

Two-Trick Pony

Paul Rae and Kaylene Tan



We presented our first show in 1997. A decade later, we were still at it, and decided to celebrate under the slogan '10 years of modest achievement in the arts'. We didn't. We were rather busy, and in any case ambivalent about whether, absent a desire to use the opportunity as a marketing ploy or branding exercise, our work had left a residue of value robust enough to withstand reanimation.

#1

And so it begins with love.

It was a love that brought me here.
A love -
Of?
Who?

There is nothing there.
No idea nobody.
Emptied out again.
It's better this way.
It's not you it's me.

The space is brimming with ghosts of shows past.
I am waiting for you to begin again.

Fatalism is never pretty, especially when applied in retrospect. But the real problem was that lack of interest in marketing. In Singapore, English is the *lingua franca* and the first language of many, but never the 'mother tongue'. Precise planning and detailed execution smoothes the co-existence of its high-density millions. A disciplinary corporeal repertoire advances productive well-being and tempers subject and society alike. And commerce is glorious. In such a place, one may be tempted to

conclude there is inherent virtue in a theatre with other priorities: one that plays poetry with language, that expends energy, gesture and meaning without rational hope of return, that doesn't make money.

(You didn't pick me. I fell into you.)

One would be mistaken. Of course, we worked in a spirit of affirmation rather than critique. We didn't sit around bemoaning the state of the nation. We were positively invested in problem-solving, play; in the fun we were having and the relationships we forged, one by one. But in an ergonomic society like Singapore's, negative capability, however modest, can cede easily to a creative practice negatively defined, however subliminally. Discriminating between the two and maintaining that distinction day-in, day-out is one of the central challenges of art-making in Singapore. It is not a challenge we have met consistently, and where we failed, the work was derivative, incomplete, compromised. Where we succeeded, we created something we were proud of. What makes the difference?



I Got Stung (1998)

#2

Lights?
There.
Hello?
Hi.
Nice to see you.
Hello.
Hello again.

You and me. Together.
We are a strange fit.

The first step towards an answer lies in the fact that the art we like is not the type we make. We only know a few proper artists – there aren't many in Singapore – and are in awe of what they do. They are the kind that pay unnatural attention to what, in the run of things, other people are content to gloss over, generalize, look past or through. Which is not necessarily to say we respect them. They are as flawed as the rest of us, and are oftentimes indulged to be more so. However, it is that capacity to disassociate the personality from the work that we admire most; and it is because of our inability to do so that we do not count ourselves among them. We're easily distracted, over-interested. When people ask us to do things, including writing this article, we find it hard to say 'no'. This has its benefits: you learn a lot, meet new people, see stuff – but producing great artworks is

rarely one of them. This kind of 'yes' is shadowed by bad faith. You say it because you owe a debt to the person who asked, because you don't want to offend, because you'd quite like the opportunity to learn about this or that novel thing or because, let's face it, you'd like the money. We've got a family, you know.

#3

Conversation in the car 1

(P: Paul; K: Kaylene; L: Lola, 7; S: Summer, 5)

K I didn't like the design of the show.
P What do you mean?
K The projections were so gratuitous. And the costumes! That actor at the opening looked like a banana.
L What are you talking about?
P A show we went to see last night. Mummy didn't like it.
S Did you like it?
P I thought it had its moments.
L Why did you go if it was bad?
K I didn't know it was going to be bad.
S So why did you go?
K I thought it might be good.
P It's a risk you take when you go to the theatre.
K Most of the time, you don't know what you are going to get.
P Sometimes the show is really good..
L Like mine?
P Of course, yours was great ... and that's the magic of theatre.
L And you get a nice surprise?
K Kind of..
P Or a rude shock.
S Er... Dr Rae, what is 'risk'?



Beautiful Losers (2003)

The artists whose work we admire say 'no'. Theirs is a process of gradual and sometimes obsessive renunciation, in order that what remains – the work – can affirm on its own terms: can say 'yes' with absolute authority. This is why many of the works that remain with us give us less than we expect, rather than more. The merely fulfilling seldom satisfies for long. But sometimes you encounter a

work that leaves you asking 'is that it?', and then it slowly dawns on you that yes, it is – but 'it' is not what you thought it was, because it's not something you were ever able to *think* until now.

Which is not to say we only like minimalist work: often, it contains multitudes, with the emphasis on the act or mode of containment. Take, for instance, Ho Tzu Nyen's six-minute, 52-second *Bohemian Rhapsody Project* (2006). Originally filmed and installed in the former Supreme Court for the 2006 Singapore Biennale, it offers, amongst other things, a mini essay on the relationship between spectacle, anguish and the state. Its basic scenario is a capital trial, the literalisation of a narrative strand in Queen's 1975 song 'Bohemian Rhapsody', which, in turn, matches the pomp and operatic hijinx of the song to the pageantry and spectacle of the law court. The theatricality is further exaggerated by the performances of the 21 actors whose audition for the main role makes up the footage from which the film is spliced together.

The result is, in short, a bohemian rhapsody: a spectacle of frivolous excess, with a strong strain of amateurishness running through it. But is it trivial? In part, yes; and certainly it carries no discernible political critique, even though the death penalty remains a contentious feature of Singapore's criminal justice system.

Nevertheless, there are elements that nuance this frivolousness by appropriating it. The staginess contributes to an exploration of the relationship between the mechanics of representation, the spectacle of power and the exercise of authority. And then, there is the crying actor who says, à la Freddie Mercury (dec'd), 'I don't want to die.' As a cliché, it is of a piece with the flippancy of the film. But we find it affecting. This is no doubt because we don't want to die either; but also because it unexpectedly inflects the whole sequence with sincerity. After all, if you cry in an audition, either you really mean it, or you are transparently fake, which amount to the same thing. So when the actor cries in the film, we buy it: we feel for him, and for all his fellow auditionees, however wooden. They try too hard – but they also try their hardest, and the result is honest, without being real.

#4

I am a good liar and I'll lie my ass off for you.
I'm bad at sharing but I'll do it for you.
I am a loner but I don't mind hanging with you.
I'm shit scared but I will be brave for you.
I don't believe but I'll fake it for you.

At least that's the truth.

The calculated complexity and formal rigour required to corral the film's teeming cast, hyperactive edits and referential ebullience into such a brief and tender *récit* is, frankly, beyond us. So why write this at all? Surely the noble thing would have been to recuse ourselves from this project, and from creative practice, at the outset. Maybe. But we're interested in finding out what happens if we persist nonetheless.



Bud (1999)

#5

Then the light hits
Your blood shoots to the surface
You are saying these things
Doing these moves, fresh again each time
Raptured up
And lost
Lost in utter belief
It lasts only a moment
Less than

I am after that.
How ever bad the words or stupid the costume or stupider the idea
(Yes there's a lot of that)
Or good in which case I work harder
I wait for that.
Drag my body to the theatre and put it there for just that.

Sucker
True
That frickin' transcendental mindfuck speck of a second
I want to take you there.

Our own work lacks the disinterest of the art we like. The imprint of our enthusiasm runs too deep; our personal experiences remain too clearly defined – and defining. Ironically, this is perfect for Singapore. 'Surely,' writes cantankerous George Steiner in *Real Presences* (1989), 'there must be some licence under God for caring mediocrity.' He was writing about art criticism, relative to art. But the same could be said for Singapore, relative to nation formation. 'Meritocracy', 'excellence', 'world class' and other common exhortations are fig leaves on an ideology that exalts mediocrity. We try not to exalt mediocrity, but we do care too much. The artists we admire are indemnified by their work against any number of mundane political and social considerations we find hard to shake off. Singapore is not generally a place where greatness flourishes, and one of the reasons is that many of the public arenas in which it might be cramped and parochial – and all the more consuming for that. Small in size, centralized in organization, with a political culture characterized by paranoia and condescension, Singapore is endlessly, exhilaratingly, irritating. It appeals to the basest instincts of the liberal imagination – self-righteousness, relativism, hypocrisy, doubt – and gnaws away at whatever sentiments may otherwise compel transfiguration.

And there we are, lapping it up, spluttering helplessly away at the arrogance of our leaders, the stupidity of our journalists, the brazenness of the salesmen. We take our hit of self-serving indignation every morning over the *Straits Times*, then wonder why we're finding it so hard to come up with any artistic ideas.

#6

*Simi lanjiao!*¹ Why am I here? Why did you make me come to this shit. Everything is so ... mediocre. So lukewarm... Give me boiling hot or icy cold *lah*² can or not?

Maybe I am just not getting it. Why do I bother? Why do you? Are you there for the applause? You want the LOVE? You feel more love in a hot yoga session, OK. I watch those people on stage and I think 'hello? WTF? Wake up!' They are like zombies. Why are you there doing those things it is nothing new ok this shit makes ChannelNewsAsia look interesting and why are you saying those things I have seen them before you are bloody recycling them from your last show ok and the show before that and those tears - pretend one and that quivering lip - please *lah* I also can do - I just have to think about you and that makes me want to cry. Yes I was there at your last show - guilty! - why was I there? Stupid lor. Stupid. *Kena*³ con. I took a risk. And I got *suaned*.⁴

Yet the principled life is a half-life at most, and theatre in particular is hard to make on principle alone. However far we remove our concerns from the diurnal round, it is not only our limitations but theatre-making itself that draws us back into the world. We go, with a sense of relaxed resignation. Our passions, prejudices, the trivia of our life - we stuff it all in, poorly edited, here poking out through the surface of the work, there sellotaping a crack in the structure or narrative.

It doesn't help that our imaginations are so unevenly developed. We can write passably well and organize people on a stage. But when it comes to visuals - costume, set, lights, publicity - we're really at the mercy of circumstance. When budgets are tight, and budgets are always tight, that means we are incapable of imagining anything other than what is. We are as incoherent with our designers as with our hairdresser, not because we are inarticulate, but because the immediate lays such an overwhelming claim on us, we are powerless to envision an alternative.

(What to do? Some things you just can't get out of your system. There is a part of me that still has that optimism ... or is it innocence or stupidity ... that one small shred of belief. I need to fall in love again.)

This in turn is indicative of an even greater failure of the imagination: we lack ambition. This is a recent discovery, revealed to us more through the progressive achievements of our friends than any moment of tragic realisation on our part. The last time we made an active decision was to study

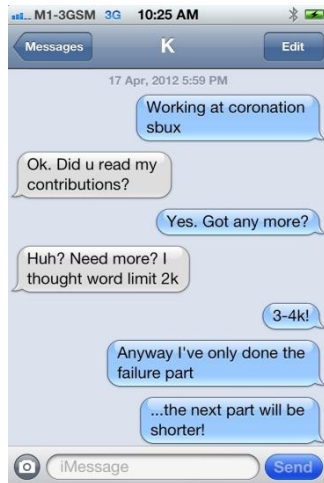
¹ [Editor's note:] *Simi lanjiao*: *Minnan hua* or Hokkien-Chinese: Literally 'What penis!'

² [Editor's note:] *lah*: Malay: '[A] particle emphasising the word to which it is appended' (A Malay-English English-Malay Dictionary, ed. A. E. Coope [revised edn.; London and Basingstoke: Macmillan Education, 1991]).

³ [Editor's note:] *kena* /kə-nah, 'gəna/ v. [Malay, bring down upon, get or suffer something, affected by, forced to] Befall, experience, happen to, occur to, esp. be selected for an undesired or unpleasant task or responsibility (<<http://www.singlishdictionary.com/>>, accessed 6 June 2012).

⁴ [Editor's note:] *Suan*, or *swan*: probably *Minnan hua* or Hokkien-Chinese: To be ridiculed or berated. Here turned into an 'English' past tense, hence *suaned*.

drama at Bristol University in 1992. Thereafter, the possibility that we might do something different never occurred to us, except when we needed money, which doesn't count. This not – as should be clear by now – because of our unstinting commitment to our art, but rather because the idea one might take a drama degree and turn it into a non-drama career never occurred to us. Our upbringing and education provided us with sufficient social and cultural capital to avoid the descent into lassitude. Our inambition takes the form of passive commitment. Paul carried on doing drama degrees until he ran out of them, then set about conferring them on others. Kaylene works the gamut from community arts to corporate copywriting. Anything, as they say in Singapore, also can.



(Last night my daughter made up a song it was called Happy Times, Sad Times and Medium Times. 'Happy times is when the sun shines, Sad times is when it rains, medium times is when it is windy or cloudy.')

* * *



Duets (2005)

#7

And so it begins with love.
It was a love that brought me here.
A love of...
A belief in -
Love.
Of course.
Really?
I fell in love with you before the second show.
What?
I fell in love with you before the second show.
The Carpenters.
Long ago...
Where were we?
And so faraway...
And so it begins with...
I fell in love with you.

All this – the disdain, inhibitions, limitations – leaves us with a very narrow furrow to plough. Not for us the wide open spaces of the spirit, the rivers deep and mountains high of the human condition. Not, either, the rich hinterland of an oppressed class background or a marginalized cultural heritage. We are unremarkably middle class. We speak one and a half languages between us. Entire realms of the temporal and spirit worlds that so exercise Singaporeans are closed to us.



Sky Duet, 2008

#8

Conversation in the car 2

P: Did you write anything?
K: No.
P: We need to give Wan-ling something soon.
K: Sure. What is it we have to write?
P: I sent you the brief.
K: I didn't read it.
P: xxxx ... contemporary practice ... xxx xxxx xxxx xxx xxx xxx xxx xxx
xxx xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxx xxxxxxxxxxxx art xxxxxxxxxxxx theatre xxxxx
spell#7. Are you listening?

K: Sorry I was thinking about dinner. What do you want to write about?

P: Something about spell#7.

K: What about? A retrospective? Or our repeated failures?

P: Failure's trendy these days. Tim Etchells, Matthew Goulish, they're all talking about failure.

K: Except they don't. Fail.

P: They're failers, not failures. And they do it well.

K: So we failed at failure?

P: It's an art.

K: We are mediocre failures and that is the worst kind.

P: What's for dinner?

And so are left with this: what does it mean to make a life, rather than a living? The first answer is that it's the difference between a life with and without theatre in it. We make theatre as and when the opportunity arises. It doesn't matter how often, as long as it's an option.

This attitude feeds into the work, which in turn represents a second answer to the question. In September 2004, Kaylene was heavily pregnant with our first child, and we took the opportunity to mark the final days of our time alone together with a performance, *Duets*. In April the following year, we revised it. We wanted to know what endured of the two of us, now we were three. We wanted to know what kind of theatre we would make, now it wasn't the primary claim on our time or affections. The result told of a life lived in and around the house, and a relationship preoccupied by an absent presence:

K Did you lock the door?

P Yes

K Are you sure?

P Um hmm

K Can you take the rubbish out?

P I'll do it in the morning.

K There's a mouse in the kitchen.

P Hmm

K Where are you going?

P Take the rubbish out

K Don't forget to lock the door.

A year later, Paul did *Duets 2*, solo. He didn't have the time or energy to do it right. It wasn't thought through. His SM was inexperienced and his lighting designer fucked him over. He forgot his lines. Kaylene was unimpressed. But when he got to the end of the show, he discovered in the particularities of its irresolution the beginning of the next one; and when he got to the end of the run, he understood out how to work in future. *Tree Duet* started as a set of stories, actions and readings in Bangkok in August 2007 with the following anecdote:

At the end of *Duets 2*, there was a kind of coup de theatre, where I walked over to this corner of the stage, and lifted up a trap-door to reveal the top of a beautiful tree growing up, as if it were growing out of the stage.

I spoke to it for a while, then I sat down here and the lights went down.

But even as the audience began to applaud, I knew that although the show had ended, it wasn't finished. It was the tree. You can't just put a tree on stage and expect it to do what you want it to do. I'm not saying trees have their own agendas – but they are their own things.



Tree Duet (2008)

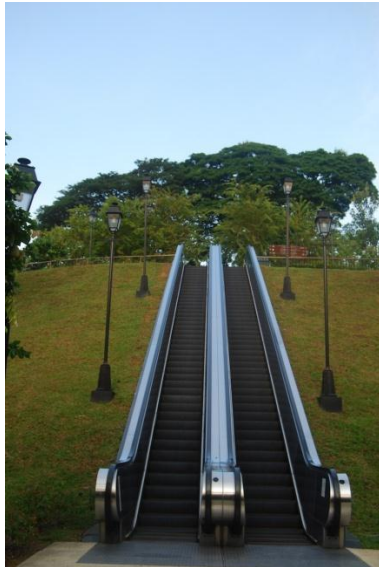
Over the following years *Tree Duet* (2007-9) was presented in different theatres and different countries to different kinds of people. It grew in length and complexity, each new version enfolding previous iterations. Paul published a version of the script in an academic book, and the art historian Lucy Davis built a sensitive scholarly article around the project. She knows best:

There are recurring stories of people and trees: politicians and trees, children playing around trees, dances with trees, historic individuals and trees, ancestors and trees. These stories are told and retold in layers, which resound through the gentle density of the piece. A considerable amount of water is consumed from plastic bottles by both performers. Most of the materials used in the production are tree products: a piano, a harpsichord, a broom, rubber balls (a reference to the Malayan rubber industry and included in a story of Henry 'Mad' Ridley, self-styled rubber seed evangelist who was appointed Director of the Singapore Botanic Gardens in 1888), a book of plays by the revered 'father' of Singapore theatre Kuo Pao Kun, handwritten notes for a eulogy to Rae's grandmother, and a temple woodblock percussion instrument. And then there were 100 Singapore five-dollar bills, which are green and although no longer made of paper, bear the image of a Singapore 'Heritage' tembusu tree.

In the play, monologues by Paul Rae – which skirt around the conventions of a performance lecture – alternate with physical and spoken interventions by Kaylene Tan, which complicate Rae's prolixity. At one point she says, 'You talk a lot' and the audience laughs. During my second and third viewings, I found myself zoning in and out of Rae's sequences of recurring stories – and instead drifted with other rhythms within the piece: the poignant but independently demanding temporalities of Toru Takemitsu's *Rain Tree Sketches I and II* and 'Rain Dreaming'; the earnest and somewhat wooden 'tree dance' that Tan and Rae return to (Tan assuredly, Rae haplessly); the sound of the temple woodblock; the sound of breath; the sound of wind; the sound of the sweeping of leaves on a temple floor (Davis 2011: 45).

We used the same incremental, iterative model for developing another theatre project, *National Language Class* (2005-8), which Paul has discussed elsewhere (Rae 2011). Meanwhile, Kaylene spearheaded a parallel practice in audio work. If *Tree Duet* and *National Language Class* emerged

from the intersection of our interests, life experiences and institutional relationships with faithful venues and patient commissioning bodies, the audio work cleaves close to our world in a different way. In 2003, we created a performance walk around the Little India area of Singapore, called *Kinda' Hot*. It was disallowed by the police because it fell foul both of safety concerns over crossing the road, and of an anti-lapdancing rule that prohibits the mingling of audience and performers. In response, we reworked *Kinda' Hot* as an audio tour, *Desire Paths* (2004). In wandering the quarter with headphones in, listeners would find the environment yet more immediate and the performers yet more proximate, but no laws would be broken.



Ghostwalking (2010)

#9

We like having a captive audience. We like being close to you. The theatre we want to make these days takes place in between peoples' ears, as they move along the city's arteries, dwell in its heartlands, and consume its spectacles.

The medium has changed but not what we are trying to do and or make you feel. It is still that frickin' transcendental mindfuck speck of a second. Like in *Desire Paths* when Ben says there are flowers in the wall and there really are, and when we talk about the black dog, there really is one (after seven years). Or in *Ghostwalking* (National Library) when the music comes on, the surroundings start to take on a sparkle and when you look up at the underpass the leaves do fall like rain. These are very small things. But they make a difference.

This doubled embeddedness – of the listener in their environment and voice in the listener – has exercised us in subsequent audio works. *Sky Duet* (2008) addressed human aging in a changing city, and lasted the duration of a single revolution of the Singapore Flyer observation wheel. *Ghostwalking* (2010, and ongoing at www.ghostwalking.sg) speaks of four moments in a long life. It features four downloadable audio tours linked to different stations on the metro system, and three smartphone films to be watched on the intervening train journeys.

I wanted to give people to freedom and responsibility for their own experience. That's why the download.

Who knows what audiences will do, given that freedom?

The performance begins when someone clicks to download, where sounds and videos 'possess' the device that is closest to their body. The content becomes their heart, their brain.

Press play and theatre now exists in the space between the ears, in the space between one's fingertip and a touch screen. Theatre now is the wired body in the environment. The space is activated. The listener performs by being present.

We create the score.

Dream-Home (2009-10) combined mobile audio technology and live performers. Presented during the evening rush hour, twelve audience members followed a performer as she made the commute from work-self to homebody. We never set out to mine this mundane seam. Time was, we would talk about our work in terms of interculturalism, globalization, mobility. Now we realize whatever we've done, wherever we've been, we've always been heading home. And just like the character in *Dream-Home*, we'll never actually get there.



Dream-Home (2010)

#10

Conversation in the car 3

P: Did you read it?

K: Yes. Pretty defeatist.

P: The next half is going to be feelgood.

K: Oh. When is that going to happen?

* Some of the texts in Courier New are the beginnings of a text for *Perfection of 10*, directed by Sean Tobin, and to be staged in Singapore at The Esplanade - Theatres by the Bay in September 2012.

Paul Rae (UK) and Kaylene Tan (Singapore) co-founded *spell#7* performance in 1997. Paul teaches on the Theatre Studies programme at the National University of Singapore. He is the author of *Theatre and Human Rights (Palgrave, 2009)* and numerous scholarly articles on contemporary theatre and performance. Kaylene combines her work for *spell#7* with freelance writing, teaching, and audio projects. Further details can be found at <www.spell7.net>.

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