THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
POSTMODERN SELF-REFLEXIVITY
AND POST-INDEPENDENCE
SINGAPOREAN THEATRE

LIM KOK WAI BENNY

A submission presented in partial
fulfillment of the requirements of the
University of Glamorgan for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

November 2012
## CONTENT

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abstract</th>
<th>1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 1: The Premise of the Human Lefts Series</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.1: An Introduction</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.2: The Development of the Series</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3: Contextual Framework</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.3.1: A Brief History of Singapore’s Theatre</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 2: Key Terms and Research Methodology</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1: An Introduction</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2: Research Process</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Self and Politics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1: An Introduction</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2: Politics in the Human Lefts Series</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Self and Alternative Sexualities</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.1: An Introduction</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.2: Sexual Identities and its Representation in Human Lefts</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.3: Alternate Sexualities in the Human Lefts Series</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 5: Self and Appropriation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.1: An Introduction</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.2: Appropriation in the Human Lefts Series</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 6: The Absence of Rehearsals</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.1: An Introduction</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.2: The Rehearsal Process</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.3: Self-Reflexivity and the Rehearsal Process</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.4: The Functions of a Performer in a Postmodern Self-Reflexive Theatre</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 7: Conclusion</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 1</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 2</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 3</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 4</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 5</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 6</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendix 7</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
VIDEO

**Human Lefts 1**  
*Running time: 36 minutes 13 seconds*

Human Lefts 1 is a story about a prisoner on the death row for drug trafficking who believes that he would be let free by his long time lover, the son, who is the current leader of the country. The son, despite holding the top position, is under the shadow of his father, the ex-leader of the country. The play explores the relationships between the father, the son and the prisoner.

Conceptualised by Benny Lim; Performed by Benny Lim and Jocelyn Chua

**Human Lefts 3**  
*Running time: 40 minutes 58 seconds*

Human Lefts 3 is a comical story about a transvestite who decided to go out to the streets to protest against the city he/she lives in, in hope of lifting the chewing gum ban. He/she sat quietly for days in hope for more people to join in the protest but eventually realises that it is a lone battle and he/she becomes more of an entertainment than of someone who is making a political statement.

Conceptualised and Performed by Benny Lim

**Human Lefts 4 – The Finale**  
*Running time: 59 minutes 47 seconds*

In the distant future, cloning of human is legal. However, humans that are cloned have to stay in an enclosed city, locked away from the rest of the civilization. After a long paperwork process, one cloned man is released from his city for the very time to speak to a selected group of the ‘normal’ people. This cloned man runs a theatre company in his city. He begins by sharing his daily work in his company. As he gets more comfortable with the audience, he shares the problems he faces and eventually, he opens up and talks about the situations and problems he faces in his city, revealing some shocking secrets.

Conceptualised and Performed by Benny Lim
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I would like to express my deepest gratitude to my supervisors, Professor Richard Hand and Professor Stephen Lacey, for their directions and constructive feedbacks throughout this study, which allowed me to put together my thoughts in a coherent manner.

I take this opportunity to convey my sincere thanks to staff and students of the Cardiff School of Creative & Cultural Industries who attended my workshop and/or performance showcase in January 2012. The experience has provided me with good insights for my research.

I will also like to thank my family and a few of my very close friends who have supported me to take this path.

Finally, I would like to give special thank to KDU University College (Malaysia) for supporting and enabling me to complete this study.
ABSTRACT

This critical review serves as a significant formal documentation of the postmodern self-reflexive theatre in the postmodern and post-independence Singapore. Through the Human Lefts Series, which I conceptualised and performed between 2005 and 2009, we are able to look at postmodern Singapore theatre beyond issues relating to the loss of cultural and historical past, which might not be significant for those who were born after 1965. The situation is such that, currently, there is no formal documentation of postmodern self-reflexive theatre in the Singapore context, especially theatre pieces responding to postmodern, post-independence Singapore. This critical review aims to detail analysis made from the Human Lefts Series and its significant contribution to the study of self-reflexivity.

More relevant issues to the postmodern Singapore include the current political situation, alternative sexualities (homosexuality and transexualism explored in the Human Lefts Series), and the effect of 'cloning' and appropriation being the key cultural dominant of Singapore. By the end 2009, a total of four pieces of works under the Human Lefts umbrella was showcased to the public. Three main outputs will be discussed in this review.

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is self-reflexivity in the postmodern, post-independence Singapore context?
2. How has the Human Lefts Series responded to the self-reflexivity defined in this research?

3. How has the concept of self-reflexivity affected the process of creating the Human Lefts Series?

4. What further inferences can be made, in relation to postmodern theories, from the process of creating the Human Lefts Series?

This portfolio also highlights the absence of a physical rehearsal process for the Human Lefts Series. With a clear performance structure, a performer can walk into the performance and begin the delivery of the performance immediately. There is also a discussion on the functions of a performer in a postmodern self-reflexive theatre, in relation to Roland Barthes’ essay on The Death of the Author. The performer’s experience cannot be totally separated from the character in a postmodern self-reflexive performance.

The portfolio consists of the main body of text (the review), a set of appendices and the video recording of the three research outputs. It is recommended to watch the video recording (performances) prior to reading this review.
1.1 An Introduction

In her book, *The Politics of Postmodernism*¹, Linda Hutcheon states, "Few words are more used and abused in discussions of contemporary culture than the word ‘postmodernism’. As a result, any attempt to define the word will necessarily and simultaneously have both positive and negative dimensions." (Linda Hutcheon, 2002: 1)

The notion of postmodern theatre is one that borders dangerously on cliche (even as the meaning of the ‘postmodern’ remains, until today, endlessly deferred; understandably, artists in Singapore stop bothering to care since anything can be considered postmodern these days; less understandably, some believe they know everything there is to know about it and discard the notion as no longer relevant), but arguably not so to a vast majority of theatre goers, particularly in Singapore, where the word ‘postmodern’ has yet to even be readily bantered about amongst theatre goers.

---

There is no one clear definition for postmodernism\(^2\). Being a set of concepts about a particular situation in our current society, postmodernism is not deemed a thing, but more of a condition:

"Like the millennium, postmodernism in psychology brings a lot of hype with it; it creates an advance wave of scare stories; it seems to open up a new sense of possibility; and we may be celebrating it at the wrong time. Yet is a something that we ourselves have made. Surely, the 'fact' that we have made it now, and made it the way we have, must tell us something about ourselves now. Postmodernism is a condition that we find ourselves in."

Postmodern Psychologies, Societal Practice, and Political Life.- Two Cheers for Postmodernism: Living the Paradox\(^3\) (John Morss, 2000: 15-16)

Postmodernist artistic styles are often being associated with the postmodern condition within the society. Postmodernism is also often linked to modernism and more so, as a continuation of modernism\(^4\). While modernism presented optimism and progress, postmodernism is often linked to more depressing truths and pessimism. If modernism is about experimentation, then postmodernism is about acceptance. Postmodernism is often being regarded as the condition of many deaths\(^5\) – deaths of history and deaths of the real. To quote from America\(^6\) (John Baudrillard, 1989: 32):

---

\(^3\) Readings, Bill and Schaber, Bennet. Postmodernism Across the Pages: essays for a postmodernity that wasn't born yesterday. Syracuse University Press, 1993
"Everything is destined to reappear as simulation. Landscapes as photography, women as the sexual scenario, thoughts as writing, terrorism as fashion and the media, events as television. Things seem only to exist by the virtue of this strange destiny. You wonder whether the world itself isn't just here to serve as advertising copy in some other world."

1.2 The Development of the Human Lefts Series

I have researched on postmodern theatre in Singapore since 2003\(^7\). Prior to the research, my works were mainly influenced by Alvin Tan, who is the Artistic Director of prominent Singapore theatre company, The Necessary Stage, as well as Paul Rae of Spell #7 performance company. At that time, Alvin directed a series of original plays, either devised or scripted, which had gay themes. Such plays included *Abuse Suxxx* (2001), *Godeatgod* (2002) and *Mardi Gras* (2003). Paul Rae, on the other hand, focused on intimate original performances that connect history, culture and politics with life. Therefore, between 2001 and 2003, I directed several small and intimate gay-themed performances\(^8\). All these performances were scripted.

My research on postmodern theatre in Singapore began with a performance, entitled *Perdition*, that explores death being the only meaningful path of life. Subsequently, several other works such as *Death.Mother* (2004 to 2008), *The Most Blatant Day of my Life* (2004) and *Story* (2005) were conceptualised and realised/perform ed.

---

\(^7\) Refer to Appendix 1
\(^8\) Refer to Appendix 2
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

The Human Lefts Series was first devised in May 2005 after I returned from the Performance Studies International #11 Conference in Brown University, Providence (RI, USA). At that point in time, I was still working on a series titled, Death.Mother, which explored the delusional lives of mothers living in a postmodern society like Singapore. I was inspired by the experience in Brown and wanted to prepare for the next conference in London in 2006. It was then I realised that the theme of the Performance Studies International #12 would be Performing Rights. The whole concept of ‘Rights’ was of considerable interest to me and at the very same time, an unfortunate coincidence happened in Singapore. A man named Shanmugam was executed in Singapore for drugs trafficking. It was then clear to me that something on Human Rights can be worked on and the issue of mandatory death penalty would be a relevant and topical area to explore. The title, Human Lefts, was meant as a parody of Human Rights. The first Human Lefts was scheduled to run as part of the Initiation International Festival in 2005.

The idea of Human Lefts 2 and 3 came about in July 2006. At that point in the time, I was still developing and performing the Death.Mother series. The Death.Mother series was conceptualised in response to award-winning Singaporean gay poet, Cyril

---

9 Visit PSI 12 website at: www.psi12.qmul.ac.uk
10 Shanmugam s/o Murugesu was hanged on the 13th May 2005 at 6am in Singapore for trafficking 1.03 kilograms of cannabis. According to Singapore’s law, anyone who is arrested for trafficking above 500 grams of cannabis will be sentenced to a mandatory death penalty. Despite several appeals, Shanmugam was hanged. While the government does not publish statistics showing how many prisoners are under sentence of death, it is thought that at least eight other people are currently on death row. Singapore, with a population of just over four million, has the highest per capita execution rate in the world. At least 420 people have been executed since 1991.
11 Human Lefts was scheduled to run on the 3rd December 2005 as part of Initiation International 2005. Initiation International aims to offer an intimate platform of creative discovery in an open and non-threatening atmosphere of artistic exchanges. Inspired by the concept of a performance panel, this festival seeks to draw together a variety of unique performances that respond to a collective theme. Artists may interpret the given theme from their individual perspectives and create an original performance accordingly. Showcased artists may share their journey in response to the year’s given theme while audiences are encouraged to provide thoughts and feedback to the artists’ works in an atmosphere of openness and genuine support. As such, Initiation International also invites the submission of works-in-progress as an avenue of growth and inspiration.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

Wong’s fourth collection of poetry, Unmarked Treasure, published in 2004. The book consists of confessional writings by Cyril about his relationship with his mother. Therefore, the series explored the plight of a deluded Asian mother, who has chosen to ignore the fact that her husband and children no longer love her. In the performance, the mother talked about her glorious past as a waitress, cashier and later, travel agent. She also expressed her love for her son and the little things that seemingly connected her with her son.

As part of the creation process, I met up with Jenny Wong, who is the mother of Cyril. Jenny is aware of Cyril’s sexual orientation but has chosen not to discuss about this issue with him. When I met her, she was clearly uncomfortable seeing her son bringing another man to the meeting. One of her mannerisms attracted my attention. Throughout the meeting, she kept an awkward grin on her face. Nonetheless, she maintained very calmed and composed. Within a short one-hour meeting, she shared with Cyril about his media coverage and that she has kept the newspaper cuttings. Cyril, on the other hand, remained indifferent and uninterested in what she was saying. It was clear that Cyril has got minimal affection and patience towards his mother while Jenny has got complete affection for her son. I was keen to explore this dramatic connection between the mother and the son in the Death.Mother series. In the series, there were discussions on this assumed reality that the mother is in fact played by the son who is cross-dressing as the mother. In Human Lefts 1, there was also a cross-dresser character. This led to the thought that Human Lefts 2 could look into the state of the cross-dressers living in Singapore. The deluded Jenny character was therefore borrowed into the Human Lefts Series.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

*Human Lefts 4* was meant to be the finale of the *Human Lefts* series. I borrowed the idea and the character from a play I invited to Singapore in 2005, and reworked the premise in the relevant context. By the end of 2009, a total of four pieces of works under the *Human Lefts* umbrella was showcased to the public.

1.3 Contextual Framework

Just some sixty years ago, Singapore was a colonised state. The British moved out of Singapore in 1959 and Singapore was granted self-governance. Fifty years back between 1963 and 1965, Singapore was part of Malaysia. Singapore separated from Malaysia and gained independence as a sovereign state on the 9th August 1965. Today, Singapore is widely regarded as a developed country.

Singapore is a postmodern state in many aspects. The economy itself has shifted from labour intensive mass production in its early days to the service and innovative oriented condition of today. Even at the time of independence, Singapore was a migrant society with the population making up of immigrants from Indonesia, Malaysia, China and India. Today, Singapore is a globalised city with influences from a fusion of east and west. There is no one defining Singapore culture but the city-state promotes cultural development of its various ethnic groups. Nonetheless,

---

there is a concern that ethnic groups are losing their respective origins due to globalisation and technological advancement. The Chinese are not familiar with their Chinese roots, and the same is true of Malays and Indians. It could also be due to the fact that post-independence Singaporeans do not know their roots well right from the beginning. Wang Gungwu, in his foreword in the publication *Reframing Singapore: Memory-Identity-Trans-Regionalism*, argues that Singapore, in its first decade of independence, discouraged people from asking and probing questions about its past. Although the policy has reversed, Wang indicated that it has been difficult to change people’s mindset about the uses of the past. In the same publication, Derek Heng reiterated that post-independence Singapore focused on developing its economy and a productive workforce. Heng then stressed that the racial groups were subsumed under the singular social grouping called Singaporeans, backed by policies that, in his words, “subtly dismantling the features that fostered more diverse social groupings that had hitherto been inherent to Singapore’s society.”

Places with ethnic origins are preserved and recreated mostly for tourism purposes. Chinatown, Little India and Malay Village are popular tourist destinations in Singapore. These places originated from the early days where each respective ethnic group settled down. The growth of public housing in the 1960s and 1970s has integrated the different ethnic groups. Without a critical mass of the ethnic groups together and with globalisation, Singaporeans are losing their roots. Nonetheless, the

---

18 Ibid
Singapore government, through the National Arts Council\textsuperscript{21} and the National Heritage Board\textsuperscript{22}, has recreated arts and culture and reinvented Singapore's arts and cultural scene. Today, Singapore has one of the most expensive arts centres in the world\textsuperscript{23} and there are some forms of arts and cultural festivals almost every month. In a way, one can conclude that Singapore has created a false reality of cultural depth\textsuperscript{24}.

The massive economic development in Singapore has also blurred the concept of place. Today, a town in Singapore is saturated with huge shopping malls, major business institutions, cafes, Cineplex and mass rapid transport system (with its own in-station cafes and shopping zone). This is in relation to what Mark Auge\textsuperscript{25} referred as the rise of 'non places'. People in Singapore are spending a lot of their time in places that bear very little cultural past and identity. Every corner of the country is growing in line with the level of economic growth. Technological development is another key area. New technology is replacing old technology, creating new problems in order for newer technologies in the future to tackle\textsuperscript{26}. In a publication by the Center for Research on Information Technology and Organisations (CRITO) – University of California, they concluded that:

\begin{itemize}
\item [21] National Arts Council website: www.nac.gov.s\
\item [22] National Heritage Board website: www.nhb.gov.s\
\item [23] The arts centre in Singapore, Esplanade, cost S700 million to build.\
\item [24] Sasitharan, director of TTRP Singapore (a non-profit performing arts school), dwelt on the point that Singapore does not have the freedom of political and social discourse to match its status as a global city with excellent infrastructure. He recalled an encounter with noted South African civil rights activist Albie Sachs in 2009 who remarked, when Mr. Sasitharan introduced himself as coming from Singapore: Ah, you have everything except a soul.’\textsuperscript{24} We refer to the URL: http://www.spp.nus.edu.sg/ips/docs/media/yr2011/p2011/ST_Global%20city%20push%20has%20affected%20quality%20of%20life_180111.pdf\
\item [25] Auge, Mark. Non-places: Introduction to an anthropology of supermodernity. Verso, 1995. Marc Auge discusses that in the past, there was an organic and creative link between places and their occupants. Our experiences with space now come pre-packaged and mediated by a proliferation of imagined and imaginary references.\
\end{itemize}
"Underlying the relationship between postmodern consciousness and information technology is a profound relationship between ontology (our view of reality) and technology. One feeds on the other incessantly. As technology creates new realities, virtual and interactive, postmodernism provides a framework within which such realities can be grasped and understood. Many of our postmodern sensibilities are concretised through technological possibilities. The advent of technology has created opportunities for simulated realities and thinning the line between real and the simulated."

1.3.1 A Brief History of Singapore’s Theatre

In the 1950s, Singapore was still a colonised stated of the British Empire. The theatre scene was dominated by English Drama put up for the British soldiers and their families assigned to Singapore. These productions were usually staged during off-duty hours and involved lots of laughter and alcohol. It was mainly entertainment for the British residing in Singapore. Singapore gained independence in 1965 after separating from Malaysia. There was a return of English educated Singaporeans such as Lim Chor Pee and Goh Poh Seng. Their works serve as a study of the early years of decolonisation in Malaya. Arguably, these plays were influenced by the mood and issues of their age and environment, and the minority English-educated group they represent. It was not until the 1970s where there was a shift away from the expatriate shadow and that there were more Singaporean voice in the plays. The 1980s was the main period of development for theatre in Singapore. With a multicultural society
and bilingual education system, Singapore theatre is also unique for its exploration of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural theatre. There was also a significant growth in the number of local theatre companies and local playwrights. Such companies include Theatreworks (founded in 1985 by Ong Ken Seng), The Necessary Stage (founded in 1986 by Alvin Tan) and Asia-In-Theatre Research Circus (founded in 1987 by the late William Teo). There was also a growth in the number of playwrights such as Stella Kon, who is well-known for her feminist work, *Emily and the Emerald Hill*, as well as Kuo Pao Kun (who has been working in the Chinese theatre scene since the 1960s) with his works exploring Singapore's cultural past. The 1990s saw an even larger group of local playwrights born post 1965. That was the period of time where satires and plays with homosexual content were explored.

Generally, arts goers in Singapore still prefer attending conventional theatre plays written by renowned dramatists or attending musicals, and are not exposed to the postmodern self-reflexive theatre. However, since the late 1980s, there have been Singapore-made theatre pieces that are considered postmodern in nature. One example of a postmodern piece of theatre is Kuo Pao Kun’s *Descendents of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995), which works on the cultural fragmentation of Singapore as the country gears towards capitalism and economic development. However, there was a major change before and after independence, especially on the social integration that led to the loss of individual culture. Singaporeans born post-independence are used to the postmodern condition with economic development, technological development

---

27 Kuo Pao Kun (b. 1939 Xiaoguo village, Hebei, China - d. 10 Sep 2002, Singapore), was a playwright, producing plays in both English and Chinese. He is considered one of the most significant dramatists in Singapore and a pioneer of Singapore theatre. Many of his works, produced over four decades of creative work, have been translated into Malay, Tamil, German, Japanese, Arabic. And many, too, have been produced and performed by theatre companies in Singapore and abroad.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

and the created cultures.\(^{28}\) The element of self-reflexivity in highlighting the loss of the cultural identity becomes less of an issue as compared to those who were born pre-independence.

The situation is such that, currently, there is no formal documentation of postmodern self-reflexive theatre in the Singapore context, especially theatre pieces responding to postmodern, post-independence Singapore. This critical review aims to detail analysis made from the Human Lefts Series and its significant contribution to the study of self-reflexivity. This will influence further research into the key areas such as politics, alternative sexualities and appropriation identified in this review, rather than to continue focusing on Singapore’s loss of historical and cultural past, which has little impact to people in the postmodern, post-independence Singapore. This review also introduces a brand new perspective on the functions of a performer within such a context of performance.

A qualitative approach is employed in the research. In this case, the outputs are already completed (the Human Lefts Series spanned over 4 years between 2005 and 2009) while this particular research began in 2010. In order of importance (beginning with the most important), this study involves reviewing the performances (through the videos), reviewing literature to identify the theoretical and contextual framework of

\(^{28}\) In their article, *The conservation-redevelopment dilemma in Singapore* (published in *Cities*, Vol 13, No 6, ep. 411-422, 1996 by Elsevier Science Ltd), Brenda Yeoh and Shirley Huang (both from the Department of Geography in the National University of Singapore) concluded that the Singapore government’s strategies of heritage management were based an “even-handed” approach whereby there was an equal representation of major ethnic groups in the choice of historical monuments to preserve. On top of that, the government argued that such strategies would provide a new “glue”, which could bind the different ethnic groups to form a multi-cultural Singapore society.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

the Human Lefts Series and reviewing feedbacks (through discussions with audience).

The study aims to answer the following research questions:

1. What is self-reflexivity in the postmodern, post-independence Singapore context?

2. How has the Human Lefts Series responded to the self-reflexivity defined in this research?

3. How has the concept of self-reflexivity affected the process of creating the Human Lefts Series?

4. What further inferences can be made, in relation to postmodern theories, from the process of creating the Human Lefts Series?
CHAPTER 2 – KEY TERMS AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

2.1 Introduction

“Self-reflection needs to recur because we continue to perform throughout life, and therefore need as often to reflect upon the previously unassessed. Also, culture’s eye is capricious, its attention and emphasis over matters ebb and flow, thus we must continually re-anticipate culture’s judgment over not only our nonce, but also over the whole history of our being in the world. In self-reflection, we re-perform ourselves in order to understand through culture’s eyes what our performance means—this might aptly be termed a self-reflexive performance.”

_Self-reflexive performance: dancing with the computed audience of culture_²⁹

(Liu, H. and Davenport, G., 2005: 4)

This quotation sums up my approach towards self-reflexivity in theatre. Self-reflexive theatre, in this _Human Lefts Series_, refers to a performance that shows a creator’s attempt to look at my cultural mirror constantly, and tapping the unassessed. The cultural mirror includes a self-conscious awareness of me being an artist and a performer as well my physical environment, and in this case, the post-independence Singapore that I am born in. In his foreword to Wee Wan-Ling’s _The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore_, Chua Beng Huat commented that the self-reflexivity in the context of post-independence Singapore evolved around the

---

²⁹ Liu, H. and Davenport, G. Self-reflexive performance: dancing with the computed audience of culture. _International Journal of Performance Arts and Digital Media_ 1(3), Intellect Ltd, 2005
representation of the obsession with capitalist growth in the media, as a device to discuss human values and concerns.\footnote{Wee, Wan-Ling. The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore. Hong Kong University Press, December 2007}

The word ‘Self’ is used consistently throughout this critical review. ‘Self’, in this context, is more than the self as Benny Lim but also the self as a Singaporean, the self as a performing artist and the self as a researcher who is keen to respond to the postmodern Singapore. The term ‘postmodern self-reflexivity theatre’ refers to how I have included myself (as Benny Lim, as the performing artist, as the researcher) into each of the works deliberately in responding to key topics.

The term ‘post-independence’ Singapore refers to Singapore after 1965 when she gained the status of an independent, sovereign state. ‘Postmodern’ Singapore, on the other hand, does not refer to a fix period of time. Instead, it refers to the various milestones suggesting Singapore as a postmodern city after post-independence Singapore. These two terms are not to be used interchangeably but rather postmodern Singapore is after the post-independence Singapore.

Alternative Sexualities is another term that is widely used in this review. It refers to any forms of sexual orientation other than heterosexuality.

Appropriation refers to the taking possession of something without prior permission. Appropriation also signals the end of ‘originality’ and has political connection – for
instance, subcultures appropriating images from mainstream culture and thereafter subverting the meanings of the images.

"...appropriation frequently affects a more decisive journey away from the informing source into a wholly new cultural product and domain. This may or may not involve a generic shift, and it may still require the intellectual juxtaposition of (at least) one text against another that we have suggested is central to the reading and spectating experience of adaptations."

*Adaptation and Appropriation*\(^31\) (Julie Sanders, 2006: 26)

The term ‘Space’ is also mentioned regularly in this review. Singapore is a small nation of slightly over 700 square kilometers. Yet the country has a population of over 5 million people (World Bank: 2010). Singapore is a densely populated nation. As discuss earlier, due to the land scarcity, the Singapore government has to determine the monuments to preserve, under the pretext of cultural heritage management, and the areas to be developed for economical reasons. This is the physical space. There is also an issue with political space. The ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) has been in power since 1965 and there is little presence of opposition in parliament. Singapore also restricts freedom of expression and freedom of speech. Until 2008, Singapore bans any form of public protest\(^32\). Even after 2008, public protest can only be held in

---


\(^32\) Chapter VIII of the Singapore Penal Code highlights that an assembly of above 5 is considered unlawful. Rioting is also illegal in Singapore.
the Speakers’ Corner[^33], located at Hong Lim Park, which to many has little impact on liberalisation[^34]. Space, in Singapore, is therefore closely linked to politics.

For the remainder of this critical review, *Human Lefts* 2 and 3 will be referred to as *Human Lefts 2/3* as their content are similar and the latter is actually the development of the former. The three pieces of works in the *Human Lefts Series* are interrelated and are postmodern works. Each of these works consisted of elements of what conventionally is known as postmodern theatre. Each piece of work involved self-reflexive elements, made up of borrowed cultures and sources (appropriation), presented a series of ironies and conflicting realities as well as a lack of a fixed and/or one-track narrative. Some works explored some of these elements in greater depth.

### 2.2 Research Process

I have employed a one-on-one in-depth interview from two audience members who watched the entire *Human Lefts Series*. An interview is a good choice since the goal is to obtain rich narratives through feedback[^35]. The audience members are credible respondents as each represents a different background and professions. Mr. Richard Chua is a theatre practitioner whereas Mr. Roy Soetantio is a tertiary student.

[^33]: Loosely modeled after London’s Hyde Park, the Speakers’ Corner is Singapore’s first-ever free-speech venue opened in September 2000 with the aim to ‘help develop civil society’ by making active citizenship ‘more visible’. Speakers are required to register at an adjacent police post and show proof of his/her Singaporean citizenship.


[^35]: http://www.wellesley.edu/NECASL/Pd11.10.08Mixed%20Methods%20presentation%20for%20web.pdf. The information in this website is adapted from slides from the presentation "Qualitative Assessment and Student-Faculty Collaborations," by Cristin Bates (Wellesley College ’08), Claire Droste (Wellesley College ’10), Lee Cuba (Wellesley College Professor of Sociology), and Joseph Swingle (Wellesley College Assistant Professor of Sociology) at the Mixed-Method Assessment Meeting for Wabash National Study institutions held at the Center of Inquiry in March 2008.
interested in theatre performances. The interview has specific purposes. First and foremost, I am keen to understand their take on self-reflexivity within the series. Next, I revealed to them the rehearsal process to seek their response. Finally, I requested for them to share their insights drawn from the entire series.

Both Richard and Roy could clearly identify my attempt to bring in issues relating to homosexuality and politics. Both also mentioned that while these issues were brought up in the series, I have not made a clear stand. Richard felt that it was important that I did not take a stand as it allowed for the audience to ponder and to think about the issues highlighted. Both Richard and Roy did not mentioned about the reusing of certain props and ideas in the series. When appropriation was brought up, Richard mentioned that the reusing of the props would mean very little to the audience, as the attempt to highlight the repetition at my end was minimal. Roy did not feel that the reusing of props meant anything. On the rehearsal process, both expressed disbelief that no actual physical rehearsal actually took place. Roy mentioned that each of the performances seem like a well-rehearsed piece. With regards to the insights, Richard discussed at length about how the series triggered his thoughts on what it means to be human. Are the roles important? Is gender important? Is sexuality important? On the other hand, Roy highlighted that the issues brought up were very appropriate for the Singapore context and would still be appropriate in years to come.

---

Richard Chua is the artistic director of the Little Red Shop, a theatre company based in Singapore. Richard is well versed in working with scripts and has no background in doing postmodern works. Roy Soetantio is currently pursuing a Masters in Graphic Design in Italy.
3.1 An Introduction

“Space is not a scientific object removed from ideology and politics; it has always been political and strategic. If space has an air of neutrality and indifference with regard to its contents and thus seems to be “purely” formal, the epitome of rational abstraction, it is precisely because it has been occupied and used, and has already been the focus of past processes whose traces are not always evident on the landscape. Space has been shaped and molded from historical and natural elements, but this has been a political process. Space is political and ideological. It is a product literally filled with ideologies.”

*Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*

(Lefebvre as cited in Soja, 1989: 80)

In one of his books entitled *Postmodern Geographies: The Reassertion of Space in Critical Social Theory*\(^\text{37}\), Soja discusses the impact of capitalism on spaces. He cites that postmodern cities are affected by urbanised ways of living and thinking, where there is a more global approach to identity, a more information-based industry and an increased obsession with security and surveillance. Singapore fits well with Soja’s ideas. In the last quarter of 2011, the Urban Redevelopment Authority of Singapore approved the building of residential apartments on a cemetery ground due to land

---

scarcity\textsuperscript{38}. Another recent case study (May 2012) is the increase of surveillance cameras in Singapore's housing estate. The police plan to install cameras in all public housing estates by 2016\textsuperscript{39}. On one hand, this action by the police suggests a safer Singapore. On the other, this may also be interpreted as the people of Singapore are being 'watched' more often and the country becoming more prohibited.

One of the key observations in the post-independence Singapore is the growing involvement of the people's voices with regard to politics. The country's main political party, the PAP has been in power since independence (in 1965). Opposition parties have played an insignificant role and have little representation in the Singapore Parliament. Singaporeans were once known to be ignorant about the political developments or were too afraid to air their views on politics publicly in fear of being captured and detained\textsuperscript{40}. In recent years, the sentiments of Singaporeans have shifted. People want to be more involved in the political development process and they want their voices to be heard\textsuperscript{41}. In the Prime Minister's speech addressed in October 2011 in parliament, he mentioned:

"Our politics is not constant; it is evolving, it happens in every country, it is happening in Singapore. Nothing is permanent, no situation is forever, no solution works indefinitely. Our politics is evolving in response to new economic and social realities because our economy is facing challenges for the

\textsuperscript{38} In this article "No Room for the Dead in Singapore" written by Bernice Han (AFP), the writer indicated that Singaporeans are campaigning for history to win over development. http://newsinfo.inquirer.net/53477/no-room-for-the-dead-in-singapore  
\textsuperscript{39} http://www.channelnewsasia.com/stories/singaporelocalnews/view/1198955/1/html  
\textsuperscript{40} Chia Thye Poh was detained 32 years without trial and is Singapore's longest serving political prisoner. He was detained in 1966 - just a year after Singapore's independence. While there are few such cases in Singapore, the fear of detention without trial under the Internal Security Act has frightened the citizens since the beginning. The Asiaweek article by Andrea Hamilton in 1998 gave a summary of this incident. http://edition.cnn.com/ASIANOW/asiaweek/98/1211/nat5.html  
\textsuperscript{41} http://www.pmo.gov.sg/content/primeminister/media centre/speechesinterviews/primeminister/2011/October/Speech_by_Prime_Minister_Lee_Hsien_Loong_at_the_Debate_on_The_President_Address.m.html (clause 39)
future, because our society is having greater income gaps. It is becoming more diverse therefore our politics is reflecting the social and economic conditions. There are more diverse interests and perspectives among different segments of the population. We have a better-educated population, they want to hear more alternative voices, they like closer engagement and they believe in a different relationship with the Government. As one of them said in the old days we were here, the Government is here (PM uses his hands to show a gap between the people and Government), now we are here, the Government is here, the gap is not so big (PM narrows the gap between his hands). So therefore the relationship has changed and I think that is correct and the relationship ought to change”.

This speech is most likely an outcome of the General Election in May 2011, whereby the Oppositions garnered 9 out of 90 seats in Parliament\(^\text{42}\). This is the highest percentage of seats (10%) the Oppositions have ever held in Parliament. Through the Human Lefts Series, I have taken a stand to bring up politics (and space), in relation to Singapore, onto the discussion table for audiences to ponder. However, it was never my intention to actually take sides in the political conditions and to spark any political debates.

3.2 Politics in the *Human Lefts Series*

In *Human Lefts 1*, several fictional worlds are created – a prison, a lecture space, a beauty pageant stage and some others undefined.

(The Minister answered questions at a beauty pageant. The name of the pageant was reflected on screen.)

(The Prisoner shared his love story in a prison cell.)
The actual space (as in location/country) was never mentioned throughout the performance. However, the fictional worlds presented in the play overlapped with the elements that suggested the real world, and in this case, was Singapore itself.
For instance, the hood and the death penalty suggested capital punishment, which was a controversial issue to discuss in Singapore 2005 (with the hanging of Shamnugam and the pending execution of Nguyen Van Thuong). The controversy worsened when an Australian reporter interviewed the main executioner Darshan Singh about the fact that his intention to retire was postponed because it was impossible to find a successor'. Subsequently, Darshan Singh was sacked for accepting the interview that revealed his identity.  

---

43 Veteran hangman sacked. Reuters, 28th November 2005. (Text) Singapore has sacked its long-serving hangman, just days before the scheduled execution of Australian drug smuggler Nguyen Tuong Van. "They called me a few days ago and said I don't have to hang Nguyen and that I don't have to work anymore," Chief executioner Darshan Singh said. "I think they [the prison authorities] must be mad after seeing my pictures in the newspapers," Singh said following reports he had been sacked after being identified by the Australian media. Media reports said a new executioner was expected to be flown into Singapore this week to carry out the Friday's hanging of 25-year-old Nguyen Tuong Van, who was sentenced to death for carrying 400 grams of heroin while in transit at the island-nation's airport. Singh, a 74-year-old ethnic Indian, was reported in the Australian media to have conducted more than 850 hangings in his 50-year career. The reports said Singh had wanted to retire, but the search for a replacement was unsuccessful. Singapore's prison department could not be reached for comment. Despite repeated pleas from Australia to reconsider clemency for the former salesman, Singapore has stood firm on its decision, saying that Nguyen was caught with enough heroin "for 26,000 doses" and that the Government would not allow Singapore to be used as a transit for illicit drugs. Singapore has one of the world's toughest drug laws. Laws enacted in 1975 stipulate death by hanging for anyone aged 18 or over convicted of carrying more than 15 grams of heroin, 30 grams of cocaine, 500 grams of cannabis or 250 grams of methamphetamines. Amnesty International said in a 2004 report that about 420 people had been hanged in Singapore since 1991, mostly for drug trafficking, giving the city-state of 4.2 million people the highest execution rate in the world relative to population.
The white shirt and the white pants represented the colours of the main political party, PAP\textsuperscript{44} in Singapore and the colour ‘white’ was further emphasised verbally in the play.

The minister dressed in a ‘Batik’\textsuperscript{45} shirt and waving\textsuperscript{46} to the audience was a clear reference to Singapore’s Prime Minister, Mr. Lee Hsien Loong, reproducing his

\begin{footnote}{44} The People’s Action Party (PAP) of Singapore has always been associated with the colour white. Members of PAP wear white shirt and pants/skirts for all party related functions. There was book published in 2010 by Sonny Yap, Richard Lim and Leong Weng Kam titled \textit{Men In White} – The Untold Story of Singapore’s Ruling Political Party. \end{footnote}

\begin{footnote}{45} Batik is a traditional Javanese cloth that uses a complex dyeing method in the production. \end{footnote}
signature wave to the public. His waves are usually strong and he raises his hands up high.

The introduction of a father character (father of the prime minister), who was the highest ranking political leader of the country, further emphasised the familiarity with Singapore’s politics as the father of the current Prime Minister of Singapore is the founding Prime Minister of Singapore, Mr. Lee Kuan Yew.

In *Human Lefts 2/3*, Singapore was clearly identified by the character. Singapore is the only country that bans the import and sales of chewing gum. The play was set in a protest scene, which was still illegal at the time of the play. In this fictional space, the character shared the need for people to come forward to speak their minds. This is

---

46 The Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, often wears his signature batik shirt. He also has a signature waving action where both his hands are raised up high.
47 The current Prime Minister of Singapore is Lee Hsien Loong and his father is the founding father of modern Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew
48 There was a mention of a location, Changi - which is in Singapore. Given the fact that the performance was done in Singapore, the term ‘Changi’ is very much self-explanatory that Singapore is inferred here.
49 Singapore legalised public demonstrations at the Speakers’ Corner in Hong Lim Park on 1st September 2008.
aligned to Singaporeans wanting more avenues to voice out their thoughts and
concerns as highlighted many occasions in the last three decades.

There was indeed a ‘Bapok’ lane in Singapore, where cross-dressers stood around,
scouting for potential clients who wanted oral sex. The character Jenny talked about
her job at Bapok Lane, which involved providing oral sex to men. She clearly
indicated that she was proud of her achievements as the tasty queen. Towards the end
of the performance, it was clear that the character was actually in drag as she removed
her makeup and revealed her male identity. *The Straits Times* (Singapore’s national
English language newspapers) described this particular scene of moving out from the
drag as inspirational.\(^\text{50}\)

\(^{50}\) Refer to Appendix 3
These elements generated possibilities that the protest against the Singapore government for the ban of chewing gum was indeed real, but was disguised in the form of a theatre play, when a public protest was not possible. Again, the line between reality and fiction was blurred.
The premise of *Human Lefts 4* was in itself fictional. It was impossible in reality for a cloned man to be released from a City of the Cloned to give a public lecture. The fictional world overlapped with the mention of the actual auditorium the performance was in – Alliance Francaise Theatre (Singapore)\(^{51}\). Immediately, the audiences were deemed as attendees to this lecture. Certain realistic conventions were also brought into the foreground to contrast the fictional background. For instance, the three years Primary School education system in the cloned world was compared with the six years one in Singapore\(^{52}\).

*Human Lefts 1* received major press attention due to the total ban of any references to the death penalty and political figures. Press attention went beyond Singapore to Australia, Taipei and the United Kingdom\(^{53}\). The issue was no longer just the death penalty in Singapore but also the state of censorship in the Arts and Media in Singapore. In this respect, *Human Lefts 1* has achieved its aim to present a platform for people to discuss issues facing the postmodern Singapore. The issue has moved from inside the theatre space to a real issue discussed by many within and outside Singapore. Up to this day, *Human Lefts 1* is still cited in papers in regard to the death penalty and censorship condition of Singapore\(^{54}\).

\(^{51}\) In the performance, the speaker mentioned that the talk was presented in Alliance Francaise Theatre, which is the actual performance venue.

\(^{52}\) Refer to MOE website: [http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/primary/](http://www.moe.gov.sg/education/primary/)

\(^{53}\) Refer to Appendix 4

\(^{54}\) Arts Engage is a network of arts practitioners from various disciplines coming together to discuss the policies that govern and impact their respective practices. Started by members of the Arts Community egroup, Arts Engage is intended to be used by arts community members who wish to engage in issues of art practice, such as censorship, funding, spaces, intellectual property, making a living as an artist, position of art/artists in society, etc., in a more focused manner. In 2010, they have come up with an Arts Community position paper on censorship and regulation in Singapore. The basic position is that censorship is not working so the authorities should like at regulating instead. Visit the site at [https://sites.google.com/site/artsengage/](https://sites.google.com/site/artsengage/)
CHAPTER 4 – SELF AND ALTERNATIVE SEXUALITIES

4.1 An Introduction

In understanding the postmodern condition, one needs to understand that postmodernism is beyond the stage of experimentation. In fact, is there anything left to experiment with? Instead, postmodernism embraces a view of acceptance of a plurality of styles. I was interested in exploring alternative sexualities not just because I am gay but rather, I am interested to see how well the postmodern Singapore has ‘accepted’ the notions of alternative sexualities. Singapore does not ban gay-themed gay plays. However, I have always been concerned about the constant use of stereotypes in such plays.

Foucault argues in *History of Sexuality*\(^{55}\) (page 78): -

"It is pointless to ask: Why then is sex so secret? What is this force that so long reduced it to silence and has only recently relaxed its hold somewhat, allowing us to question it perhaps, but always in the context of and through its repression? In reality, this question, so often repeated nowadays, is but the recent form of a considerable affirmation and a secular prescription: there is where the truth is; go see if you can uncover it. [...] It is reasonable therefore to ask first of all: What is this injunction? Why this great chase after the truth of sex, the truth in sex?"

Sexuality, in this time and age, is not being silenced. Instead, sexuality is being talked about, studied, commercialised and sensationalised.

4.2 Sexual Identities and its Representation in Human Lefts

The whole notion of a sexual identity is, of course, in itself problematic as why should anyone's identity be so significantly linked to her or his sexual preference? The factoring of one into the other is possible but to what extent depends on the individual, or in the case of public discourse, ideology and power - two of Foucault’s favourite words. However, the individual is inevitably conditioned by the social. For better or for worse, putting on a play with alternative sexualities themes in Singapore is always an ideological move. Whether these plays play into the hands of the dominant, heterosexual discourses or whether they assert utopian, egalitarian ideals is less debatable than whether the proliferation of gay themes simply repeat the same questions without conclusion (What are alternative sexualities? Can an alternative sexuality be one day socially acceptable? Aren’t homosexuals or transsexuals just like anybody else?). The more such questions are heard, the greater the general awareness, leading hopefully to a gradual public acceptance.

With the Human Lefts Series, the intended impact was to achieve the same resonance of authentic personal and self experience, avoiding the need to make clear a political message and a stable narrative to serve as a vehicle to transmit that message. Instead of a focus on negotiating with gender or sexual stereotypes, the alternative sexualities settings in the Human Lefts Series aimed to express something more macroscopic;
maybe something about society in general; maybe an evolving, contemporary perspective on what it means to be human. The pressure of the times to discuss salient issues of homosexuality or transsexualism was ignored by the plays within the series. Richard Chua, mentioned that, "Maybe, we should start learning how to be a man or woman, then to further understand ourselves as to who we are." The implication is the same, which is that audiences seem too eager to jump into the pigeon holes of such labels as gay and transsexual without further exploring the regions of uncertainty still left on the maps of such words as "man", "woman" or "life". The Human Lefts Series offers no answers, of course, but further propels that process of exploration.

4.3 Alternate Sexualities in the Human Lefts Series

Throughout the series, there were references made to the notion of homosexuality, which was an issue close to me personally and as an artist. However, such notions were taken for granted without becoming self-consciously homosexual 'issues'.

In Human Lefts 1, there was an underlying love relationship between the prisoner and the minister, both males.
The character shared his love experience, a simple one that impacted on his life. He explained that it was the very desire to see his lover again that got him caught by the authorities for drugs trafficking. He also highlighted that he did not even know what he was carrying.

There were also references to the ‘rainbow’ coloured fireworks and the ‘rainbow’ fan, suggesting the colours used on the gay pride flag. The character (minister) shared his yearly attendance to the national day celebration and his love for the fireworks, which was as colourful as rainbow. While homosexuality was referred to (through the outright mention of a male lover as well as the representation of the ‘rainbow’ colours), there was no discussion about homosexuality as an issue or a problem throughout the entire performance. In a way, homosexual relationship is taken for granted.
In another scene, the portable rainbow fan was introduced as an accessory to the character (cross-dresser). Here, the cross-dresser shared her record-breaking sex with 251 men in 10 hours. Again, the character was merely sharing his sexual experience and not highlighting the social issues related to homosexuality and transsexualism.
In another scene, the ideal physical image of the perfect gay man as lean, toned, smooth and fair, was highlighted\textsuperscript{56}. Pop icon Hideaki Takizawa from the popular Japanese TV drama, ‘Strawberry Shortcake’, was named as a reference to having the qualities of the perfect gay man.

One group of gay men would refer the set of criteria mentioned above as the perfect gay man. Another group would prefer a gym-fit muscular body as the perfect gay man. I chose the criteria mentioned earlier as a self-reflexive moment for me as artist to inject my personal stand on what a perfect gay man should be like.

\textsuperscript{56} The minister mentioned how he, on one of the national day celebrations, met this boy who fulfills the perfect gay man criteria of lean, tone, smooth and fair. The criteria is in line with what most gay Chinese Asians would think is perfect for a partner.
In another scene, the co-performer shouted out ‘302’ as she threw the letter to the character (prisoner). ‘302’ here referred to prisoner’s serial number. At the same scene, the character explained how he was caught with 302 grams of heroin at the airport and was immediately arrested.
In Singapore, the number 302 has a direct connotation to alternative sexualities, as one of the penal codes for men who come out as either gay or transsexual prior to or while serving national service in the military. I declared my homosexuality in the army and was, too, labeled 302.

In Human Left 2/3, the ‘rainbow’ fan was brought up once again. As a preset, the character (in the dark) was holding the rainbow fan.

Moreover, there were also indications if the cross-dresser was gay. There was a question brought up in the interview video in Human Lefts 2/3 to ask if the character (a cross-dressed Jenny) was homosexual or heterosexual. Jenny replied that she was a

---

57 The most widely known and infamous classification is Category 302 in Singapore, a medical code given to personnel who are “homosexuals, transvestites, pedophiles, etc.” Category 302 (popularly referred to as "cat 302") homosexuals are further classified into those “with effeminate behaviour” and those "without effeminate behaviour". This form of discrimination persists despite the fact that homosexuality was depathologised by the American Psychiatric Association in 1973, and homosexuality is not regarded as a psychiatric condition by the local medical profession. Moreover, the military's grouping of homosexuality and transvestitism with pedophilia further reinforces the public misconception that it is abnormal.
woman and she liked men and therefore she was heterosexual. This part contrasted significantly with the finale when she was no longer dressing as a female but as a male newspaper seller. What was then the sexuality of the male form? This was included to again, highlight the discourse of alternative sexualities.

In one scene of *Human Lefts 2*, Jenny hugged the torso tightly, hoping to find warmth in men again. Her area of work exposed her to men who were desperate for quick oral sex. She has not been able to find the warmth she needed from a man whom she loves. The male torso represented the character's wants to feel the warmth in men again, given her work.
In *Human Lefts 4*, issues of homosexuality were brought up once again when the question of husbands and wives, both of the same gender, having sex was brought up. The cloned speaker answered a question on whether husbands and wives have sex. He highlighted that husbands and their wives must have sex at least once a week. Since the people within the City of the Cloned were all genetically males, this suggested the idea of men having sex. This is another scene leading to the discourse of alternative sexualities in the postmodern Singapore.
CHAPTER 5 – SELF AND APPROPRIATION

5.1 An Introduction

I will begin this chapter with a quote from Jean-Francois Lyotard.

"eclecticism is the degree zero of culture: one listens to reggae, watches a Western, eats McDonald’s food for lunch and local cuisine for dinner, wears Paris perfume in Tokyo and retro clothings in Hong Kong; knowledge is matter for TV games."

*The Postmodern Condition* (Lyotard, 1984: 76)\(^{58}\)

This is relevant to the condition in Singapore today. A man, though known as a Singaporean, is made up of so many different cultures from the clothes he wear to the food he eats. This man is exposed to an urbanised lifestyle with an emphasis on the fragmentary and fluid nature of experience. The man is also more concerned about his social role and how he lives his life. This is the kind of cosmopolitan way of life referred to by Fredric Jameson as a world of global media, travel and corporations. Jean Baudrillard proposed the idea of a simulacrum, in which a picture has no relation to the reality but is based on an individual’s own take of its reality. The mass media and the new media also played a part in creating a simulated reality\(^{59}\) of our own understanding and acceptance. Hence, what is reality if the world is made of simulated understandings? In our daily lives, we give meaning to our lives through

\(^{58}\) Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition*. Manchester University Press, 1984. This book was key to spreading the understanding of the term postmodernism in the 1980s within the academia circle.

\(^{59}\) Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Semiotext(e), 1983.
our actions, such as falling in love and/ or going to work. These are simulated realities of our daily lives.

5.2 Appropriation in the Human Lefts Series

The Human Lefts Series has explored this copy and paste culture as the dominant culture of the Singapore society. Perhaps it is not as important to learn about Singapore's cultural history. After all, Singapore gained independence only in 1965 and one should look what the Singapore culture is then after. With the premise of eclecticism in the Singapore context, I went on to explore a series of appropriations within the Human Lefts Series.

I have included myself into the series in either very explicit or implicit ways. In Human Lefts 1, I mentioned that I was getting fatter and could not fit into a proper costume. The character highlighted that the pants was supposed to be a pure white pants but he could no longer fit into that pants. He used this off-white pants in replacement instead.

The character was actually speaking as myself and was referring to my personal weight increase over the years (from 60kg to 90kg in 10 years).
In Human Lefts 2/3, I also related to his personal experiences as an army boy visiting the ‘Bapok’ lane in the military jeep. I used to serve in Changi Air Base when I was doing my National Service. As an army boy, I visited the bapok lane regularly (as it was nearby) and interacted with the transvestites. This experience was shared in an interview with The Straits Times in 2008.\(^6\)

In Human Lefts 4, I used my own photographs and described them as my family members and my actors. In Human Lefts 4, the character (cloned speaker) introduced himself as a theatre director and one of the plays he has directed was Romeo and Juliet. He showed the pictures of the actors and it was apparent that the actors looked identical to the speaker.

---

\(^6\) Refer to Appendix 5
I actually took these pictures from my earlier productions. The picture of Romeo was a photo of me taken from *The Most Blatant Day of My Life*, a play conceptualised in 2004. Juliet was a photo of the researcher when I performed as a cross-dresser in *Human Lefts 1*.

Furthermore, the character and I have the same role in life – as an Artistic Director. Such references were intentionally made to reinforce the self-reflexivity into my own works. In *Human Lefts 1* and 2/3, there was a repeated notion of a different language used in each of the plays. Cantonese was used to express key monologues in each of the pieces as a somewhat unfamiliar language to most people. The use of the loudhailer was another repeated element in the deliverance of the monologue in Cantonese. The actions were more significant than the actual words delivered.

---

61 Benny Lim was the Artistic Director of The Fun Stage, the presenting company the plays.
62 Cantonese is one of the dialects of the Chinese language. As of 2000, statistics published by the Statistics Department of Singapore, 15% of the Chinese population in Singapore are Cantonese.
Cantonese is not a widely used language in Singapore but is a language familiar to me. It was a deliberate choice on my part as the artist to inject something personal to me. When the monologue was delivered in the language that I was comfortable in, I was
more emotionally involved, especially when there were no rehearsals to practice the emotions.

I broke out of character in each of the pieces, revealing myself as Benny Lim. The intention was to encourage the audience to go through a thinking process through the sudden switch of the characterisation, which suggests the switch of levels of theatrical reality. *Human Lefts I* ended with the prisoner’s final plea, there was an obvious switch from a melodramatic character and it was further emphasised by the fact that the prisoner no longer need any notes to read the lines off from the source.
In *Human Lefts 2/3*, the character was 'removed' from a cross-dresser to a man (audiences will be unsure if it was a fictional character or if it was Benny Lim) when the make-up was removed in front of the audience as the melody of *Dreams Are My Reality* was hummed.
The taping of the mouth marked the end of the ‘live’ delivery of lines, signifying that the character, Jenny, will forever hold her peace.

It also signified my intention to hold my peace and that this issue on transexualism would never be brought up again in the future Human Lefts Series.

In Human Lefts 4, the performance ‘ended’ with the character’s disappearance. The crew was involved in ‘searching’ for the character but he was nowhere to be found\(^6\). When the audience exited from the theatre, I was actually standing by the entrance, in a total ‘dressed down’ mode and wearing a baseball cap. Some members of the audience could identify me but were confused, thinking that I might still be in character. Even my friends were not sure if the show had ended and had reservations about greeting me. Audiences who were not able to identify who I was at the lobby

\(^6\) The crew were shining their torchlights at the audience, frantically searching for the missing cloned man. The crew also ran up the stage to perform the search. At that point, audience were just returning to the auditorium from a 10-minute break requested by the speaker.
THE \textit{HUMAN LEFTS SERIES}:
\textbf{Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre} 

simply left the theatre. It was a deliberate action to reveal himself/myself as who I really was while most audiences were still thinking that I was in a fictional state.

While postmodern works are highly self-reflexive, the created fictional world is not completely cut off or covered by the real world. In fact, the real and the fictional worlds overlap and contrast with each other. Irony can be generated by having a familiar real world as the background, and eventually abusing and subverting elements in this real world excessively that it becomes unfamiliar to the audience. The ‘borrowing’ of elements from the familiar past yet making them unfamiliar is one way to question the styles of the performance. For the \textit{Human Lefts Series}, the defamiliarisation of the familiar past created irony and questioned the styles. The constant questioning of styles led to the questioning of the very form of the series – a performance, a play, a stage production – however one wanted to name it. In \textit{Human Lefts 1}, there was a consistent display of the prisoner character reading from a script. This could be highly alienating for the audience to witness, and could be related to Bertolt Brecht’s theory of the Alienation Effect. Nonetheless, the action was not put in place specifically to be a Brechtian moment. It could be but merely a borrowed idea but not used in totality. On another note, the audience might not find the action alienating but find the texts terribly familiar. Most of the texts read off from the script were taken directly from published sources. The minister’s introduction was indeed taken from a biography of a Singaporean minister\textsuperscript{64}. There was also the use of a parody within a parody in this piece of work where a parody was presented using a

\textsuperscript{64} The spoken lines in the performance was taken and adapted from the following article: http://www.hyperhistory.net/apwh/bios/b31lee-kuanyew-singapore.htm. The third person was changed to a first person (I) in the performance.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

parody. The Coke Manifesto\textsuperscript{65}, which was read out in Cantonese, was taken completely from a book that was making a parody out of Karl Marx’s Communist Manifesto. I felt that the context on equality was apt and therefore ‘borrowed’ the entire text. Annabel Chong, though not mentioned explicitly in the performance, was highlighted when the character refers to herself having had sex with 251 men as well as a porn star commenting on morality of the death penalty.

\textsuperscript{65} Refer to Appendix 6
In *Human Lefts* 2/3, there was one scene that applied the same technique of reading directly from a poem that was taken directly from a published source\(^{66}\).

In *Human Lefts* 4, the premise of the plot was taken directly from a piece, *Mr. C.*, by an Israeli artist, Gil Alon\(^{67}\), whom I commissioned in 2005. In fact, *Human Lefts* 1 was scheduled to be performed in the same festival as *Mr. C.* I ‘borrowed’ the premise of this 2005 piece, changed the context and used it in *Human Lefts* 4. By borrowing this piece of work, I have borrowed the concept of cloning. Cloning was a relevant issue to conclude the *Human Lefts Series*. In his foreword to Wee Wan-Ling’s *The Asian Modern: Culture, Capitalist Development, Singapore*, Chua mentioned about how Singapore is deemed by neighbouring Asian nations to be a role model or as a desired future due to its economic development. How do we ‘clone’ the success of Singapore in our developing neighbours? Chua also argued that

---

\(^{66}\) The poem read out in this scene is taken directly from an already written poem, *Natural Selection* by Constance Naden.

\(^{67}\) Gil was awarded an honoured life membership in the International Film and Television Research Center - The Asian Academy of Film and Television - New Delhi (India). He has also conducted workshops on Buddhism creativity and meditation in India, Thailand, Japan, South-Korea, Nepal, The Philippines, Australia, New Zealand, Fiji, Belgium and Israel.
Singaporeans would find it hard to respond positively to such notions without reservation. A one-party political system with authoritarian features as well as the lack of freedom to express seems to contradict with the 'ideal' Singapore that should be cloned. Therefore, I incorporated this concept, and the issue on cloning was put in relation to Singapore, discussed alongside Singapore's education, political and social systems in the play.
CHAPTER 6 – THE ABSENCE OF REHEARSALS

6.1 An Introduction

The process of developing the Human Lefts Series is similar to one of an academic research. A topic is identified and a set of research questions is determined. Thereafter, data is collected through a qualitative approach and synthesised. This chapter will highlight the process that happens after the key information for the performance has been determined as well as the functions of a performer in a postmodern self-reflexive theatre context.

6.2 The Rehearsal Process

After the research process, a list of items was put into a performance structure. Performance Structure highlights the flow of the performance as a chronological order. It provides the performer with the understanding on what the different scenes are. Performance Structure is not a very detailed document with all the actions and directions listed. It merely layouts sufficient information for the performer to carry out the scene. The structure was followed during the performance and was put in a chronological order (of the performance)\textsuperscript{68}. The items could be identified in various ways – a movement scene, a monologue or an action. Audio and visual information were also incorporated into the performance structure. In the Human Lefts Series, video and multimedia clips were always used, but not lighting. Except for blackouts,

\textsuperscript{68} Refer to Appendix 7
the lights on stage stayed on at the same intensity throughout. Once the performance structure was confirmed, the multimedia clips were produced.

At no point in the research and rehearsal process did I ‘act out’ any of the scenes in the performance structure. Never once did a rehearsal involve any form of practicing of the delivery. On the actual day of the performance, there was no full run of the performance as well as no full dress rehearsals. As audiovisuals were used, only technical rehearsals were done. It would only be at that point, that the stage manager would confirm the exact execution of the music and clips for the performance. This documentation of The Human Lefts Series has proven that such a process can work and is effective in the development of a postmodern piece of work.

6.3 Self-Reflexivity and the Rehearsal Process

Self-reflexivity of this kind is not a process that can be practiced. Unlike the process of characterisation, where a performer attempts to understand the thought processes of a particular character he/she is playing, self-reflexivity happens as a response, and very often, an immediate response. It is not a process that can be tapped into and applied. It is a process of responding to what is already in the performer’s conscious and/or subconscious to a particular scene in the performance. I also came to an understanding that a need for a rehearsed set of emotions was not necessary. By the time the performance takes place, the performer should have done a considerable amount of research. On top of that, the performance structure would have been finalised with a fair injection of personal experiences and borrowed cultures and
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

stories (appropriation). With all this information, the performer can walk into the performance and begin the delivery of the performance immediately. There is no need for a rehearsed set of emotions as the performer will be able to deliver the performance based on the knowledge he/she garnered and give a natural spontaneous and educated response to the situation.

This process is similar to the context of a teacher. A teacher prepares for his/her lesson and eventually walks into the class to deliver the lesson. There are no rehearsals needed for the emotions required and if the teacher has done substantial research on the topic, the delivery of the lesson will be good and a natural reaction would suffice. Therefore, it is not necessary for the performer to prepare the emotions, body language and facial expressions prior to the performance. In rehearsing a postmodern piece of work of this kind, the performer needs only to gather sufficient information from the research as well as putting together a finalised performance structure with the necessary elements of self-reflexivity, irony and appropriation.

Unlike a script-based or narrative play whereby the performer plays a specific role of a prescribed characterisation, the performer of a postmodern self-reflexive piece of theatre will be able to walk into a performance and deliver it in his/her most natural reaction and expressions without the need for a rehearsed character. It will be redundant to act out the scene during rehearsal because there is no need to pinpoint blocking until the technical rehearsals. Therefore, the performer can run through the scene in his mind to determine the effectiveness of the particular scene before deciding to finalise the scene in the performance structure.
6.4 The Functions of a Performer in a Postmodern Self-Reflexive Theatre

In 1968, Roland Barthes published an essay entitled *The Death of the Author*[^69]. The main arguments lie in the fact that an author is not available for study but his/her text is. Furthermore, an author is unable to control the multiple interpretations that people will make of his/her works. As the works travel through history, geography and culture, new meanings are gathered. Finally, whether the author meant it or not, words used by the author generate their own meanings to different readers. To quote Barthes:

"... the reader is without history, biography, psychology; he is simply that someone who holds together in a single field all the traces by which the written text is constituted. Which is why it is derisory to condemn the new writing in the name of a humanism hypocritically turned champion of the reader's rights. Classic criticism has never paid any attention to the reader; for it, the writer is the only person in literature. We are now beginning to let ourselves be fooled no longer by the arrogant antiphralistical recriminations of good society in favor of the very thing it sets aside, ignores, smothers or destroys; we know that to give writing its future, it is necessary to overthrow the myth: the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author."


A text is only a random mass of signs until a reader comes along and deciphers the signs. Based on these observations, Barthes concluded that authorship is dead. In the Human Lefts Series, the interpretations of the meanings of the actions, text and the misc-en-scenes cannot be controlled. The audiences are free to interpret them in the way they want to. While the performance is self-reflexive in nature, I am conscious of this inability to control interpretations. As much as my intentions were clear in the delivery of the entire series, I did not place any faith that my intentions would be understood as intended. I have never wanted to take a stand in the issues highlighted in the Human Lefts Series, nor is it possible for me to take a stand. I am unable to fix or dictate a meaning to my actions or texts simply because I am unable to provide an equal experience to audiences who know me or do not know me, who have watched my previous works or who have never watched my works. Perhaps Barthes's conclusion can be applied to a performer developing a postmodern self-reflexive theatre, in terms of managing intentions and meanings. Nonetheless, as discussed in earlier chapters, the performer's experience cannot be totally separated from the character in a postmodern self-reflexive performance. The performer's input, therefore, plays a key role in providing the premise for discussion.

One of the main criticisms of Barthes's conclusions about the death of authorship is the erasure of the significance of the author's social and cultural identity in relation to the text. The same question can be asked of a performer in the context of postmodern self-reflexive and post-independence Singaporean theatre. The discussions on the postmodern and post-independence Singapore in the earlier

---

70 Burke, Seán. The Death and Return of the Author: Criticism and Subjectivity in Barthes, Foucault and Derrida. Edinburgh University Press, 1998
chapters suggest that Singaporeans born after 1965 have little or no cultural history. I am Chinese but I know little about my roots. Perhaps Barthes’ conclusion can be applied in this context to the performer, in dismissing the importance of the cultural identity of the performer in his/ her performance. Nonetheless, the social identity of the performer is still an important factor in the performances.
CHAPTER 7 – CONCLUSION

This documentation of the Human Lefts Series serves as the significant formal documentation of the postmodern self-reflexive theatre in the postmodern and post-independence Singapore. Through the series, we are able to look at postmodern Singapore theatre beyond issues relating to the loss of cultural and historical past, which might not be significant for those who were born after 1965. More relevant issues to the postmodern Singapore include the current political situation, alternative sexualities (homosexuality and transexualism explored in the Human Lefts Series), and the effect of ‘cloning’ and appropriation being the key cultural dominant of Singapore. These issues are definitive of the postmodern, post-independence Singapore. I have also included to myself into the Human Lefts Series in four different capacities – self as Benny Lim, self as the Performer, self as Singaporean Chinese and self as the Researcher (who is keen to understand postmodern theatre in Singapore) in responding to each of these issues.

Human Lefts 1 focused on an issue that has never been explored before in Singapore – the death penalty. While the issue was linked to human rights, politics were not spared and were discussed. Through the linkages of the stories with the play, two other issues were brought up – alternative sexualities and appropriation. Despite the non-narrative structure, these are issues that are prominent to the postmodern Singapore as compared to what other artists have explored in their journey of postmodernism. Human Lefts 2/3 continued the discussion on alternative sexualities and brought up greater issues about their survival in the conservative, yet postmodern Singapore. The story ended with thought that the character has two personalities (one
of a guy and one of a girl). Which of these two personalities is the real self? In *Human Lefts 4*, the issue on cloning was not a direct reference to any particular issue related to Singapore but it does suggest appropriation as a way of life (culture) in Singapore.

As a further inference, this portfolio also highlighted the absence of a physical rehearsal process for the *Human Lefts Series*. With a strong research process, it was not necessary to act out the scenes during rehearsals or practice the emotions. This is discussed in relation to a teacher, whom with adequate readings and research of the topic, can walk into a class and deliver the topic well, without the need to memorise lines and to rehearse the emotions.

Finally, this portfolio explores the functions a performer in a postmodern self-reflexive theatre context. While it is impossible to control the interpretation of the meaning and the intentions, the performer plays a key role in setting the premise for a discussion in the topic or issue raised in the performance. Identity politics were also reviewed within the post-independence Singaporean theatre context. While the performer's cultural identity may not seem relevant in the development of the performance, the social identity still plays an important role and it is not possible to rule out identity politics completely from a performer.

I hope that this portfolio has provided a clearer understanding of postmodern self-reflexive theatre in the post-independence Singapore and offered a way into the discussions of relevant issues such as politics and space, alternative sexualities as well as cultural appropriation.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

BIBLIOGRAPHY


Baudrillard, Jean. *America*. Verso, 1988

Baudrillard, Jean. *Simulations*. Semiotext(e), 1983


Chia, Wai Mun Chia and Sng, Hui Ying. *Singapore and Asia in a globalised world: contemporary economic issues and policies*. World Scientific, 2009


Foucault, Michel. *The Archeology of Knowledge*. Tavistock, 1974


THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre


Lee, Hock Guan and Suryadinata, Leo. Language, nation and development in Southeast Asia. ISAS, 2007


Lytoard, Jean-Francois. The Postmodern Condition. Manchester University Press, 1984


Readings, Bill and Schaber, Bennet. Postmodernism Across the Pages: essays for a postmodernity that wasn't born yesterday. Syracuse University Press, 1993

Sanders, Julie. Adaptation and Appropriation. Routledge, 2006

Shadrake, Alan. Govt cannot find replacement for executioner. The Australian, 28th October 2005

Shiraishi, Takashi. Across the causeway: a multi-dimensional study of Malaysia-Singapore relations. ISAS, 2009

THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre


Yuen, Belinda and Teo, Ho Pin. Singapore Housing: An Annotated Bibliography. NUS Press, 1998
Past research performances on the Postmodernism and Theatre

The Beginning Stage (2003 - 2004)

Title of performance: PERDITION
Showcase: 20th September 2003
Location: Dramaplus Arts, Singapore
Audience size: 25

This piece opens up questions about truth and falsehood, reality and representation, exposing the fallibility of such dichotomies. Presented in a period when the country is facing economic crisis and life-threatening epidemics, this work is affirmative of life. The story deals with the complicated relationships between a mother and her son.

Title of performance: THE MOST BLATANT DAY OF MY LIFE
Showcase: 28th February 2004
Location: The Substation, Singapore
Audience size: 25

The whitewashed walls; the mirror; the red steel roofs and the lonely souls that surround it – such are the reflections of the last emperor of China, Henry Puyi, who lived his life like a puppet. This performance hopes to evoke an oriental landscape and to soothe the loneliness of the spirit. One has to face the most blatant side of one’s self – a way for one to treat each other with compassion, honesty, integrity and love.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre


Title of performance: DEATH.MOTHER

Showcase 1: 22nd May 2004
Location: The Substation, Singapore
Audience size: 120

Showcase 2: 1st April 2005
Location: Brown University, Providence (USA)
Audience size: 50

Showcase 3: 8th February 2006
Location: Hong Kong Fringe Club, Hong Kong
Audience size: 50

Showcase 4: 26th October 2007
Location: The Republic Cultural Centre, Singapore
Audience size: 100

It depicts a story of a mother, who arrived at the life she did not choose, married with children eager to leave her and a husband who has forgotten how to love. It is a searing monologue sewn with poetry and images surrounding a life about nothing, you might find this story terribly familiar - this could be about your mother, with a couple of self-delusions and a broken heart.
Recent showcase

Title of performance: DIASPORA
Showcase: 24th November 2011
Location: The Actors Studio, Malaysia
Audience size: 200

On his last day alive, a prisoner on death row seems oddly calm. He recounts a part of his life that seems highly deluded, yet, blatantly truthful. As he finally realises the truth about the human condition, he walks towards his predetermined death. A story based on false realities and ironies. Audience will be brought through an emotional roller coaster ride.
Appendix 2

List of other gay-themed plays conceptualised by Benny Lim

THE DIARY OF A SBG (December 2001)

A coming out story of a gay young man, evolving from a straight to bisexual and eventually gay.

CODE 302 (May 2002)

A story about a son of a military colonel declaring he is gay when he enters the army.
Existence revolves around two protagonists who try to find meaning in life through love. The dynamics of the play explores the use of poetry in drama. Full of impressionistic moments of delicate drama and richly poetic gestures, both verbal and physical, this play – adapted from the poems of Cyril Wong – hopes to pose the question: Can love truly make us save us from ourselves?

Origins (December 2003)

Origins is developed with aim to search for one’s inner most sources and to trace back to one’s origins.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

THE MOST BLATANT DAY OF MY LIFE (February 2004)

The whitewashed walls; the mirror; the red steel roofs and the lonely souls that surround it – such are the reflections of the last emperor, Henry Puyi, who lived his life like a puppet. This performance hopes to evoke an oriental landscape and to soothe the loneliness of the spirit. One has to face the most blatant side of one’s self – a way for one to treat each other with compassion, honesty, integrity and love.

DEATH.MOTHER (2004 – 2008)

Based on Cyril Wong’s poems from his latest book, Unmarked Treasure, The Fun Stage (fringe) presents a monologue evolving around the sad life of a mother.
A play about the emotional effects of AIDS, a story of friendship and love.
THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

Appendix 3

Review of the Human Lefts 3 by The Straits Times – Singapore leading English newspaper.

LifeArts

RIGHTS AND
LETS

UelArts

PHOTO: THE FUN STAGE

Not enough to chew on

PHOTO: THE FUN STAGE

HUMAN LEFTS 3
The Fur Stage

Adeline Chia

THE Human Lefts series of plays aims to take on serious issues in a light-hearted way and in this third instalment, the idea was to explore the plight of transvestites in Singapore.

The Fun Stage production had an interesting premise: A transvestite named Jenny decides to protest Singapore’s ban on chewing gum.

But the issue was never tackled with enough depth or nuance to make it truly thought-provoking.

Eschewing the silly ribaldry people associate with drag shows, Fun Stage artistic director Benny Lim, who also wrote the play, took an unconventional step by playing Jenny as a sincere and open soul. Soft-spoken and gentle, she was a likable and sympathetic figure, done without much fanfare.

The intimate setting at (Re)Box helped reinforce this aspect of the play, although the limitations of space showed when dance sequences seemed contrived.

But this shot at emotional truthfulness never developed into something more substantial in the script. The sketchy details of her life and hopes weren’t enough to let audiences feel connected to her plight.

Moreover, the chewing gum idea, which was the turning point of the plot and the core of her difficulties, remained a bit too superficial and simplistic. Jenny took to the streets alone to protest the ban in a makeshift one-person booth, which featured a mat laid out on the ground, two packets of Jack and Jill potato chips and a small rattan stool. Behind, the walls were covered with pieces of paper scrawled with protest slogans such as “No chewing gum, no life” and “Give me back my chewing gum”.

The production did show flashes of inspiration. In the finale, Jenny stripped off her drag outfit, took off her wig, removed her stockings and make-up, while humming Abba’s Fernando, with its theme of valiant but failed endeavours. Lim then taped his mouth and plastered his hands together with masking tape – still humming all the time.

It was a powerful moment packed with drama and metaphor. But such moments were few, and one got the nagging feeling that there were still rich ideas of protest and silence to be mined in this production. That would make it truly live up to the suggestion of its cheeky title – a spin on the theme of human rights.
Death play comes undone

A PLAY that looks at the death penalty in developed countries done by local theatre group The Fun Stage became a victim of extremely bad timing: The play’s creators had to submit a completely new script to the Media Development Authority (MDA) mere days before it was to be staged.

_Human Lefts_, to be staged at the Drama Centre at the National Library on Saturday, was to come a day after Vietnamese Nguyen Tuong Van was scheduled to be hanged for being in possession of 396g of heroin.

Under the conditions conveyed to the playwrights only recently by MDA, the play could not talk about the death penalty and could not be based on any political leader here, artistic director of The Fun Stage Benny Lim told TODAY.

These conditions had to be fulfilled before they could be issued a license to perform it.

Responding to _TODAY’s_ queries, an MDA spokesperson said: “The MDA did not issue a permit to The Fun Stage for the performance earlier as there were insufficient details in their original script to enable us to make an assessment.

“Subsequently they submitted a script with required details and we have since approved their application for a licence.”

Mr Lim, who will also be performing the play by himself, said that all reference to the death penalty was taken out in the new script. Originally written about the hanging of drug courier Shanmugam Murugesu on May 13, Mr Lim had told _TODAY_ in an earlier interview that it was “unfortunate timing” that Nguyen’s hanging was scheduled just the day before the play ran.

“The plot is still the same, about a son and his father, but it’s so general I’ve applied a different story to it. It is now about a father and son who are searching for their own beliefs in their own culture,” he said.

The play is part of the two-day performance festival, _Initiation International_, organised by The Fun Stage.

— DAVID CHEW
ASIANews

OTHER VIEWS

http://www.asianewsnet.net/home/news.php?id=12620&sec=3

Singapore has ordered a theatre director to remove all references to the death penalty in a play to be staged on Saturday - a day after the execution of Australian drug smuggler Nguyen Tuong Van, a Singapore newspaper said.

The government's Media Development Authority (MDA) demanded Human Lefts, a play about the hanging of Singaporean drug smuggler Shamugam Murugappas in May, make no mention of the death penalty and no reference to any political leader. The play's director was quoted as saying:

"The plot is still the same - about a son and father, but it's so general I've replaced the dramatic storyline. I'm just repeating the play's theme as saying in the pro-government Today on Saturday.

"The MDA did not issue a permit to The Fun Stage for the performance as there were insufficient details in their original script to enable us to make an assessment," the paper quoted the authority as saying.

Yesterday Singapore executed Van, a forrign Meiboume desparte repealed preas for

Singapore "bans" execution references in play

THE HUMAN LEFTS SERIES:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

http://www.ifex.org/singapore/2005/12/07/play_censored_artist_s_work_altered/
One-man play explores plight of transvestites

Adeline Chia
Straits Times

WHEN theatre practitioner Benny Lim had to work in Chang Ai Rice, he would set aside translation at the nearby Chang Village area... The one-man play titled "Human Lefts" explores the plight of transvestites in Singapore. The title is a witty twist on "human rights" - although the term seems to have a more definite meaning. The play is set in 2005, a year when the Singapore government launched a campaign to raise awareness about the issue. The play starts with a scene where a transvestite is being harassed in a park. The protagonist, a transvestite named Li, tells the audience about his experiences and the challenges he faced in society. The play ends with a powerful message about the importance of human rights and the need for society to accept diversity. The play is a significant contribution to the discussion on trans rights in Singapore, and it is a must-see for anyone interested in this topic.
In the style of Karl Marx

The history of all society is the history of thirst. Bourgeoisie and proletariat, capitalist and communist, socialist and anarchist, hoi polloi and plebeian, misanthrope and miscreant, in short, all have thirsted for a better life.

Thirst has played a revolutionary role in history. It is, after all, a base need that manifests itself in naked self-interest if left unsatiated. The proletariat is compelled to make do with the crudest tap water while the bourgeoisie imports bottles of overpriced mineral spring water across the continent, sometimes across great oceans. This inequity creates an irreparable rift in society. The ruling class, its extravagant thirst quelled, becomes an insulated and callous oppressor;
the working class, left to thirst for something great, becomes an oppressed class.

There is, however, a soft drink refreshing the world—Coca-Cola, a great equalizer that can correct this gross imbalance. Let us consider the value of Coca-Cola in reckoning hostility between these two opposing classes.

First and foremost, Coca-Cola is the pause that refreshes. It not only satisfies, but an icy-cold bottle of Coca-Cola is coveted by the aristocrat, the bricklayer, the gourmet chef, the street cleaner, the impoverished doctor of philosophy expelled from Prussia, anyone with a thirst crying out to be quenched. Indeed, Coke is the greatest taste you’ll ever find.

Moreover, in the revolutionary movement against an existing social order, Coke is the real thing. Class distinctions are dissolved by Coca-Cola. That is to say, a prince cannot buy a better battle of Coca-Cola than a peasant. The quality of Coca-Cola is not only uniform, but it in itself forces even the most obstinate aristocrat to capitulate to a pleasure enjoyed by the masses. Embracing Coca-Cola, the bourgeoisie and proletariat come to recognize, on a visceral level, that political equality is an attainable utopian ideal and begin to thirst instead for the realization of this balanced society. Accordingly, to call Coca-Cola the opiate of the masses would be heresy. It is precisely this contact with Coke that is needed to bridge the antagonism between the classes. But as every class struggle is a political struggle, the distribution of Coca-Colas thus becomes a revolutionary movement to overthrow bourgeois supremacy and seize political control by the proletariat.

To this end, Coke adds life. In this sense, things go better with Coca-Cola. The abolition of private property goes better with Coke; state control of the means of production goes better with Coke; a dictatorship of the proletariat goes better with Coke; centralization of the banks in the hands of the state goes better with Coke; state control of the press and transportation goes better with Coke; the inevitable class struggle to overthrow capitalist oppression goes better with Coke. In a word, life is much more fun when you’re refreshed. Ultimately, I’d like to buy the world a Coke.

Workers of the world, have a Coke and a smile!
Appendix 7

- Performance Structure of *Human Lefts 1*
- Performance Structure of *Human Lefts 3*
- Performance Structure of *Human Lefts 4*
### The Human Lefts Series:
Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

**Human Lefts 1: Performance Structure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details of Scene</th>
<th>Audio Visual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preset: Prisoner and lady - Lady orders a blackout to start the scene.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Lady gives a welcome speech while waving a white flag; prisoner attempts to speak up but in vain. Eventually, lady removes tape from prisoner’s mouth.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoner changes to all white - Father.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Father delivers the coke manifesto in Cantonese over a loudhailer.</td>
<td>Music plays in the background.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father orders lady to pass him his speech. A wrong speech was given and eventually he got the right speech. He reads a monologue of his achievements.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father changes to the Batik shirt – Son</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lady introduces Guest of Honour (the Son) of a beauty pageant. She passes the Son his speech.</td>
<td>Powerpoint slide displays the event title.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview: About Human Rights. Son gives his point of view. He eventually speaks on how death penalty defines human right.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son changes to Prisoner.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Prisoner talks about how he got caught, but is positive that he will be safe.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prisoner changes to Father.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Presentation: Father talks about why death penalty is important.</td>
<td>Communist dance clip play.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Powerpoint slides (with irritating, childish sound) support the presentation.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father changes to Son.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Son orders lady to pass him his chair.</td>
<td>Video of Annabel Chong shouting 'death penalty is immoral' while having sex.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Son talks about his life as the son of the powerful man. He also talks about the love of his life. As he goes on, he changes to ‘Annabel Chong’</td>
<td>Fireworks display – signifying national day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Annabel Chong carries a rainbow fan and talks about her world record.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annabel Chong changes to Prisoner</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Prisoner reads of the monologue for a final appeal to his boyfriend’s father. He switches character.</td>
<td>Son talks about his fantasy of having sex with his father.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Lady proceeds with the execution.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Human Lefts Series:**  Postmodern Self-Reflexivity and Post-Independence Singaporean Theatre

*Human Lefts 3: Performance Structure*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details of Scene</th>
<th>Audio Visual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Preset: Music playing in the background; Jenny sitting down looking at the audience and enjoying the wind from the rainbow fan.</td>
<td>Picture of Jenny in her younger days.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Jenny shares her thought on Changi, the place where she works.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement: Jenny dances to a fast beat music.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Jenny shares her work as a sex worker.</td>
<td>Interview</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Jenny shares her glamour past 1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Movement: Jenny dances the same step to a slow beat music and feels awkward.</td>
<td>An advertisement to call for help</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Jenny shares her problems due to the ban of chewing gum.</td>
<td>Subtitles</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Jenny shares her glamour past in Cantonese on the loudhailer.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Jenny explains why she is protesting</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Jenny hugs the male torso and sings a song.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monologue: Jenny shares what happens next.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action: Jenny removes her wig and tapes her mouth. She will forever hold her peace.</td>
<td>Video showing what the non-drag Jenny is doing.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Human Lefts 4: Performance Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Details of Scene</th>
<th>Audio Visual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Announcement - turn off ringtone/ house light off</td>
<td>City of the Cloned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloned man walks out and gives an overview of his presentation</td>
<td>Overview of the presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloned man introduces himself</td>
<td>The Speaker</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloned man introduces the City of the Cloned</td>
<td>Introduction: City of the Cloned</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The building (underground)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Education system</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The different ministries (including defence, roles and genetic development)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Work allocation in the City of the Cloned</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- The governance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloned man introduces his work as an artistic director and shares some work</td>
<td>Speaker’s Work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A short break of 3 minutes</td>
<td>Question and Answer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Question and Answer session – questions get more challenging</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding it hard to tackle all the questions, the cloned man breaks down</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloned man gives a conclusion but feeling very uncomfortable</td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloned man suggests performing a short 15 minutes monologue</td>
<td>Mayor’s Message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audience takes 10 minutes break</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>After the break, cloned man is missing and as crew try to find him, the video message from the mayor plays accidentally</td>
<td>Video of the mayor’s message</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>