



Goh Ching Lee  
Singapore National Arts Council's Senior  
Director of Arts Cluster Development,  
director of the Singapore Arts Festival

## Data

Singapore National Arts Council



<http://www.nac.gov.sg/>

Singapore Arts Festival



<http://www.singaporeartsfest.com/>

# Presenter Interview プレゼンターインタビュー

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A look at the Singapore arts scene,  
invigorated in recent years by new theaters and festivals

新劇場やフェスティバルなど、活性化する  
シンガポールの芸術文化シーンに迫る

The Singapore arts scene has been marked by the recent opening of the Esplanade as the largest theater in the region, as well as new theaters like the Arts House and the Drama Center. And, the “Renaissance City Report” presented by the Singapore government in 2000 stressed the importance of the arts and brought new funding that has invigorated the arts scene. To learn about the status of these new developments, we spoke to the Singapore National Arts Council’s Senior Director of Arts Cluster Development and director of the Singapore Arts Festival, Ms. Goh Ching Lee.

(Interview: Ken Takiguchi)

What is your view of the recent developments in Singapore performing arts scene?

I think the obvious developments are a kind of outcome of the policy made in the late 1980s about developing Singapore into a culturally vibrant society. In the last 10 years, with the formation of the National Arts Council (NAC), we have been pursuing the mission of developing Singapore as a distinctive global arts city. So, the development in terms of infrastructure and funding can be traced back to the mid 80s and it was the time, I think, when the arts became a part of the national agenda. Before that, Singapore has very much focused on establishing economic foundations, trade development, education, housing and basic infrastructure. Right after our independence in 1965, Singapore’s GDP was less than some of the African countries’. We tend to forget these facts when we see Singapore today but, at that time, these were the pressing, urgent needs.

Only in the 80s did we start to feel that we had come a long way and now there was more time for us to look into things other than material achievement. People had become more educated and they requested different kinds of things, including the arts. That was the origin of the recent developments.

Before the government’s “Renaissance City Report,” there was another important report, called “the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts,” which was released in 1987. The report committee was chaired by the deputy prime minister, so it was a very high-level committee. They studied the needs of the arts—aspirations of the people, requirements to implement the vision of a culturally vibrant society. It was this report that recommended the formation of the National Arts Council, the building of the Esplanade, government funding for the La Salle polytechnic institution to train young practitioners and establishing new museums. Without this report, the landscape of Singapore arts would probably be quite different from what we have today. The government developed a lot of infrastructure based on the recommendations of this 1987 report. The National Arts Council was established in 1991 and the Esplanade company was formed in 1992.

Another important development was the Arts Housing program. We have taken over a lot of heritage buildings in areas of the city such as Little India, Chinatown and Waterloo, and converted them into premises for artists. They can work, rehearse there and even convert these houses into performance spaces. They only need to

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### \*The Esplanade

This theater complex opened in 2002 has a 2,000-seat theater, a 1,600-seat concert hall as well as a theater studio and recital studio, each with a capacity on over 200 seats. Also holding events like free outdoor weekend concerts each week, this

facility is establishing itself as a vital center of the performing arts in Singapore.

[www.esplanade.com](http://www.esplanade.com)

### \*The Arts House

This arts center opened in 2004 occupies the renovated former parliament building built originally in 1827. In addition to exhibition galleries, it also has a small capacity “black box” space and a movie space.

[www.theartshouse.com.sg](http://www.theartshouse.com.sg)

### \*Drama Center

Opened in November 2005, this is Singapore’s newest theater facility. The old Drama Center opened in 1955 was a familiar venue for primarily performances by local theater companies until it had to be closed due to an expansion of the Singapore Museum of History. As the replacement for the former facility, the new Drama Center was built within the newly built National Library. This is one of the theaters run directly by the National Arts Council. It has a 615-seat proscenium theater and a 120-seat black box space.

### \*The 2-year Major Grand Scheme

This is a scheme of the Arts Council that offers two-year grants to fund the activities and works of arts companies. As of 2005, six companies have been designated for this grant, which now has a yearly outlay of more than 2 million (Singapore) dollars in support money. Among the groups receiving this grant are the companies Singapore Dance Theatre, the Necessary Stage and Theater Works that appear in this interview.

pay 10% of the rent—the government subsidizes 90%.

And NAC has been playing a major role there.

Yes. But in the 1990s, our focus was more on the infrastructure. However, later on, more focus was put on the software aspects. The “Renaissance City Report” came with a special funding of over 50 million [Singapore] dollars over five years to support artists’ works by strengthening artist companies, developing artistic works and engaging our artists more in international projects.

**Especially, the grant scheme for the major theatre companies has had a great impact on the local theatre industry. Can you explain about it?**

This 2-year Major Grant scheme was also established as a result of the “Renaissance City Report.” Although the companies were funded even before this scheme was introduced, the level of the funding was lower. There was a clear shift towards support for the artists at that time. The budget that came with the Report enabled us to create the grant structure, which gives more stable funding to the arts companies.

**And NAC itself was restructured in 2004. What was the aim of the restructuring? Any changes in the policy on supporting the arts?**

In the last couple of years, also as a part of the “Renaissance City Report,” there was awareness that the arts had become a part of the wider creative industry. The arts are not only for their own sake. Arts can also support the economy, the community and nation-building. Sometimes we call it “the ABCs of the arts,” namely Arts for the Arts, arts for Business and arts for the Community. This is quite a new concept in Singapore, but it reflects recent international developments in a way. Now, the commercial sectors like music, film, publishing and new media technologies are interconnected and create an industry that can make an impact on Singapore as a society.

With this philosophy, NAC has taken a different kind of approach to support for the arts in the last two years. It is a holistic approach to the arts as a part of industry. And, our support is not only directed towards the key players, but also for the small companies with potential who also have roles to play. They should support each other. Although most of our support goes to the non-profit sector of the arts, we work quite a lot with commercial companies who want to venture into the arts, like art galleries and auction houses. Occasionally, we help them to organize arts-related events. This is not in terms of funding, but engaging them in the arts and, at the same time, helping them to improve their product.

The whole idea is to make Singapore a vibrant place with multiple levels of players—artists, venues, intermediaries, independent producers, organizers and public schools.

**I’m sure that the Singapore Arts Festival is a part of the vision of a culturally vibrant city. The Festival is now recognized internationally as one of Asia’s leading arts festivals.**

Yes. The character of the Festival was set based on the vision of the NAC, “to develop Singapore as a distinctive global city for the arts.” The keywords are “distinctive” and “global.” Global means that we want to be engaged internationally. Maybe previously we tended to say that Singapore was catching up and getting global players. That’s still very important. However, now we feel that we have reached the stage where we can share what we have achieved. Not just importing, but exporting artists of potential as well.

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And we find ourselves being very comfortable working with the East and the West because we are in a very special position in between East and West—Asia and rest of the world, and because Singapore has a multi-cultural background. We can play a role of interfacing both and that is reflected in our culture and the works created by our artists. Ong Keng Sen, the Artistic Director of Theatre Works, is an excellent example of one who is creating a new kind of hybrid artistic sensibility. And that is why [international] collaboration is considered very important in our festival. It is a reflection of what we are and what we hope to contribute to the cultural scene.

**As the Festival Director, how do you put together the program? What is your selection policy?**

There is a very clear identity to the Festival—we focus on Asia and contemporary works. We are also quite interested in technology. I feel all these elements reflect what we are in Singapore and are quite natural to us. A lot of young people here are very connected to the new visual world and they have no baggage, meaning cultural baggage, which prevents them from accepting a lot of new ideas freely.

The audience always wants to see what is different and new. We have a very young audience. I think the age of most of the audience, 60-70% of them, is below 35. So, that governs the way we program. But, of course, as a national festival of Singapore, we need programs that are more accessible to the general public. So, there is a mixture of different kinds of programs, but I would say Asian programs and contemporary programs are the majority.

We are quite interested in looking at the process of each project—unique and interesting processes of creation. We also consider the context—discussing some issues that are pertinent to us. Our selection criteria are a combination of these two elements. I feel that “innovation” is the keyword in our festival. We are always looking for original movements or processes of creation. We are also looking for intercultural aspects—collaborations with and between different countries and cultures—and interdisciplinary projects such as collaborations between dance and theatre, music and theatre or dance and multimedia. These works sometimes break down conventional ideas of category.

In terms of the theme, we are interested in issues about identity, such as the issue of migration and diaspora, and history. Revisiting historical context is an important theme for us.

**Malaysian director and playwright, Huzir Sulaiman staged his *Occupation* at your 2002 Festival. It was a story about the lives of the people in Singapore during the Japanese occupation.**

We had a number of productions with historical themes. Huzir’s is one example and others include *Opium*, a piece of Chinese Opera about the Opium War by Checkpoint Theatre and *Sandakan Threnody* by Theatre Works, both from Singapore in our 2004 Festival. In the earlier years, we had one work about Sun Yat Sen, *One Hundred Years in Waiting*, by TNS and the late Kuo Pao Kun’s Theatre Practice.

There was an interesting piece about the identity issue. A collaboration between London-based Motiroti and New

York-based The Builders Association titled *Alladeen*, was a story about a call centre in India. The operators there are trained to mimic Americans—the American customers call to ask questions about products and they believe they are calling somewhere in America, but actually it is India. It was about the crossing of identities and this particular piece was very interesting because of its innovative use of multimedia.

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### \*The Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals

This organization was established in June of 2004 for the purpose of promoting international cooperation in the field of performing arts festivals in the Asian region and establishing networks for cost sharing and joint communications. The establishing members include the China Shanghai International Arts Festival, the Singapore Arts Festival, the Hong Kong Arts Festival and the Jakarta International Arts Festival: JakArt, and today its official membership has expanded to 13 organizations including the Tokyo International Arts Festival.

[www.aapaf.org](http://www.aapaf.org)

### \*Singapore Dance Theatre

This dance company was established by the late Anthony Then and the present Artistic Director, Ms Goh Soo Khim. The company also has strong ties with the Asian contemporary dance scene, as exemplified by collaborations with artists such as Boi Sakti of Indonesia.

[www.singaporedancetheatre.com](http://www.singaporedancetheatre.com)

### \*Theater Works

This is a theater company led by the internationally active artistic director Ong Keng Sen. The company is actively involved in international collaborations developed from Ong's artistic network. It is also involved in cross-genre projects with artists from the fine arts and film worlds, such as the "Flying Circus" that was performed at the Yokohama International Triennale of Contemporary Art in Japan.

[www.theatreworks.org.sg](http://www.theatreworks.org.sg)

### \*Projects with Akram Khan and Ea Sola

In connection with the 2004 Singapore Arts Festival, a 2-week residency was offered to the UK-based company of Akram Khan, which resulted in the creation of a new work titled *Ma*. This work was performed as the opening event of the festival, after which it toured to London, Paris, Rome, Amsterdam and New York. In 2006, the Vietnamese choreographer Ea Sola did a re-interpretation of the 1995 work *Drought and Rain*, which deals with the war-time memories of the elders of a village in northern Vietnam. The participation of the Vietnam National Ballet dancers gave this work a two-generation perspective.

When I organize the festival, I seldom realize how interesting it actually is. Of course I know it's interesting, but... I really don't see how the programs are interconnected. Only after a few years do I realize how interesting the entire festival was!

It is interesting for me to see that recently the Festival has been becoming a space for the creation of new works rather than just inviting established works. For example, you offered the Akram Khan Company of UK a 2-week residency for the 2004 Festival to create a new piece.

Yes, and after Akram Khan, we had [a residency] for Wim Vandekeybus from Belgium. This year we have Ea Sola from Vietnam/France. We couldn't make their performance during the Festival an international premier, but we commissioned her working with two generations of Vietnamese. We learned a lot from our neighbors and our counterparts. We have been able to create our own tools and practices based on what we have known and learned and eventually they became our policies.

After NAC was established, I think, there were more conscious efforts to implement all these policies. We can use certain events as a tool or an engine for paving the way for new developments. So, the festival is not just buying the shows and presenting them in turn. Rather, it is really a platform to try to deepen the audiences' understanding of the arts, to keep abreast with what's happening in the world and, very importantly, to develop our artists. Developing them by commissioning new works is important, but at the same time, bringing international shows in is also important to offer new ideas to our artists. And then, it is also true that the festival can develop international links. I'm not sure I can claim this, but I think Singapore has always been very active in the region. In fact, that's why I am chairing the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals, a new organization just set up.

In terms of new creation, international collaboration can be an important method. In this year's Festival, two out of three theatre productions by the Singaporean companies are international collaborations. How do you find the possibilities for these collaborations?

When I took over the Festival in 2000, there had been several international collaborations already. For example, we commissioned Ong Keng Sen's *Desdemona*, which he created with the Japanese playwright/director Rio Kishida. We also had commissioned a new work by Robert Wilson. Gradually, over the years, we built up certain relations with other international festivals such as Australian and Hong Kong festivals. And after that, we started even more international commissioning, like the Akram Khan project. The idea was to originate works and reverse the flow. There was a one-way flow in the earlier times, which was just importing existing works by the artists. Now we want to give the artists the opportunity to broaden their horizons, and we also hope to do a kind of matchmaking with the regional artists and partners.

There was a very impressive collaboration between Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT) and H. Art Chaos of Japan, which was presented in your 2003 Festival. H. Art Chaos was invited to the Festival for the first time in 2001 to perform their own piece and came back two years later. How did this project come about?

There were some shifts in the programming. In the 80s and 90s when arts were still growing, the festival was a very important tool for developing the audience. So, the program was more mixed for appealing to a broader range of audience.

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But, by the time I took the [directorship] position in 2000, the arts scene had grown and there were many other players besides NAC. Many international events came to Singapore on their own. So, I thought the Festival needed to be something else, and that was the year we stepped into the new millennium and we wanted to create a festival for the future.

Therefore, we titled our 2000 Festival “New Inspiration.” In that year’s Festival, we introduced a lot of contemporary works and very clearly focused on Asian artists. Since then, more than 50% of our contents actually come from Singapore and other Asian countries. It is very clear that we want to develop new creation—first by our own artists. So, previously all the works by Singaporean artists were new commissions. But what I thought important for them was to work with regional artists. And to get other festivals to support them.

So, in the case of H. Art Chaos, we thought it was very important to develop the relationship with the artists. Previously, we had to keep bringing in the new things to stimulate the audience. But then, we thought it was time to follow up with particular artists and their works. Now we consciously invite foreign artists who can be possible collaborators in the future. Our audience can have the chance to get to know their work, and a few years later, we invite them again to work with local artists.

**In the case of SDT and H. Art Chaos, how was the relationship developed between the two companies? Was it you who kept in touch with these companies?**

We are always trying to encourage our artists to collaborate with artists from overseas and now, a lot of them have started to build their own relationships. At the same time, we introduce them to possible counterparts because we keep in touch with the foreign artists after we get to know them. So, it’s a combination—sometimes we get the artists together to work with each other and sometimes they do the research by themselves and make proposals to us.

I kept telling SDT that they should work more with Asian artists, and in the case of H. Art Chaos it was we who recommended that SDT get in touch with Chaos and work with them. We helped SDT do so because we knew Chaos’s agent and all the people behind them.

In this year’s Festival, SDT will work with Singapore Chinese Orchestra. This is not an international collaboration, but we wanted to put these two companies together to create something new. We also tried to get choreographers from the Asia Pacific region, including Japan, for this production, but it didn’t happen, unfortunately.

**So, NAC took the initiative to develop the SDT-Chaos collaboration. On the other hand, as you mentioned, Singaporean theatre companies have started to initiate collaborations by themselves. The collaborations in this year’s Festival seem to fall into this category—The Necessary Stage (TNS) and Theatre Works developed the ideas and organized the collaborations by themselves. What do you think about such artists-led collaborations in comparison with NAC-led collaborations? Which is more preferable for you?**

I think it should be both ways. I feel one of the most interesting and rewarding aspects of working at the festival is this; sometimes you start an innocent conversation about something with someone, and then, people develop it independently. And in the end, things come together in a certain way—sometimes you find unseen forces behind the development. Sometimes results come immediately and sometimes it doesn’t. So, we are quite happy to initiate such talks and start any specific collaborations. Also, artists have got to know our thinking and

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The Necessary Stage *Mobile*  
Photo: Sim Chi Yin

### \*The Necessary Stage

This is a theater company formed in 1987 by Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma. It is known for works that touch on social issues in telling ways. It is also a company that actively pursues collaboration with foreign artists and outreach programs to involve local communities. Since 2005 it has also organized the annual M1 Singapore Fringe Festival.

[www.necessary.org](http://www.necessary.org)

now a lot of them come to me and say, “Hey Ching Lee, I have a new project and I know you are always interested in commissioning collaborations. Will you be interested in this?” So, as I mentioned, it is quite natural to have both cases—sometimes it starts from them coming to me and sometimes it is us who initiate the project and try to find possible collaborators.

In the case of The Necessary Stage (TNS)’s collaboration, *Mobile*, Tokyo’s Setagaya Public Theatre was the main mover behind the whole process because they had invited quite a number of artists of this region—16 of them—including TNS’s resident playwright, Haresh Sharma, to Japan to create a piece from 2003 to 2005. I actually went to Tokyo to see the initial stage of their project. At the time, I was not sure if the whole process could work well because everything was still raw. But once I knew that TNS had a project with a smaller group of people extracted from Setagaya’s project with a theme of migrant workers, which is a common issue in the region, I thought this was a project we should consider seriously about working with. So I told them to keep me updated on the development.

We have seen a lot of Japanese artists participate in the collaborations commissioned by your Festival. For example, an award-winning playwright and director, Tatsuo Kaneshita and two actors are participating in *Mobile*. What are your future plans for the Festival? Do you think we will see more such collaborations?

I think the future is very positive in terms of collaborations between Japanese and Singaporean artists. We also see the possibility of collaborations with countries like Indonesia. I feel this is a desire of both sides—the desire to work together in the region is very strong. I think the most important thing there is to find suitable and organic ways for the artists to collaborate.

Of course, there will be some difficulties. All the artists are from different countries and backgrounds and the methods of collaboration may vary. One way is to give one person the [decision-making] power and let him/her direct the production. Another way is to put the people on an equal standing and let them create in a democratic way. The former, however, might have the risk of becoming something dominated by the director, while the latter sometimes fails to produce finished pieces, which is just understandable, even though the intentions are noble. Perhaps we cannot go with a completely democratic process—there must be some means to manage the participating artists.

Now many theatre companies in Singapore are developing their connections with foreign theatre companies and Singapore is becoming a hub of collaboration projects in the region.

I think we are very bold. The National Arts Council’s core value is to be bold. In the festival, we are trying to be bold and progressive. We take risks. I think the nature of these kinds of projects is quite risky, because we never know the outcome of the projects that we are trying to support and fund, until the end. One of the reasons we can take these risks may be because we don’t have the cultural burden from the past to carry. We can actually work very freely with many different parties and try to distill different influences together.

With NAC funding, we encourage Singaporean artists to travel and be engaged in international projects, and we also try actively to find opportunities. We recommend that they go to other festivals and arts markets. So, a lot of works to support the artists are going on outside of the festival, too. We have the International Collaboration Grant scheme and support artists who hope to work with foreign counterparts. The outcome of this grant should not only be seen in Singapore but also be presented in the counterparts’ country.

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Now I see some of the companies are doing collaborations on their own. Before that, there was a general mood of learning and Singaporean companies tended to invite directors from overseas just to direct them. Now, collaboration means working in a more equal relationship. This is an important change, and I believe the Festival has helped to encourage the shift. For example, Singapore Dance Theatre is now trying to do collaborations on their own—in fact, they are planning to invite H. Art Chaos again. Singapore Chinese Orchestra now has a lot of ideas for working with other artists in multi-disciplinary projects. Some of the Singaporean theatre companies are doing that quite regularly. It is important that they are organizing collaborations in a very organic way.

**So, you are the pivotal person in connecting these people?**

Yes, we are a kind of connectors. We connect people and hope something happens for future festivals. In terms of working with Japanese artists, we have been quite active in inviting them—mainly in the field of dance and multi-media performances because of the language barrier. We have been researching Japanese companies and are currently talking with a few of them. Actually, even language is not a vital problem anymore, because we can use subtitles—what matters eventually is the nature of the contents and costs. We are also planning to commission Japanese artists' works together with other international festivals. There are a lot of works to do. We organized the Singapore Season in London with great success last year. Actually it happened quite by accident—it was a part of our effort to try to develop the opportunities for Singaporean artists overseas and several projects happened almost at the same time coincidentally. So, we decided to invite more people and develop all the events as a season. Ultimately, it got really big and involved the government and business sectors. Because of the success, it was decided to have the season once every two years. The next one in 2007 will be in Beijing and Shanghai, and we will have a 2009 season in New York.

**Any plans to come to Tokyo?**

Yes, we hope so. Actually we wanted to do it this year because it is the 40th anniversary of diplomatic relations between our two countries. But... it was not possible. I hope it will happen some day.