



Unfinished Business: Conference on Krishen Jit's Performance Practice and Contemporary Malaysian Theatre

Dates: 9th – 11th January 2015

Venue: Kuala Lumpur Performing Arts Centre (KLPAc), Jalan Strachan, Sentul, Kuala Lumpur

This contemporary theatre conference explores the performance practice of pioneering Malaysian theatre director Krishen Jit (1939-2005) in relation to the ongoing work of experimental and inter-disciplinary artists from Malaysia and abroad who have collaborated with Jit during his outstanding career. It brings together arts researchers, practitioners, academics and students whose work has been in some way influenced or inspired by the thinking and practice of Krishen Jit, in an effort to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of this practice and to extrapolate on its future application in culture and the arts, specifically theatre. Taking up where Jit left off in his final production, *Monkey Business* (2005), in which Jit collaborated with a contemporary gamelan ensemble, Rhythm in Bronze, to develop an interdisciplinary and intercultural performance with musicians, the conference interrogates notions of experimentation and collaboration that were crucial to Jit's ethos, and mark a critical part of the arts company he co-founded in 1984, Five Arts Centre. Jit's capacity to draw from the multiplicity of the everyday, and juxtapose the traditional and modern, local and foreign, led to his work becoming a critical site for alternative imaginings of contemporary Malaysia, evident in his directorial vision for *Monkey Business*, where the boundaries of performance were bent and twisted to produce a compelling, even if disturbing, reworking of what Jit termed 'gamelan theatre'.

A provocative refashioning of performance was a significant part of Jit's contribution to theatre thinking and practice, and the conference aims to draw from this resource as a focal point for reviewing the work of performance business in contemporary Malaysia and the region. The conference will include keynote addresses, panel discussions, workshop dialogues, story dialogues and performances that explore the methodologies, strategies, philosophies and politics that inform significant approaches to making contemporary performance. The discussion will be grounded in actual performances and practices, drawing on experiential insights and embodied knowledges, that enquire into Jit's aesthetics, politics and practice while attentive to present and emergent frames and



processes that inform current work. Presenters will include those who have collaborated extensively with Jit since the 1970s and more recently, as well as individuals whose encounters with Jit were minimal but nonetheless critical in apprehending the significance and scope of contemporary performance as part of a wider discourse on theatre and the arts. In addition, an exhibition that communicates critical aspects of Jit's work through visual art, installation and multi-media will frame the setting for the conference and contribute towards a staging of ideas, practices and performances. As such the conference is geared towards generating diverse responses that are inclusive of the verbal and non-verbal, corporeal and conceptual, such that the process will engage in work that is intellectually rigorous and challenging, without being academically dense and dry!

Kuala Lumpur, a postcolonial, multicultural and modern city, provided the context within which Jit responded to socio-political shifts in the nation and region, serving as a potent site to develop inter-disciplinary and inter-cultural articulations of the contemporary human condition. Issues of difference, which continue to impact expressions of urban culture and identity in the 21st century, were often foregrounded in Jit's theatre, and will feature as a framing trope in the conference. Allowing for convergences and divergences, arrivals and departures, the conference aims to initiate interactions and encounters that produce creative collusions and collisions, reflective of the plurality of networks that forged Jit's theatre landscape. These critical engagements, moderated by skilled facilitators within an open and dialogic space, are intended to prod participants towards reviewing settled assumptions and rethinking hegemonic norms as part of a larger need to continually interrogate the workings of performance and art.

Critical descriptions, theorisations, questions and deliberations that emerge within the conference will be documented and analysed to provide accessible resources for practitioners and researchers, as efforts towards building archival research and supporting a discursive community of arts practitioners, academics, students and enthusiasts. In collaboration with the Theatre Performance Asia (TPA) archive, a project currently being developed by the National University of Singapore, Jit's selected works will be available online. This resource will serve as a bridge for participants who are interested to watch Jit's work, and participate in online discussions prior to the conference. The programme booklet is also envisaged as more than just a listing of events and speakers, aiming to provide useful articles that introduce, theorise and critique the ideas being discussed. This will hopefully generate interest in critical discourse among those who are new to the terrain,



and create an inclusive context within which to dialogue the arts.

Charlene Rajendran

July 2014



PROGRAMME AS OF 7 AUGUST 2014:

Exhibition of Visual, Installation and Multi-media Work:
 (to run throughout the conference and for a month after)

DAY ONE: FRIDAY 9th JANUARY 2015

6.00PM	Registration	
7.00PM	Welcome <i>followed by Opening Reception</i>	Charlene Rajendran & Marion D'Cruz
8.30PM	Performance 1	Huzir Sulaiman & Claire Wong
9.30PM	Performance Dialogue 1	Moderators: Mark Teh & Ken Takiguchi
10.30PM	END	

DAY TWO: SATURDAY 10th JANUARY 2015

9.00AM	Registration	
9.30AM	Keynote 1	Krishen Jit and the Contemporary in Southeast Asia T.K. Sabapathy
10.15AM	Keynote Dialogue	Respondent: CJWL Wee Moderator: Kathy Rowland
11.00AM	<i>Coffee Break</i>	

11.30AM	Panel Presentations 1	Contemporary Business: Construction, Reconstruction, Deconstruction Ong Keng Sen Leow Puay Tin Ray Langenbach
12.30PM	Panel Discussion 1	Respondent: Paul Rae Moderator: Charlene Rajendran
1.00PM	<i>Lunch</i>	
2.00PM	Workshop Dialogue 1	Practicing... De/Re/Constructions Marion D'Cruz Chee Sek Thim Moderator: Lim How Ngean
4.00PM	<i>Tea Break</i>	
4.30PM	Story Dialogues 1	Collaborating with Krishen... Joe Hasham Faridah Merican Kee Thuan Chye Chin San Sooi Moderator: Charlene Rajendran
6.00PM	<i>Dinner Break</i>	
8.30PM	Performance 2	Jo Kukathas and Ivan Heng
9.30PM	Performance Dialogue 2	Moderators: Anne James & Chee Sek Thim
10.30PM	END	

DAY THREE: SUNDAY 11th JANUARY 2015

9.00AM	Keynote 2	Krishen Jit and Networks in Asia Makoto Sato
9.45AM	Keynote Dialogue 2	Respondent: Ken Takiguchi Moderator: Lim How Ngean
10.30AM	<i>Coffee Break</i>	
11.00AM	Panel Presentations 2	Experimental Business: Interdisciplinary, Intercultural, Interconnection Mohd Anis Md Nor Soon Choon Mee Tan Sooi Beng
12.00PM	Panel Discussion 2	Respondent: Susan Philip Moderator: Pat Matusky
12.30PM	<i>Lunch</i>	
1.30PM	Workshop Dialogue 2	Practicing... Inter-sections Janet Pillai Mark Teh Moderator: Ray Langenbach
3.30PM	<i>Tea Break</i>	

4.00PM	Story Dialogues 2	Experimenting with Krishen... Jillian Ooi Anne James Namron Zahim Albakri Moderator: Marion D'Cruz
5.30PM	Wrap-Up Dialogue	Moderators: Charlene Rajendran Ken Takiguchi Lim How Ngean Marion D'Cruz
6.30PM	Closing Remarks	All Participants
7.00PM	<i>END – Closing Dinner</i>	

Conference Organising Team:

Charlene Rajendran - Convenor

Ken Takiguchi – Assistant Convenor

Lim How Ngean – Producer

Marion D'Cruz – Co-Producer

Janet Pillai - Advisor

tenTenTEN Team – Grey Yeoh, Mark Teh, June Tan, Adrian Teh and Hoe Hui Ting

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SESSION BRIEFS:

Performances

Performance 1: **Huzir Sulaiman and Claire Wong**

Performance 2 : **Jo Kukathas and Ivan Heng**

These performances are envisaged as theatrical responses to the working relationship between Krishen Jit and the theatre artists, who were all, at one point or another, directed by Jit, and collaborated with him from the 1990s till his passing in 2005. These are also spaces that celebrate and critique the act of performance as powerful interventions into the cultural landscape, while bringing to bear histories of theatre that inform the contemporary performance terrain. Presenters are invited to engage with theatre as an open platform for dialogue, which is embodied, sensuous, intellectual and imaginative, articulating how performance executes the politics, philosophies and practices of those who contribute to its making. Each performance will last 45-60 minutes, and be followed by a discussion with the audience.

Performance 1, which opens the conference, is created by Huzir Sulaiman and Claire Wong, both Malaysian practitioners, currently based in Singapore. As performers, directors and writers, Sulaiman and Wong have initiated work that examines the local and global, finding critically exacting ways to develop performance languages that reflect on and resonate with an urban contemporary sensibility. This includes attending to new and experimental writing, generating opportunities for critique and dialogue, as well as producing cutting edge performances that interrogate contemporary issues of self-apprehension, uncertainty and urban anxiety. This performance looks at what it means to write and rewrite performance in a space of ongoing change, bearing in mind Jit's interest in adaptation, translation and deconstruction, in his directorial approaches to staging plays.

Performance 2, is created by Jo Kukathas and Ivan Heng, performer-directors whose skillful experience in creating politically potent theatre performance in Kuala Lumpur and Singapore, has led to their work being known for its sharp satirical wit, strong incisive comment, and exemplary standards of acting. In recent years they have collaborated as artists across the national boundaries of Malaysia and Singapore, raising questions about the inter-connectedness of both societies, and interrogating issues of difference that prevail



in the spaces between. This performance explores the politics of both nations in critical negotiation with each other, through the performance of varied iconic theatre characters that have shaped the imagining of alternative local/ glocal worlds. It also articulates the fluidity of the stage in allowing for overlapping and intersecting narratives, bearing in mind Jit's interest in staging multiplicity within bodies as much as between them.

Panel Discussions

Panel Presentations 1

Contemporary Business: Construction, Reconstruction, Deconstruction

Leow Puay Tin
Ong Keng Sen
Ray Langenbach

Respondent: Paul Rae

Moderator: Charlene Rajendran

Panel Presentations 2

Experimental Business: Interdisciplinary, Intercultural, Interconnection

Mohd Anis Md Nor
Soon Choon Mee
Tan Sooi Beng

Respondent: Susan Philip

Moderator: Pat Matusky

The Panel Discussions are intended as critically analytical and theorised reflections on contemporary performance and practice in relation to two broad overarching themes, namely the contemporary and the experimental. Presenters, having at one time or another worked with Jit on performance-making are invited to reflect on their notions of contemporaneity and experimentalism, drawing on ideas and experiences that link to their working relationship with Jit and/or aspects of contemporary Malaysian theatre. Each speaker will be allocated 15-20 minutes for their talk, followed by a ten minute response from the Respondent and then a discussion with the audience.

Panel 1 engages with issues of contemporary performance, and frames of construction, reconstruction and deconstruction that often underpin the practice and process of practitioners engaged in expressing and contesting aspects of contemporaneity. It is meant to highlight the challenges and conflicts that arise in making theatre that grapples with persistent shift and liquidity, insistent in its ambiguity and rhizomatic enactments of difference, while drawing heavily on history, tradition, memory and myth as localising and

indigenising resources that also characterise the relationship with contemporariness.

Panel 2 analyses the work of artistic experimentation, with particular emphasis on how performances that embrace the interdisciplinary and intercultural develop interconnections across boundaries that are then rendered porous and shifting, opening new spaces and experiences for apprehending and affecting culture. The session is meant to examine why and in what ways these complex attempts to refashion cultural imagining through experimental juxtaposition and intersection, continue to inform the ongoing work of practitioners interested in devising and innovating new tropes for performance, even as reductive and narrow frames continue to plague global frames of culture.

Workshop Dialogues

Workshop Dialogue 1 **Practicing... De/Re/Constructions**

Marion D'Cruz

Chee Sek Thim

Moderator: Lim How Ngean

Workshop Dialogue 2 **Practicing... Inter-sections**

Janet Pillai

Mark Teh

Moderator: Ray Langenbach

The Workshop Dialogues foreground the critical practices of artists who experiment and collaborate with performers and fellow-artists in the making of contemporary performance. They invite practitioners to identify and showcase specific working methods and strategies of performance making that underline their principles of practice, and facilitate a short workshop in which conference participants can experience a glimpse of the approaches they have developed and the possibilities thereby created. Each artist is allocated 45 minutes to briefly articulate a method or strategy, and then conduct a short workshop that demonstrates the practice discussed. This is then followed by a discussion with the conference participants.

Workshop Dialogue 1 looks at the process/practice of deconstruction and reconstruction, following on from the Panel Discussion earlier in the day. Performance as a site for alternative imaginings is filled with opportunities to relook the ordinary and rethink norms, as a critical response to passive consumption and dominant forms. Marion D'Cruz (choreographer-performer) and Chee Sek Thim (director-performer) have initiated a range of improvisational approaches to performance-making, including those that are text-based, movement-based and music-based, to complicate the scope of contemporary performance in ways that defy definition. Having collaborated with Jit on diverse projects, D'Cruz and Chee were important collaborators whose current practice may reflect convergences and divergences, shared ideals and conflicting philosophies, which inflect and refract current insights on Jit's performance practice.



Workshop Dialogue 2 looks at how when choices are made to engage with juxtapositions of culture, form, politics, aesthetics, ideology and history in the arts, this emphasises and interrogates the value of overlap and intersection in artistic vision and experience. Examining how performance projects that are located within community settings and designed to elicit/reflect multiple vocabularies of expression from a particular site, the session showcases particular methods developed by the artists to facilitate critical dialogue and engaged art in non-conventional performance spaces. Janet Pillai and Mark Teh, theatre directors, educators and cultural workers, have been critically influenced by the thinking and practice of Jit through observation, conversation and research. Their work can be seen as tangentially linked to Jit's, and this session aims to understand these convergences and divergences within a critical frame.



Story Dialogues

Story Dialogues 1

Collaborating with Krishen....

Joe Hasham
Faridah Merican
Kee Thuan Chye
Chin San Sooi

Moderator: Charlene Rajendran

Story Dialogues 2

Experimenting with Krishen....

Jillian Ooi
Anne James
Namron
Zahim Albakri

Moderator: Marion D'Cruz

The Story Dialogue sessions are created to provide space for practitioners to tell stories and narrate events that critically reflect their experience of collaborating and experimenting with Krishen Jit. Presenters will be asked to identify and tell 3 or 4 stories within 10-15 minutes, that characterise their perceptions and understanding of Krishen's work process, articulating how these moments exemplify the impact of their working relationship. These marked moments, be they of quirky incidents or lengthy conversations, inspired moments in rehearsal or tensions of disagreement, constitute a significant part of Jit's performance practice, in which relationships with collaborators was crucial to the artistic process he engendered.

The Story Dialogue sessions also generate an opportunity for other conference participants to share their stories about Jit during the open dialogue, and thus add layer upon layer to the shared memory of knowing and working with Jit. Having these conversations within a public setting makes available to those who were not part of Jit's career, a body of ideas and knowledges that is often exclusive to those who had close ties with him. As such it gives access to younger theatre students and theatre makers who did not have the opportunity of collaborating with Jit, and allows for those who did to consider their memories and stories in relation to others.

