

## Cultural Policy in Singapore : Government Funding and the Management of Artistic Dissent

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### Abstract

Singapore is arguably the most artistically vibrant city in Southeast Asia today. Its arts calendar is jam-packed with performances, exhibitions, festivals, and a large-scale international contemporary art biennale. The small island nation does not merely rely on foreign imports for its programmes but counts on its thriving local cultural industry that comprises many professional arts companies and independent artists. The present vivacity of the arts is undoubtedly the result of the government's cultural policies and plans over the past two decades. However, despite the state's arts support and promotion structures and its aspiration to build a "Global City for the Arts," artistic integrity remains a highly contentious issue. This essay attempts to explicate the relationship between government funding and the management of artistic dissent in Singapore through the prism offered by developments in its English language theatre. It begins with a history of the formulation and implementation of various government funding policies and assistance plans to demonstrate how they were primarily motivated by the government's cultural, social, economic, and political imperatives. I argue that although the policies were beneficial to the development of theatre, they also functioned as tools for regulating the content of theatrical discourse. In examining the case of Singapore, I hope to illustrate how a government's hegemonic cultural policy can serve as an ideological apparatus to advance its governance and to sustain the status quo. I will also suggest how the mechanisms of local and global market economy can offer avenues to protect and sustain artistic integrity.

**Keywords :** *Cultural Policy, Censorship, Artistic Integrity, Arts Market, Singapore Theatre*

### Introduction

Singapore is arguably the most artistically vibrant city in Southeast Asia today. Its arts calendar is jam-packed with performances, exhibitions, festivals, and a large-scale international contemporary art biennale. The small island nation does not merely rely on foreign imports for its programmes but counts on its thriving local cultural industry that

comprises many professional arts companies and independent artists. The present vivacity of the arts is undoubtedly the result of the government's cultural policies and plans over the past three decades. However, despite the state's arts support and promotion structures and its aspiration to build a "global city for the arts," artistic integrity remains a highly contentious issue. On 13 May 2010, the national broadsheet newspaper of Singapore *The Straits Times* reported that the National Arts Council (hereafter "NAC") had cut its annual funding for Wild Rice by \$20,000, from \$190,000 to \$170,000<sup>1</sup>. The theatre company is well-known for staging plays that tackle sensitive political and sexual issues. Responding swiftly to the funding cut, the theatre community issued a public statement of protest. In addition to the statement, the community as well as concerned members of the public discussed the issue with much fervour on Facebook and numerous internet blogs<sup>2</sup>. Many of them articulated their disapproval of the government's move and expressed the opinion that it was an act of censorship.

This essay explicates the relationship between government funding and censorship in Singapore through the prism offered by developments in its English language theatre. In analyzing the issue at hand, I attempt to fill a perceived lacuna in scholarly literature on the relationship between government funding and artistic content in the Southeast Asian context. The academic study of arts and cultural policy is still an emerging field and much of the available literature has focused on Western countries such as the United States of America, the United Kingdom, and Australia<sup>3</sup>. Nonetheless, some Singaporean scholars have begun interrogating their country's cultural policy. Examples of these efforts include Low Kee Hong's dissertation *Cultural Policy and the City State: Positioning Singapore in the Age of Transnationalism* and Lily Kong's seminal essay "Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating

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<sup>1</sup> Adeline Chia, "Don't Play Play," *The Straits Times*, 13 May 2011. All monetary figures stated in this paper are in Singapore dollars.

<sup>2</sup> The fact that the funding cut attracted much discussion on Facebook is based on my own personal observation through my account on the platform. For examples of internet blogs on the incident, see "About Wild Rice's Funding Cut," 8 May 2010, [http://jeremyyew.com/2010/05/08/about-wild-rices-fundi ng-cut/](http://jeremyyew.com/2010/05/08/about-wild-rices-fundi-ng-cut/), accessed 13 October 2011; "NAC cuts Wild Rice Funding," 6 May 2011, <http://callantham.org/blog/2010/5/6/nac-cuts-wild-rice-funding.html>, accessed 13 October 2011; "Singapore Cuts Funds to Theatre Company," 5 May 2011, <http://catscarpediem.blogspot.com/2010/05/singapore-cuts-funds-to-theatre-company.html>, accessed 13 October 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of these studies include Jennifer Craik, *Re-Visioning Arts and Cultural Policy: Current Impasses and Future Directions*, Canberra: Australian National U Electronic P and the Australia and New Zealand School of Government, 2007; Jim McGuigan, *Rethinking Cultural Policy*, Buckingham: Open U P, 2004; Kevin V. Mulcahy, *America's Commitment to Culture: Government and the Arts*, Boulder: Westview P, 1995; John Pick, *Vile Jelly: The Birth, Life and Lingering Death of the Arts Council of Great Britain*, Doncaster: Brynmill P, 1991; David Throsby, *The Economics of Cultural Policy*, Cambridge: Cambridge U P, 2010.

Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas.”<sup>4</sup> Although Low and Kong's investigations are very helpful in offering ways of looking at Singapore's cultural policy and in pointing out some of the primary sources to consult for my purpose, their endeavours are focused on discussing the agendas behind the government's policies and give scant attention to their relationship with the question of artistic integrity.

On the following pages, I will first begin with a history of the formulation and implementation of various government policies and assistance plans from the 1960s to the 1990s to demonstrate how they were primarily motivated by the government's cultural, social, economic, and political imperatives rather than a genuine interest in developing a conducive and encouraging environment for free creative expression. I argue that although the policies were crucial in serving the material needs of theatre practitioners, and thus, instrumental to the development of theatre, they allowed the government to regulate the content of theatrical discourse. In the process of mounting this argument, I shed light on the severe disjuncture between the government's perception of the role of the arts in society and the theatre practitioners' expectations of state funding. In examining the case of Singapore, I hope to illustrate how a government's hegemonic cultural policy can serve as an ideological apparatus for advancing its governance and to sustain the status quo. Additionally, by examining the theatre practitioners' reception of and negotiation with the government's policy, I will suggest in the conclusion how the mechanisms of local and global market economy can offer avenues to protect and sustain artistic integrity.

## The Government's Utilitarian View of Culture and the Arts

Since the early days of nationhood, the Singapore government has consistently demonstrated a utilitarian view of culture and the arts. In the 1960s and 1970s, the arts were considered useful for the purposes of nation-building, promoting cultural cohesion, and resisting the negative influence of the perceived decadence of Western culture. This particular view was clearly articulated in 1967 by the Minister of Defence Goh Keng Swee when he addressed a variety concert organized by the People's Action Party and gave specific advice on playwriting. He stated that theatrical plays should present a spirit of patriotism and reflect the “multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious” reality of Singapore society rather than the

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<sup>4</sup> Low Kee Hong, *Cultural Policy and the City State: Positioning Singapore in the Age of Transnationalism*, Dissertation, National University of Singapore, 2001; Lily Kong, *Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas*, *Geoforum* 31 (2000): 409-424.

"crazy, sensual, ridiculous, boisterous and over materialistic style of the West."<sup>5</sup> Goh's view was reiterated by the Minister of Culture Jek Yuen Thong in 1974 who stated:

Literature, music and the fine arts have a significant role to play from within the framework of nation building. A truly Singaporean art must reflect values that will serve Singapore in the long run. Faced with threats from the aggressive culture of the West, our own arts must reflect countervailing values that will be helpful to Singapore.<sup>6</sup>

To advance its nationalistic and socio-cultural agendas, the government organized arts events for the masses such as the "Art for Everyone" and "Music for Everyone" fine art exhibition and concert series at community centres.

It is evident that by the mid-1970s, the government had come to realize the potential of local theatre to advance its nation-building agenda. In 1975, it started a Drama Promotion Scheme, and in 1978, launched a Drama Festival. Both of these initiatives offered funding for local theatre groups. As David Birch has accurately pointed out, the advent of government intervention in the development of local theatre was motivated by its view of the medium as a form of community activity which could help foster social cohesion.<sup>7</sup> The government's emphasis on community activities that promotes social cohesion at this time was revealed by the Minister of Culture Othman Wok in 1975 when he stated, "To quicken the process of cultural development, people are encouraged to look at culture as a community activity which helps in the nation building process."<sup>8</sup>

In the mid-1980s, the government began to regard the arts as an important component of the economy. When Singapore was in the midst of an economic recession in 1985, an Economic Committee was tasked to research and formulate new strategies for future growth. The committee regarded the performing arts, film production, museums, and art galleries as part of the service industry, recognized that they are economic activities and organizations in their own right, and proposed that attention be paid to the arts as a potential area for growth.<sup>9</sup> It suggested that developing the arts would contribute to a vibrant cultural and

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<sup>5</sup> "Writing a play- 5 pointers by Dr Goh," *The Straits Times*, 9 April 1967.

<sup>6</sup> Press Release, 28 June 1974.

<sup>7</sup> David Birch, "Singapore English Drama: A Historical Overview 1958-1985," *9 Lives: 10 Years of Singapore Theatre 1987-1997: Essays Commissioned by The Necessary Stage*, Singapore: The Necessary Stage, 1997, 37.

<sup>8</sup> "A 'greater social cohesion now' in Singapore society, says Othman," *The Straits Times*, 16 February 1975.

<sup>9</sup> Report of the Sub-Committee on the Service Sector, Singapore: Economic Committee, 1985, 211.

entertainment scene which would improve the quality of life for Singaporeans, enhance the tourism industry, and attract foreign professionals and talents to settle and work in Singapore. Specific recommendations made by the committee included developing arts festivals, museums, art galleries, and arts education. As pointed out by Lily Kong, these recommendations were not immediately taken up.<sup>10</sup> However, there is evidence to suggest that the government was gradually increasing its support of the arts and cultural sector in the late 1980s. In 1988, the Minister of Community Development Wong Kan Seng revealed that the government had increased its arts funding by 37 per cent to \$397,000 which would be distributed to 86 groups.<sup>11</sup>

As the decade of the 1980s was drawing to a close, the government directed more of its attention to investigating the benefits of the arts to society. In February 1988, the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Defence Goh Chok Tong called for the formation of an Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts "to review the current state of the arts and culture in Singapore and to recommend measures that will make Singapore a culturally vibrant society by the turn of the century."<sup>12</sup> The Council was chaired by the Second Deputy Prime Minister Ong Teng Cheong and its report was submitted in April 1989. In this report, which was pivotal in the development of culture and the arts in Singapore, the Council states the motivations behind the government's plan to create a "culturally vibrant society":

...culture and the arts benefit society in many ways. The arts broaden our mind and deepen our sensibility. They give a nation its unique character and provide the much needed social bond to hold its people together. They add to the vitality of a city, and enhance the quality of life. Good facilities and activities help to attract world class performances and exhibitions, thus creating a more congenial environment for investors and professionals to stay and tourists to visit Singapore.<sup>13</sup>

The statement cited above can be seen as a summary of the government's utilitarian view of the arts which had been developing since the early days of nationhood in the 1960s. It clearly articulates the perception of the arts as tools for nation-building, promoting social cohesion, improving the quality of life, and furthering economic progress.

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<sup>10</sup> Kong, 413.

<sup>11</sup> Irene Hoe, "Government gives more to the arts," *The Straits Times*, 14 January 1988.

<sup>12</sup> Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, Singapore: Ministry of Community Development, 1989, n. pag.. The first few pages of the report are not paginated.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, n. pag..

To realize these government objectives, the Council recommended the formation of a centralized administrative body to amalgamate the functions of the Cultural Affairs Division of the Ministry of Community Development, the National Theatre Trust, and the Singapore Cultural Foundation.<sup>14</sup> In September 1991, the NAC was formed under the Ministry of Information and the Arts with the mission to “help nurture the arts and develop Singapore into a vibrant global city for the arts.”<sup>15</sup> After its inception, the NAC began developing a comprehensive system of providing financial assistance for the arts.<sup>16</sup> In addition to offering grants for individual projects, it also provides annual funding to subsidize the operating costs of new and established performing arts companies. To offset the high cost of space in land scarce Singapore, it runs an arts housing scheme that offers studio, rehearsal, and office spaces at highly subsidized rates. Recognizing the importance of building an audience base for the arts, the NAC initiated various collaborations with other ministries in the area of arts education for the public.

Although the government maintained its view of the arts as useful for socio-cultural purposes through the 1990s, the decade witnessed an increased emphasis on the necessity to harness the potential of the arts in furthering the economic cause. In 1991, the Minister of Information and the Arts George Yeo argued:

We should see the arts not as luxury or mere consumption but as investment in people and the environment. We need a strong development of the arts to help make Singapore one of the major hub cities of the world...We also need the arts to help us produce goods and services which are competitive in the world market. We need an artistic culture...we also need taste. With taste, we will be able to produce goods and services of far greater value.<sup>17</sup> ...

In 1995, the Executive Director of the NAC Foo Meng Liang elaborated on the economic benefits of having a vibrant arts and culture industry.<sup>18</sup> He cited figures to show that the arts had provided over 500,000 jobs in the United Kingdom and accounted for 27% of the earnings from tourism in 1987. Additionally, he elaborated on how the arts generated an

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 29.

<sup>15</sup> National Arts Council Annual Report 1992, Singapore: National Arts Council, 1993, 4.

<sup>16</sup> For details of the NAC's funding and housing schemes, see the agency's annual reports.

<sup>17</sup> George Yeo, “Building in a Market Test for the Arts,” *Speeches: A Bimonthly Selection of Ministerial Speeches*, 15, 54.

<sup>18</sup> *Art vs. Art: Conflict and Convergence*, Singapore: The Substation, 1995, 29..

annual turnover of US\$9.8 billion and created about 110,000 jobs in the New York metropolitan area. Recognizing the fact that Singapore's small population was not sufficient to sustain a large cultural industry, the government planned to develop the island nation into an arts and cultural centre that would attract regional audiences. This particular intention was articulated by Yeo in 1993 when he cited the ability of musicals like *Cats* and *Les Miserables* to attract tourists and stated that "Singapore would be on its way to being a theatre hub in Southeast Asia." To achieve its objectives of exploiting the economic benefits of the arts and building a regional arts hub, the government announced in the mid-1990s that it would inject \$1 billion to build new and upgrade old cultural facilities.<sup>19</sup> Most significantly, it planned to construct a new major arts centre which has been named the Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay, by 2001. The \$600 million arts centre would contain a 2,000 seat theatre, a 1,600 seat concert hall, a black box theatre, a recital studio, and an art gallery. The rest of the budget was allocated to the development of the Singapore History Museum, the Singapore Art Museum, and the Asian Civilization Museum.

The government's increased investment in the arts was not confined to developing "hardware" or facilities but extended to nurturing "software" or manpower and audiences. On 9 March 2000, the landmark *Renaissance City Report*, which was formulated by the Ministry of Information and the Arts in consultation with the arts and cultural community, was presented to the Parliament. The report reiterated the government's view of the arts as "economic catalyst[s]" and "desirable goods"<sup>20</sup> and articulated its belief that a vibrant arts scene "will provide people with the stimuli and the opportunities to create products and services that are innovative and value-adding."<sup>21</sup> Citing the examples of New York and London, the report asserted that a "buzzing cultural city" would attract the foreign talent that are required for the nation's economic growth.<sup>22</sup> The report recommended several strategies to help Singapore develop the "software" that is necessary to achieve its aspiration to become a cultural city that is on par with those in the West. To develop audiences and cultivate arts appreciation, the report recommended expanding the scope of arts education by introducing arts literacy into schools in a way similar to physical education and civics, increasing the funding for NAC's Arts Education Programme by \$400,000 per

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<sup>19</sup> Kong, 416.

<sup>20</sup> *Renaissance City Report: Culture and the Arts in Renaissance Singapore*, Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 2000, 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 33.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 24.

annum, and promoting the teaching of literature through drama.<sup>23</sup> The report recognized the importance of building flagship arts companies and recommended that an additional amount of \$5 million be given out to support eight established companies.<sup>24</sup> To groom local talent, the report advised “beef[ing] up scholarship funding for the arts by \$300,000 per annum and establishing a “New Artist Discovery Scheme” with a start-up fund of \$200,000 per annum to discover and nurture young and promising artists.<sup>25</sup> To improve the infrastructure and facilities for the arts, the report recommended that the NAC’s Arts Housing Scheme be expanded to include a further 7000 square metres of space over the next five to seven years.<sup>26</sup> It also recommended that an additional \$700,000 per annum over the next five years be allocated to promoting Singaporean artists overseas. Based on the recommendations of the landmark report, the government announced that the arts will receive a total of \$50 million over the next five years and that the “money will go directly to arts groups, activities, and education.”<sup>27</sup>

## The Impact of the Government’s Policy on the Development of Singapore’s English Language Theatre

This section attempts to assess the impact of the government’s policy on the development of the English language theatre in Singapore. As Birch has noted the roots of the medium can be found in the Anglo-American productions staged by the expatriate community for their own entertainment during the colonial era. It was only in the 1960s that locals began to write and stage plays with local content in the English language, but these early local productions were mounted by amateur groups. The drive towards the professionalization of English language theatrical practice only started in the mid-1980s with the establishment of the first local professional English theatre companies Act 3 and Theatreworks in 1985. As the professionalization of these companies took place at a time when the government was starting to pay more attention towards the arts, it is tempting to

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 52.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid, 54.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>27</sup> Lydia Lim, “\$50m boost for the arts,” *The Straits Times*, 10 March 2000.



conclude that increased government support led theatre practitioners to professionalize and to make a living out of their practice. However, to do so would be to ignore the fact that the amount of state funding at this time alone was insufficient to sustain the operational cost of a professional theatre company. Instead, the emergence of professional companies cannot be attributed to any singular factor or policy. As Birch argues:

The turning point of Singapore English language theatre which heralded this unprecedented activity in 1985 – at a time of economic recession previously unknown of in modern Singapore and reducing company sponsorship of the main festival in Singapore – is not something that can be pinned down to one particular event. But chief amongst the many factors must be, I would suggest, an increasing recognition that writers, directors, actors and audiences required there be a phenomenon recognizable as Singapore theatre.<sup>28</sup>

Although the professionalization of English language theatre in the mid-1980s was not the direct result of any policy, the government's increased support and management, especially through the NAC after 1991, helped sustained the momentum of professionalization. Direct subsidies, which were granted either on a project or annual basis, not only helped cover production costs, but contributed to the operational cost of maintaining a professional company. Budding professional theatre companies such as Theatreworks and The Necessary Stage, benefitted much from the Arts Housing Scheme which offered rehearsal, office, and storage space at highly subsidized rates. The former was housed at Fort Canning while the latter at the One-Two-Six Cairnhill Arts Centre and the Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre. Today, over 90 arts organizations and independent artists practising in various mediums are housed in 43 government subsidized properties.<sup>29</sup> According to the NAC's annual report for financial year 2010 to 2011, a total of \$4.75 million was distributed in direct funding, arts housing subsidies, talent development, and support for international presentations to theatre companies and practitioners.<sup>30</sup> In addition to direct funding and subsidized housing, the NAC's festivals, which include the annual Singapore Arts Festival, are also important sources of income for theatre companies. Besides the NAC's festivals, the Esplanade –Theatre on the Bay, which opened in 2002, runs many festivals and series that commissions local theatrical works. At the time of writing, festival commissions in Singapore

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<sup>28</sup> Birch, 41.

<sup>29</sup> For details of the various properties under the NAC's Arts Housing Scheme, see <http://www.nac.gov.sg/fac/fac03.asp>

<sup>30</sup> *Setting the Stage: National Arts Council Annual Report FY 2010/2011*, Singapore: National Arts Council, 2010, 63.

for local theatrical productions range from approximately \$10,000 to \$200,000 depending on the scale of the production.<sup>31</sup> Similar to direct funding, the festival commissions offered by the NAC and the Esplanade do not merely cover the cost of the productions but also contribute towards a professional company's operational costs and creating jobs for freelance artists.

The efforts of the NAC in the area of arts education was perhaps the most important in opening avenues through which theatre practitioners could make a living through their practice. By bringing together theatre companies and the Ministry of Education in the early 1990s, it helped pave the way for theatre practitioners to perform, teach, and facilitate drama programmes in primary and secondary schools as part of the students' extra-curricular activities. Today, all of the major companies have a specialized department that offer such services to schools on a regular basis.<sup>32</sup> Educational work constituted and continues to make up a significant proportion of the income of many theatre companies and freelance practitioners in Singapore. For example, for Cake Theatrical Productions, school engagements and projects constituted approximately 85% of their total income for the financial year 2010-2011 while direct government subsidy only made up 15%.<sup>33</sup> Veteran actress Jean Ng started a company Joyarts in 2005 to cater to schools' demand for drama programmes, and presently, she derives 95% of her annual income from providing such a service.<sup>34</sup> Only 5% of her income comes from acting in professional theatre productions. Even one of the most prolific stage actor in Singapore English language theatre today Rodney Oliveira derives most of his income from working in schools.<sup>35</sup> 65% of his income is derived from directing and facilitating drama projects in schools while the remaining 35% is from acting in professional productions.

Although statistics that are specific to English language theatre is unavailable, it is possible to deduce that the government initiatives in cultural development have yielded significant

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<sup>31</sup> Personal Interview with Natalie Hennedige (Artistic Director of Cake Theatrical Productions), 24 October 2011; Personal Interview with Low Kee Hong (General Manager of Singapore Arts Festival), 24 October 2011.

<sup>32</sup> Examples include the Theatre for Youth and Community Branch of The Necessary Stage, the Ch!! Padi Division of Wild Rice, and the Reach Out! Branch of The Finger Players. For details of the services offered, see the companies' websites at [www.necessary.org](http://www.necessary.org), [www.wildrice.com.sg](http://www.wildrice.com.sg), and [www.fingerplayers.com](http://www.fingerplayers.com).

<sup>33</sup> Personal Interview with Natalie Hennedige, 22 October 2011.

<sup>34</sup> Personal Interview with Jean Ng (Freelance Actress), 24 October 2011.

<sup>35</sup> Personal Interview with Rodney Oliveira (Freelance Actor), 25 October 2011.

quantitative results by looking at the statistics of the overall arts scene.<sup>36</sup> In 1997, the total number of arts activities (measured in performances and exhibition days) was 6,625. By 2008, this number had increased to 29,383. Ticketed attendance at arts events also witnessed a steady increase within the same period. In 1997, the number of tickets sold was 754,100, and in 2008, it had grown to 1,538,000. Furthermore, the number of arts societies and companies also increased. In 1997, there were 215 groups, and in 2008, 327 groups. Perhaps, more revealing of the growth of the theatre sector is the fact that in 1997 there were 18 theatre companies in Singapore, and by 2008, there were 90.

## Censorship through the Withdrawal of Funding and Support

Before proceeding to elaborate on how the government's financial support of the arts enables it to control the content of theatrical discourse, I will briefly describe the official mechanism of censorship. In Singapore, theatrical performances are under the purview of the Public Entertainments and Meetings Act (Chapter 257) which has its origins in the Public Entertainments Ordinance (40) of 1958. Under this legal act, theatre companies and practitioners are required to send their scripts to the authorities for vetting and to obtain a license before they can stage any public performance.<sup>37</sup> In the history of English language theatre, there had been several instances when a company was refused a license due to the content of its performance. Theatreworks' 1991 production of Tan Tam How's *The Lady of Soul and Her 'S' Machine* is a notable case. According to the company's Artistic Director Ong Keng Sen, the play was refused a license because it portrayed the local civil service system unfavourably and offered sex and communism as an option to a nation looking for a soul.<sup>38</sup> In December 1999, The Necessary Stage's production of *sex.violence.blood.gore* was censored by the government through the licensing requirement. Two days before the play was due to open, the company received a license permitting the staging on the condition that "three of the scenes which were deemed to offend religious and racial sensitivities be

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<sup>36</sup> The statistics presented here have been culled from the NAC website at <http://www.nac.gov.sg/sta/sta01.asp>.

<sup>37</sup> The license was referred to as the Public Entertainments License and was administered by the Singapore Police Force. Since 2005, it has been renamed the Arts Entertainment License and is now administered by the Media Development Authority (MDA). For details, see MDA's website at <http://www.mda.gov.sg/Licences/Pages/ArtsEntLicence.aspx>

<sup>38</sup> Hannah Pandian, "Censors pass political play," *The Straits Times*, 2 December 1992. Due to the recommendations of the Censorship Review Committee, *The Lady of Soul and Her 'S' Machine* was passed by the censors and staged in December 1992.

excluded from the performance.”<sup>39</sup> The company complied with the condition but distributed the censored scenes in print to the audience. Another case of censorship in the theatre happened in October 2000 when the government rejected the theatre group Agni Koothu's application for a license to stage Elangovan's *Talaq*, a play about marital violence and rape in the Indian-Muslim community, as several religious groups regarded as blasphemous to Islam.<sup>40</sup> After failing to secure a public entertainment license, the president of the group S. Thenmoli decided to stage a private performance for an invited audience, but the authorities objected to the performance.<sup>41</sup> Thenmoli then decided to conduct a full-dress rehearsal and record the play on video for documentation purposes.<sup>42</sup> However, when she arrived at the venue with her cast and crew, she was told by representatives of the NAC that the auditorium was closed. Thenmoli refused to leave the premises and was eventually arrested by the police for criminal trespassing. The case of *Talaq* suggested the potentially severe consequences that await artists who refuse to comply with the authorities' demand. As such, most theatre practitioners in Singapore tend to be cautious when it comes to fulfilling the licensing requirement. Although established theatre companies have been exempted from submitting their scripts for approval when applying for a performance license since 1994,<sup>43</sup> many continue to do so. Articulating the prevalent sentiments of the theatre community towards this practice, freelance theatre artist Loo Zihan explained, “We want to play safe and don't want to practice self-censorship. It is better for [the government] to tell us what is not allowed.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to the licensing requirement, the government regulates theatrical performances by withdrawing its funding. In 1993, The Necessary Stage staged a double-bill presentation of *MCP* and *Mixed Blessings* that utilized the theatrical methodology of Forum Theatre. Originally conceptualized by Brazilian theatre director Augusto Boal, Forum Theatre is a theatrical form that engages improvisatory techniques and a high level of audience participation to explore and work through social and political issues. As much of the

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<sup>39</sup> Helmi Yusoff, “Scenes snipped: three scenes cut from TNS' play,” *The Straits Times*, 4 December 1999.

<sup>40</sup> “Police on controversial play,” *The Straits Times*, 19 October 2000.

<sup>41</sup> “Arts Council respects decision to call off play,” *The Straits Times*, 28 October 2000.

<sup>42</sup> Chua Chin Hon, “Head of arts group arrested,” *The Straits Times*, 29 October 2000.

<sup>43</sup> The exemption was made on the recommendation of The Censorship Review Committee Report of 1992. For details see The Censorship Review Committee Report, Singapore: Ministry of Information and the Arts, 1992, 29.

<sup>44</sup> Personal Interview with Loo Zihan (Freelance Theatre Artist), 25 October 2011.

performance text is improvised based on the audience's input at the moment of the performance, no single party can dictate the content. Despite the fact that *MCP* and *Mixed Blessings* were staged without causing any trouble, the government perceived Forum Theatre as a threat to Singapore's social stability because it was impossible to control its content. Commenting on the theatrical methodology, the Ministry of Home Affairs claimed that it "pose[s] greater risk to public order, security and decency" and that "the performances may be exploited to agitate the audience on volatile social issues, or to propagate the beliefs and messages of deviant social or religious groups, or as means of subversion."<sup>45</sup> The Chairman of the NAC Tommy Koh clarified the agency's stand on the issue, "The NAC will not provide grants or other forms of assistance to any arts groups to stage Forum Theatre...but their other projects can be considered."<sup>46</sup> Together with the NAC's termination of funding for Forum Theatre, the government installed a new regulation that required a company that wanted to utilize the theatrical form to place a deposit of \$10,000 and to submit a description of the performance.<sup>47</sup> If the content of the production deviated from the submitted description, the deposit would be confiscated.

In August 2003, The Necessary Stage produced Haresh Sharma's *Mardi Gras*, a play about a group of gay men and lesbian women coming together to organize Singapore's first Gay Pride Parade.<sup>48</sup> After the company submitted the script to apply for a performance license, the playwright was invited to a meeting with representatives of the NAC to discuss the play. During the meeting, Sharma was advised to omit scenes in the play that suggested an incestuous homosexual relationship between two brothers. With support from the company's artistic staff, the playwright rejected the council's recommendation. Despite the fact that the play was staged in its entirety, the NAC cut its funding for the company by 20% the following year as a direct consequence of the rejection of its recommendation. As a result of the reduction of government funding, the company had to scale down its operations in the following year and retrench some members of its creative staff.

The relationship between the theatre and the government's funding policy remains one which is steeped in subtle precariousness. As the artistic director of The Finger Players Tan Beng Tian noted, "Nowadays, [the government] is much more discreet when it comes to

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<sup>45</sup> Felix Soh, "Two pioneers of forum theatre trained at Marxist workshop," *The Straits Times*, 5 February 1994.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Personal interview with Alvin Tan (Artistic Director of The Necessary Stage), 25 February 1999.

<sup>48</sup> This account of The Necessary Stage's staging of *Mardi Gras* is based on my observations as Resident Director of the company. I worked in this position from 1999 to 2004.

censoring through the withdrawal of its support. There have been some cases when the NAC requested the withdrawal of its logo in the publicity materials of productions which it deemed to be offensive or politically incorrect. The artists are always anxious that their funding would be cut the following year.”<sup>49</sup> An example of such a case is Theatre Ekamatra's production of Chong Tze Chien's *Charged* in 2010. The play explores racial issues within the context of Singapore's military conscription policy. Although government funding for the theatre company was not affected, it nonetheless had to delete the NAC's logo from the posters and flyers of the production.

An investigation into the amounts of government funding and support received by two theatre companies would allow us a glimpse into why theatre artists in Singapore are so concerned over the issue. The Finger Players is one of the companies that are on the two-year “Major Grant” scheme of the NAC, a scheme which is reserved for a selected number of outstanding companies. For the financial year of 2010, The Finger Players received \$180,000 from this scheme as well as a touring grant of \$31,352.<sup>50</sup> These amounts constituted 48% of its total income. Cake Theatrical Productions is a younger company and is on the NAC's annual grant scheme. For the financial year of 2010, it received approximately \$100,000 which constituted roughly 16% of its total income.<sup>51</sup> Regardless of the amount of the grant received, it is crucial to recognize that the government's hegemonic control of the arts is not restricted to its annual grant schemes but extends to other support mechanisms. The two companies mentioned above are under the NAC's Arts Housing Scheme which subsidizes 80% of the rental of their office and rehearsal space and is extremely crucial to their survival in land scarce Singapore where rentals are particularly expensive. The other perhaps more important form of government support which the two companies receive is through the arts education policy of the Ministry of Education. As elaborated earlier, the offering of educational programmes to primary and secondary schools constitutes the lifeblood of theatre practitioners' income. The Finger Players and Cake Theatrical Productions are involved in varying degrees in this form of work. For The Finger Players, income from educational work made up 17% of their revenue, while Cake Theatrical Productions derived approximately 66% of their income from working in schools. Yet another avenue through which these two companies rely on government support is through the commissions by government cultural institutions such as the museums. At the time of writing this paper, Cake

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<sup>49</sup> Personal Interview with Tan Beng Tian (Artistic Director of The Finger Players), 25 October 2011.

<sup>50</sup> Personal Correspondence with Ang Hui Bin (Administrator of The Finger Players), 26 October 2011.

<sup>51</sup> Personal Interview with Natalie Hennedige, 24 October 2011.

Theatrical Productions had just finished staging a performance that was commissioned at the cost of \$100,000 by the National History Museum for its "Night Festival." The Finger Players had also just won a two-year contract to provide puppeteers to support the museum's exhibit of traditional puppets.

The brief statistics and figures cited above are enough to demonstrate the fact that the theatre practitioners are heavily reliant on direct and indirect government support and endorsement. They also clearly illustrate the government's hegemonic control of the arts through economic means. If the content of a theatre company's productions is regarded as offensive to society, politically incorrect, and/or incongruous with dominant ideologies, the government can simply terminate its operation by withdrawing the NAC grants and arts housing subsidy and by forbidding its cultural and educational institutions from commissioning and engaging the company. These actions would severely cripple the theatre company financially and most probably force it to close down. To date, the government has not taken such drastic steps to regulate the content of theatrical productions. Perhaps, this is due to the fact that none of the theatre companies are deemed offensive enough to warrant such persecution. A more realistic explanation would be that the government is equally invested in the arts and require the companies to help fulfil its socio-cultural and economic agendas.

## Severe Disjuncture: The Question of Social Responsibility

Theatre practitioners in Singapore are clearly not aligned with the views and intents of the government. The controversy over Wild Rice's funding cut which is recounted at the beginning of this paper explicitly reveals a severe disjuncture that exists between the artists' and the government's conception of the arts. In its official statement on the funding cut, the NAC explained it would not fund "projects which are incompatible with the core values promoted by the Government and society or disparage the Government." The theatre community which was represented by 23 artists and arts administrators, including the artistic directors of the major theatre companies Wild Rice, Theatreworks, and Theatre Practice, claimed that the government has never defined the term "core values" clearly.

Contrary to the theatre community's claim, the government has clearly defined the term "core values" in its grant application form that states that:

The NAC is obliged to prioritise financial support away from artistic projects which: a) erode the core moral values of society, including but not limited to the promotion of permissive lifestyles and depictions of obscenity or graphic sexual conduct; b) denigrate or debase a person, group or class of individuals on the basis of race or religion, or serve to

create conflict or misunderstanding in our multicultural and multi-religious society; c) disparage or demean government bodies, public institutions or national leaders, and/or subvert the nation's security or stability.<sup>52</sup>

The government's definition of the term "core values" is aligned with its long-held view of the arts as a tool for promoting social cohesion. In other words, for the government, art is required to be socially responsible and should not threaten the status quo. Furthermore, the government's support of the arts since 1965 has always been motivated by its utilitarian view of the arts as tools for furthering socio-cultural and economic agendas. It has never been its objective to champion artistic integrity or freedom of expression.

For the theatre practitioners, "core values" and social responsibility hold drastically different meanings. They argued that "the spectrum of 'core values' must include notions such as tolerance, inclusivity and diversity- the very values that are upheld in a multiracial and democratic country such as ours."<sup>53</sup> They also added that "NAC's priority should be directed towards developing Singapore as a world-class city for the arts, and not towards developing the potential of a statutory board – entrusted with public money – as an organ of social control." Additionally, it appears that being socially responsible is not about adhering to the tenets of the status quo but representing the plurality of different voices in society. This view was explicitly articulated by the artistic director of Drama Box Kok Heng Leun who contended that the government should not prohibit "certain segments of society" from being represented on the stage.<sup>54</sup> He also asserted that, "If you cannot criticize the Government, then you are saying that the Government is right. Then where is democracy?" Reiterating the sentiments of the theatre community which was articulated in the joint statement, Kok further argued that the NAC's job "is to nourish the arts" and that its "responsibility is to make sure that there are enough choices, that there are different kinds of arts activities."

The disjuncture between the government and the theatre community's definitions of the role of theatre and state support presents a perplexing conundrum. It is evident that the theatre practitioners believe that it is the state's duty to support the production of all forms of artistic content, even those which the government deems as offensive to society, detrimental to social stability, and threatening to its political dominance. This begs the question of whether any government or ideological institution would endorse and support resistance, opposition, and dissent against itself. Additionally, the government is fundamentally a

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<sup>52</sup> Cited in Chia.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.



representative of its constituents and an agent that disseminates public funds that have been collected from tax payers. As such, the public's opinions over what should be allowed on stage should ideally be the primary consideration. However, the public's opinions over issues of sexuality, race, class, and politics can be extremely divided. Rather than presenting another conundrum, the plurality of perspectives can offer alternative avenues of funding for theatre companies. In more tangible terms, sponsorship can be secured from local and global private corporations that are seeking to appeal to customers who hold alternative views. In 2011, Wild Rice managed to secure the Man Group as its title sponsor for its annual Singapore Theatre Festival. The international alternative investment management business is also the major sponsor of the Man Booker Prize and the Man Asian Literary Prize. Another successful attempt at securing major corporate funding is The Necessary Stage's annual Singapore Fringe Festival. For over a decade, the telecommunications company M1 has been the title sponsor of this festival.

## Conclusion

This paper has attempted to offer a brief historical account of the development of cultural policy in Singapore and a glimpse into the relationship between government funding of the arts and censorship. It has demonstrated that by increasing its management and support of the arts, the government has constructed an efficient system of regulating artistic content. Within this system, most theatre practitioners are highly reliant on the state's policy, endorsement, funding, and support to sustain their professional practice. To maintain artistic integrity and protect the space for artistic freedom, theatre practitioners are required to constantly negotiate with and sometimes protest against the government's policies and regulations. They are also required to diversify their sources of income by securing corporate sponsorship from local and global private companies. As co-artistic director of The Finger Players Chong Tze Chien said, "I don't put all my eggs in one basket."<sup>55</sup> Nonetheless, it is important to note that corporate sponsorship alone does not resolve the obstacle of censorship that is posed by the licensing requirement which allows the government to have the final say on what eventually appears on the stage. It appears then that a widespread attitudinal shift towards discursive openness in society which would liberalize the licensing guidelines is required to truly protect and sustain artistic integrity and freedom of expression.

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

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