed the audience that

they were watching a performance that had been censored - so that there was a way in which you knew as you engaged with the performance that there was always a silence that we were speaking through."

- Ruhanie Perera

Nonetheless, I maintain the importance of continuing to develop a better understanding of body politics as a practising dramaturg myself. I have been in rehearsal rooms where the female body was not always given due care by the director/choreographer present, sat in meetings where queer persons were treated politely but with an underlying air of condescension. It does not matter if one is consciously an ally or an advocate. Thus far, I am most persuaded by the view that paying attention to how systems and ideologies continue to perpetuate real-world behaviour is a more helpful stance than to constantly take each instance of body politics as a judgement of one's moral character.

In speaking to structures of power, the panellists conceded that an antagonistic approach towards patriarchal symbols and narratives was not always necessary. In fact, Shinta Febriany sought to deconstruct such values precisely by reimagining male melancholy, and to gesture towards gender equality through male vulnerability:

"It was always said that the male body and female body in theatre has a distinct difference. But for me, I think both male and female body has the same similar opportunities to speak about the same thing. For example in the first piece, *My Name is adam*, there is a scene where a male actor is running and doing push-ups and sit-ups while saying "I have to train my body so I can be loved."

"In reality the female also sometimes thinks that we have to beautify ourselves so we can be loved. So that is a perception that weakens the female body on stage. That's why I and my colleagues at Kala Teater are actually very interested to explore the male body. It's very seldom done because the male body on stage is perceived as something - as performed prowess, while the female body is the opposite."

- Shinta Febriany

"This is my work titled *My Name is adam, adam without the capital A*. It talks about the construction of the male as the head of family. This is back in 2003. Part of this society still believes that - this myth - this is part of what man should be.

"What I would like to express here is that the myth was not really actual for people to hold on to. Because based on our research targeting male artists who married and who were poor, they could not hold this position [as head of family] anymore. [...] The letter is written by adam, the male actor. The content of the letter is that they express how sad they are to become the head of their family."

ON DRAMATURY AND BODY POLITICS

ON DRAMATURY AND BODY POLITICS

In a move that disturbed her actors, Hennedige resisted the corrective choice of wholly diminishing the magnitude of the male lead characters, even as she sought to centralise Ophelia.

"When I was working with the actors there was an anxiety - why is there so much of Hamlet? Why is there so much Hamlet in this piece? Well, Shakespeare's Hamlet is the engine of the piece; I didn't want to diminish that, right, but I wanted Ophelia to rise through that.

I'm not going to create a piece where I diminish Hamlet and therefore Ophelia rises. I'm going to place Hamlet as he is, big, bold and wonderful, right, and then have Ophelia work with that tension. And that way you can really look at a very true kind of power dynamic and a struggle."

"I spent a lot of time building Hamlet in the rehearsal room. Because I had to fall in love with Hamlet. When you create - when I create and the title of the piece is *Ophelia*, I'm the defense lawyer for Ophelia. But in creating good theatre, I need to fall in love with the person that's causing both Ophelia and me grief too, this figure of this man.

"And so I had to fall in love with him and so I worked a lot with him, sometimes to the frustration of Ophelia. I just told her, the actress playing Ophelia, I just said, trust that you're amazing. But I am going to spend time with him, don't come into rehearsals for three days, I'm going to spend time with him. She was very upset about that, I said trust me on this. And I also casted someone I genuinely loved, as a human being, because I feel that that was important, that makes it a lot more complex."

- Natalie Hennedige

In both Febriany's and Henedige's commitment to the male perspective, we are invited to reconsider the binary logic of pitting men against women, that to contend with the body politics of gender equality, the complexities in performance can indeed benefit from what seems like a counterintuitive affirmation of the male and patriarchal narratives in question.



In volunteering to unpack the material from the following two panel discussions from the Asian Dramaturgs' Network Meeting 2017 at the Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama (TPAM) 2017 – *Dramaturgies of Female Performance* and *Gendered/Queer Dramaturgies* – I bumbled my way in the Zoom meeting between the Editorial Team, dancing around my awareness of my privilege in a mix of embarrassment and awkwardness, trying to decipher if it was appropriate for me to take these topics on. One might even surmise I was virtue signalling: trying to demonstrate my morally progressive character of being self-reflexive about my positionality...



**“Good dramaturgy is like good sex.
You know it when you experience it.”
– Gee Imaan Semmalar**

In this panel discussion on *Gendered/Queer Dramaturgies* held on 18 February 2017 at the BankArt Studio NYK 2F (Space), I observed three main considerations for gendered and queer dramaturgies raised by our panellists and even audience members during the Q&A segment:

1. how queer dramaturgies are often positioned on the periphery, against the patriarchy, or aside from western queer models;
2. the need to disrupt binaries and resist minoritarian positions amidst;
3. how queer dramaturgies had to adapt to the pressures and expectations of both heteronormative and queer audiences, censors and communities.

Just as these artists found the need to historicise and problematise queer discrimination in their dramaturgical choices and interventions, so too three key moments stood out for me during the Q&A session bear significance in approaching the subject of queer discourse. The first concerns an openness to discerning relevant terminologies in queer discourse. The second considered an intersectional critique of how queer artists approach the archival sources for their work: why use Western queer archives for an Asian queer production? The third moment was a panellist's challenge to the male dominance within the make-up of this very panel itself...



Before we proceed further, first it would be prudent to (re)stage an extended scene from the Q&A segment to discern some relevant terminologies in queer discourse:

Audience Member:

[Could you please clarify] the difference between the terms 'gay' and 'homosexual' in relation to the performativity of it [these words]. Because sometimes you were using the words interchangeably and sometimes it wasn't interchangeable. And I was reading my own interpretations of that which I'm not sure are the kinds of interpretations you meant. But there seem to be differences and there seemed to be slippages that came in and out of. So then that also links for me to the question of 'queering' and 'queer' in relation to genders and then sexualities, because that's another layer that emerges in this question and questioning.

GEE IMAAN SEMMALAR:

So homosexuality is rooted in that medicalised pathologised history of same-sex relationships, whereas gay was more a term of self-identity that was asserted and pushed against something that was used to describe the community.

So it would be useful to think of it in terms of what people were called and what people call themselves. And queer also is a term that was asserted initially it was used in a derogatory sense to refer to people and then 'fag', 'queer', all of these terms have been taken back, reclaimed in a certain sense. Yes we are queer, yes we are fag. "So what?" you know. So it was a strategy to assert using the very terms that were used to insult.

Similarly you would see a parallel between the word transsexual and transgender. 'Transsexual' is

rooted in the medicalised history, the pathologised history, of having a psychological disorder so to speak. I have two psychiatric certificates that say that I have a gender identity disorder. And till today we are pathologised as having some kind of disorder and it was rooted in whether you medically transition or not. So what your body looks like.

Whereas 'transgender' has been used as an umbrella term, regardless of whether you go through any interventions in a more deep pathologised sense. By the community ourselves. So we have abandoned the use of the word 'transsexual' and taken on the use of the word 'transgender'.



This moment near the end clearly reminds me that language which names the body has always been a key site of contestation in engaging with queer subjectivities. What are my ethical responsibilities as a non-queer individual towards queer friends, family, colleagues, acquaintances, strangers? Turning towards art and performance-making, what are my ethical responsibilities as a dramaturg, as a fellow practitioner, towards queer artists and audiences, regardless of my degree of interaction with them?



It is no surprise that queer bodies are often placed on the periphery in society. Semmalar invokes a centre-periphery model to consider how gender and/or queer dramaturgy has hitherto occupied a marginal position in theorising about dramaturgy:

Gender dramaturgy or queer dramaturgy is relegated to the periphery whereas the universal unmarked dramaturgies you can think of [tend to stem from writers such as] Aristotle to Ibsen to Miller. You can name any dramaturg who's well known and who we refer

to and who has had many adaptations as the dramaturg. And [then note that] the feminist dramaturgy or the Chicano dramaturgy or the African American dramaturgy or the queer dramaturgy is relegated to the periphery, where [it becomes obvious that] the centre is universal and unmarked. So this creates a problem of whether the centre can be displaced or whether our relationship to the centre will always be in terms of peripheral relationships to the centre.

He further outlines how it is almost inevitable for queer practices of artmaking to necessarily be tied to the objectifying lens of patriarchal representations, ones that dominate the Indian subcontinent context (not unlike Febriany's evocation of Makassar earlier):

So in terms of dramaturgy, I would say that we created something [in *Color of Trans 2.0*], an art that is inseparable from the condition or the subject position of trans people. And much like feminist dramaturgies, we tried to deconstruct sexual difference and undermine the patriarchal power that is inherent in most social relationships. [...] In terms of understanding this performance, I think it is important to briefly touch upon the dominant narratives around trans representations in the Indian subcontinent. Most representations eroticise or sensationalise or victimise, right, so this performance really questioned the process of who speaks for who, or who constructs who, and in terms of humanising yourself to an audience that sees you as the 'other'.

How does one disrupt an othering gaze in erotic representations of queer bodies? I am now thinking about how the categories of videos on pornography websites are constructed (Yes, I am going there -- well, not quite, not all the way). The eroticisation (or rather, sexual objectification) of bodies is often listed and thumbnailed by sexual orientation, others by ethnicity ("Asian" comes to mind here as a catch-all term). I understand there are sites catered to queer tastes

and fetishes, but I wonder as a further thought experiment on intersectionality: how would an Asian queer pornographic website developer conceive of Western bodies?

This question arises from my being struck by this moment where an audience member questions Takao Kawaguchi about his key source material for *Touch of the Other*. Referring to [*Tearoom Trade: Impersonal Sex in Public Places \(1975\)*](#) by American sociologist Laud Humphreys, this audience member opened up a consideration about Occidental/Oriental lenses of conceiving the Asian queer subject. How transferable are Western queer sources and models to Asian queer contexts? Implicit in this question seemed to be one that sought to centralise Asian queer references for Asian queer artmaking, one that Alfian Sa'at later takes up...



Takao Kawaguchi speaking at ADN Meeting 2017 on 18 February 2017.



Audience Member:

Why refer to Western queer archives instead of Asian ones?

TAKAO KAWAGUCHI:

There is no one place where everything is archived. There are lots of literature, there are lots of magazines, and I personally have not been able to find any resource for that kind of material [the activity of 'gay cruising'] in Japan. So my approach was to bring that [*Tearoom Trades* (1975) by sociologist Laud Humphreys] as a catalysis into Japanese audience... because toilet cruising is not alien in Japan either.

ALFIAN SA'AT:

Why are we not somehow reclaiming some of our own histories? And I want to say that sometimes we try but then we cannot decontextualise those particular moments right? So I know like within Asian histories, within Chinese culture, emperors had concubines for example and there's a bushido code in Japan. But though I think there's always a danger of importing those kinds of discourses and also inevitably importing also the kind of feudal structures that exist and those kinds of power asymmetries as well right, [...] what were those actual relationships like? Within what particular structures of exploitation or asymmetry were these relationships sustained, yeah? And I think it's very dangerous to somehow idealise those and say that there is a very direct continuity between that and our contemporary gay identity and existence.



Perhaps implicit here in Sa'at's instinctive caution against seeking out (and even romanticising) Asian queer histories that can be redemptive or romanticised lies an important step in our mental concepts of queerness: to resist thinking in binary and essentialist positions, to revel in non-binary and fluid ways of thinking, seeing and interacting instead. Elsewhere, Sa'at also explores a way of redirecting our understanding of gay/queer liberation and identity politics through the character of Agnes from his play *Dreamplay: Asian Boys Vol. 1*, who is a goddess sent down to earth "to save gay men from themselves":

So I'm gonna go into this thing which might be a provocation, might be a bit problematic. Because in trying to look at Asian notions of queerness, what Agnes was offering was a challenge to this idea of an essentialist, authentic gay self. And by talking about theories of rebirth, about a soul that migrates from body to body, she passes a possibility of multiple selves and sexual fluidity. So she talks about the negotiations between an authentic self and a theatrical self.

Are there Asian ways of being gay that are different from certain western models with its emphasis on let's say 'being true to yourself'? The authentic gay self? The idea of coming out? I think in Asian societies coming out is very problematic and I would like to contest the idea that one is a lesser gay man by not coming out. Now, because they're issues about performativity as well, so there are roles that you actually play in Asian societies. You are an authentic gay person but you are no less an authentic son or brother or all these other identities and roles. So I'm trying to deprioritise that moment of coming out as a way of coming to terms with an essential gay self. I'm basically talking about gay liberation *from* identity politics rather than gay liberation *through* identity politics.



A clip from *Color of Trans 2.0* at ADN Meeting 2017 on 18 February 2017.

Here, Semmalar explains how he and his fellow artists at Panmai Theatre seek to resist majoritarian and minoritarian ways of presenting queer subjectivity. This then highlights the strategy of circumventing the binary of oppressor-oppressed:

So these are the kinds of ways in which we try to break out of that. We used the grotesque body, exaggerated and expressive gestures, as well as satire. But we also mixed it with realism, because if you make it completely rooted in fantasy then there is a problem of alienating the audience because these are real lives that we are depicting. So I would like to briefly touch upon disidentification as a theory that was put forward by José Muñoz. He says that it is the refusal to make oneself legible in terms of minoritarian identity positions.

And in terms of problems, we again were afraid whether a woman's body being naked on the stage would be a consumable object and whether it would be rooted in victimhood. And one of the strategies that we used was to use a photograph as the backdrop. Where you see a scar that I have received as a trans person in the background. And you would see that there is a tension between this picture and what is enacted on stage. Which is how we try to solve the problem of whether the woman's body is the commodified body rooted in victimhood. Because you do not see a victim here. You see a stylised representation of someone who claims power and claims resistance.

Adding to this, Semmalar introduces the framework of a continuum to interpret representations of queer bodies and experiences in response to people asking him what Panmai Theatre's *Color of Trans 2.0* is about. This not only helps to capture the relativity of audience responses and validates them regardless of their positionalities, it can also chart the ways in which heteronormative ways of seeing are continually disrupted:

So if you were to ask me to give a summary of the play [*Color of Trans 2.0*], I would be unable to do that because it is a continuum of textual readability. There are as many ways of understanding the play as there are the number of audiences. Because for some it will be a play on trans experiences, for others it would be a play on power relationships, and yet for others it would be a play on the politics of body and governmentality. So there are multiple ways of reading the play.

If that is the male gaze that was viewing the performance, it would be disrupted by what it is receiving from the stage. Because you cannot eroticise that body. Or even if some people eroticise the body, there are other elements that disrupt that gaze.

**SPEAKING OF THE MALE GAZE,
WE INTERRUPT REGULAR
PROGRAMMING TO (RE)STAGE
A CHALLENGE!**

Audience Member:

So given that idea that queer is not just about bodies and identities but a proposal, a new manifesto of ethics, can there be queer dramaturgy for non queer bodies or for all bodies?

GEE IMAAN SEMMALAR:

I agree with you which is why I began by a questioning whether there is such a thing that's distinctly separate as queer dramaturgy. And I think there can be because queer, as you said, is a proposal. It is a call and it is a universal call. And across sexualities people can be queer and I believe that.

And I think there is an easy link between gay men and queer which I'm seeing on this panel as well, and I think that we should note this [looks at LIM HOW NGEAN, who nods] because of the absence of any women [on this panel]. I mean I'm a man of trans experience. I come from a different history but the absence of any women on this panel really shows the conservative masculinist impulses in queer politics and I know that there are a lot of...

Lim nods gravely. Sa'at and Kawaguchi give Lim a knowing look. Lim smiles and nods. Applause from the audience.

LIM HOW NGEAN (without microphone):

I am implicated. I am, I am.

Continued applause from the audience.

GEE IMAAN SEMMALAR:

I cannot forget... I really cannot forget where I come from. So I thought that it is my political duty to point that out, and I believe that a lot of my cisgender heterosexual friends are in fact queer. In terms of queer as practice. And in terms of dramaturgy I think that a lot of feminist dramaturgy talks about the Aristotelian model where there is a transformation of the self on stage. A recognition, a movement from ignorance to knowledge if you will.

And I think the possibility of queer dramaturgy is not the transformation of the self on stage but the transformation of the audience from a position of not knowing to a position of trying to grasp and not fully knowing. So I think that is the potential.

ALFIAN SA'AT:

I also now see that sometimes those acts of visibility and representation fall into this rubric of respectability politics. And I think that's where theatre still has a role to play in proposing an alternative, more radical politics to that. I think in Singapore especially this desire, anxiety to be accepted that has resulted in a lot of a mainstreaming of gay identity, so the image of the gay person in Singapore is Chinese, male, middle class male. Yes, I hear you. Yes, a lot of women are invisibilised in queer discourses, it is true.

GEE IMAAN SEMMALAR (almost inaudible, without microphone):

They are unicorns.

WE NOW RETURN TO REGULAR PROGRAMMING.



It seems then, that everything is problematic; everything can be problematised. But where do I/we go from here? Am I/Are we left with a default stance of problematising ideologies and perspectives in the dramaturgy of body politics? Just how far can the embodied politics of performance-makers affect real people?

In this penultimate section (and thank you for joining the long, wild rhizomatic ride thus far), I highlight five key instances of how the panellists have adapted and responded to the pressures and expectations of real audiences, real censors and real communities encountered in their performance-making.



1. Private Performances; Public Selves

“So you see there that the self and the performer collapses, and the self and the other collapses, and really like in most of the meet-the-artist sessions everybody would ask us more details of our lives rather than about the theatre that we did. So it’s really that the narrative does not give you closure in terms of fully knowing the characters or the performers and so you’re always asking for more even in terms of offstage interactions with the actors.”

- Gee Imaan Semmalar

2. Adapting Artist Questions: Educating Audience Ignorances

“But the problem of doing that [Takao’s original intent of questioning Japanese gay culture] is that the society at large, the audience at large in Japan, did not necessarily have this knowledge of gay identity. When I said gay is becoming conservative, they went ‘Huh?’. ‘You know gay is liberal’, ‘gay is something new’, So many people [were] really confused why is gay becoming conservative. [...] The producers said, because the venue Spiral Hall put some money too and they said ‘we don’t want this to become exclusively for small community of gay men’, and a lot of people really helped support financially and with publicity, we had to make this performance understandable to larger population and we cannot take for granted the gay history, so we put up a lot of materials on the foyer so that people can read and people can look at.”

- Takao Kawaguchi

3. Circumventing Censors: Centralising Homophobia

"Given this kind of censorship regime in Singapore, how do we sneak something under the censor's noses? So in looking at Strindberg's *Dream Play*, [in which] the main protagonist is the daughter of the god 'Indra' because Strindberg was very influenced by Hindu philosophy and mythology, and thus he named this particular figure 'Agnes' after the god of fire 'Agni', I wanted to begin the play with a woman. Because I think this was one way to subvert the expectation that this was gonna be a gay play. So how come the main character is actually a woman? But that was done strategically because to recognise that actually with a lot of gay people there's this idea of the queer icon, who is this woman diva goddess person known for theatricality, authenticity, strength and suffering.

"So, actually in our play, this 'Agnes', this woman, is homophobic. She's an imperious entity. She believes her mission is to actually save gay men from themselves. By doing this we're hoping to disarm the censors when they look at the play. Because we hope they will think this woman is actually echoing some of their own beliefs. Hopefully they don't see what the rest of the play is about. So it relies on this kind of secret language, a coded language. So gay people recognise her as something that's quite opposite. Instead of being this homophobic woman, they will see her as this over-the-top tragic gay icon."

- Alfian Sa'at

4. Shouldering Community Representation: A Necessary Space

"For a very long time the gay play or gay theatre in Singapore seemed to be the only arena where we could potentially discuss certain issues. So we do have a state-controlled media for example in Singapore, and therefore theatre has always been tasked with that burden of representing the community. Giving a voice to a community. Giving visibility to it.

"So I stopped [focusing on gay plays] in the year 2007 because that was the year when people started to talk about gay rights, especially in Parliament. So what happened in Parliament was that they raised the issue of removing this law which is called section 377A - which is a law that criminalises homosexual acts in Singapore. Also in 2009 we had what would be the equivalent of a gay pride event in Singapore which is called the Pink Dot event. And I think that also was about this eruption of the gay discourse in a public spirit. I think in that sense as theatre-makers we felt all those attempts to make the discourse public has finally entered into the national conversation. And maybe we can sit back and watch what happens rather than be so invested in raising these issues."

- Alfian Sa'at

5. Oppressive yet Enabling: Queer Theatre as Marketable Object?

"In terms of marketing, a lot of newspaper reports covered us as the first transgender theatre group in India or the first transgender play and this was limiting because it again relegated us to the periphery as a marketable object which is given a space in a liberal multiculturalism which is both oppressive and enabling at the same time."

"In terms of strategies of portraying the gendered body, which is another question that was posed, a lot of narratives on trans experiences centred on the body or transition, and in terms of the way that we try to portray the body. Of course, body was central to our performance but so was the relations of power between the police, who you would see between the medical establishment, between family and the people whose lives we represent."

- Gee Imaan Semmalar



**“Performers can stop giving impressions
but cannot stop giving them off.”**

– Erving Goffman

ON DRAMATURGY AND BODY POLITICS

I return to this quote from Erving Goffman, whose work in sociology often appropriated theatrical metaphors in considering the dramaturgy of the self. As our panellists have demonstrated, regardless of societal context, the body cannot help but speak to and away from power, both on and off-stage.

In this playful assemblage from the two panels, I have sought to first introduce my privileged voice and acknowledge my cis-heteronormative male positionality throughout this article. But this is not to remain as an outsider to feminist or queer discourse looking in. Rather, I hoped to disrupt such a binary, to instead experiment with ways in which the dramaturgy of body politics can be characterised by a commitment to relativity and reflexivity.

Thus, in both its idiosyncratic form and content, hopefully this article can embody and facilitate the transformation of the reader, akin to what Semmlar proposed:

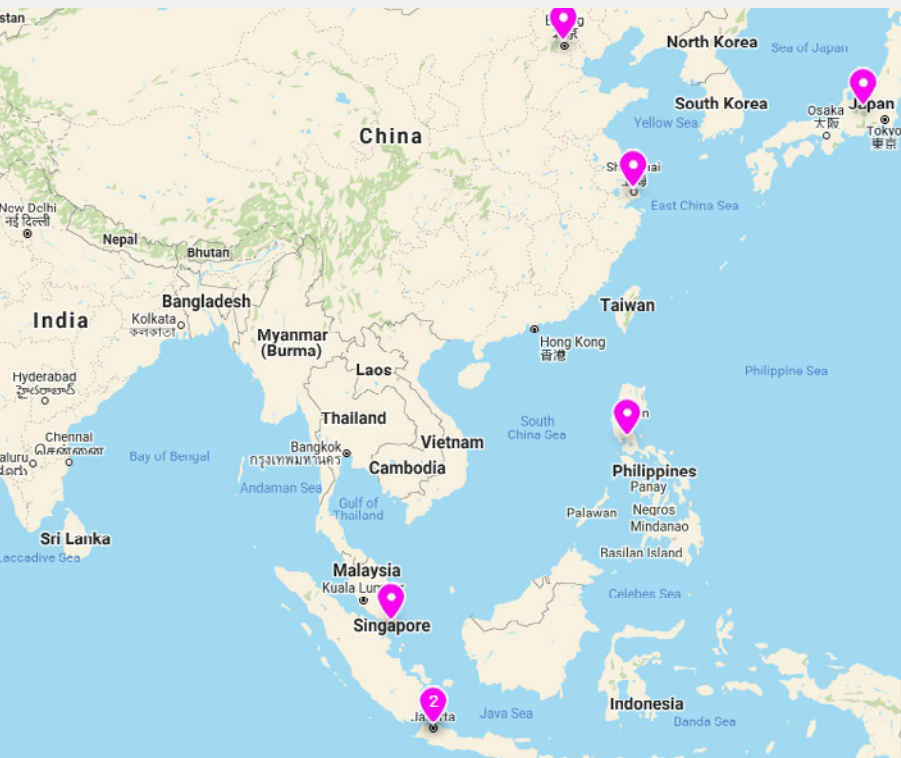
The possibility of queer dramaturgy is not the transformation of the self on stage but the transformation of the audience from a position of not knowing to a position of trying to grasp and not fully knowing. So I think that is the potential.

ON DRAMATURGY AND BODY POLITICS

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ONGOING MAPPING



To build a stronger sense of a network, we invite you to locate yourself on a map and share vocabularies on dramaturgy. Head to [our Padlet page](#) and let us know what dramaturgy is like where you are.

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3. (Optional) Write a bit about a dramaturgical practice! (Note: You do not need to call yourself a 'dramaturg' in order to have a dramaturgical practice.)

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SPEAKERS' BIOS

ALFIAN SAAT is a Resident Playwright with WILD RICE. His published works include three collections of poetry, *One Fierce Hour*, *A History of Amnesia* and *The Invisible Manuscript*, a collection of short stories, *Corridor*, a collection of flash fiction, *Malay Sketches*, three collections of plays as well as the published play *Cooling Off Day*. Alfian has been nominated 10 times for Best Original Script at the Life! Theatre Awards, eventually winning in 2005 for *Landmarks*, in 2010 for *Nadirah*, in 2013 for *Kakak Kau Punya Laki* [Your Sister's Husband] and in 2016 for *Hotel* (with Marcia Vanderstraaten). In 2001, Alfian won the Golden Point Award for Poetry as well as the National Arts Council Young Artist Award for Literature. He has also been nominated for the Singapore Literature Prize three times, for *Corridor* (1999, Commendation Prize), *A History of Amnesia* (2004) and his translation of the novel *The Widower* (2016).

ANNETTE SHUN WAH is Artistic Director of OzAsia Festival, Australia's largest annual multi-artform festival engaging with Asia, and Artistic Director of Contemporary Asian Australian Performance (CAAP dedicated to expressing the contemporary Asian Australian experience through performance. Annette has co-directed six theatrical storytelling shows with photographer and master storyteller William Yang including *The Backstories* series for Adelaide Festival. She recently dramaturged CAAP's hit show *Double Delicious*.

ANURADHA KAPUR studied at the Universities of Delhi and Leeds and is a theatre practitioner and an academic. She finished her term as Professor of Acting and Direction, and Director of the National School of Drama, New Delhi in 2013, and has since taught practice and theory at Universities in India and abroad. She has written widely on the theatre and her book *Actors Pilgrims Kings and Gods: the Ramlila at Ramnagar* has been published by Seagull, Calcutta (1990, 2006). She is a founder member of the theatre group Vivadi which is collective of visual artists, filmmakers, writers, and musicians. Anuradha's work has been cross-disciplinary and collaborative in nature and has travelled nationally and internationally. For her contribution to Indian theatre, Anuradha was awarded the Sangeet Natak Award for Direction in 2004, which is one of the highest awards for theatre-making in India.

EDWIN KEMP ATTRILL is a South Australian theatre maker and the creative director of Replay Creative. He is the founder and former Artistic Director of ActNow Theatre and the former Artistic Director of the University of Adelaide Theatre Guild. Edwin's theatre work focuses on interactive theatre and participatory storytelling, exploring social justice themes. As a new video practitioner, Edwin is focused on engaging online audiences to the arts through live to digital documentation. He holds a Diploma in Theatre Arts through Victoria University and a Graduate Certificate in Arts and Community Engagement through Victorian College for the Arts. Edwin was the recipient of the 2013 Channel 9 Young Achievers Award for Career Leadership, the 2015 Geoff Crowhurst Memorial Award at the South Australian

Ruby Awards, the 2018 Australia Council for the Arts Kirk Robson Award and 2020 Carclew Young Achievers Award. He is an alumni of the Salzburg Global Seminars Young Cultural Innovators programme and the Foundation for Young Australians Young Social Entrepreneurs programme.

EISA JOCSON is a contemporary choreographer and dancer from the Philippines. A trained visual artist with a background in ballet, she won her first pole-dancing competition in Manila in 2010, and started pole "tagging" and other public interventions in various cities. Under successive residencies in Belgium, Eisa developed an artistic praxis that questions the stereotype and context of the female pole dancer. Her solo *Death of the Pole Dancer* (commissioned by In Transit Festival 2011 in Haus der Kulturen der Welt, Berlin) toured across the world. As a 2014 Visiting Fellow of The Saison Foundation, she conducted her research in Japan and presented *HOST* at TPAM in Yokohama 2015 as a work-in-progress. The work was world-premiered at Tanzhaus-nrw Dusseldorf in May 2015.

FELIPE CERVERA is a Mexican theatre maker and academic based in Singapore since 2012. He writes about the interplay between science, technology, and performance, as well as about the crossroads between theatre and politics. As an actor and director, he has worked and toured extensively across The Americas, Europe, and Southeast Asia. He is a Lecturer in Theatre at LASALLE College of the Arts, and serves as the Editor of Global Performance Studies and Associated Editor of Performance Research. More info at felipecervera.me.

GEE IMAAN SEMMALAR is an activist, writer, theatre artist and filmmaker. He completed his postgraduate studies in Arts and Aesthetics from Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. He co-founded Panmai Theatre group along with Living Smile Vidya and Angel Glady in 2014. The debut production of Panmai theatre, *Colour of Trans 2.0*, which was devised by the founders based on their own lives as trans people, toured many cities of North America and India. Gee directed one of the first films on trans men in South India, *Kalvettukal* [Sculptures] in 2012. In 2015, he co-directed and acted in a stop motion animation film, *Won't the Real Transformers Please Stand Up?*. In 2016, he acted in a road trip experimental film called *Naked Wheels* which covered the issues of trans people. His most recent performance was a collaborative piece with Raju Rage (London-based artist) and Aryakrishnan R (Kerala based artist) at the Kochi-Muziris Biennale 2018. He uses art as a tool to explore identity, history, citizenship, caste and political action.

JANICE POON is Senior Lecturer (Playwriting and Dramaturgy) and Academic Project officer at the School of Drama, The Hong Kong Academy for Performing Arts. She is also the Artistic Director of Hong Kong Dramatists and a veteran theatre artist and cultural practitioner engaged in play-writing, directing, dramaturgy, curating and theatre-making with specific focus on contemporary dramatic text and dramaturgy in cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural theatre making. Her works

have been presented in major cities in the UK, Europe, the US, Canada, China, Taiwan, Singapore and other regions in Asia. *And Then, I Float* was awarded four major awards, nominated for the best play award at the Hong Kong Theatre Libre (2014), and also invited as part of the cultural exchange project at the Schillertage festival in Mannheim, Germany (2015). *Small Waisted* (2016) won the Multi-cultural Short Plays Competition organised by the International Theatre Institute of UNESCO. Her curated project *Dramaturgy and Beyond - Dance Dramaturgy* series was nominated Outstanding Service Award at the Hong Kong Dance Award 2019.

KEI SAITO is a performing arts administrator and producer currently based in Chizu Town, Tottori Prefecture. Born in Tokyo in 1974, he moved to Tottori in 2006 and helped set up BIRD Theatre Company and BIRD Theatre, where he managed the venue, performances, festivals and international projects. He left the company in 2016. He is also a board member of the Open Network for Performing Arts Management (ON-PAM).

KEN TAKIGUCHI is a theatre manager of Setagaya Public Theatre in Tokyo and a part-time lecturer at Tokyo University of the Arts. Formerly a research fellow at National University of Singapore, he obtained his PhD from NUS specialising in theatre translation, intercultural theatre and cultural policy. Ken also works as a dramaturg, translator and producer. He has actively participated in numerous intercultural productions since then, including *Spring in Kuala Lumpur* (2004,

Five Arts Centre [Malaysia] & Pappa Tarahumara [Japan]); *Mobile 2: Flat Cities* (2013, The Necessary Stage [Singapore]); *HOTEL* (2015, Wild Rice [Singapore]); and *Always Coming Home* (2019, Festival/Tokyo [Japan], Adam Mickiewicz Institute & TR Warszawa [Poland]).

KENTARO MATSUI is currently the Director of the Cultural Centre of Fujimi City located in Saitama prefecture next to Tokyo. He has been working as a theatre producer, critic and dramaturg. From 1981 to 1996, Kentaro was a member of the Black Tent Theatre company, one of leading companies in the Japanese Underground theatre movement established in the late 1960's. He was involved in the planning process of Setagaya Public Theatre in Setagaya ward, Tokyo city, from 1990 to 1996. When the theatre opened in 1997, he became its Chief Dramaturg and Program Director for 11 years.

LIM HOW NGEAN is a performance-maker, dramaturg and dance researcher who has been actively involved in the performing arts for over 20 years. He is also the founding co-director of the Asian Dramaturgs' Network. Earlier in his career, he performed in productions in Singapore and Malaysia as well as wrote reviews and features on dance and theatre for the Malaysian press. In recent years, he has served as dramaturg for dance performances at the Singapore Arts Festival and Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay. He was conferred his PhD in 2014 from the National University of Singapore for his research on contemporary dance choreography in Southeast Asia.

MARION D'CRUZ began dancing at the age of 6 and started making dance at the age of 16. One of the pioneers of contemporary dance in Malaysia, her work has gone through many phases – the search for a Malaysian identity in contemporary dance, the socio-political commentary, working with 'non-performers', the democratisation of the artistic space. She has broken many rules, and continues to do so, in search of interesting projects that empower performers and audiences alike. More recently, she has been creating unique performance structures that allow artists and non-artists to come into and tell their stories.

NATALIE HENNEDIGE is currently Festival Director of SIFA - Singapore International Festival of the Arts (2022-2024). As a performance director and writer, Natalie is known for her singular artistic language and creative vision exploring contemporary issues through highly constructed heightened worlds with collaborators from diverse artistic disciplines and cultural backgrounds. She served as Artistic Director of Cake, a performance company now in its sixteenth year of presenting progressive new works at the intersection of performance and a variety of other disciplines. Her work has been presented in national and international venues. She is a recipient of the National Arts Council Young Artist Award (2007) and JCCI Singapore Foundation Culture Award (2010).

NESS ROQUE is a theatre and film actor, performance dramaturg and educator. She was a core member of Manila-based contemporary performance company Sipat Lawin Ensemble (2009–2018). She is part of Salikha Kolektib (formerly named Prodx Artist Community), an interdisciplinary collective integrating participatory art and research practices, community engagement, and education. Ness is a MEXT scholarship recipient and is currently a graduate student at the Tokyo University of the Arts - Graduate School of Global Arts (Department of Arts Studies and Curatorial Practices). She received an Honorable Mention-Elliott Hayes Award for Outstanding Dramaturgy 2018 from the Literary Managers and Dramaturgs of the Americas (LMDA) for an essay on Sipat Lawin's *Gobyerno*. www.nessroque.com

RUHANIE PERERA is a performer and lecturer based in Colombo, Sri Lanka. She works at the Department of English, University of Colombo, and is a founding member of Floating Space Theatre Company. In 2009, she graduated from Goldsmiths, London with an MA in Performance and Culture. This has shaped her research foci: storytelling communities and lived-experience in performance. *Inscribing Her* (first performed at the International Art Critics' Association Seminar, Colombo 2013) and *Somewhere Between Truth and its Telling* (first performed at Stranger Than Fiction, London 2012) are two of her solo performances that reflect her preoccupation as a performer with the body and the lived experience of women.

SHINTA FEBRIANY is Artistic Director of Indonesian theatre company Kala Theatre, based in Makassar, South Sulawesi. She works as a director, playwright, and performer. She has directed over 20 plays mostly based on her own scripts. Most of Shinta's theatrical themes are about gender relations and body issues, such as in *My Name is Adam, without Capital Letter* (2003), *The Story of Body* (2006-2007), and *Vessel for Stories* in collaboration with Australian poet and performers, Kelly Lee Hickey and Anna Weekes. Shinta is also a poet and essayist, and has been the curator for the Makassar International Writers Festival since 2012.

TAKAO KAWAGUCHI is a choreographer, performer and artist based in Tokyo. After working for the dance company ATA DANCE, with Atsuko Yoshifuku, he became a member of the collective Dumb Type between 1996 and 2008, as well as collaborating with visual artists, working with light, sound and video. Since 2008, he has developed his solo series of site-specific performances under the general title *A perfect life until today*, which includes *From Okinawa to Tokyo*, presented at the 2013 Yebisu International Festival for Art and Alternative Visions, in the Tokyo Photographic Art Museum. He created butoh dance pieces like *The Ailing Dance Mistress* (2012), based on the writings of Tatsumi Hijikata, and *About Kazuo Ohno - Reliving the Butoh Diva's Masterpieces* (2013). Kawaguchi was the director of Tokyo International Lesbian and Gay Film Festival from 1996 to 1999, and translated Derek Jarman's *Chroma* into Japanese in 2002.



The Asian Dramaturgs' Network (ADN) is formed with the intent of mapping and networking the region's dramaturgical experience and knowledge. ADN is collaboratively conceptualised with Centre 42 and held its inaugural ADN Symposium in Singapore in 2016. Since then, various gatherings of dramaturgs, performance-makers and arts educators from around the Asia-Pacific region have taken place in Indonesia, Japan and Australia. ADN is part of Centre 42. Learn more about ADN at asiandramaturgs.com.



Centre 42 is a theatre development space committed to the creation, documentation and promotion of texts and writings for the Singapore stage. The Centre incubates original writing for production development, provides space for artists and new work creation, and runs a functional archive documenting the histories and processes of Singapore theatre. Importantly, the Centre functions as an independent intermediary amongst makers, enablers and consumers, and strives to be a bridge to connect people by helping and supporting. Centre 42 was developed in collaboration with the National Arts Council (NAC) Singapore, and officially opened in 2014. The Centre is a non-profit organisation with Institute of Public Character (IPC) status, and is supported by the NAC for the period 1 April 2020 to 31 March 2023. Learn more about Centre 42 at centre42.sg.

66 A dramaturg acts to engage with the social, political (or metaphysical) realities of the time and place; to interpret or promote discourse or viewpoints within a society, to intervene and bring awareness or create change. **The role calls for an understanding, and sometimes a breaking, of boundaries and cultural codes, semiotics and philosophy.** Hence, the role of a dramaturg is not so easily defined. The dramaturg has been described differently in different circumstances; objective observer, interpreter, interlocutor, creative mediator, coach, intervener, broker, curator, etc. The role is shaped by several variables; the context, the content, the type of performance, the audiences, the intentions, creative relationships, components and elements. This also depends on how you want to connect to your audience. Something that is planned quite consciously by the maker, and how he/she wants to relate to the spectator. It's about making or breaking meaning.



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– Janet Pillai