

Verena Tay

Three Views

MY PAST

While I was growing up, my mother would tell me about her grandmother who died after the Second World War. Through her industry and keen business sense, my great-grandmother built up a small family fortune in property all over Singapore. She was illiterate until she converted to Christianity late in her life. Determined, she learnt to read the Bible in Chinese. For years before she finally succumbed, she suffered from breast cancer for which surgery, radiation and chemotherapy were then not widely available.

My paternal grandfather had four wives. The second wife was a Japanese woman, a savvy businesswoman too who earned her status within the family despite her childlessness. My own grandmother was wife No. 4, my father being her firstborn. My grandmother was carrying my aunt, her second child, when my grandfather suddenly died. After my aunt's birth, my grandmother remarried; but she was not allowed to take her children with her - the family paid her to leave the two behind. The Japanese wife then raised my father and aunt.

My mother was the eldest daughter. She had to look after and set an example for her siblings. Though not a top student, she was an avid school net-ball player as well as active in church and the Girls' Brigade. After the war, she won a scholarship to study social work in Wales. When she returned, she became a teacher, then a principal, and finally a school inspector. She also eventually became International President of the Girls' Brigade.

I have a picture: I am eight or less, dressed in T-shirt and shorts; my mother is decked out in her Girls' Brigade officer's uniform; we are walking together happily as part of a Girls' Brigade walkathon. My mother is leading me by the hand. I like to think that my mother is guiding me into the future.

MY PRESENT

Until the 1980s, Singapore concentrated mainly on

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acquiring the 5 Cs: career, cash, car, condo and credit card. A 6th C like culture was not important. Today, Singaporeans are far from cultured, but at least the arts scene is flourishing now compared to the '60s and '70s with some popular, as well as a great deal of government, support.

Modern Singaporean theatre bloomed in the mid-'80s when the number of young people enthusiastic about creating theatre relevant to Singapore (I was one of them), and a corresponding audience base, grew to a significant size. Without formal theatre training, most artists acquired their skills through hard work and experience. Many would eventually leave for theatre studies overseas and then return to work here. Some of today's leading theatre groups were also formed in that critical period. Over time, these groups have attained various levels of professionalism, supporting several individuals in modest full-time employment.

To younger people now entering the theatre, I am considered by some to be a "wise" and seasoned practitioner. However, I feel awkward about this impression. Besides feeling that the-more-I-do-the-less-I-know, I have not established myself as a pillar of Singaporean theatre like some of my contemporaries. I have no formal theatre qualifications. Although I worked almost two years full-time as an actor-facilitator with The Necessary Stage, I now edit newsletters and books for a living because of financial need, and cannot claim to be a proper professional focussing solely on theatre.

As age catches up, my insecurities as an artist increase correspondingly. How can I return to full-time theatre and earn enough to make ends meet, especially when I lack the aggression to find commercial work to survive? I have acted, directed and written plays - should I specialise as some have advised me to? Now that I am unaffiliated to

a theatre company, do I form my own group (and how do I accomplish and maintain this), or should I create solo works? Should I teach theatre - but how, where, what do I teach especially when I lack the proper credentials in formal qualification-hungry Singapore? Should I go away to study - where and what to study, and how to get the financial means and the family support to do so?

So I am amazed at the confidence and meteoric rise of the younger generation of talented women in local English language theatre. A fine actress, Beatrice has recently emerged as a major personality in Singaporean theatre and television circles and her face appears regularly in magazines. Loretta, who has just finished her theatre studies degree locally, is off to London to do her Masters as she wants to teach theatre upon her return. Wendy directs and runs full-time Singapore Repertory Theatre's youth wing. Natalie also acts and directs for various theatre companies on a project basis. And many more... All these women surely have their own private apprehensions; but I am envious of their youthful exuberance and comparative self-assurance.

MY FUTURE

August 1999: the largest play I have been commissioned to devise/direct (in terms of cast size, venue and logistics) opens to a mixed reception. Audiences either hated or loved it. More importantly, the process of creating it was unpleasant, leaving me spiritually and physically exhausted.

Artistically, I have learnt several things from the production. I am no longer interested in devising plays with large ensembles on huge social themes, resulting in a very text-reliant performance. I want to explore more physical-based theatre that also utilises the voice in non-conventional ways. I want to return to full-time theatre: I want to do

more personal training and build up physical and vocal sensitivity, instead of working at more lucrative jobs that stymie the body's expressiveness. I want to create a very personal body of work. While working at The Necessary Stage, I had begun to devise monodramas based on my own experiences and history, something I want to continue doing in the near future. I want to cultivate a group of people whom I can trust and work with and with whom I can build our own theatre company together doing our own stuff.

I don't know how much of the above is wishful thinking. It will involve a lot of hard work, self-confidence, drive and luck. Hopefully it will all come together sometime soon... There are some ideas afloat already. In 1998, while working with The Necessary Stage, I created *Silent Man*, a monodrama

about my father. It is now perhaps time to look at the different generations of women in my family and pay them their due tribute. I mean, what better way to look into my future than looking at and getting inspiration from my past?

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