

Rapporteur's Report on

ADN REPORT

16 February 2018 | 10.30am – 12.30pm

Presenters: Lim How Ngean, Robin Loon, Charlene Rajendran

The fourth Asian Dramaturgs' Network (ADN) Symposium, took place as part of TPAM (Performing Arts Meeting in Yokohama) on 16 and 17 February 2018, with the theme "Dramaturgy & the Political". To provide some context of ADN's journey so far, the network's three co-directors – Lim How Ngean, Robin Loon, and Charlene Rajendran – opened the event by giving an overview of the issues and topics that had been brought up in previous editions.

Before they delivered their presentations, Lim – who is a practising dramaturg, and the founder of ADN – started off by reiterating his reasons for establishing the network in 2016: to engage with others in the region who are doing similar dramaturgical work, and to connect regional thinking about dramaturgy from an Asian point of view. He envisioned ADN as an artist-centred network for the open sharing and exchange of ideas, and as a platform to gather knowledge that he hopes will be shared as a repository resource in the near future.

Lim also explained that while the ADN Symposium has been held in various countries, the network's home base is Singapore. Theatre development space Centre 42 initially came on board as a partner in logistics and administration, but the network has now officially become a part of the Centre.

ADN Symposium 2016 (Singapore)

After this brief introduction, Loon then presented a recap of the very first ADN Symposium, which was held at Centre 42 and Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, Singapore, on 23 and 24 April 2016. As the theme "Mapping Out, In & About" suggests, the intention of this edition was to start mapping the terrains, and begin conversations about what dramaturgs and artists are doing in the Asian region.

One of the key topics that surfaced early on in the event was the idea of terminologies, as "the dramaturg" has been translated in different ways in different languages. For instance, in China, it has been translated into both "戏剧构作" (the dramaturg as someone who is part of the creation process of the work) and "戏剧顾问" (the dramaturg as an outside consultant who is brought in to give advice). Similarly, in Malaysia, the dramaturg is sometimes referred to as "pendamping" (an accomplice or companion), and sometimes as "pengganggu" (a provocateur or questioner).

The unique space that the dramaturg occupies – as someone who is both inside and outside of the creation process – was discussed in detail by several of the speakers at this first symposium. Eko Supriyanto (Indonesia) said that a dramaturg should be an advisor, mentor, coach, sounding board, and discussant. But this brought up issues of ethics and responsibilities – how does a dramaturg configure his/her subjectivity when dramaturging a piece of work? Nanako Nanajima (Japan), for example, recalled the conflict she felt when she had to decide between accurately representing the art form that she was trained in (traditional Japanese dance), or to serve the need of the work that she was dramaturging for.

For Shintaro Fujii (Japan), he found it useful to distinguish between the role of the dramaturg, and the practice of dramaturgy. David Pledger (Australia) then expanded on this idea, referring to dramaturgy as an operating system, while the dramaturg is someone who has to create the system, as well as work within it. Sankar Venkateswaran (India) described the same concept in another way: by comparing dramaturgy to the steel beams that maintain the structural integrity of a building, and the dramaturg to the structural engineer that an architect would hire.

Other roles that a dramaturg may take include being someone who negotiates and mitigates cultural differences, as Ken Takaguchi (Japan) pointed out; or as an open-minded person who helps the audience make sense of the material, according to Yair Vardi (Israel); or as the work's first critical spectator, as Charlene Rajendran (Singapore) put it.

ADN Symposium 2017 (Yokohama, Japan)

While the first edition of the ADN Symposium was about finding out who practises dramaturgy in Asia and what the role of the dramaturg may comprise, the second edition was about delving in deeper into the specifics of Asian dramaturgy. Held in Japan as part of TPAM from 16 to 18 February 2017, the theme for the second ADN Symposium was “Tracing Asian Dramaturgy”.

In his presentation, Lim explained that the ADN team wanted to explore the dramaturgies that were coming out of different disciplines in that edition, because contemporary dramaturgy is no longer bound by text. Consequently, participants at the second ADN Symposium included performing arts practitioners from all fields, including dance and theatre makers, producers, playwrights, and others. Over the course of three days, 26 speakers took part in a series of panel discussions, roundtables, working groups, and a keynote presentation.

Some of the highlights from the event include a roundtable titled "Dramaturgy in Asia: Of Roots & Traditions", where participants explored and interrogated the historicity of the

practice in the region through, for instance, the ancient Sanskrit performing arts manual, the *Natyashastra*. Another highlight was a panel called “Japan in Dramaturgy”, where the speakers discussed the theory and practice of dramaturgy in contemporary performance in Japan.

This edition also pushed the boundaries of dramaturgy to include curation and programming, which was highlighted in Ong Keng Sen’s (Singapore) keynote address, where he talked about how dramaturgy of the city itself played a crucial role in the way he shaped the Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) as festival director from 2014 to 2017.

ADN Symposium 2017 (Adelaide, Australia)

Rajendran then took over to present a recap of the third ADN Symposium, which took place in Adelaide, Australia, on 1 and 2 October 2017, with the theme being “Dramaturgies of the Social & Cultural”. This edition of the symposium was held in association with the Australian Theatre Forum as part of a larger cultural exchange partnership between the two countries. This satellite edition of the symposium was much smaller in scale, and it’s the first one so far to only involve artists based in two countries: Singapore and Australia. The intention was for artists to come together to talk about the work that they had been doing in their own context, with a focus on cultural differences and social action, and what dramaturgy can mean beyond a performance setting. It comprised two keynotes, two roundtables, and a wrap-up session.

The two keynote speakers were David Pledger and Rajendran herself. Pledger shared how he used dramaturgical thinking in his biennial project, *2970° The Boiling Point*, to push his audience to start thinking more critically about context, power, self and other, and notions of culture. He felt that the space for that kind of thinking has been reduced in the neo-liberal capitalist environment that his society operates in, and there is thus a desire to create artwork that opens up that space, either covertly or confrontationally.

In her own keynote at the time, Rajendran drew from the work of three Singaporean theatre practitioners – Ong Keng Sen, Kuo Pao Kun, and Kok Heng Leun – who made work that critically respond to the landscape. She explained how each of them pushed artists to rethink the role of artists, especially in a society where art is constantly being commodified.

These ideas were further discussed and examined during the roundtables. It’s clear that the context of the two countries are very different politically, socially, and culturally. One participant, Tim Rosemen (Australia), felt that Singapore artists and dramaturgs are responding to society in a way that practitioners in Australia aren’t doing, and questioned why that might be. Rajendran suggested that it could be due to the differences between the two countries’ political landscape – Singapore is highly patrolled, while people can

generally say what they want in Australia – and therefore the sense of urgency in their artwork is also quite different.

Rajendran then summed up three of the key concepts that emerged during that symposium. Firstly, the idea of participation (in the form of engaged/community/interactive/immersive performances) – practitioners believe that participatory democracy is important, but what does that lead to, and what expectations do they have of their audiences?

Secondly, that context makes a difference to how dramaturgs understand what they're doing, but also the extent to which this makes them complicit in the ideas explored in the projects they take part in, especially when they are social or political.

Thirdly, participants at the symposium discussed what ADN is about as a network. For example, Pledger introduced the idea of ADN being a mobile laboratory (where participants can find ways of thinking, experimenting, and playing with different ideas), or a spaceship (which moves around and transforms the geopolitics of that particular city or region it lands in). Rajendran said that these ideas will be further explored at the following ADN event, which will take on a form that's more similar to a workshop, in Jogjakarta later this year.

Lim, Loon, and Rajendran then took questions and comments from the floor. Topics that were brought up at this point include how dramaturgs can bridge cultural differences; whether there's a need to define "dramaturgy" since it is constantly changing; how artists should decide whether they need a dramaturg for their project; and whether there really is a dramaturgy that is specific to Asia.

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