



# Changing Places

## Drama Box and the Politics of Space

Edited by  
Charlene Rajendran  
Richard Gough

PERFORMANCE RESEARCH BOOKS

INSIDE  
PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICE





Changing Places  
Drama Box and the  
Politics of Space



First published 2022 by Performance Research Books

Performance Research Books

General Editor: Richard Gough

Managing Editor for *Changing Places*: Helen Munro Berry and Helen Gethin

Project Manager of *Changing Spaces* for Drama Box: Tay Jia Ying

Centre for Performance Research

6 Science Park, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, Wales, SY23 3AH, UK

[www.performanceresearchbooks.com](http://www.performanceresearchbooks.com)

Performance Research Books is an imprint of ARC a division of Centre for Performance Research Ltd.

Editorial matter © 2022 Charlene Rajendran and Richard Gough

Individual contributions © 2022 individual contributors

Performance texts, images and documentation © 2022 Drama Box

Designed and typeset by Fable

Copy-edited by Julene Knox

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

Printed and bound in Wales by Gomer Press, Ceredigion

Distributed by Performance Research Books

Centre for Performance Research

6 Science Park, Aberystwyth, Ceredigion, Wales, SY23 3AH, UK

Email: [info@thecpr.org.uk](mailto:info@thecpr.org.uk)

[www.thecpr.org.uk](http://www.thecpr.org.uk)

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication Data*

A catalogue record for this book has been applied for

978-1-906499-11-2

# Changing Places Drama Box and the Politics of Space

Edited by  
Charlene Rajendran  
Richard Gough



# Contents

## Spaces & Places

## Processes & Provocations

Acknowledgements	6
PREFACE	8
Art as a Way of Thinking	
Maria M. Delgado	
Introduction	16
Charlene Rajendran and Richard Gough	
Drama Box is ...	26
Drama Box	
INTRODUCTION	34
Imagining and Making Space, Together and Differently	
Kwok Kian-Woon	
<i>The Lesson: Critical dialogue in the public sphere</i>	46
Corrie Tan	
How Art Makes Space for the Public	64
Janet Pillai	
Rewriting Spatial Conflict: Drama Box and verbatim theatre	80
Prue Wales	
Drama Box and the Place of Community-Engaged Performance in the Production of the Singaporean Space Scape	96
Kerrie Schaefer	
GoLi – The Moving Theatre: Creating a new space for community	114
Hong Xinyi	
the GoLi ... or what happened when a theatre company decided that they would like to change their status from a company without a house to a company with a house	130
Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius	
<i>Air: An excerpt</i>	142
Zulfadli Rashid	
INTRODUCTION	150
'Agent Provocateur': The orchestration and curation of Drama Box's theatre	
Richard Gough	

## People & Purpose

Articulating Silences around Death in <i>Both Sides, Now</i> : Medical professionals grappling with grief	164
Ng How Wee	
<i>Both Sides, Now</i> – Reflections	
Wandering Through <i>Both Sides, Now</i> : The difference art makes in death and dying	180
Charlene Rajendran	
On Looking at Clouds from <i>Both Sides, Now</i>	188
Richard Gough	
<i>Trick or Threat!:</i> A Forum Theatre script	196
Kok Heng Leun and Aidli Mosbit	
Articulating a Politics of Art Through Activism: Drama Box's strategies of dialogue with the state	222
Lau Si Xian	
The Acknowledged Legislator? A theatre director in parliament	238
Paul Rae	
INTRODUCTION	260
Challenging Frameworks for the Future: Critical directions for change	
Charlene Rajendran	
A Kaleidoscope of Perspectives: Drama Box's journey with collaborators over the years	270
Chong Gua Khee	
Six Memos for Art-Making: Drama Box's practice of change	286
Kok Heng Leun	
On ARTivate: Activating young people through art	302
Teo Eng Hao and Kok Heng Leun	
Beyond Drama and Outside the Box: Why this work now?	314
Kok Heng Leun in conversation with Richard Gough	
<i>Last Dance: An excerpt</i>	358
Kok Heng Leun	
Drama Box Milestones	366
Contributors	394



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The editors would like to thank the following people for their contributions and invaluable help in putting together a story of Drama Box based on their experience, research and relationship with the company. They are part of a critical and caring community without which the work would not happen, and for whom we hope this volume matters:

Aidli Mosbit, Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, Chong Gua Khee, Corrie Tan, Hong Xinyi, Janet Pillai, Kerrie Schaefer, Kwok Kian-Woon, Lau Si Xian, Maria Delgado, Ng How Wee, Paul Rae, Prue Wales, Teo Eng Hao and Zulfadli Rashid, whose writing constitutes the primary resource of this volume.

Doreen Toh, Shelly Bryant, Lai Shuya, Adib Kosnan, Ngiam Su-Lin, Evelyn Chia, Chetra Sinnathamby, Benson Puah, Ong Loy Eng, Geraldine Ee, Quah Sy Ren and Li Xie, whose translations and perspectives added critical insights.

All photographers who captured images of Drama Box in varied phases of its history to provide an important visual text in the story of the company.

Kok Heng Leun, Koh Hui Ling, Han Xuemei, Chng Yi Kai, Amanda Leong, Jo Lim, Josephine Lee, Khaw Han Chung, Lim Ailing, Ng Siaw Hui, Lee Shyh Jih and the staff and board of Drama Box, present and past, who have helmed the leadership of the company and supported its vision.

This publication has taken several years to come to fruition and has evolved during changes in the artistic leadership of Drama Box and the COVID-19 pandemic. The editors would like to thank all involved in the conception and realization of this publication, especially for their patience. They also wish to acknowledge the sustained and detailed work undertaken by the Managing Editors of Performance Research Books, Helen Munro Berry and Helen Gethin, and the copyediting and proofreading of Julene Knox and Helen Pendry. Finally, the editors would like to express immense gratitude for the persistence and fortitude of Tay Jia Ying as the Project Manager of this publication, who has overseen all the archival research in Singapore, liaison with the Singapore-based book designers and who has been the interface between Drama Box and Performance Research Books since the project's inception.

IMAGE CREDITS

- Alecia Neo 263

Amos Law 352

ampulets 168

APAP 133

Association of Women for Action and Research 386

Atelier Watt 115, 118

Ben Tay 15, 380

*Both Sides, Now* 167, 170, 186-7 (2013-6)

Carol Sak 199, 206, 215, 218, 275, 279

Chng Yi Kai 28-9, 397

Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay 306

Franz Kloet 57, 391

Goh Seok Muay 293

Han Xuemei 25

*IPS Prism* 385

James C.K. Tan / Tan Chee Kwang 173
- Jett / Liu Yao 311

Kevin Lee 50, 55, 86

Marco Canevacci 132

Matthew Wong 47, 54, 60, 67, 71

raumlaborberlin 137, 141

Tay Jia Ying 321

Teo Pei Si 285

Tey Yong How 257

The Pond Photography 40, 79, 82, 97, front cover, back cover

*TLOCCTC* 392

Tuckys Photography 283

Widewall Studio 174

Wong Jing Wei 70, 74, 121

Zinkie Aw 30, 90-1, 100, 104, 107, 113, 128, 146-7, 152, 157, 388, 398, 400, inside front cover

Zinkie Aw, for *Both Sides, Now* 186-7 (2018-9), 191, 195, 247, 266, 287, 298, 359-63



Screen grab of a short video put together by the Drama Box staff to check in on their friends and supporters during the 'Circuit Breaker' for COVID-19.



## PREFACE

# Art as a Way of Thinking

Maria M. Delgado

## Rehearsing democracy

To write about Drama Box is to recognize a fluid body of work that draws on multiple art forms – street theatre, *commedia dell'arte*, Augusto Boal's Forum Theatre, the Living Newspaper developed during the US's Federal Theatre Project, verbatim performance, text-based drama, photography, film, installation art, musicals. All are refashioned through a process of engagement that encourages play, debate and discussion in pursuit of social egalitarianism. From the site-specific *IgnorLAND* series (2007–16),<sup>1</sup> to the civic and multi-disciplinary Immersive Arts Experiences initiated in 2012<sup>2</sup> and the end-of-life issues foregrounded in *Both Sides, Now* (2013–present),<sup>3</sup> this is a theatre engaged in what the company's founder Kok Heng Leun terms 'a demonstration of what is possible ... a place for learning ... a place for rehearsal' (cited in Tan 2016). Drama Box is a space where democracy as much as theatre is rehearsed and practised.

Key here is an idea of performance rooted in specific geographic locations where the histories and memories of those spaces are interwoven into the performance stories that the company crafts with different communities. There is no such thing as an 'empty space'<sup>4</sup> for Drama Box: spaces are always a configuration of persons, social identities, cultural geography, architecture and layered histories and memories. Drama Box's activities – whether a factory production line on the outskirts of the city in *Parallel Cities – Factory* (2012) or on the streets in the Kreta Ayer area in *Chinatown Crossings* (2018, 2019) – are an articulation of the politics of space, and space is, as Kok articulates at the opening of Prue Wales's chapter, 'a very important issue in Singapore'. Space is at a premium on an island of 5.7 million persons where land is a scarce and expensive resource. It is perhaps not surprising that Corrie Tan's chapter argues that 'land contestation and land use' have been central to Drama Box's work since 2010. Drama Box makes work about things that count.

Working across Chinese language and English language theatre, and engaging also with Malay language theatre, Drama Box has produced over 100 pieces of work across a range of theatrical and found spaces. Crafting a multi-disciplinary arts practice that is forged around difficult issues, with a range of interdisciplinary collaborators, Drama Box promotes a theatre that cannot be contained within four walls, a nomadic theatre of engagement rooted in a spirit of egalitarianism. Issues such as end-of-life care, disappearing landmarks, dissent and governance in Singapore, and the politics of inequality require 'an aesthetic of listening' (Kok 2017). Theatre becomes an approach to community engagement where conflicts, paradoxes, questions and debates can be staged in and across public settings. In his chapter, Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius writes of Drama Box as choosing to be 'one of those companies without a house'; indeed, I would position them as a company that fashions multiple homes in the spaces where they choose to work. The city is the lived, ever-changing context and locale for the work – a shifting space where commerce, enterprise and kinship intersect. As Foerster-Baldenius discerns, 'the sounds and smells of the city, the social circumstances and the weather' are 'an integral part of the show'.

Drama Box may ostensibly have moved 'indoors' in 2015 with GoLi – The Moving Theatre, the two green and white inflatable portable theatres designed by William Tan and Ting-Ting Zhang, former lead designers at Zaha Hadid Architects, but theirs remains a permeable theatre which uses the

entire nation as its stage. The pop-up GoLi embodies the company's ethos: light on its feet, adaptable, moveable, flexible, accommodating, welcoming. Drama Box looks outwards – dancing across different corners of the nation, bridging the gap between mobility and place while providing a use of space that sparks the imagination and participation of those who engage with their workshops, performances, installations and forum pieces. Emblematic of the company's work is the *IgnorLAND* series, inaugurated in 2007, which provided alternative tours of Singapore districts that accorded a prominence to overlooked memories, histories and geographies. The series encouraged participants to look, with care and attention, and consider their own relationship to the urban landscapes of this island city-state. It's an aesthetics of consideration, a commitment to care. 'Making theatre', as Kwok Kian-Woon argues in his essay in this volume, 'is making space for hope'.

Drama Box's ethos is one of intersection and engagement with other cultural bodies: *Excavations* (2018) was realized with the Singapore Art Museum and *Chinatown Crossings* with businesses backed by the Singapore Tourism Board.<sup>5</sup> An adaptation of *The Lesson*, undertaken by Koh Hui Ling and Han Xuemei, was programmed with secondary schools, and demonstrated a pattern of participatory behaviour that differed to the earlier 2015 iteration in the GoLi at Toa Payoh Central.<sup>6</sup> *The Lesson* has been returned to multiple times between 2017 and 2020, a way of continuing a process of engagement that recognizes 'the work' is never finished. Theatre remains iterative and dialogic. Conversation needs to continue, for it is responsible, reflective decision-making that defines a democracy. It is perhaps no surprise that in this volume both Janet Pillai and Paul Rae position Drama Box and Kok respectively through the writings of Jacques Rancière: an engagement with what it means to act with integrity and due consideration to others.

## Socially engaged leadership: Kok Heng Leun and Koh Hui Ling

I complete the writing of this preface as Drama Box embarks on a new era. The book, which focuses on the last ten years of Drama Box, also celebrates thirty years of a company that now looks to a new artistic team to forge a future post-2022. Kok's model of socially engaged leadership has been manifest across an ability to involve and crucially to delegate decision-making to younger members of the company for some years now. Kok remains a key member of the company but stepped down as Co-Artistic Director on 1 April 2022, with Han Xuemei joining Koh Hui Ling as Co-Artistic Director – a post the latter had been appointed to in late 2020. Koh's involvement with the company as Associate Artistic Director and now Co-Artistic Director demonstrates a recognition that effective leadership involves distribution of responsibilities and a recognition of the relationship between power and responsibility. Han also has a long track record of work with the company, joining as a resident artist in 2013. The democratization of process promoted by Kok has allowed for the company's work to develop. Koh's leadership is evidenced not simply in the genesis and development of particular projects, including the ARTivate training programme and *IgnorLAND* projects post-2012, but also the realization of the GoLi. The different voices of Drama Box are very present in this volume. Company members and collaborators past and present – including actor and playwright Lee Shyh Jih, Producer Lim Ailing, former Company Manager Tay Jia Ying, translator and collaborator Adib Kosnan, producer and collaborator Ngiam Su-Lin and former Production and Stage Manager Evelyn Chia – articulate an oral history of Drama Box with Koh, Han and Kok in Chong Gua Khee's chapter. Chong herself is a former company member who continues to work with Drama Box in an independent capacity. The reflection is honest: the challenges of negotiating multilingualism in a nation with four official languages – English, Malay, Mandarin and Tamil; the politics of working with translation; the need for a new board; and Kok's view that 'I don't really know where it [Drama Box] is heading'. With a younger generation at the helm there may be new directions but the principles and priorities remain the same.



In a 2021 interview Koh observes that '[t]here'll be some big changes and small changes, but we're really all just pushing ourselves further each time, grow[ing] new networks, and work[ing] on all the potential and possibilities we have' (cited in Bakchormeeboy 2021). Drama Box doesn't have answers, but it embraces possibilities and recognizes the need to keep asking questions of itself and society. This explains the focus on bringing in medical professionals to engage with *Both Sides, Now* and environmental scientists in *IgnorLAND*. Broadening the debate is always crucial. Acceptance has never been a suitable option.

Any consideration of Drama Box must necessarily consider the roles played by the company's Co-Artistic Directors in driving its artistic and social agenda. While it has been Kok Heng Leun who has perhaps been most closely identified with the company as one of its founding members in 1990, Koh Hui Ling has also had a key role to play in the company's evolution and has been the leading artistic force behind a series of key projects including *Chinatown Crossings* and *IgnorLAND* (2014, 2016). Koh's leadership role within Drama Box's youth engagement work is particularly important here – building sustainability through education programmes with young people, teachers and adults returning to education. The youth work is not outreach: it is the core of the company's approach to making work with communities. She defines the move to Co-Artistic Director as a shift of title rather than a shift of role, recognizing that she had been working alongside and with Kok for sixteen years before becoming Co-Artistic Director (Bakchormeeboy 2021). Koh acknowledges the importance of the distributed model of leadership Drama Box works with 'we do see everyone as capable in their own right, so we never [have] to hover over them to monitor their work, and really give them a lot of independence. I'd say it's very flat in terms of hierarchy, and how we like to involve even our resident artists Xuemei and Yi Kai to join in for high level meetings like major grant submissions' (cited in Bakchormeeboy 2021).

Koh's relatively new role working alongside Han to shape the company's vision looks to the future but the company's past – the years 1990 to 2020 – is very much rooted in the leadership of Kok Heng Leun. Kok's input has been key to Drama Box's evolution but he has viewed his own work very much as an enabler and facilitator.<sup>7</sup> Playwright, director, artistic director, educator, dramaturg, orator, Nominated Member of Parliament, artist, activist, Kok is a polymath who asks questions of the world in every one of his intersecting roles. Like the American director Peter Sellars, he animates and inspires, he advocates and enquires. He leaves one believing that whatever might be happening in the world, change is always possible, and that change can begin with the opportunities for bringing persons together that theatrical encounters offer. Theatre becomes a way of engaging with communities and cultures, or, to quote Elin Diamond, 'a doing and a thing done' (1996: 1). Indeed, I would argue that it is the focus on *doing* as an ethical, social and communal practice consistently subject to self-interrogation that defines all Kok's myriad activities. Crucially, it links him to theatre-makers across the globe, from Milo Rau to Lola Arias. 'What is to be done?' asks Rau (Rau and Wolters 2014); 'what is our responsibility as theatre makers to those whose stories we engage with' enquires Arias (2017).<sup>8</sup> They are questions that similarly lie at the heart of Kok's galvanizing practice with Drama Box.

For thirty plus years, Kok has promoted a vision of directing with participation and engagement at its very core. Working across text-based theatre as with the double-bill of Edward Albee's *The Zoo Story* and Rachel Lim's *Singles* (1991), musical theatre as in *Happy* (2005, adapted from Oscar Wilde's love letters, *The Happy Prince* and *Salome*), site-specific performance as in *It Won't Be Too Long: The Cemetery (Dawn)* (2015) and participatory Forum Theatre as in *It Won't Be Too Long: The Lesson* (2015), his is a mode of making work that engages with the very processes of what constitutes community. Whether it is discussing the physicality and psychology of space, the representation of loss, the dynamics of multilingualism, environmental awareness or the role of artists in shaping societies, Kok provides a way of thinking about theatre as an active mode of civic commitment.

Theatre provides an empathetic mode of engaging with a society's fears and anxieties, its hopes and dreams, its sense of self and other, its shared humanity. He talks of creating art for the public that is, in his words, 'meaningful and empowering' (2017) and this has helped shape Drama Box into one of the world's most inspirational theatre companies.

Kok's biography and early career demonstrate a restless quality, a need to organize, mobilize and act. He studied mathematics at the National University of Singapore between 1987 and 1990, and indeed employs mathematical concepts to structure and organize his work. He then joined the civil service as a Community Development Officer, where he assisted grassroots organizations in organizing events for residents. Moving into the arts sector, he pioneered a theatre practice rooted in an engagement with public space, which he defines as 'strangers sitting beside strangers, strangers engaging with strangers with trust rather than with a lot of distrust' (cited in Tan 2015). This is key to the promotion of a vision of art as 'a way of thinking' (cited in Nanda 2016).

In early 2016, Kok Heng Leun was appointed a Nominated Member of Parliament by the President of Singapore.<sup>9</sup> His maiden speech, given as a response to the 2016 budget, pulled no punches, identifying the importance of art as a way of making sense of the world. 'Where is Art in the future of Singapore? Why is Art important in the future of Singapore?' he asked. The state had failed in mediation between parties that disagreed, because it was, in Kok's view, 'reactive, unable to effectively manage difference to find a common ground' (cited in Tan 2016). 'Being fair', he went on to state, 'means being fair to all, not just those who write the angriest letters or shout the loudest slogans or garner the most signatures' (cited in Tan 2016). He advocated for a stronger level of state investment in creative and critical teaching and for the opening up of a space for discourse, a practice of theatre that he defines, using Goat Island's term, as 'a small act of repair' (cited in Tan 2016). 'Repairing the body and the hearts that have been bruised by the experience of crisis and change' (cited in Tan 2016). Drawing on a quotation by Rebecca Solnit, Kok articulated a vision of theatre of democracy as 'built upon trust amongst strangers' (cited in Tan 2016). It's a vision shared by Koh in her recognition of theatre as a 'powerful privileged space' that allows conversations with minoritized communities 'to happen and be heard' (cited in Bakchormeeboy 2021). For both Kok and Koh directing is, as Richard Gough notes in his introduction to Section Two of this volume, not simply about the skills of directing a play but rather a 'need to engage all involved ... in the process, in identifying and clarifying the issues, in elaborating the concept and in generating the material that takes place': a recognition of the role of the director at the intersection of enabling and editing.<sup>10</sup> Process is at the heart of what this book discusses – a way of thinking through the *how* as much as the *why* of making theatre.

## Making theatre as politics

On the eve of Kok's keynote address at the International Federation for Theatre Research conference in Shanghai in July 2019, as I was preparing an introduction to Kok for the event and thinking about the significance of his theatre making, Paul Rae, a scholar who had been based in Singapore for several years, informed me that

Singapore is a socially stratified and bureaucratically siloed society, carved up for policy purposes and often in public discourse along the lines of "race", language and religion. Kok Heng Leun is one of the rare few – [and I would argue Rae is here discussing Drama Box as much as Kok himself] – who can confidently operate in multiple linguistic and social contexts, both as a theatre-maker and as a citizen. While the mainstream of Singapore theatre is in the main an English language, middle-class pursuit, Heng Leun's work is grounded in, and speaks to, the experiences of the sizeable blue-collar



demographic. Often, this takes the form of works that are presented in the so-called "heartlands" of Singapore – public housing estates where approximately 80% of Singaporeans live. But Kok is also capable of speaking with authority and lucid elegance to those in power .... As an Independent Member of Parliament ... he had special responsibility to advocate for the arts, artists and audiences; that was his constituency. But the role enables the holder to speak across the range of Parliament business, which Heng Leun did with plain-spoken passion.

(Rae 2019)

Kok completed his parliamentary term in September 2018 having championed the importance of the arts in civic life, speaking out consistently against social inequality and calling for the development of artistic talent. Paul Rae's chapter chronicles his achievements as a legislator – tabling 54 questions, delivering 24 speeches of between 10 to 20 minutes, obtaining 100 responses from front bench politicians and ministers, engaging with constituents and communities on legislative plans. His was a model of action, of doing and intervening that has strong parallels with the ideas of Augusto Boal, the Brazilian artist activist and legislator who deployed theatrical dramaturgy both within and beyond government to promote democratic accountability. Kok's debt to Boal is evidenced in the early history of Drama Box, but more than an influence it is a shared approach to engaging with audiences, 'encouraging critical thinking' as a way of asking questions about how decision-making happens (Tan 2016), to consider how place is formulated, to refashion the public domain as the site for theatrical encounters – what Rae terms 'making theatre as politics'.

In Drama Box, making theatre is not just rooted in Boal's model, which has been highly influential in Kok's practice. Kok's interview with Richard Gough acknowledges his multifarious influences.<sup>11</sup> Chinese *xiqu* street opera's transformation of public space and its politics of disruption; the overt physicality of Kuo Pao Kun's *The Theatre Practice*; the generation of left-wing Hong Kong filmmakers who created cinema demonstrating the impact that economic policies had on the lives of the characters who filled the screen: all these have converged to shape an approach to theatre-making that situates it as a site for discourse and experimentation – characteristics that Kok identifies with Kuo's *The Substation*, an independent arts space founded by Kuo, but that I would argue are at the core of all of Drama Box's practice. In addition, Koh has adopted and adapted approaches that she was exposed to during her studies for a Master's in Applied Theatre at the University of Exeter, combining her insights about communities in Singapore with understandings of suitable strategies for theatre-based engagement.

And indeed this political consciousness embodied by Drama Box's work takes many shapes and forms. In *Tanah • Air 水 • 土 : A Play in Two Parts* (2019), performed at the Malay Heritage Centre, the multi-racial fabric of Singapore was explored through the displacements of the indigenous Malays and Orang Seletar. In *Project Mending Sky* (2008–12), environmental awareness was promoted through community scenarios that encouraged a heightened awareness of the importance of individual responsibility. *Another Tribe* (1992) was the first play in Mandarin to deal with gay identities in Singapore. The scope of Drama Box's engagement with social issues is bold and broad: censorship in *shh... a date with the community* (2010); terrorism in *Trick or Threat!* (2007); community anxieties following the Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome outbreak in SARS (2003); patriarchal control and violence in *FLOWERS* (2019); domestic violence in *Lian Can Cook!* (2001); stress and mental health in relation to young people in *Girl in the White Sand Box* (2011); sex work in *How Much?* (2011). The development of a training model for young people, ARTivate, rooted in an understanding of art grounded in a social consciousness, demonstrates a commitment to fostering future generations of artists.<sup>12</sup> If Drama Box returns again and again to certain issues – ageing and death, the politics of space, health and welfare – it is because these issues continue to matter.

## Vulnerable listening

Drama Box has remained alert to emerging fears and uncertainties that shape evolving work. *It Won't Be Too Long: The Cemetery* (2015), directed by Kok, engaged with the exhumation of graves at the landmark Bukit Brown Cemetery to make way for a new highway. A site-specific part, *Dawn*, performed at 5:30 a.m., provided a space for engaging with the sounds and life of this historic location. *Dusk*, performed in the evening, took a different approach as playwright Jean Tay crafted a verbatim text from the views of different stakeholders involved in shaping the decision-making. An engagement with decision-making remains at the heart of much of Drama Box's work. *It Won't Be Too Long: The Lesson* (2015), directed by Li Xie, asked residents to make informed choices about what space has to be demolished to make way for a new MRT<sup>13</sup> railway station. And space was created by facilitators within the very form of the piece to bring in different voices to articulate the implications of what the development might mean culturally, socially and environmentally: theatre as a site for what Janet Pillai in her chapter terms the exercising 'of political agency' and the building of 'political literacy'. *It Won't Be Too Long: The Lesson* was not simply about engaging 'with the task to choose a site for demolition, but with the frames surrounding that task, and the right to question the very basis on which choices were being made'.

Such an approach is dependent on an ethos rooted in what Kok has termed 'vulnerable listening', which acknowledges the seminal role played by facilitation in negotiating different viewpoints and creates a space where the consequences of votes cast and decisions made can be lived with respectfully. Charlene Rajendran and Richard Gough recognize this in their introduction to this volume when they write that '[t]o enlist interest and procure the support of people, the company and the artists that collaborate with Drama Box must generate trust if they hope to encourage communities and individuals to articulate concerns, desires and opinions with confidence'. Looking at Drama Box's work, I am struck by the extent to which it is rooted in the practising of a duty of care, thinking about how Singaporeans exert their social and ethical responsibilities as citizen-artists. Self must always be considered in relation to other. 'Ultimately for us', as Koh observes, 'it's never just a case of putting on a show, but also making sure it is a practice of change through the critical discourse and meaningful conversations generated' (cited in Bakchormeeboy 2021).

For Kok Heng Leun and Koh Hui Ling, the personal is always political. Productions and projects are linked to bodies of knowledge and lived experiences. The genesis of *Both Sides, Now* – which developed from an immersive art project at Khoo Teck Puat hospital in 2013 where visitors, patients and staff could engage with end-of-life care – indicates how Drama Box nurtures projects over different iterations and extended periods. Works rarely feel linear, rather, through a series of participatory encounters, embodied artistic research is conducted as communities come together to ask how to live responsible lives. Furthermore, *Both Sides, Now* has much in common with Fevered Sleep's *This Grief Thing* (2019–21), the curating of a series of conversations where people come together to think and talk about grief: taboo subjects that are too often seen as awkward or embarrassing but that embody our mortality and humanity.

Drama Box has given Singapore a theatre of the everyday, where that which is discarded, ignored or marginalized is brought to the fore. The oft-repeated motif of *Both Sides, Now* – 'Living well, leaving well' – could indeed function as the company's core mission: a way of considering how we lead a life where empathy, understanding and compassion guide our behaviour, a way of articulating our frustrations and anxieties while engaging with the views of others, a way of ensuring that when we depart – a conversation, a place, a community – we do so with due concern for those we leave behind. Drama Box encourages all of us who form part of the encounters the company curates to ask questions of each other and of the world. The company's creative manifestations give form to these questions, and in so doing they provide some of the



most urgent and resonant theatre of the twenty-first century. This book is a fittingly collaborative recognition of Drama Box's wide-ranging achievements.

#### Notes

- 1 See Kerrie Schaefer's chapter in this volume.
- 2 See Hong Xinyi's chapter in this volume.
- 3 See Ng How Wee's chapter in this volume.
- 4 To appropriate the title of Peter Brook's 1968 book.
- 5 See Kerrie Schaefer's chapter in this volume.
- 6 See Janet Pillai's chapter in this volume.
- 7 See Kok Heng Leun in conversation with Richard Gough in this volume.
- 8 These questions feature also in Graham-Jones and Arias (2019).
- 9 See Paul Rae's chapter in this volume for details on Nominated Members of Parliament in Singapore.
- 10 See Richard Gough's introduction to Section Two in this volume.
- 11 See Kok Heng Leun in conversation with Richard Gough in this volume.
- 12 See Teo Eng Hao's and Kok Heng Leun's chapter in this volume.
- 13 The MRT, an abbreviation of Mass Rapid Transit (which is never said in full), makes up much of Singapore's railway network system.

#### References

- Arias, Lola (2017) 'Interview with the author', 15 December.
- Arias, Lola, and Graham-Jones, Jean eds. (2019) *Lola Arias: Re-enacting Life*, Aberystwyth: Performance Research Books.
- Bakhormeeboy (2021) 'The Banter: Koh Hui Ling shares more about the Mini-ICAF and Drama Box', 22 February, <https://bakhormeeboy.com/2021/02/22/the-banter-koh-hui-ling-shares-more-about-the-mini-icaf-and-drama-box/>, accessed 11 April 2022.
- Brook, Peter (1968) *The Empty Space*, Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Diamond, Elin (1996) 'Introduction', in Elin Diamond (ed.) *Performance and Cultural Politics*, London: Routledge, pp. 1–12.
- Kok Heng Leun (2017) Keynote, Hong Kong Academy of the Performing Arts, 5 December.
- Nanda, Akshita (2016) 'Arts NMP Kok Heng Leun talks targets for his term in office', *The Straits Times*, 19 April, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/arts-nmp-kok-heng-leun-talks-targets-for-his-term-in-office>, accessed 7 November 2020.
- Rae, Paul (2019) Email to the author, 10 July.
- Rau, Milo, and Wolters, Nina (2014) 'What is to be Done', *The Drama Review* 58(1) (Spring): 2–3.
- Tan, Corrie (2015) 'Cross Talk with Benson Puah and Kok Heng Leun: Audiences and staying relevant', *The Straits Times*, 3 November, <https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/cross-talk-with-benson-puah-and-kok-heng-leun-audiences-and-staying-relevant>, accessed 7 November 2020.
- Tan, Jeanette (2016) 'This parliamentary speech by Arts Nominated MP Kok Heng Leun is more important than you think', *Mothership*, 6 April, <https://mothership.sg/2016/04/this-parliamentary-speech-by-arts-nominated-mp-kok-heng-leun-is-more-important-than-you-think/>, accessed 8 November 2020.



*Project Mending Sky: Us* (2012), at Bukit Timah Railway Station.



# Introduction

Charlene Rajendran and Richard Gough

## A Company in a Contemporary City: Places and people

In 2017, after attending a Drama Box production called *The Lesson*, a participatory theatre event that engages audiences to talk about and take decisions on contested issues around space and place in Singapore, one participant wrote on her Facebook page:

In a country where so many decisions are seen and treated as *fait accompli*, such an opportunity to deliberate and discuss and question is rare. That alone makes something like *The Lesson* incredibly valuable and important for as many Singaporeans as possible to attend.

(Han 2017)

Han, a journalist and activist, acknowledged that compared to the difficulties and frustrations of being involved in real-life advocacy and civil society, the 'simulation' provided by the Forum Theatre-based framework for public engagement in *The Lesson* was a 'safe space in which to fail' (Han 2017). But she also noted that it was a 'liberating space in which to try' because she felt able 'to practice applying the principles, values and processes that I want to uphold' (Han 2017) without having to deal with the sticky consequences of trial and error. Perhaps most significantly she admitted that 'such an opportunity' was much needed because it provided a place in which ideas could be reflected on and challenged, making space for audiences who embrace the 'opportunity to deliberate and discuss and question' to then benefit from feeling 'reassured, renewed and recharged' (Han 2017). Regrettably, this is still not a common occurrence.

Creating opportunities for Singaporeans and Singapore-based audiences to engage critically has become a central focus for Drama Box, which is Singapore 'born and bred', innately Singaporean and inseparable from Singapore. To use the economic terms of this most prosperous city-state, Drama Box is 'invested' in Singapore, 'embedded' and 'thriving' in Singapore, and contributes greatly to the cultural wealth (and health) of Singapore. Primarily it is a socially engaged theatre company that creates many forms of performance and multifaceted art projects that generate debate and discourse, challenge given orthodoxy and enable reflection and contemplation – all orchestrated to effect change. This is change that affects the lives of people who live in Singapore and who have become part of this place.

With approximately 5.7 million inhabitants in a landmass of 730 square kilometres, Singapore is the world's second most densely populated country. Space and people's narratives are compacted; places, locations and one's sense of belonging are charged, redolent and often contested. The island's history is enriched as well as troubled with multiple layers of ancestral and colonial pasts that have produced the multicultural and multilingual dimension of the nation – rich, complex and further compounded by recent flows of migrant labour at varied levels of demand and expertise. What results is a nexus of multiplicity in a maritime region that has positioned Singapore as one of the world's busiest sea and air ports, having to navigate a bustling traffic of cultures, peoples, beliefs and ideas. Yet what often goes unnoticed is that between all these structures and formations there exist cracks and crevices, amid people and spaces, cultures and languages, authorities and places. And in these fissures lie narratives, hopes and dreams – some privileged, some marginalized, some unarticulated and some repressed, even silenced.

Drama Box, through the application of highly developed and attuned strategies of theatre-making, throws a light on these difficult and often uncomfortable issues of life and living in contemporary Singapore. Working at an intimate level of community and neighbourhood engagement, Drama Box makes work that is challenging, uncompromising and provocative, but/and at the same time empathetic, supportive and inspiring. It must do this to win the hearts and minds of people, and thereby evoke the imaginations of audiences who are called upon not only to respond quietly from their seats, but also to speak out, take part and/or become co-creators of the work.

戏剧盒, the Chinese characters used to represent 'Drama Box', are three ideograms that speak to the company's philosophy of developing dialogue through the arts and dealing with difficult questions that arise as part of critical agency. The first two characters refer to 'drama' and the third character stands for 'box'. The first ideogram is of 'people at a feast being entertained by the enactment of a tiger hunt with spears' while the second depicts 'a fierce battle between a tiger and a boar'. 'Drama' is thus related to a hunt and a battle that are essential to survival, and the capacity to overcome adversity by confronting difficulty rather than avoiding conflict. It is also about the capacity to look at and reflect on an interpretation of what happens in everyday life. The third ideogram conveys 'a tier of containers with a cover' and sounds similar to two other Chinese words that mean 'to close up' or 'to come together'. The purpose of the 'box' is not merely to keep things within it, but to be opened when what lies within needs to be made available. When gathering an audience or coming together with participants and co-creators, Drama Box facilitates interaction by discerning when, where and how to manage the dynamics of collaboration, which includes navigating tension and disagreement. In a context that tends to avoid open discussion and a free exchange of ideas, this takes skill and conviction that the 'box' is a space for 'drama' that is crucial – anchored in people and embedded in context.

Much of the work that Drama Box creates functions as a 'call' that invites a 'response' that in turn becomes a subsequent 'call' awaiting further 'response', drawing from Jan Cohen-Cruz's (2010) frame for 'engaging performance'. Cohen-Cruz highlights how the word 'engaging' is both a verb and adjective, and emphasizes the need for performance to fulfil both aspects of (being) 'engaging' when reaching out to people. This means urging audiences to review issues and stories from critical perspectives, as well as captivate spectators through artistic expressions of content and form that are attractive and resonant. Taking on the contextual dynamics of the Singapore space, and keen to harness the potentiality of varied physical and cultural sites as options for art-making, Drama Box is effectively changing the way places can be felt and apprehended, even as it reckons with the varied ways that places are changing and thus requiring people to adapt accordingly. The company is simultaneously 'changing' (verb) places, even as it has to deal with what it takes to be part of a rapidly 'changing' (adjective) place.

To enlist interest and procure the support of people, the company and the artists that collaborate with Drama Box must generate trust if they hope to encourage communities and individuals to articulate concerns, desires and opinions with confidence. Founded in 1990 by a group of National University of Singapore (NUS) graduates from varied disciplines, all of whom were theatre enthusiasts and wanted to keep alive their passion for making performance, Drama Box has continually sought to prioritize people in the growth of the company. It worked initially through Mandarin and Chinese languages such as Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew, reaching out to Chinese speakers who were struggling to understand their location within a city-state aggressively moving towards becoming a global hub and thus wanting to elevate English as the main language of the nation – even if this meant excluding those for whom English was relatively distancing. Drama Box has since become more multilingual in its approach and creates work with, for and of diverse communities (cultures, languages, locations and generations) for indoors and outdoors, within civic centres and out in the public sphere. Since 2015, it even has the GoLi – The Moving Theatre, its own



mobile (pop-up) theatre that transforms the physical environs where it is temporarily set up, and changes a sense of everyday space into one that is ready for art to take place.

Adapting to new cultural stimuli and emergent modes of performance-making, the company has transformed and developed as an interdisciplinary arts company. Theatre remains its core, but to reach a wider range of people in varied kinds of contexts, it has become increasingly adaptive to the incorporation of varied other art forms such as film, visual and sonic arts. This enlarges the scope of art-making and broadens the vocabularies of communication and expression in a changing contemporary world. With an expansive vision for the role of art in society the company has explored and experimented with different ways of positioning art as central to everyday life. They include the following:

- devised, collaborative and intersectional arts-based civic engagement based on emergent areas of need such as end-of-life, co-created by various artists and communities;
- site-specific and site-responsive performances that incorporate immersive installations to engage directly with historically contested sites, landmark buildings and land redevelopment;
- the commissioning and production of plays in varied languages, namely English, Chinese and Malay;
- adopting theatre techniques of Augusto Boal, specifically Forum Theatre, and adapting them to a Singaporean context and regionally;
- professional development in the arts, focused on training workshops for actors, directors and writers.

This wide-ranging scope of art-making, training and civic engagement demands that Drama Box renews and revolutionizes its practice, never allowing tried-and-tested formulae to propagate complacency, all the time reaching out to new audiences and engaging more deeply, refining its social art practices and redefining its theatre practice. This is work that leads to a deliberation on places and people, a politics of contemplation, and opportunities for reflective and informed action. The aim is, 'by shining a spotlight on marginalised narratives and making space for the communal contemplation of complex issues, it seeks to tell stories that provoke a deeper understanding of Singapore's culture, history and identity' (Drama Box 2021a).

The question is how best to discern which stories will stir a deeper understanding of agency and belonging. How best to fashion processes and performances that serve as imaginative portals in which spectators will critically reimagine culture, history, society and identity openly and consciously. As Kenneth Paul Tan has noted when deliberating on the arts, culture and politics in Singapore, 'the problem was that with so many years of authoritarianism rule and clamp-down on artists, we had all the money to build the infrastructure, but where were the stories, imagination and out-of-the-box thinking going to come from?' (quoted in Dawra 2014).

## A Company in a Multifaceted Context: Political and cultural reimagining

The challenges faced by Drama Box when navigating issues of space and place in order to develop arts engagement that connects meaningfully with people and their stories are in part related to its location in a region that has to constantly balance questions of political credibility with cultural cohesion. Art-making in contemporary Singapore, as with much of urban Southeast Asia in the

twenty-first century, navigates the local in relation to the global, amid social, cultural and political shifts (Tan and Rajendran 2020). While pushing to become progressive and advanced in the financial, business and technological realms, states must also deal with countervailing socio-cultural forces that tend to pull towards rigid, conservative values that curtail a freedom to explore new options that emerge from a liberal contemporary ethos. The need to address questions of why there is prevailing inequity and a policing of identity is precipitated by fluctuating economic tides, neoliberal structures of power and unpredictable shifts in cultural practice and belief, which inhibit the viability, if not legitimacy, of artistic production. When art is deemed irrelevant or disruptive, it impacts negatively on the availability of infrastructural support, funding, arts training and education. As a result the space to negotiate questions of freedom and agency can be curbed by the state, and it is through initiatives such as civic activism and social advocacy that alternative options become available. Some of these involve artists and art production – on stage and in the street.

Making space for open and rigorous dialogue that confronts questions of belonging, precarity, access and agency, such as Drama Box seeks to do through artistic process and production, can be read as a form of critical, at times dissenting, intervention. It enlarges the option for ordinary people, otherwise relatively removed from decision-making and conscious participation in political engagement, to be actively involved in reimagining nation and community. Nation-states in the region, such as Indonesia, the Philippines, Malaysia and Singapore, which were newly formed post-Second World War when they gained independence from Western colonial powers, have prioritized top-down approaches to nation building. These are meant to establish political stability and focus on the development of physical infrastructure, economic growth, industrial capacity and technological advancement. Supplemented by social and cultural policies that build and nurture 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983) through shared aspiration and collective memory, social cohesion and cultural integration are targeted as critical for strong nationhood. Such approaches lead to a limited range of 'sanctioned' stories about country and society, framing difference as disruptive and detrimental to 'unity'.

Artists and activists from across the region, including theatre practitioners such as Kuo Pao Kun in Singapore, W. S. Rendra in Indonesia and Cecile Guidote-Alvarez in the Philippines have resisted these essentialist and prescriptive tropes of culture because they deny plural perspectives and oppositional voices from the ground. Through radical reimaginings that generate alternative proposals for more inclusive and porous cultures, the artworks and processes developed by these pioneering contemporary artists often contested state narratives and questioned official histories of community and country. These were significant efforts to foreground difference and dismantle a privileging of the dominant and unified story, to include space for the marginalized and make place for the fragmented story. Companies such as the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS, co-founded in 1965 by Kuo), Bengkel Teater (Theatre Workshop, founded in 1967 by Rendra) and the Philippine Educational Theater Association (PETA, founded in 1967 by Guidote-Alvarez) attracted varied artist collaborators who shared similar convictions about the need for art to be a political language and not just entertainment, particularly for disenfranchised segments of society. These companies and the practitioners who worked with them form a foundational layer of contemporary practice that led to later explorations of art as a space for political and cultural reimagining.

Drama Box continues to push this envelope. Its ethos and history draw directly from this work, most evident in the connections with PPAS and PETA that trace a line to the individuals and practices involved. Kuo was a powerful influence in the thinking and practice of Kok Heng Leun, founding member and Artistic Director of Drama Box from 1998 until 2020, as is made evident in Kok's articulation of his journeys through theatre in an extensive and probing interview with Richard Gough in Section Three of this volume. PETA's O-A-O (Orientational-Artistic-Organizational) framework for socially engaged art processes, developed in the 1980s and still widely used, was adapted by Drama



Box in the 2000s when it began its youth theatre branch, ARTivate, as explained by Teo Eng Hao and Kok Heng Leun in the same section. Other Southeast Asian companies/collectives with similar interests in political activism, civic engagement and critical pedagogy, such as Makhampom in Thailand and Five Arts Centre in Malaysia, have also forged links with Drama Box, and Janet Pillai, who contributes a chapter on *The Lesson* in Section Two, is a member of the latter.

However, it is ties with East Asia, such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and China, that have become a significant aspect of Drama Box's international profile, given its facility with Chinese languages, especially Mandarin. Drama Box's adaptation of Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed aesthetic methodology and critical pedagogy has resulted in the company generating contextually grounded approaches to Forum Theatre training and devised theatre strategies. This has led to the company being invited to share these practices and co-create work using these methods in Hong Kong, Macau, Taipei, Shanghai and Tokyo. Collaborating with organizations such as the Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre in China, Centre for Applied Theatre in Taiwan and Setagaya Public Theatre in Japan, and internationally celebrated artists such as Danny Yung from Zuni Icosahedron in Hong Kong and Yu Rongjun from Shanghai Dramatic Arts Centre, Drama Box has been involved in exchange and interaction that deepens its capacity to innovate and change in response to diverse contexts and unpredictable circumstances. Stories, experiences, sensations and encounters that emerge from these varied locations are listened to and explored with careful attentiveness to how these serve as rich resources with which to rethink norms and approach change with a sense of resolve.

As it evolves its practice and purpose as a Singapore theatre company committed to socially engaged arts processes, Drama Box also connects and collaborates with a wide range of artists and partners within the country to realize its interdisciplinary aspirations. Situated among a constellation of groups and individuals who shape the landscape of Singapore theatre, to support a critical revisioning of arts practice, Drama Box recognizes the importance of the network and participates in efforts to galvanize the arts community when issues such as censorship and the loss of space for the arts arise. As arts leaders and public intellectuals, Drama Box practitioners contribute to the collective voice of organizations and individuals that negotiate with the state for better working practices and stronger alliances. Together with companies such as The Necessary Stage, ArtsWok Collaborative, The Finger Players, TheatreWorks (now T:>Works), Teater Ekamatra and Toy Factory, with whom Drama Box interacts in a range of capacities, it performs as a critically engaged company that is embedded and invested in the ecosystem within which it lives and breathes. It takes on the challenges of socio-cultural and material change, with a desire to evoke politically conscious and agential transformation. While physical changes in a fast-developing terrain are often more visible, the unseen shifts are potentially more crucial.

Singapore is widely known as a fast-paced bustling metropolis, with a slick downtown landscape of skyscrapers and trendy cafes. Perhaps less familiar to visitors or observers from afar are the residential outskirts, often referred to as 'heartlands', where sturdy public housing apartment blocks, well-equipped schools and neatly maintained parks would appear to offer its populace a comfortable and secure living. This is amid more volatile and less affluent Southeast Asian nations where economic and political stability are relatively elusive. Despite the limits of land in the small island state, Singapore conveys the sense of a thriving metropolis where scaffolding is a familiar sight, and new construction projects populate the island from one corner to the next, reminders that while space may be limited, renovations of place can enlarge opportunities and expand horizons. Perhaps it is this ethos of working with possibilities of reinvention and reconfiguration that contributes to Drama Box's resilience and tenacity to persevere in efforts to question prevailing notions of what is valuable and why alternatives matter, especially when faced with problems of financial sustainability and questions of how to negotiate scrutiny from the authorities. The company is committed to developing critical agency and deepening citizenry that enriches the public sphere, excavating

stories of ordinary people to illuminate complex layers of everyday life and socio-historical details of local contexts. Allocating resources and energies to socially engaged arts processes, it enlarges spaces for varied kinds of participation and critical expression, thereby shaping suitable environments for multiple perspectives to be shared and facilitating dialogue with respect. All this and more are part of its evolution as a place for people-centred engagement through the arts.

## A Company Responding to Change: Purpose and practice

This volume examines the varied layers of space and place that Drama Box engages in its efforts to produce art that is responsive to people's needs and reflective of socio-political issues that warrant discussion. As the essays that follow reveal, the company's social and political sensitivities are expanded and sharpened when it responds critically and empathetically to structural and physical changes in a rapidly shifting urban space that prioritizes material well-being, often at the cost of cultural, emotional and spiritual health. In particular the chapters focus on key projects that Drama Box has produced since the early 2010s, to show how the company has reinvented itself in order to make connections with emergent concerns, and thereby meet its audiences with insight. The three sections in the book highlight aspects of how Drama Box approaches this work, with each section including different kinds of material such as script excerpts, personal reflections, edited transcripts and analytical articles. These are intended to function as a palimpsest in which there are varied overlaps and interconnections of ideas and perspectives.

In Section One, 'Spaces and Places', the emphasis is allocated to physical spaces and places that influence how Drama Box develops its art-making and social engagement. To underline the importance of experience in the meaning of location, Kwok Kian-Woon's insightful and nuanced introduction offers a frame that integrates the poetic articulation of theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun's revisioning of 'home' as a space of choice and a place for change, with theoretical concepts of space and place that cultural theorists and geographers such as Yi-Fu Tuan draw on. The perpetual state of transformation and the consequent transition that results from a persistent need to build, and keep building, lead to a depletion of certain fragile and vulnerable environments that are made to give way to the new and brazen. Displacement and disembodiment are inevitable as a result, but the work of Drama Box takes pains to counter this by sensitive and sensing approaches to storytelling that foreground the voices of ordinary people, evoking the resonant sounds of historical and cultural settings within which these stories are situated.

Section Two, 'Process and Provocation', deals with key strategies that Drama Box has developed to work collaboratively and provocatively when engaging audiences, arts practitioners, stakeholders and the state. In his introduction, Richard Gough deliberates on what it takes for Drama Box to do this effectively and considers the skills required to propose critical alternatives through art, while navigating the political landscape in Singapore, which is generally averse to expressions of disagreement and critique. Gough makes critical links with international companies and individuals who have been actively political in their approaches to art-making, situating Drama Box as part of a wider terrain in which art is 'activated' to become a provocateur, even as the Singapore-based company must temper its approaches to accommodate the particular anxieties of the local landscape.

The final section, 'People and Purpose', provides a glimpse into the history and the philosophy of the company via the voices of people who have worked for and collaborated closely with it. It includes articulations of critical frames that underpin the approaches taken to performance-making and training that the company has developed and devised to meet its needs and aspirations. Charlene Rajendran's introduction discusses how Drama Box has been variously concerned with the positioning of the arts practitioner within Singapore and how this affects the focus on people-centred



work and socio-political review. Change is acknowledged as a constant, and varied individual journeys are embraced as part of dealing with multiple modes of transformation. The Drama Box Milestones then indicates how the company has moved from one thing to another, navigating the dynamics of dialogic and reflective engagement with different sectors of the public.

The ethos of the Inside Performance Practice book series is to focus on those artists and theatre companies that have distinctive and located practices, work with specific communities through social and political processes, and create innovative, perplexing and challenging work that is often off stage, decentred, on the periphery, offside and on purpose. These are not necessarily theatre companies or artists gaining international currency but ones that contribute significantly to the shaping and developing of a contextually grounded landscape of art-making that is local and/or regional. It is worth noting that Drama Box contributed significantly to the enhancement of Chinese language theatre in its early years when it focused primarily on performances in Chinese. To address critical gaps in knowledge it also developed research on the history of Chinese language theatre in Singapore, seeking to understand the largely ignored role of theatre in the shaping of national consciousness. In the process it excavated rare images and narratives about Chinese language theatre's 'mission to inspire public discourse and to aid disaster relief in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century' (Drama Box 2021b), identifying the strong political relationships and social consciousness that produced a certain quality of cultural action. *SCENES: A hundred years of Singapore Chinese language theatre 1913–2013*, written by Quah Sy Ren and published in 2013 by Drama Box and the National Museum of Singapore, demonstrates the company's investment in building cultural capital that deepens the work of theatre in cultural reflection, and amplifies a call to take seriously the responsibilities of art-making. In a 2011 publication, *Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore – Cultural intervention and artistic autonomy*, Ng How Wee highlights how the company has consciously developed arts-based strategies to build vocabularies and creative processes that reflect and represent marginalized voices, at the same time as critiquing power relations between arts practitioners and the state. While the arts in Singapore have often been associated with an educated elite, Drama Box has made every effort to make art accessible by locating its work in public spaces and within community sites. As Quah Sy Ren has noted, Drama Box

has a keen and active concern in the (*sic*) Singapore society and works to bring theatre beyond the middle-class elite. Combined with their passion for social activism, the group aims to be at the heart of the community and touch those in the lower rungs of society. (2014: 10)

Being 'at the heart of the community' entails being people-centred, listening deeply and realizing the value of multiple voices.

The varied writers who have contributed to this volume reflect a fragment of people who are integral to the life of Drama Box. There are those who have collaborated closely on previous publications and arts projects, such as Ng How Wee, Teo Eng Hao, Chong Gua Khee, Prue Wales and Charlene Rajendran. Others have observed and studied the work of Drama Box from a relative distance such as Kwok Kian-Woon, Paul Rae, Janet Pillai, Corrie Tan, Kerrie Schaefer, Hong Xinyi and Lau Si Xian. Some are more newly acquainted with the company, and have ties with particular practitioners whom they have encountered locally or at international fora where chance meetings and conversations have led to deeper links over time, namely Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, Maria Delgado and Richard Gough. Each voice contributes to a significant understanding and evaluation of the way Drama Box extends the boundaries of art-making and calls out for bolder engagement with issues of the human condition. In their writing, questions also arise about the space for further involvement and critical review.

A further organizing principle of the Inside Performance Practice book series is to place scholars (usually, but not always, the editors) into a dynamic collaboration with the artists, so that each book

is the result of an integration between artistic practice and theory, between the scholar's optic and the artist's vision; where one interrogates the other, where the artist's voice (perspective, insight) is equal to that of the scholar. Through such dialogue, enriched insights into the idiosyncratic artistic practices of specific artistic endeavours are advanced. Furthermore, this series seeks to incorporate texts, images, notes, scripts, scenographic designs and artist reflections alongside critical analysis and appraisal. Through such a scholarly engagement with artist-led research and practice, a lively conversation between theory and practice emerges and the form and function of the performance work is revealed through dialogue and discourse.

This process corresponds appositely with the discursive and conversational practices of Drama Box. The resemblance in method has allowed a redoubling in purpose to see a book 'about' the company become a book 'with' the company. Kok Heng Leun, formerly Artistic Director of Drama Box, has been heavily involved in the shaping and structuring of this volume, contributing as a writer and participating in extensive discussions with the editors about what is needed in the book, how best to arrange the material and what additional texts or images are useful to get a glimpse of the company's story. Tay Jia Ying, formerly Company Manager of Drama Box, has also been critical to the process of collating and sifting through resources, attending to design and production elements, having worked in various capacities on the projects discussed. Their insights and experience, particularly in relation to contextual and cultural specificities, have been invaluable. Neither of the editors reads or speaks Chinese and have thus been reliant on their translation and interpretation to access certain aspects of meaning and significance. While this is a publication in English, it is important to bear in mind that Drama Box is most adept and impactful when it moves between Chinese and English, and more recently Malay as well.

Change will continue to propel Drama Box, and the arts practitioners who collaborate with them, into new initiatives that the company imagines and creates with those who become part of its story. A series of discussions about artistic vision and arts leadership resulted in a restructuring of the company at the end of 2020 and in early 2022. In April 2022 Koh Hui Ling and Han Xuemei became Co-Artistic Directors, having already been involved as key persons in the development and direction of projects. Kok Heng Leun continues his work in a new capacity as Artist, Founder and Chng Yi Kai is Resident Artist. The four individuals form the Artistic Team of Drama Box, supported by production, administration, marketing and publicity personnel and a Board of Directors.<sup>1</sup> With leadership responsibilities now shared among a broader and younger team, Drama Box will be steered in directions as yet unknown. Its commitment to socially-engaged processes will remain strong as the emphasis on people-centred projects continues. How, where, when and with whom new work takes place will constitute the subsequent chapters in the company's journey as it questions and engages with hope, criticality, deep listening and empathy to produce spaces that will invite audiences to 'deliberate and discuss and question' through imaginative and artistic tropes that lead them to feel 'reassured, renewed and recharged' (Han 2017).



## Notes

- 1 As these changes occurred in the final stages of publication for this book, the editors decided not to revise the references to Kok Heng Leun as Artistic Director, Koh Hui Ling as Associate Artistic Director and Han Xuemei as Resident Artist through the volume. For details about the current Artistic Team see [http://dramabox.org/eng/about\\_co-ad.html](http://dramabox.org/eng/about_co-ad.html)


## References

- Anderson, Benedict (1983) *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism*, New York: Verso.
- Cohen-Cruz, Jan (2010) *Engaging Performance: Theatre as call and response*, New York: Routledge.
- Dawra, Preeti (2014) 'Kenneth Paul Tan: Shaping the discourse on arts, politics and culture', *Mint*, 28 March, online publication, <https://www.livemint.com/Companies/vYv7ppZvxNqN9GLsCWs49L/Kenneth-Paul-Tan--Shaping-the-discourse-on-arts-politics-a.html>, accessed 12 September 2021.
- Drama Box (2021a) 'About us', [http://www.dramabox.org/eng/about\\_db.html](http://www.dramabox.org/eng/about_db.html), accessed 2 September 2021.
- Drama Box (2021b) 'SCENES: A hundred years of Singapore Chinese language theatre 1913–2013', [http://www.dramabox.org/eng/book-100yrs\\_spore\\_chinese\\_lang\\_theatre.html](http://www.dramabox.org/eng/book-100yrs_spore_chinese_lang_theatre.html), accessed 26 September 2021.
- Han, Kirsten (2017) Facebook post on 23 July, <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=504302813163&set=a.502268005933.72.220200003&type=1&theater>, accessed 2 October 2021.
- Ng How Wee (2011) *Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore – Cultural intervention and artistic autonomy*, Singapore: Global Publishing Co. Pte Ltd.
- Quah Sy Ren (2014) 'The paradox of harmony', trans. Lu Caixia, *Draft* 3(2): 4–13, [http://www.dramabox.org/eng/downloads/Draft\\_Vol3\\_Issue2\\_English.pdf](http://www.dramabox.org/eng/downloads/Draft_Vol3_Issue2_English.pdf), accessed 20 September 2021.
- Quah Sy Ren (2013) *SCENES: A hundred years of Singapore Chinese language theatre 1913–2013*, Singapore: Drama Box and National Museum of Singapore.
- Tan, Marcus Cheng Chye and Rajendran, Charlene (2020) 'Politics, Performance, the Contemporary and Southeast Asia', in Marcus Cheng Chye Tan and Charlene Rajendran (eds) *Performing Southeast Asia: Performance, politics and the contemporary*, Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1–34.



MISSING: The City of Lost Things (2018)





# DRAMA BOX is...

a theatre company founded in 1990, over thirty years ago, in Singapore.

We started as an amateur drama group that produced plays for pleasure and without professional training. Over the years we have evolved our practice.

We are constantly searching for what it means to make theatre, and responding to the time and place we live in. Our context and culture continually shape the way we practice.

In our first ten years, we worked towards making Chinese language theatre a mainstay of the Singapore theatre scene.

In the next ten years, we discovered and developed the importance of dialogic learning through our exploration of Forum Theatre and other applied theatre forms.

In the last ten years, we have moved to create multi-disciplinary socially engaged arts projects that create spaces for listening, dialogue and learning.

Our practice involves listening deeply to the call of society and community in order to decide what work to make. In response, we create artistic counter-calls to draw out further responses from the community, to deepen our understanding of an issue.

In essence, our practice of Call and Response honours collaboration, making alliances and creative play.

In trying to capture the spirit of what Drama Box is, we called upon our colleagues who are administrators, producers and marketers, to identify objects that symbolize what constitutes the company.

Their choices reveal what cannot be fully described in words about our company.



# GINGER RHIZOME

We are **grounded**, working with community, connecting with community. Forming **relations**, producing new shoots, new roots, new networks.

The **interconnectedness**, the links, the spreading out, moving laterally and deeply mark our story as we work continuously to explore new ground.

# CHILLI BAWANG

The Chilli Bawang (chilli and onion) is planted in the vicinity of every one of our **outdoor** events. This is a common regional **ritual** that we have embraced, to ask for clear weather during our performances.

It suggests how we and our work are subject to **environmental** and weather conditions. At the same time it highlights our need to be **adaptable**, to navigate, plan and be ready to make **changes**.

Whether under the blazing sun or heavy rain, hard work and **teamwork** play a crucial part.

The ritualistic act of planting is about **faith**, **belief** and **magic**; it is **playful** and **healing**.

The chilli placed on top signifies the **feisty spirit** that we invoke. Beneath that is the onion, made up of many **layers**, symbolic of how we explore what lies beneath the surface, to evoke reflections, understanding and even tears.





# PEOPLE IN DRAMA BOX

戏聚现场  
—论坛剧场—

The **culture** of the company: the willingness and openness to teach, to give, to accept, to **listen**, to **dialogue**; **generosity** and patience to **care** and to guide.

The camaraderie, the relations that are built, shape each and every one of us.

SCENES  
—FORUM THEATRE—

戏聚现场  
—论坛剧场—

Be the difference  
作出改变

7-5 July





SPACES  
& SPACES  
& SPACES  
PLACES



## INTRODUCTION

# Imagining and Making Space, Together and Differently

Kwok Kian-Woon

Home? I have no home  
My home is across the ocean, on the seas  
Home? I have no home  
My home is in alien countries, on faraway waters

I have no name  
I have no sex  
Departing is my arriving  
Wandering is my residence

(Kuo 1995: 66)

What does it mean to have no home? The Singaporean dramatist and public intellectual Kuo Pao Kun (1929–2002) poses this question at the end of his play *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*. The opening stanzas of Admiral Zheng He's final soliloquy, quoted above, were preceded by the following words:

the eunuch admiral seemed never to have given up the hope of finding an alternate life. On board his drifting vessels, in the loneliness of the vast ocean, in the limbo between departing and arriving, between being a man and a non-man, he kept on dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling.

A soliloquy, but not quite the lamentation of a devastated human being who was drowning in the depths of grief and sorrow, mourning an irreparable, irrevocable, irreversible loss: 'he kept on dreaming, hoping, searching, struggling'. Zheng He's loss was a bodily dismemberment, but also a dispossession of one's place in the world, or, in other words, *homelessness* as an existential predicament. Yet this was not naturally given but human-made, engendered by a socio-political-cultural system, and, in spite of it, he does not give up. The question 'What does it mean to have no home?' implies an opposite question: 'What does it mean to have a home?' or, more potently, 'What does it mean to *make* a home?' – even, in this case, 'in the loneliness of the vast ocean, in the limbo between departing and arriving'. Here then is a profound insight forged in the crucible of extreme conditions: *home* and *hope* share something in common; it's not a question of 'having' or 'not having' per se, but one of choice-making under circumstances not of one's choosing. By extension, 'homelessness' is not *necessarily* accompanied by an incapacitating 'hopelessness', and this is predicated on not giving up 'the hope of finding an alternate life' or, in the same spirit, imagining, seeking and working towards alternatives.

Kuo Pao Kun's insight is enlisted here as a starting point for this introduction to a set of essays on the relationship between *space* and *drama*, focusing on the theatre practice of Drama Box within the context of the spatial transformation of Singapore. Based on close readings of a dedicated series of socially engaged productions, as well as references to theoretical writings on space as a

social phenomenon, the writers – individually and collectively – make a compelling case for the intriguingly innovative ways in which a single theatre company has grappled with Singapore's changing landscapes. Here, it is useful to refer to the notion of 'landscape' defined by a group of Singaporean geographers:

Landscape is more than a visible spatial surface; it also refers to ways of reading and interpreting the social relations and spatial arrangements in a given area. For geographers, landscapes can be read as a text in that the symbolic imagery, social relations and material culture contained within are open to interpretations by different social groups that participate in the landscape.

(Ho et al. 2013: 2–3)

From this perspective, our geographers have investigated a wide range of changing landscapes in Singapore – in relation to, for example, heritage, the natural environment, familyhood, the elderly, migrants, terror and security, the economy, the arts, tourism and even the 'diaspora' landscape of Singaporeans living abroad (Ho et al. 2013). However, the relationship between 'space' and 'drama' has not figured prominently in the academic literature on landscapes in Singapore. Conversely, artists in the country, notably Drama Box, have a long-standing preoccupation with spatial change. In this sense the essays in this section fill a lacuna in the literature, and uniquely so by focusing on how the theatre company has creatively opened up multiple ways of interpreting landscapes, especially by involving ordinary citizens in public deliberation on the meanings and uses of spaces and places in Singapore. In saying this, it is helpful to recall the distinction between 'space' and 'place' drawn by the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan in his book *Space and Place: The perspective of experience*:

In experience, the meaning of space often merges with that of place. 'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place when we get to know it better and endow it with value. Architects talk about the spatial quality of place; they can equally well speak of the location (place) qualities of space. The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space, and vice versa.

(2018 [1977]: 6)

Note that 'space' and 'place' are *relational* concepts; we shall see that associated concepts tend to have what may be called a 'dialectical' quality. In this introduction, I aim to highlight a number of salient themes, rather than to summarize or reprise the many productive overlapping lines of enquiry found in the essays, which are different in focus and approach and, at the same time, share a distinctive attentiveness to the special contributions of Drama Box to Singapore and world theatre. In doing so I make some general observations on the overarching theme of space and drama, drawing on broad theoretical ideas, including some used by a number of the writers and which may strike the lay reader as rather difficult or dense. I also comment on Singapore as an extraordinary, if not paradigmatic, case of spatial transformation – at once extensive and intensive, compressed within both a relatively short historical time frame and a small island-city-nation-state. In the process, I aim to amplify what is suggested in the essays: through its creative interventions, Drama Box offers both an inspiration and a set of artistic strategies for thinking and talking afresh about landscapes, in effect, establishing a vital connection between space and drama.

To begin with, let's make a fundamental connection between space and drama: both involve what may be called a dialectic between boundlessness and boundedness, a *social* process in which boundaries are imagined, marked and maintained and yet with the potential for the same boundaries to be imagined differently, contested and shifted. Human beings can behold boundless physical space – land, sea, sky and, beyond the planet, outer space – and this boundlessness is almost always



Pages have been omitted from this book preview.



This book examines how Drama Box negotiates the changing dynamics of space and place to produce art that is responsive to people's needs and reflective of socio-political issues. Working at the intimate level of community and neighbourhood engagement, this Singapore-based company makes work that is challenging, uncompromising and provocative while being empathetic, supportive and inspiring. It manages to win the hearts and minds of people, and evoke the imaginations of audiences, who are often called upon to speak out, take part and/or become co-creators. Through the application of highly developed and attuned strategies of theatre-making, the company casts a light on difficult and often uncomfortable issues of life in contemporary Singapore. Adapting to new cultural stimuli and emergent modes of performance-making, Drama Box has transformed and developed as an interdisciplinary arts company. This wide-ranging scope of art-making, training and civic engagement demands that Drama Box constantly renews and revolutionizes its practice, never allowing tried-and-tested formulae to propagate complacency. The chapters in this volume focus on key projects since the early 2010s, and how the company's social and political sensitivities are expanded and sharpened when it responds critically and empathetically to structural and physical changes.

INSIDE  
PERFORMANCE  
PRACTICE

ISBN 978-1-906499-11-2



9 781906 499112 >