

Adelina Ong

Against a Brick Wall

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It is easy to work as an actress in Singapore. It becomes hard when you want to produce work that will address political and social situations. As a woman and artist working in Singapore, I find it difficult to say the things I want to say clearly and directly, having in many cases to find some indirect way of pointing to the problem rather than addressing it head on. There are several facets to this problem: government restrictions; journalists who jump to denounce attempts to address political or social problems through art as useless navel-gazing; public apathy towards politics and social situations that don't directly affect them; the misrepresentation of women and lack of women playwrights in local writing.

In 1976, Kuo Pao Kun - a cultural activist, dramatist and educator who is best remembered for his insightful critiques on the government from the perspective of everyman - was detained without trial under the Internal Security Act for alleged "political activities", stripped of his Singaporean citizenship in 1977 and imprisoned till 1980. In 1990, he was awarded the Cultural Medallion by the Drama Advisory Committee but his application for reinstatement of citizenship was rejected.¹ In 1994, the National Art Council ceased funding any performance that was labelled "performance art" or "forum theatre" after performance artist Josef Ng snipped off his pubic hair in silent protest against the arrest of twelve men for alleged homosexual solicitation.²

Not too long ago, when war in Iraq first broke out, six people stood outside the American Embassy here in peaceful protest against the war. They were quickly detained by the police for questioning. Two weeks later The Substation successfully organised a candlelight protest in which artists from many different disciplines gathered to put on pieces,

1. Kuo Pao Kun, *Pushing the Limits in Singapore Theatre* by Robert Yeo, Radio Singapore International, 19 Sept 2002.

2. A review of Josef Ng's performance by Lee Weng Choy, 1994.

read plays or poetry which they had written to voice their objection to the war and our government's support of it. This event was attended by a wide range of people, Singaporeans, non-Singaporeans, artists and non-artists, activists and non-activists, in support of the following statement: "We strongly oppose Saddam's brutal dictatorship. But we also oppose, on moral, legal and strategic grounds, the US-led pre-emptive war, and America's imperial defiance of the UN. We fear the war will have disastrous political, economic and humanitarian consequences, and believe it poses one of the gravest threats to democracy, world stability and the regulation of weapons of mass destruction."³

Two days later a commentary in the national newspaper, *The Straits Times*, written by ex-ISD (Internal Security Department) now-journalist Chua Lee Hoong labelled the event "misguided political fervour", asserting that "every country has its own iconic moments in dealing with potentially destabilising dissent. Tiananmen was one of China's... It brought relative political stability for at least twenty years. Singapore's moments were Operation Coldstore in 1963, and... Operation Spectrum in 1987. Thanks to those periodic inoculations against misguided political fervour, present generations of Singaporeans as a whole are well immunised against political flights of fancy."⁴ (Operation Coldstore arrested twenty-two opposition political leaders and trade union leaders at the time on allegations of being "under the control of the Communists".⁵ Operation Spectrum arrested fifteen people for being part of "a Marxist conspiracy to overthrow

the government by violent means"⁶.) Chua ended her article by saying, "Me, I'd rather save money on candles, and donate it to Mercy Relief".

What she refuses to concede is that such gatherings of people, in support of a voice that would not otherwise be raised in any of our state-controlled media, are precious and powerful because having a voice and making the means to be heard is the first step towards building much-lacking actual feedback between this country's people and their leaders. Not that I'm dismissing donating money to a worthy cause. But donating money to a non-political cause alone without the expression of one's stand on political issues is accepting silence because one's voice easily becomes lost amongst the rest who support the war under the government's official stance, even when one feels very strongly against it. And if there is no debate, no public gathering of people to argue their case against the war, it becomes easy for the government to assume, again, that it has made the right choice for the people because it knows best. Of course, plain talk without action is just as bad. But because we can do both, there should be nothing to stop us from donating to a worthy cause as well as voicing our opinions on political issues we feel strongly about.

Because we, as artists, can communicate these messages so clearly in so many layers and perspectives and move and galvanise a reaction (if the audience lets us), we should. No, we must. It is important to continue speaking out loud, in any way that we can. To use the word "politics" can be misleading because some people associate "politics"

3. Lee Weng Choy and Lucy Davis, *An Active Civil Society is Central to the Anti-War Cause* www.substation.org 9.4. 2003.

4. *The Straits Times*, 12.4.2003.

5. *The Sunday Times*, 3.4.1963.

6. Sinapan Samydorai, *Singapore: The Internal Security Act and The Newspaper and Printing Act: Impact on Human Rights, Internal Security and Human Rights* in Hong Kong, Seminar, 7.12.2003, Hong Kong, SAR, China, Justice and Peace Commission of Hong Kong.

solely with dirty power games played by politicians. But this is not so. Politics is also about relationships - between the leaders and the people, influencing the way we live, and between people. And having active dialogue between leaders and the people is important for a nation that pledges to build a "democratic society".

Censorship is a big problem in Singapore. Most people blame it on the government. However, I'm more concerned with public censorship. In 2002, I wanted to produce *Stop Kiss*, written by Diana Son, about two straight women who fell in love. I was driven to produce this play because I felt that, although the censors had relaxed in recent years and there were now a lot of gay plays being produced, none of them had yet dealt with homosexuality from a female perspective. *Stop Kiss* was important because the protagonists had always thought they were straight, and falling in love with each other was never about homosexuality until the society they lived in labelled and abused them as lesbians. *Stop Kiss* passed through the censors without cuts, emerging with a PG rating, and we were very happy. But on the opening night, a member of the public called the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (a branch of the Singapore Police Force) to complain that our publicity poster (showing two women, appropriately covered, in bed about to kiss) was "vulgar". Our play was immediately slapped with an RA (above eighteen only) rating even though there was only one kiss in the whole play and absolutely no sex scene. This caused us a little trouble because we had to turn away some people at the door, but I felt that the bigger loss was that this incident would serve to strengthen the government's opinion that we still are a conservative majority, unprepared for the real world that encompasses taboo subjects like sex and politics, regardless of what the actual majority sentiment

might be, and the fact that this complaining member of the public would probably never watch *Stop Kiss* in the first place.

The action taken was significant: it was the poster that was considered "vulgar", but the play's audience that was censored. The issue of censorship is too complex to be adequately discussed in this article, and cannot be simplified to generalities like "abolish all censorship in favour of ratings systems" as some in the local arts community have recommended. The fact is that Singapore does indeed have a sizeable conservative population that believes there is a need for sensitivity and a need to protect children from certain lifestyles because they might not be equipped with the maturity required for discernment. But is it justified to censor a play based on one person's complaint? More importantly, how does one weigh conservative societal values - which can be justified in isolation - against the need to express and discuss alternative perspectives?

This year, when I tried to rally people to attend The Substation's candlelight vigil protesting against the war in Iraq, one person said to me, "Who cares about the war in Iraq when it's so far away? I'm more concerned about SARS." When I offered to pass on my issue of *Time* so people could get information on the war, they discarded it only to pick it up later because they found an article on SARS inside.

Perhaps some people are afraid to speak up against the government; after all, opposition party members have to apply to the police for a permit to speak, even during election time. But more and more, I get the sense that people here just don't care about what happens to others as long as they still make enough to feed and shelter their families. And when that's done, their next step is to make more money, own a car and have club



Adelina Ong and Wang Meiyin in *Postcards from Persephone*. Photo: Vernon Leow

memberships. So this self-interest grows and most see politics as dangerous or dirty or they just don't care.

Even the local reading of the *Lysistrata* Project (re-titled *Lysistrata Lah!*), a protest play-reading project started in New York against the Iraq war, was de-politicised by its organisers because most of the actors and/or organisers involved in the project allegedly were pro-peace, but non-political, and wanted to remain this way. We cannot be apathetic artists. We cannot remain non-political because politics affect us whether we say anything or not. I don't believe in art for aesthetics' sake that does not have a message worth communicating. If we are not telling a good story with the tools that have been given to us, then we are not artists. We are clowns in a propaganda circus; pure spectacle and noise, little else.

The theatre scene here is just in its

infancy, but I feel it is already stagnating. Bigger theatre companies, who receive the majority of the funding, remain in debt by building expensive sets and elaborate costumes and flying in overseas talents, who are sometimes less talented than some of our local talents. Smaller theatre companies go bust with insufficient funding and over-ambitious projects. Theatre companies continually extend their hand towards the government begging for grants and funding money, whilst berating the same government for being paternalistic where censorship is concerned. Most produce purely commercial entertainment, keeping a safe distance away from political or social commentary. I hope one day to change all these things. I have been trying in many different ways to perform and push for more pieces written by women about women because I feel there has been a general lack

of representation of women in locally written plays here, and when women do feature, they are often misrepresented. For the most part, most "token woman" roles in local theatre fall into submissive (or long-suffering) wife, girlfriend, bimbo, frigid spinster or flirtatious slut. We need more women who will speak up for themselves and not through the mouths of others. We need more real stories and less misconceived or misinterpreted notions of women.

One notable exception to this dreadful state of portrayal is playwright Eleanor Wong, who first addressed lesbian politics here onstage in 1993 through *Mergers and Accusations*. She has followed up this lesbian voice in recent years with *Wills and Secessions* and *Jointly and Severally*. All her plays are a triumph of writing and truth for women here, lesbians or not. They deal with issues of invisibility and silence. Wanting to love, and not wanting to be ashamed of whom you love. First overcoming and accepting the self, then the family, then finally living in a society that will tolerate your personal choice as long as you agree to invisibility. I guess in many ways we still are a society that believes in saying the right thing so that one can live differently.

In 2000, I discovered what I was missing. I needed more control over the messages of the pieces I was performing. I needed to step away from the powerless position of being just an "actress" and move into producing, creating and directing works that had a message that I really cared about. At that time, Wang Meiyin, a friend and very gifted playwright, wrote a play about mothers and daughters and the place of women in society today. She roped me in to perform this piece as well as help her produce it. It was called *Postcards from Persephone*.

She decided to produce this play herself and set up a feminist theatre company called Livid Room Productions which I became

involved with. We were very surprised to discover that we were the first feminist theatre company registered in Singapore. Realising this strengthened my resolve to keep on producing works featuring strong female voices and unique stories that need to be told, in the hope that all that I am doing will somehow help people understand each other better. It is most satisfying when someone comes up to me and says, "I used to think homosexuals were perverse. Then I watched *Stop Kiss* and now I understand them a little bit better". Or women who come up to me and say, "I really identified with that. Thank you."

Producing and acting in *Stop Kiss* was an incredible journey. We resolved to work on a minimal budget and promised the artists an honorarium. I worked with two other people over a period of six months to pull the whole production together. We managed to gather some sponsorship, and all of us were multi-tasking. I was producer/publicity and marketing/ticketing/actress. My fellow co-producers were also stage manager/production manager/logistics/accounts and sponsorship coordinator/operations respectively. I am really fortunate that the people I worked with were incredibly capable and dedicated.

We had full houses every night and people were still calling begging for tickets. When all was accounted, we managed to pay the artists more than twice the sum we had originally promised. It was the most fulfilling project we had ever pulled off. Not only had we successfully put on a play with an important message, the audience "got" it and was affected by it, and we managed to pay the artists their dues and more. I was convinced that producing my own work was the way to go. And that's what I've been doing ever since.

More recently, I have been working with a local women's rights group to develop a

programme on sex education and making responsible choices for a group of young girls living in a girls' home. These girls are mostly taken out of abusive environments. They are either sent to the home by court order for rioting and gangsterism or sheltering from problem homes where physical and sexual abuse feature with frightening regularity. They struggle everyday with dignity and identity.

My part of the programme focuses on boosting their self esteem and helping these girls work out their aspirations through theatre games and role-playing, directing them towards their goals and helping them realise the importance of the decisions they undertake in the course of their lives to achieve these aspirations. We start off with theatre games that teach them about teamwork, listening to one another and trust. Then the girls write a short monologue about their hopes and aspirations and the obstacles they face. The essence of these monologues is extracted and put together in a short performance that is recorded for the girls to play back sometime in the future when they feel they need to be reminded about who they want to be. This is the first time I have used theatre to help someone in such a direct way. I hope to continue finding more opportunities to work directly with people in need, helping them in whatever way I can, be it through theatre or not.

On a more personal note, I am very young and there is much I'm afraid of and much that I want to learn. Sometimes I get very tired and annoyed with people who tell

me "You can't do this" or, "You're not good enough", or government administrators who tell me they are unable to help because there is no provision or classification for what I want to do. I am still afraid of writing. I am afraid of revealing too much. But I am gradually coming to see that some stories worth telling are also worth being transparent for, and I am infinitely grateful to those who share their stories with me so I might learn from them.

ADELINA ONG (Singapore) is a freelance producer, director and actor who has worked with Livid Room Productions and Singapore Repertory Theatre Young Company to put on shows featuring strong women. She believes in using art to complement social work and is actively involved with the Association of Women for Action and Research (AWARE).