

# *Tree Duet by spell#7*

16 – 22 August 2009

11.30am

New Town Theatre (Fringe Venue 7)

Part of the  
Singapore Showcase in Edinburgh 2009



## Tree Duet By spell#7

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*Tree Duet* is a meditative performance about our continuing entanglement with trees. Accompanied by pianist Shane Thio, performers Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan combine an intricately interwoven set of stories and reportage with simple actions and gestures to create a delicate theatrical ecology of sounds, words and images.

Eco-performance minus the moralizing, *Tree Duet* encompasses everything from the history of the Malayan rubber industry to carbon offsetting, the music of Japanese composer Tōru Takemitsu to the 100 year-old Bodhi tree at the Jin Long Si Temple in Singapore.

In exploring how some of the slow mysteries of tree-time persist amongst the fast-paced life of a global city, Paul and Kaylene invent some tree-lore for the 21st century, and apply it to the vexed relationship between our all too human obsessions with nature, power and death.



Photo by Yuen Chee Wai

## spell#7

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spell#7 is a Singapore-based performance company that creates intimate theatrical performances and environmental soundworks. Formed in 1997 by Kaylene Tan (Singapore) and Paul Rae (UK), the company has developed a distinctive and inventive focus on the ways history, culture and politics intersect in everyday life and experience.

Recent works include *National Language Class* – a bilingual language lesson with the audience in Mandarin and Malay – and *Sky Duet*, an audiowork for the Singapore Flyer, presented in the Singapore Biennale 2008. In June 2009, they premiered the rush hour performance-walks *Dream-Work / Dream-Home*, a collaboration with Bodies in Flight (UK), which will tour in 2010. *Tree Duet* is the latest in Paul and Kaylene's 'Duets' series – pseudo-autobiographical performances that explore the power of two in a world of many.

[www.spell7.net](http://www.spell7.net)

## Shane Thio, Pianist

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Shane had his early music education in Singapore and was awarded an Associated Board Scholarship to study at the Royal Academy of Music in London. At the Academy he won a number of prizes including the accompanist award in the Tankard Lieder Competition. He was the recipient of the 1992 National Arts Council Young Artists' Award, which enabled him to pursue further studies at the Royal College of Music.

As an orchestral pianist, he performs with the Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Malaysian Philharmonic Orchestra. He is the resident pianist with the Singapore Symphony Chorus and performs regularly with local contemporary group, The Magnetic Band. As a chamber music pianist and vocal accompanist he specializes in the 20th century repertoire, and has worked with numerous Singaporean choreographers to create works for piano and dance.



## Cast and Crew

Andy Lim      Lighting Designer  
Paul Rae      Writer/Performer  
Kaylene Tan    Writer/Performer  
Tang Fu Kuen   Producer  
Shane Thio     Pianist

All music by Tōru Takemitsu:

*Rain Tree Sketch II: In Memoriam Olivier Messiaen* (1992)

*Rain Tree Sketch* (1982)

*Rain Dreaming* (1986)

Excerpts from Kuo Pao Kun's *The Silly Little Girl* and *the Funny Old Tree* (1987) used with permission.

## Thanks:

Lee Weng Choy, Audrey Wong, Ivan Heng, C. J. Wee Wan-Ling, Kuo Jian Hong, Karen Loh, Dee Heddon, Anthony Newto.

Tree Duet has been developed in association with Live Arts Bangkok, The Substation, the Singapore Theatre Festival 08, and the University Cultural Centre, National University of Singapore.



## Tōru Takemitsu on Trees, Music etc.

"No matter how sheltered the place where they grow, without asserting their presence trees concentrate self-expression, creating their own complex forms. They are trees, only trees - a passive existence without deceit. But petty human knowledge forgets this." (1980)

"The wind begins. The mists lift. The blue-black mountains are suddenly revealed, and I look, wondering if they were always there. In such moments I feel, within, the musical impulse. This is not inspiration arising from dramatic confrontation. In nature there are subtle continuous changes as well as sudden violent changes. Perhaps I am one of those who try to see the invisible, to hear the inaudible. Human perception is not uniform but has varying levels. Therefore, what I felt cannot be experienced directly by another. But I am not alone. I live - and at the same time am made to live. By what? By whom?" (1993)

"I can only be a hand. And that hand is certainly part of myself. The something that makes me alive could be myself. Just because I am only a hand doesn't mean we can say that my hand could not be a tree" (1971).

Tōru Takemitsu, *Confronting Silence: Selected Writings* (Fallen Leaf Press, 1995.)





## The Expediency of History and the Management of Nature

by C. J. W.- L. Wee

*Tree Duet*, described by its creators as 'a performance about how we remember in a city of forgetting', is part of the changes in the way artistic practice is coming to terms with history, culture and a constantly changing environment in today's Singapore.

What are these changes? In a book entitled *Our Place in Time*, the writer Janadas Devan has argued that 'Singapore, in many ways, is the product of forgettings...Forgetting is the condition of Singapore.' Devan was thinking about the 'problem' of Singapore's foundation in 1965. Long a British colony, it was always assumed that decolonization would involve a political merger between island Singapore and mainland Malaysia. That happened in 1963, but within two years, the arrangement had become untenable. So for Singaporeans, independence marked an abrupt break with their previous history and identity as 'Malayans'. On top of that, 'Singapore' itself is not a simple cultural entity. As the editors of *Our Place in Time* put it in 1994: 'We have inherited conducive conditions for material advancement but also disembodied fragments of past forms of cultural life. In effect, we became cultural orphans, isolated from the sources of knowledge from which ideals, visions and moralities develop.'

The expression 'cultural orphan' was also closely linked with the late playwright-director, Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002). It is a phrase that suggests a process both of forgetting and of being forgotten, and, in the context of *Tree Duet*, raises the question of whether Singaporeans may be 'orphans of nature', too. As the low-rise colonial cityscape of post-'65 Singapore became transformed into an industrialised, financial centre dominated by high-rise public housing blocks and what the geographer Ooi Giok Ling calls 'managed nature', the problem of 'forgetting' intensified. 'Nature' and 'Culture' alike were put to the service of nation-building, and there was little space for the independent development of 'arty-crafty' high culture, or of wildlife habitats.

These days, culture and history are no longer put use by the state in quite such obvious ways, and some threatened ecosystems have been granted a measure of protection. In a post-Cold War world where neo-liberal capitalism has become dominant, 'culture' and 'nature' have become economic resources in their own right. The performing and visual arts, television dramas and historical memories of the way we used to live are used to enhance education, foster cultural tourism, and contribute towards making society 'innovative' for a knowledge-based, 'creative' economy.

In striving to make a performance that, as Paul Rae puts it, stays 'true to trees', spell#7 has created a work that cuts across some of these conventions. *Tree Duet* spans the pre- and post-independence period, as well as exploring the diversity of attitudes toward time that co-exist in contemporary Singapore. It melds the personal and the public, and combines music, objects, anecdotes and reportage to stage an encounter between two people who share a life and home, but who come from different cultures, and have divergent ideas about belonging.

History can become a form of commercial nostalgia by which a 'happening', 'global' city can be forged. But it is also a more layered and multi-level affair that younger artists can work through for visions of culture not tied in exclusively to nation-building or the exigencies of a globalized economy. And what remains of the 'natural world' provides important points of entry to other times and meanings, including those of the future.

## Singapore Showcase in Edinburgh

6-30 August 2009

A slice of Singapore culture arrives at the Edinburgh Festivals this August, giving a glimpse into the confluences and connections of Asia and the world in Singapore that belie the sense and sensibility of being Singaporean.

The Singapore Showcase is a season of programming that features leading figures of the city's colourful arts and culture scene, and takes place in association with five of Edinburgh's Festivals:

Date	Title	In association with
6 Aug	Jeremy Monteiro: Singapore Swing	Edinburgh Jazz & Blues Festival
8 - 9 Aug	New Asia	Edinburgh Mela Festival
15 - 16 Aug	Diaspora	Edinburgh International Festival
16 Aug	Singapore Writers	Edinburgh International Book Festival
16 - 22 Aug	Tree Duet	Universal Arts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe
25 - 30 Aug	Q & A	Universal Arts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

We hope that you will enjoy the Singapore Showcase in Edinburgh. For more information on the Singapore Showcase, please visit [www.nac.gov.sg/singaporeshowcase](http://www.nac.gov.sg/singaporeshowcase)

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