

KEYNOTE SPEAKER: ONG KENG SEN

FEB 16, 4.00PM-5.00PM

Singapore theatre director and Festival director of Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA) delivered the first keynote for ADN. Moderated by Charlene Rajendran, this keynote followed a question-and-answer style that teased out Ong's dramaturgical methodologies and strategies when curating an international festival like SIFA. Outlining the SIFA circuit, Ong contextualised the festival within the political climate of Singapore that is steeped in censorship. Sharing the themes over the past four years — *Legacies* (2014), *Post-Empire* (2015), *Potentialities* (2016) and *Enchantment* (2017) — Ong explained that the pluralities and multiplicities were necessary to situate the individual within the plurality of time (of the past, present and looking towards the future — a space that we constantly inhabit). Hence, *Legacies* served as a reflection about history and not much on history itself. With *Post-Empire*, the intent was to redefine empires and potentialities strived to look into the future. In post-Brexit and post-Trump times, *Enchantment* encourages the individual to still believe in (something) and not be cynical about it. So the pluralities aimed to re-situate the individual within the larger empire.

Ong then reiterated the political climate of Singapore as an important factor that shaped his strategic responses or planning of the Festival. It is important to work through lateral ways compared to a monolithic way of looking at and entering into the landscape. In comparison to the top-down approach that Singapore celebrates, Ong sees his role as a festival director more as an intervention. It is an intervention into the city that cuts into the policies made by politicians on arts and the interruption of those processes.

Probed by Rajendran on the necessity of the platform OPEN, Ong shared that it was to counter the sense of vagueness and potential loss that drifts after a performance has left the space. Pushed by his own frustration as an audience member who wants to know more about the work (likening it to chasing a UFO that has taken off and disappeared), Ong expressed that OPEN tries to create an ecosystem of the potentialities. OPEN is held in June/July and then main festival is in August. Acknowledging Rajendran's note that the OPEN pass is not a conventional one, Ong explained why such a pass was needed for Singapore. Affordability aside in affluent Singapore, he hoped that audiences can partake in a post-disciplinary process where they can move between film-talk-photo gallery and in doing so slip between genres and disciplines. The intent is to create a flexibility of thought in an otherwise rigid land of censorship. To him, the Festival becomes particularly successful when the invisible political process becomes transparent and visible.

Operating at a national level, with clusters and series of events, the Festival becomes politically strong. Ong likened his role to that of an ombudsman (a checks-and-balances person who mediates and facilitates) that presupposes, as highlighted by Rajendran, a conflict at play. Highlighting

that agencies like the National Arts Council (NAC) play an important role for funding Singapore commissions and often take “issue” with some works that are commissioned, Ong shared that the conflict is in using those monies that are rightfully part of the public domain. Pressed on by Rajendran on the kind of interventions and ruptures that he foresees for the audience members who co-create the ecosystem, Ong explained that he chooses to align his audience as an imagined one, following Benedict Anderson’s notion of “imagined communities”. Needing to know the 'what, how and for whom', Ong supports art that creates an intimate experience as compared to being a profit-driven or cost-recovery one. Citing *Open Kitchen* by Lebanese artist Kamal Muzawak (“Make food not war”), Ong further expressed that there is indeed a silent war that needs to be addressed in Singapore — one of silence and censorship.

Asked on how much of the local situation international artists may be aware of, Ong replied that they may not be as privy to the background. In fact, many may not be touched by censorship at all. And yet, when ratings are given by the IMDA, there tends to be wrong signals that are given out. For instance, the M18 rating given to Milo Rou’s *Five Easy Pieces* on pedophilia created a “culture of ungenerosity” where everyone but the actors were over the age of 18.

Summing up his role, Ong explained that for the context of the festival, it is about thinking through the dramaturgy of ownership for the audience. Given that there are one too many festivals in Singapore, SIFA aims to be for those who want it and not intended for the regular people on the streets. How do you own the festival as an audience member? Perhaps by making transparent the thinking process — so that ownership can start to creep in, creating opportunities to disavow, dialogue or even contest preexisting conditions.

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