

HARESH SHARMA



READING
THE ROOM:

A Playwright's Devising Journey

In *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey*, Haresh Sharma has created something relevant, living and powerful. Living because it will speak to the reader, anytime, anywhere, with wisdom, wit, generosity and tremendous insight. It is revelatory of Haresh's creative energy rooted and inspired by living and being in Singapore and it transcends geographical boundaries to any and everyone who cares to look into the intricate veins and the mechanics of creative expressiveness in the performing arts. Haresh captures and imparts what it means to create specifically and bold-heartedly. It will inspire you and connect you to your own creative self. It will open your heart and it will make your mind soar.

Natalie Henedige

Artistic Director, Cake Theatrical Productions

HARESH SHARMA

For Navin

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READING THE ROOM:
**A Playwright's
Devising Journey**

Editor
SHAWN CHUA

A roller-coaster of a book which combines a down-to-earth approach in terms of a 'how-to book on devising and playwriting', along with a meticulous documentation of the process and practice of The Necessary Stage from its inception to the present. Designed as a page-turner with quick transitions and bullet-point questions, *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey* is a performance in its own right. What comes through most strongly is the inventory of a life in the theatre, and more specifically, a theatre that could only exist in Singapore. Haresh Sharma is in his element here as he brings to life the past in the present.

Rustom Bharucha

Author of *Theatre and the World* and *The Politics of Cultural Practice*

Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey offers deep insights into the expansive and transforming work of the playwright Haresh Sharma and his more than 30-year involvement with The Necessary Stage (TNS), one of the most prolific and influential theatres in Singapore and Southeast Asia. It is both a practical source book illustrating Sharma's dramaturgical process and a record of productions and performances devised by Sharma and TNS. Extensively illustrated by rehearsal notes and dramaturgical discussions, the book foregrounds questions of why and how to make theatre, reminding us always of Sharma's concern—remarkably consistent over many years as a playwright—to never forget the many voices in the creative process.

Peter Eckersall

PhD Program in Theatre & Performance
The Graduate Center, CUNY

Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey by Haresh Sharma is a foundational reference in Singapore Theatre Studies. As a historiographic resource, it offers incomparable insights into the evolution of Singapore theatre through the lens of one of its key makers. Its pages are a testament to the critical artistic

praxis that Sharma has developed with The Necessary Stage for over three decades. Written with the wit and virtuosity that is characteristic to Sharma's pen, this is a book that thinks through theatre-making and devising as no other book has done so far—a gem that scholars, artists, and avid theatre readers will certainly enjoy and treasure.

Felipe Cervera

Theatre-maker and scholar

Lecturer in Theatre, LASALLE College of the Arts

This is an intimate history of one of Singapore's most celebrated theatre companies disguised as an essential handbook for devising—and we are all luckier for it. Through real-life rehearsal room case studies, handwritten notes, archival materials and personal correspondences and reflections, Haresh Sharma has produced a meticulously crafted, clear-eyed overview of The Necessary Stage's pioneering artistic processes. While reading this book I was deeply struck by how much being a playwright and a performance-maker prompts one to grapple with the politics and passions of the human condition: injustice, ideology, illness, inequality, inclusion, identity... The Necessary Stage's plays and processes embrace them all, combining careful research with compelling lived experience. Instructive without being prescriptive, this is a must-read for any practitioner, student, or lover of theatre.

Corrie Tan

Performance researcher and resident critic, *ArtsEquator*

Haresh Sharma's *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey* is a long-awaited how-to book on devised theatre. With many concrete case studies in different contexts and with different artists, this book is a must-read for those interested in devising theatre. *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey* is in part a radical historicization of Singapore theatre in the last 30 years, it is a chronicle of a theoretically well-informed yet very humane

“playwright's devising journey,” making the volume exciting for not only theatre practitioners and performance studies scholars but also for general readership.

Tadashi Uchino
Professor Emeritus, the University of Tokyo

Henry Miller famously once said “When you can't create, you can work.” Haresh Sharma, in this revealing account of selections from his 30-year work, demonstrates he has consistently done both—in *tandem*. In this rare insight into how he has developed both method and practice as a deviser, he lays bare, in ways most writers would never dare to do, some of the “secrets” of his craft. At the heart of his long career, and the theatre company The Necessary Stage, has always been an overriding concern for understanding Singapore—warts and all. This book is a road map for others to do the same.

David Birch
Retired academic and author of *Haresh Sharma: The Cultural Politics of Playwriting in Contemporary Singapore*

A master craftsman not only develops skill sets by borrowing and adapting known techniques, but also conceptualises new ones to suit all purposes. Playwright Haresh Sharma is one such master in his field. This illuminating book is not only a practical guide to devising in theatre, but also a memoir that traces his body of work and artistic trajectory, mapping out the various ideologies, devising methods and ethos with his key collaborators of actors, directors, designers, and various partners in community over his illustrious career. His profound insights culled from decades of practice would no doubt delight and inform readers, especially aficionados of Singapore theatre history and aspiring students of the craft.

Chong Tze Chien
Playwright and director

Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey made me appreciate the sheer depth of labour behind the TNS ethos of collaboration, experimentation and critical reflexivity: where it came from, how it works (and when it doesn't), and what its real-world implications are. Just like his plays, Haresh communicates complex concepts and compelling stories in crisp language and trademark wit, giving practical, step-by-step, phase-by-phase advice for a diverse range of devised theatrical forms. While doing so, he also tacitly demonstrates a kind of attitude or disposition that is so crucial to his collaborative process—one that embodies openness, flexibility, humility, and kindness. This is a book not just for playwrights but for anyone involved in the theatre, backstage, onstage, and in the audience.

Cheng Nien Yuan
Performance scholar

Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey is an important documentation of a process that has shaped the works of one of Singapore's most established theatre companies. Haresh deftly dissects the complex process of devising new work into parts with eye-opening examples and amusing anecdotes, making the process relatable and digestible without speaking down to readers. Written in a friendly and conversational style, it feels at times like Haresh is a BFF sharing his experience and dishing tips over a long brunch. The best part of the book is Haresh's many reminders that in working collaboratively in art-making, it's important to “be kind”, “be considerate” and “be generous”.

Rydwan Anwar
Head, Theatre
Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay

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Foreword

Thank you for making it this far. If you're interested in theatre, playwriting and devising, then you've come to the right place.

For the longest time I've wanted to write a book about my experience in the theatre. But my "tell-all" book proposal didn't get approved, so instead, here's my "how-to".

My work with The Necessary Stage has enabled me to create, write, learn, devise, explore, teach, research and play in the Singapore theatre scene for the past 34 years. I have been able to take risks every step of the way, with the full support of the company. I have collaborated with artists who were much older than me (when I was much younger) and artists who are much younger than me (now that I'm much older).

My development as an artist began with Alvin Tan, who today is still my artistic collaborator. As the founder and Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage, Alvin's vision is one that prioritises artistic innovation, community engagement and arts education. The Necessary Stage has always found space to platform emerging artists and promote discourse and discussion through the arts.

With this fertile and stable foundation, I was able to devise and write a huge range of plays—from main season works going through an extensive 3-phase process to assembly plays performed in front of 800 teenagers; from international, intercultural, interdisciplinary collaborations with artists from around the world to "made-to-order" medical plays based on research, performed at community centres and auditoriums.

So, when I was thinking about this book, wondering what I could possibly write about, I didn't have to give it a second thought: a how-to book on devising and playwriting. As resident playwright of TNS I've devised a lot of plays, something I do without even thinking twice about the process and the methodology.

However, a few years ago a young actor told me that he and his friends had done some work based on the "TNS method". I was shocked. What is this TNS method and why didn't anyone tell me about it? Also, why do people I don't know, know about the TNS method? I asked a few theatre friends and the common consensus was that there *was* a TNS method, which is: tackling social issues in theatre; devising based on improvisations; a process-based approach to theatre-making.

So, when the opportunity came along, I decided to write this book. And by opportunity I mean being awarded the Cultural Medallion in 2015 and being able to apply for a grant, which I did in 2018.

I won't bore you with the details of how much planning went into this book, the preparations, writing, rewriting, structuring, editing and roller coaster love-hate moments in this two-and-a-half-year journey. I shall save that for my tell-all.

All I can say is, I'm glad I took on this challenge, and I couldn't be more proud of the final product.

Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey captures my theatre experiences and processes which I have structured into readable chapters. It represents the breadth and depth of work Alvin and I have achieved with The Necessary Stage. And it honours the artists, designers, administrators, production personnel—and especially actors—who have been part of this playwright's journey.

As a young playwright starting out, whenever I was in the UK, US or Australia for theatre events, I would always spend all my money buying theatre books. I read with much excitement about the different artists' processes, the interviews with directors and playwrights. I treasured those books which I read and re-read for years.

And now, finally, I have written such a book, about my own experience of living and working in Singapore. It did not come from the West, it's not about methodologies that exist in faraway countries created by distant theatre artists. It's about us—The Necessary Stage. It's a Made-In-Singapore book which took more than 30 years to realise.

You may not know this but the "necessary" in The Necessary Stage has always represented Singapore voices. In 1986, when Alvin and the original members of TNS planned to start a theatre group, they felt that it was a "necessary" time in Singapore's history to write and present original plays which reflects our reality, our society, our hopes and dreams. Our stories. Our voices.

It's been an absolute pleasure putting together this book for you. I am extremely grateful to my editor Shawn Chua for working alongside me these past two years, and helping me craft every chapter. My thanks also to Melissa Lim, who has done (almost) everything to make sure this book sees the light of day. Huge thanks to the actors and artists who agreed to be interviewed and to the many out there who posed questions for the Q&A segment.

Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey is, on one level, a culmination of a vision which began decades ago. But on another level, it's about sharing the vision. With you. Whether you're a theatre kid in school, an emerging artist trying to break through or a seasoned playwright keen to devise a play; whether you're a theatre lover or a teacher; a designer, a dramaturg or a

director, this book is for you. Every chapter has been written with the intention of helping you understand my process, with the hope that you too will embark on a journey of devising plays with your own theatre families.

Haresh Sharma
4 Feb, 2021

Acknowledgements

This book has been more than 30 years in the making. I would like to thank everyone who has been part of my theatre journey, and who still give me space to play and grow.

Alvin Tan, who started it all... and still keeps it going.

The Necessary Stage, which gave me never ending opportunities to create, and paid me a monthly wage.

Shawn Chua and Melissa Lim, who have been part of this book from day one.

Tse Chueen, for all your help.

All the interviewees.

The artists and collaborators who I have worked with over the past three decades.

The production personnel and crew.

The Necessary Stage's administrative staff past and present.

National Arts Council.

All the students and audience members for supporting our theatre.

No journey is travelled alone. Thank you for making mine a part of yours.

①

INTRODUCTION

Devising with The Necessary Stage

②

Devising with The Necessary Stage

I started writing plays by accident. In 1987, when I was a first year undergraduate at the National University of Singapore studying English Language and Literature, I met Alvin Tan who had just started a drama group comprising other arts undergraduates: The Necessary Stage (TNS).

I signed up and got involved in all aspects of theatre-making—acting, backstage work, selling tickets around campus and the most fun of all, watching rehearsals and doing improvisations.

In 1988, without fanfare, I wrote three short plays. I entered them in a competition and won a prize. Alvin then told me to write a play for TNS.

THE PLAYWRIGHT

Haresh Sharma is currently an undergraduate majoring in English Literature. His first experience on stage was in Primary Two playing Old King Cole. Since then, he has progressed to meatier roles such as Hal in Orton's "Loot". His interest has extended into the area of playwriting. To date, Haresh has penned five plays, four of which have already been or are currently being staged. "Rigor Mortis" which received a Merit Award in the '88 NUS/Shell Short Play Competition will be performed by the Necessary Stage in October this year. Although he has been largely concentrating on his skills as a playwright, Haresh is eager to get back on stage.



When I started writing, I had no theatre or playwriting training. In the late 1980s, theatre-wise, I was most impressed and excited by the plays and productions

of Kuo Pao Kun. I found his philosophy and approach to theatre-making liberating. Theatre was as much about the ensemble as it was about the protagonist; it was more about narrative than plot; the empty space, the voice of the everyday Singaporean. And of course, writing about the society we live in.

When I started getting input from the playwriting workshops I attended, I was attracted to the idea that *Character* determines *Plot*; that we follow the journey of the character, whose actions are determined by their want in the play. This basic principle continues to guide me till today, and is something I teach in my playwriting classes.

An important ethos of TNS back then— which has lasted till today—was the focus on research and process. Because none of us were trained in theatre (there wasn't a theatre studies programme at the university back then), we decided to work together and be a collective resource for each project.

For example, we would share stories about our backgrounds, our different cultural sensibilities and so on. We would also create a lot of improvisations, what we called "devising". So a common phrase back in the day would be "let's devise a play", a phrase which was usually met with cheers more so than jeers. This was because devising meant everyone had a say, everyone could contribute in some form or other, through improvisations or research or feedback. There was structure and hierarchy, minus the authority.

I would say that *Lanterns Never Go Out* is my first devised play. I wrote it in 1989 and it was first staged as a lunchtime play. TNS performed at many lunchtime platforms during our early years from 1987-1990. They include the Shell Lunchtime Series, DBS Lunchtime programme and the NUS lunchtime performances.



↓ "Haresh Sharma is currently an undergraduate majoring in English Literature" Bread & Barter/Lanterns Never Go Out (1989), Programme booklet

Pages have been omitted from this book preview.

Over the past three decades, award-winning playwright Haresh Sharma has written more than 120 plays, many of them created with the The Necessary Stage's (TNS) unique devising methodology. *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey* offers unprecedented access into the devising process, with keen insights and intimate reflections gleaned from Haresh's artistic journey.

This book describes Haresh's devising process in meticulous detail, illustrated by production case studies and incorporating numerous archival artefacts, including photographs, early drafts of scripts and personal correspondences. It also features in-depth interviews with some of TNS' most notable artist-collaborators. The chapters highlight different aspects of devising such as:

Devising with Communities

Devising and Verbatim Theatre

Devising and International Collaboration

Devising and Interdisciplinary Theatre

Written as an accessible how-to guide, *Reading the Room: A Playwright's Journey* promises to be an invaluable resource for playwrights, directors, students, teachers and collaborative artists, as well as anyone curious about Singapore theatre history.

"Designed as a page-turner with quick transitions and bullet-point questions, *Reading the Room* is a performance in its own right."

Rustom Bharucha

Author of *Theatre and the World* and *The Politics of Cultural Practice*

"Extensively illustrated by rehearsal notes and dramaturgical discussions, the book foregrounds questions of why and how to make theatre."

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