

Beyond Entertainment: Theatre of Social Healing

Singapore based Founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage, **Alvin Tan** is the brain behind Asia's Largest M1 Singapore Fringe Festival. Held in February 2006, this year's festival was based on the theme, Arts and Healing. In an email interview with Lada Guruden Singh, Alvin speaks from personal space about the role of theatre in healing.

Lada Guruden Singh (LGS): How do you use theatre as a medium of Healing through Arts? How different does it become from a normal theatre production, given the fact that Theatre essentially is looked at as the best medium of catharsis?

Alvin Tan (AT): Theatre heals in so many ways. The Necessary Stage has used theatre as a medium of Healing in many ways.

Completely With/Out Character was a play created in collaboration with a person who was living with HIV. As much as it was cathartic for Paddy Chew, it was also a production that put a human face to the disease and brought about awareness of a person living with AIDS. Since theatre is a social event, healing pertains to and deals with social ignorance that breeds prejudice.

Who was Paddy Chew?

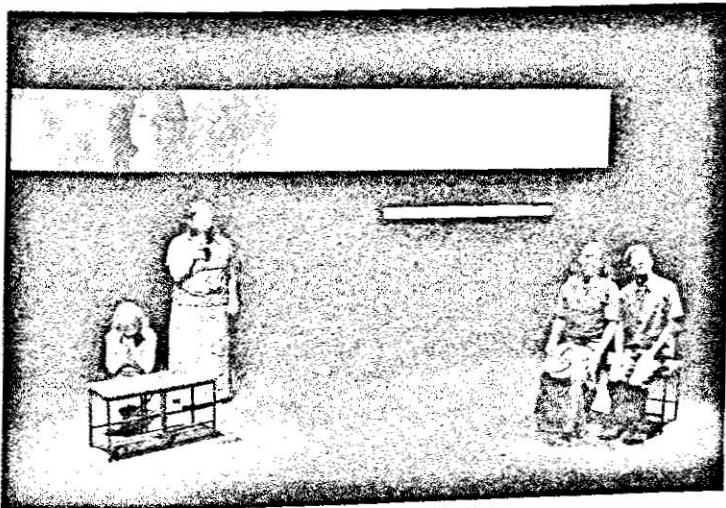


Providing Face to HIV AIDS

Social theatre that is reflexive critiques singular and reductive perspectives, challenges established and shackled mindsets and liberates the imagination. *Abuse Suxxx!!!* is a play that deals with emotional and psychological abuse—the kind that is invisible. One of the vignettes deals with a gay person who upon realising his coming out hurt his mother, decides to leave his boyfriend, seeks treatment and finds a girlfriend. In his epilogue, he says that his future is clearer now. And if this choice makes his mother and friends happy, then so be it. Although as creators of the work we may not agree with the protagonist's choice, we wanted to challenge liberal thinkers if we could respect difference enough to accept his choice. Are liberal thinkers exempt from prejudice?

For *godeatgod*, a performance created in response to 9/11, God is on trial, accused for being the cause of human killing. People die in his name. God replies that it is beyond his/her control. During a discussion segment, inserted three-quarters into the performance, the playwright who is a sound operator on stage, throws questions at the actors who play themselves as characters. One of the questions is—If your mother is kidnapped and you are instructed to bomb a Cineplex to save her life, would you? The discussion also includes the role of art/theatre. Should we do theatre to challenge and create awareness? A production costs a lot of money. Why not give the money directly to people who need it?

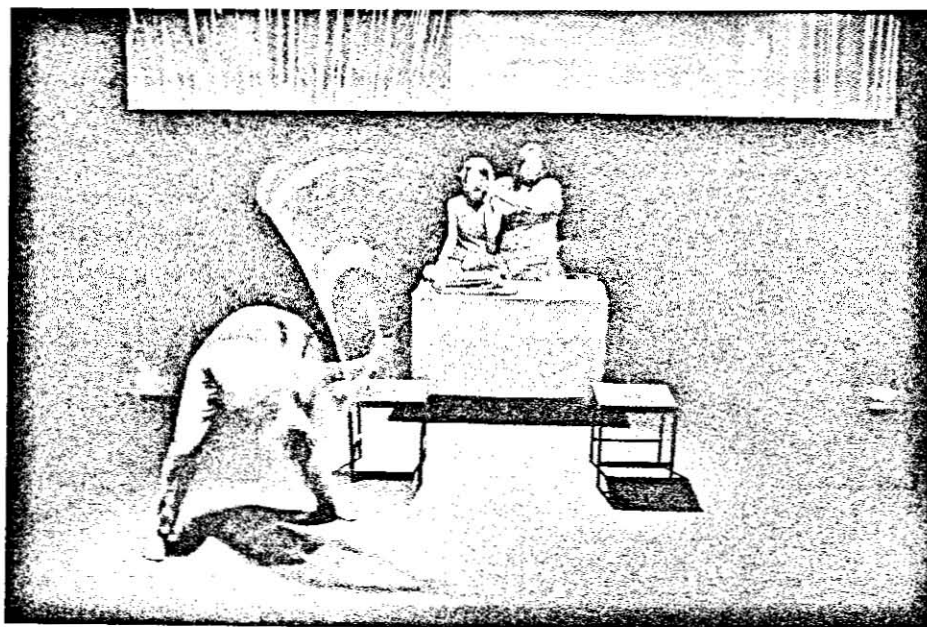
For *The Necessary Stage*, contemporary social theatre has to disrupt/intervene/rupture the familiar routine to be effective. But to do so without self-awareness or reflexivity is to risk making social theatre tiresomely didactic. Besides, one of the crafts of contemporary social theatre is to deny manifesting conflict or catharsis on stage but to create conflict between what happens onstage and the audience. This shifts the witnessing experience to an implicated experience. One actively participates in the interruption because it is concrete and is hopefully healed from the complacency of normalcy



Godeatgod in production

LGS: There is a branch of theatre called Documentary Theatre, in which victims are made to live through their trauma while enacting. Real people with real incidents are directed to produce theatrical work. An example is your fellow Singaporean Keng Sen Ong who used Em Theay to relive her past as a royal court dancer of Cambodia during Pol Pot's reign. How much does such a kind of theatrical experience contribute towards Healing?

AT: I'm more familiar with Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre and I much prefer to see theatre being the facilitating medium for healing. Firstly the participants can bring healing upon themselves. Secondly, the collaborative engagement between the creators, the participants and the audience has the potential for social healing to take place. As long as people gather and have roles to play, theatre functions very much like religion with rituals that can heal. I'm not comfortable with the idea of the theatre director being a kind of guru that brings healing to a community. I find Boal's model of communal participation a more appealing healing process. This is because even a healer needs healing and a person in need of healing can heal.



Where are the Gods?

LGS: While using theatre as a medium for Healing, how does one ensure that Theatre as an art does not become a medium of "social service" and retains its value as an essential form of entertainment?

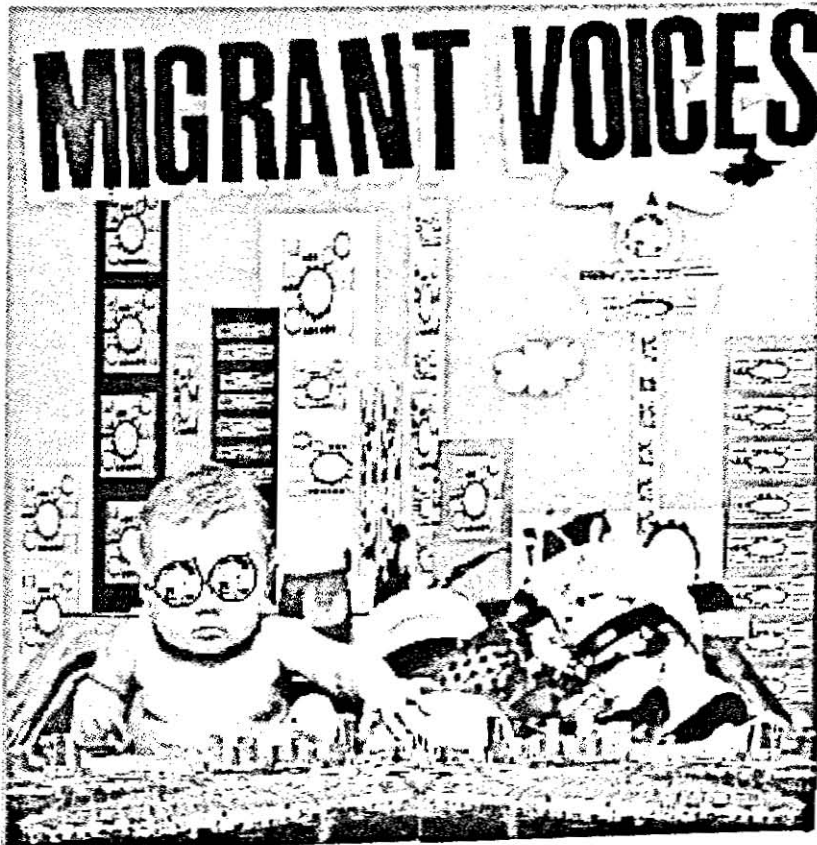
AT: Keeping that in mind, we at M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, are not taking healing literally. Healing is also taken metaphorically. Allow me to cite some non-theatre examples.

First of all there is the Bhutan project sponsored by UNDP. Bhutanese cloth is used by Singaporean designers to create garments and lifestyle furniture and sold. This is an attempt to develop cultural industries and open markets for Bhutanese cloth in the contemporary world. It is a kind of social healing.

Another social healing is a forum called *Detention.Writing.Healing*. For this forum we brought together a few ex-political detainees who have written poetry and/or novels. We also had in the forum, a playwright who has written a character based on an ex-detainee. Here, art and healing takes on a very interesting relationship.

InsideOut is a group of professional photographers teaching 30 migrant workers photography. Their photographs were exhibited during the festival.

MigrantVoices is another group of volunteers who have put together a CD of migrant workers (songs and interviews) residing in Singapore. The CD was launched at the festival. The singers performed at The Esplanade Outdoor and now the CD is on sale. The proceeds



Locating New Lands, Dislocating History

collected will go to shelters and organizations managing migrant workers.

InsideOut and *MigrantVoices* are two projects intended to promote the positive image of migrant communities in Singapore. These projects show they are human beings, with emotions, creativity, the capacity for self expression. Hopefully these initiatives will help melt away the divides between Singaporeans and migrant communities.

Both *InsideOut* and *MigrantVoices* are self-contained projects carried out by independent individuals coming together, but they also contribute to The Necessary Stage's present works-in-progress, *Mobile*. *Mobile* is a collaborative work involving practitioners from Thailand, Philippines, Japan and Singapore. There are many migrant workers from Philippines and Thailand residing and working in both Japan and Singapore.

Our focus on Asian collaboration prompted us to have a workshop session during the fringe festival. It was called *Something In The Way She Moves*. With an increase in mobility of Asian practitioners, we decided to come together to create work interculturally and to explore and build our confidence in working across cultures and languages. There was a presentation near the end of the festival.

We want to investigate the ways we collaborate to create works for one another in Asia. There was a forum called *Who's Afraid of Contemporary Asian Collaboration* that looked into how some Asian collaborative initiatives are usually helped by practitioners from countries with more advanced economies. What are the implications on contemporary collaborations? We are also looking at a method of contemporary social theatre collaboration. Something we call intra-cultural practice.

For me, all these initiatives heal. Or at least begin the healing processes. They have the potential to heal many things at many levels: one has to reach out of one's country, in today's globalized world, to explore the possibilities of a theatre practice beyond the borders.

This brings me to something I've been exploring and contemplating on for some time. The possibility of healing takes place in how we see ourselves through other's eyes; whether they are those who behold us or those who view us with prejudice. It works either way because human beings are complex.

And that is where art still plays an important role. It gives us that space to be beside ourselves, a space to play, an autonomous space where what is done can be undone, where what is sacred and precious can be treated with irreverence, where what can be sacrosanct one moment can be debased the next, where what has value in one context can lose its total value in another. And that is how art heals because art is a space where absolutes end.

When your theatre doesn't subvert what is precious to you, then it becomes a propaganda pamphlet. To keep theatre from being a "social service" is to protect theatre's right to have the freedom to question all the time. And to question all the time means choosing spirituality over religiosity, metaphor over literal.

LGS: Do you think there is a difference in orient and occidental take on Healing through Theatre?

AT: In today's world, I think there are more overlaps. Perhaps this is a view unique to Singaporeans. As our late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun coined the phrase: we are cultural orphans. Singaporeans are so far away from their respective motherlands that they have always been opened up to each other's cultures and the western cultural forces. This is more so now because of the speedy rate of cultural knowledge and information, which is flowing into this small island incessantly. Being a cultural orphan is our weakness but we're working at turning it to a strength all the time. What choice do we have? I am a Peranakan, a Straits born Chinese (an intercultural hybrid of Malay and Chinese cultures) who studied in English and later went to U.K. and the U.S. How do I approach this question that has binary markings; pit west against east? It has little meaning to me. When I was young, I was brought to a Chinese priest at a temple where he performed under trance, cut his tongue, drew blood and wrote some Chinese characters on yellow parchment, which my mother burnt and put in water for us to drink. Another time, I visited a *bomoh* (Malay medium) with my mother and there was lime cutting and incense burning being performed. And we brought back flowers that were thrown into our pails of water to bathe in. When I was 14, I became an altar boy and performed at the altar in service of the Lord Jesus Christ till I was 16 and got baptized. These were the myriads of theatrical performances that etched my memory and they are constantly replayed in different permutations in some of the theatre works I create today, like *godeatgod*.

I would say for me, there is either a dialogue or a fusion rather than a difference but at the end, it's the healing or any other purpose for which theatre is created, that matters.



Kapila G Venu, first female performer of Kutiyattam, a disciple of Guru Ammanur Madhava Chakiyar.

Wm. L. G. S.