Theatre for Young Audiences in Singapore: Dimensions of Creativity

Caleb Lee Wei Hao

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Department of Drama, Theatre and Dance

Royal Holloway, University of London

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Declaration of Authorship

I, <u>Caleb Lee</u>, hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed: Date: 3 July 2020

Acknowledgements

This thesis is for my grandmother. Thank you for taking care of me, teaching me many valuable life lessons, and watching over me. Even though we lost you halfway through this journey, I will always remember your generous spirit, love and kindness. Every word is dedicated to you.

Abstract

This thesis explores the relationship between Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) and Singapore. The research is set against the fast-moving and changing landscape of the city-state, and aims to illuminate the position of TYA where market forces, education and politics intersect. It analyses the socio-political circumstances under which TYA is produced and received, and illustrates the ways in which it responds to different periods and contexts. By bringing together critical perspectives of creativity from theatre and performance studies, cultural geography, education and management, this thesis investigates how TYA in Singapore connects with different conceptualisations of creativity. The central argument in this thesis is that, while TYA might be pressured to respond commercially to the demands of the market, it also has the potential to adapt to changing circumstances and engage children through new forms of participation and spectatorship. Methodologically, it employs a mixed-method approach, using interviews, archived documents and performance analyses. By examining case studies that are informed by my professional practice as the festival manager of the ACE! Festival – a local arts festival for children and their families – as well as my participation in TYA-related events, site visits and engagements with the National Arts Council, this thesis traces the connections between varying cultural narratives, political agendas and theatre practices in the city. With TYA gaining interest and recognition in Singapore and the region, this thesis is relevant to theatre-makers, producers, educators and to the wider emerging field of scholarship in TYA.

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Chapter One
Introducing Creativity and Theatre for Young Audiences in Singapore

My first experience of what is today referred to as Theatre for Young Audiences (TYA) happened in 1989. I was five, and the production that I watched was an adaptation of *Charlotte's Web*, a popular children's novel by American author E.B. White, staged inside a black box theatre within the sumptuous parkland surrounds of Fort Canning Hill, Singapore. I vividly recall the excitement and anticipation of going to the theatre with my parents. Upon arrival, we were ushered into the small theatre already filled with members of the audience. Inside, there was a raised platform with only a few spotlights – just enough to illuminate the stage. Together with several other children, we were prompted by an usher to sit more towards the front to get a better view. Soon, the lights dimmed. In front of us stood several sheds and barns that depicted an image of a farm. The performance that followed wove together catchy tunes, choreography, colourful costumes and an engaging story that told the tale of the unlikely friendship between a pig and a spider. I remember the heightened atmosphere inside the little theatre. I was utterly mesmerised by the spectacle on stage. I left the theatre feeling thrilled and enchanted, and I remember that I did not stop talking about the play for weeks. This theatre production by act 3 has stayed with me to this day.

I also recall my second encounter with child-oriented drama. It took place at my primary school in Singapore five years later, when I was 10. Four performers were dressed in school uniforms and, using simple props, started to depict various bullying scenarios that students might face at school. In each of these conflicts, they came up with a solution that could alleviate the situation. Despite the obvious important message, it was lost on the pupils because crucial theatrical elements that would have engaged young children were missing. The setting inside the school hall was arguably half-hearted; a few tables and chairs were used to show a classroom setting, and there was no creative use of lighting to focus children's attention on what they are looking at. There were no songs, or anything remotely catchy to latch on to and, as the performers were also not using microphones, students were straining their ears to listen to the dialogue. Unsurprisingly, some of us became

restless and started talking to each other, which further distracted and annoyed the other students and teachers. At the end of the performance, the actors came down from the stage and directly addressed the audience. However, unlike my first experience, the performance was less engaging, with too much focus on the didactic and not enough on entertainment. This piece of theatre, while well-intentioned, was not a success because it did not capture children's imaginations. Even at 10 years old, and with experience of only two theatre productions, I had become a theatre critic.

Fast-forward 15 years to 2007, and the strength of feeling I had as a child for what made children's theatre work was still with me. I had just graduated from the National University of Singapore and was exploring a career in theatre, specifically in the TYA sector. Instead of just watching theatre, I wanted to be involved with the production and the creative process. As a result, I worked as part of the stage crew on a production of *The Wizard of Oz*, presented by local TYA company, I Theatre. This production took place at the grandiose and state-of-the-art Drama Centre, an impressive, 615-seat auditorium located in the heart of the city. As part of the stage crew it was my job to transform the stage with each new scene efficiently and smoothly. As the audience were transported from Kansas to Munchkinland, and on to the Emerald City (via the yellow brick road, of course), I could hear their enthralled 'oohs' and 'aahs'. It struck me then that magic happens when the production team successfully works together with the designers, performers and the director. Collectively, we created a production that enraptured the audience, both young and old, and sent them off on a journey far away from their normal lives – just like Dorothy.

Regardless of how exciting or unpleasant my encounters with children's theatre were, these are experiences which remain indelibly engraved in my memory. These three snapshots of my theatre experiences are key in shaping my interest, curiosity and passion for TYA in a city-state that is increasingly acknowledging the importance of supporting the arts amongst children.

Researching Theatre for Young Audiences in Singapore

Before embarking on this PhD, I was working as a production coordinator (2007–2011) at I Theatre, the company that staged *The Wizard of Oz*. I later took on the role of festival manager for the same company (2011–2014), where I was responsible for programming and managing the ACE! Festival – an annual local arts festival for children and families. I subsequently became the company's Associate Director and consultant (2014–2018). As part of my professional practice, I had the opportunity to interact with different artists, educators, policy-makers, stakeholders and funders, as well as visit international festivals and participate in various networking programmes. As a result of my engagement with these different sectors, my professional interest in TYA has always considered the economic and political aspects of TYA alongside its educational purposes and artistic qualities. I was curious to see how these areas overlap and inform one another, and wanted to find a way to bring my practice, reflections and research closer together. This inspired me to embark on this PhD.

Building on my professional practice and interest, this thesis explores the relationship between TYA and Singapore. The research is set against the fast-moving and changing landscape of the city-state, and aims to illuminate the position of TYA where market forces, education and politics intersect. It analyses the socio-political circumstances under which TYA is produced and received, and illustrates the ways in which it responds to different periods and contexts. Over the past two decades, the growing demand for spectacular productions has encouraged a culture of consumption that might be seen as exclusive and elitist. The activities in these luxurious and expensive theatres not only heighten the relationship between theatre and the market, but also blur the boundaries between the economic and social values of TYA. The central argument in this thesis is that TYA, while it might be pressured to respond commercially in the global environment, has the potential to defy the forces of capitalism and engage with children and young people in new forms of participation and spectatorship. Accompanying this line of enquiry are also five secondary questions that I consider in the subsequent chapters:

- How have important milestones in Singapore's history and educational practices influenced contemporary TYA?

- What challenges do TYA practitioners and companies face in an increasingly competitive commercial environment?
- How can local stories, performed in TYA, invite broader questions about young people's cultural identities?
- How are spaces used by TYA shaped by broader social, cultural and material contexts?
- How might artists engage with communities and, in doing so, create different forms of TYA and affective experiences for children?

Contextualising Theatre for Young Audiences in Singapore

TYA in Singapore has, thus far, attracted very little research. Much of what I have learnt about TYA is based on my professional practice, conversations and experiences of watching these performances. In Singapore, TYA is broadly used to refer to professional, family-friendly performances targeted at children. These performances, that range from musicals to dramatic plays, usually take place in dedicated theatre buildings, have high production values, and are closely linked to education. Within the cultural sector, productions for children are also sometimes referred to as 'children's theatre' or 'theatre for children'. These are now largely replaced by 'TYA', thanks to the term being used in the *Arts Master Plan* – a policy document that outlined the direction of the arts and cultural sectors in Singapore from 2015–2019. I will discuss this policy in the next section, but what is important to note here is that, even though the term TYA has been officially adopted by the government, it has not been clearly defined. This has led to differing practices and perspectives across the cultural, education and entertainment sector. Although TYA is used as an umbrella term in other countries (e.g. Australia, Japan and the UK) to include productions for children and young people up to 18 years old, I have examined a range of theatrical productions specifically for children aged 12 and under in my research. This is because productions aimed towards teenagers and young adults in Singapore are called 'youth theatre' and carry a different set of educational and aesthetic qualities. Throughout the thesis, I use the terms 'theatre for young audiences', 'theatre for children' and 'children's theatre' interchangeably, as they are in the sector. In doing so, I hope to embrace

and consolidate a range of practices and performances that are designed for children and their families in the Singaporean context.

Due to the lack of any comprehensive research on TYA in Singapore, I used case studies from other parts of the world during the initial stages of my research to learn more about the relationship between TYA and society. On an international level, TYA has no singular definition. It has been used broadly to describe professional theatre productions made for audiences ranging from infants to young adults. Therefore, it is evident that the role of 'theatre' and what defines a 'young audience' mean different things in different places. TYA scholar Manon van de Water's book, *Moscow Theatre for Young People: A Cultural History of Ideological Coercion and Artistic Innovation, 1917–2000*, offers an account of the cultural and political intersections that have informed the two oldest theatres for children in Moscow: Central Children's Theatre (now the Russian Academic Youth Theatre) and the Moscow Theatre of the Young Spectator. Her analysis of TYA traces some of the historical milestones in Moscow to illuminate how the development of theatre for young people coincided with periods of significant political changes. She explains the functions of TYA as an Instrument of State Apparatus (ISA) at the end of the twentieth century and how it was used as a tool to influence children's thinking about how great Soviet Russia was. In her later book, *Theatre, Youth and Culture*, van de Water offers a broader perspective on the shifting cultural and material conditions that have influenced the practices, histories and perceptions of TYA. Using examples from the United States, she argues that TYA had been defined and motivated by ideological, cultural and economic imperatives at the end of the twentieth century. Drawing on the work of Moses Goldberg who previously argued that Children's Drama was 'something less than drama', she contends that the marginalised image of TYA in the USA is 'perpetuated and sustained by the theatre practitioners themselves' (2012, p.14). The progressive years that followed continued to play a significant role in developing the relationship between children, entertainment and education. As a comparison, she shows how TYA changed dramatically in The Netherlands and in northern Europe, where political shifts in the 1960s 'paved the way for a reconceptualisation of childhood and the role of theatre on a child's life' (2012, p.39). By bringing together theory and practice, van de Water's analysis of TYA demonstrates how historical conditions and

material circumstances can play a huge role in shaping contemporary practices and perceptions in the TYA field.

In the UK, it was also during the 1960s that the Theatre in Education (TiE) movement emerged, which would later go on to have a significant impact on the development of TYA there. In *Learning Through Theatre*, Anthony Jackson and Chris Vine offer an insight into the historical developments of TiE and illustrate how it 'seeks to harness the techniques and imaginative potency of theatre in the service of education' (2013, p.5). Much has been written about the pedagogy and politics of TiE in the UK and how it overlaps with TYA. In *Theatre for Children and Young* People, Stuart Bennett offers an insight into the development of professional TYA companies in the latter half of the twentieth century. He attributes their development to early practices and works of TiE companies, particularly at the Belgrade Theatre in Coventry. Paul Harman's *A Guide to UK Theatre for Young Audiences*, serves as a useful companion to Bennett's book and provides a detailed archive of TYA organisations in the UK. This 'rich and varied landscape', as he describes it, includes dedicated venues (e.g. Unicorn Theatre, Polka Theatre and Halfmoon in London), TYA festivals (e.g. Belfast Children's Festival and Imaginate – Edinburgh's International Children's Festival) and touring theatre companies (e.g. Catherine Wheels, Action Transport Theatre, M6 Theatre Company). Tom Maguire and Karian Schuitema, in *Theatre for Young Audiences*, offer a perspective on how the place of TYA and the role of the child in the UK has been shaped over the years by the funding bodies, venues and public policy. They observed that despite the inconsistency in funding, the one constant is the attention placed by TYA artists and production companies on the 'affective domain of children's development' (2012, p.5). Not only do most of these positions in the UK frame TiE and TYA as complementary rather than in conflict, but also suggest that TYA is a growing industry that has been shaped by shifts in cultural and political developments.

At the time of writing, there is no comprehensive research on TYA in Asia, let alone Singapore. Any type of research in this area can only be found infrequently in publications of conference proceedings, university research portals (e.g. The Education University of Hong Kong), and the collection of essays by the International Theatre for Young Audiences Research Network (ITYARN) – *TYA, Culture and Society* and *Youth and Performance*. In my

research, I discovered that these articles tend to lean towards specific case studies pertaining to the country of the author, rather than trace broader trends and developments of the field. Po-chi Tam's article, 'An Exploratory Case Study on the Aesthetic Responses of the Young Theatre Audience: The Insect Play', examines the educational purposes of drama for children in Hong Kong. Using an ethnographic approach, Tam critically examines how environmental factors can affect their responses and experiences. She argues that the children's 'aesthetic experiences' and how they view the world are closely linked to the 'construction of society' (2010, p. 67–68, translated). In Taiwan, Yiren Tsai's article, 'A Reflection of the Child and Childhood in Taiwanese TYA through the Winning Plays of The Taipei Children's Arts Festival', draws on three popular TYA productions to examine the multiple perspectives of childhood. By critically analysing the three Taiwanese plays alongside each other, she reflects on the plurality of family structures represented in the plays and illustrates how contemporary society has informed the parent-child relationship. She goes on to argue that, while some of these ideas of childhood reinforce 'Taiwanese traditional values', the reliance on Western stereotypes to dramatise these family relationships on stage have problematised the contemporary perceptions of the child and childhood in Taiwan (2010, p.163). This, according to Tsai, has raised questions about East and West, as well as the expectation of the male and female role in society (2010, 163).

These cultural insights suggest that TYA is not a fixed set of practices but its relevance needs to be contextualised. It is shaped by its historical, educational and political circumstances, which in turn set the context of how it is utilised and perceived in contemporary society. To make connections between art and the world they live in, theatre practitioners have always been creative in engaging with children and young people. Whether in the theatre or schools, artists have used drama to discuss different subjects and themes in imaginative ways. In other words, TYA is interwoven with educational, political and dramatic innovations, and usually responds to the society and cultural norms of the period. With this in mind, and empathising with the Taiwanese audience in the previous example, who were faced with alien Western stereotypes, this has led me to reflect on TYA in Singapore.

Having grown up and witnessed the transformation of Singapore over the years, I am interested in the relationship between TYA and the wider socio-political structures of the

city-state. The three snapshots that I began this thesis with illustrate that TYA encompasses a wide range of practices that engages with different subjects and themes. In my professional practice, I have also encountered artists who have produced dynamic methods to respond resiliently to different political and economic circumstances. In doing so, they have pushed the boundaries of theatre and consequently invigorated the cultural landscape. Equipped with these insights and knowledge, this impulse inspired me to examine how TYA connects with different cultural, economic and educational territories. As van de Water rightly identifies, despite the differences in how educational systems and political structures operate, 'professional theatre for young audiences is undeniably part of the cultural makeup of many countries around the world' (2012, p.2).

While there is no comprehensive scholarship on TYA in Singapore, it is not because it is not worthy of research. On the contrary, there are many theatrical productions, activities and festivals for children and families that take place throughout the year. Local theatre companies such as I Theatre, Paper Monkey Theatre, The Little Company and The Players Theatre produce a range of lively and exciting theatrical productions for local schools and general audiences. The national cultural centre, The Esplanade – Theatres by the Bay, also has an established programme for children, such as *PLAYtime!* (a series of interactive performances for children aged between two and six) and *Octoburst!* (a children's festival that features local and international productions and workshops). In more commercial settings such as Marina Bay Sands and Resorts World Sentosa, there are Broadway musicals and live children's television spin-offs (e.g. *Sesame Street*, *Thomas the Tank Engine* and *Peppa Pig*) that attract many family audiences. Singapore journalist Adeline Chia observed ten years ago in her article, 'Young Start for Arts', that theatre for children is a 'rapidly growing and exciting industry to look out for' (2010, p.2).

The *Arts Master Plan*: Theatre for Young Audiences and cultural policy

Theatre for children has blossomed, largely thanks to the aforementioned *Arts Master Plan*. This cultural policy marks an important milestone for TYA in Singapore as it has given the green light to open up creative possibilities and explore new theatrical territory. Crucially, this new policy prioritises theatre as an enrichment of a child's life, where previous policies used the arts as a means to benefit the state. With this in mind, a discussion of the policy

will serve to illuminate some of the concerns raised about the use of theatre for children in the past.

When I first approached my thesis, I was very inspired by the *Arts Master Plan*. This cultural policy was created by the National Arts Council (NAC) and launched in August 2014. It revealed a vision for the Singapore arts scene to be achieved over a five-year period (2015–2019). In this policy, different strategies were mapped out to support artists and boost the growth of the arts. The document states: 'It is a reflection of the performing arts sector's aspirations for their individual practice, the arts at large and at a higher level, the Singapore society'.[1] What is unique to Singapore about this policy is that, unlike previous cultural policies that adopted a top-down approach, many of the ideas were initiated and informed by members of the local arts community. More crucially, it was the first time that TYA has been included in any policy document at all. Between January–September 2014, the NAC held several consultations with directors, educators, artists and arts managers to better understand some of the concerns and challenges on the ground. From the separate discussions about music, dance, visual arts and theatre in Singapore, four key areas were identified for potential development: critical writings, public engagement, shortage of space and theatre for children.[2] As part of my professional practice, I was invited to participate in the sessions on TYA to share some of the practical challenges and, where possible, discuss strategies for the future of this sector. Being part of these dialogues granted me access to some of the more nuanced and sensitive socio-political issues about TYA raised by both the NAC and the sector. For example, I was surprised by how forthcoming and transparent some companies were in sharing their profits and losses. Some also pointed out how they had difficulties paying an upfront cash deposit when booking rehearsal studios and theatre spaces in commercial venues. In one of the sessions, the NAC also explained the ways in which organisational restructuring and shifts in policies have affected the distribution of arts funding. These series of conversations eventually led to the idea of constructing a dedicated children's arts centre – a significant case study that I discuss later in this thesis. By reflecting on these conversations alongside the policy document, it allowed me to situate TYA within

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[1] *Arts Master Plan*. The National Arts Council website. Retrieved on 2 Aug 2015 from: https://www.nac.gov.sg/aboutus/arts-masterplan.html
[2] Ibid. These key areas were identified by the NAC and artists from the theatre sector.

the broader arts and cultural landscape of Singapore, and examine the gaps between what was said and what was written. Though these conversations were not part of the official fieldwork phase of my PhD, they shaped my thinking about TYA and society during the early stages of my research.

In the *Arts Master Plan*, the NAC recognised that the arts and culture sector in Singapore has matured over the years and that it could afford to increase and diversify the wide range of arts on offer. Building on previous cultural policies and the suggestions offered by the members of the arts community, the *Arts Master Plan* revolved around three leading questions: 'Are we winning new audiences? Have we remembered to document and study our precious cultural legacies? Where do we go from here?'[3]. In the TYA sector, one key concern raised was the lack of quality performances in which 'young audiences may not be experiencing the best in theatre' (Theatre Sector Plan, 2014, p.4). This is a refreshing view that contrasts with previous, more state-oriented policies, which aligned activities involving children and young people with the demands of the market. A prime example is the *Renaissance City Plan III* (2009–2013)[4], the cultural policy document prior to the *Arts Master Plan.* It outlined the ambition of the state to move towards a 'global knowledge and innovative-based economy'. This resulted in policymakers placing a strong emphasis on arts education in schools, as these programmes were considered necessary in providing children with the 'soft skills' to later 'compete in a global marketplace' (2008, p.29). More explicitly, it was proposed that the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts work closely with the Economic Development Board to 'develop skills standards and training needs' of young people to 'address skills and manpower needed to fuel the economic growth of this sector' (2008, p.26). Therefore, the idea of offering children the 'best in theatre' in the *Arts Master Plan*, rather than using theatre to equip them with a set of skills to enhance the state's commerce and industry, represents a shift in political ambition. It marks a change in attitude of the state and sets a new tone for TYA. I Theatre's Artistic Director, Brian Seward, notes in the article, 'Buzz over potential of National Arts Council's new Performing Arts

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[3] Ibid

[4] *Renaissance City Plan III*. Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts. The National Arts Council website. Retrieved on 2 Aug 2015 from: https://www.nac.gov.sg/dam/jcr:18cf2883-7907-4938-9931-384333e210ce

Masterplan': 'I think it is excellent that children's theatre is finally being recognised as an art form rather than as pure entertainment or used for teaching' (2014, p.25).

As a way to cultivate and encourage quality theatre for children, it was proposed that the NAC support TYA artists and companies in three ways:

a) A tiered capability development approach for practitioners who are keen to work in these areas (e.g. playwrights, directors, designers, actors, puppeteers) depending on their level of experience. Activities can include foundational talks and workshops for newcomers; mentorships with local established companies for those with some experience; and overseas residencies and mentorships with internationally acclaimed children's theatre companies. NAC will seek out and anchor long-term partnerships with these companies.

b) A focused season/ platform to draw greater attention and recognition. There are existing platforms today targeting young audiences, each catering to different age groups, each with unique artistic visions and objectives. They also take place at different times of the year, which can be challenging for parents and schools to keep track of. While some practitioners had suggested aggregating these individual efforts and resources into a single, coherent, industry-led platform with a stronger identity and programme to develop audiences and build profile, this would require closer discussions with the industry on the implementation. It could also reside at a dedicated space for a children's theatre, where existing efforts could be collated into a widely marketed calendar of offerings for the year.

c) Dedicated space(s) for children's theatre to provide consistent programming in an environment purpose-built for children, and which would be the go-to place for parents seeking out activities for their children throughout the year. Existing spaces, such as those managed by venues, can be activated, repurposed or reconfigured as a dedicated space for children's theatre throughout the year or for fixed periods. Both models can co-exist and locations spread out to various parts of Singapore. (Theatre Sector Plan, 2014, p.8)

It is evident, then, that Singapore placed a growing importance on theatre for children and young people. The new directive not only embraced the emancipatory power of the theatre, but also recognised it as an art form in itself. Furthermore, it does not explicitly list the educational intentions and outcomes like previous cultural policies. While all theatre can of course, at some level, be thought of as educational, this shift enabled the boundaries of TYA to expand, allowing for more nuanced ideas of what education might involve. Whether the aim was to build 'future patrons, artists and audiences' or promote families to 'experience the arts together', introducing quality programmes at a young age was seen to have sustained benefits for the children (2014, p.8). As the policy document stated: 'Only by changing the way the scene creates art can Singapore then capture young people's imagination for life' (2014, p.9).

Unsurprisingly, the implementation of these strategies for TYA resulted in an influx of activities for children and families in Singapore over the last five years. These events have included TYA festivals, cultural exchange programmes, creative workshops and international collaborations. These created a much-needed dynamic injection to Singapore's cultural scene and TYA community. In my research, I also encountered innovative and exciting practices such as new forms of interdisciplinary works, installations and a range of engaging participatory workshops. In a feat of excellent timing, the duration of the *Arts Master Plan* coincided with the period of my PhD, providing me the opportunity to look back and reflect on some of the changes in the TYA landscape. This process has also led me to understand some of the challenges in the TYA sector that resulted from the new policy and has helped me to make connections between TYA and the broader economic, cultural and political practices at play.

Singapore50 and creativity

Along with the *Arts Master Plan*, the early stages of my research coincided with the Singapore50 (SG50) – a year-long celebration that marked Singapore's 50th year of independence from Malaysia. SG50 was a momentous year for Singapore and an occasion for its citizens to commemorate, reflect, and celebrate the nation's progress together as a community. In this section, I shall reflect on this historical moment, and discuss how the

urban changes, cultural activities and government speeches during that year were useful in informing my thinking about creativity and TYA in Singapore.

Singapore's story is one of rags to riches. It has always prided itself on its urban transformation and rapid progress from a small fishing village to a cosmopolitan city. Singapore first came into being as a nationless state; an island without an identity. Throughout its history, the concept of it becoming a nation did not exist until its post-independence political reconstruction. Having been colonised by the British in 1819, occupied by the Japanese empire during World War Two (1942–1945), and culminating in the nation's brief merger with the Federal State of Malaya after the war, it finally gained independence in 1965. The interconnectedness between shifts in history, changing landscapes and political ideologies of the nation had a significant impact on the geo-political milieu of the country. The status from a small village to a cosmopolitan, independent state has nurtured a certain commercial-driven identity that has in turn affected its attitude towards the arts. Now that the state has been bedded in for 50 years, its attitude has relaxed and changed.

SG50 took place between 2015–2016 and started with a ground-up initiative from the government to find out the ways in which citizens would like to celebrate the occasion. An open call from the Ministry of Culture, Communication and Youth was sent out to the different communities and heartlands, inviting members of the public and residents to propose ideas and activities that 'raised awareness of the Singaporean identity and sense of belonging to Singapore'.[5] This initiative attracted over 1200 proposals that ranged from music concerts to art exhibitions to community engagement projects. A budget – termed Our Singapore Fund – of S$5 million was originally set aside by the state for these projects, but was later increased to S$25 million to meet the demands of the unexpected and overwhelming response.[6] To help manage these activities, a SG50 steering committee, led by Finance Minister Swee Keat Heng, was formed by assembling key leaders from the

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[5] SG50 Website. Accessed on 13 June 2017 from: https://www.sg/sg50/Celebration%20Fund.aspx
[6] It was initially estimated that this initiative would attract about 500 projects. However, this increased to 1500. SG50 Website. Accessed on 13 June 2017 from: https://www.sg/en/SG50/Celebration%20Fund%20and%20Ideas/Ground-Up%20Projects.aspx

different sectors who were experts in their own fields. Within this structure, five sub-committees – Education and Youth, Culture and Community, Economic and International, Environmental and Infrastructure and Partnerships – were further created to assist with the selection, facilitation and execution of these projects. Each project was evaluated and selected based on three main criteria. Firstly, it needed to promote and celebrate the Singaporean identity – a complex concept that the government and citizens have been grappling with since the nation's independence. Secondly, it needed to engage with the local communities. Finally, on a practical level, the applicant needed to demonstrate that they could complete and execute the proposed project according to plan. After a rigorous process, 135 projects were selected and showcased during that year. These citizen-driven activities were part of the government's efforts to encourage creative expressions amongst the people, but more importantly, foster a sense of belonging and national identity. As Heng articulated in his parliamentary speech on 24 August 2016:

> We want to support projects that build the spirit of caring and resilience, nurture our can-do spirit, and promote unity and our sense of being Singaporean…. It is Our Singapore Fund because it is about how we all can come together in partnership to share our strengths, share our loves, create something more and better together, to build our Singapore together.[7]

On a wider scale, significant economic and cultural capital were also invested in revitalising the city. In the Civic District, the Victoria Theatre – the oldest theatre building in Singapore – was reopened after a S\$30 million investment and four-year restoration. The National Museum of Singapore, in partnership with the City Developments Limited (an urban development company), commissioned a commemorative public artwork that was displayed outside the museum building. The largest cultural makeover that year was the S\$530 million that the state spent on transforming the former Supreme Court and City Hall into the new National Gallery Singapore – a state-of-the art gallery space that boasts 'having the largest

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[7] Sim, Walter. 'Singapore Budget 2016: 'Our Singapore Fund' of up to $25 million to support citizen-led projects'. The Straits Times Online Accessed on 13 June 2017 from: https://www.straitstimes.com/business/economy/singapore-budget-2016-our-singapore-fund-of-up-to-25-million-to-support-citizen-led

collection of Southeast Asian art in the world'.[8] According to the Economic Development Board, a total of S$740 million was spent restoring and revitalising the cultural districts.[9] These investments by the government, alongside with the citizen-led projects, resulted in a plethora of cultural and commemorative events that year.

Figure 1: National Gallery Singapore, 2015. Source: *Today Online*

The urban regeneration and cultural activities not only transformed the physical landscape, but also created a vibrant environment for Singaporeans to reflect on their heritage and embrace their national identity. These initiatives demonstrated the government's commitment to building a city where its citizens could foster a sense of belonging. Minister of Culture, Community and Youth and chairman of the SG50 projects, Lawrence Wong, stated in his opening speech:

> It's an important investment in our heritage, to remind us of the common history
> that unites us as a nation…. We must preserve our heritage, and remember the
> past. We must celebrate our arts and culture, and strengthen our sense of identity

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[8] The National Gallery Website. Accessed on 13 June 2017 from: https://www.nationalgallery.sg

[9] Nanda, Akshita. 'Singapore Budget 2015: $740 million invested on Civic District revamp'. The Straits Times Online. Accessed on 13 June 2017 from: https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/singapore-budget-2015-740-million-invested-on-civic-district-revamp

as a people. But most importantly, we must look forward to consider what kind of future we want for Singapore and for the next generation.[10]

The end of the year-long jubilee was marked by the symbolic and spectacular National Day Parade on 9 August 2016. In his National Day Rally speech, Prime Minister Hsien Loong Lee not only acknowledged the cultural vibrancy that the city had experienced that year, but also posed a poignant question: 'What got us to SG50?' To address this, he identified three factors:

> Firstly, we determined to be a multicultural society, Secondly, we created culture – a culture of self-reliance and also mutual support. And thirdly, we kept faith between the Government and the people.[11]

Following that, he gave examples of various educational reforms that have enabled the population to be self-reliant and explained how these policies have responded to globalisation and technological changes. He also referenced different housing, transportation and international policies that have made the country more efficient and improved the lives of its people. Looking back at how the nation has developed culturally and economically, he praised the efforts of the previous generation and urged the current and future citizens to ensure the prosperity of Singapore. He ended his speech by describing a significant moment of the National Day Parade, in which children were central to the performance, to illustrate his hope for the nation:

> I thought to myself these are the faces of the future of Singapore. Fifty years from now, SG100, they will be about 60 years old – still vigorous with many more active years ahead of them. I hope they will be back at the Padang celebrating again, remembering SG50, congratulating one another on how much they have done and

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[10] Wong, Lawrence, 'SG50 – Our Heritage, Our Culture, Our Future'. Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth website, 12 March 2015. Accessed on 17 June 2017 from:
https://www.mccy.gov.sg/news/speeches/2015/Mar/COS2015_MinSpeech1.aspx
[11] Lee, Hsien Loong, 'National Day Rally 2015'. Prime Minister's Office website, 23 August 2015. Accessed on 17 June 2017 from: https://www.pmo.gov.sg/national-day-rally-2015

how far they have come and looking at more young, radiant faces of children and many grandchildren and singing *Majulah Singapura!*[12]

Figure 2: National Day Parade, 2015. Source: *Today Online*

Lee's speech reflected and reiterated the official narrative of the nation that was seen and heard in many of the projects and events during that year. As a nation, Singapore has always existed as a curious state in which its unique geopolitical position straddles between the West and the East, and has often been used to negotiate its cultural space. In building the nation, the government overcame many challenges by defining the problems, coming up with new ideas, testing out these ideas, reviewing different strategies and solutions. In many ways, the government had to be innovative in its approaches and had incorporated creativity into its educational, cultural and economic policies and practices to ensure the survivability of the young nation state.

Being a small island and without any natural resources, the government had created a social and economic environment in which creativity could be nurtured and harnessed. The skyscraper buildings, the robust commercial activities and the numerous cultural monuments are some examples of a city that has been powered by creativity. Reflecting on the transformations of the city and the bustling activities of SG50 alongside Lee's speech

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[12] Ibid. Majulah Singapura is the National Anthem of Singapore and when translated means 'Onward Singapore'.

provided a useful way for me to think about creativity – not just exclusive to the arts, but also as an economic necessity and force that has played a crucial role in the nation's development. The importance of cultivating creativity in its people and the impact on the city is articulated by Minister of State Balaji Sadasivan:

> Creativity is a key driver of change and progress in human society. It transcends various domains of knowledge and is not solely exclusive to the arts, science or technology… Creativity applied to the arts and science, with the impetus of technological advancement, has enabled our society to move beyond the Industrial Age and into the Information Age. Without creative individuals who challenge convention, introduce alternative perspectives and suggest novel yet practical solutions to existing problems – across all disciplines – our daily lives would not be as they are today.[13]

The transformation of Singapore's economy has been impressive over the past five decades, but there is also a need to consider the other side of this argument. This version of creativity that promises economic prosperity and growth has also brought about consequent divisions of class and race. As a global financial centre with a total asset worth of S$2.7 trillion, Singapore is ranked fourth behind only London, New York and Hong Kong in the 2018 Global Financial Centres Index.[14] While this is evidence of its robust economy and global status, economist Manu Bhaskaran argues that the nation has become a 'highly unequal society', in which the distributions of economic growth remain skewed compared with more successful, developed economies such as those in Northern Europe.[15] In his 2018 parliament debate speech, Prime Minister Lee acknowledged that creativity has brought about prosperity for Singapore, but it has also created class, race, language and lifestyle divides amongst its

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[13] Sadasivan, Balaji. 'Speech at The Forum on Creativity in the Arts, Science and Technology'. Ministry of Communication and Information archive. 26 November 2004. Accessed on 17 June 2017 from: https://www.mci.gov.sg/pressroom/news-and-stories/pressroom/2004/11/speech-by-dr-balaji-sadasivan-at-the-forum-on-creativity-in-the-arts-science--technology
[14] 'The Global Financial Centres Index 23', *Z/Yen Group and China Development Institute*, March 2018. Accessed on 22 March 2018 from: http://www.longfinance.net/images/gfci/GFCI_23.pdf
[15] Bhaskaran, Manu. 'Getting Singapore in Shape'. *Lowyi Institute.* Accessed on 22 March 2018 from: https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/getting-singapore-shape-economic-challenges-and-how-meet-them-0#_edn4

people. He discusses how globalisation has threatened multilateral trading ties between countries such as China and the United States and argues that it is important for Singapore to reflect on its position in the region and for its people to maintain social cohesion. He stressed that the country's next wave of development needs to support every individual's social mobility, and cultivate a more inclusive society. This, according to him, is of 'national priority'.[16] In Lee's words:

> We want Singapore society to maintain an informal and egalitarian tone, where people interact freely and comfortably as equals and there are no rigid class distinctions or barriers that keep good people down…. Nation-building is always 'a work in progress'.[17]

As part of the government's strategy in the next phase of its development, measures have been drawn up to address some of the social challenges. In the workplace, the state has allocated S$100 million in the form of Special Employment Credit, education bursaries and workfare grants to support 100,000 union workers[18]. Initiatives such as grant vouchers, healthcare and housing subsidies are also some examples of the government's commitment to ensuring the welfare of the lower and middle-income Singaporeans is taken care of. In the arts and cultural sector, there have been efforts in making the arts accessible to the underserved communities such as the elderly, lower-income families, at-risk youths and people with disabilities. For example, *ArtReach* – a partnership between the National Arts Council, artists, government agencies, community partners and social service organisations – was established to develop projects that use the arts to enhance the mental and emotional well-being of young people, and thus strengthen their social connections. In his speech at the 2018 Arts & Disability International Conference, Parliamentary Secretary for Culture, Community and Youth, Yam Keng Baey, states:

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[16] Kwang, Kevin. 'Singapore society must maintain 'informal and egalitarian tone': PM Lee on tackling inequality'. Channel News Asia Website. 16 May 2018. Accessed on 3 Dec 2019 from: https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore-society-must-maintain-informal-and-egalitarian-tone-pm-10239110

[17] Ibid

[18] Ministry of Manpower Website. Accessed on 3 Dec 2019 from: https://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Home.aspx

We believe that the arts have the power to build three important 'C's, a Caring people, a Cohesive society, and a Confident Nation. We believe that this is the foundation of a strong Singapore, and that is why we work to develop and promote the arts across diverse audiences, from different backgrounds and of all abilities. We want to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to participate in and be inspired by the arts.[19]

Creativity powered by self-interest and global competition over the past 50 years has resulted in the prosperity of the nation but, moving forward, this has also led to a rethinking of creativity that experiments with new ways of living. What is at stake here is that, while technological advancements and businesses have encouraged the profitable environments of this young nation, they could be bringing commercial drivers into the lives of children and young people. So, while wealthy families are paying for expensive tickets and watching performances in extravagant buildings, children from lower income families are struggling to make ends meet. This raises the question: What is the role and place of TYA in society? Here, I am concerned with how, and to what extent, TYA might offer a form of creative resistance and provide a voice for social critique. Creativity might provide a narrative for the commodification of theatre that is fueled by economic and urban growth, but it also offers artists and policymakers the opportunity to find innovative ways to defy the commercial world. Given this context, creativity is concerned with ideas, objects, performances, practices and is a catalyst ingredient that can affect change in people and the city in multiple ways. Not only does it flow from the community into the economic and social well-being of the nation, but is central to imagining, innovating and creating the future. Regardless of the agenda, one thing is clear: creativity matters.

Inspired by the different ways in which creativity is used in the city, I have focused on creativity as the central framework of this thesis. Making performances, building a theatre, creating policies, responding to global changes, enhancing a city's image – all of these

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[19] Baey, Yam Keng. Speech at Arts and Disability International Conference: Building a strong and inclusive society through the arts. Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth Website. Accessed on 1 Sep 2018 from: https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/speeches/2018/mar/building-a-strong-and-inclusive-society-through-the-arts

involve different ways of thinking about creativity that are deeply embedded in the cultural lives and social fabric of Singapore. In the research process, I have discovered political challenges as the boundaries between leisure and learning, entertainment and education are increasingly blurred in a climate where creativity has been harnessed for commercial purposes and is linked to the social well-being of the country. TYA in Singapore, then, is not just an artistic practice but inescapably comes with political, cultural and economic implications as well. By connecting TYA with the broader structures of Singapore, I aim to illuminate how, and in what ways, different political, economic and cultural processes play a role in shaping TYA and, in return, how TYA might mirror the concerns of the city. It is in this context that I have positioned this thesis.

Research methodology: a mixed-methods approach

As mentioned in the previous section, TYA in Singapore involves a combination of people, organisational structures and creative practices which produce something that often encompasses wider economic, political and educational aspects. Since TYA is a relatively new area of research in Singapore, this has allowed me the opportunity to examine the field from different perspectives, resulting in a process of discovery that opened up new and exciting possibilities. To understand the position of TYA in the cultural landscape, this thesis drew on detailed fieldwork that I conducted between 2015–2018. Here, I outline the development of my methodology and discuss some of the implications and ethical considerations in the research process.

My starting point in thinking about research methodologies has been influenced by performance ethnographer D. Soyini Madison. Taking her cue from Jim Thomas, Madison discusses in her book, *Critical Ethnography,* the moral position, methods and obligation of the researcher:

> The critical ethnographer…takes us beneath surface appearances, disrupts the status quo, and unsettles both neutrality and taken-for-granted assumptions by bringing to light underlying obscure operations of power and control…. Because the critical ethnographer is committed to the art and craft of fieldwork, empirical methodologies become the foundation of inquiry and it is here "on the ground" of

others that the researcher encounters social conditions that become a point of departure for research. (2005, p.10)

Here, Madison is writing about the ethnographer's moral commitment towards social justice and how his or her work can contribute towards change within their communities. Though my intention is not to address social inequality, this context was useful in informing my thinking about the circumstances that might have perpetuated the marginalisation of the field and its practitioners in the context of Singapore. Inspired by the numerous performances that I experienced and stimulating conversations that I had with the Singapore TYA community over the years, I was interested in learning more about the working practices, attitudes and challenges of TYA in different times and spaces. The concept of 'on the ground' is what I found particularly useful in thinking about my position, ethical responsibility and research approach. As a researcher who is also part of the TYA scene, I am interested in gathering a range of voices and practices in different educational, creative and commercial settings. Methodologically, I aim to find an approach that can capture the different perspectives of educators, artists, policy makers, audiences, as well as take into account broader material structures that might play a role in influencing the practices and perceptions of TYA.

Methodologically, I had to find, adapt and amalgamate different approaches – an ever-evolving and creative process that was open to trial and error. This approach is advocated by Madison, who argues that probing 'other possibilities' allows the researcher to challenge institutions and social practices, which can contribute to new forms of knowledge (2005, p.11). Following this, I have chosen to gather my research materials in three key ways. Firstly, I interviewed artists, educators, stakeholders, funders and policy makers to assemble different accounts of TYA. In my professional practice, I discovered that many of the ideas and practices of TYA exist in their lived and embodied memories of artists and audiences, which are passed on from generation to generation. Therefore, my research process invited a range of people to reflect on their experiences and articulate some of the challenges and stories of TYA across time. Secondly, I witnessed performances and visited spaces where TYA happens as a way to experience the richness and diversity of the field. Finally, I turned to archival research, where I drew on significant government speeches, cultural policies,

reports, reviews that I found both online and in municipal buildings. I was curious to explore how significant historical milestones and national events might have played a role in shaping the cultural attitudes and contemporary practices of the field. In tracking these mixed methods, I navigated the different boundaries that overlapped with TYA and, at times, reflected on my own practice, values and beliefs. In the following sections, I outline my approach as a signpost towards the subsequent analysis and implications that are discussed across the thesis.

Conducting interviews

Critical ethnography, as Madison states, requires 'a deep and abiding dialogue' with the research participants (2005, p.14). She argues that one hallmark experience of fieldwork research is doing interviews (2005, p.27). For her, these exchanges keep meanings open and are important in opening up pathways to grasp the participants' 'voice, body, history and yearnings' (2005, p.14). Following Madison's suggestion, my research process drew on interviews[20] to broaden the understanding of the field as well as to keep the TYA dialogue energetic and open. These interviews formed a large part of my methodology, particularly in Chapters Two to Five, when analysing TYA activities and opinions that were embedded in the experiences of the research participants.

Working for the aforementioned TYA company I Theatre provided an excellent starting point for my research. Although I was no longer managing the ACE! Festival when I started the PhD, I remained as a consultant for the company. This meant that I was still treated as a staff member and was granted permission to observe rehearsals, participate in meetings and access the company's archives during the research process. I also ensured that I obtained consent from the company before using the interviews and data for this thesis. Between 2015-2016, I conducted interviews with Artistic Director Brian Seward and other members of staff from the production, marketing and front-of-house departments. My colleagues were often candid in their responses and were quick to elaborate on the different challenges that they faced. Even after the interviews had concluded, they continued to revisit these conversations from time to time, and offered new ideas whenever

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[20] Refer to Appendix A for a full list of interviews.

they had a fresh perspective or recalled a particular experience. Although these conversations helped broaden my knowledge of the working practices of the company, it also meant that my colleagues were getting increasingly involved in the research process. To expand on ideas that were beyond the organisation, I extended the research project to the broader TYA landscape.

Being a part of the wider community allowed me to engage with a range of TYA practitioners and professionals from different sectors. In the research process, I interviewed artists, educators, stakeholders, funders and policymakers. Additionally, Seward also referred me to theatre-makers who were involved in previous I Theatre productions, but have since moved on to pursue different careers. It was here that I was inspired to include the voices and experiences of both former and contemporary TYA professionals as part of the research. In these conversations, I asked them to reflect on their experiences and to articulate how changes in the environment and shifts in policies might have influenced their working practices and attitudes towards the field. Alongside this, I also encouraged them to share old photographs, programmes, recordings of performances, personal blogs and Facebook pages to evoke memories and particular histories of TYA. In these exchanges, some recounted significant moments in Singapore's history that shaped organisational practices and cultural attitudes of the field, while others reflected on their personal experiences performing for children; revealing the ways in which TYA has intertwined with economic activities as well as social and cultural life. These accounts not only provided valuable insights into TYA across different times and spaces, but also helped me to understand how different practices and challenges mirrored the development of the city. This investigation became an active process of retelling that embraced the variations, gaps, and silences. By holding a range of conversations, it helped me recognise the tensions, richness and layers of TYA in – and beyond – the city.

Conducting interviews is an energetic process that granted me access to the world of TYA through the lens of the participants. Since these responses were often unpredictable, I rarely ended up gathering data that were fixed in neat categories. Anthropologist Michael Angrosino, who writes about the style and form of 'doing ethnographic and observational research' in his book of the same title, states that researchers engaging with qualitative data

must be open to new possibilities and need to 'go with the flow' (2007, p.17). In these conversations, ideas often converged, overlapped and, at times, moved in different directions. In the spirit of keeping the dialogues open, I encouraged the interviewees to bring forth areas and themes of TYA that they find particularly poignant. Rather than sway their opinions towards certain ideas, I ensured that the conversations flowed according to their interest and enthusiasm. This in turn enabled the nuances of the subject's feelings, thoughts and actions to come to the fore. It was these spontaneous moments that led to insightful discoveries. For example, I was particularly struck by an interview that I had with a retired school teacher, Bee Choo Ong, who shared her passion for performing for children in her younger years.[21] The interview was meant to revolve around educational concerns in the 1980s but, in the process, had shifted to Ong sharing personal stories of how she had to abandon her ambition of becoming an artist to make ends meet. This fluid and reciprocal dynamic not only provoked questions that I had not previously considered, but also illuminated the complexities of the individual's subjectivity, memory and hope that are inseparable from contexts and personal histories.

There is, however, an ethical issue in conducting research via interview that needs to be acknowledged. The conversation between the interviewer's pursuit of knowledge and respect for the integrity of the interviewee requires a delicate balance. This tension is well articulated in Richard Sennett's book, *Respect*:

> In-depth interviewing is a distinctive, often frustrating craft. Unlike a pollster asking questions, the in-depth interviewer wants to probe the responses people give. To probe, the interviewer cannot be stonily impersonal; he or she has to give something of himself or herself in order to merit an open response…. The craft consists in calibrating social distances without making the subject feel like an insect under the microscope. (2004, p.37-38)

This openness in dialogue meant that I had to remain alert to new questions and also consider a safe space for the interviewees to freely share their views. Instead of trying to

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[21] Bee Choo, Ong. Interview. Temasek Primary School, 24 April 2016.

steer the conversation along a set path, based on my own set of beliefs and assumptions, I allowed the interview to develop organically, and asked follow-up questions when a subject arose that was worth pursuing. This enhanced the dialogue by letting the conversation flow naturally and, in doing so, generated both interesting insights and a deeper interpersonal relationship with the participants. Conducting interviews in a respectful manner thus revealed, to borrow Madison's term, 'deeper truths' in TYA which was significant in many levels of my inquiry (2005, p.27).

Experiencing performances and spaces

TYA, like any other theatrical form, is live and ephemeral, rooted in encounter and experience. When considering questions of performance, an understanding is needed that theatre is not just articulated in language. It should be acknowledged that the unsaid and embodied memories of the audience hold significant meanings and values. For me personally, being surrounded by lights, evocative soundscapes and visual spectacles meant that witnessing and being part of the sensory environment informed part of my research approach. Here, I return to the work of Madison who points out that engaging with/ in performance has become a popular approach for ethnographers to expand definitions and assumptions of a range of social phenomena. She draws on the writings of anthropologist Victor Turner and asserts that performance can teach us about our culture and ourselves. An aspect of performance analysis, she suggests, addresses the notion of 'experience' (2005, p.152). According to her, this experience is 'received in consciousness' and, when reflected upon, can be useful for ethnography (2005, p.153). Although Madison's perspective of experience is framed within the context of cultural performance and the everyday, I found appropriate connections between the sensory modalities in her approach and TYA, which places the sensory, social and aesthetic experiences of the young audiences at the core of the theatrical event.

I was curious to see what sort of visceral responses TYA could produce from the audience and to see for myself the reaction to the action on stage. As a means of gathering pieces of information that were embodied and emplaced, I attended performances and visited spaces where TYA occurs. In particular, I went to see *The Rainbow Fish* (2016) and *Baby Space* (2017) to experience TYA first hand, and which I use as case studies in Chapters Three and

Five, respectively. Although analysing the spoken word, set design and the live action on stage helped inform my understanding of the performance's form and content, 'experiencing' the event constituted, to borrow Madison's term, 'feeling and expectation' (2005, p.127). In these contexts, my focus was not on deciphering the educational or social benefits of TYA but, rather, the immediacy of the audience's emotional engagement with the theatrical performance on stage. Instead of interviewing the (young) audience members, I chose to immerse myself in their chatter and reaction to the performance. Methodologically, this approach not only foregrounded my presence with the audience in the same space as a fully invested and shared bodily moment, but also offered an immediate awareness of the teachers', parents' and children's emotional and intellectual responses to the environment. 'Being there' enabled me to remain attentive to the affective and embodied sensations at key moments during the research, rather than treat the audience as passive and removed from the theatrical event.

To extend my thinking on using experience as a method, I turned to the writings on sensorial ethnography – an approach that has been well theorised by cultural geographers and anthropologists. In *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, Sarah Pink discusses the multisensorial dimensions of the ethnographic approach:

> The sensory ethnographer is trying to access areas of embodied, emplaced knowing and to use these as a basis from which to understand human perception, experience, action and meaning and to situate this culturally and biographically. (2009, p. 47)

Rather than simply observing, her emphasis is on being with research participants and placing ways of experiencing and knowing at the core of ethnography, while also acknowledging the material and political contexts in which the ethnographer is situated. The sensory ethnographer, according to Pink, 'shares with others the senses of place they felt as they sought to occupy similar places to those of their research participants' (2009, p. 2). This view is also shared by anthropologists Chris Pole and Sam Hillyard in their book, *Doing Fieldwork.* In here, they reference Pink's experiential approach and apply it to a wider range of research settings, arguing that it is necessary for researchers both to adopt particular

methods in thinking about and planning research strategies, and be actively involved in understanding the perspectives of others in relation to their environments. To do so, they suggest that researchers 'immerse' themselves in the research setting and 'deploy methods which provide, as far as possible, an insider's view' (2016, p.5).

This suggests that, to understand the perspectives of those being studied, there is a need to look beyond the mode of observation that is often used in 'conventional' ethnography and actively sense, experience and participate. The idea of 'total experience' is one that I find useful in thinking about embodied and emplaced knowledge that go beyond participant-observation (2016, p.6). This awareness of my experience helped characterise my thinking of ethnographic methods, particularly in Chapter Five. In this chapter, I examine The Artground, a new arts centre for children. I had the opportunity to interview Executive Director Luanne Poh, who has been involved with the venue since its inception. Additionally, I also conversed with other artists who were working on art installations at the centre. During these interviews, I was invited to walk around, play with the props and interact with the installations. This sensory approach deepened my understanding of the artists' working practices, and enabled me to engage with the material and sensorial qualities of the things that they described. It was also here at The Artground that I watched *Baby Space*, a multi-sensory installation/ performance that was aimed at pre-walking toddlers. In this performance, music and movement replaced the spoken word. The boundaries between audience and performers overlapped and blurred. As the performance progressed, I found myself drawn towards the rhythms, beats and flows of movement and became immersed in the environment. As a way to illustrate how the affective qualities of smell, sound, movement, texture were interwoven into my research process, I include detailed descriptions and analysed these key moments. Adopting sensory ethnography in these contexts led to moments of learning which placed 'experiencing' at the core of my discovery, and allowed me to engage with the evocative and sensory qualities of TYA.

Archival research

As part of my research, my intention was to examine the wider economic, cultural and material circumstances that govern TYA, as well as find out how shifts in history and urban development might have played a role in shaping the current practices and attitudes of the

field. In the article 'Investigating Cultural Producers', sociologist Aeron Davis advises researchers to not only focus on individuals who produce culture, but also 'structures, external factors and high-level decision makers' that might influence and shape these cultural activities and products (2008, p.54). For Davis, the negotiations and decisions of politicians, government officials and business owners ultimately influence the choices and outputs of these cultural products. He compares his approach to research with investigative journalism, stating that publicly available resources such as industry survey forms, financial statements, historical archives and policies are a rich treasure trove of information that reveal the broader cultural structures at play.

During my research, the challenge was to locate, access and interpret these materials as a way to develop a 'macro account' of the situation in Singapore (2008, p.54). As well as rooting out information embedded in spreadsheets and webpages, I also sought to collect documents that were officially recorded. To do so, I accessed four different archives over the course of the research: The National Archives of Singapore, the National Arts Council, the Ministry of Education and I Theatre. The archive, as Maggie B. Gale and Ann Featherstone define it, is 'a vital cultural tool as a means of accessing versions of the past' (2013, p.17). According to them, the archive is always in a state of 'incompleteness', in which researchers need to make connections between different materials to examine and process multiple truths (2013, p.24). While deciding on the parameters of my research during its initial stages, I chose to focus on the relationship between performance and pedagogy. I considered two general areas embodied by TYA as a means to kickstart my research – education and the cultural sector. By focusing on these, I was able to determine which archives would be most relevant.

I started with the oral and written accounts kept in the National Archives of Singapore (NAS). This official archive of Singapore, as the tag line states, is the 'keeper of records of national or historical significance'.[22] Besides acquiring records from public agencies, private sources and overseas institutions, it also holds reports pertaining to the British

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[22] National Archive of Singapore website. Accessed 29 January 2015 from: http://www.nas.gov.sg/About-Us/Our-Roles.

administration of the Straits Settlement in Singapore. From here, I drew on historical documents such as government speeches, transcripts of interviews, and cultural reports to examine how significant milestones in Singapore's history might have influenced the development of TYA. The materials here were particularly useful in tracing how ideas and theatre practices were in parallel to national ambitions and changes in the city across time. This is covered in Chapter Two.

Secondly, to understand the links between theatre and education, I turned to the websites of the National Arts Council (NAC) and the Ministry of Education (MOE) where I accessed and analysed various cultural and educational policies. On a policy level, I was curious to find out to what extent theatre for children reflected the social and educational priorities of the day, and why they mattered.

Lastly, I visited the archives of I Theatre to examine the working practices of a local TYA company. Here, I drew on financial reports, recordings of performances, publicity brochures, scripts and production designs that were organised in a series of production files. As a previous I Theatre festival manager, I had a head start with this area of my research as I contributed to the content and the organisation of the company's archive. As a state-funded company, these files needed to be meticulously ordered and up to date in order for the NAC to check financial accounts and to confirm the company's non-profit status.[23] Revisiting these documents was particularly useful in understanding the tensions between educational expectations, expected financial outcomes and expressive art forms, which have been tethered together by Singapore's market-driven economy. Finally, to widen my perspectives of local TYA, I visited personal blogs and websites that reviewed a range of productions.

Working with archived documents is an unwieldy and unyielding task. The voluminous amount of paperwork and the scarcity of information directly related to Singapore TYA meant that I had burrow inside a mountain of documents relating to different departments and varying disciplines. I then had to collate relevant materials and group these in a way that would construct a meaningful narrative. This process required creativity and

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[23] I will explain the company's position in the cultural sector and its working practices in Chapter Three.

imagination. In the essay 'Invigorating historiographical practices in rhetoric and composition studies', published in *Working in the Archives: Practical Research Methods for Rhetoric and Composition*, Cheryl Glenn and Jessica Enoch argue that it is important to see ourselves as the 'sources of data' in the research process (2010, p.21). Histories, they state, are always partial, therefore interpreting documents found in archives is ineluctably tied to a researcher's prejudices and perceptions. Glenn and Enoch assert that the goal for the researcher is to achieve 'interestedness', as it informs the overarching research agenda and final text (2010, p.22). Arguing in similar terms, Gale and Featherstone state that a historical position or perspective often lies at the root of the researcher's work in the archive (2013, p. 21).

These views informed my choices and the ways in which I collected the data over the course of the research. Rather than provide a linear and complete list of TYA activities in Singapore, I accumulated materials that were in line with my professional practice and interests as a way to make connections between TYA and society. As Glenn and Enoch argue, '"history" has become "histories", and histories change in response to the dominant values of institutions, cultures, and historiographers' (2010, p.11). For them, what is crucial is that researchers reflect critically on the archive material and consider how best to represent that information in their individual narratives. In ways like this, engaging with the different archives from the position of 'interestedness' enabled me to draw creatively and reflexively on a range of materials to produce a version of, what Glenn and Enoch term, a 'usable past' – one that speaks to present concerns but also 'treats that past ethically' (2010, p.25). By contextualising and reconnecting different materials in the process, it provoked new questions about people, place and practices of TYA. Acknowledging my own professional interests and (re)entering the archive thus enabled me to rethink and re-vision the overall trajectory of TYA, which was crucial in layering the different materials that I gathered.

Reflecting on my position as a researcher and producer

As a researcher who is deeply involved with the TYA sector, negotiating my thoughts and actions in different contexts had its challenges. In many ways, the idea of reflexivity has been one that I greatly contemplated as I grappled with my ethical responsibility and shifting positions in relation to the creation of knowledge with/ through others in different

situations. Reflecting on my position had been a crucial part of the research, particularly when encountering views that were in conflict with mine, which led me to question my own sets of values, biases and assumptions. Research, as Madison argues, needs to extend from the mode of enquiry to the 'politics of positionality' (2005, p.11). For her, positionality is vital because it asks the researcher to acknowledge his/ her privileges and prejudices. This idea of turning back on ourselves, which she terms 'reflexive ethnography', accounts for the researcher's moral responsibility relative to representation and interpretation (2005, p. 17).

Arguing in a similar vein, drama educator Kathleen Gallagher in her book *The Methodological Dilemmas* states that researchers who engage with qualitative approaches often face complex ethical and political challenges in their quest to chart new narratives and produce forms of knowledge. She states that researchers dealing with praxis and theory usually find innovative ways to respond to various challenges:

> They make these choices within particular political contexts, they build relationships with research 'subjects' in order to get closer to the problems being studied, and they find themselves, ultimately, in the complex territory of representing the messy corporeality and materiality of those lives. (2008, p.4)

These views were useful in guiding me through my own research dilemmas. Navigating the broader concerns of people and practices within their socio-political context was a complex, unpredictable and challenging process. Although many TYA professionals welcomed the idea of a research project about TYA in Singapore and were keen for me to learn more about their companies, in some instances there was a reluctance to participate. Some were concerned with the confidentiality of their working practices and saw my investigation as a threat. Others viewed my presence as an intrusion into their territories and, at times, were more interested in getting on with the work at hand. On several occasions, I also encountered artistic tastes that I disagreed with, and sometimes heard attitudes about TYA in conversations that were patronising and unsettling. On these occasions I would sometimes remain resolutely unmoved, and at other times find myself challenged to see things differently. These moments not only revealed the tensions in TYA, but also led me to reflect on my own views and questions that I had to ask.

In *The Methodological Dilemmas*, Gallagher looks at the 'The Art of Methodology'. Here, she uses an arts-based approach in her research to discuss the implications of the researcher's involvement in the production of knowledge in unpredictable and fluid situations. In keeping a balance between active participation and observation, she argues that being 'fully involved' is crucial as it attends to moments of engagement that 'betray our interpretive lenses' (2008, p.72). Following Gallagher, it is this idea of responding to the unknown and shifts in the research that I embraced. During the research process, my position was one of continuous reflection that responded appropriately to different people and environments. I encompassed the openness to change according to the participants' responses, events in the field, and also to new ways of thinking about TYA. In situations that were challenging, I remained attentive to new questions and engaged wholly with performances and creative encounters. I grounded my understanding of the practice of an ethical relationship with the research participants in a commitment to listen and question, but with the knowledge that meanings in the process of ethnography are mutually negotiated between the researcher and participant.

My research did not privilege one particular company or voice, but aimed to illustrate the dynamic and diverse landscape of TYA in Singapore. There are as many omissions as there are inclusions, and the representations of these voices are partial. Given the vastness of the field, methodologically, I pulled together a repertoire of embodied memories, practices, interviews, policy documents and first-hand encounters to examine TYA in Singapore across time and space. In doing so, it effected a narrative that connected the past and present together, bringing to the fore an account of TYA that has been excluded from the broader theatre history and cultural narrative of Singapore. Throughout the chapters, I have also attempted to be as transparent as possible in discussing the problems and points of indecision that I encountered in the process, reflecting upon how these have shaped my thinking and practice. Anthropologist Giampietro Gobo states, 'one ethnographic approach, unique and universal, does not exist' (2008, pg. xv). Thus, engaging with a variety of methods allowed me to respond to the ephemerality of performances and the materiality of a fast-moving and globalised city. Conducting interviews accounted for multiple perspectives and encouraged a contextualisation of TYA that was tied to memory, personal

histories and embodied knowledge. Experiencing performances and the place in which they happen sought an understanding of others through sensorial engagement within their environment. Engaging with the archive looked to broader socio-political systems that connected TYA to the material processes of the city. The materials presented in the following chapters are therefore based on anecdotal and experience-based narratives combined with knowledge that is formal and disciplined. I respond to the range of concerns that different disciplines address and discuss the methods that I used in more detail in each chapter, drawing on a variety of case studies to illustrate the picture of the landscape of TYA in Singapore. By highlighting the richness and challenges of the field across the chapters, I aim to draw attention to the artistic and social potentials of TYA, as well as reflect on creative moments that were spontaneous and unexpected. In doing so, I hope to invoke the spirit of 'inventiveness and curiosity' that Gallagher encourages at the heart of this thesis (2008, p.2).

Overview of chapters

Previously, I mentioned van de Water's concerns with the marginalisation of TYA in the US. This thesis hopes to join a developing field of scholarship that may still be seen in some places or with some audiences as shifting in perceptions, or even struggling to legitimise itself as a serious art form. Since TYA is still a relatively new field of research at the time of writing, there is an opportunity for making an original contribution to knowledge in this area in Singapore – a process, and perhaps a responsibility, that is both exciting and intimidating. Given the diversity and openness of the field, I have chosen to tread multiple paths. Even though this thesis focuses on TYA in Singapore, it does not exist in isolation. Part of the aim of this thesis is also to draw parallels and connections between local practices and challenges that the international TYA community might face. By bringing together critical perspectives of creativity from the fields of theatre and performance studies, education, cultural geography and management, this thesis aims to connect different ways of thinking about creativity and TYA to illuminate its position in Singapore, and how it might counter and challenge capitalist forces. This research not only elucidates a corner of theatre practice that has not been critically examined, but the specific case studies that this thesis is based upon might resonate with practices and research in other cultures and contexts. With TYA in

Singapore and the region gaining interest and recognition, I anticipate that this thesis will be of relevance to theatre-makers, producers, educators and the wider field of scholarship.

The next chapter is divided into two parts. The first explores the ways that I have conceptualised creativity in my research. Here, I turn to the work of various scholars who have written about creativity and the city. These varied perspectives were a starting point for my research – from understanding creativity as a driving force in the twenty-first century economy to how it might encourage a range of cultural and social practices. The second part of the chapter aims to illuminate how a part of the nation's history has impacted on and shaped contemporary practices and perspectives of TYA. It focuses on two major milestones: the introduction of the National Arts Council Arts Education Programme and the expansion of the cultural sector that took place between 1990–2000. By positioning these narratives alongside each other, my intention is to illuminate how the convergence of theatre, educational and national agendas informed the foundations and early development of what can be described today as a TYA landscape.

Building on this, Chapter Three examines how cultural, economic and political conditions shape the ways in which contemporary TYA is produced and received in Singapore. Using *The Rainbow Fish* as a case study, I explore how I Theatre, as an example of a TYA company, manages tensions and opportunities between making art as an economic necessity and as an unfettered creative practice. By investigating some of the working practices and challenges of the company, the intention of this chapter is to illuminate how creativity, when appropriately managed, can balance between artistry and TYA's social agenda.

In Chapter Four, I reflect on my own practice as a festival manager and investigate how the ACE! Festival responded to the cultural landscape of Singapore, and shaped creative activities for children and young people. The opportunity to revisit this work as a researcher enabled me to reflect on the relationship between theatre and cultural politics in an increasingly complex global environment. Here, I analyse two productions that I programmed – *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* and *Our Island* – to illuminate how the local and global are not disconnected but, rather, symbiotically intertwined, with each informing the other. In doing so, I illustrate how the festival, in a small way, offered the audience an

opportunity to confront dichotomised concepts such as us/ them, local/ global and traditional/ contemporary, and make their own connections with the world.

Chapter Five moves TYA away from commercial spaces and popular repertoires to consider broader aspects of creative practices and forms that might be overlooked in favour of market forces. By examining The Artground, a new arts centre for children that emerged from the *Arts Master Plan* policy document, this chapter is concerned with how this venue promotes a more considered process of working, and how experimentation can lead to different forms of children's participation and social engagement.

The final chapter revisits the TYA landscape in Singapore and suggests how the force of creativity can open up possibilities to create new worlds for children and young people. The use of performance to confront uncertainties and to encourage social imaginaries has been one of the more optimistic responses to a changing world. Here, I also discuss what I have learnt over the course of the research, reflect on some of the methodological limitations and implications, and suggest future lines of inquiries.

Chapter Two
Part One: Conceptualising Creativity as a Socio-Spatial Practice

The force of creativity has played, and still plays an instrumental role in building the nation. Beyond the realm of the arts, creativity also spills into territories of politics and economics, and has played a large part in Singapore's history and its socio-political processes. Since its independence, creative strategies and practices alongside political and global changes have enabled Singapore to overcome its natural constraints of limited land, labour and market size to achieve economic growth. Across the arts, science, medicine, engineering, technology and manufacturing sectors, people have produced innovative ideas that have challenged existing paradigms and moved the nation forward. Whether it was the creative use of space and resources, creative thinking of the government or the creative arts, they all underpinned the wealth, influence and sense of worth not only of the nation, but also of communities and individuals.

In the first part of this chapter, I illustrate the ways that I have conceptualised creativity in my research. Rather than providing a detailed history about the ideas of creativity, I have chosen to outline two key areas that are useful in illuminating the context of Singapore in which TYA operates. The first examines economic impetus, where I discuss the ways in which creativity has been used as a response to global capitalism. The second explores the social dimensions of creativity, which may have been overlooked in favour of market forces. In seeking to conceptualise a framework for TYA against the fast-moving and changing backdrop of Singapore, I turn to the works of scholars that have explored the relationship between creativity and global cities. These varied perspectives were a starting point for my research – from understanding creativity as a driving force in a first-world economy to how it might encourage a range of cultural and social practices.

As a researcher who is deeply connected to the local TYA community and seeking to examine the position of TYA in Singapore, it was important for me to first recognise that creativity happens in relation to place. To further understand this, I turn to the works of geographer Harriet Hawkins who has inspired the ways in which I have approached and conceptualised creativity, particularly in her book *Creativity*:

> Creativity…has a whole set of geographies, and in turn creative practices produce geographies, they make place, shape the bodies, subjectivities and minds of those conducting them, and weave together communities and evolve environments. (2017, p.2)

Here, Hawkins examines the relationship between creativity and the materiality of place, and how this relationship influences local residents. She contends that creativity is concerned with a range of ideas, objects and practices, and is intimately bound up with the 'where' (2017, p.3). Whether it is used in urban planning, cultural policies or arts activities, considering creativity as a placed practice enhances understanding of the ways in which the location can shape the content and conduct of the creative endeavours, and, in turn, how creative activities might affect the site in which they happen. Hawkins goes on to argue that understanding the geographies of creativity not only allows an appreciation of the 'possibilities of creativity', but also critiques its 'place in contemporary economic and political spaces and processes' (2018, p.3). Thus, considering the sites where creativity happens was extremely useful in helping me understand the ways in which creativity is mapped onto the Singaporean landscape.

And Singapore, it is fair to state, is a beautiful city. Stunning cosmopolitan vistas of elegant skyscrapers are combined with manicured parklands and carefully restored heritage buildings. The city-state prides itself on its near-spotless landscape of old and new. Its raison d'etre is optimising citizens' lifestyle and showing itself to be a main contender in modern, enviable living; always evolving and reinventing itself in the same way it shook off its fishing village mantle to flourish into a vibrant metropolis. In order to achieve this within its tiny 286-square-mile surface area, there needs to be creative thinking, creative ideas and creative city planning. In July 2001, Singapore's land use planning body, the Urban Redevelopment Authority (URA), launched a city regeneration strategy. With the economic boom of the 1990s boosting the growth of Singapore, there was a new ambition from the state to further the growth of the country at the turn of the century. Under the slogan 'To Make Singapore a Great City to Live, Work and Play', this initiative sought to enhance the physical development of Singapore over a period of 50 years, with the vision of building 'a

thriving world-class city in the twenty-first century'.[24] URA chairman Bobby Chin stated in a 2001 urban report:

> In continuing to unlearn and reinvent ourselves, as well as planning with the people and for the people, URA will strive towards creating a distinct global city and the best home for those living, working and playing here in Singapore. [25]

Accompanying this launch was a poster with the slogan: 'Towards a Thriving World-Class City of the 21st Century'. Alongside this motivational tagline was an image of the Padang – which means 'field' in Malay and is a verdant expanse of lawn in the central district that was identified in 1989 for the development of the Civic and Cultural District – set against a backdrop of historical buildings and modern skyscrapers. This image captured the URA's vision of conserving the city's heritage, while also paving the way for a growing tourism industry. In addition to the poster, a Master Plan that proposed various physical changes to the city was also released.[26] In the business district, it was recommended more roads and underground spaces should be constructed to facilitate and increase the flow of people and encourage more commercial activities. As a way to improve the quality of living, island-wide parks would be built to create a greener city as well as offer more opportunities for its citizens to participate in a variety of recreational activities. Alongside this, the heartland areas would be fitted with a range of amenities and facilities to help improve the lives of its residents. It was proposed that the iconic Merlion statue be relocated to the mouth of the Singapore River and major refurbishments be made to the façade of the National Museum of Singapore to enhance the overall landscape of the Civic and Cultural District. Arguably the most significant development was the plan that detailed the transformation of the Marina Bay waterfront. Aside from a sparkling waterfront, this area would include commercial buildings, luxury hotels, a shopping district, casinos and entertainment sites. The motivation behind this expansion, according to the Singapore Tourism Board (STB), was to 'boost

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[24] Annual Report 2001/2002. Urban Redevelopment Authority Library Archives. Accessed on 18 Feb 2020 from https://www.ura.gov.sg/-/media/Corporate/Resources/Publications/Annual-Reports/PDFs/AnnualReport_2001-2002.pdf

[25] Ibid

[26] Ibid

Singapore's attractiveness as a premium destination for business and leisure visitors' that would in turn 'stimulate an additional S$2.7 billion (or approximately 0.8%) to Singapore's annual Gross Domestic Product and generate 30,000 jobs throughout the economy'.[27]
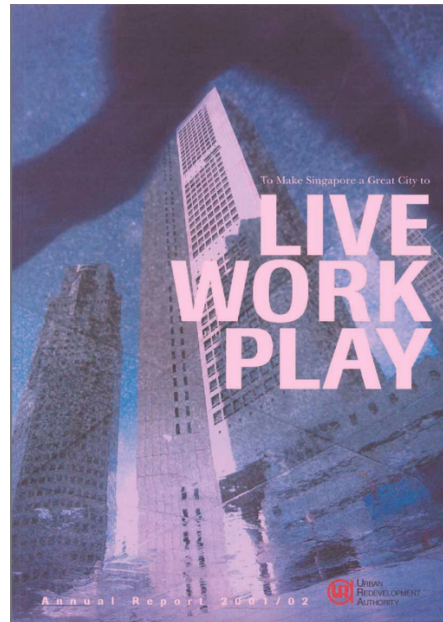
Figure 3: URA Annual Report 2001. Source: *URA Library Archives*

Figure 4: Civic and Cultural District, 2016. Source: *URA Library Archives*

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[27] 'Government Awards Marina Bay Sands Project to Las Vegas Sands Cooperation'. Singapore Tourism Board Archives. Accessed on 18 Feb 2020 from https://www.stb.gov.sg/content/stb/en/media-centre/media-releases/government-awards-marina-bay-ir-project-to-las-vegas-sands-corporation.html

This re-imagining of the city highlights how creativity was being mobilised within urban development strategies in Singapore. Whether it is through the preservation of cultural monuments, remodeling of the heartlands or constructing spectacular architectural vistas, they all contribute to the creation of a glossy urban image that is in line with the global branding of the nation. The aim of these developments was not only to create a vibrant environment for its citizens to 'live, work and play', but also to raise the nation's international profile as an economic hub and its position as a tourist hotspot. As political scientist Kenneth Paul Tan points out in his book, *Singapore: Identity, Brand, Power*, this global branding is directed at 'investors and tourists, as well as developing countries looking at Singapore as a role model, and advanced countries looking to Singapore for enhancements or even alternatives to liberal democratic approaches to governance' (2018, p.47). It is not surprising that the idea of using creativity to enhance the attractiveness of the city is being celebrated and replicated in many countries today. As Hawkins points out:

> Creativity has become a near ubiquitous strategy for urban growth, circling the world as cities from Amsterdam to Jakarta turn to the formulas for developing a 'creative city' provided by academics and policy gurus such as Richard Florida (2005), and Charles Landry (2006). (2017, p.18)

For many governments, this idea of rebranded cities powered by creativity is undeniably attractive, since it promises economic and urban progress. To further understand this, I turn to the works of Charles Landry and Richard Florida who have written widely about the 'creative city' and the economic value of creative work. In his book *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, Landry explores an approach of strategic urban planning that encourages people to think, plan and act creatively. His main thesis is that creativity has become increasingly important to cities as it is the catalyst for new ideas, wealth creation and solution to a range of urban problems. He defines the creative city in this way:

> The Creative City idea advocates the need for a culture of creativity to be embedded within how the urban stakeholders operate. It implies reassessing the regulations and incentives regime and moving towards a more 'creative bureaucracy'. Good governance is itself an asset that can generate potential and

wealth. By encouraging creativity and legitimizing the use of imagination within the public, private and community spheres, the ideas bank of possibilities and potential solutions to any urban problem or opportunity will be broadened. (2008, p.xxii)

Similarly, Florida has argued that creativity, prosperity and the city are intimately linked. In his book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, he propounds that the economy is transforming and creativity is a vital force for the economic success and prosperity of the city. Florida's definition of the creative class revolves around the entrepreneurial and cosmopolitan workers who are engaged in areas of work such as the arts and cultural sectors, research, science, law and technology. He asserts that the creative class choose to live in cities, and what he calls 'creative centres', with high concentrations of other 'creative class people' (2002, p.8). These spaces are seen to provide the creative class with an 'integrated ecosystem or habitat' in which their creativity can flourish, whilst also validating their own creative identities (2002, p.9). Furthermore, with economic growth occurring in places with highly educated and creative people, firms are now finding innovative ways to attract them. As a consequence, there is a rising emphasis placed on the 'market value' of the creative class (2002, p.30). Cities that want to succeed, according to Florida, not only need to develop creative people but must aim to attract creative types, since they are the future.

Both Landry and Florida engage with ideas of creativity that are illustrative of the economic imperative of the city. These views are illustrative of how creativity is appropriated for economic growth as well as within agendas for global development. They advocate for the development of human resources and harnessing their potentials as a way for economic and social development. Additionally, stylish urban environments and redesigned cities are also now seen as places that can enhance the city's global status as a way to attract the creative class. This formulation and operation of creativity is not only used as the core source of progress, but is also viewed as a force that can improve ways of living. As Landry argues, 'creativity is like a new currency that is more sophisticated and more powerful than finance capital' (2008, p.xxv).

The idea of a creative city and a creative class has its critics. In his book, *Against Creativity*, geographer Oli Mould challenges the ways in which creativity is wielded for profits and

argues for its potentials to resist capitalism and address social injustice and inequality. Drawing on the works of critical theorists Theodor Adorno and Max Horkeimer, Mould contends that the production and consumption of high and popular art in the twentieth century has led to the commodification of creativity across time. Over the years, he argues, the 'power to create' has shifted from being a divine power in ancient societies to become an exploitable individual trait with an 'exchange value' that is sought after by business people, companies and governments (2018, p.8). In his chapter 'The City: Concrete Creativity', Mould draws on iconic architectural and design landmarks that he regards as successful embodiments of creativity, such as the Wynwood Art District in Miami, USA, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, and Darling Harbour in Sydney, Australia. He argues that these examples illustrate how creativity can create distinctiveness while also tackling urban regeneration and enhancing the city's cultural status. In contrast, the imagined aesthetics of what a stylish urban environment should look like – a vibrant night life, craft-based industries, luxury services etc. – has led to the homogenising of cityscapes, with cities losing their identity because they all end up looking the same (2018, p.157). Mould goes further by accusing the creative city agenda of exploiting the 'social and emotional labour' of creative work in its quest to generate profits – a process he terms 'artwashing' (2018, p.161). Some examples of contrived creative attempts include featuring graffiti art in gentrified neighbourhoods to make them appear more hip and trendy (and thus increasing rents), or converting old buildings into art galleries not for the sake of art, but to attract creative-minded and well-paid workers to occupy the neighbourhood and gentrify it, which in return raises rents and drives out the less wealthy residents. It is here, he states, that forms of artistic protests through subversive interventions and collaborative ways of working can offer 'creative resistance' to gentrification and the powers of capitalism (2018, p.173). Rather than 'releasing the inner entrepreneur', he advocates for creativity that can, and should, 'release the inner revolutionary' (2018, p.53).

Using creativity to boost the economy, improve quality of life and enhance the image of the city is a common theme that runs through many studies in Singapore. As I explained in the previous chapter, being a small country of humble origins, and without any natural resources, this monetised version of creativity appeals to politicians, business leaders and policymakers, and is closely aligned with the political ambitions of the government. While

the creative city script predominantly revolves around Western cities, Singapore has adopted and embedded some of these ideas in its nation building strategies. In particular, the language of creativity can be found in various educational and cultural policies and practices over the past two decades. Here, I turn to three studies that illustrate how this version of creativity has been intertwined with the building of the city-state.

In the chapter, 'Constructive Creativity in the Context of Singapore', educationalist Ai-Girl Tan examines some of the socio-cultural practices and milestones in the education sector that contributed to the development of the nation. She defines constructive creativity as 'knowing, making, looking forward, problem-posing and doing something good for the people', and that it exists in all aspects of life (2016, p.411). Tan references various creative strategies employed by the government that include expanding the physical landscape through land reclamation, solving the water shortage, promoting racial harmony and reforming education in schools. She argues that the idea of 'constructive creativity' has been instrumental in Singapore's survival and prosperity. Additionally, she illustrates the ways in which the government has placed a huge focus on its educational policies across time to ensure that children are equipped with the necessary skills for employment. Here, she describes the changes in the education sector over the years and identifies a paradigm shift from the early 'vocational' training in the 1970s and 1980s to 'creative pedagogies' from the 1990s onwards (2016, p.414). These creative programmes, which include student-centred learning, cross-cultural projects and information and communication technologies, were considered useful to cultivate problem-solving skills and critical thinking amongst the students. According to Tan, the 'tools for constructive creativity' encouraged a more 'balanced education' and were useful for 'future entrepreneurism' (2016, p.418).

Writing more specifically about the relationship between creativity and the cultural sector, geographer Lily Kong in her article 'Ambitions of a Global City: Arts, Culture and Creative Economy in "Post-Crisis" Singapore' charts some of the key cultural policies that illuminate how the arts was used to advance economic and cultural growth in Singapore. In the first two decades after the nation gained independence, the government was concerned with the survivability of its people. As a result, policies mostly leaned towards creating better jobs, housing, education, healthcare and, more importantly, ensuring that the country could

sustain itself. As standards of living began to improve and Singapore began moving out of its Third World conditions, policymakers were able to start focusing on improving culture and the arts. However, Singapore suffered a major setback in the late 1980s and early 1990s because of an economic recession, which understandably meant prioritising the economic agenda. During this period, the government had identified the arts and culture sector as one of the key areas that could be developed for economic gain. Here, Kong explains how the Economic Development Board (EDB) had allocated S$1 billion to develop and upgrade infrastructural arts and culture facilities (e.g. theatre, museums, heritage and cultural centres), grow clusters to attract the 'creative class', and facilitate the entry of talented individuals into the creative and media industries in Singapore. These economic investments, as Kong notes, were seen as a way that could 'contribute to the tourist and entertainment sectors' and 'attract global workers' (2012, p.265). Whilst recognising the various cultural and social values of the arts, this was a calculated move to strategically align economic policy with the arts and culture sector, and was to prepare Singapore for the 'transition from an industrial to a creative economy' (2012, p.286). Here, Kong points out that ideas around a 'creative economy' emerged from the definition and conceptual framework of the 'creative industries'. As defined by the Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA), the creative industries are 'industries which are inspired by cultural and artistic creativity and have the potential to create new economic value through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property'.[28] The media and design sectors were added to the arts and culture sector to form the 'creative industries', as all three were considered to have potential to creating economic value for the country beyond trade and manufacturing (2012, p.280). With the aim of repositioning and transforming Singapore into a 'Global City of the Arts', establishing a 'creative economy' was a strategy to enhance the attractiveness of city and boost the nation's profile as an arts hub.

While the creative industries framework is an effective business model that focuses on economic benefits, as well as beautifying a city and creating new opportunities, this

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[28] The Ministry of Information, Communication and the Arts (MICA) is now known as the Ministry of Communications and Information (MCI). Website. Accessed on 20 June 2017 from https://www.mci.gov.sg/pressroom/news-and-stories/pressroom/2004/11/the-creative-industries-asias-new-age-and-edge--singapores-experience-in-developing-the-creative-industries

approach overlooks the inherent social values of the arts. Extending the reach of the arts to involve all communities from all backgrounds defies the image of exclusivity that cultural pastimes can have. Providing equal opportunities will grant everyone access to a more cultivated upbringing, which will improve self-expression, stimulate the imagination and enhance well-being. Therefore, however important creativity might be for financial growth and advancing policies, there is a need to consider the counter-narrative. As Hawkins argues, privileging creativity that is tied to economic activities 'exclude other dimensions of creativity and those individuals whose creativity is not primarily conducted through economic logics' (2017, p.8). Since the introduction of the *Arts Master Plan*, several attempts have been made by practitioners in the TYA sector, despite the economic challenges, to move away from the commercial world and engage with less affluent children in the local neighbours of Singapore. This shift reveals that, as much as creativity is an economic practice, it is also a social one.

Despite the evident importance of creativity's social benefits, this is largely overshadowed by the importance placed by Singapore on arts as an economic industry. Unsurprisingly, this has attracted critique from political scientists Terrence Lee and Denise Lim. In their article, 'The Economics and Politics of "Creativity" in Singapore', they discuss the ways in which creative industries have exploited the arts for economic gain. However, like Kong, they do recognise the positive financial and quality of life outcomes that have come as a result of state investment into creative cities. Notably, the *Singapore Cultural Statistics Report* stated that the arts and culture sector alone contributed approximately S$43 million to the economy in 1986, with this figure bourgeoning to S$922 million in 2003.[29] But, despite this economic growth, Lee and Lim argue that repackaging the city-state as 'a creative and vibrant place to "live, work and play"' draws too much upon a generic blueprint model. Rubber-stamped cultural policies and proposals, they state, tend to reflect the government's intent to keep up with global trends, rather than focus on the cultural and social vibrancy of creative practices (2004, p.150). They reference Florida's definition of creativity and argue that the economic motivations have made 'the harnessing of new ideas,

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[29] 'How the Arts and Culture Sector Could Vitalise Singapore's Economy'. The Epoch Times: Singapore Edition. 21 Dec 2018. Accessed on 13 Feb 2019 from: https://epochtimes.today/how-the-arts-and-culture-sector-could-vitalises-singapores-economy/

solutions or products' a challenge to attain in Singapore (2004, p.156). An example they highlight is Singapore's dependence on imported goods owing to an absence of its own natural resources. This dependence, while economically most viable, has contributed to the privileging of cultural and creative products from international sources, particularly from the West. But this has social consequences: local artists and cultural workers are deprived of spaces and opportunities to explore and nurture their craft, resulting in a 'decrease in "creativity"' (2004, p.157). To counter this situation, Lee and Lim propose that the mindsets of the authorities and citizens need to be changed before Singapore's own creative and innovative identity can emerge.

These studies demonstrate how creativity is fuelled by global capitalism and is interwoven with the economic and political narrative of Singapore. They reflect the intersection between creativity's economic value and the nation's ambition, driven by commerce, knowledge and progress. In these contexts, creativity is used as an entrepreneurial, urban and tourism solution for the economy, rather than purely as an arts practice. The ambitions of the Singapore government resonate with Landry's idea of how cities 'want to move up the value chain' to become 'central hubs of wealth creation where they can increase their drawing power' (2008, p.xviii). Although this might help to advance the economy and enhance the nation's cultural status, it is important to recognise that appropriating the arts, and turning it from a form of creative expression into a tool for generating profits and gentrification, can trouble the role of the artist and the social values of the arts.

The tension for TYA in Singapore lies in the entangled relationship between arts practices and economic activities that are driven by productivity, sustainability and profits. This raises questions about who is making TYA, what kind of work they are obliged to make, and how they respond to material and political conditions in contemporary Singapore. TYA, like other art forms, exist within the cultural landscape, which is in turn shaped by material and economic circumstances, making TYA ineluctably harnessed to government strategy. So, in an increasingly competitive environment, the boundaries between commerce and the arts have become muddied. On one hand, cultural activities for children have been used to justify continued investments and gentrification in keeping with the 'creative' appearance of the city. On the other, theatre-makers struggle to stay true to their artistic integrity in a

competitive market. During my research, I have encountered TYA companies whose survivability is largely hinged on state funding and box office sales. In an attempt to fulfil a set of criteria imposed by funding agencies and educational organisations, creative practices are sometimes compromised and moulded to fit the demands of the market. Behind closed doors, interests are pitted against one another, with producers and directors competing to obtain the rights to a popular title, rushing to secure a theatre venue or outdoing one another by staging a more glitzy and spectacular production. In more commercial settings, imported Broadway and West End-type productions are focused on increasing tourism and thus are exploiting the arts scene for economic gain. Furthermore, international productions command exorbitant ticket prices compared with local productions,[30] widening the gap between rich and poor arts consumption, and thus put a wedge between different classes. As a festival manager, I have also found myself in a moral quandary about programming popular productions that could attract large number of audiences as a way to generate profits for the company. In these situations, I ensured that some of the revenues were channelled into developing experimental and more intimate works. All these issues signal a cultural climate that is driven by global capitalism, where TYA artists and companies are pressured to think and act entrepreneurially.

One way to understand TYA as a social practice is to remove the angle of TYA as a commercial commodity. Here, I turn to social anthropologists Elizabeth Hallam and Tim Ingold who, in their book *Creativity and Cultural Improvisation*, offer a spatial analysis of creativity that challenges the perception that creativity can only be found in sites of artistic display and in the domains where talented individuals reside. Using a theatrical metaphor, they challenge that 'there is no script for social and cultural life', in that all aspects of life involve 'improvisation' (2007, p.1). Creativity, they suggest, can be found everywhere. In their words:

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[30] An average ticket for Disney's *The Lion King* range between S$80-180 compared with a ticket for an I Theatre production that costs S$25-$30. I will discuss these tensions later in Chapter Four. *The Lion King* website. Accessed 4 June 2017 from: http://lionkinginternational.com/singapore/

Creativity is a process that living beings undergo as they make their way through the world….It is that this process is going on, all the time, in the circulations and flows of materials that surround us and indeed of which we make – of the earth we stand on, the water that allows it to bear fruit, the air we breathe, and so on. (2007, p.11)

This view recognises that all individuals are connected to multiple routes, places and cultural forms, and that they work out ways of knowing and doing as they go along. These interactions between the individuals and their environments illustrate that creativity is embodied; it is a fluid and unfinished process. In much the same way, they assert that creative practices are neither fixed nor stagnant but are always evolving in response to their given circumstances. Hallam and Ingold offer a way of reading creativity that looks at improvised 'productive processes' rather than outcomes (2007, p.3). Favouring creativity as 'improvisation' as opposed to 'innovation', they propose that creativity should be read forwards, 'in terms of the movements that gave rise to them', rather than backwards, 'in terms of its results' (2007, p.3). This forward way of reading thus challenges the idea that creativity arises only from individual talents and ready-made products, and highlights the collaborative, generative and social dimensions in creative processes.

In *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the Cultural Economy,* cultural geographer Tim Edensor and his co-authors build on Hallam and Ingold's idea of cultural improvisation and challenge the prevailing discourses surrounding creative cities. In their introduction, they critique the work of Florida and his concept of the 'creative class', but also acknowledge that his view on the economic value of creative work has become an influential thesis to policy-makers and scholars. One of their main arguments is that the concept of the creative class and creative cities has rebranded artists as entrepreneurs and has privileged 'large metropolitan centres as sites of cultural productions' (2010, p.5). In doing so, it has created 'a spatial other' (2009, p.1). They argue that when these marginalised spaces (that include homes, sheds, and gardens) are juxtaposed with the dominant narratives surrounding the creative nature of the urban centres, they are often dismissed as 'cultural deserts devoid of coolness' (2010, p.1). As a result, these distinctions have led to consumerist patterns being articulated around a series of spatial oppositions such as local/ global, suburban/

metropolitan, and urban/ rural. Here, the metropolitan is also caught up in relation with the non-metropolitan, coolness with the uncool, and so creativity becomes entangled with what is thought to be uncreative (2010, p.13–14). It is in this context, they assert, that creativity has far more complex and nuanced geographies, and argue for a rethinking of marginal and everyday spaces where creative activities also take place. Other contributing authors also discuss a variety of 'vernacular' creative practices, ranging from rural festivals, community gardening, and Christmas light displays – all of which would be excluded from Florida's creative cities. They argue that it is important to consider a broader and more inclusive concept of what constitutes creativity, as creative practices in these alternate spaces offer the chance to 'reveal and illuminate the mundane as a site of resistance, affect and potentialities' (2010, p.10).

The works of Hallam and Ingold, and Edensor and his co-authors, have been hugely influential in shaping my thinking about creativity in marginalised spaces and as part of everyday life, as these are areas that I had overlooked during my professional practice. Although my research primarily focuses on the material and political circumstances that shape the production and reception of TYA in Singapore, these views inspired me to also consider the ways in which 'social dynamics connect local practices to wider networks of cultural and economic activity' (2010, p.15). Against Singapore's global backdrop, these important, and also rather optimistic, theories of creativity provide a critical framework to analyse how theatre practitioners, cultural organisations and their collaborators participate in various strategies of resistance that favour non-economic practices. Creativity might provide an important contribution to the debates of the creative class and gentrification of the city, but it also provides a space for cultivating alternative practices that can engage with economies of generosity, care, playful politics and experimenting with urban spaces.

The recognition that creativity has spatial, social and generative dimensions has a number of implications for TYA. Firstly, by disassociating TYA from the novelty value of commercial products, it offers a way to consider the social dimensions and the evolution of TYA, rather than analysing it as a 'finished' theatrical product. Secondly, acknowledging that creativity is always in the making celebrates the risks, messiness and even failures of TYA, which expands the possibilities of the field. Finally, it seeks new ways to invent art and society that

exist outside of the profit-seeking world. Recently, there has been a growing interest in TYA that moves beyond box office sales and challenges the market. During the course of researching and writing this thesis, I was afforded the opportunity to meet and engage with artists and companies who have shifted their work from the seductive charm of the urban centre to engage with communities in the suburbs. For example, the site of The Artground (the dedicated children's arts centre) is a refurbished school hall that is deliberately located away from the civic centre. The ambition was to encourage artists to experiment with ideas and working practices that are disassociated from the commercial theatres as a way to develop new experiences for children. In the heartlands, several theatre groups have also partnered with infant care centres and social welfare organisations to create and bring performances to non-theatrical spaces, such as community centres and hospitals. I am not suggesting that the works in these spaces are free from the forces of capitalism and the challenges associated with them. However, with a growing emphasis placed on building a more inclusive society and nurturing the next generation in more holistic ways, TYA and creativity have experienced a reinvigorated, unadulterated dynamism in Singapore. This signals an energising and growing TYA community that is developing creative ways to resist the commercial world, recognising Mould's idea that 'true creativity is to seek out the tiny voices offering viable alternatives to the injustices of capitalism' and collectively resisting 'those that seek to appropriate them' (2018, p.184).

These debates around the creative city and theories of creativity were useful in helping me conceptualise how creativity might be re-envisioned by analysing the relationship between creativity and the materiality of place. By putting creativity within a place, it provides a critical framework to examine the intersections and notable tensions between TYA and the different political, economic and social territories in their given contexts. Furthermore, conceptualising creativity as a socio-spatial practice embraces a range of activities that is evolving and responding to the changing landscapes of the city. This not only opens a way to examine the multiple practices and potentials of TYA and creativity, but also as Hawkins suggests, 'fulfil the possibilities for remaking worlds' (2017, p.346).

The focus on TYA and children in Singapore has always been orientated towards the future, but it is important to acknowledge that this knowledge is also built on the past. One way to

understand how TYA is shaped by the place from which it emerges is to reflect on the ways history and geography might have influenced its principles, practices and implementation. In the next part of this chapter, I examine how part of Singapore's history has shaped the role and place of theatre for children. This will illuminate the ways in which TYA has been 'made and remade rather than replicated' (2017, p.4). By tracing some of the cultural policies and political milestones in Singapore's history between 1980–2000, my aim is to draw attention to the landscapes that capture the narrative of theatre for children and young people, and uncover a corner of theatre practice that is culturally, geographically and politically situated.

Part Two: Creative Learning, Urban Transformation and the Rise of Theatre for Young Audiences

The second part of this chapter aims to elucidate thematic concerns of TYA between 1980–2000. Although dramatic performances for (as well as with and by) children in Singapore have a long and rich history that dates back to the pre-colonial period, they were mostly rooted in ritualistic practices or had links to traditional performances. It was not until the 1980s that the idea and provision of theatre for children as a form of entertainment started to come to the fore. The early inception of TYA in Singapore, or what was more commonly termed 'children's theatre', can be traced back to act 3 – the first TYA production company in Singapore, established in 1984 (the original name of the company is in lower case). After a decade of creating and presenting a range of theatrical productions for local audiences, it was announced in 1994 that the company would separate and operate as two independent businesses – ACT 3 Theatrics and ACT 3 International. Both companies would later go on to develop their own identity and focus on different theatrical activities for children and young people. In constructing a historical narrative for TYA, I have chosen to focus on act 3 as a starting point because its story as the pioneer of children's theatre in Singapore illuminates several connections between history, creativity and children, and hints at the social priorities of the day. In particular, the separation of the company coincided with a period of significant economic growth and cultural change in Singapore, and a time where there was an emphasis on developing children's creativity and creative approaches to learning.

Building on the story of act 3, I shall examine two milestones that have informed the foundations and early development of what can be described today as the TYA sector. The first examines the National Arts Council Arts Education Programme (NAC-AEP) and its impact on children's theatre. In 1993, the NAC-AEP was introduced to primary and secondary schools to provide students with an opportunity to engage with the arts in the school environment. On a national level, these programmes emphasised the importance of the arts amongst children, in the hopes of nurturing a future generation that would appreciate its values. The second explores the urban and cultural development that emerged in the mid-1990s, during which the arts, heritage, media and design sectors started to gain recognition for their economic value. This was in part due to the ambition of the

Singaporean government at that time to boost the profile of the nation, which resulted in the state investing significant resources into building new infrastructures, supporting artistic development and rebranding the city. The introduction of NAC-AEP in schools, along with the changing cultural landscape, signalled a political shift. By positioning these two milestones alongside each other, my intention is to offer a historical account of TYA that intersects with some of the changes of the city. In doing so, I aim to illustrate the ways in which national policies influenced practitioners working in the field and how they responded to the socio-political changes and challenges of the time.

Constructing a historical narrative for Theatre for Young Audiences

In the previous chapter, I explained that there is currently no comprehensive academic research on TYA in Singapore. Other than the occasional list of children and family events in the local newspaper and a brief mention of act 3 in the book *Theatre Life!: a history of English-language theatre in Singapore through the Straits Times (1958–2000)* (2001), by journalist Clarissa Oon, practices and participation in theatre aimed at the young have not been documented or analysed. As identified by Singapore theatre director and educator, Jeffery Tan in 'Mapping the Archives: 9', despite the wealth of information on people, policies and practices in Singapore dating back as early as 1938, nationwide archives such as The National Archives of Singapore and National Online Repository of the Arts hold almost no accounts of Young People's Theatre, Drama in Education, Theatre in Education or Applied Drama. He observes that, while some companies still possess old scripts and production documents, there are still many important practices that have yet to be recorded, which makes it a challenge for current and future practitioners to 'reflect on past practices' (2018, p.132). Given this lack of information, the challenge is to construct a history of TYA that has yet to be critically interrogated, documented, and questioned.

My methodological approach in constructing a historical narrative for TYA was inspired by the works of performance studies scholar Diane Taylor. In her book, *The Archive and the Repertoire*, Taylor draws on various case studies from the Americas to illuminate how performance is a 'vital act of transfer' that can transmit cultural memory, identities and social knowledge (2003, p.2). Her main argument is that both the archive (text, documents, materials) and the repertoire (spoken languages, social practices, ritual, gestures) are valued

sites of transmission and knowledge-making. Taylor recognises but rejects the ways that writing has represented and replaced embodied knowledge. It is here that she contends the repertoire of embodied memory can offer alternative perspectives, and is particularly useful in reconsidering historical processes:

> The repertoire…enacts embodied memory, performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance, singing – in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge.…The repertoire requires presence: people participate in the production and reproduction of knowledge by "being there", being a part of the transmission. As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same. (2003, p.20)

Rather than viewing and placing these two approaches at opposite ends of the spectrum, she argues that the constant state of interaction between the two can contribute to the making of social relationships and cultural meaning. Following Taylor, I was inspired by the idea of the archive and the repertoire. My methodology for constructing a TYA past therefore involves two contrasting but mutually reliant modes of enquiry that draws on personal stories and official documents. Firstly, I interviewed three groups of people – theatre practitioners, arts managers and educators – as a way to (re)trace and chart how ideas, practices and values of TYA have travelled and evolved over time. As I have explained in the previous chapter, much of the history of TYA and its past practices exist in the embodied memories of these people that have yet to be documented. Notably, I interviewed two of the founding directors of act 3, Rama Chandran and Ruby Lim-Yang, to learn more about the company and some of the motivations and circumstances that shaped the early work. Alongside these conversations, I also invited them to share old photographs and programmes to evoke memories and particular histories of TYA. These forms of knowledge that are connected to consciousness, patterns of thinking and varied worldviews offered me an insight into the early principles and practices of TYA through the lived experience of these people.

My second mode of enquiry investigates cultural policies, newspapers and official reports. Additionally, I also turned to oral and written accounts in the National Library Board Archive

and National Archives of Singapore (NAS) – the official archive of Singapore's collective memory – and drew on significant government speeches and interviews. Theatre historian, Bruce A. McConachie, in his article 'Towards a Postpositivist Theatre History', argues that the investigation of the past needs to go beyond the aesthetics of theatre to consider how cultural contexts have influenced these modes of reception. For McConachie, the 'social-historical roles, actions and perceptions constitute the fundamental stuff out of which theatrical events emerge' 1985, p.464). He argues that these events play an important role in understanding the '"who", "what", "why" of the theatrical production' (1985, p.465). This view suggests that theatre practices are linked to broader structures and society at large, which involves considering the material, political and economic conditions that shape the ways in which it is produced and received in its given context. This approach was useful in that it allowed me to engage with knowledge that is formal, objective and disciplined, and move beyond personal stories to uncover a range of wider national interests and political agendas. Furthermore, they also enabled me to make connections between TYA and the official narratives of the nation.

It is important to recognise that the historical moments and milestones that I have chosen to highlight in this chapter constitute a construction of a past that is selective and subjective, as any such attempt is bound to be. My purpose is not to uncover a list of the most innovative works in Singapore but, rather, illuminate a small corner of theatre practice for children that is currently absent in the theatre history of Singapore. Erika Fischer-Lichte, theatre historiography scholar, urges theatre historians to consider research construction in this way:

> Choose research subjects that fall within their fields of expertise, select performance events that are productive for answering their research questions, and – using the documents and sources available to them – write a history as one possible history rather than the definitive history. (2014, p.72)

This view suggests that history should not be taken as an absolute, nor its events be looked at from their beginnings. Following Fischer-Lichte, rather than construct a unified and ordered chronology of TYA in Singapore or present a journey of theatrical practices, I offer a

diverse view of TYA, exposing its dynamics in order to reflect the ever-shifting web of material and political conditions of the city. Analysing both personal stories and formal documents meant that I could present a TYA history that is official and imaginative, critical and creative, and engage with a past that makes connections in all directions. By positioning TYA within a longer tradition and series of political and cultural shifts, it opened a way to explore how theatre for children has endured and evolved across time.

The story of act 3: pioneers and professionalism in children's theatre

Dialogues and debates about TYA in Singapore always make reference to the company act 3. act 3 was established in July 1984 and is Singapore's first children's theatre company. Over the years, the company has been widely recognised by policy-makers, practitioners and audiences for its artistic contributions to the cultural sector and commitment to children. Although act 3's intentions and working practices might differ from TYA artists and companies today, the company has played a major role in influencing practitioners and audiences across time, and marks an important milestone in a TYA narrative. As lawyer and educationalist Kirpal Singh said in his opening speech at the PRUDENTIAL CHILDREN FIRST! Theatre Festival of Children in 2001:

> We in Singapore have tended to reward mainly the adult practitioners, forgetting that it is in childhood that the real love for the arts is nurtured and nourished. As far as I know, only act 3 has all along held faithfully to this belief and valued Children's Theatre for its own sake, frequently forgoing profits for real contact and experience. Of course, in more recent years, others have come into the arena, and their entry is to be welcomed for the more children's events and activities we have the better.... act 3, with its very humble start is today truly recognised as a most important theatre group by those who know the arena well: this is true not just of us in Singapore but of many around the region and beyond. Let us, together, help give these wonderful people the muscle they need to become a permanent and vital part of our Singaporean experience. [31]

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[31] Singh, Kirpal. Speech at the Prudential Children First! Theatre Festival. Accessed on 15 March 2015 from: http://www.mysmu.edu/faculty/kirpals/03e%20Pub%20Speech.html

It is clear from this statement that act 3 is an important company that has made a significant cultural contribution to the local and regional landscape. The idea of creating art 'for its own sake' as opposed to 'profits' not only highlights the altruistic intentions and social commitment of the company, but also hints at the environment that it operated in. Reflecting on act 3 through a contemporary lens thus helped me imagine the beginnings of TYA. I was interested in learning if the company could offer insights into a past that reflected broader challenges and trends which society was grappling with. Particularly, I was curious to find out if there were links between the memories of the founders and the socio-political circumstances of the time. To do so, I interviewed Chandran and Lim-Yang, and visited the National Archives of Singapore to understand how the company came into being as well as some of these concerns.

During the 1980s, television programmes were the dominant source of entertainment for many families, leaving theatrical activities, mostly by a few amateur theatre groups (e.g. Experimental Theatre Company, The Stage Club and Scene Shifters), to operate on a relatively modest and sporadic scale.[32] The founding members of the group – Ruby Lim-Yang, Rama Chandran and Jasmin Samat-Simon – began their first collaboration in an acting and writing workshop that was organised by Radio and Television Singapore (RTS) in 1979. The national media station had planned to create a local English television drama series for children and invited the trio to work on it. However, on 7 September that same year, former Prime Minister, Kwan Yew Lee, launched the Speak Mandarin campaign as part of the government's efforts to enhance language proficiency in the school curriculum. The aim of the policy was to implement a single language discourse for Chinese citizens, improve communications, and cultivate a Mandarin-speaking environment that would facilitate the introduction of a Bilingual Education Programme in schools in subsequent years.[33] As a consequence of this policy, more resources were invested into producing Mandarin television programmes and entertainment. This led to the gradual decline of English

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[32] Oral History Interviews Archive, Reel 6. National Archives of Singapore. Accessed on 12 Feb 2017 from: https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/88fb76d2-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=chandran%20act%203&keywords-type=all
[33] Speak Mandarin Campaign. National Library Board Archive. Retrieved 10 November 2015 from: http://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_2013-07-04_122007.html

television programmes and the eventual termination of the children's drama series, causing Lim-Yang, Samat-Simon and Chandran to abandon the project.

Despite the setback, Chandran shared in an interview that collaborating with Lim-Yang and Samat-Simon on the television series had 'stirred up a passion in them to create quality content for children'.[34] This motivation was also fuelled by the lack of a theatre scene and, more so, the absence of theatrical performances that were available to children and families. For these reasons, the three members decided to form act 3 in 1981 (an informal theatrical society during that time). The group would mostly perform in bookshops and community centres due to the lack of theatre spaces during that period. The early vision of the group, as stated by Chandran, was to 'tell good stories in innovative ways to as many young people as possible, wherever they are'.[35]

Over the next two years, these performances started to gain popularity amongst the audience, which resulted in the group producing an average of four productions every month to meet with increasing demand. The intensity and efforts of the group eventually caught the attention of the government. Chandran explains that 'the peak and turning point' for ACT 3 was an invitation by the Ministry of Culture in 1983 to perform a production of *Treasure Island* at the Drama Festival.[36] First launched in 1978, this festival was a prestigious national event and was part of the government's initiative to 'invigorate the local arts scene'.[37] The performance of *Treasure Island* attracted a large audience and received very positive feedback. One of the audience members, Jeffrey Tan, then aged twelve, recalled:

> *Treasure Island* blew my mind. I was amazed at how creative and inventive the
> company was. Even though there were only three performers, they managed to

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[34] Chandran, Rama. Interview. ACT 3 Theatrics office, 15 Nov 2015.
[35] Ibid
[36] Ibid
[37] Drama Festival. National Library Board Archive. Accessed on 15 Nov 2017 from:
https://eresources.nlb.gov.sg/infopedia/articles/SIP_324_2005-01-07.html

capture the attention of both and the children and adults in the crowd....This performance was what got me interested in theatre.[38]

Figure 5: *Treasure Island* by act 3 at Bras Basah Park – Drama Festival, 1983

The growing rapport between the company and the audience, and the increase in recognition from the state, inspired the three members to develop their brand of children's theatre. On 1 July 1984, act 3 became the first registered theatre company and, more importantly, the first children's theatre company in Singapore. The transformation from an informal group to an official company reinforced the status of act 3 as the pioneers of children's theatre in Singapore, and strengthened the members' social commitment to the next generation. In the words of Chandran: 'We wanted to take children's theatre in Singapore to the next level and show people that children's theatre is a professional and serious art form'.[39] To advance their vision of making theatre accessible to children, the members created the Living Room Theatre – an initiative that brought theatre programmes and activities to non-theatrical spaces such as homes, libraries, public parks – with the hope of reaching new audiences and developing their interest in theatre. Furthermore, with Chinese television programmes dominating social life and leisure time, there was a

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[38] Tan, Jeffrey. Interview. ACT 3 Theatrics office, 15 Nov, 2015.
[39] Chandran, Rama. 'The Journeys and Reflections'. ACT 3 Theatrics Blog. Accessed on 15 June 2015 from: http://act3theatrics.blogspot.com

deliberate focus by the company to develop an English language theatrical repertoire, often revolving around popular Western fairy tales (such as *Jack and the Beanstalk*, *Goldilocks and The Three Bears*, and *The Three Little Pigs*) as a way to offer an alternate form of entertainment to children. ACT 3 was also invited to produce more commercial productions for larger venues. For example, the company was commissioned shortly after its formation to create the *Strawberry Shortcake Extravaganza*, a full-length musical based on the popular children's television programme, for the World Trade Centre Auditorium that involved a cast of 30 children and adults.[40] Over the next decade, the company grew in size and prominence, eventually acquiring their own premises and staging original plays in larger theatre spaces.

Figure 6: The company of act 3, 1984

After a decade of working together, act 3 announced in 1994 that they would disband and operate as two independent organisations: ACT 3 Theatrics and ACT 3 International. Although both companies continued to focus on promoting children's theatre, their missions and visions were very different from each other. As Lim-Yang stated: 'While we might have different creative approaches and offer different styles of children's theatre, our

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[40] Oral History Interviews Archive, Reel 6. National Archives of Singapore. Accessed on 12 Feb 2017 from: https://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/oral_history_interviews/record-details/88fb76d2-1162-11e3-83d5-0050568939ad?keywords=chandran%20act%203&keywords-type=all

core beliefs will always be the same'.[41] ACT 3 Theatrics, commanded by Artistic Director R. Chandran, continued to build on the earlier works and success of the company. With the aim of building and enlivening the local cultural sector, the company continued to support local performers as well as develop children's creativity and their sense of imagination through theatrical activities. It was also during this time that the National Arts Council's Arts Education Programme was introduced, which resulted in schools seeking specific programmes from the company. Chandran said:

> In order for our art scene to grow, we need to groom our local talent and dramatically increase the theatre-going population. The best way to do this is to train actors, cultivate our young audiences and get the schools on your side.… Of course, we also have the Arts Education Programme to thank – it opened so many doors for us. We started to get requests for assembly shows, drama activities, voice workshops.… These activities and collaborations with schools and large corporations also meant that adults and children all over Singapore get to experience the magic of theatre. Children's theatre is a big responsibility, but an even bigger joy.[42]

In contrast, Lim-Yang's new vision for ACT 3 International focused on presenting international productions on the Singaporean stage, as well as collaborating with artists from around the world. Additionally, she also started the ACT 3 Drama Academy that provided 'active and aesthetically interactive workshops for children'.[43] Lim-Yang's approach to children's theatre opposed Chandran's in terms of scope. She explained:

> For children's theatre to grow in Singapore, we need to look beyond ourselves. ACT 3 International was created to oversee the development of Arts Education not just in Singapore but also to seek adventures and opportunities overseas for performances, projects and programmes, and this led us to establishing ourselves as festival presenters presenting large flagship arts events like CHILDREN

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[41] Lim-Yang, Ruby. Interview. ACT 3 International office, 18 December 2015.
[42] Chandran, Rama. Interview, ACT 3 Theatrics office, 15 November 2015.
[43] Lim-Yang, Ruby. Interview, ACT 3 International office, 18 December 2015

FIRST!, Singapore's most visible children's arts festival which went onto pioneer other festivals for children in Singapore….When we started, the Singaporean theatre landscape was also growing and this gave us the opportunity to dream big and look beyond Singapore.[44]

The story of act 3 illuminates a number of connections between the role of theatre and society of the day. The early works of the company sought to promote children's theatre as an art form in itself, but its branching out in the 1990s signalled a move away from this original outlook. It should be noted at this point that my intention is not to examine the political motives of the directors, nor the reasons for the decision to split the company. Instead, I focus on two central concerns that reflect the relationship between children's theatre and the changing landscape of that period.

Firstly, the history of act 3 reflects the early ideologies and principles that characterise children's theatre in Singapore. Whether performed in community centres, public parks or in theatrical spaces, these performances, as opposed to television shows, were considered by the company to be beneficial to children and provided an alternative form of entertainment that was engaging and energetic. Although it was not the company's explicit intention to use theatre to educate, the theatrical form and content of these performances allowed children to engage with knowledge alongside the fun. It was not until the introduction of the government's arts education programme, later on in the 1990s, that the state and schools started to pay more attention to the instructive function of theatre. Taking theatre to schools meant that theatre-makers had to engage with the politics of both theatre and education, as well as create new modes of communication that could meet a set of pedagogical outcomes. What is worth highlighting here is that, although the political agenda has changed, the idea that TYA can develop children emotionally, socially and intellectually has taken various forms and endured over the years.

Secondly, the splitting of act 3 into two different companies suggests that theatre had become increasingly linked to commercial opportunities and international movements,

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[44] Ibid

creating a new relationship between TYA and the city. The global focus of ACT 3 International reveals that TYA was becoming intertwined with market forces, and also highlights the idea of TYA as a commodity. Whether it was presenting international works, starting a festival or creating workshops for children, these activities reflect a forward shift in professional theatre, and suggest that the audience taste and preferences were also changing. In an environment where theatre and the commercial market started to overlap, this also mean that the material worlds of children and their families were slowly altering.

The setting up of the two separate ACT 3 companies was a result of a climate where arts, education and business were converging, which pushed the development of theatre for children in two directions. In the first, theatre practitioners were finding effective ways to articulate and account for theatre's aesthetic and playful dimension more than ever before. In the second, the role of theatre as an educational tool was becoming recognised and pressed into service by the state. These two areas are not necessarily incompatible, but they often seem to be in tension with one another. I will explore this artistic and educational overlap in detail in the next chapter, but what is worth highlighting is that the idea of theatre as a vehicle for the instruction and edification of children needed to be organised in a structured and systematic manner. It is here that the NAC-AEP came into play. To provide an insight into some of the social and economic implications on TYA that resulted from the NAC-AEP, I will first explain the reasons that led to the nation's shift towards creative approaches to learning, before examining how the NAC-AEP reconfigured the relationship between theatre and education.

The National Arts Council Arts Education Programme and creative learning

The post-independence years of the nation (1965-1985), as I have illustrated earlier in this chapter, were politically and socially unstable, with policies understandably prioritising the basic needs of the people, as well as the survival of the nation. After declaring independence, there was a dire situation: mass unemployment, housing crisis, land shortages and the lack of natural resources. In *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, William Peterson notes that citizens in the first decade of nationhood (1965–1975) were less interested in the arts and more concerned that 'their proverbial rice bowls remained full' (2011, p.11). Hence, arts and cultural policies were

rarely considered by policy-makers, and when they did, were mostly used to instil moral values and a sense of belonging in its people. This view is articulated by educationalist Yeow Tong Chia in *Education, Culture and the Singapore Developmental State.* In his study, which explores the relationship between the state and citizenship education, he observes that the early cultural activities were used to circumvent the influence of Western 'decadent' lifestyles and thinking, and often promoted Asian values that were vital to the 'moral development' of children and youth (2015, p.67–68). Activities such as folk dances, story-telling (in traditional ethnic languages) and community choirs were considered useful by the state in fostering a national identity and nurturing 'good citizens' who could 'live, work, contend, and cooperate in a civilised way' (2015, p.71).

As standards of living began to improve, and with political stability gaining traction from the late 1980s, policy-makers turned their attention to developing Singaporean arts and culture. The idea was to use the arts to develop a capital-intensive economy. The year 1989 was a historic and momentous milestone in the development of the cultural landscape. With the ambition of creating a 'Global City for the Arts', the Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts (ACCA), led by former Second Deputy Prime Minister Teng Cheong Ong, was formed by the government to realise this vision. This initiative was a broad and comprehensive plan designed to boost the arts and cultural industries as a way to turn the city-state into a cultural hub. As a first step, the *Report of the Advisory Council of Culture and the Arts* called for the institutionalisation of the National Arts Council (NAC), which officially and swiftly took form two years later, in 1991. The organisation's role was to provide the necessary infrastructures and administrative support to implement appropriate arts policies that aligned with broader national agendas. Here, I highlight two key areas in the ACCA report that were influential in shaping the development of TYA.

Firstly, as part of the nation's strategic ambition to achieve global city status, part of the report reflected on the 'economic potentials' of the arts and cultural sector (1989, p.3). It was proposed that funding and support from the state be directed towards building new cultural facilities – such as a world-class performing arts centre, a fine art gallery, a modern library and specialist museums – as part of its strategy to 'enhance the image of the city' in order to 'generate a higher perceived value for the city's products and services' (1989, p.

12). As the report articulated, 'a strong cultural infrastructure is an asset for any city, especially for a city-nation like Singapore' (1989, p.12). Secondly, it was in the interest of the state to create a vibrant and creative environment for its people, with the hope that it could nurture a generation that would be well-informed and interested in the arts. To achieve this, one of the recommendations was to improve the quality of arts education in schools as a way to cultivate the 'artistic sensibilities' amongst younger Singaporeans (1989, p. 8). Together with the suggestion to review the music and visual arts syllabus, it was proposed that an Arts-in-Education Programme be implemented to allow students to participate in performances and exhibitions, as well as visit museums and theatres to broaden their learning experience (1989, p.30).

What is illuminating is that, with this official policy, the new relationship between creativity and the economy represents a shift in educational priorities. The recognition that the arts now had an economic value marked a departure from the early cultural policies and signals a new way of thinking about creativity. Here, creativity is instrumental to the future of children and young people and the progress of the nation. To inform my thinking about the relationship between creativity and learning, I turn to the works of educationalist Ken Robinson, who is an advocate of educating for the creative economy. It is also worth highlighting that Robinson was one of the four international advisors to the Singapore government for its strategies to become the creative hub of Southeast Asia.[45] His debates are mostly about the British education system, but these perspectives have undoubtedly influenced some of the educational and cultural policies in Singapore.

In his book, *Out of our Minds: Learning to be Creative,* Robinson claims that education is vital to the success of working lives, long-term global developments and economic growth. His main argument is that creativity is central to the future and that it is necessary to first start at the 'heart of education' (2001, p. 8). He contends that many businesses, governments and education are still rooted in old ways of thinking and, as a result, get left behind. To cope with the increasing pace of technological advancements and challenges of

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[45] Robinson, Ken. Website. Accessed on 14 May 2017 from: http://sirkenrobinson.com/about/

the twenty-first century, he proposes for a radical change in educational priorities, in which creativity needs to be central to learning:

> The companies, communities and nations that succeed in future will balance their books only by solving the complex equation of human resources. Our times are being swept along on an avalanche of innovations in science, technology and social thought. To keep pace with these changes, or to get ahead of them, we will need all our wits about us-literally. We must learn to be creative. (2001, p.203)

This perspective on creativity as a way to 'balance the books' represents a new way of thinking about creativity. The educational policies of Singapore at the turn of the century mirror Robinson's emphasis on creativity in education. Even though the term and ideas of 'creative learning' were not explicitly articulated, some of its political impulses can be found in the educational practices of the time. Here, I return to the work of educationalist Ai-Girl Tan, who has pointed out in her article that, in order to prepare students to cope with the increasing technological and economic challenges, the school curriculum in the 1990s started to move away from 'academic education' to 'creative education' (2016, p.417). These perceived 'creative programmes' – which include cooperative learning, cross-cultural project work, music, and art lessons – were seen as crucial to cultivating a range of 'soft skills' that could be harnessed in the future workplace (2016, p.418).

Arguing in similar terms, educationalist Sing-Kong Lee and his co-authors provide an insight into this paradigm shift. In the book, *Towards a Better Future: Education and Training for Economic Development in Singapore since 1965*, they contend that the decision of the government to move from an 'efficiency-driven' to an 'ability-driven' system was motivated by global economic transformations and the ambition to achieve 'a world-class standard' of working and living by 2020 (2008, p 30). In order to make the transition from the Third World to the First, it was thus imperative that radical changes be made to the education system to encourage the development of highly creative and entrepreneurial individuals. They state:

The rise of the new economy requires young Singaporeans to see that survival in the twenty-first century means the acquisition of twenty-first century skills. Workplace competencies are now more complex, requiring workers to possess complex problem-solving skills, communication skills, indicative and deductive reasoning skills, creative thinking, and an innovative mindset. (2008, p.108)

These insights illuminate how shifts in the education system were motivated by economic instrumentalism and changing employment trends. The structures of education that mimicked and served the earlier labour-intensive manufacturing industries during the 1960s and 1970s were becoming obsolete and incompatible with the increasingly global climate. Instead, the wealth and future of the nation were now hinged on the capacity of the people to learn and their ability to 'think analytically and creatively' (2008, p.109). This new value placed on the social identity of the emerging form of workers mirrors Florida's 'creative class', whose key role is to 'develop new ideas' that allow them to adapt, problem-solve, take risks and be flexible in societies (2005, p. 36). The bottom line, according to Florida, is that creative people are important to the economy:

The Creative Class consists of people who add economic value through their creativity. It thus includes a great many knowledge workers, symbolic analysts and professional and technical workers, but emphasises their true role in the economy. (2002, p.68)

This view suggests that preparing a 'creative' workforce that can cope with the global challenges of the twenty-first century is central to the success of the economy. As this group of people become increasingly popular to the government and companies who employ them, there is a need to introduce and implement creative approaches to learning as a way to develop human resources. For Singapore, this emphasis on an education that embraces skills and creativity not only resulted in a radical transformation in learning environments, but also influenced and shaped cultural policy.

In 1993, two years after the formation of the National Arts Council, the organisation introduced the Arts Education Programme (AEP). The NAC-AEP was first launched as part of

the audience development division, with the aim to advocate the value and importance of arts education and to cultivate an appreciation of the arts amongst the younger generation. Furthermore, this programme was also used to connect the arts community with the education sector and support the professional development of arts educators.[46] Implicitly, it served to develop future audiences, so as to encourage a vibrant arts scene in Singapore. Since its inception, the programmes are still broadly categorised in the same three ways: *Arts Exposure*, *Arts Experience* and *Arts Excursion* (3E). The *Arts Exposure* programme funds schools to organise visual arts and stage arts events onsite, so that students can appreciate the arts within the comfort and convenience of the school compound. Targeted towards a large school audience, events include artist talks and performances during school assembly. The *Arts Experience* programme requires a more practical and participative approach whereby students are more involved with the art-making process. Examples of such programmes include dance workshops, participatory theatre, and arts and crafts activities. Finally, the *Arts Excursion* programme, as the term suggests, seeks to encourage students to visit visual and performing arts events. This ranges from visits to museums, theatres and art galleries.[47]

As a way to make these programmes affordable and accessible to schools, the NAC sought the support of the Singapore Tote Board to subsidise the programmes for all local primary and secondary schools, as well as junior colleges. Established in 1988, the Singapore Tote Board is an organisation that manages the donation of surplus funds generated from the operations of Singapore Turf Club and Singapore Pools for the benefit of the arts, community development, education, health, social services, and sports sectors. As a result of this partnership, schools that participated in these programmes were entitled to use a combination of funds from the Singapore Tote Board together with any other state education funds, such as the Edusave Grant or the School Operating Fund. To put this into perspective, if an arts programme costs S$1000, the Singapore Tote Board would subsidise S$600 (60%), with the remaining S$400 (40%) supported by other educational grants by the

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[46] National Arts Council Arts Education Programme. The National Arts Council website. Accessed on 9 May 2016 from: https://aep.nac.gov.sg/nacaep/nacaep.html
[47] Ibid

Ministry of Education. What this means is that, in principle, these programmes were at no cost to the schools or students.

The investment and the extensive steps taken by the council to ensure that schools engage with the NAC-AEP illuminate how the arts is recognised for its educative potentials, and demonstrate the state's commitment to nurturing creativity in the next generation. These programmes, which operated in parallel to the main curriculum, offered an alternative system to learning that complemented the academic subjects that were taught in the classrooms. As Lee and his co-authors suggest, the combination of subjects such as languages, mathematics and science with creative activities was perceived to provide a 'holistic experience', in which the 'talents and abilities' of the students could be harnessed for the growth of the nation (2008, p.32). This integrated approach to learning chimes well with Robinson's idea of a creative education that 'values different modes of intelligence and sees relationships between disciplines' (2001, p.201). Although the political agenda might have shifted, the introduction of the NAC-AEP marks a time where arts education was seen as a pedagogical approach that was creativity-centred and could better balance the ways in which children think and learn.

The NAC-AEP is, however, not without its critics. In the article, 'The Ambiguities of the National Arts Council-Arts Education Programme', theatre educators Richard Chua and Benny Lim adopt a critical position of the ways in which these programmes were created and delivered. Although they recognise the good intentions of the council, Chua and Lim point out three problematic aspects of the NAC-AEP. Firstly, they identify that the value and importance of the arts are not highlighted and made explicit to the students. As a consequence, students are quick to lose interest in these activities and tend to favour more media-based forms of entertainment and learning. Secondly, they argue that the NAC and schools are more concerned with the 'learning objectives' of these programmes, which result in artists and educators spending more time justifying their work, rather than focusing on the actual delivery and 'depth' of the programmes (2015, p.84). Finally, they make reference to their own professional experience and point out that most of these arts activities are usually being implemented en masse (e.g. assembly shows, craft classes and school trips to museums). In doing so, these group activities tend to overlook the interests

and preferences of the individual student. Their suggestion is that, for the NAC-AEP to be relevant in a 'media and tech savvy' climate, policy-makers and artists need to rethink the current role of the NAC-AEP and ask how these programmes can be less 'product-driven' (2015, p.87).

Chua and Lim's views suggest that there is a need to further analyse the educational and social implications of the NAC-AEP, and calls for a more nuanced understanding of the delivery and content of these programmes for creativity and learning to be effective in the twenty-first century. Without a set of pedagogical principles and consideration for its inherent values of the art, the NAC-AEP risks being a rigid system and political tool governed by power structures. My intention is not to evaluate the NAC-AEP, however, I want to illustrate how systems of education have led to the commodification of these 'product-driven' programmes. In the next section, I shall examine the ways in which artists navigated the politics of arts and education in the learning environment, and exploited the NACP-AEP for economic gains.

The commodification of the National Arts Council Arts Education Programme
The introduction of the NACP-AEP led to new demands made on artists and theatre companies who were creating work for children. The view that drama could cultivate a particular set of skills is explained by Lim-Yang in the article 'Imagining the Possibilities: The History of Theatre, Education as "We" Remember It':

> Drama in education programmes has become complicated over time. They began very simply. Drama processes were used to build imagination and confidence using language. When we first began introducing drama in schools, we did drama for the sake of drama. The teachers who engaged us wanted children to know drama, nothing more.... Shortly thereafter, drama became the means to other ends. The flood gates for this opened when the Ministry of Education created a strong impetus for students to be creative, expressive, and to speak better. We began generating programmes such as Drama for Communication, for Debating Skills, for Presentation, each aimed at achieving specific goals. Performance became the

benchmark for deliverables. Hence, drama quickly became product-driven and not process-driven, with a greater emphasis on tangible outcomes. (2011, p.21)

Unlike the earlier art for art's sake rhetoric that act 3 championed, the tone has shifted with the instructive value of theatre being more explicitly and aggressively asserted. What is clear here is that schools were increasingly interested in using drama to create skills, rather than embracing it for its artistic experience or personal expression. In other words, this pedagogy favoured a particular kind of theatrical product that could develop proficiencies needed for the twenty-first century economy.

In his book, *Theatre and the State in Singapore*, sociologist Terence Chong threads together different interviews to illuminate how the NAC-AEP programme became an exploitable commodity. In his study, Chong points out that the generous funding schemes from the various government ministries and the Singapore Tote Board had created a saturated and competitive environment for artists who were delivering these programmes in the 1990s and 2000s. As a result, they started to make explicit connections between the arts and educational objectives by tailoring their programmes to meet the desired learning outcomes of the school (2011, p.108). For example, in the same way that Lim-Yang describes, a drama workshop would be designed to teach the students presentation skills and delivered in a way that could boost their confidence. To further convince educators to purchase the programmes, Chong points out that many arts groups also started to adopt 'corporate-speak' when presenting themselves to schools (2011, p. 108). The business language, as Chong suggests, was used to 'project a professional and sophisticated image of the company' and enhance the 'branding of their programmes' (2011, p.109). In some cases, theatre groups also leveraged their 'non-profit persona' and 'supposed creative integrity' to differentiate themselves from other profit-making companies (2011 p.79). On a practical level, Chong also explains how, once the group had invested in the initial labour and material costs, these programmes could be repeated and sold to different schools. This repetitive way of working made it very lucrative for the arts groups, with the workshop becoming 'a product with recurring returns' (2011, p.108).

The client-consumer relationship between the arts companies/ groups and schools is also identified by arts manager and educator, Michele Lim:

> The NAC-AEP programme really encouraged schools to spend on the arts since they had nothing to lose. Naturally, theatre groups started to create more programmes that could attract the teachers since that was where the money was…. What I also remember is that there was a road show very similar to an arts market. At these events, theatre groups would set up individual booths to promote their programmes. Teachers and principals would go around and listen to the presentations before purchasing the programmes that were relevant for their respective schools. There were even buses organised by the NAC to bring them to these arts events. Teachers were literally arts shopping.[48]

These views suggest that the relationship between theatre groups and schools was becoming increasingly commercial in a competitive environment, which invariably shaped the ways in which the arts education programmes were designed, packaged and delivered. The implication is that the appeal of these activities no longer rested on the inherent values of the arts, but mostly on the persuasiveness and marketing ability of the arts groups. It was thus, perhaps, not uncommon for schools to request these workshops without having any genuine interest in theatre or drama. With the engagement of the arts being tied to didactic justifications and the need for concrete and measurable evidence, it reveals how the content and delivery of these programmes were informed by changing demands made by the economy, rather than, as Robinson advocates, ways that reflect knowledge's 'intimate connections in the world beyond education' (2001, p.201).

This supposed mistreatment of the NAC-AEP, according to Chong, led theatre programmes to gain a negative reputation. One of the reasons can be traced back to the drama companies' disingenuous approach to TYA that was born out of this growing mercantilist attitude towards theatre. Chong points out that in the search for profits, the transactional relationship between schools and the artists resulted in some theatre groups paying less

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[48] Lim, Michele. Interview. Singapore Drama Educators Association office, 6 April 2016.

attention to the artistic or theatrical quality of the product. This led to professional companies who held onto the artistic integrity of their work to start viewing such theatre practitioners as '"selling out" or compromising their work' (2011, p.108). Furthermore, some of these theatrical activities were also criticised for their low production values and sloppy presentation. One of the performers who used to be involved in these performances shared a candid view of proceedings:

> The assembly shows are not something that I am proud of. I think we had about four shows that toured to different schools. Each show focused on an educational theme such as crime prevention, health education or racial harmony. We usually only had about three rehearsals and would tour the show for one to two years. I was really just doing it for the money. It got to a point where we were dreading to do it. Sometimes, actors would even oversleep or miss a performance, and when that happened, we would just improvise and carry on with one less person.[49]

These views illuminate how the educational bureaucracy, together with the framing of the arts for its vocational and transferable skills, had resulted in the commodification of knowledge and creativity in systems of learning. The example of the assembly show also illustrates how artists were willing to compromise the artistic quality for economic gains; although it must be recognised that there are exceptions to this generalisation. The original intention of the NAC-AEP may have been honourable but, in reality, its approach was a far cry from Robinson's idea of creative learning that 'requires the teaching of knowledge and skills, together with the opportunities to speculate and experiment' (2001, p.201). Pedagogically, children might acquire certain abilities through the participation of these programmes, but the gap that encourages empathy, imagination and innovation still calls for a more nuanced understanding of creative learning, and invites a re-assessment of the NAC-AEP. This analysis is beyond the scope of this thesis, but what is important to highlight is that the convergence of business, theatre and education led to changes in the working practices of the theatre industry. In the next section, I shall examine how theatre companies reorganised themselves to adapt to the educational and political shifts. Alongside this, I also

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[49] Performer (anonymous). Interview. The Finger Players office. 14 April 2017.

explore how the expansion of the cultural sector injected a new dynamic into TYA at the turn of the twenty-first century.

<u>Urban transformation and the (new) beginning for Theatre for Young Audiences</u>
In his study, Chong claims that the NAC-AEP has been the 'single most influential arts policy' on the ways in which 'theatre groups structure themselves internally' (2011, p.107). In a market where the NAC-AEP had opened up the opportunity for artists to profit from, theatre groups began to form a 'young wing' or 'educational branch' within their organisation dedicated to devising and packaging theatre workshops to sell to the local schools (2011, p.108). These youth or educational platforms, according to Chong, were the 'biggest money maker' for local theatre groups, which helped them generate funds for their daily operations and other theatrical productions (2011, p.108). An example of this organisational change can be seen through the lens of the Chinese puppet theatre company – The Finger Players (十指帮). Formed in 1996, The Finger Players was part of the children's division under the Mandarin-language theatre group, Practice Performing Arts Centre Ltd (now known as The Theatre Practice). This platform was strategically developed to bring puppetry performances to educational settings, communities and libraries as a way to generate funds for its main repertoire. Due to the increase in demand for such programmes, members of The Finger Players eventually split from their parent company in 1999 and established themselves as an independent company. Moving forward, the company not only continued to create educational programmes for schools, but also started to produce productions for adults and take their works to international festivals. By the end of 2003, The Finger Players became Singapore's first professional puppet theatre company, which reaches out to an average of '25,000 students and members of the public annually, through performances and workshops with schools, communities and institutions'.[50] In an interview, Artistic Director Tze Chien Chong shared with me how the NAC-AEP also opened opportunities for a new wave of artists:

> The arts education programmes were definitely lucrative for many companies,
> including us. But I think what's more important is that the trend in creativity in

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[50] The Finger Players website. Accessed on 3 March 2017 from: https://www.fingerplayers.com

education really encouraged more people to join the arts. With the increasing demand for these programmes came an influx of freelance actors. There were enough jobs for everyone. These performers would do the NAC-AEP projects in the day and take on other theatre jobs in the evening. Some of them also split their time between the assembly school shows and their part-time jobs.[51]

The rising demand for theatre for children meant that there were more jobs and new opportunities for artists. In other words, a career in the arts, that was previously financially unsustainable, had become a possible option for performers and theatre-makers in the 1990s. The restructuring of theatre companies and an increasing freelance culture illuminate an evolutionary adaption to the changing nature of creative work.

At the same time, the urban landscape was transforming, and this shift in employment pattern gelled well with that change. As I explained in the earlier section, the recession had triggered an attempt by the state – during the late 1980s – to assume a new economic and global position. Low-skills manufacturing gave way to a more sophisticated service and finance sector, as the government sought to reinvent the city-state as a financial and cultural hub. Against this backdrop of economic change, the government had recognised the commercial potentials of the arts and started to place significant efforts and investments into the building of cultural infrastructures and rebranding the city. With the ambition of becoming a Global City for the Arts, the articulation of the arts and culture was both audible and visible. This is examined by geographers, Chia-Ho Ching, Tsu-Lung Chou and Lily Kong, who explore the relationship between new urban landscapes; the image of global cities provides a useful perspective to consider this. In their book, *Arts, Culture and the Making of Global Cities*, they argue that cities hoping to become global have realised that they cannot just rely on economics, but also need to frame themselves as cultural cities in order to progress further. Building on the works of geographer Brenda Yeoh, they contend that the competition to become a global city has 'intensified around the production and consumption of art and culture', often taking on the construction of mega projects and hallmark events, developing infrastructures and the cultural industries, and branding

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[51] Chong, Tze Chien. Interview. The Finger Players office, 15 March 2017.

activities that can boost the city's image (2015, p.6). They cite examples, such as The Louvre and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the Tate Modern and the British Museum in London, and 13 new museums along the River Main in Frankfurt, to illustrate how these facilities allow the respective cities to maintain their competitive edge. They argue that these cultural infrastructures and projects are a way to 'attract economic investment, develop the tourism industry, create positive urban images, and enhance their competitiveness' (2015, p.8). They are critical of how this approach might cause places to lose their unique culture and heritage, but have identified that cities in Asia striving for global status have adopted similar practices and policies in recent years:

> The physical fabric of cultural infrastructure/ facilities is more tangible than the invisible or non-physical aspect of cultural development; building huge cultural infrastructures has become the prevailing strategy in many Asian cities. (2015, p. 8)

The idea that a city's global reputation is linked to its cultural products and image supports the reasons for the infrastructure development that was carried out by the Singapore government at the turn of the century. Politically, this was a strategy to strengthen Singapore's competitive position as a global city not just for the arts, but all aspects of commerce and trade. As Kong points out in 'Cultural Policy in Singapore: Negotiating Economic and Socio-Cultural Agendas', the construction of The Esplanade, the Singapore Art Museum and the Asian Civilisations Museum, as well as the expansion of the National Museum of Singapore, are the results of the investments by the government as part of its attempt to advance Singapore as a 'regional and cultural hub' (2000, p.417). In addition, the Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA) worked alongside the Economic Development Board and Singapore Tourism Board, and set up a Singapore Film Commission. The latter gave the cultural industry a further boost, with S$2.5 million worth of grants to disburse as scholarships for projects, so as to encourage Singaporeans to produce quality Singapore-made films that could be exported internationally (2000, p.418). On a national level, there is an instructive rationalisation for creativity that links the arts with global capitalism. In 1990, Minister of Information of the Arts, George Yeo, proposed that for Singapore to remain competitive, it needed to promote the arts. While Singapore had been an international

market for resources such as rubber, oil and spices, he hoped that it would also be recognised as an 'international market for the arts' (1991, p.6):

> We should see the arts not as luxury or mere consumption but as investment in people and the environment. We need a strong development of the arts to help make Singapore one of the major hub cities of the world…. We also need the arts to help us produce goods and services which are competitive in the world market. We need an artistic culture…we also need taste. With taste, we will be able to produce goods and services of far greater value. (1991, p.54)

A similar view was echoed six years later in 1997 by the former Chairman of the National Arts Council, Thai Ker Liu, who asserted that 'there was nothing wrong in the arts being aligned with economic impetuses' (quoted in Kong, 2000, p.415). Although supporting the arts would be of great financial cost to the state, he stated that the government recognised that the economic gains potentially outweighed the expenditure, which made this investment justifiable. His opinion was that spending on the arts was the act of a 'responsible government' (quoted in Kong, 2000, p.415). Notwithstanding the social and cultural values of the arts, the underlying political agenda was clear: creativity is connected to profitability.

Given this recognition, the government began to rigorously pursue the policies and strategies that harnessed the economic potentials of the arts in the late 1990s. The development of cultural facilities and infrastructures in the form of theatre buildings, art galleries and museums not only enhanced the physical landscape of the city but also provided fertile ground for the growth of cultural activities, giving theatre for children a new impetus. The extensive support from the National Arts Council in the form of grants and funding schemes, alongside the stigma of the theatre education programmes, pushed artists away from the NAC-AEP and encouraged them to find new ways of working. It is here that theatre practitioners, who were committed to the social development of children and young people, began to (re)brand themselves and reclaim the field of TYA. Besides The Finger Players, ACT 3 Theatrics, and ACT 3 International, the formation of other TYA companies such as I Theatre Ltd, The Players Theatre, Paper Monkey Theatre, as well as platforms such

as The Little Company (the children's division of Singapore Repertory Theatre) also started to emerge during this time. These companies resisted the rigidity of theatre as a form of education and sought to explore the art form in its own right. In my interview with Artistic Director Brian Seward of I Theatre, he describes some of his key motivations for starting the organisation:

> I wanted to move away from the assembly shows that looked amateur and cheap. I wanted to create a proper theatre experience for children. This means creating a show in the theatre with a set, lights, sounds, and costumes – a production that we can all be proud of. You can't do that in a school hall. I Theatre is all about creating quality productions that make children want to return to the theatre.[52]

Rama Chandran of ACT 3 Theatrics, who shares a similar view, states:

> We want to create quality shows that can inspire children to learn, explore, experiment, create, articulate and present their thoughts, dreams, writings and performances…. They blossom to their true potential when surrounded by a sense of joy, wonder, spontaneity and freedom. This is very important for their development and the future of Singapore. [53]

The emphasis on producing 'quality' theatre for children and cultivating new audiences marks a new beginning for TYA, and echoes the vision and altruistic intentions of act 3 in the early years. It is here that the shift from arts education in schools to TYA is instructive. Theatre education, in the context of the NAC-AEP, identifies with using theatre as a tool directly to teach and harness a set of marketable skills, whereas TYA's central focus is to create an aesthetic experience that is based on high production values. This (re)visioning of the wave of TYA companies not only paved a new direction for theatre for children and young people but, more crucially, presented TYA with a set of ideologies and practices, as well as a new identity.

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[52] Seward, Brian. Interview. I Theatre office, 20 June, 2016.
[53] Chandran, Rama. Interview. ACT 3 Theatrics office. 15 November, 2015.

The expansion of the cultural sector provided the opportunity for artists and companies to experiment with new ways of working, but it also presented various challenges. One of the challenges for TYA artists was to rethink the relationship between theatre and education, and art and the educational agenda. This was largely due to the fact that the NAC-AEP had resulted in the separating of children's theatre for entertainment from children's theatre for education. In the context of the NAC-AEP, theatre practices often operated primarily by means of participatory workshops, assembly performances, craft lessons and had always taken a more instrumental role. The agendas which motivated the work and determined the sites in which these programmes operated inevitably impacted on the educational expectations of theatre. The blurring of these boundaries can be seen through the lens of the Singapore Drama Educators Association (SDEA). In 2002, the SDEA was established by a group of educators, theatre practitioners and arts administrators who sought to strengthen drama's educational purposes. Their aim to develop drama education is written as a statement of belief:

> We aim to foster and establish drama education as a profession by promoting, advocating and advancing the study and development of drama and theatre education in Singapore.[54]

The organisation is an advocate for drama education and embraces different theatrical approaches that can harness the art form's educative potentials. At the time of its inception, there were no clear distinctions between the different of activities for children (e.g. theatre for/ by/ with children), resulting in all forms of drama and theatrical activities that involved children to be classified under the umbrella term 'Drama Education'. Similar to the NAC-AEP, drama facilitators in SDEA would design theatrical workshops and productions around a set of pedagogical objectives and deliver them in spaces such as libraries, community centres, hospitals and even shopping malls.[55] As a consequence, the pairing of theatre and education outside of the school context continued to strengthen the intrinsic didactic

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[54] Singapore Drama Educators Association website. Accessed on 25 March 2017 from: https://sdea.org.sg
[55] Performer (anonymous). Interview. The Drama Centre, 11 April 2017.

necessity in the programmes' representation and provision. This strengthened the perception that theatre for children, regardless of where it was performed, needed an educational intent. I will elaborate on this in the next chapter.

In rebranding the city between 1990–2000, Singapore had created an environment in which creativity and productivity flourished. The blending and merging of educational policies, theatre practices and national building strategies carry different sets of agendas that overlap considerably. Artistic creativity, business entrepreneurship and technological innovations had become the new currency for growth, creating an expectation in the next generation to be active, creative, imaginative and to be able to generate value from entrepreneurial activities. Throughout the second part of this chapter, I have emphasised that the politics of creativity in learning when instigated by official policies has resulted in theatre for children to be practised and imagined in different ways. The formation of new theatre companies and the increasing freelance culture at the turn of the century also illuminate the evolution of creative work, which moved theatre for children from the fringes of society to the economic mainstream. It is thus not surprising that the growth of TYA coincided with a period where there was significant economic and cultural progress. Cultural policies that promoted creativity in learning might have resulted in the commodification of the NAC-AEP and caused a negative stigma in the theatre programmes, but they also presented a new dynamic for theatre for children and young people, paving the way for what can be described as a TYA landscape today.

Chapter Three
Managing Creativity: A Case Study of I Theatre's
The Rainbow Fish

The history of Singapore's cultural sector highlights some of the political motivations that inspired significant changes in the city at the turn of the twenty-first century. The idea that the arts could be harnessed to progress the nation led to shifts in policies in culture and education, as well as the transformation of the urban landscape. With education, vocational training gave way to creative approaches to learning that emphasised a set of skills that could help young people meet the challenges of the global economy. Although these political shifts injected a new dynamic into the cultural sector and moved TYA from the margins to the economic mainstream, they also strengthened the perception that theatre for children needed an educational intent. This prompted TYA artists and companies to rethink the relationship between theatre and education. TYA today has moved to the foreground in the cultural and entertainment sectors, but it is important to recognise that its roots are entrenched in deeper historical and cultural contexts, and grew from a number of important overlaps in theatre, education and political territories across time. Traces of these principles and practices still remain visible and continue to inform and influence the development of TYA. Building on this context, this chapter examines how cultural, economic and political conditions shape the ways in which contemporary TYA is produced and received in Singapore.

David Wood, in his book *Theatre for Children,* provides a comprehensive guide to 'writing, adapting, directing and acting' (as the subtitle states) and offers some practical advice on making children's theatre that can be both educational and entertaining. He writes that 'we must give children the best we can', and that no matter how valuable drama is best employed as an educational tool in schools, it should not be a substitute to a trip to the theatre to witness actors 'performing a quality piece of theatre' (1997, p.6–7). However, in this quest for 'quality', Wood also acknowledges that theatre for children is fundamentally a branch of 'showbusiness', in which '"business" is the operative word' (1997, p.239). This suggests that, as much as TYA is an artistic practice, it is also an economic entity. Taking this idea forward, I am interested in exploring how I Theatre, as an example of a TYA company,

manages tensions and opportunities between making art as an economic necessity and as an artistic practice. This is important because it draws attention to the wider material networks (e.g. funding, cultural policy, economics and urban development) at play, as well as audience preconceptions that often lead TYA artists to juggle both the entertainment side of art and the educational aspect.

I have chosen to focus on *The Rainbow Fish* as a case study because this production was produced by I Theatre no less than seven times between 2002–2016. This is not only testament to its popularity amongst local audiences, but also illustrates the historical and emotional relationship that the company has with them. Rather than just analysing the production itself, I am concerned with how tensions, interpretations and participation amongst the director, designers, performers, marketing, and production departments in the creative process can enhance the artistic practice and social value of TYA. This way of thinking aligns with the overarching focus of this thesis in which I consider the relationship between TYA and society, and the ways in which TYA can adapt to changing circumstances. By investigating some of the working practices and challenges of the company, the intention of this chapter is to elucidate the position of TYA at the point where commerce, education and creativity intersect.

Reading *The Rainbow Fish* in context

I first watched *The Rainbow Fish* in 2011 at the Singapore Airlines Theatre. The production was adapted from the popular children's book by Swiss author and illustrator, Marcus Pfister. I was working with I Theatre at that time, but was not directly involved in the production. In February 2015, Artistic Director, Brian Seward, announced that the company would restage this production as part of its 15-year anniversary celebration that would take place the following year. This caught my attention and, as part of the research process, I wanted to examine how this version of *The Rainbow Fish* was conceptualised, designed and produced, as well as learn if there were any differences between this production and previous ones. I am not suggesting that *The Rainbow Fish* is an exemplary model for TYA, nor is it representative of all TYA in Singapore. Rather, my intention is to highlight how some of the significant political shifts and broader material networks have affected the creative ideas and practices of TYA – directly or indirectly.

To inform my thinking, I turn to theatre studies scholar Ric Knowles, who offers a method of performance analysis. In his book, *Reading the Material Theatre*, Knowles observes that the traditional ways of analysing drama and theatre have tended to focus mainly on the performance or the script itself. Drawing on the fields of semiotics and cultural materialism, Knowles extends on Marvin Carlson's approach of performance analysis, ('the entire theatre experience'), and develops his own 'reading' that he terms 'materialist semiotics' (2004, p.9). In his analysis, he outlines a triangle consisting of three areas that are worth considering: performance text, conditions of production and conditions of reception. This tripartite relationship illustrates what he means for each point of the triangle:

Performance Text

(script, *mise en scène*, design,
actors' bodies, movement and gesture, etc.
as reconstituted in discourse)

Conditions of production
(actor, director, designer training
and traditions, rehearsal process,
working conditions, stage and
backstage, architecture and amenities,
historical/cultural moment of
production etc.)

Conditions of reception
(publicity/review discourse,
front of house, auditorium, and
audience amenities, neighbourhood,
transportation, ticket prices,
historical/cultural moment of
reception etc.)

Extracted from *Reading the Material Theatre* (2004, p.19)

These points are complex and are coded systems that work together either in tension or harmony, and 'meaning' in theatre lies somewhere in these points of interaction (2004, p.19). To account for a more precise, contextualised and politicised understanding of how this 'meaning' is produced in the theatre, Knowles proposes that researchers consider the cultural and political specificities of the site in which the production is produced and received, alongside the actual performance. In doing so, it enables a contextually situated analysis in which 'neither text nor context is isolated from the other' (2004, p.14). It is in this triangular relationship that I aim to situate my 'reading' of *The Rainbow Fish*.

In his study, Knowles also acknowledges that his methodology is more challenging in practice than in theory. To address the limitations, he engages with the analysis in four ways. Firstly, he restricts the performances only to those he has witnessed as a culturally positioned spectator and examines them within their local contexts. Secondly, he draws on

local reviews of the production as a way to contextualise and locate these perspectives within their immediate setting. Thirdly, he also accounts for the interpretations and responses of the audience – not as evidence of the actual meaning of the performance but as suggestions of how they felt and comprehended the performance in its particular context. Finally, he considers only the audience response within the theatrical event and does not analyse them outside of this environment (2004, p. 21–22).

Part of my research method for this chapter mirrors Knowles' approach in two main ways. Firstly, I focus only on *The Rainbow Fish* in the Singaporean context to make connections between the 2011 and 2016 versions of the production. Secondly, I analyse reviews by journalists and bloggers who have watched the production locally. Alongside this, I also draw on comments and feedback forms given by educators after the performance in 2016. I did not interview any young audience members, but 'being there' with them in the same space offered me insights into their response and engagement within the theatrical event.

In addition, I also reflect and draw on my professional practice as Associate Director of the company. This position provided me direct access to the working practices and archives of the company as part of this research, which allowed me to consider the wider cultural, economic and political structures that govern TYA through the lens of I Theatre. During the research process, I interviewed and interacted with a range of managers, artists and designers as a way to understand some of the company's management styles, organisational structures and creative motivations. Alongside this, I also drew on financial reports, publicity brochures, old photographs and production materials (e.g. scripts, set, and costume designs). Finally, I attended two rehearsals from April to May 2016 to see how directors, designers, performers, and the production crew interacted and contributed to the creative process of *The Rainbow Fish*. Being an 'insider' during this period provided me access to witness some of the company's creative and political dilemmas, thereby opening a range of artistic and managerial vantage points from which I could analyse *The Rainbow Fish*. This additional method, which is absent from Knowles' approach, not only offers a robust insight into the working practices of a TYA company, but also illuminates the ways in which a theatrical production operates in relation to its context. By reflecting on my dual position (researcher and company member) and drawing on a range of embodied and

written materials, this methodological approach allowed me to engage with, what Knowles terms, an 'open-ended practice' (2004, p.22).

The aesthetic and educational dimensions of Theatre for Young Audiences
As discussed in Chapter Two, TYA in Singapore has transformed and developed over the past three decades as a response to economic, political and cultural shifts in the city-state. The introduction of the NAC-AEP in the 1990s offered both funding and a spotlight for education-oriented theatre and related activities. Many TYA companies in Singapore that sought this support survived largely by learning how to adapt and create a balance between producing work that is aligned with the state directive and staying true to its artistic integrity. As local journalist Jian Xuan Lee noted:

> The growth of children's theatre comes as more schools and parents view theatre not merely as entertainment, but as having educational value in teaching languages and values as well as firing a child's creativity and imagination.[56]

To illustrate some of the educational and artistic overlaps in TYA, and the concerns from which they emerge, I will reflect on two encounters: The first is my earliest experience of watching *The Rainbow Fish* in 2011 and the second is a company meeting that took place in 2015.

The production of *The Rainbow Fish* that I watched in 2011 was performed in a 350-seat proscenium arch theatre auditorium. The story is about a beautiful, multi-coloured fish called Rainbow, whose glistening scales dazzled all who came near. One day, a little fish called Little Blue asks Rainbow if he could have one of her scales. [57] But Rainbow rudely refuses and so reveals herself to be an attractive but selfish and self-centred creature. Word gets round among the rest of the sea creatures about this encounter, and she is

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[56] Jian Xuan, Lee. 'Theatre for kids: More quality children's plays and musicals for local theatre scene'. The Straits Times. Feb 25, 2015. Accessed on 7 Dec 2015 from:
https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/entertainment/theatre-for-kids-more-quality-childrens-plays-and-musicals-for-local-theatre

[57] In the original story, Rainbow is a male character. But in I Theatre's adaptation, Rainbow is a female character.

consequently snubbed by all but one of her friends, Starfish. Seeing she is upset and lonely, Starfish advises she seek the advice of a wise Octopus who lives in a mysterious, deep cave beyond the reef. Upon arrival, she bursts into tears. Octopus feels sorry for Rainbow and explains to her the importance of sharing, and that the value of friendship is more important and beautiful than the shiny scales on her body. On her way home, Rainbow encounters Little Blue again and this time, she readily shared one of her scales with him. The adventure concludes positively with Rainbow generously giving her friends each a beautiful scale.

The action on stage was set against a spectacular ocean backdrop where the performers skilfully manipulated massive, colourful puppets that moved and glowed magnificently under the ultra-violet light. The characters on stage were brought to life by catchy songs and beautifully choreographed sequences that enraptured the audience, who clapped and tapped along to the musical spectacle. Pantomime-like audience interaction was also featured, such as when the performers asked the crowd to point out the direction where the characters went. The combination of the superb acting, lively music, entertaining dancing, stunning set design and impressive puppetry made every scene enchanting and exhilarating to watch. The performance concluded with a spectacular finale song and dance routine, Real Beauty On The Inside, that emphasised the moral of the story: the importance of sharing and friendship. Unlike the assembly performances in schools that were often didactic and half-hearted, *The Rainbow Fish* had high production values, an edifying theme and was well executed. It generated an overall positive experience for children and their families, who were evidently enthralled by the spectacle and story, and had high praise for the show.

Figure 7: *The Rainbow Fish* by I Theatre, The Singapore Airlines Theatre, 2011

My second encounter with *The Rainbow Fish* took place in the I Theatre office on a sunny afternoon in February 2015. Artistic Director Brian Seward had called for a team meeting to brainstorm ideas, as well as gather suggestions for the upcoming repertoire. This session was especially significant as the company would be celebrating its 15th anniversary the following year. After throwing a few ideas around, Seward announced that he would restage the production of *The Rainbow Fish.* According to Seward, this production not only generated the largest revenue out of all the productions staged, but had also been the most popular and recognised musical. He said:

> Let's just give the schools and parents what they want. It's fun. It has a good message. It's one of our popular hits that check all the right boxes. It's a 'tried and tested formula' and will surely work….We cannot afford to take any risks. However, this time, I want to make it bigger, bolder and better .[58]

I was curious to trace some of the early educational and artistic overlaps and interviewed Seward, who has directed every version of this production.[59] It is interesting to note that the first production of *The Rainbow Fish* did not take place in a school or theatre. Instead, it was

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[58] Observation, I Theatre office. 2 Nov 2015.

[59] Seward, Brian. Interview. I Theatre office, 10 Aug 2015.

co-produced in 2002 with The Church of Our Saviour – a local church that was interested in creating a Pre-Evangelistic Theatre Outreach programme for young people – and was presented in the church's auditorium. The church had recognised the educational and social benefits of theatre and was motivated to use it to as a tool to impart moral lessons to children. On the level of religion, the church had also hoped that, by creating theatrical productions that were entertaining, it could attract children and families to participate in its spiritual activities. However, it lacked the necessary artistic abilities and sought the help of I Theatre to bring this idea to life. Seward explained the church believed that 'artistic standards were needed to effectively engage and preach'.[60] After some discussion, several church members proposed to stage an adaptation of *The Rainbow Fish* as they felt that it was a good story with strong moral values that the community would readily respond to. This first performance was non-ticketed and drew a large audience. According to Seward, the performance not only conveyed a strong educational message, but delighted and entertained both children and adults. In fact, it received such a positive response from the audience that I Theatre was invited to restage the production in November that same year. Since then, the theatrical production of *The Rainbow Fish* in Singapore is synonymous with I Theatre and has been performed in many ways and in different spaces.

Figure 8: *The Rainbow Fish* by I Theatre, The Church of Our Saviour's auditorium, 2002

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[60] Ibid

My experience of watching the show and Seward's insight illustrate how TYA straddles both theatre as education and theatre as art, and highlight the underlying social and educational premises on which TYA is based, as well as the agenda that drives the work into creating the production. These two domains – education and theatre – are often intertwined and have been pulled apart in different directions as public policy is recalibrated and as political shifts in society make ever-changing demands. My purpose here is not to polarise education and theatre. Rather, I am interested in exploring some of the issues that engender this seeming recurring tension between the two. To inform my thinking, I turn to the writings of Anthony Jackson, who examines the ways in which theatre's educational potential has been harnessed.

In his book, *Theatre Education and the Making of Meanings*, Jackson navigates theatre's aesthetic and instrumental dimensions and examines how tensions between theatre as education and theatre as art might be reconciled. He argues that theatre that aims to educate can do so '*only* if it values entertainment' (2007, p.27, emphasis in original). He asserts that the art element should not be seen in opposition to education, and stresses the importance of theatre's aesthetic qualities:

> …. even in the most proactive interventionist theatre, the aesthetic dimension of the work is pivotal. Lose sight of the aesthetic and the *capacity* of such theatre to intervene is seriously diminished. It is through the aesthetic indeed that effective theatre will achieve its goals – so long as those goals go beyond the mere imparting of a message, moral or otherwise. (2007, p.28, emphasis in original)

Jackson is critical of practices that exploit theatre's inherent form of entertainment to convey a message. He also observes that the artistic dimension in educational theatre (e.g. applied theatre, interventionist theatre, theatre for development) is rarely placed at the core since the emphasis is often on the participants' engagement and process, rather than the product. He recognises that there are both internal and external factors at play. On the one hand, there is pressure from 'outside agencies' to demonstrate that the work is 'socially beneficial rather than artistic' (2007, p.28). On the other, artists and companies feel pressured to supply performances and workshops that prioritise the needs of their target

audience, and are controlled by outcome-driven organisations, so that 'a debate about art and aesthetics can seem irrelevant' (2007, p.28).

The tension between the educational and artistic role in the context of TYA is discussed by Argentine theatre director and writer María Inés Falconi. In her article, 'Theatre for Children and Youth: Art or Pedagogy?', Falconi notes the challenges of separating art from education in theatre for children and young people. Her contention is that TYA is always regulated by intermediaries such as funders, teachers and parents, who decide and determine what is appropriate for the young audience. In the school context, she points out how teachers often favour 'safe' works such as historical accounts, fairy tales and themes (e.g. environment, health education or friendship) that are in line with their pedagogical objectives. These demands, she argues, lead artists to modify their proposals, alter creative work and align their art to pedagogy (2015, p. 159). Although she recognises that the economic survival of TYA artists is often connected to state funding and the market, she reminds them to also treat TYA as an 'independent artistic work' and not 'leave the viewers behind' (2015, p.159-160).

Directing educational objectives meant for children at teachers, funders and parents is a common paradox that has been identified and debated by many TYA scholars and practitioners internationally. As van de Water identifies in her study about TYA in the United States, it is this 'mythical notion of its educational and social significance' that needs to be justified in order to 'legitimise its right of existence and obtain necessary funds' (2012, p.18). Drawing on French socialist and anthropologist Pierre Bourdieu's idea of cultural capital, she argues that the common perception is young children have yet to develop the necessary 'codes, competencies and disposition' of cultural capital (2012, p.42). Consequently, she contends, the creation of the performance and decision-making are mostly 'adult driven', in which they take on the role and responsibility as educators and intermediaries (2012, p.43). This view is also reflected in the works of educationalist Shifra Schonmann who argues that theatre for children today is still 'governed by the familiar myth of the innocent children controlled by adults' (2006, p.47).

These insights illustrate the discrepancy that has often existed in TYA, and still exists, between the educational role that it is expected to play and the inherent artistic values and merits of the work. The implication is that young audiences are incapable of experiencing art as 'art' and thus the work is framed to serve the interests and preconceptions of the adults. In these contexts, TYA is treated as a tool for educational growth, rather than an art form that can be nurtured for the sake of its cultural and artistic values. The educational framing and expectation of TYA is a point that I will return to later in this chapter. This overlap between theatre as art and theatre as education highlights how TYA is valued in the minds of critics, funders, sponsors, government, educators and parents. It also shows the tug-of-war that artists have to deal with in order to survive. This is important because it draws attention to the position TYA has marked for itself within the wider cultural and political agendas. These dilemmas and challenges are no different for I Theatre. It is caught in the middle, struggling to balance the need to earn a living with the social ethics of its output. To understand how some of these political and social implications are intertwined in the local context, it is important that I provide a brief history of the company.

I Theatre was formed in 2001 by three members – Brian Seward, Christina Sergeant and Mervin Goh – who were dedicated to advancing the field of TYA. It was during this period that TYA artists were finding new ways of creating quality theatrical experiences for children. The company's aim is written as a statement of belief:

> I Theatre is one of the region's premiere professional producing companies for family-orientated theatre. We aim to produce theatre experiences that will be as accessible and challenging, funny and thought provoking to an adult as to a child. In this, I Theatre holds a unique position within the local theatre scene.[61]

Since its inception, the company has been supported by the NAC and receives an annual grant.[62] Despite the financial provision, these funds only partially cover the company's

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[61] I Theatre Ltd website. Accessed on 3 March 2016 from https://www.itheatre.org/aboutus
[62] The Major Company Scheme supports the professional and artistic development of registered arts organisations in Singapore. The National Arts Council website. Accessed on 24 March 2017 from https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/funding/majorcompanyscheme/overview.html

administrative, operational and production costs.[63] What this means is that, for I Theatre to operate as a full-time theatre company, it also actively seeks other sources of revenue from private sponsorships, fund-raising activities and partnerships with commercial organisations (e.g. banks, retail outlets). A large proportion of its income is tied to box office sales,[64] so the company has taken a more commercial approach in its programming by including popular Western stories such as *The Gingerbread Man*, *The Little Red Hen*, and *Aesop's Fables.* These productions are often framed around educational themes or a set of learning outcomes as a way to attract school groups and the family audience. Over the years, various political and economic factors have led to fluctuations in the government's support for the arts. For example, with the decrease in general arts subsidies from the Ministry of Community, Culture and Youth due to a dip in the economy, the company's funding was slashed by 20 per cent in 2013.[65] As more theatre companies enter the cultural sector, this has made state funding even more competitive, putting further pressure on the company to find different ways to sustain itself. Against a backdrop where the market and political agendas intersect, I Theatre has to strike a balance between what is allowed and encouraged within educational and political systems, and the artistic work it strives to achieve. In May 2017, the NAC announced that it would cease its support for I Theatre. This loss has major financial and organisational repercussions. It is not my intention to investigate the reasons behind funding cuts and its implications, but it is worth highlighting the volatility of funding structures, pressures of the market, and the competitive climate in which a TYA company like I Theatre is expected to operate.

In times when government support for the cultural sector is unpredictable, it is important to ask what might be lost when TYA is driven by forces to commodify and control. In her book, *Fair Play: Art, Performance and Neoliberalism*, Jen Harvie, who writes from the perspective of cultural materialism, examines the ways in which economic structures have shaped contemporary cultural productions in Britain. She takes into account the socio-political and

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[63] The Major Company Scheme supports 'no more than 50% of a reasonable and realistic estimate of total qualifying cost'. The National Arts Council website. Accessed on 24 March 2017 from https://www.nac.gov.sg/whatwedo/support/funding/majorcompanyscheme/overview.html
[64] Approximately 60% of the company's revenue is based on ticket sales. Figures extracted from I Theatre's Financial Report, 2012-2013 (private document).
[65] The company usually receives an annual grant of S$125,000. In 2013, this figure was reduced to S$100,000. Figures extracted from I Theatre Financial Report, 2012-2013 (private document).

economic conditions, and questions the identities and motivations of the artists in increasingly competitive markets. She contends that economic factors and the motivations of creative industries, cultural policy discourses and challenging funding structures have pressured artists into becoming more business-like. This emphasis on artists as entrepreneurs – something she terms 'artrepreneur' – 'privileges the "liberty" of individuals to trade as they please' and, in doing so, 'promotes private enterprise within apparently "free" or "open" markets over publicly regulated economies' (2013, p.63). This, according to her, has created a climate where the social value of the arts and economic imperatives have become intertwined. It is here that Harvie argues contemporary art and performance practices can resist and respond to capitalist forces and, in return, produce 'models of fairness and constructive social engagement' (2013 p. 24). In her chapter on public and private capital, Harvie points out that one recognisable connection between the state and the arts is funding:

> This link clearly marks an economic relationship, but it also articulates state and social attitudes to the importance of the arts, to social responsibilities for the arts, to social relations and to society itself. (2014, p.150)

Harvie does not write about TYA, but her thoughts made me reflect on how I Theatre might turn to arguments that are in line with the prevailing educational rhetoric that justifies TYA in terms of its instrumental role, rather than for art's sake. Instead of examining the funding structures of the NAC or the grant amount that I Theatre received, I shall turn my attention to the NAC assessment form – an evaluation document for the performing arts – to underline one of the ways in which control is placed on the arts by the government.

The assessment of Theatre for Young Audiences and entrepreneurism

Since the late 1990s, the NAC has been supporting arts companies through various funding systems and schemes. In doing so, it has introduced a set of benchmarks, key performance indicators and detailed assessment criteria as a way to appraise the work and justify public funds. These reviews are also conducted to ensure that companies do not breach the regulations that forbid them to dramatise and discuss topics such as race, religion and politics in an insensitive manner. Therefore, every piece of work needs to be reviewed by a

panel of four or five assessors (often comprising practitioners, educators and policymakers). For TYA productions, however, only one member from the NAC and one from the industry would appraise the work. A reason for this is that there are numerous non-TYA productions happening and not enough assessors to go around. Furthermore, the NAC has always worked under the assumption (and trust) that companies who create TYA and education-oriented theatre will ensure that the work is in line with what the state and public perceive as culturally appropriate and wholesome.

The assessment is based on three main categories: Content, Audience Engagement, and Accessibility.[66] The 'success' of the productions are then judged by how well they achieve these markers (albeit through the, arguably, biased lens of the assessors), which ultimately informs the grant amount that the company or artist subsequently receives. Inevitably, and not unreasonably, companies that wish to obtain state funding have to meet specific briefs and criteria that are usually driven by national policies and political agendas. Below is an extract of the evaluation form that illustrates the assessment structure and some of the questions:

Figure 9: The NAC External Assessment Form, *The Rainbow Fish*, 2016

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[66] NAC External Assessment Form. I Theatre archive (private document). Accessed on 16 Jan 2016.

The NAC assessment form is an example of how the evaluation process can be rigid, one-dimensional and restrictive. In these appraisals, the assessors simply check the boxes that correspond with their subjective response without having to provide any explanation. There is an open-ended section in the final part of the report that asks the assessors to summarise and elaborate on their observations and thoughts, but I have observed that this section is often left blank.[67] Here, it is worth noting that the criteria for assessing 'audience engagement' is linked to a set of objectives or policy outcomes, rather than the production's artistic value or the audience experience. The artistic, in this context, is implied only in terms like 'effective' or 'engagement'. The way in which this assessment is framed is, at best, used to justify audience numbers and at worst, an exercise in marketing. What is arguably most unsettling is that the same evaluation form is used across the spectrum of the performing arts sector (music, dance, community art, theatre), regardless of each company's motivation, scale of production, form, target audience and size. This reveals that finding ways to describe, articulate and evaluate the aesthetic dimensions in these performances are often overlooked in favour of a set of readily measurable criteria.

Given this context, it is clear that the demands for proof of effectiveness, justification and accountability are unrelenting. The benchmarks for outcomes have led to copious amounts of work, extensive reports to be completed and boxes to be ticked, which in practice can be arbitrary and inaccurate. Jackson, who writes about the relationship between funding and 'agenda-driven theatre', argues that if the aesthetic nature of the work gets side-lined, this consequently '"devalues" the very medium through which the "messages" are communicated' (2007, p.198). Taking this argument on board, creative work that is linked to state support will be inevitably subjected to structures of power and driven by the need to justify and quantify 'development', 'outcome' and 'impact', rather than celebrated for its aesthetic qualities and inherent values.

Other scholars are also critical of these evaluations. In their chapter 'Community music through authentic engagement: bridging community, school, university and art groups', published in *Community Music Today*, Silvia Chong and her co-authors write from the

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[67] These completed evaluation forms are shared with the companies.

perspective of music education and examine the impact of music programmes that are designed for children. In their survey of the music sector in Singapore, they are critical of these forms of assessment and have identified that music performances for young audiences often emphasise the 'educational outcomes' rather than their 'appreciation' (2013, p.154). Drawing on the works of music educator Maria Elena Letona, they propose that, for these programmes to have a greater impact, a closer collaboration between the state, educators and artists is necessary 'to solve problems such as inefficiency, diffuse public accountability, and a lack of responsiveness' (2013, p.155). This suggests that, for any art form that might play a role in educating young audiences, it is equally important to ensure that its full creative potential is recognised. As Schonmann argues, 'the non-intentional educational experience will result in education at its best' (2006 p.43). This optimistic view, however, can be challenging in practice. In a culture where funding for the arts comes with the proviso that there is proof of educational and social benefits, it adversely affects the aesthetic qualities and indirect educational outcomes of TYA. Since I Theatre's survival is intimately tied to state funding and the market, inevitably, but not unjustly, the company faces the pressure to operate under what Jackson terms, the 'targets and outcomes culture' (2002, p.199). These demands to meet political agendas and performance indicators have shaped the ways in which the work has been designed, packaged and delivered over the years. Here, I want to draw attention to two reviews of *The Rainbow Fish* to illuminate how creative work can be inhibited in this context. On 'Little Day Out', an online platform that promotes and reviews activities for children and their families, local reviewer Clarence Yap writes:

> There are a few ingredients that go into a hit children's production: colourful characters, fun and timeless storyline, strong learning points, easy-on-the-ear music and a dash of goofy humour.

> I Theatre's *The Rainbow Fish* ticks all the above boxes, so it's no wonder it's one of the company's most well-loved productions. Based on the worldwide bestselling children's book series by Marcus Pfister, the troupe first performed it in 2002 and has restaged it seven times in the past 14 years due to popular demand. Given this

year marks I Theatre's 15th anniversary, bringing back this all-time favourite is a no-brainer.

A by-now classic tale that's been known to strike a chord with kids, it holds strong lessons about friendship, pride, sharing, inner beauty and the importance of individuality.[68]

This review is generally positive and in praise of the production. Granted that Yap is considering the children's viewpoint, but it also reflects the danger of how artists might narrowly conceive their practice to meet very specific briefs and criteria, and lose sight of the qualities that lie at the heart of TYA: playfulness, surprise, emotional engagement, and empathy. The list of 'ingredients' that Yap describes reveals the fact that even members of the audience are aware of I Theatre's predictable formula. The production's theme and moral message are explicitly amplified by reviewer, Audrey Says:

I love I Theatre productions because they are always filled with learning points for take homes and discussion. This time, I asked Wey[69] what he learnt from the show. The first obvious answer was the part about **Sharing** – how it was wrong to be selfish and not share with friends. I liked that we could talk about Rainbow Fish's **self-centeredness** and vanity that made her full of herself and too **proud** to see the worth of others as **equal individuals**. It was also nice to explore the value of **Teamwork** (another value Wey's school has been focussing on) when Rainbow Fish, Star Fish, Small Blue, Big Violet and Little Green came together to 'scare' off the shark.[70] (emphasis in original)

The instructive framing of the production illustrates how a TYA company like I Theatre might risk complying with the prevailing educational rhetoric and justifying the performance in

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[68] Yap, Clarence. The Rainbow Fish Review: Underwater Magic. Little Day Out. 3 May 2016. Accessed on 16 February 2017 from: https://www.littledayout.com/2016/05/03/the-rainbow-fish-review-underwater-magic/

[69] Wey is Audrey Say's five-year-old son, whom she took with to the production.

[70] Says, Audrey. Underwater Fun with I Theatre's *The Rainbow Fish*. SAys! Happy Mums. 4 May 2016. Accessed on 16 February 2017 from: https://sayshappymums.wordpress.com/2016/05/04/review-underwater-fun-with-i-theatres-the-rainbow-fish-26-april-15-may-2016/

terms of its development of a set of skills or its use as a tool for imparting moral lessons, which might result in its production being overly didactic and, therefore, patronising. I am not dismissive of the company's work, nor suggesting that it has conformed to a set of criteria imposed by funding agencies. On the contrary, I have learnt that the company generally produces work that has its own artistic merits while at the same time fulfils the goals set out by the NAC. However, what is worth noting here is how external factors might limit the frameworks that companies have to operate in and by which means they have to justify their work. Furthermore, since funding for TYA and arts companies that produce work only for adults comes from the same pot of money, this makes the competition even more intense. As I Theatre's former company manager, Jasmine Choe, explains: 'This annual assessment is very rigid and does not necessarily reflect the creative work that the company prides itself on'.[71]

What is interesting and heartening to note is that at the time of completing this research, the NAC has consulted with the industry to create a new framework for assessing TYA. This comprises an expanded assessment form that includes additional and more nuanced criteria, such as the artistic aims and objective of the piece, the artistic rationale for the production design, and the skills of the performers, as well as feedback and reflections from the children after every performance. The new direction is in line with the new 'Best Production for the Young' award — a prize given by the NAC and local newspaper, The Straits Times — that aims to raise the quality and profile of TYA in Singapore. I will elaborate on this in the final chapter.

On a national level, there is an instructive motivation for creativity that links arts companies to global capitalism. The Singaporean government has explicitly acknowledged that these organisations should not just rely on state support, and that the private sector also needs to also play a role in the cultural development of the nation. This view is articulated by former Minister for Information and the Arts, George Yeo, at the Cultural Awards Presentation ceremony in 1990:

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[71] Choe, Jasmine. Interview, I Theatre office, 12 July 2016.

In the end, we need some kind of market mechanism, so that success is rewarded with more resources, which in turn makes further success possible. This relationship between the arts and economics is inescapable in the long term for any society… Public funding of the arts should always incorporate a market test. We need a partnership of Government and the private sector. Without the help of the government, progress will be difficult. But without the participation of the private sector, of corporation and individuals, the result will likely be perverse and distorted.[72]

The message is clear here: arts groups need to think and act entrepreneurially, in that they should not just rely on the state, but also actively and responsibly seek out alternative forms of commercial support. Sponsorship, for example, makes the corporate sponsors look good by supporting TYA, and TYA receives a vital cash injection while having more freedom to pursue aesthetic aspects of a production. This is viewed as good practice as it will ensure that both the cultural sector and economy develop in mutually beneficial ways. The underlying assumption is that if companies are unable to remain competitive, they should make way for other players who are more resilient and adaptable. It seems that, while the state continues to support the development of the arts, it would also let the market ultimately judge the rise and fall of these companies. This expectation on artists to be 'artrepreneurs' has potentially detrimental effects. In her study, Harvie has identified three ways in which a competitive and market-driven economy can potentially damage the arts, culture and the artists involved:

One, it insists that art prioritises self-interest and individualism. Two, it requires art to acquiesce to creative destruction as an apparently inevitable by-product of innovation…. And three, it obliges art relentlessly to pursue productivity, permanent growth and profit. (2014, p.63)

This reveals how the artistic imagination and cultures of creativity are intimately linked to the economy, and highlights the precarity of creative work in such an environment. The

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[72] Yeo, George. Speech by BG George Yeo at the 1990 Cultural Awards Presentation. National Archives of Singapore. Accessed on 6 August 2015 from:
http://www.nas.gov.sg/archivesonline/data/pdfdoc/yybg19910325s.pdf

fuzzy lines between commerce and politics and art practices may themselves fluctuate according to the agenda of the time and the preconceptions of the audience which, in turn, inform the style and content of the performance. Local journalist Akshita Nanda notes in her article, 'Time to Let Theatre for the Young Show Up': 'Theatre troupes heavily depend on government funding and private sponsorship to develop new works or even stage existing plays' and 'shows that push the boundaries are very rare'.[73] This has led artists to oscillate between audience and market, quantity and quality, art and policy. By ticking all the right boxes, *The Rainbow Fish* might appear to achieve 'success' in the eyes of the funding agencies and intermediaries. But, against a backdrop that emphasises formal and public justification, the thought-provoking, artistic and challenging work that a TYA company like I Theatre might strive to achieve will be replaced by repetition, re-production and predictability if they succumb to the pressures of the economy.

While the debate up to this point suggests how TYA might face the dangers of becoming stagnant due to political conditions and the demands of the market, my aim is also to provide a counter argument to illustrate how artists have found ways of adjusting to these circumstances while retaining their core values. Market forces might put pressure on artists to model entrepreneurism, but artists have also found innovative ways to develop their work in ways that are both aesthetically and socially valuable, even if emerging conditions require they find new ways of doing so. TYA, as Schonmann argues, is not merely a hybrid between theatre and education, but rather 'a complex and indivisible entity' (2006 p.203). I shall take this idea forward in the rest of this chapter and examine three aspects of *The Rainbow Fish* – the rehearsal process, marketing and the foyer area – to illustrate the ways in which I Theatre has calibrated and negotiated this liminal space. It is here that I hope to illuminate how creativity, when appropriately managed, can embrace both the artistic practices and social agenda of TYA.

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[73] Nanda, Akshita. Time to Let Theatre for the Young Show Up. The Straits Times Online. 30 Aug 2016. Accessed on 27 Sep 2017 from: https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/time-to-let-theatre-for-the-young-show-up

The creative process: managing the artistic and social dimensions

Over the years, *The Rainbow Fish* has been performed in different spaces and in different ways. What the musical is perhaps best known for is its high production values that excite and stimulate the imagination of the audience. As one of the teachers expressed in the feedback form: It was a colourful and captivating performance – I left with a good feeling.[74] Below is a list that illustrates where in Singapore the production has been performed:

- 2002: Church of Our Saviour Auditorium (May)
- 2002: Church of Our Saviour Auditorium (Nov)
- 2004: The Alliance Française Theatre
- 2006: The Alliance Française Theatre
- 2008: The Alliance Française Theatre
- 2011: The Singapore Airlines Theatre
- 2016: The Drama Centre

Although *The Rainbow Fish* has been staged seven times, I want to stress that each subsequent version was revised, reinterpreted and refreshed. Reviewers and audiences might not pick up on these differences, but being part of the company allowed me to understand how this production has transformed over time. In particular, I have come to realise that it is in the rehearsal process that creativity is most dynamic.

The work of Gay McAuley provided me with a useful perspective to consider the relationship between the creative process and the rehearsal room. In her book, *Not Magic but Work*, McAuley positions herself as a participant-observer and offers an 'ethnographic account of a rehearsal process' (the subtitle of the book) of the making of *Toy Symphony* – a production by Company B that was staged at the Belvoir Street Theatre in Sydney, Australia. Her study is not on why rehearsals work or how theatre is made. Rather, it provides an analysis of the rehearsal process as a culturally situated practice and a set of social interactions in which meanings are negotiated and created. Her argument is that applying

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[74] Anonymous. *The Rainbow Fish* feedback form. 23 May 2016. Retrieved on 12 June 2017 from I Theatre's archive.

an ethnographic practice to the process of rehearsal broadens the focus from concentrating on the materiality of the final performance to include an understanding of the social and artistic interactions in the rehearsal room. She contends that being in the room and engaging with the creative development can provide an insight into the 'complex interpersonal relations, work practices and the collective creative process', that is usually not seen by the general public (2012, p.4).

I attended two rehearsals of *The Rainbow Fish* between April–May 2016 to learn how it was conceived and developed. I was interested to examine how, and in what ways, a group of people (e.g. directors, designers, performers) could work together in a collaborative setting and negotiate the different artistic and social territories. In the rehearsal room, I was a participant-observer, made welcome by the director, actors and the production team, who were aware of my position and that I was conducting a research project on TYA. Besides being present and observing the process, I also conversed with the participants during their breaks, before and after the rehearsal. Of course, not all of our exchanges revolved around my investigative enquiries. Some conversations inevitably flowed from talks about their thoughts on the creative process and TYA in general to more personal anecdotes and sensitive reflections. These stories allowed me to discover embodied memories and practices as well as develop important relationships and build trust with the participants in the research process. While most were happy for me to document these encounters, there were others who were uncomfortable in me doing so. In these moments, I respected their requests and did not record or share them. McAuley reflects on her own ethnographic process:

> Writing about rehearsal, thus, requires navigation of a fine line between betraying confidences by telling too much and failing to engage with the reality of the practice by telling too little. (2012, p.8)

As a researcher and member of the company, this approach required a careful balance between the ethical dimensions of the practice and my research agenda. Similar to McAuley's study, I found that the ethnographic process of the rehearsal was 'a process of discovery', where every element is unknown to the people involved in the

production before it begins (2012, p.2). It was through a series of improvisation, negotiation and experimentation that eventually brought the different creative components (e.g. set, music, choreography, puppetry) together. In much the same way, my methodology reflected this spirit of unexpected discovery and allowed me to engage with a wide range of practices and people in the creative work. Below are my observations of the rehearsal process:

Research diary, the first rehearsal, 14 April 2016. On the first day of rehearsal, I arrived early at The Drama Centre Visitors Centre – the space used for rehearsals – to find production manager Hatta Said and his stage manager Justina Khoo already hard at work. They were moving the chairs and tables out of the room, so that they could mark the floor based on the actual stage measurements. The rehearsal room was on the top floor of the National Library building and had a stunning view of the Civic District. As the rest of the performers and creative team arrived, they smiled and greeted one another before chattering amongst themselves. After a round of introductions, playwright and Artistic Director Brian Seward explained that due to the larger stage at The Drama Centre, a major overhaul of the production was necessary, so that the audience could get a 'better experience'. He shared that, even though the production had been performed many times, each iteration was never 'bogged down' to a fixed form and set interpretation, and that he wanted this latest version to be equally exciting and fresh. To ensure that each production remained engaging, he explained how he consciously analyses the audience 'level of engagement and the flow of the narrative', before adjusting the text and dramaturgy for the next staging. He also acknowledged that being receptive and sensitive to the audience was important to the creation process as it can 'take the work to the next level'. More importantly, he stressed that the production should be treated with 'respect', and that the performers should engage with the process like how they would with any other production.

As a step forward from the 2011 production, Seward announced that he was going to include two new characters: Tiny Stripes and Sharkie. He felt that they

were vital in helping establish a clearer relationship with the protagonist, Rainbow, and would strengthen the narrative and message of the production. On a theatrical level, this meant that there was an opportunity to include new songs, puppets, and choreographic sequences as a way to make the production more spectacular and visually appealing. Seward added that he would work closely with the design team to recreate the puppets, set and costumes, and also encouraged the performers to actively contribute in the creative process as he 'cannot do it alone'. There was certainly a buzz of energy in the room when the performers played with the props and moved around during the different scenes. What struck me most was not so much Seward's acknowledgment that significant modifications would be made, but the fact that he seemed content for these changes to emerge from the rehearsal process, in which he would only play an intermittent role.

Figure 10: The Drama Centre Visitors' Centre, 2016

Research diary, the second rehearsal: putting things together, 2 May 2016. The work process began with a reading of a scene called 'Rainbow Finds a Way Home'. In this section, Rainbow returns from the cave of the octopus and is elated to share her scales with her friends. Following the read, the performers assumed their position in the marked-out space and suggested several ideas amongst themselves about how the scene could unravel. Although the script is written by Seward, I discovered that the text itself is subjected to a significant

amount of rewriting and reinterpretation by the other members of the creative team. Halfway through the rehearsal, musical director Wenfu Bang asked Seward if he could make changes to some of the lyrics, so that the music would have a 'better flow and rhythm'. He started to play a few chords on the keyboard to demonstrate how the melody would complement the spoken-word, and suggested changing the words from 'from the north to the south' to 'everywhere'. At this moment, choreographer Cathy Kee readily jumped in and said that the gesture of having 'both hands in the air' could amplify the word 'everywhere', and would 'work better' for that particular dance sequence. The performers responded to these suggestions by picking up the puppets and experimented with different ways of moving. One of the performers, Dwayne Lau, proposed: 'Maybe we can try moving the fish over and under to make it look like they are swimming away from each other'. After thirty minutes of improvisation, a vibrant and lively scene emerged from these dramaturgical and theatrical revisions. At this moment, I noticed stage manager Khoo and production manager Said turn to each other and nod. Said gestured a thumbs-up to Seward as a sign of approval and indicated that he enjoyed the scene. Seward took these suggestions positively and commended the designer and performers for their 'remarkable choices'. His tone was friendly and informal, which made everyone in the rehearsal room felt at ease. This encouraged them to voice their opinions when they did not agree with his artistic choices or if they had interesting ideas to share.

In the evening, general manager Jasmine Choe, marketing manager Shahirah Sharifa, and front-of-house manager Masnita Osman dropped in during the final hour to observe the rehearsal. Since there was little opportunity to talk to the office staff once rehearsals began, Seward invited them to witness the process to stimulate ideas on how they might advertise the production. I was invited to join Seward and the trio for dinner after the rehearsal. During this time, they made a list of the different ways that the show could be advertised, as well as discuss how the foyer area could be dressed and used. In my time working with the company, I also noticed that the term 'team' was used very

often in emails and conversations. As we were walking to the bus stop, I decided to ask Seward what his motivation was. He replied that he chooses to use the term 'team' to address both the artistic and administrative departments as a way to flatten the hierarchy of the company. Additionally, he wanted to preserve the 'team spirit' that the founding members shared, and to honour Sergeant, who passed away in 2011. He acknowledged that this 'organic way of working' occasionally caused confusion amongst staff members in terms of their roles and responsibilities, but they also recognised that it could produce 'new and exciting ideas'.

Figure 11: Rehearsal of *The Rainbow Fish*, The Drama Centre Visitors' Centre, 2016

My observations led me to reflect on the creative process that involved the coming together of different ideas, reflections and practices of a group of creative people. It is in the rehearsal room that artists engage with a range of materials such as the script, characters, puppets, and production designs, that can open multiple interpretations. Creating a children's musical involves analysis, adjustments, and considering the minute details of gesture, melody, intonation, and dramatic action in relation to the spoken word. The layering of ideas and practices in the rehearsal process is explained by McAuley:

A stage production is now acknowledged to be a complex work of art and it is through the rehearsal process that this art is brought into being….Rehearsal is the time when the multiple material elements that will constitute a unique work of art

are progressively brought together and when the process of reaction between them is set in train. (2012, p.5)

She elaborates on this further in her observation of the first improvised run-through of the performance:

It is extremely laborious to describe in words the difference these minute adjustments and interventions make but electrifying when you see it happening, when you see the light and shade that emerge, the nuances that inflect the words and the emotional event that is unfolding. (2012, p.78)

This reveals that, as much as the rehearsal is a creative practice, it is also a social process. The interaction between Seward, Kee and Bang is a good example of how these moments can lead to unexpected and spontaneous discoveries, and how the form and content of *The Rainbow Fish* is interpreted and completed by a group of people with different skills, practices and thoughts. In practice, this is a complex process that requires different ideas, abilities and types of embodied knowledge to synergise and come together. The work might emerge from a genuine collaborative effort by a group of artists working together, but McAuley reminds her readers that the role of the director in the creative process is a crucial one. Referencing theatre directors Richard Foreman and Tadeusz Kantor, she argues that the director is ultimately in charge of 'stimulating and unleashing the creativity of others as well as moulding the results into an intellectually, dense, artistically compelling work' (2012, p.5). Here, I am interested in applying a reading of management to my analysis – not to test the effectiveness or credibility of the production, but to try to understand how creativity as a social activity might result in new ideas and practices to emerge.

In his book, *Management and Creativity: From Creative Industries to Creative Management*, Chris Bilton challenges the opposition between 'creatives' (writers, directors) and 'suits' (company managers), and draws on management and creativity theories to examine the intersections between creativity and business. He contends that creativity should not be defined or limited to the creative genius or individual talent in the team. Likewise, Bilton argues that management should also not be restricted to logical and rational processes.

Rather, management needs to embrace intuition, risk, strategy – all of which, he states, requires creativity. Bilton brings these two areas together and argues for a more nuanced appreciation of creativity; one that considers how different ideas and unexpected thoughts can be achieved through a series of interactions, networks and systems. His main argument is that 'creativity is a deliberately managed process and in the same way, management is necessarily and inherently creative' (2007, p.xx).

Bilton also discusses creative teams and asserts that they require effective managerial involvement – not through the direct controlling and leading of the creative process, but 'more indirectly through monitoring and modifying the relationships which underpin that process' (2007, p.36). Drawing on the theories of 'complementary opposites' by business consultant Michael Kirton, he argues that creative teams depend upon a tension between individual focus and collective process. He contends that too much of one or the other might lead to 'over-specialisation or over-familiarisation respectively' (2007, p.35). Here, he suggests that if the individual inventiveness and collective creativity can be effectively bridged, it will enable them to connect new ideas, think critically and problem-solve. Of course, team work it is not without its limits. According to Bilton, creative processes cannot function without some boundaries and constraints, whether these are generated internally (e.g. formal rules and conventions) or externally (e.g. funding, requirements of the brief). Creative work, he presents, should not be seen as fluid and formless, but requires a balance between 'release and control, not in a fantasy world of absolute freedom' (2007, p.88).

Bilton does not discuss the rehearsal process, but this way of thinking about creativity provides a useful way to consider some of the artistic and social aspects in the 'making of' TYA, rather than just focusing on its output. It brings together different thoughts and practices that are unruly and unpredictable, and draws attention to the intrinsic process of production that might be overlooked when focusing on the economic value of products, brands and their makers. In the rehearsal room, Seward's approach to theatre-making is horizontal and open. Instead of asserting control from a top-down position (which is sometimes seen in other directorial practices), he avoids hierarchies and empowers every member. He does this by drawing on the opinions and views of the performers through different theatre games and participatory exercises, rather than imposing his own ideas. In

between scenes, Seward would also regularly pose questions to the group such as 'what do you think?', 'how do you think this might work?' or 'how can we improve on this?', which offers the opportunity for artists and production crew to critically reflect on their input and the overall direction of the work.

On a management level, Seward's way of working mirrors the team approach that Bilton discusses. This 'soft control' encourages individuals to 'express themselves, take risks and challenge conventional thinking' that, consequently, will make them more 'productive and inventive' (2007, p.66). Seward did not limit a person to their assigned role and responsibilities, but encouraged them to offer suggestions that might shape the other aspects of the production. For example, he would ask the music director, choreographer, technicians, and stage crew to voice their opinions after every scene, as he believed they could provide a critical point of view when watching the action from the 'outside'. He would also ask the performers for their suggestions and ideas about the aspects of the production design (e.g. costumes, music, set and props). An example to illustrate this idea of creative agency can be viewed through the lens of performer Jodie Tan, who has been involved in three productions of *The Rainbow Fish* (2008, 2011, and 2016). She describes her contribution to the creation here:

> There were so many changes that we had to make from the 2008 version….But it was nice that we could work collaboratively and the actors had a say in the decision-making process. I remember one of the major changes that I suggested was to get rid of the headgear. It was super uncomfortable and the perspiration kept ruining the make-up. Funny story – I remember in one of the earlier performances, I was very close to the audience. I did not realise that, against the ultra-violet black light, my eyes and mouth looked like they were hollow. The child in front of me was so terrified that he cried so loudly. I must have looked very scary. As a group, we reflected on this problem and finally decided to use rod puppets instead of the head gears for the subsequent staging of the production.[75]

[75] Tan, Jodie. Interview. The Drama Centre, 2 May 2016.

Figure 12: Performers using headpieces in *The Rainbow Fish,* The Alliance Française Theatre, 2008

Figure 13: Performers using rod puppets in *The Rainbow Fish,* The Singapore Airlines Theatre, 2011

This open and collaborative style might encourage different forms of thinking and solutions to develop, but it is also worth recognising that conflict and tension can emerge as well. An incident I witnessed during the second rehearsal exemplifies this. While the performers were devising the content for the aforementioned scene, 'Rainbow Finds a Way Home', the performer playing the character Sharkie suggested that it might be 'funny' if Sharkie chased Rainbow on her journey back home. Although the performer who played Rainbow seemed doubtful, she decided to improvise the scene with Sharkie to see if it worked. After a few attempts, she dropped her puppet and exclaimed, 'this does not make any sense – why would you trivialise this moment of realisation?'. This outburst created a rather awkward

atmosphere, so Seward quickly stepped in to diffuse the tension. He thanked the performer playing Sharkie and proposed that the 'chase sequence' could be placed towards the end of the finale song. He added that all the performers could even enter into the audience space, which would give the overall experience an 'interesting touch'. This suggestion was received positively by the rest of the group and was eventually integrated into the final product.

These examples illustrate that every member is valued and taken seriously, and demonstrate how 'brokering creativity' is important in cultivating a culture of democracy in the rehearsal room (2012, p.36). They also reflect Bilton's idea that the most important aspect of teamwork is not the 'breakthrough thinking' but, rather, the 'recognition and development of half formed ideas' (2007, p.42). This collaborative way of working embraces a range of ideas that emerge from an individual's critical judgement, imagination, and intuition, and can also inspire new ways of thinking and seeing. In fostering such an environment, it highlights how creativity as a social practice can lead to theatre-making that is multi-directional, imaginative and vibrant. In these moments of experimentation, ideas are not just generated by individuals, but are tested and developed collectively. To this end, McAuley, who values the social dimension in the rehearsal process, states:

> The incremental advances in knowledge and understanding, the hesitations, anxieties and compromises as well as the thrill of discovery, the tensions that arise as well as the emotional warmth of the relations between the participants are all vital in accounting for the complex nature of collective creativity. (2012, p.28)

It is this collaborative ethos that allows each interpretation of *The Rainbow Fish* to be artistically refreshing and communally produced. Within the agenda-driven context, it also gives space for the work to be lively, imaginative and engaging. As I observed in both the rehearsal room and the final production itself, there was a playfulness at the centre of the piece, which allowed for engagement on both emotional and intellectual levels. The audience clearly relished the theatrical experience of the most recent production and was captivated throughout the performance. This shows how accomplished I Theatre is in creating TYA that is imaginative while also sticking to the given agendas that it serves, and suggests that the social and aesthetic functions can work in harmony. However, it is also

important to recognise that a balance between 'release and control' is needed to achieve this. Artists and managers need to negotiate and calibrate the limits of what is permissible, while working within specific boundaries and the 'rules of the game' in order to reinvent them (2012, p.87). Using this type of process requires the director to have particular skills such as diplomatic leadership, good communication and a spirit of open-mindedness. It involves both the shared recognition of the collaborative culture and a commitment to the bigger vision of the work for which all are prepared to devote their energies. The reward is the unleashing of the imaginative and intellectual potential of TYA. This way of working not only celebrates the creative freedom and autonomy of each team member, but also regenerates, transforms, and propels the work forward. This idea of creativity as an ongoing dynamic and social process is best captured in the words of Seward: 'Each production is a reflection and a step forward from the one before.'[76]

In the next section, I shall explore how the company has learnt to reconfigure structures and rules which govern TYA beyond the rehearsal room. As Bilton argues, if a creative idea is to challenge existing parameters and redefine a problem, 'it must first engage with the existing boundaries and rules' (2007, p.77). Here, I shall examine the ways in which aspects of marketing – an area that is often not analysed in TYA – can be imaginative and inclusive.

Creative marketing

Earlier in this chapter, I showed the ways in which TYA might conform to the prevailing educational rhetoric and notions of appropriateness in order to forge partnerships with its stakeholders and meet the expectation of the adults. As van de Water identifies, pressures by the economy often result in companies first targeting the adults as the 'initial market' (2012, p.18). One way to examine this relationship between the producer (TYA artists and companies) and adult consumer is to reflect on the marketing material of TYA. Below is an image and excerpt from I Theatre's 2016 publicity brochure of The Rainbow Fish:

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[76] Seward, Brian. Interview. I Theatre office, 20 June 2016.

Figure 14: Publicity brochure of *The Rainbow Fish*, 2016

Based on Marcus Pfister's award winning storybook, I Theatre is again proud to present this marvellous hit musical for the whole family in Singapore!

Rainbow Fish learns some very valuable lessons about her attitude to others, some hard lessons about pride and selfishness, and some valuable truths about the power of generosity and humility…

Small Blue, Big Violet, Little Green, and newcomers Tiny Stripes and Sharkie all find out how teamwork helps everyone; and how gossip and rumour can cause damage to friendships!

For this brand new re-imagined production of the classic tale, we've created marvellously colourful puppet characters and a wonderful Black Light underwater world in a hilarious comedy for the whole family.

You'll discover colourful characters and cute songs for the young ones, an interactive and funny script for the older ones; and very valuable lessons for all – young or old.

There is a compelling reason that connects the illustration on the book to the flyer. Seward explains:

I insist on using only this image because it is such a popular book and people
already know it so well. I want teachers and parents to recognise it immediately ….
Plus, it is such a beautiful illustration.[77]

Former marketing manager of the company, Shahirah Sharifah, adds to this perspective:

It doesn't matter how good or bad the production is. My job is to persuade parents
and teachers to buy the tickets. It defeats the purpose of putting on a production if
I can't convince them to part with their money, right? I need to find different ways
and angles to sell the show. It's all about transforming the production from a want
to a need.[78]

The publicity flyers for *The Rainbow Fish* were distributed to schools and ticketing agents as
early as a year before rehearsal even began. This is because schools in Singapore usually
take at least three months to sort out the necessary administrative paperwork. These flyers
were also sent to parents, as well as being displayed on distribution stands in various malls
and tourist attractions a few months before the production commenced. Additionally, the
production was also advertised in local family magazines such as *Young Parents* and
Singapore Parenting Magazine.

These insights not only reinforce the fact (and paradox) that TYA is first and foremost 'adult
driven', but also highlight how marketing is a persuasive and communicative tool. Bilton
offers a perspective that considers the relationship between marketing and patterns of
consumption. In his chapter 'From Creative Marketing to Creative Consumption', Bilton
builds on Bourdieu's idea of 'symbolic goods' and argues that the value of cultural products
does not lie in their physical and tangible properties, but in 'symbolic meanings – ideas,
images, emotions and experiences' (2007, p.138). One assumption of modern marketing, he
contends, is that consumers are increasingly interested in the benefits of the product, rather

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[77] Seward, Brian. Interview. I Theatre office, 20 Jun 2016.
[78] Sharifah, Shahirah. I Theatre office, 20 Jun 2016.

than the product itself. On a theoretical level, he makes a distinction between the 'product' and the 'product surround', and discusses how consumers are more concerned with the 'meaning and value of the product' and not the 'thing itself' (2007, p.141). Taking this idea a step further, he proposes that, for marketing to be effective, producers need to shift their focus from the product to the consumer, in particular the 'customer experience' (2007, p.141).

This way of thinking extends the analysis of the audience experience to consider how the design and arrangement of the images and text on the flyer can shape their expectations and thoughts even before watching the production. Given how influential these brochures are, I Theatre has consciously designed them in a particular way that draws attention to the production, as well as what it can do for the children. For example, the vibrant and colourful image, together with the emphasis on the moral message – generosity, sharing and friendship – frames the production as attractive, playful, and fun, and reinforces its educational value. By advertising it as a 'brand new re-imagined classic tale', it creates the impression that the audience can look forward to a refreshing experience, even though they may have witnessed a previous version. Finally, the iconic illustration of *The Rainbow Fish* on the glossy front of the flyer offers a sense of familiarity to the consumers. All these suggest how images, text, and their arrangements, when considered and managed appropriately, can communicate to the (adult) consumers/ ticket-buyers a certain message. The creative work here lies in the process of selecting, filtering and manipulating the content that is equally, if not more, important than the final product. As Knowles argues, the publicity materials relating to a show (e.g. posters, programmes, and advertising pre-show interviews and features) – what he terms 'public discourse' – can influence the audience response, expectation and experience in many ways. The accumulative impact of these materials, he suggests, 'can create discourses of excitement or prestige, exploration or comfort, risk-taking or assured quality' (2004, p. 92).

Notwithstanding the pressures of defending the work to funding agencies, one possible reason for framing a TYA production in this particular way is that a trip to the theatre has been increasingly met with demands made by the schools themselves. Educationalist Christine Sinclair in her chapter 'Access and Practicalities of Attendance', published in *Young*

Audiences, Theatre and the Cultural Conversation, points out the challenges when teachers organise a theatre excursion for their students:

> They had to seek out information about appropriate programming, find performances which met with curriculum requirements and school and assessment scheduling, disseminate information and garner support amongst school, student and parent communities, organise ticket bookings and transportation, arrange for teacher replacement, and, once organisational matters had been attended to, take responsibility for the educational opportunities and obligations afforded by the theatre excursion. (2014, p.42)

Sinclair makes it clear that bringing a class of children to the theatre involves a complex range of organisational responsibilities and considerations. It is unsurprising, then, that TYA publicity material is often designed to communicate the educational importance of the theatre experience, so that it justifies the laborious undertakings for organising such a trip. I personally encountered teachers in Singapore who were increasingly burdened by copious amounts of administrative forms and reports to justify these 'educational experiences' outside of the classroom. In fact, on several occasions, schools had deliberately chosen not to visit the theatre because the educational justifications were deemed inadequate by the school principal. This reinforces the fact that I Theatre is aware of the 'boundaries and rules' of TYA in relation to the market and have chosen to frame the production brochures around a set of outcomes in order to speak the 'language' of teachers and educational institutions. It might appear that the company has designed the flyers according to the prevailing orthodoxy, but I want to demonstrate how it has also learnt to diversify and challenge these cultural expectations. Here, I shall focus on a key marketing strategy that the company employed as part of its 15th anniversary.

Between 2015–2016, the company manager and the marketing team launched a marketing campaign called 'Let's Get Creative', which sought to promote the productions that year and engage members of the public. As part of this outreach strategy, the company encouraged the general public (no ticket purchase necessary) to think of ideas, memories, pictures, favourite moments and stories that they would like to see on stage and share them on the

company's website and social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and *Instagram*. The company also posted videos of the rehearsals, backstage tours and interviews with the different creative teams (e.g. costumes, set and props, music), as a way to expand the participants' knowledge and enhance their experience beyond the stage. Additionally, they could also participate in a range of online quizzes, games, arts, crafts, and learning activities that revolved around the productions that year. For example, during the production of *The Rainbow Fish*, people could download and print out a set of instructions on how to use everyday materials to create their own Rainbow Fish. Halfway through the campaign, I Theatre organised a contest called 'Creatively You' to find the best ideas for character names, stories, set, costumes, and prop designs. Not only would the best entries be used in future productions, but the winners would receive complimentary tickets to these shows. What is most significant is that, in all of these interactions and exchanges, participants were referred to as 'friends of I Theatre'. This created a welcoming tone and blurred the relationship between producer and consumer. These virtual experiences were interactive, empowering, playful, and received very positive responses from local and even international participants. To quote a comment that was posted on the company's Facebook page: 'My son and I had so much fun playing with the different online activities. It made us feel like we were a part of the I Theatre family. This is what makes I Theatre truly unique!'[79]

Figure 15: *The Rainbow Fish* craft activities (in partnership with 'Fun With Mama'), 2016

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[79] Anonymous comment. I Theatre Facebook page. Accessed on 12 June 2016 from: https://www.facebook.com/ITheatreSG/

This strategy marks a shift from conventional approaches to marketing. It provided plentiful resources available online that gave people the freedom to choose their own activities. More significantly, rather than just targeting the adults, this marketing idea also directly targeted children, as it offered youngsters the chance to engage with the online resources, as well as express their ideas, feelings and thoughts – an aspect in Singaporean TYA that is often overlooked. These activities were less about didactic learning but instead encouraged creative expression and idea generation. Furthermore, the experience also provided rich material for teachers and parents to use and follow-up in the discussions and workshops. By empowering both the adults and children in ways like this, it shifted their role from passive consumers to active producers. This consumer-led approach mirrors what Bilton terms 'letting go', in which producers shift the responsibilities of cultural production to the consumers, within certain boundaries. I am not suggesting that marketing in this context is a form of cultural production. However, thinking about creativity in this way allows new communities, values and identities to be created. By fostering a social and creative culture online, it privileged the autonomy of the consumers as well as encouraged interaction between the consumers and the company.

Marketing and advertising, in this context, is no longer designed to sell a commodity or to communicate key messages to the customers. Instead, it detaches itself from the product and plays a role in reinventing the meaning and value of the product. By arranging and curating an experience that is performative and imaginative, it allowed participants to control their own version of the narrative laid out by the producers and marketers. Harvie, who borrows American futurologists Alvin and Heidi Toffler's term 'prosumers' (the combination of 'producers' and 'consumers'), points out that audience members are now engaged in labour previously done for them by others, whether they are commodities or services. She argues that art and performance practices that enlists the audience to co-create them offer the pleasures of 'action, self-determination and discovery' (2014, p.50). These engagements, she contends, not only fulfil the audience's needs by allowing them to produce what they want to consume, but also offer them the opportunity to design their experiences according to their own specifications and desire, at their own pace, and in their own time (2014, p.51). Writing more specifically about marketing and advertising, Bilton suggests that the aim of the producer is to 'construct a symbolic web of associations around

the product that in return allows consumers to create their own meaningful experiences' (2007, p.141). The idea that 'experiences' are appropriated by the participants and made their own chimes well with the marketing approach of I Theatre. This virtual framework might possibly be a portal to generate new audiences for the company, but it also provided people who do not have access to live theatre a range of activities to engage with, as well as offer an insight into TYA. Of course, this can, and will, never replace the live experience. But in ways like this, the creation of a performative, imaginative and socially engaging space challenged the boundaries of the agenda-driven and educational framing of TYA, and allowed participants to express their ideas (e.g. story-telling, images, designs, videos) in playful and meaningful ways.

In the final section of this chapter, I shall further discuss this idea of the 'consumer experience' and illustrate how the theatre lobby can influence the audience experience. In particular, I want to draw attention to the design, arrangement and activities in the foyer space of *The Rainbow Fish* to highlight how it challenged commercialism and encouraged a range of artistic expression and social engagement.

Curating the foyer space: challenging commercialism:

Performances at The Drama Centre are usually presented in the main auditorium, but there is also a huge foyer where the audience can mingle and congregate before and after the show. Other than the building-owned café that occupies a permanent area in that space, the rest of the lobby is usually left empty for companies who rent the theatre to conduct activities such as post-show talks, photo-taking sessions and workshops. Since the library is located directly one level below the theatre, members of the public occasionally visit the café or use this lobby as a reading area.

Figure 16: The Drama Centre foyer

The foyer for the production of *The Rainbow Fish* was curated to extend and expand on the audience's experience beyond the theatrical production. Located immediately outside of the theatre auditorium was a large make-shift 'bookstore' that had a range of popular children's books, including *The Rainbow Fish*. Beside it stood a booth that sold various memorabilia such as tote bags, t-shirts, mugs, badges and the production soundtrack. There were also several pop-ups around this space, where facilitators offered various art and craft activities and story-telling sessions. At the opposite end, an attractive backdrop of *The Rainbow Fish* was specially constructed for the audience to take pictures with the performers during the meet-and-greet sessions. After every performance, the ushers would also distribute colouring pictures of the different characters in the show, along with stickers and colouring pencils. In line with the inclusive ethos of the company, those not attending *The Rainbow Fish* could also participate in these activities free of charge. What struck me was that the children (and even the adults) were more interested in completing the artwork and displaying them on the walls of the foyer than browsing the merchandise. There was certainly a buzz in this space; and the workshops, the pictures on the wall, the excitable chatter of the crowd, and the delighted smiles on the children's faces all added to this lively and vibrant atmosphere.

This goes to show that theatres are never just spaces for performances. In his analysis, Knowles notes that a range of peripheral services make up the holistic experience of the theatre, with watching the performance but one part. He argues that the theatre lobby is a space that frames and prepares 'the audience horizons of expectation' (2004, p.71).

Knowles comments on merchandise and other products on sale at theatres, and refers to McAuley's argument that such underscoring of the commercial basis of theatre may undermine the art produced there. In such instances, Knowles contends that 'all such amenities carry with them ideological coding that can reinforce, modify, or undercut artistic intent' (2004, p. 73). While the design and placement of the pop-ups in the foyer of *The Rainbow Fish* might, at first glance, resemble the lobby of a shopping mall or an indoor market, let me compare this with a production of Disney's *The Lion King* that I went to see in Singapore in 2011. The Marina Bay Sands Theatre, where the performance was held, is part of a mega shopping mall that offers a range of luxury goods and services. In here, the foyer area had a bar and a huge gift shop. During *The Lion King*, the walls of the lobby were covered with the Mastercard logo – the main sponsor for the production. Meanwhile, merchandise related to the show such as character toys, keychains, costumes, collectible items and souvenir programmes were also being paraded by the ushers along the aisle and entrance of the theatre. Even before the performance began, children were clearly distracted with their newly bought toys; while others without them were peering enviously or persuading their parents to purchase these objects. Notably, the building was designed in a way that forced the audience to pass through the gift shop as they exited the theatre. Those adults who did not want their children to be tempted by all the goodies on display would leave the building quickly, rather than staying to interact and mingle in the foyer after the performance.

This production's 'ideological coding', as phrased by Knowles, is in stark contrast to that of I Theatre's. The commodification of children's leisure time is glaringly evident in the outside space of *The Lion King*, with cynical ploys to tempt children to want the show's merchandise almost everywhere they look. Here, I want to highlight three main distinctions. First, unlike the Marina Bay Sands Theatre, the foyer at The Drama Centre was in operation two hours before and after every performance. It created a space and atmosphere that encouraged the audience to linger, interact, and participate in the various activities. While it mostly extended the visit of the young audiences who were there specifically to watch the performance, it was also a separate form of entertainment for members of the general public who were using the café or were just passing through. In other words, a visit to The Drama Centre during that time did not have to be a 'theatre' event at all. On the contrary,

this space was designed and curated to offer children (and adults) entertainment and an opportunity to play and socialise outside of the performance itself. Interestingly, the pop-up gift shop was not the main attraction for the children, who mostly passed it by, despite it being in the most prominent part of the foyer. This is because the shop was not the only activity in the foyer; the more engaging story-telling sessions, craft activities and creative workshops overpowered the lure of merchandise.

Secondly, I Theatre was a state-funded company and possessed a different ethos and identity to the more commercially minded companies such as BASE Entertainment Asia that presented *The Lion King* in Singapore. To an extent, this allowed the company to be freed from the profit-making agenda. It had chosen to explore different ways of attracting extra revenue from an audience without putting on the pressure to spend their money on treats and souvenirs designed to appeal to children. For example, Seward would make a short announcement after every performance to seek donations from the audience. The marketing team would also linger in the lobby area to discuss the 'Arts for All' scheme, which openly asks for financial support through the company's charitable status. In these situations, the team would wait patiently for the audience to approach them, rather than aggressively and blatantly seek their support. In ways like this, the audience did not feel obligated to donate and could freely participate in the activities.

Finally, The Drama Centre is situated inside the National Library Building, which creates an impression that reinforces the educational framing of the production as well as the ethos of the company. By curating an experience that straddled both learning and the arts, it strengthened the artistic and educational premise that drives the work and the social agenda that TYA is expected to fulfil. Front-of-house manager Masnita Osman, who was in charge of designing and organising the foyer, explained in my interview with her that, while it was important that the merchandise generated the necessary funds to cover the logistical costs, her aim was not to make profits. Instead, it was to create a space that could 'value-add to everyone passing through – after all, it was the company's anniversary'. [80] In this context, Osman had clearly put much thought into creating a space where schools and

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[80] Osman, Masnita. Interview. The Drama Centre, 28 May 2016.

family audiences would feel safe and welcome. The way in which the foyer was managed and curated signaled to the audience that the ideology of the space was one of participation and play, rather than commercialism. More importantly, by adopting a spirit of inclusion and extending this experience to children who were not attending the performance, it generated, to borrow Harvie's term, 'a model of fairness' in which they could engage in imaginative play, spontaneous discovery and creative expression (2013, p.25).

In this chapter, I have used *The Rainbow Fish* as an example to demonstrate the ways in which a TYA company like I Theatre has responded to broader political conditions and material networks, and how artists and managers can rediscover and adapt existing products and processes rather than invent new ones. Market forces and funding structures might put pressure on artists to commodify and control, but they also encourage innovation to evolve from incremental processes of adaptation and experimentation. Moving through some of the political and cultural concerns of *The Rainbow Fish*, I have illustrated how I Theatre managed to balance the tensions and opportunities between art and business, and repositioned itself within a more competitive and market-driven economy. At the heart of its practice is a belief that TYA can provoke the imagination and offer an engaging, aesthetic experience without compromising the given agenda it serves. By calibrating and (re)negotiating the relationship between arts and authority, as well as rights and restraints, it has opened a way for creativity to help untangle uncertainty, push ideas forward, challenge existing boundaries, and reassert the social value of TYA, allowing the company to evolve and grow. Creativity, as Bilton states, matters not because of its importance to the economy, but because a social process can effect 'change in organisations, management and society' (2007, p.174). In the next chapter, I take forward this idea of creativity as a social practice, and examine how TYA within a festival context can offer a voice of resistance and social critique to the commercial branding of creativity.

Chapter Four
Negotiating the Local and Global: Creativity and the Cultural Politics of the ACE! Festival

The arts in Singapore, as discussed in Chapter Two, have been used in political ways to enhance the nation's status as a global cultural hub, and to power the economy. With financial success being one of the key aims, the tourism and commercial sectors have cashed in by importing popular international productions that are guaranteed to sell out theatres. These flashy Broadway and West End shows promise quick economic returns, but also serve to boost the slick, affluent image that is part of the city-state's global branding campaign. So, over the past two decades Singapore has been flooded with big-budget family musicals such as Disney's *Beauty and the Beast, The Lion King* and *The Sound of Music*, and live adaptations of popular US and British children's television programmes such as *Sesame Street*, *Peppa Pig,* and *Barney and Friends.* Additionally, commercial producers have also created family events that are, culturally, from the West, such as Disney on Ice, The Prudential Marina Bay Carnival, and Christmas Wonderland. Inevitably, the appropriation of Western thinking, practices and brands has been imprinted onto the landscape and minds of children and their families. This, in turn, has led theatre companies to produce even more Western shows, as these are perceived to be the most popular and lucrative.

In the first part of this chapter, I reflect on the branding of Disney's *The Lion King* and a family event called KidsFest to illuminate some of the cultural and economic implications of global productions in Singapore. In the second, I analyse the response from the local theatre community to these more commercial forms of children's entertainment by drawing on my position as a festival manager of the ACE! Festival – a local children's arts festival organised by I Theatre. Looking at the creative activities of this festival is especially pertinent because the event brought together both local and international productions. The opportunity to revisit this work as a researcher enabled me to reflect on the relationship between TYA and cultural politics in a global environment, and examine how creativity can offer a range of cultural and social practices.

I have chosen to focus on two productions that I curated in 2012 as part of the festival

because they reflect some of the concerns that I had as a festival manager. The first looks at *Hakim and the Giant Turtle*, a production based on a local folk tale, *The Legend of Kusu Island.* The original myth has been used widely in educational settings to impart moral lessons, and was adopted by the Singapore Tourism Board to promote a sense of national identity. However, traditional stories in Singapore have not been well-received by the local audience as they are perceived to be didactic and overtly nationalistic. Here, I explain how this production advanced my ambitions to represent local heritages and narratives within the cultural sector. I will also examine how it addressed aspects of the local community's traditions and practices that are usually absent in the Singaporean TYA repertoire.

The second festival production I explore – *Our Island* – is a collaboration between I Theatre and English TYA company Kipper Tie Theatre. This was a commissioned work for the festival and, during the development of its content and performance, exposed some of the political and cultural tensions at play in the Singapore arts world. The production evolved over a series of Skype conversations between myself and Kipper Tie's director, Bernie Byrnes, followed by a month-long rehearsal in Singapore. By paying attention to the dramaturgy and the way it was created, I shall discuss how this production provoked questions that are linked to place, cultures and identities. Through these two productions, I will highlight the interplay between the local and global, showing that they are not disconnected, disparate entities but, in fact, inform each other.

Festival as a creative and cultural practice

Contemporary arts festivals are not just isolated events but are a collective of happenings where people, buildings, sites, objects and ideas are temporarily brought together. They often encompass a whole range of activities besides the performances themselves, including workshops, meetings, seminars and other related activities. This is because arts festivals are not only sites of collective celebration and recreation, but are also spaces for social and political discussions. These debates and dialogues might be deliberately curated (e.g. panels and round-table discussions) or can emerge innately from the performance themselves. In ways like this, festivals can also embody two conflicting values – the social and the commercial. To further understand these interconnections, I turn to scholars who have written about festivals/ events and their environments. In their book, *Event Mobilities*,

Kevin Hannam and his co-authors write from a mobility perspective and examine the interconnections of people, objects, thoughts and imaginations, and events/ performances within their given sites. Building on Mimi Sheller and John Urry's seminal work, *Tourism Mobilities*, they argue that events are always place-based and political – in the sense that they can both inspire the flow of ideas and practices as well as lead to interruptions for different communities. Events, they suggest, are not isolated entities, and can serve as contexts that provide meaning and purpose in relation to, and as, 'a series of social interactions and actions' (2016, p.2). They draw on a range of mega and minor events such as the London Olympic Games, music festivals and weddings, and propose that doing research in these contexts involves paying attention to the ways in which people, objects and intangible entities (such as ideas) are on the move, as well as how the environments themselves influence these activities. The need for mobile methodologies in these contexts, they argue, is not 'necessarily used to capture but keep pace with the fluidity of social life' (2016, p.12).

A perspective on how festivals are a response to society is offered by sociologist Monica Sassatelli. In the chapter 'Urban Festivals and the Public Sphere: Cosmopolitanism between Ethics and Aesthetics', published in *Festivals and the Cultural Public Sphere*, Sassatelli writes about cultural production, display and consumption in contemporary festivals, and argues that paying attention to the challenges and needs of the community can help balance the ethical and artistic aspects of such events. Festivals, according to her, need to be studied as a social process that is contextualised in the particular settings and tensions of society. It is for this reason, she suggests, that it is counterproductive to think of a festival in terms of dichotomous either/or categories. Rather, it is more useful to develop a framework that is 'sensitive to its specific forms of participation, reflexivity and sociability' (2011, p.26).

Ric Knowles, who writes about international arts festivals from a materialist perspective, notes that these events are, first and foremost, marketplaces. On a conceptual level, he contends that 'there is *no such place* as the international marketplace'. Theatre festivals, no matter how international, he argues, '*take place*, within local markets' and, in doing so, 'set up complex tensions between local and global that are not always or easily contained or controlled' (2004, p.188, emphasis in original). He goes on to debate that, since all

international theatre festivals and sites of production operate differently, performances from the local or national site do not all 'respond to contextual shifts in the same way' (2004, p.188).

These views prompted me to reflect on the ways in which the ACE! Festival responded to the global backdrop of Singapore, and how its framing, material structures and the political conditions within which it operated might have shaped cultural attitudes and practices. In thinking about festivals as flows rather than fixed points, it allowed me to develop a more nuanced understanding of how ideas, cultural capital, performances and people move in relationship to place. This way of thinking considers the social and creative processes of the festival, rather than just the event itself, and keeps pace with understandings of creativity and culture as socially produced terrains.

Methodologically, this chapter continues to draw on I Theatre's archive, which includes the festival programmes, reports, videos, photographs, reviews and emails. Since the 2012 ACE! Festival did not take place during the official research period, I also organised online interviews (through Skype) with Isabella Chiam, who directed *Hakim and the Giant Turtle*, and UK director Bernie Byrnes to learn more about their motivations, artistic practice and cultural concerns during that time. This retrospective approach not only prompted them to critically reflect on their experience, but also re-energised the overall TYA conversation. Additionally, I also reflect on the urban landscape and my concerns leading up to the festival event itself. This is important because it captures a period in the cultural sector when international productions were burgeoning, which informed my thoughts, feelings and actions during the curation process. Although I focus only on the 2012 festival, it is worth acknowledging that my participation at other local and international TYA festivals, and conversations with different people (e.g. artists, curators, directors, politicians) during my research also played a crucial role in shaping my thoughts and ideas at the time of writing. Combining my reflections, knowledge of the company's practices, and the understanding of the wider development of TYA in Singapore enabled me to consider some of the tensions and opportunities between the local and global. This approach made connections in multiple directions and provided a useful way to examine how and, in what ways, the ACE!

Festival was mediated by 'politics, place and performance' (the subtitle of Hannam et al's book).

Reflections on Disney's *The Lion King* and KidsFest

Since the turn of the twenty-first century, Singapore has become an international hub for trade and commerce, placing an emphasis on its material and economic achievements. While it is one of the most economically prosperous countries in the world today, it has also allowed commercial drivers and global brands to permeate the cultural lives of children and young people within the realm of children's entertainment. With children exposed to a growing number and range of commercial messages, the question is whether these have had an impact on shaping children's cultural consumption, and to what extent they have exploited the imagination of children. To discuss this, I shall reflect on two encounters: The first is a visit to the Marina Bay Sands Theatre where I witnessed the theatrical production of *The Lion King,* and the second is my experience at KidsFest – a new children's theatre festival that emerged the same year that I programmed the ACE! Festival. Rather than focus on the performances themselves, I shall reflect on their branding to illustrate how these productions/events operate within the market structure of capitalism.

In July 2011, I visited the Marina Bay Sands Theatre (now renamed MasterCard Theatres) to watch the *The Lion King*. This venue is one of the two large theatre auditoriums inside Marina Bay Sands (MBS) – Singapore's newest integrated resort that is located in the heart of the city. Accompanying the theatres is a world-class hotel, an international casino and a mega shopping mall that is lined with exclusive outlets selling luxury brands, services and celebrity chef dining experiences. The exterior of the building is covered in a shiny metallic material that reflects the sunlight, creating an aura of opulence. This majestic structure and its surrounding not only showcases how urban planners have enhanced the city's self-imaging, but also projects a particular imagination of Singapore's cultural and economic success.

Figure 17: Marina Bay Sands Integrated Resort

Even before the construction was completed, huge banners featuring *The Lion King* lined the roads leading to the architectural masterpiece. The resort's seductive marketing text for the musical stated: 'Come experience this world-class production at a destination for those who appreciate luxury'. [81] The words reinforce the glamorous, glitzy image of MBS, and highlight that *The Lion King* is the sort of big-budget extravaganza worthy of a spot at such an exclusive venue. These billboards were also placed both inside and outside MBS, emblazoned with both the Disney and sponsor Mastercard's logo. These logos were very visible at the entrance of the theatre and all around the foyer space. Before the performance, producers and corporate partners of the show greeted VIP guests with warm smiles as they entered the theatre, and handed each a goody bag that included a range of *The Lion King* merchandise. The site of the theatre, its design, and the branding of the production highlighted the commercial interest of the performance, but also made me very aware of how my experience was intertwined with capitalist forces.

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[81] Marina May Sands Fact Sheet. Accessed on 16 Sept 2017 from:
https://www.marinabaysands.com/content/dam/singapore/marinabaysands/master/main/home/company-information/media-centre/marina-bay-sands-amenities/factsheet-mastercard-theatres.pdf

Figure 18: Lobby of the MasterCard Theatres

A few months later, in January 2012, I was invited to watch *We're Going On A Bear Hun*t that took place at the Singapore Repertory Theatre. This UK production was part of KidsFest – a new children's theatre festival created by Singaporean company, ABA Productions. As the newly appointed festival manager, I was interested to learn more about the festival's programmes and activities. Additionally, this particular production was one that I had considered programming. As I entered the building, I scanned my environment and noticed that the theatre lobby was filled with mostly expat children and their families. The foyer was decorated with balloons, streamers and headliner posters of the festival – all of which created a colourful and vibrant atmosphere. Even before the performance began, the ushers, dressed in bright red KidsFest T-shirts, were distributing balloons, badges, and festival bags that had the KidsFest logo printed on them. In the corner, there was a huge gift shop that sold toys, keychains, mugs and other souvenir items.

At the box office, I was surprised to learn that the price of a festival ticket was approximately three times that of a regular I Theatre production.[82] I picked up a copy of the festival guide and spotted two other UK productions that were part of the repertoire: *Stick Man* and *The Tiger Who Came to Tea*. I was aware that these productions had toured internationally and were very popular with children and their families. What struck me most was the way in which the festival branded itself. Printed across the giant posters were the words: DIRECT FROM THE UK! Importing these productions was not a new practice in Singapore, but having an entire festival dedicated to them was. It soon became clear to me

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[82] The price of a Kidsfest ticket was S$60. An I Theatre ticket costs around S$22.

that KidsFest had packaged and rebranded these Western productions in a very commercial way.

Figure 19: KidsFest flyer, 2012

Global productions: commodifying creativity

My experience of *The Lion King* and KidsFest helped me to imagine how economic and political changes had altered the physical landscape and influenced the way in which international productions are displayed and consumed in the global city. The two stories that I have described not only reveal the convergence of entertainment for children and the commercial world, but also mark changes in consumerist cultures. Dan Rebellato, who examines the role of theatre in a globalising world, offers a useful perspective to consider this. In his book, *Theatre & Globalization*, Rebellato points out that one of the ways in which theatre has become a globalised commodity is through the process of franchising and international distribution. He uses the term 'McTheatre' to refer to a series of mega musicals such as *The Phantom of the Opera, Wicked*, and *Beauty and the Beast*, and explains the ways they have been homogenised, replicated and performed to millions of audiences in enormous theatres across global cities. The idea behind the standardisation of the production elements such as the set, music, light and costumes, he suggests, is to ensure that audiences around the world have the same experience. Rebellato is critical of this

approach and argues how it has dehumanised the effects of labour, homogenised cultural tastes and diminished the liveness of theatre. However, he also recognises that 'the success of these musicals is undisputable' (2010, p. 40). The production of *The Lion* King at the Marina Bay Sands Theatre is an example of 'McTheatre' and its commercial achievement. According to MBS, this production ran for 35 weeks and attracted over 340,000 local audience to date, making it the best-selling musical in Singapore.[83] As a result of this positive response, the production returned to the MasterCard Theatres in 2018, playing for another 20 weeks.[84] Given their quick financial returns, global status and commercial appeal, predictably, the Disney brand and such mega musicals have been exploited for profits and have perpetuated the new Singaporean culture of global branding and opulent urban lifestyle.

KidsFest is another example of how producers are turning Western TYA into business opportunities. In the book *Every Day's a Festival!*, Susanne Kuchler and her co-authors write from a commercial perspective and discuss how some festivals thrive on the display of selfhood, and exploit the stage for a consumption-driven economy. According to Kuchler, 'festivalization' – a term that she uses to describe the reconfiguration of cultural activities to form a new event – has the potential to draw the support of private investments, and also develop and encourage profits through the 'physical creation of commodities and infrastructures' (2011, p.7). This commercial way of working is highly visible in KidsFest. Of course, I am not suggesting that local TYA companies are purely artistic entities, nor that Western TYA is only exploited for profits. On the contrary, as more international productions enter the cultural sector, local TYA companies have also started to think and act more entrepreneurially. However, in this situation, it is the commercial motivation that drives the festival activities rather than the art. I was told by festival executive producer Heather Riley that, since KidsFest was a new and independent festival, she had to think

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[83] Marina May Sands Fact Sheet. Accessed on 16 Sept 2017 from:
https://www.marinabaysands.com/content/dam/singapore/marinabaysands/master/main/home/company-information/media-centre/marina-bay-sands-amenities/factsheet-mastercard-theatres.pdf

[84] Marina Bay Sands Website. Accessed on 16 Dec 2017 from:
https://www.marinabaysands.com/entertainment/shows/the-lion-king.

about its survival from a business perspective.[85] It is thus not surprising to see why the festival had only chosen to programme Western productions and price them so exorbitantly. As Riley explained, productions from the UK are perceived to have higher artistic values and are of 'better quality' compared with local performances. More often than not, teachers from the international schools and the expat community are willing to pay a higher price for these shows.

On an operational level, KidsFest also mirrors the practices of 'McTheatre'. When festival director Matthew Gregory imports a production, he cannot simply buy the rights to the show but is required to purchase everything that comes with it – lighting and sound design, direction, promotional design and merchandise. Each of these neatly packaged productions then tours Singapore and Hong Kong, usually for a period of three to four weeks, and is sold at a premium to tourists, international schools and the general public (although it is usually the upper class and expat communities that purchase these tickets). By programming, pricing and branding the festival in ways like this, it has re-framed Western TYA as an elitist and exclusive commodity, made accessible to only a small, privileged audience. At the time of writing, Kidsfest has been running consecutively for eight years and presents an average of six to eight UK productions during the festival. This is indicative of the increasing demand for Western TYA and is testament to the commercial success of the business model and brand of Kidsfest. These Western productions, which are now synonymous with KidsFest, are a different world to local TYA.

The reach of these international products illuminates how branding has come to the fore in today's material culture, and has become an increasingly important part of consumption. The idea of how lifestyle brands insert themselves into the lives of consumers, particularly in young people, is examined by Maurya Wickstrom. In her book, *Performing Consumers: Global Capitalism and its Theatrical Seduction*, Wickstrom argues that the lived experience and the imagination are becoming increasingly exploited by globalised brands. She uses examples such as Disney and Nike to illustrate how these entities have employed persuasive and performative forms of marketing that produce highly theatricalised experiences, making

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[85] Riley, Heather. Personal conversation at KidsFest. Singapore Repertoire Theatre, 30 Jan 2012.

them hard to resist. She describes these forms of affective connection with consumer products as a 'brandscape' and contends that it allows the consumers to 'embody the resonances of the brand as feelings, sensations and even memories' (2006, p.2). She draws on philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri's concept of biopolitics and suggests that 'power in global capitalism depends on its ability to spread laterally, across geographical boundaries, through virtual space, and in the bodies and affective responses of human beings'. (2006, p. 105). Reflecting on this, it made me very aware of how the marketing material of *The Lion King* was reminiscent of my childhood (e.g. the trailer, advertisements, familiar songs), and it was this nostalgia that ultimately motivated me to watch the live version of this show. In other words, it is the affective play on the consumer's imagination that makes this form of marketing so successful.

The growing commercial pressures and seductive marketing techniques raise some ethical concerns about the potential effects on children. David Marshall and his co-authors offer a useful perspective to consider the relationship between commercialism and childhood. In the edited collection, *Understanding Children as Consumers*, Marshall examines how advertising campaigns are influencing children's consumption, and notes that, with the growth of marketing, it has attracted children and their parents into a culture of consumption that 'plays on their dreams and exploit their vulnerabilities' (2010, p.2). This 'hostile takeover of childhood', according to him, has created a 'toxic commercial environment' permeating all aspects of young lives (2010, p.3). He is critical of marketing tactics that manipulate children's imagination and their leisure time, but acknowledges that there are positive ways in which children are responding to commercialism (e.g. acquisition of social skills and economic knowledge, cognitive development, joint participation with adults). Throughout the book, the contributing authors draw on examples such as food marketing, online advertisements and forms of media to explore what being a consumer means to a child. They offer a debate about children's 'agency' and their proposition is that children should be treated as 'social beings in their own right' (2010, p.3).

These insights suggest how commercial drivers and the aestheticising of global brands can create another set of middle-class tastes. I will not go as far as to say that this environment has taken over children's culture in the Singaporean context, because it implies that the

local artists and theatre companies are powerless to resist ideological domination. Additionally, I believe that these international productions have artistic merits and can be entertaining in their own right. But what is worth pointing out is that these mega-musicals represent the danger of arts and commerce merging, creating a phenomenon that Wickstrom calls 'retail theatre'. Wickstrom, who also examines *The Lion King* in relation to capitalism, points out that the advertisement in the programme of the original production at the New Amsterdam Theatre in New York in 1997 tells the audience to 'enjoy your audience with the King. And remember, even in the jungle, American Express helps you do more' (2006, p.66). This advertisement, she argues, not only illustrates how theatre and the market have become intertwined, but places and inscribes the audience within the fiction of the musical. She states:

> They are not merely an audience watching the lion king Mufasa on a stage, they are inside the play, enjoying their audience with him. The market, in the form of American Express, has a clear commercial interest in encouraging consumers to slide from their actual location as spectators of a show to fictional participant in the stage drama, which, in this case, is a multimillion-dollar commodity. (2006, p.66)

On a theatrical level, the African backdrop, in which the story happens, functions as a setting for the global market. Since the animated film, that was released in 1994 (three years before the premiere of the stage production), was already part of a global brand, the musical had to transfer the characters and the African savannah onto the stage in a way that the audience could readily recognise and identify with. According to Disney, its creators embraced the challenge by incorporating various performative and aesthetic elements that the West typically associates with African culture: music with rhythmic Conga drums, masks resembling African tribes, a setting with earthy natural colours, costumes made out of fabric with African wax prints, and a selection of ritualistic and tribal dances.[86] This is, of course, not an easy feat in practice. However, in doing so, it reproduced a simplified representation of Africa that ignored the cultural diversity of a whole continent within a Western theatrical

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[86] Disney website. *Exploring The Lion King*. Accessed on Jun 2016 from http://www.exploringthelionking.co.uk

form. Granted that the dramatic action is set within a fictional world and that the global success is rooted in the themes of the story (e.g. father-son relationship, courage, and the balance of nature), but by appropriating and homogenising the African culture, it has created a simplified and Westernised version of the African culture for the audience to purchase and consume, exploiting aspects of the source culture to generate profits for the producers. This illustrates how such a production is culturally representative of no-one but can be consumed by everyone, or at least for those who possess enough economic capital. In ways like this, a global production like *The Lion King* has the potential to restrict cultural understanding, commodify the imagination and accentuate inequalities, placing further pressure on those who are already disadvantaged.

Figure 20: *The Lion King,* Marina Bay Sands Theatre, 2018. Source: *MBS*

However, there is a need to consider the other side of the argument. Wickstrom's 'retail theatre' works under the premise that the audience engagement is limited to purchasing tickets to be part of the fiction and experience where they are consumers in a passive sense. Her criticism also assumes there to be an audience that will collectively interpret and understand the performance according to a fixed frame of reference, rather than acknowledging the cultural diversity that can be found in countries like Singapore. Similarly, despite Rebellato's assertion that *The Lion King* is no more than a global standardised theatrical product, it must be acknowledged that a child's theatrical experience remains an individual and unique one, formed by connections that he/she has with the direct environment and informed by their cultural backgrounds. The simplified backdrop, catchy

songs and stereotyped characters are, perhaps, necessary to keep children mesmerised and entertained, since these elements are often found in children's television programmes and things they are familiar with. In his book, *Young People, New Theatre*, theatre director Noël Greig argues that an aspect of human nature is a sort of innate conservatism – 'a desire for the safety and security of "the known"' (2008, p.5). He suggests that even when we venture into a new environment, we have an impulse to 'carry with us, or recreate, the symbols of our known and secure world'. (2008, p.5). While these approaches can reduce the confusion and tensions between different cultures and environments, Greig points out that they can also 'mask an underlying aggression towards "the other"' (2008, p.5). Marshal argues that in the commercial world, 'there is no clear answer to the question of whether children are either vulnerable or competent; the truth, if it exists, seems to lie somewhere between the two' (2010, p.16). Hence, taking into consideration children's 'agency', it gives them some credit as consumers and can open new ideas about children as engaged and active participants in the marketplace.

As the city continues to engage with capitalist forces and embrace these flashy productions, it inevitably troubles the market and moral sentiments of children. What is at stake here is how the commercial branding of creativity as a marketable commodity impacts on the identity of the child and social role of TYA. There are two questions that emerge from my experience and these insights. The first asks if there is a space that can bring local and global ideas and practices closer together. The second is ideological and enquires how TYA as an artistic form and cultural practice might offer an aesthetic and social alternative to the commodification of creativity and culture. To address these issues, I reflect on the ACE! Festival and my position as a festival manager in the rest of this chapter to navigate some of the ethical dilemmas, challenges and opportunities in the festival context.

The ACE! Festival in practice: cultural and creative connections

The ACE! Festival was a children's arts festival that was created and first presented in 2009 by I Theatre. It caught the attention of the audience, stakeholders and cultural organisations because it was the only TYA festival of its kind. While ACT 3 International previously organised PRUDENTIAL CHILDREN FIRST! Theatre Festival of Children, this festival mostly presented international performances and was discontinued in 2008. The inaugural ACE!

Festival branded itself as the 'best in performing and visual arts for the young and young at heart', and brought together a range of local and international creative activities that included theatre productions, story-telling, music performances and workshops.[87] Politically, this festival emerged from a climate where policymakers were attempting to push theatre for children to the fore. The NAC grant officer in charge of the festival's funding stated: 'The ACE! Festival is very timely and very important to the growth of the cultural sector'.[88] The creation of the festival not only reinforced the company's ethos, but also meant that it had the task of engaging the community on a wider level. The foundational success of the ACE! Festival that year attracted the interest of the National Museum of Singapore (NMS), which led to a partnership in 2010. This collaboration not only strengthened the cultural status of the ACE! festival (and I Theatre), but also enabled it to widen its scope. Working with the museum meant that the festival could tap into its infrastructural support and resources (e.g. venue, rehearsal space, labour, audience database) – a luxury that it did not previously have. This opportunity enabled the festival to work with more local artists in innovative ways, as well as increase the number of international productions. Unlike the 2009 festival, where there was only one production from the UK, this edition of the festival had four: *The Gruffalo* (UK), *The Dandelion's Story* (Korea), *The Legend of the Magnificent Moon* (Africa) and *Antoine and the Paper Aeroplane* (France). With this additional support, the festival also managed to engage with the museum's visitors and expand its overall audience reach.

Unfortunately for I Theatre, a change in management at the NMS shortly after the 2010 festival finished resulted in the partnership collapsing. Without the support of the museum, this made it economically and logistically challenging for the ACE! Festival to continue. It was also during this time that there was a wave of TYA and related activities which saturated the children's market. The rise of international productions, as I showed earlier, also added to the competitive climate, and reinforced the boundaries between the commercial/ artistic, local/ global, contemporary/ traditional. For these reasons, the company decided to pause the festival to re-evaluate its position within this complex landscape. It was at this point that I was appointed festival manager and was asked to

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[87] ACE! Festival website. Accessed 16 Dec 2016 from http://www.acefestival.org
[88] NAC officer (anonymous). Email, 3 Feb 2009. Retrieved on 2 May 2016.

revitalise and revise the ACE! Festival. Seward questioned: How do we continue to grow the festival without losing its cultural intimacy?[89] This process required creativity and imagination.

As a starting point, I reflected on the landscapes of Singapore and was inspired by the vibrant urban environment, the variety of stories entering its shores, and the different cultural activities that flowed within the city. I did not view the international productions as a competition or challenge, but seized it as an opportunity to reconsider the cultural space which local TYA could occupy. Rather than looking for a model for an international festival, I was interested in creating a framework where theatre practices could encourage cultural flows and dialogues amongst the audience and performers. Most importantly, I was concerned with curating a repertoire that could renew an interest in local heritage and culture, while simultaneously celebrating global ones. My modest intervention was not to resist or challenge Western influences, but to find a more grounded approach that could enable both local and international TYA practices to come together.

On a conceptual level, I wanted a TYA festival that could reflect and celebrate the diversity and multicultural spirit of Singapore. I had hopes to create a space whereby the audience could reflect on their everyday experiences and connect them with new discoveries and journeys. My curiosity and fascination with the ever-evolving city finally led me to decide on the festival's theme: Explorations. My vision was not only for children to discover stories, environments and cultures but, ideologically, I also believed that there were inherent values in the process of exploring such as participation, curiosity, and creative learning. On a personal level, I was interested in my own 'exploration' – thinking, searching and learning how to put together a TYA festival.

This process took ten months of planning, and involved many conversations with theatre companies, educators, policymakers, sponsors, and international partners. The final programme incorporated seven productions alongside several creative workshops and fringe activities (e.g. community singing, story-telling sessions, pottery, and a mini carnival). The local highlights included two popular titles, *The Little Mermaid* and *Just So Stories,* that

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[89] Conversation with Seward. Festival planning meeting, I Theatre, 2 April 2011.

were presented by I Theatre. While there were concerns that these were Western stories and might reinforce the existing rhetoric, the content and style of these performances were conceptualised and adapted to the local context. The story of *The Little Mermaid*, for example, was set in Singapore. The costume designer for this show also drew inspiration from different ethnic groups and combined fabric and designs from the Malay Baju Kurung and Chinese Qi Pao. Similarly, the themes and moral lessons in the *Just So Stories* were adapted to reflect pertinent issues in Singapore such as conservation of water, filial piety, and racial harmony. Theatrically, these fables were told in different local native languages and featured a range of ethnic celebrations (e.g. Hari Raya Puasa, Deepavali and Chinese New Year). Interestingly, these productions were so well received that they inspired the company to produce more of such works. On a more commercial level, I had chosen to programme *The Owl Who was Afraid of the Dark* – a well-known title that was produced by UK company Blunderbus Theatre. Based on my professional experience (and encounter at KidsFest), I knew that such a production would appeal to the audience. On an artistic level, I found that there was a playfulness at the heart of this piece when I had watched it in the past. As much as I wanted to programme works that were solely 'experimental' and 'artistic', I had to strike a balance between the economic and creative practice of the festival. With the help of one of the board members of the company, I managed to garner the support of Australian sponsor Simone Lourey, who also connected me with TYA companies in Australia. After several conversations with the directors and producers, I included two puppet productions as part of the repertoire: *Hare Brain* by Spare Puppets Theatre Company (Perth) and *Dreamer in the Deep* by Dream Puppets (Melbourne). To advance my professional ambition of promoting more Singaporean stories, I programmed *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* – an adaptation of a local folklore tale. Finally, I was interested to see if the festival could go beyond just programming productions from different countries to include new ways of bringing local and international artists together. This was perhaps the biggest challenge and ambition of the festival. To address my curiosity, I commissioned the aforementioned Kipper Tie to develop a new work that would involve both local and UK artists working together. What resulted from this collaboration was an original and devised piece entitled *Our Island*. The ACE! Festival that year took place in two different spaces and ran for five weeks (between May–June), making it the longest running and largest TYA festival in the history of Singapore.

Curating a festival is not just matter of personal taste and preference, but involves a wider consideration of its identity and place in society. As Sassatelli states, festivals have something to do with 'place', which 'includes an aesthetic and affective dimension of the public sphere' (2016, p.22). At the time of producing the festival, I was very conscious of my social commitment to the TYA sector and the audience, and questioned how it might offer children important opportunities in terms of entertainment, learning, creativity, and cultural experiences. I did not turn to academic readings then, but researching about festivals during the PhD period led me to discover two works that enabled me to reflect on the ethical dimension of programming. In the article, 'Festivals, Who Needs 'Em?', Ritsaert ten Cate examines the role of festivals as cultural economies in increasingly globalised societies. He observes that festivals moving towards multiculturalism are increasingly driven by pragmatic reasoning, political opportunism, and the availability of funding, rather than personal and social motivations. As a way to challenge this, he urges festival organisers to consider:

> …. what their own *function* is within the larger context of a mélange of art and society and the world and also how that function might help move us toward a future – perhaps even a future somewhat better than the present day they observe around them. (1992. p.86, emphasis in original)

In 'Art biennales and cities as platforms for global dialogues', sociologists Nikos Papastergiadis and Meredith Martin explore the explosion of art biennales around Europe and Asia by considering the different ways these events are situated in urban landscapes. They propose that culture should be used to promote urban regeneration and social integration, rather than treating it merely as cultural or capital exchange. Culture, according to them, takes on different social processes and is always shifting. It is here that they highlight the importance of the curator as cultural intermediary in the festival context:

> At the forefront of this challenge is the redefinition of the role of curator as a mediator of the contemporary. The function of the curator is no longer confined to being an arbiter of good taste, or the authoritative interpreter of historical trends. As a mediator in a cosmopolitan cultural sphere, the curator is required to set in

motion questions that both come from the core of artistic practice and also interact with non-artistic issues. This adds not only a new level of social negotiation to the curatorial agenda, but also a more robust awareness of the interplay between art and politics. It requires not just a capacity to relate to a much wider set of constituents, but also an ability both to read the often contrary ideological and aesthetic value systems and to remain open to the unpredictable feedback resulting from this process. (2011 p.57)

The thought process that guided my curation is reminiscent of these ethical and social propositions. Throughout the process, I carefully considered the artistic qualities and inherent values of the productions, rather than allowing the political and financial opportunities to steer the festival. For example, Australian sponsor Lourey insisted on bringing in a commercial production that could attract a large audience, but I resisted and chose to programme two less-well known and smaller works that, in my opinion, were more artistic and could engage the children's imagination. Even though part of the role required me attend to the economic practices of the festival (e.g. budget, box office sales, getting sponsorship), my vision was motivated by the quality and artistic merits of the work rather than profits. My choice to showcase a range of local and international productions was also largely driven by my professional ambition to build an effective model that could reflect the cultural mosaic of the city, rather than branding them as cultural exemplars. Hence, instead of programming shows that would 'authentically' represent the different countries, I chose a range of performances and practices that reflected more imaginative and fluid terrains. In ways like this, my position as a creative and cultural facilitator confronted the interaction between 'art and politics', and opened a space that encouraged local and global dialogues to flow.

Looking back at the ACE! Festival at the time of writing, it illuminates how the festival enabled a space for cultural and creative connections to develop. This was an occasion where theatre practices and ideas were discussed, negotiated, and, perhaps, even redefined. The creative activities within the festival also emerged from and reflected different conceptualisations of urban space, identity and place. To help unpick some of these complex issues, I turn to one of the influential writers on contemporary festivals,

Stanley Waterman. In the article, 'Carnival for Elites? The Cultural Politics of Arts Festivals', Waterman explores the place of arts festivals and identifies how this phenomenon in Western culture transforms everyday settings into temporary artistic environments. He makes a distinction between arts festivals from other festivals and suggests that an arts festival 'is a processing of culture in a concentrated time and place in which artists, directors, agents, audiences come into mutual contract for a limited time and interact with one another' (1998, p.55). He contends that, in this process, the questions of aesthetics, tastes and style cannot be separated from questions about power, inequality and oppression, and reflects the 'world view of a distinct socioeconomic section of modern society' (1998, p.59). He goes on to argue that the ways in which the audience consumes culture also produce the environment (culturally and economically) that shape the ideological, commercial and cultural function of the festival. He suggests that the idea of 'culture as an aesthetic realm in the festival context' also needs to account for 'culture that is defined as a way of life', and these intersections can illuminate how 'culture is contested' (1998, p.54).

Additionally, I am also influenced by Nadine Holdsworth, who has written about theatre practice in relation to different national contexts, socio-political circumstances and cultural imaginations. In the introduction of her book, *Theatre and National Identity*, Holdsworth argues that nations and national identities are not fixed entities and are subjected to shifting forces of history, power and politics. She proposes that the shared circulation of a national play or performance plays a role in contributing to the 'complex nexus and practices of the social construction of the nation and imagination of what a national identity might constitute' (2014, p.5). She extends on an argument by Jen Harvie who suggests that national identities are neither biologically nor territorially assigned, and contends that a national culture and its meanings shift and alter to account for 'changing times, preoccupations and levels of national confidence' (2014, p.6).

These views provide an insightful way to consider the social role of TYA when creativity, culture and nationhood come together within the festival context. Given that culture is unfixed and always evolving, theatre, when connected to the culture of the nation, can help debate and dramatise these contested issues and navigate its tricky terrain. Reflecting on

theatre's content, forms and aesthetic pleasures, as Holdsworth suggests, 'opens up a space for exploring the paradoxes, ambiguities and complexities around issues of tradition, identity, authenticity and belonging associated with the nation' (2010, p.7). Thus, thinking about creativity and the ACE! Festival from this perspective has the potential to make connections between TYA and the cultural fabric of Singapore. In doing so, it opens up a discussion on how the festival, as a cultural and artistic practice, can reassert the social value of TYA by instigating questions of identity, a sense of belonging in relation to Singapore (or) their native countries. It explores political thoughts, actions and possible solutions that relate both to the local community and the external world. This way of thinking revitalises Waterman's idea of arts festivals as interactions between the producers and consumers of culture, recognising that the 'local and global are more often than not closely linked' (1998, p.69). Here, I shall turn my attention to two productions, *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* and *Our Island*, to discuss these matters.

Hakim and the Giant Turtle: reinventing heritage

Local Singaporean stories are mostly told in a classroom to teach moral lessons or are deployed by the state as a mechanism to promote nationalism. Over the years, these approaches have led the adults to perceive local folklore as overly instructive, old-fashioned, and rather tedious; although children who have never heard of these stories might find them exciting and engaging. As a result, theatre companies, who are aware that adults are the purchasers of tickets, have always shied away from such stories in their repertoire. When they do adapt local folklore, it is usually driven/ commissioned by government-funded agencies which demand specific educational briefs. This has led to a lack of Singaporean stories in the TYA landscape, with theatre companies preferring the more popular titles that can guarantee box office sales. While this is understandable, this attitude perpetuates the notion that native stories hold little value compared with their Western counterparts. In my role as festival manager, however, I saw it as a challenge to overthrow this ingrained perception. Hence, rather than just programming popular fairytales that I knew were safe and profitable, I wanted to explore how local narratives could excite Singapore's cultural TYA landscape and create a shift in attitude towards local folklore.

As a first step, I approached theatre director Isabella Chiam, who shares the same passion for championing local stories and practices as me, to take on the project. To expand our knowledge of local folktales, we visited the National Library Board and spent two weeks browsing through different catalogues before eventually deciding on *The Legend of Kusu Island* – a local myth that is found in the textbooks of primary school students. This is a well-known story amongst Singaporeans, and is also central to the physical landscape of the city-state. *The Legend of Kusu Island* follows the journey of a Malay and a Chinese fisherman who live in a tiny fishing village. Historically, the expulsion of Singapore from the federation of Malaya in 1965, territorial disputes and disagreements over water prices have led these two races to be in conflict. Because of their preconceptions towards one another, they barely interacted and led separate lives. One day, when they were out fishing, there was a huge storm that caused both their boats to capsize. Despite their cultural prejudices, they decided to work together out of fear. Subsequently they overcame their adverse feelings towards each other. A magic turtle who saw this ordeal in the distance was impressed by their teamwork and transformed itself into an island to save the shipwrecked sailors. Saved and provided for, the two became friends and were so grateful to the turtle that they built many shrines on this island in its honour. There are many versions of this story, but the central theme that runs through all of them is the importance of cultural acceptance between communities. Geographically, Kusu Island (which means Turtle Island in Hokkien, a colloquial dialect) is an actual island that is located south of Singapore. This site is endorsed by the National Heritage Board and is a popular recreational and religious destination amongst the Chinese and Malay communities who visit the island's temples during their pilgrimage. The interweaving of the mythical narrative and its real-life topography, plus the lesson about ethnic harmony between the Chinese and Malay communities, make this folktale uniquely local. It is for these reasons that Chiam and I chose this story as we felt that it could engage children on an imaginative, educational, and cultural level.

Making this story appealing and getting people to look beyond its instructive agenda had its challenges. Here, I want to highlight two barriers that Chiam had to overcome. The first was political. Over the years, *The Legend of Kusu Island* (as well as many other folktales) has been adopted by tourist attractions as a means of promoting a harmonic, culturally diverse Singapore. The image of the different racial groups in Singapore – Chinese, Malays, Indian

and Eurasians – dressed in their ethnic costumes and helping one another can often be found in Singapore's museums, buildings, tour buses, and even on postage stamps. Geographical quarters such as Chinatown, Little India and Geylang Serai (Malay Village) have also been designed and packaged to tourists as a novel attraction. The Singapore Tourism Board advertises:

> Take in the aromatic smells of spices in Little India, then on to Chinatown for some of the best herbal teas you'll find, and through Geylang Serai for a look at the traditional Malay culture that drifted down from the mainland above.[90]

The branding of Singapore's cultural heritage and the utilising of race relations highlight how cultural identities have been exploited to gratify the touristic imagination. A good example of the effects of Singaporean heritage marketing is offered by Kim Jane Saunders. In her article, 'Creating and Recreating Heritage in Singapore', Saunders discusses the ways in which the Singapore Tourism Board (STB) has consciously foregrounded the representation of the four main cultural groups in various tourist destinations, ethnic crafts and local food. This approach, she suggests, not only promotes the multicultural brand of Singapore, but also frames the city as 'Instant Asia' – a strategy that is used to convey the idea of Singapore as a holiday destination that combines all the sights, sounds and cultures of Asia's main ethnic groups (2010, p. 442). On an international level, she references the advertising campaign for Singapore Airlines – 'Singapore Girl: A great way to fly' – and comments on the commercial success of the image. According to Saunders, this image of the Singapore Girl dressed in a blue batik-patterned Malay-style *sarong kebaya*[91] has become a cultural and international icon for Singapore, and even has her own wax model displayed at Madame Tussauds London (2010, p.444–445). While on the surface these marketing efforts seem harmless, Saunders is critical of STB's approach because this form of tourism might lead to the 'Disneyfication' of identities and heritage (2010, p.443).

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[90] Singapore Tourism Board website. Accessed on 15 June 2018 from:
https://www.stb.gov.sg/content/stb/en/media-centre/media-releases/rejuvenated-chinatown-heritage-centre.html

[91] A *sarong kebaya* is a traditional costume of the Peranakan community — a sub-ethnic group defined by their genealogical descent from the first generation of Chinese settlers in the Malay Peninsula.

It is not difficult to see how particular imaginings of culture might be readily commodified and consumed (e.g. craft, food, traditional performances), or, to borrow Saunder's term, become 'Singaporean memorabilia' (2010, p.445). Marketing the country's heritage in this way might put Singapore on the world map, but it does not engage with the realities of cultural differences and social identities in society. The ways in which STB has branded and exported Singapore's heritage not only conceal Singaporean society's complexities and contradictions but perpetuate racial stereotypes by cartooning cultural practices. This raised the question of how *The Legend of Kusu Island* can be reimagined to challenge these forms of representation, and encourage a better understanding of ethnic communities that goes beyond mere tokenism.

The second apprehension that Chiam had concerned education. Singapore's independence in 1965 provoked race-based civil disturbances and unrest between the Malay and Chinese communities that lasted four years. Historically, this period was considered to be the most chaotic in post-war Singapore. As a result, the story of Kusu Island has been used widely over the years in the school curriculum to convey messages of cultural tolerance and friendship, as well as a reminder of the upset caused by civil disruption. The story has already been staged as a play in arts educational settings, but its presentation has always focused on the didactic aspect, with its worthy tone leaving no room for excitement and drama. Chiam recalls:

> Theatre groups have done this story out of necessity, rather than from the heart…. I remember myself cringing when I watched a version of this show during one of the assembly periods. Not only was the performance boring and moralistic, but the characters, plot, design were all one-dimensional. There was no magic. [92]

Focusing too heavily on the message of the story rather than a more subtle approach to educational enrichment has been the downfall of any known theatrical version of *The Legend of Kusu Island*. Rather than empowering this local tale with dramatic meaning and cultural expression, the beauty of the story is lost amid the red tape of economic and

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[92] Chiam, Isabella. Interview. Skype, 23 Jan 2017.

educational agendas. This then also takes away opportunities for deeper engagement and conversations, as the audience is disconnected from the outset. As a conscious move away from all the hang-ups surrounding this particular story, Chiam decided to give her production a new title: *Hakim and the Giant Turtle*. Reflecting on this at the time of writing, it sounds strangely similar to popular children's books such as *James and The Giant Peach* and *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* written by British novelist Roald Dahl. This, perhaps, was a subconscious appeal to children because it is a title format that they might recognise. Her vision for this adaptation was to create a show that was vibrant and entertaining, but, more importantly, one that could spark a renewed interest in local culture amongst young people. It is the connection between the old and the new that Chiam had hoped would make the theatre experience meaningful and lead children to new discoveries. In her own words:

> Singaporean myths and legends have always been fascinating to me. I find that they are a very important part of our culture, and I'm very excited to be able to present this story to you, the audience. The story is essentially a timely reminder of all the beautiful things we already possess, and that we should appreciate, treasure and remember it. Hopefully, this story will inspire you to unearth old stories of Singapore and create new ones too.[93]

In Chiam's interpretation, the story revolved around the character Hakim, the son of a fisherman who went out to sea on behalf of his parents, who were ill. Similar to the original myth, a storm capsized his boat and a magic turtle comes to his rescue. Hakim returned home and excitedly shared his tale with the villagers. Amidst the crowd, two greedy fishermen overheard Hakim's adventure and hatched an evil plot to capture the giant turtle and sell him. They tricked Hakim into bringing them out to sea to look for the creature. Soon, a storm approached and the two fishermen were thrown overboard. Stricken with guilt and fear, they vowed never to be greedy again and offered to help the villagers with their fishing duties. The magic turtle decided to grant them a second chance and turned

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[93] Chiam, Isabella. Director's notes for *Hakim and the Giant Turtle*. ACE! Festival 2012 programme booklet.

itself into an island. Touched by the turtle's kindness, the villagers decided to move to Kusu Island and, over time, this civilisation grew and became home to everyone.

Unlike the original story, the overt ethnic disharmony angle in this version was removed. On a theatrical level, Chiam chose to work with a multicultural cast that included a Chinese and two Malay performers to make up for the absence of the original conflict in the folklore tale. The production was predominantly in English, but the playwright incorporated different dialects, languages, and local references into the script. This approach not only helped propel the narrative in a way that would relate to the local audience, but also highlighted the cultural nuances in society. For example, the Hokkien dialect names of the two greedy fishermen are Sotong and Hebi, which translates into 'squid' and 'shrimp', respectively. In Singapore, these terms refer not only to the sea creatures but also to people who are old-fashioned and narrow-minded. These 'inside jokes' created plenty of laughs from children in the audience.

Theatrically, the dramatic action of the boat capsizing was performed using Wayang Kulit – a traditional form of shadow puppetry that has historical and cultural roots in Singapore and the South-East Asia region. However, instead of using the conventional method whereby the puppet figures are silhouetted onto a screen using a coconut-oil lamp, the puppets in this production were redesigned. Unlike traditional Wayang Kulit puppets that are made of leather and adhere to fixed measurements, the puppets in this production were created out of sticks, fabric and cellophane paper of different colours. The modern puppets were also deliberately repurposed to be larger than life, and, when cast onto the sail of the fishing boat (which was used as the screen), projected a colourful and gigantic image. Alongside the use of the Wayang Kulit technique, the villagers were represented through Western hand puppets that resembled characters from *Sesame Street*. In some scenes, Chiam also weaved hip-hop, Chinese dance and Silat (a form of Malay martial arts) together to create new physical movements. To encourage audience participation, Chiam drew on pantomime techniques. For example, the performers would ask the audience to point out where the

character went. Additionally, she incorporated the children's game, *Simple Simon Says,*[94] into the performance as a way to keep the audience engaged and the show interactive. The music that underscored this production combined traditional South-East Asian instruments (e.g. gamelan, gongs, Malay drums and two-string lutes) with Western ones, creating a refreshing and unique soundscape that blended well with the dramatic action. The costumes, music, mixed languages and different theatrical styles all contributed to the overall aesthetic of the production that conveyed a mix of the East and the West. The performance that I witnessed was engaging and uplifting, unlike the dull and patronising experience that Chiam described. A heartening response to the play came from a school teacher who emailed to say that the performance had ignited amongst her students 'a deeper appreciation for Singapore stories and its heritage'.[95]

Figure 21: *Hakim and the Giant Turtle*, I Theatre, ACE! Festival 2012

Hakim and the Giant Turtle represents a key success story in reimagining and dramatising heritage in a way that does not detract from the nobility of cultural education. There is no

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[94] *Simple Simon Says* is a popular children's game. One player takes the role of 'Simone' and issues instructions (e.g. jump in air, stick your tongue out) to the other players, which should be followed only when prefaced with the phrase 'Simone Says'. In the production, 'Simone' was replaced with "Hakim".

[95] Teacher (anonymous). Email, 3 June 2012. Retrieved on 2 May 2016.

'disneyfication', and no dry, wheeling out of another moral tale to educate the children. The art of this production was in its subtlety and delicate balance – it seamlessly intertwined the modern with the traditional, the East with the West, and the moral with the story. However, there is a thin line between celebrating culture through drama and exploiting culture through entertainment.

In 'The Future of Local Community Festivals and Meanings of Place in an Increasingly Mobile World', cultural geographers Kelley McClinchey and Barbara Carmichael argue that cultural boundaries have diminished because of globalisation facilitating the increase of physical, economic and social mobility. They use the Multicultural Festival in Canada to illustrate how cultural festivals can help give ethnic groups justification and a purpose 'for practising cultural activities and a motivation for staying involved with their ethno-cultural groups' (2015, p.148). While this might enable the visibility of cultural groups and promote the formation of social identities, the scholars also point out that if ethnic cultures are presented in 'anesthetized' or 'sanitized' form for the purposes of entertainment and enjoyment, it might lead to 'meaningless cultural performances', and consequently festivals could lose their 'distinctiveness and authenticity' (2015, p.141).

Although well-intentioned, festivals, in their quest to entertain the masses, can easily fall into the trap of inadvertently generalising social groups. Instead, they should consciously consider how local culture can be promoted in meaningful, ethical ways. *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* is a prime example of how TYA can represent and confront the complexities of culture and heritage in an increasingly global climate. Rather than relying on stereotypes or simplified forms of representation, Chiam assiduously modified, combined and re-energised different styles and forms of theatre practices. A constructive balance was struck, rather than a compromise, between the traditional and contemporary, local and global, past and present. Although the story of *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* might tie TYA to the particularities of the 'local' place, it is worth recognising that this position is not fixed. As McClinchey and Carmichael argue, it is the exchange of ideas and practices that can 'strengthen ties among culture, place of origin, the new urban space and the next generation' (2015 p.151). This suggests that any attempt to situate cultural positions in isolation would run the risk of overgeneralisation. Commercial and education sectors might

have perpetuated top-down approaches in promoting heritage, but a TYA production like *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* can reframe and challenge prejudicial nationalism. It is here that the negotiation between local concerns and broader contexts can offer artists and audiences a space to reinvent and engage with cultural practices, heritage and social identities in creative and imaginative ways. As Chiam aptly puts it, 'it is this hybridity that sparks the imagination of the contemporary child'.[96]

Our Island: confronting differences through cultural exchange

As art forms continue to evolve alongside the people that create them, it also raises uncomfortable and sometimes confrontational issues of culture, place, and identity. These are encapsulated in a production I commissioned for the ACE! Festival, called *Our Island.* The dramatic play was a collaboration between I Theatre and English TYA company Kipper Tie Theatre, the sort of cultural exchange popularised by international festivals. Certainly, Singapore's cultural sector has benefited from a global arts vision with events such as the Singapore International Festival of Arts – the largest annual arts festival in Singapore that showcases theatre, dance, music and visual arts. Local acts share billings with international artists, and the multi-cultural repertoire brings artists and audiences together in inventive and engaging ways. TYA festivals have also picked up the international baton. In particular, one trend I have noticed is the amount of collaboration projects between artists from different countries. At the Kijimuna Festival in Okinawa, Japan, in 2011, I witnessed a piece of TYA called *Superheroes*. In the post-show dialogue, I learnt that this project involved artists from a range of different countries including Japan, Croatia, Korea, Spain, and Hong Kong. The project timeline had them come together three weeks before the festival, during which time they not only rehearsed the performance and shared ideas, but also went on organised excursions to experience the local culture. These activities and conversations culminated in a work-in-progress performance that took place during the festival. The show saw the artists combining personal reflections with cultural stories, weaving a tapestry of practices and shared experiences to create a futuristic world. Although a director facilitated the creative process, it was clear that the content was largely driven by the collective efforts of the participants themselves. Of course, most performative art forms are collaborative in

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[96] Chiam, Isabella. Skype interview, 23 Jan 2017.

nature. However, a transnational project such as *Superheroes* focused on the exchange of different stories, traditions and knowledge, and thereby created an understanding that transcended cultural boundaries.

I have often wondered about the creative processes and implications of such cultural exchanges. On the surface, a creative meeting of minds amongst the international community offers a meaningful space for artists to develop new performance skills and can encourage conversations that might dispel any previous prejudicial assumptions. Dig deeper, however, and these collaborations are often fraught with cultural assumptions, inequalities and governed by structures of power. For example, a host festival might select artists based on diplomatic ties, or only choose to engage with companies from countries that might have available funds. Ric Knowles, in *Theatre & Interculturalism*, examines this relationship between performance practice and cultural exchange. He contends that such an interaction 'raises issues about cultural imperialism, appropriation, and colonization, even as it offers the utopian promise of a world where race and cultural differences do not matter' (2010, p.1–2). In a similar vein, cultural critic Rustom Bharucha argues that intercultural performances are potentially 'involved in the draining of source cultures through arbitrary, non-negotiated, and essentially one-sided modes of transportation determined by globalising mechanisms and complicities of the market and the state' (1997, p.32). Although Bharucha writes mainly about how cultures in his native India are affected by Western global powers, his criticism can extend to all other countries.

Putting all cynical viewpoints aside, I was curious to learn what the coming together of different ideas and knowledge between two countries might look like, and how the outcome can close the gap between the arts world and cultural politics. Additionally, I wanted to increase the range and quality of work made by young people for children that reflects cultural and creative diversity. I took this idea to Seward, who suggested that I worked with Bernie Byrnes, the Artistic Director of Kipper Tie whom he had met a year ago at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I was told that she would be appropriate to work with because she had a 'good vibe', and that Kipper Tie's vision for TYA was closely aligned with I Theatre's. On a practical level, we also decided to work with artists from the English-speaking world to minimise the language barrier. On a personal level, my decision to work

with Byrnes was also inspired by the colonial history between Singapore and the UK. During World War II, the fall of the British military forces led them to surrender Singapore to the Empire of Japan. According to the Singapore history textbooks, the Japanese occupation took place between 1942–1945 and was the darkest period for many citizens. It was only after the surrender of the Japanese that the British returned to power. However, the failure of the British to defend Singapore had destroyed their credibility as infallible rulers in the eyes of the locals in Singapore. The decades after the war leading to the nation's independence saw a political awakening amongst the local populace and the rise of nationalist and anti-colonial sentiments. The political tensions between the two countries have long disappeared, but I was interested to see if these historical narratives and themes might resurface during the collaboration.

One drawback, however, was that Byrnes could not obtain funding from the UK, so, with I Theatre's budget already stretched, this meant that rehearsals were limited. We decided the best way forward was to discuss the initial concept and scenes via email and Skype in the months leading up to the festival. We would then connect in Singapore during the final month to put all the material together. This production is about three diverse and comical characters that are washed up on a mysterious island. The synopsis reads:

> Why? We don't know. How? We don't know. What we do know is that they really don't understand each other. They must overcome their fears and phobias and work together to share their new home.

> First, they need to learn how to communicate with each other in order to work together. Using physical theatre, comedy, music and mayhem to raise some questions and examine preconceptions about stereotypes, this is an international collaboration about international collaboration.[97]

Besides Byrnes, the project had an international team with actor Sally Lofthouse from the UK, Chinese actor Glory Ngim, and Malay actor Erwin Shah Ismail. They worked alongside a

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[97] *Our Island* synopsis. ACE! Festival 2012 programme booklet

multicultural production and design team from Singapore. The vision of the project was to create a production for children (and performed by young adults[98]) that confronted the politics of cultural difference in an increasingly borderless world. Byrnes states:

> This piece explores racial intolerance and attempts to raise questions about cultural xenophobia. The marooned castaways' resistance to each other's presence, their initial inability to communicate, and their reticence in cooperating with each other all create scenarios intended to explore problems involved in a shared space.[99]

Rather than creating or following a script, the brief was for Byrnes to work closely with the performers and draw on their history, heritage, beliefs and cultural practices as a way to shape the content and form of the production. In other words, the devising process would largely be driven by the artists' own cultural backgrounds and perceptions of the world. However, although Byrnes had a plan at the start of the project, in practice the team did not gel at the start of the rehearsals, resulting in a space that felt creatively, emotionally and politically charged. In an interesting turn from a negative to a positive, the theatrical narrative for the final production captured some of the tensions and conflicts that emerged from the creative process, which are detailed below. My purpose here is not to discuss the entire creative process, nor evaluate the production's success. Rather, I want to highlight significant moments that can reflect the complex issues surrounding the politics and ethics of cultural exchange, and ask questions that are linked to identities and place. To set the context and examine some of these parallels, I shall first describe the performance.

The story of *Our Island* began with three characters waking up to find themselves marooned on a deserted island. Dressed in different coloured costumes (blue, green and red), this theatrical composition highlighted their distinct identities. In this world, the three characters spoke in three different fictitious languages – 'mong mong', 'deng deng' and 'wa wa'. Incapable of communicating with one another, the characters became increasingly frustrated and drew boundaries on the island to separate themselves from each other. They

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[98] At the time of the collaboration, Lofthouse, Ngim and Ismail were 20, 18 and 22 years old respectively.
[99] Byrnes, Bernie. Director's notes for *Our Island*. ACE! Festival 2012 programme booklet

remained in their respective little territories and tried to survive based on their own abilities. However, this did not work. They faced a series of calamities and problems including a tropical storm, cabin fever, and a lack of food. All three gradually grew weaker with each passing day. The trio finally realised that, in order to survive, they had to put aside their differences and learn to work with one another. Apart from the gibberish 'mongs', 'dengs' and 'wahs', the whole play did not have speech, so this reconciliation was dramatised using a blend of physical theatre, comedy and dance. In this scene, the characters each took turns to share his/ her own ritualistic practices, games, and music, learning from each other along the way. The story concluded with the blaring of a horn from an incoming rescue. However, moved by their new-found friendship, they decided to forgo the rescue and made the island their new home. The finale was a celebratory dance that involved the trio harmoniously combining a set of choreographies that they had learnt from each other's 'cultures' to mark the dawning of this new utopia.

Figure 22: *Our Island*, I Theatre and Kipper Tie Theatre, ACE! Festival, 2012

The intentionally open and fluid premise on which this project was built on meant that there was room for unpredictability in the processes of creation and cultural negotiation. Inevitably, not everything went smoothly. During the first rehearsal, Byrnes had asked the three performers to choreograph a set of movements that was unique to their heritage. Her

intention was for each of the characters to showcase a traditional dance in the world of the play. Byrne would then find a way to combine the three dances together in the final scene. British performer Lofthouse drew inspiration from an Irish jig, even though she was not Irish or had ever visited Ireland. Ismail had some training in Joget – a traditional Malay dance – and decided to draw on that experience. Ngim, however, struggled and resisted the task. She explained to Byrnes that she only learnt contemporary dance and ballet when she was a child, and had no knowledge of traditional Chinese dance. Ngim was clearly uncomfortable and told Byrne that she did not want to portray a character that was stereotyped, as she felt that it was culturally inappropriate. This created an atmosphere that felt tense and emotionally charged. After some coaxing and a discussion with Lofthouse and Ismail, Ngim finally relented and attempted the task. However, Byrnes insisted that her movement was not 'Chinese' enough and requested that she made it more exotic. At this point, Seward stepped in to diffuse the situation. He suggested that a useful way forward might be for the performers to imagine and create a new set of movement vocabulary that they could all be comfortable with. This process took time and patience. Byrne agreed and after some negotiation, it led the team to produce more nuanced and vibrant characters that were not tied to specific cultures or countries. As the rehearsals progressed, the conversations became more robust as the collaborators openly shared their traditions, childhood memories and travel experiences. These lively dialogues not only generated useful material that was incorporated into the final production, but also brought them closer together.

This example illustrates how working together in such a way involves decisions and choices that might be creatively and culturally contested. It also reveals the historical and cultural assumptions that people carry with them in relation to their cultural position in the world. However, cultural intermingling can regenerate the artistic and social values of TYA. Theatre director Noël Greig, who writes about working creatively with groups of young people across cultural divides, provides a useful perspective. In his book, *Young People, New Theatre*, Greig draws on his experience of Contacting the World – a Manchester-based project that brought together young artists from different countries to create a new piece of theatre – and offers a 'practical guide to an intercultural process' (the subtitle of the book). He terms this theatrical exchange a 'partnership of differences' and shows how it is this very diversity that inspires creativity (2008, p.15). In the later part of his book, Greig observes

there is an 'innate sense of superiority in the UK' and that there are 'remnants of subservience' in previously colonised cultures. His hope is that artistic and creative exchanges can offer artists the opportunity to challenge and change the attitudes that still uphold the 'colonial frame of mind' (2008, p.24).

The challenges of theatrical collaboration are also examined by Simon Murray. Although he does not write about cultural exchanges, Murray provides a useful perspective to reflect on the tensions and opportunities that emerge from the creative process. In his book, *Contemporary Collaborations and Cautionary Tales*, Murray points out that collaboration is a highly ideological practice and 'is a site of dispute and contestation' (2015 p. 34). Murray goes on to argue that putting individuals into restrictive boxes is no longer the hegemonic model of practice in contemporary theatre collaborations. He insists that for the collaborations to be effective, it requires voices and bodies to come together in which 'differences become a dramaturgical driver' (2015, p.39). According to Murray, the enthusiasm and willingness to share experiences between the collaborators is crucial in sustaining them throughout the inevitable challenges of the creative process and that this approach can achieve, what he terms, 'contemporary collaborative utopianism' (2015, p.43).

The 'dispute and contestation', as I showed, were very visible in the creative process. It reveals how place, identity and cultures can be easily misappropriated if theatrical practices are not carefully calibrated and ethically considered. The conflict that I described was less a matter about the art, but more the uncertainty, discomfort and confusion that are tied to cultural and national assumptions. Given the historical precarity between Singapore and the UK, these preconceptions, as Greig suggests, can even risk possible hostility towards the 'mother country' if the process is not appropriately facilitated (2008, p.24). A project like *Our Island* might offer the opportunity to turn the meetings between different cultures into a creative interface, but it is also important to recognise that the struggles of power, inequality and assumptions are very real. However, it is in those moments of conflicts, and when things seem to go wrong, that the collaborators can learn from another, recognising the 'partnership of differences' that Greig advocates.

The belief that artists should respect and embrace differences is arguably at the heart of any cultural exchange. Murray and Greig's practical advice is centrally important to this ethos, and suggests that, for cultural exchange to work both socially and theatrically, it requires the participants to be open and willing to learn from each other. There might be a tendency for artists to carry with them what they know, but confronting differences can offer a space to contest the unpredictable process of being in relation to others, as well as challenge cultural assumptions and fixed prejudices. As Greig states, rather than thinking about differences as a 'tick-box', the creative work should be based upon 'negotiation between different worlds' (2008, p.18). This is not just a moral or political point about cultural exchange, but also a concept that illuminates the diverse societies and interconnected world that children live in.

The connective processes of globalisation are changing the lives of children in Singapore. The majority of children and their families live in the city where migration (e.g. families and exchange students from China, Indonesia, the Philippines) in the last decade have significantly altered and diversified the ethnic and cultural make-up of society. Cheap international air-travel is increasingly available, and traveling to different parts of the world has become the norm for most middle-class families. At the same time, children are globally connected through web-based, digital and social media such as *Facebook* and *YouTube*. This phenomenon is not just unique to Singapore but is applicable to many countries around the world; although it must be noted that this is dependent on where in the world the child is. Through mass media and technological changes, young people, as Greig suggests, are living in 'a world in transit' (2008, p.4).

Geographer Doreen Massey, who examines the relationship between the nature of mobility in an era of globalisation, introduces a different understanding of the concept of place. In her seminal essay, 'A Global Sense of Place', Massey opposes previous views developed by David Harvey and other Marxists who portray the negative effects of globalisation. Places and social relationships, she asserts, are the result of 'particular arrangements of power, whether they are individual and institutional or imaginative and material' (1997, p.317). She contends that our sense of place is relative and conceptualises place as 'progressive' (1997, p.315). This progressive sense of place, Massey suggests, refers to the unfixed linkages and

connections among different social and cultural practices that are brought together through production, consumption and daily patterns of movement. In comparing the relationship between geography and social connections, Massey asserts that individuals who live in a particular area are likely to share views and challenges with people residing in other areas in the world. She argues that if places can be conceptualised in terms of the social interactions which tie them together, 'then it is also the case that these interactions themselves are not motionless things, frozen in time' (1997, p.320). This geographical perspective challenges how places and economies operate, and prompts a new way to consider how people develop through and within global shifts. The implication is that if spaces are unfinished and always in the making, then there is a possibility for them to be politicised and created in different and, potentially, more balanced ways. This will require young people to ask how they see themselves and each other as they navigate a huge range of cultures and communities.

It is within this political climate that theatre can offer a way to bridge social and cultural divides. The story of *Our Island* acts as an essay about cultural and social differences, revealing the characters' discomforts, their prejudices, and their journey from separate entities to working as a team and creating a harmonious way of life. The new world that the trio created aptly mirrors Massey's 'progressive sense of place', and reflects how forms of identities are open to transformation in a world that is changing and merging. The fictional world portrayed in *Our Island* created a productive and creative space that enabled the imaginaries of place, identity and culture to be challenged. It invited the children into the drama where they could reflect on their own social position in relation to their everyday experiences, and imagine new journeys and horizons that can transcend cultural and political boundaries. Exposing children to cultural differences and global interconnectedness can thus contribute to an awareness of the world as a single, although varied, place, and enable them to become active participants in a global cultural exchange.

Children's imaginations are filled with limitless narratives, and world-building encourages children to tap into, grow and shape themselves beyond the periphery of their minds. The idea of engaging children through global cultural exchange is also examined by TYA scholar Karian Schuitema; although her focus is on creating work *with* children. In 'Intercultural

Performances for Young Audiences in the UK', Schuitema makes reference to the production of *Once Upon a Tiger*, a collaboration between two groups of children from Birmingham, England and Seoul, South Korea. This project used a bespoke online site and blog that allowed the artists to facilitate the intercultural exchange using the inventive ideas of the children. According to Schuitema, the theatrical dialogue between children and artists from different geographical locations led to a cultural mix and hybrid theatrical forms. For example, the accompanying music was mainly Western, but a gong and rhythmic drumming related to P'ungmul, a Korean dance tradition, were also incorporated into the performance. This performance, she states, reflected 'a full interaction of global and local scales' (2011, p.78). She contends that multicultural exchanges such as this project can challenge the economic processes of globalisation and encourage creative participations amongst children from different heritages. Schuitema states:

> Children's theatre opens up possibilities to represent and engage with an interconnected world and diverse society, rather than reducing discussions about globalised society and intercultural performance to how global economics oppresses and standardises local cultures. (2011, p.69)

This led me to reflect on how global spaces for children and young people can be imaginative and lively, full of promise and surprise. It also made me reconsider the social aspect and values of the arrival and presence of people in our everyday lives, and how the coming together of different cultures, faiths, beliefs and ways of life can continue to shape the world. In many ways, Singapore is a good example of how ethnically diverse communities – Chinese, Malay, Indian and Eurasian – can all co-habit in a tiny city-state. As a nation, the government and people have always prided themselves on its unique multicultural way of life, while also recognising the importance of maintaining social connections with the rest of the world. According to Hallam and Ingold: 'If we ask what organisms and persons create, the answer must be that they create one another and themselves, playing their part on the never-ending and non-specific project of *keeping life going'* (2007, p.48, emphasis in original). This suggests that cultural identities are not rooted in place, but are open to change as new cultural forms emerge. It acknowledges cultural and social engagement with different parts of the world and links identities to forms of cultural

citizenship that go beyond national boundaries, providing an opportunity to re-imagine feelings, ideas and relationships with one another. This way of thinking brings cultural exchange and TYA closer to cosmopolitanism than globalisation. Although both concepts are concerned with interconnectedness and global exchange, globalisation is often motivated by the economy, and cosmopolitanism, by contrast, focuses on shared thoughts and actions that are ethically and morally driven.

Of the different views of cosmopolitanism that might inform cultural exchange and TYA, I find the perspectives of philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah particularly useful. In his book, *Cosmopolitanism: Ethics in a World of Strangers*, Appiah identifies two interweaving strands of cosmopolitanism:

> One is the idea that we have obligations to others, obligations that stretch beyond those to whom we are related by the ties of kith and kind, or even more formal ties of a shared citizenship. The other is that we take seriously the value not just of human life but of particular human lives, which means taking an interest in the practices and beliefs that lend them significance. People are different, the cosmopolitan knows, and there is much to learn from our differences. (2006, p. xiii)

This perspective is reminiscent of Greig's 'partnership of differences', and offers a helpful way to think about cultural exchange that is driven by fairness. On the one hand, it demands that differences and cultures be respected and valued. On the other, it implies that, even if people do not have anything in common, they can still learn from one another or simply be intrigued by alternative practices and thoughts. To that extent, Appiah's idea of cosmopolitanism works on the level of universality, but also acknowledges the implicit differences across communities and cultures.

This hope-filled view prompts new ways to think about the ethics of human rights and suggests that a sense of community can be forged in a politically uneven world. As Appiah states, the quest for cosmopolitanism begins with 'what is human in humanity' (2006, p.34). This suggests that there are common moral traits in the human condition (e.g. principles of generosity, empathy, politeness and restraint) and maintains the commitment to social

equality and pluralism. There are critiques of Appiah's idea of cosmopolitanism that focus on addressing the challenges that arise from cultural differences at the expense of economic inequalities driven by global capitalism. I am not suggesting that cultural exchange is a solution to all social inequalities nor that it should be seen as an 'exalted attainment' (2006, p. xvii). However, by viewing cultural exchange and TYA through a cosmopolitan lens, it asks how theatre practitioners and young people might work together in ways that are artistically, socially and culturally engaged. Negotiating cultural differences might be a challenging and uncomfortable process, but it can also enrich the values of humanity, and has the potential to strengthen the connections that link cultures to one another on a small scale. In the words of Appiah:

> The problem of cross-cultural communication can seem immensely difficult in theory, when we are trying to imagine making sense of a stranger in the abstract. But the great lesson of anthropology is that when the stranger is no longer imaginary, but real and present, sharing a human social life, you may like or dislike him, you may agree or disagree; but, if it is what you both want, you can make sense of each other in the end. (2006, p.98–99)

During my interview with Byrnes, she explained that the experience of creating the production had been extremely rewarding and that it had helped to redefine her cultural position in relation to performance-making.[100] She shared that, despite the apprehensive start, the creative process had allowed a deeper appreciation and understanding of different cultural practices in a multicultural world. She states: 'We are rootless. We are the products of mass human movements and the acceptance of one another is necessarily a journey into humanity'.[101] Interestingly, this production was also performed at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival the same year and was well received by an international audience. This, perhaps, suggests how themes like xenophobia, stereotypes and cultural differences have become urgent issues that resonate with the rest of the world. It is in this context that a production like *Our Island* can provide a creative platform for theatre practitioners and

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[100] Byrnes, Bernie. Skype interview, 6 March 2017.
[101] Ibid

audiences to encounter cultural and social differences, and to reconsider how collective feelings, practices, habits and values can be negotiated. Disagreements and disputes are inevitable within and across cultures, but they also offer people a space to reflect on what these differences mean and how they might be agents of change. This is perhaps one small way in which the exchange of creative and cultural practices in TYA can encourage civic engagement and social democracy 'in a world of strangers'.

Festival as a space for dialogue

In this chapter, I have illustrated some of the contradictions and opportunities that can emerge when local and global creative practices are entwined. In different ways, *Hakim and the Giant Turtle* and *Our Island* responded to the increasingly globalised landscape of Singapore, and demonstrated how children can engage with real and imaginary spaces that cross different cultural and political boundaries. On a broader level, the ACE! Festival made connections between creative and cultural practices, and offered artists and audiences an opportunity to confront dichotomised concepts such as us/ them, local/ global, traditional/ contemporary. However, notwithstanding the social and artistic values of the festival, it is equally important to recognise that it was shaped by broader political and economic networks. Navigating these territories had its challenges. For example, I had hoped to work with other local theatre companies and programme TYA in different languages (e.g. Malay, Mandarin, Tamil) as a way to encourage diversity. However, all of them turned down my invitation, citing reasons such as the lack of finances or artistic differences. Additionally, I was also rejected by several UK companies who had signed exclusive agreements with KidsFest. Above all, there was also pressure to justify the festival's expenditure and outcomes to funders and stakeholders. This reveals how, beneath the surface, the ACE! Festival is informed by structures of power, economic practices and personal politics, and that its reliance on this exchange economy is a vital part of its creation and curation. What this suggests is that interests and values, as well as cultures, can be conflicting.

Reflecting on these challenges, I am inspired by Appiah's contention that people hold onto different values, and that we can never reach a consensus on how to rank and order them. His solution to the problem is simple and resounding: seek out conversations. He states:

So I am using the word "conversation" not only for literal talk but also as a metaphor for engagement with the experience and the idea of others. And I stress the role of the imagination here because the encounters, properly conducted, are valuable in themselves. (2006, p.85)

This suggests that there is a significant potential for TYA and festivals to develop new modes of collaboration and dialogue, and for theatre practices to address some of the concerns in the cultural sector. Greater conversations between policymakers, artists and audiences can widen local cultural practices as well as encourage political rhetoric and social thoughts. In doing so, they provide children and young people with a space to explore alternative narratives of place, identity and culture, re-energising the social values of TYA and recognising that creativity is always in the making and developed over generations. As Holdsworth states, as nations continue to evolve in response to internal structures and global circumstances, theatre has the potential to 'contribute to the creation of the nation through the cultural discourses, the presentations it offers and the stories it chooses to tell' (2010, p.79-80).

On an international level, the ambition to create a shared and dialogical space is a sentiment that resonates with the global TYA community. As former Vice President of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ), Stefan Fischer-Fels, states:

The world is in a big process of rapid transformation. We have the option to accept the backlash of nationalism and segregation or we have the option to answer these strong powers by celebrating instead. "Diversity", "Inclusivity" and "Fairness". That's what ASSITEJ is about – internationally and in each of our countries: explore this idea step by step, create opportunities and "best practice examples".

> A globalised world urgently needs more fair exchange and learning from each
> other. This is also an answer to the last 150 years of political, economic and cultural
> colonialism.[102]

The idea of equality might seem implausible in an increasingly globalised world, but the 'imagination' that Appiah advocates can enable festival producers to reframe what 'fairness' looks like, unlock innovative approaches that can defy neoliberal capitalism and empower artists and children in new ways. Shifting and fading boundaries might be an uncomfortable process, but sharing practices through 'fair co-operation' can bring about the occasion to wrestle identities away from the clutches of prejudice and assumptions, presenting young people with theatrical experiences that invite a range of identification. At the heart of the ACE! Festival was a place for children and young people to understand the world differently, and an opportunity for them to reflect on their own position. Such an approach invited them to navigate their own cultural experience and, in that process, transformed the festival into an exercise in dialogue – not just amongst themselves, but also with the adults. As festival reviewer Jon Ping writes: 'It is fair to say that the performances presented in ACE! Festival is theatre not just for children but for those young at heart. I think children's theatre definitely means much more than its name'.[103] The ACE! Festival, in a small way, not only challenged the preconception that TYA is only for children but, by embracing the transformative power of creativity and TYA, also encouraged civic engagement and social dialogues amongst the audience within the urban city they occupy.

As Singapore continues to develop, international exchange, trade, and technological advancements will inevitably influence the ways in which children play and live. Globalisation and capitalism are not going to disappear, but it is important to recognise and challenge them. As Rebellato states:

> We will need to draw on theatre's particular mode of production, its gaps and

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[102] Fischer-Fels, Stefan. 'Welcome Fair Co-Operations!', ASSITEJ Newsletter Feb 2018. Accessed on 3 March 2018 from: http://www.assitej-international.org/en/2018/02/welcome-fair-co-operations/

[103] Ping, Jon. Children's Theatre. More Than A Name. *Arts Republic*. 2 June 2012. Accessed on 3 April 2018 from: https://artsrepublic.sg/backstage/childrens-theatre-more-than-a-name/

complexities, its striving for beauty and grace and ambiguity and metaphor — to offer an arsenal of experiences that can help us to grasp the everywhere and the everyone. (2009, p. 85)

With global media and commercialisation on the rise, the question is thus raised of children's cultures and leisure time. In other words, how can TYA continue to provide a space for children that looks towards openness, liveliness and the experimental? In the next chapter, I move TYA away from the metropolitan centre and the clutches of commercialism. My intention is to seek an alternative space that can encourage new forms of children's participation and social engagement.

Chapter Five
Rethinking Creativity: The Artground as an Alternative Space for Theatre for Young Audiences

In the previous chapters, I showed how Singapore, as an example of a creative city, privileges approaches to creativity that champion specific forms of urban development and economic growth. One of my arguments is that, when the cultural sector becomes commercialised, there is pressure to commodify, putting the intrinsic qualities and social values of TYA at risk of being compromised. Drawing on examples such as *The Rainbow Fish* and the ACE! Festival, I showed how artists balance making art as an economic necessity with art as an intrinsically creative practice. By doing so, they have found innovative ways to advance the social agenda of TYA. Regardless of their good intentions, however, their practices and the work produced are still situated in an environment that is inevitably governed by global capitalism.

The aim of this chapter is to extract TYA from economic machinations and consider creative practices and forms that might be overlooked when theatre is made to satisfy the market. My purpose is to move TYA away from an environment that aligns creativity with market-ready products and services to a space that can encourage new forms of participation and spectatorship. I am not criticising the, arguably, ineluctable move towards a mercantile arts sector in Singapore. Rather, my intention is to locate a space where artistic merit reigns over profits, and where innovation and inclusivity drives the work. To do so, I have chosen to examine The Artground, an arts centre that opened in 2017, and hosts music and movement-based interactive sessions, gardening workshops, and multi-disciplinary installations designed for children aged 12 and under. This space is especially significant because, as well as being the first of its kind in Singapore, it also emerged from a series of conversations between The National Arts Council (NAC) and the TYA sector. Notably, The Artground is fully financially supported by the NAC, whereas other arts institutions in Singapore only receive partial state-funding. This means that the centre can prioritise its resources and time on cultural and artistic development, rather than worry about sustaining itself.

In this chapter, I will examine three key areas of The Artground. Firstly, I analyse how The Artground has positioned itself as a 'play space' for children. I am interested in exploring some of the underlying principles and methodologies that have shaped the centre's design, activities and spatial configuration. Secondly, I reflect on my experience of *Baby Space* – a production designed for babies and toddlers – to illuminate how The Artground can offer creative forms and experiences that differ from conventional TYA. Thirdly, I will examine the GroundBreakers – a development programme that lets artists take risks, ask questions and work on ideas over a longer period of time, rather than focus on just creating products. By examining the programme's approach and structure, I shall discuss how artists can resist and challenge educational and economic demands, and develop works that are motivated purely by creative aspirations. In considering these three areas, my purpose is to illustrate how The Artground can reconfigure creative practices, engage with communities and, in doing so, create different forms of TYA and affective experiences for young people. By loosening theatre practices from the clutches of commercialism, I hope to place the discussion on TYA and creativity in a more open, fluid and unpredictable environment.

Researching The Artground: a sensory approach

The Artground has been a long time coming. The idea for a dedicated arts centre for children and young people was first mooted in 2013, following a series of discussions between TYA producers, artists, and companies. All parties agreed that there were concerns over the costly commercial theatre productions turning arts in Singapore into an elitist recreation, where only the well-off could afford a ticket. Grievances were also aired about the lack of rehearsal space, and the tediously safe choice of choosing popular titles over experimental work. These conversations caught the attention of the NAC, which consequently organised several dialogue sessions between January and March 2014. The aim of the meetings was to identify some the financial and artistic challenges TYA artists and companies were facing, and to brainstorm possible solutions. The TYA representatives pitched the idea for the children's arts centre, which was later approved by the NAC and incorporated into its *Arts Master Plan*. Being a part of the TYA community and a participant in the meetings provided me with useful insights, and helped thread together some of the political, social and artistic concerns that arose out of the discussions. Although these interactions were not part of the official fieldwork phase, it is vital to recognise that they

informed the research process and my understanding of the development of The Artground. Furthermore, reflecting on these conversations also enabled me to make connections between what was said and some of the ideas that materialised.

Methodologically, this chapter continues to draw on my ethnographic fieldwork and is based on my experiences and observations during two visits to The Artground. The first was the grand opening that took place on 7 July 2017, where I was a participant-observer. Here, I witnessed children playing and engaging with the different installations in the space. Additionally, I also watched the performance of *Baby Space*, which was created especially for babies and toddlers and was the inaugural live performance-installation at The arts centre. A week later, I visited The Artground again and interviewed executive director Luanne Poh to understand some of her intentions, philosophies, and vision for the space. On this occasion, Poh also gave an insight into the working practices of the GroundBreakers programme, such as the selection process, challenges, and funding structure. Additionally, Poh helped to arrange a meeting with internationally acclaimed artistic director Dalija Acin Thelander, whose choreographic performances and art installations for babies have toured the world. She shared her creative processes and motivations for *Baby Space*, which was useful in that it broadened my understanding of TYA to include theatre for the very young, and also provided an insight into a theatre practice that is not commonly seen in the sector. The section on *Baby Space* later in this chapter will expand on those insights.

As I mentioned in Chapter One, my research approach is partly inspired by Sarah Pink's theories on sensory ethnography. In *Doing Sensory Ethnography*, she outlines a way of thinking and doing ethnography that considers the multisensorial experience as the starting point. This methodology, she suggests, is integral to both the experiences of the research participants as well as the ethnographer's practice. Her emphasis is on consciously being with research participants, rather than simply observing, which can lead to reflections on intersubjective experiences. She acknowledges that the principles of this approach do not provide 'the same materials that would be produced through the classic approach'. However, she argues, these principles are 'alternative, and ultimately valid, ways of seeking to understand and engage with other people's worlds through sharing activities, practices and inviting new forms of expression'. (2009, p.9)

The sensory approach that Pink advocates gelled with my research process at The Artground. Being surrounded by art installations, sounds, and, often, kinaesthetic experiences meant that observing and being part of sensory moments was already a natural occurrence. *Baby Space* was also the perfect performance to employ Pink's methodological orientation towards sharing a sensory experience with the participants: the work did not involve any spoken word, and the audience were mostly babies and toddlers who could not yet speak. This meant that I had to remain attentive to the affective and embodied sensations at key moments during the performance (which I expand on later in this chapter). Being there enabled me to engage with both the performers and audience in relation to the theatrical space, which made the research process reflexive and experiential. Poh and Thelander made it clear during their interviews that the sensory experience embedded within the environment was key. Rather than sitting and talking, we actively navigated The Artground and our conversations about TYA intertwined with feelings and sensations in relation to the objects, textures and materials that were in the space. Pink states:

> As researchers, we should be able to allow interviewees to communicate to us in multiple ways about their experiences, moralities and situatedness, in ways that allow us to use all of our own resources of empathy and imagination to know about their ways of being and understanding. (2009, p.87)

This suggests that the interview is not merely a conversation that focuses on questioning and talking, but is part of a wider complex of communication and practices. It involves understanding the narrative of the interview as a process through which verbal, experiential, sensorial and the emotional elements are brought together. It was in those moments of sharing and interacting with the material and sensorial qualities of things they described that brought to the fore different elements of the interconnected senses and highlighted the role that the sensory approach can play in knowledge formation.

The Artground as a situated practice

Harriet Hawkins proposes a critical geography of creativity and the need to 'put creativity in its place' by paying attention to the site and environment where art happens (2017, p.2). Notably, then, The Artground is not a typical theatre building. In fact, it is a repurposed school hall at the Goodman Arts Centre – an 'arts hive' nestled within the Mountbatten neighbourhood.[104] Geographically, this is a location away from the city centre where most commercial art spaces and theatre buildings can be found. Today, the arts centre still maintains the architectural structure of a typical local school; there are three blocks of classrooms, an assembly hall, two cafes, a small black box theatre, two dance studios and a playing field. These spaces are rented out to artists and companies from different disciplines (e.g. dance, theatre, music, visual and literary arts), one of which is, in fact, the National Arts Council. The latter point makes the site an interesting hub of activity, where the creatives and those who dictate the policy for the creatives are housed together.

Figure 23: The Goodman Arts Centre

The exterior of The Artground looks like a typical school hall and blends well with the surrounding school-like environment (e.g. classroom blocks and corridors). This concrete building, that is surrounded by a few trees, appears rather old and unassuming. Just beside The Artground is a small parking lot for visitors who drive to the Goodman Arts Centre. This

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[104] Goodman Arts Centre website. Accessed on 13 Jan 2018 from: https://www.goodmanartscentre.sg/about/

outdoor space is also sometimes used for activities such as weekend flea markets, mini carnivals and fund-raising events. The inside of the hall evokes recognisable educational undertones for local visitors who have attended public schools in Singapore, perhaps stirring up a sense of nostalgia in some. The absence of a façade might be unnerving for some visitors, who may be more acquainted with the conventional structures and designs of theatre spaces. The space also does not subscribe to expectations when it comes to theatre bars, lobbies and souvenir shops – as there aren't any. Another singular feature is that, upon arrival, visitors must remove their shoes before entering. Additionally, since entry into this space is non-ticketed, children and their families are not bound by theatre rules and conventions, and can freely enter and leave as they please.

Making and watching theatre in a non-theatrical space opens up new questions about the relationship between creativity and the materiality of place. To inform my thinking about how the spatial framing and site of the performance can shape the audience experience and production of meanings, I turn to the work of Marvin Carlson. He has dedicated studies to the neglected aspects of the physical surroundings of performance in both traditional theatre and non-theatre spaces. In *Places of Performance: The Semiotics of Architecture*, Carlson draws on semiotic analysis and examines how the architecture of a theatre building, its decorations, and location in the city can mirror the preoccupations of the community it is located in. One of Carlson's arguments is that the surroundings in which performances occur not only reflect the social and cultural concerns of the creators and their audience, but also serve to stimulate and reinforce within the audience certain ideas of what theatre represents in their society. Carlson states:

> Semiotics…has an enormous potential for aiding in this more general understanding of theatre not merely as a performed text but as an event embedded in society and culture, involved with meanings on many levels other than those of the text and staging themselves. (1989, p.5)

He goes on to argue that the understanding of 'the theatre' is also conceptually geographic as the place where a performance happens offers layers of meanings that go beyond the performance itself. This, he suggests, involves the external considerations that extend

beyond the building's influences on the performance to also examining these sites in their own rights. As he states in his conclusion:

> In every historical period and in every culture the physical matrices of the theatrical event – where it takes place within the community, what sort of structure houses it, and how that structure is organised and decorated – all contribute an important way to the cultural processing of the event and must be taken into consideration by anyone seeking to gain an understanding of its dynamics. (1989, p.204)

The examples that Carlson cites in his book are largely from the traditions of Western theatre, but his perspectives on spatial semiotics are equally applicable and relevant to understanding the theatre buildings and spaces in other cultures and contexts. A space such as The Artground is, of course, intended to attract and cater to children and their families, rather than the adult-going audiences that Carlson describes in his book. However, his work nonetheless encourages a consideration of The Artground as a situated space that plays a vital role in shaping, what he terms, 'the entire theatre experience' (1989, p.18).

My visits to the Goodman Arts Centre shifted my thinking away from TYA that happens in the theatres and commercial spaces. I started to pay attention to the ornamental designs, physical organisation and surroundings of The Artground, and became more sensitive and attuned to how and where alternate forms of creativity for children can happen. Unlike most commercial theatres in the city centre that cater to tourists and the middle-classes, Mountbatten is predominantly an area for lower income families – although there are of course the exceptions to this generalisation that can be found in any part of Singapore – and has a range of facilities that offer financial assistance and subsidised medical and home care to those in need. As a way to ensure that the residents have access to cultural activities, the Mountbatten (South East) Community Development Centre (CDC) works closely with the Voluntary Welfare Organisation (VWO) to understand community issues and implement relevant community projects (e.g. walkathons, food drives, ethnic celebrations). Throughout the year, the galleries, music and dance studios at the Goodman Arts Centre also organise subsidised and/ or free workshops specially for the Mountbatten residents. For example, the Goodman Ceramic Studio offers free monthly open classes to the local children, where

they are taught how to mould clay into various animal sculptures and cartoon characters. Other artists at the arts centre also work closely with the Mountbatten (South East) CDC to design and organise camps for children during the school holidays and bring activities such as story-telling, arts and crafts and caricature drawing to the nearby schools and community centres. The Artground fits within this demographic and serves as an alternative site for less affluent children and families who might not be able to afford tickets to the theatre (although it also attracts people from across Singapore who are interested in the activities). Other than the free entry, it also partners with social service agencies such as AWWA and the Cerebral Palsy Alliance Singapore to design and create programmes for pre-schoolers that are developmentally appropriate. I started this project interested in theatre designed for children and young people, but have come to an understanding that the location of where performance happens, the physical appearance of the building, its configuration and immediate surroundings all play an important role in reflecting some of the larger social and cultural concerns where TYA is produced and received. It is in this context that I am interested in finding a different way to consider how and in what ways the 'dynamics' of The Artground can offer an alternative artistic and social experience for children. Here, I return to the work of Tim Edensor et al and Hawkins to help me conceptualise a way of reading creativity that can engage with practices that are more holistic, diverse and socially inclusive.

Edensor and his co-authors' idea of 'vernacular creativity' challenge conceptions of creativity within the creative city agenda, and this was particularly useful to my thinking about an alternative space for developing the arts and TYA. In their work, they set up a clear distinction between the professionalised and commercialised creativity found in the city centre, and the vernacular, amateur, and everyday creativities seen outside the city centre boundaries. They foreground the non-economic values and outcomes of alternative and quotidian creative practices, along with the often marginal and everyday spaces in which this sort of creativity takes shape. It is here they argue for a rethinking of what constitutes creativity and 'who, what and where is considered "creative"' (2009, p.1).

In her chapter on 'studios, galleries and beyond', Hawkins offers an insightful perspective on the production and consumption of art beyond specialised spaces such as theatres,

museums, concert halls, and cinemas. Writing from a geographical perspective, she notes that there is a rich repertoire of studies exploring expensive and privileged spaces. As a counter perspective, she examines the 'micro geographies' of creative production – a term she uses to describe smaller sites within the wider art worlds – and proposes that these overlooked spaces might be conceptualised as valuable sites for creativity, 'encompassing processes of transformation, performance production and transmission' (2017, p.72). Drawing on the writings of Erin O'Connor and Jenny Sjöholm, she contends that studio spaces enable the coming together of the studio as a place for making work and a place for the construction of the practitioner's self and identity within the art world. She distinguishes the studio as a separate space for material-making and experimentation, and suggests that it is 'a site for processes such as thinking, reflecting and conceptualising; processes that intersect with material practices of drawing, making or sculpting materials' (2017, p.73).

I am not suggesting that The Artground is an everyday space or studio, but these perspectives prompt new ways to consider theatre practices and experiences that are located away from the metropolitan centre. Refocusing on 'non-specialised spaces' for the production of creativity enables a theorisation that actively promotes an all-embracing inclusivity. Those who may have been excluded from enjoying theatrical arts – largely because of the expensive tickets sold in the city centre and commercial hubs – would be welcomed into the fold, and there would be a heightened appreciation for all the creative activities produced for children and young people in smaller and informal settings away from the city centre. This way of thinking moves the focus away from market-ready products and services to the affective, emotive and cathartic dimensions of creative pursuits, reasserting the value of creativity that has limited economic currency but boundless value. In a saturated marketplace, this recognises, as Hawkin suggests, the value of the 'embodied, affect-rich, place-based experience of performance' (2017, p.102).

Reflections on The Artground

The tagline underneath The Artground's display title is that it is 'a curious place to be'. And it rings true. The architecture, activities and its surrounding environment all contribute to making the Artground a vastly different experience to a typical trip to the theatre. Below, I illuminate how.

On 7 July 2017, I was invited to the launch of The Artground. I was very familiar with this site as it was the same school hall that I converted into a temporary theatre space during the ACE! Festival in 2012. A delicious mix of nostalgia and excitement started to surface as I approached the glass doors that led to the hall. An usher stopped and redirected me to the new entrance that was located on the opposite side of the building. As I turned the corner, I was pleasantly surprised to see how the once uneven and empty concrete area has now been transformed into the Good Garden: a mini garden that was covered with shelves and rows of potted plants. Behind this garden was a colourful painted wall that added a refreshing and vibrant touch. I was told by one of the ushers that, as part of the experience, visitors would have to first walk through this newly constructed space before entering the building. I joined the guests who had arrived early and we were encouraged to gently shake and smell some of the plants in the smaller pots, and were even made to pluck and taste some of the herbs. The colours, textures and smells of the different plants made it a very sensory experience.

Figure 24: Outside The Artground – The Good Garden

After ten minutes of mingling and exploring the garden, we were invited to enter The Artground. Upon entering, there were several grey circular mats laid out in front of us on the floor. The mats resembled stepping stones and formed a windy path that led to a large green wall. This structure towered over the guests and had holes of different sizes. The installations were inspired by the world-renowned children's book *Alice in Wonderland*, by

Lewis Carroll, and we were encouraged to imagine that we were 'going down the rabbit hole', just like in Carroll's story. One at a time, children as well as the adults playfully crouched and crawled through the smaller entrances.
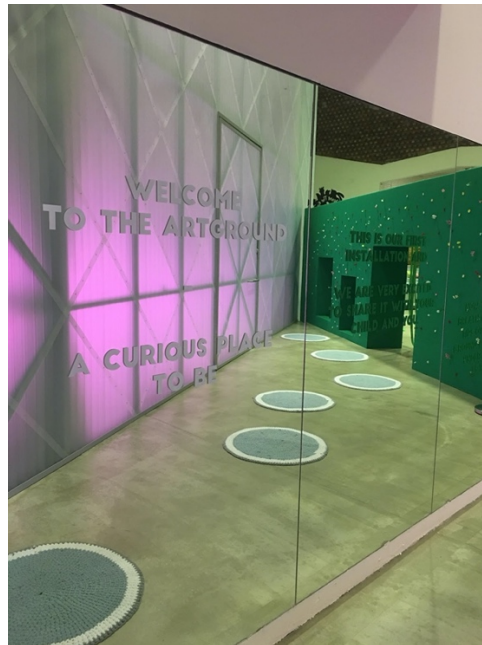
Figure 25: Inside The Artground – the space leading to the main area

On the other side stood a stage that had been transformed into a baby play area. This raised platform was fitted with walkways and slopes with a slight incline, and higher points of the slopes were surrounded by bean bags. The stage was not only a safe space for babies, it also encouraged them to toddle. Multicoloured streamers and paper cuttings hung from the ceiling and were gently swaying in the wind. There were also mesmerising art installations dangling all around and colourful interactive art pieces on the walls. Colourful cushions were scattered all over the floor and, in the corner, there was a long, snake-like, patchwork tube made out of different fabric. Some children were playing and running, while others were trying to lift the 'snake'. A lively soundscape was playing in the background and underscored the action, contributing to the overall energy. After a brief welcome, executive director Luanne Poh explained that the best way to experience The Artground was to touch and interact with the installations, rather than through a detailed lecture on the artwork. This was an invitation that motivated both the children and adults to start exploring.

Figure 26: Inside The Artground – the baby stage

There were four interactive art installations in the space. The first was a house-like structure that consisted of two levels: the lower level was a tunnel filled with red and yellow foam tubes where children could crawl around, and the upper level was equipped with a chalk board and flat surfaces for children to draw on. Beside it stood a structure that had a hollow dome. The underside of it was decorated with images of plants and insects, and had 'fun facts' about the environment written on it. The third was a mini maze with blue fabric hanging down from the top of it. As I walked through it, I could hear the sound of splashing waves and bubbles gurgling. It was at this moment that I noticed children imitating various sea creatures and 'swimming' around it. Finally, beside the maze was a crate filled with bits of materials from the other installations. In this space, children were invited to stretch their imagination and create their own objects using the scraps. They could either leave their art work in the space for others to appreciate or choose to take them home. In many ways, this space not only provided children the opportunity to play, but also touch, assemble, build, draw and create.

Figure 27: The view from The Artground's stage – the maze, the White Box, dome, and wall

After about half an hour, we were told to gather back onto the stage. Printed on the wall was a paragraph that offered a brief context of the installations:

> *Down the Rabbit Hole* hopes to get all children and the playful adults that accompany them down on their hands and knees as they tunnel their way through the mysterious world underneath their feet. Inspired by the diversity of life underground, this mixed media installation features unusual and unexpected aesthetic subjects such as tiny microbes and the bizarre looking platypus. The subterranean world of these extraordinary creatures will ignite curiosity and tickle the senses.

The mixed-media exhibition/ installation was designed and curated by Ya See Poh, the first local visual artist that was commissioned by The Artground. The installations, according to Luanne Poh, were not fixed and would change every four months. The intention was to work with different artists to transform the spaces (e.g. the Good Garden, exhibition/ play area, baby stage) into new and creative environments. This would not only refresh and renew the experiences of children, but also allows The Artground to keep evolving. Finally, Poh introduced us to the White Box – a cosy theatre that was situated at the back of the hall. This is the only permanent structure in the arts centre where different creative workshops and performances would be held. Unlike a typical black box theatre, the White

Box was made out of plastic and had translucent walls. The pink and blue lights that were seeping out of it made it aesthetically stunning and inviting. On that afternoon, the White Box was used for the production of *Baby Space,* the aforementioned multisensorial installation-performance, which I will discuss in greater detail later in this chapter.

A constructed space of play

The rather cold, austere exterior of The Artground belies the fact that its very existence is motivated by the idea of play. Without realising it, I had spent three hours observing, crawling, exploring, and playing there. I was almost entirely immersed in the space, and participating in one activity seamlessly led to the next. The children's laughter, wide-eyed enthusiasm, and riotous energy made it clear they were having plenty of fun, which, notably, added to the overall playful atmosphere. The children's senses were also stimulated and energised, and was something I was keen to follow up on. I decided to interview Poh to find out more about the motivations and mechanisms behind creating these multisensorial experiences.[105]

Poh first reflected on her childhood and explained that she spent her formative years running in open fields, climbing trees and looking for insects in bushes. Such activities, she believes, can encourage a sense of playfulness and curiosity in children. She asserts that open spaces (e.g. fields and parks) are also important to the development of children's mental and physical health, and notes that urban and technological changes have led to a decline in these spaces. Poh also explained that she had to design a five-minute activity for the NAC and a panel of children when applying for the position of executive director. Inspired by her love for nature and gardens, Poh brought live earthworms to the pitch. Her plan was simple and practical: to get the children to *play* with them. According to Poh, some of the children were initially afraid and reluctant to touch the soil and earthworms. However, after some persuasion, they picked the worms up and gently interacted with them. This activity ignited a sense of curiosity and prompted questions such as 'where did the worms come from?', 'how long do worms live?' and 'what do worms eat?'. This innovative approach caught the attention of the council, which consequently appointed Poh

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[105] Poh, Luanne. Interview. The Artground, 11 July 2017.

to the role of centre director. In line with her belief that play is essential to the growth of children, she decided to frame The Artground as a 'play space' rather than an 'arts centre'.

Urban development in Singapore has inevitably shaped the social and cultural life of children. In particular, it has reconfigured the culture of play when it comes to nature. Growing up in Singapore, I have noticed that there are now fewer open fields and parks for children to play in and explore as the city-state continues its quest to urbanise. An insightful perspective on the relationship between play and urban growth is offered by geographer Lily Kong. In 'Nature's Dangers, Nature's Pleasures: Urban Children and the Natural World', Kong examines children living in Singapore and their experience with the environment. She notes that, by developing the city, natural areas such as swamps, coasts, forests and ridges have been demolished to make way for commercial centres and high-rise buildings. She illuminates the rather poignant paradox that, as the destruction of these natural areas continue to pave the way for urban development, various policies to make the city green (e.g. planting of trees and shrubs along selected roadsides) have been introduced. As a result, she argues, Singaporeans have little contact with nature, and it is in this environment that most young people have grown up in over the past five decades (2000, p.225). Drawing on interviews that she conducted with a group of mothers, one of Kong's findings is that most parents perceive the outdoors as dangerous and would prefer their children stay home. According to Kong, parents would rather children 'sit in front of the computer' than 'let them go out and enjoy the trees and flowers' (2000, p.226). One of the dangers, she suggests, is that urban Singaporean children might have limited interest 'in and affinity for nature, to play, learn and care', which would deny them the opportunity to 'engage socially, intellectually and emotionally' (2000, p.231).

This reveals how growing up in a highly urban environment has removed particular forms of imaginative play that are assumed to be instinctive and natural to children, and has encouraged an overly protective attitude towards them when playing outdoors. I recognised clear parallels between the benefits of playing amongst nature and the design and ethos of The Artground. While it is clear that an indoor 'play space' could never compete with verdant, sunny fields or lush, tropical forests, The Artground does capture the sense of awe-inspiring discovery and childhood wonder that Poh remembers so fondly. Albeit a sanitised

version, the space actively encourages children's natural curiosity about the strange and unknown, and its methodology and ideology reimagine and recreate forms of play that have been previously lost by urbanisation. For example, the garden is a space for children to explore different types of plants and draw creative inspiration from nature. Here, they can participate in a range of programmes such as upcycling projects, worm farming, composting initiatives, and vegetable growing – all of which nurtures a sense of curiosity and a connection with nature. In the hall, the installations are designed in a way that encourage children to climb and crawl through them, similar to climbing a large tree in a park. This area is also cleared of any barriers so that it encourages children to run around and explore all the elements of the various interactive art installations. Since the play space at The Artground is free to the general public, children can freely move between the indoor and outdoor areas at leisure. All these features illustrate how The Artground has found a constructive balance between the urban and natural world, and has designed the space in way that encourages different forms of interaction and embodied experiences that can lead to imaginative discoveries. The spatial configuration, its arrangement and the decorations all influence the ways in which bodies move in the space and reflect how The Artground has prioritised sensory and open-ended play. Poh states:

> I was really looking to create a space that was open-plan. No rules, no 'please stand behind the yellow line' – really a space where children can crawl through, run around and climb over.

> Without curiosity, nothing will motivate you to learn. If you're curious, then you will want to go do something about it. A positive attitude towards playing and learning will cascade into other parts of your life, which I believe is the root to being creative in the later years.[106]

The site of The Artground, as I pointed out in the previous section, adds an important dimension to the ideological framing. The unique geographical location, its appearance and surroundings not only challenge the markers of commercial theatres, but also reconfigure

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[106] Poh, Luanne. Interview, The Artground, 11 July 2017.

the audience experience. The emphasis on play makes this participatory experience reliant on children in order for the space to be brought to life. Marvin Carlson points out:

> Theatre has traditionally presented itself as a special experience set apart from everyday life, an experience not restricted to the actual performance but extending to the entire event structure of which the performance is a part, and the location of that event structure has often carried forward that image by displaying the symbols of elegance, pleasure and high culture. (1989, p.164)

Carlson's consideration of the interior decoration in the theatre focuses on theatres designed for adult audiences, and draws attention to features that in the past signalled wealth and class. The Artground continues the tradition of presenting theatre as a 'special experience set apart from everyday life', but extends this experience to other forms of creativity and activities in meaningful ways. By focusing on play, imagination and intrigue, The Artground is designed as much for playful interaction as for the visual consumption that Carlson writes about. Since play is active and spontaneous – an 'open encounter' as conceptualised by Kong (2000, p.231) – then what is thus 'displayed' by this space takes on its own life through children's participation.

Free play is not the only activity at The Artground, however. There is also a range of creative workshops, performances and other family-friendly participatory events that take place in the White Box. Below is a typical weekend programme:

10.30-11am	*Little Green Thumbs*
11.30-12pm	*Wriggle and Giggle*
2.30-3pm	*Terrific Tales*
3.30-4pm	*Bite Size Lil' Creatures*
4.30-5pm	*Space Camp*

Figure 28: The Artground programme

There are two ways in which The Artground's events contribute to the overall playful atmosphere of the space and thus enhance the children's experience. Firstly, each activity

has a fun or nonsensical title that is deliberately ambiguous. The main reason for this, according to Poh, is that it removes any preconceived notion or stigma tied to a particular art form or activity.[107] For example, *Wriggle and Giggle* is an interactive dance workshop that promotes creative movement and expression. This activity was, however, previously just called Movement Workshop. Poh recalls an encounter with a parent who would not let her daughter participate in this event because she was 'already learning ballet', and so it was pointless for her to participate in another dance-related activity. This conversation inspired Poh to change the title. Upon doing so, the programme was so well received that it became one of the main highlights of The Artground. This shift in branding not only communicates to the participants a playful message but eradicates any assumptions about what the activity might involve.

Secondly, unlike a TYA performance that typically lasts between 40 to 50 minutes, the programmes at The Artground are curated as a flow of events. The duration of most of the activities are 30 minutes followed by a 30-minute break or change over. During this time when the artists are preparing the White Box for the next activity, the children are invited to play in the main play space or grab a snack at the café just beside The Artground. Additionally, the activities on the same day are not repeated. This not only provides adults and children the freedom of choice, but also extends their time at The Artground. Here, I will use an example to illustrate how curating the programmes in this way can influence children's sense of time and play. On my second visit, I heard parents tell their child it was time to go home as he had already 'finished' two programmes and that they had spent close to two hours at The Artground. It was clear that the parents were getting impatient. However, the child replied: 'Can we please stay longer? I have not experienced the space and music thing' (referring to the *Bite Size Lil Creatures* and *Space Camp*). It is interesting to note that the child did not use the words 'finished' but instead expressed his participation as an 'experience'. An argument can be made here about the different ways in which play is perceived by the adult and the child. In 'Art as Experience', John Dewey suggests that, while 'experience' occurs continuously, 'an experience' runs its course to completion. He describes 'an experience' in this way:

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[107] Poh, Luanne. Interview, The Artground, 11 July 2017.

A piece of work is finished in a way that is satisfactory; a problem receives its

solution; a game is played through; a situation, whether that of eating a meal,

playing a game of chess, carrying on a conversation, writing a book, or taking part

in a political campaign, is so rounded out that its close is a consummation and not a

cessation. Such an experience is a whole and carries with it its own individualising

quality and self-sufficiency. It is *an experience*. (1980, p.35)

The moment that I described can be analysed through Dewey's differentiation between the

two concepts. For the adult, each activity is treated as an isolated event and assumes that a

process has concluded. A child's participation, however, carries a complex emotional

resonance which leads to a desire to continue exploring and playing. This illustrates how

children's participation and measurement of time is linked to activity, rather than the clock.

As Dewey argues, when we have 'an experience' there are no disruptions and breaks

because of continuous merging. It is only through 'an experience' that it can be integrated

'within and demarcated in the general stream of experience from other experiences' (1980,

p.35). In her study on children's experience in the theatre, Shifra Schonmann builds on the

work of Dewey and argues that theatre for children should be treated as 'an experience'.

She draws on the works of Philip Jackson and contends that, when children are 'fully

immersed in experience', they 'lose all sense of separation between self, object and event'

(2000, p.30). This continuous merging aptly captures the flow of activities at The Artground.

The example that I described brings into focus the quality of the experience that creates its

unity and illuminates how 'an experience' is a whole and carries with it its own self-

sufficiency and individualising quality. Although these programmes might not always be

theatrical activities, they offer children the time and space to explore new ideas and

sensations, allowing them to formulate their own connections and learnings through

different experiences.

While these workshops and performances are ticketed events, and therefore appear to

mirror the economic transactions of the theatre, the price is very good value. The

programmes are heavily subsidised by the NAC, so that a typical entry fee to the White Box

is S$10 – significantly lower than the average S$30 ticket price of a TYA performance.

Moreover, a single ticket admits both the child and the accompanying adult. Interestingly, Poh stated the entry fee is a nominal amount that is not calculated to cover any production costs but, rather, is intended to send parents and children a message that art and art-creation should be treated seriously. She adds that making workshops and performances free of charge would not only cultivate unrealistic expectations from teachers and parents, but also undermine the status and value of TYA and creative activities for children.[108]

Christine Roland-Levy, who examines the relationship between children and the economic aspects of consumption, offers a useful perspective to reflect on this. In 'Children and Money', she argues that it is important for children to develop skills of negotiation with others through economic activities. She contends that this experience of 'economic socialising' provides natural specific training which gradually develops useful knowledge, skills, opinions and behaviours that are relevant to the economic world (2010, p.151). Teachers and parents, she proposes, should introduce economic education to children at an early age so that they can have a better understanding of money (e.g. how it is earned, how it can be saved in order to accumulate and purchase something more expensive later) and appreciate what it stands for (2010 p.160). This reveals that the economic exchange can generate social benefits and cultivate useful skills for children. Charging a nominal fee for each ticket therefore opens a space for constructive dialogue and prompts children and adults to reconsider the value of the art and, more importantly, appreciate the work of the artists. It sends a message to the participants that these activities should not be taken for granted, but are equally important as any other forms of paid entertainment. On a wider level, this approach encourages children and parents to invest in arts activities at a young age and has the potential to enhance audience development and develop the cultural sector in the long run.

As previously mentioned, The Artground positions itself as a 'play space' rather than an 'arts centre'. More than just a term, it represents a certain stance in Singapore. The difference between the two, as defined by Poh, is that the former suggests 'freedom and spontaneity' while the latter evokes a set of 'systems and rules'.[109] TYA in Singapore, as explained in

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[108] Poh, Luanne. Interview, The Artground, 11 July 2017.
[109] Ibid

Chapter Three, has been designed and developed based on the perception that children are not capable of enjoying and appreciating art as 'art'. From creating to choosing the show, these decisions and activities are usually adult-driven. Schonmann rightly points out that children are often a 'captive audience', in which they do not choose to attend an event but are taken to by the adults (2006, p.60). In these situations, she argues, children should be provided with quality experiences that can 'hold their imaginations in trust' (2006, p.61).

Creating such an environment recognises that the adults – whether they are theatre-makers, producers or play providers – have a role in ensuring that children's artistic and aesthetic experiences are of equal or higher quality to any form of entertainment for adults. Geographer Owain Jones has conducted research into children's use of adult-constructed space. In 'Melting geography: purity, disorder, childhood and space', he argues:

> Children mostly live their lives within the warp and weft of the striations of adult space. These material, symbolic and disciplinary structures are both incidental and deliberate in their relation to children. Children's geographies operate within these patterns. The question is the nature of the interaction between the two. If adults' geographies are intensive, rigid and powerfully embedded, there may be little chance for children to build their own geographies, but if adults' geographies can be more permeable, heterogeneous and tolerant of otherness, then those in society most celebrated for their bodily and mental spontaneity, creativity, exuberance and mobility, may have the ability to express this in the creation of their own geographies within the adult world which, it seems, is bound to continue to be the dominant ordering of space. (2000, p.43)

The fact that The Artground, culturally and architecturally, is a building specifically designed to encourage curiosity and playful discoveries suggests an ability to act as a bridge between childhood and adulthood space. This is, perhaps, what Jones calls 'polymorphic space' (2000, p.38), which can respond to the 'warp and weft' of adults' and children's interpretations and desires. What is interesting and particular about The Artground is the liminality between these positions described by Jones. The building is managed and controlled by adults, but specifically designed to allow children to play creatively and

imaginatively within it. Framing it as a 'play space' challenges the idea of control and policing, and shifts the power from the adults to children. The small entrance space in the green structures provides easy access for children, while deliberately making it more challenging for the adults; this is a good example of this playful subversion, prompting questions of who shall access what space. Additionally, since the installations are changed every few months, it encourages continuous encounters and exchanges between artists and children, enabling the reciprocity of creative input to shape its design and ethos. By providing the tools and equipment of play, The Artground brings to fore the children's 'imaginative involvement' and allows them to be creators of their own geographies (2000, p.67).

Empowering children and recognising that they are able to think and feel for themselves is not just found at The Artground, but is also the heartbeat of the International Association of Theatre for Children and Young People (ASSITEJ). The organisation's belief is written as a vision statement:

> ASSITEJ commits in principle and in practice to collaboration and cooperation between other international artistic associations on matters of mutual interest, where appropriate. We do this in order to advocate the theatre and the arts as a universal expression of humankind, as fundamental to human, social and cultural development and as a bridge-builder for mutual understanding and tolerance as enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.[110]

This view insists that children are active beings whose agency is important in the creation of their own worlds. It signifies a shift in power relations where the adult no longer automatically assumes hierarchical privilege, although it must be recognised that they are still the purchasers of tickets and the chaperones. Above all, it treats children as competent social beings and advocates for both their rights to participate in the arts and capacities for engaging with/ in performance. It is clear that The Artground shares the social commitment of the global TYA community and recognises that the arts should be a vital part of children's

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[110] ASSITEJ website. Accessed 16 June 2018 from: http://www.assitej-international.org/en/

cultural lives. Whether through free play, subsidised workshops or performances, it ensures that children are given a range of opportunities to be creative on their own terms, and at their own pace. Therefore, the vision of The Artground as 'a curious place to be' is not just reflected in its design, installations and activities, but is also visible in the active participation of the children.

Baby Space: spontaneous and open-ended play through performance

One of the highlights of my research at The Artground was the production of *Baby Space*. This performance-installation was designed by the aforementioned Swedish director-choreographer, Dalijah Acin Thelander. It was the first TYA production at The Artground as a well as the first production designed for babies in Singapore. The show has been performed around the world, and adopts a unique creation process that differs from a typical touring production: rather than traveling with a fixed team of actors and designers, and presenting a rehearsed version of the show, Thelander works with a collective of artists from the hosting country to develop the performance. In the Singaporean version, Thelander was invited to collaborate with a Malay and a Chinese dancer, and a sound designer who is trained in creating ethnic music was tasked with delivering the music within The Artground.

The production, as the title suggests, was designed for babies and toddlers and set in the White Box. The audience capacity was carefully managed and each performance only permitted a maximum of 20 people (adult care-givers and children) to enter the space, creating a theatrical experience that was intimate and immersive. Before the performance began, the audience was invited to crawl through a small hole which led to a beautiful white landscape that had a dream-like quality to it. From top to bottom, the White Box was covered in a white stretchy material that divided the room into two: one with a tent-like structure with holes, and the other an open area with white flowing tulle fabric hanging down from the ceiling, resembling white fluffy clouds. There were also soft foam pillows of different shapes and sizes scattered around the space, which prompted the adults to let the babies rest on them. The adults were asked to sit against the walls, while babies and toddlers were encouraged to crawl around the space. Soon, the house lights dimmed and two performers clothed in white entered the space; foot-by-foot and arm-by-arm. Pink and blue hues of light splashed across the white canvas, painting a soft, calm and soothing

picture. The two dancers moved gracefully to a gentle percussive melody, engaging not just with each other, but also the babies and toddlers that surrounded them through simple movements, such as linking the audience together through touch points, or picking up the soft white cushions to attract their attention. The whimsical soundscape and rhythmic beats evoked a sense of playfulness and complemented the bodies moving randomly in the space. As the music changed, so did the movements, but they were always purposeful actions that were used to engage the young audiences. Taking the cue from the children's actions that included tumbling, crawling and rolling, the two performers improvised a set of acrobatic choreography through and around the audience. They gently touched and smiled at the audience and, at times, intertwined their feet and arms with the children's. As the boundaries between the audience and performers slowly converged, my gaze alternated between the two dancers and the babies. The performance had no spoken word, nor was there a narrative. Instead, the dramatic action was propelled by the dancers' movements, music and audience members moving in the space. What struck me most was how the babies and toddlers responded to the piece in their own way. Some were mesmerised and actively interacted with the performers, while others rested comfortably on the laps of the care-givers. Halfway through the performance, two babies in front of me gurgled in delight as they explored the soft and soothing environment around them. This encouraged a few more toddlers to joined this joyful duo and they all began tumbling around. The music gradually faded after 20 minutes, suggesting that the performance section had come to an end. This seamlessly merged into a timeslot where children and their care-givers could stay and play in the space or explore the rest of the installation. Some children continued to crawl and climb through the various holes and space, while others laid on the soft cushioned floor and listened to the soothing background music that was reintroduced into the space.

Figure 29: *Baby Space*, The Artground, 2017

Baby Space, as a playful and sensory performance, fits with the overall environment of The Artground and is reflective of the type of TYA it envisions in its programming. It is clear that the production was rooted in spontaneous play that encouraged audience members to participate at any point during the performance. It also rejected a dramatic structure, recognising that its audience does not require or benefit from narrative scaffolding. Instead, multi-sensory stimuli were used to engender engagement. This production is a good example of an emerging genre and subfield of practice and research in TYA known as Theatre for the Very Young (TVY) or Theatre for Early Years (TEY). TVY and TEY are usually intimate productions that are designed for children that range from six months to six years. The focus is often on the response of the young spectators and recognises that their participation and engagement with their immediate surroundings form an important part of the theatrical experience. Critical examination into this field has been undertaken by scholars such as Manon van de Water and Ben Fletcher-Watson.

In her study on TVY, van de Water examines several projects from Europe and the United States. She references TEY companies such as Glitterbird, La Barraca, Polka and Starcatchers and discusses how the different material and educational structures in their given context have shaped the cultural production and perception of the work. She points

out that, on a cognitive level, young children tend to explore their environments through watching, moving and touching, and argue that TEY experiences/ performances can be useful to their developmental needs and abilities (2014, p.123). She draws on the work of Hungarian child psychologists Király Ildikó and Koós Orsolya, and contends that the psychological underpinnings found in artistic and theatrical experiences can help young children 'process everyday experiences, relationships and social conduct' (2014, p. 126). As a key member of the ASSITEJ committee, she shares the vision that even the youngest children should be treated as 'human beings' rather than 'human becomings' (2014, p.121).

In 'Child's Play: A Postdramatic Theatre of Paidia for the Very Young', Fletcher-Watson draws on the work of Roger Caillois, and argues that a 'turbulent and anarchic playfulness' lies at the heart of theatre for babies and toddlers (2013, p.14). Echoing van de Water, he makes reference to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, which affirms the right 'to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to the age of the child and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts', and notes that this ethos has informed the foundation of much contemporary TEY practice (2013, p.16). He draws on productions such as *BabyO* and *Multicoloured Blocks from Space* to illustrate how infant play can interweave with artistic practices to create unpredictable experiences, inviting the audience into a world that returns theatre to its primeval form as co-created play. In these moments, Fletcher-Watson suggests, children write their own 'theatrical texts' with their bodies and actions, reflecting their lived experience 'through the language of play' (2013, p.27).

There are, predictably, many overlaps between TYA and TEY. The underlying belief in both territories is that children, regardless of age, are capable of experiencing art as 'art', and that the work created for them should be of high aesthetic quality and encourage playful engagement. This ethos is central to TEY and TYA practices, and seeks to challenge adult concepts of children as unskilled, ignorant of culture, and requiring training as spectators. It seems to me that that one difference between TYA and TEY scholarship is that the latter largely focuses on the very young audiences' imaginative dexterity, improvisation and creative interplay. Seeing as TEY often focuses on the imaginative and sensory journey of the child, rather than communicate a key message, the debate (as van de Water suggests) is whether TEY should be seen as an aesthetic or educational endeavour, or both. These

concerns are, of course, equally valid and applicable to the broader scope of TYA, as I have discussed in Chapter Three. However, since TEY focuses on the more sensory, pleasurable elements of theatre rather than drum home an educational message that TYA often leans too heavily upon, perhaps, there is something to be learnt from the approach of TEY in this respect.

The relationship between play and theatre practice prompts questions on how creativity can emerge through spontaneous and open-ended play. Here, I shall return to the work of Anthony Jackson. While Jackson does not write about performances made for babies, his examination of theatre as part of a 'playing culture' is important to my analysis. In his study, Jackson draws on the work of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Willmar Sauter and argues that the concept of theatre is:

> … essentially an *interactive* activity, characterised by such elements as immediacy, impulsiveness, playfulness, entertainment, make believe, physicality, and by a consequent resistance to being appropriated as a message delivery vehicle. It also underlines the part that spectators play in the making of meaning and indeed in the making of the theatre event itself – whatever agenda may lie behind the commissioning of the script, an analysis of the impact made by the play must take account of the processes that lie at the heart of any theatrical experience. (2007, p.209, emphasis in original)

Baby Space might appear more like a play session than dramatic production, but it reflects the mutually influential exchange between the performer and audience that Jackson talks about. Unlike a typical theatrical production, it placed the spectators inside the performance, removing stage/ auditorium distinctions. The performance replaced text with movement, dance, and, most notably, kinaesthetic disruptions which altered the audience's relationship to the space and each other. Both performers and the audience were encouraged to respond freely, allowing spontaneous movements and moments that were open to interpretation. For example, there was a moment where a child moved her fingers while swaying to the music. In response to this, the performer, using her own fingers, traced the outline of the child's palm while slowly encircling her. The intertwining of fingers and

intermingling of the two bodies led to an improvised set of choreography. Throughout the performance, the artists encouraged babies to participate, emancipating them from being merely spectators, and letting them compose their own meanings from aesthetic objects and actions in space. This illustrates the reciprocity between audience and performer, and chimes well with Jackson's argument that the basis of the theatrical event rests on the concept of playing, with spectators also being participants as much as they are spectators – 'partners in the creation of that event' (2007, p.209).

Placing the audience in an active role means acknowledging that their immediate response plays a vital role in shaping the overall aesthetics and experience, and recognises that the value of the performance lies in the creative exchange. In my interview with Thelander, she shared that her motivation is rooted in the 'boundless curiosity' in unfolding the exploration together with a child, 'seeing a child as a partner in learning as well as in generating an understanding of meaning and value of artistic experience'.[111] She goes on to explain that it is precisely the interaction between the performer and spectator that inspires the work she creates. This dialogical approach, she argues, 'places both the child and adult in equal action and presence through the act of playing' and can help us understand the 'child's experience in relation to the broader human condition'.[112] In return, these valuable encounters between them contribute to the aesthetic and social experience. Thelander reflects on her choreographic practice for babies in 'Intersensoriality and Emplacement' to emphasise the importance of this form interactivity:

> The specific aesthetic of the performance lies in its very nature as an event. And the aesthetic experience of the performance does not depend on the 'work of art' but on the interaction of the participants. What emerges from the interaction is given priority over any possible meaning.[113]

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[111] Thelander, Dalijah Acin. Interview. The Artground, 11 July 2017.
[112] Ibid
[113] Thelander, Dalijah. 'Intersensoriality and Emplacement/ The Cornerstone of my Choreographic Practice for Babies'. Accessed on 17 Aug 2017 from: https://www.dalijaacinthelander.com/about/

Thelander, who is inspired by the work of art historian and critic Claire Bishop, sees agency and the idea of spectatorship as a 'politicised aesthetic practice' and proposes that 'this type of work conceives of its viewing subject not as an individual who experiences the art in transcendent or existential isolation but as part of collective or community'.[114] This suggests that a production such as *Baby Space* derives its impact and aesthetic qualities primarily from the adult-child interaction – their active and shared role in the theatrical event – rather than a narrative or dramatic arc; although there are exceptions to this generalisation found in TEY productions in other parts of the world.[115] By creating a safe and immersive environment that encourages connections between vision and movement, it empowers children to express themselves in multiple ways, respecting and recognising that their innate imaginative capability is comparable to that of adults. The performance therefore is dependent on the interrelation and interactivity between the audience and performers. It rests on the 'here and now' and acknowledges that the spectators are co-creators of the theatrical event itself. In other words, the participative act itself takes priority over any assumed outcome. As Fletcher-Watson argues, the very young children's 'participation becomes not an interruption of the theatrical moment but vital to its success' (2013, p.19).

A production like *Baby Space* is, of course, not designed to deliver a message, nor utilised for educational purposes in a conventional sense. However, it is a reflection of how playful and spontaneous encounters in TYA/TEY can invite new forms of participation and spectatorship. As Jackson argues:

> It firmly shifts the focus from persuasive, coercive, objectives-driven-work to the understanding of theatre as a pleasurable interactive experience, one that, grounded in elements such as playing, entertainment, pretence, physical activity and potential subversiveness, unites performers and spectators in a playful engagement. (2007, p. 211–212)

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[114] Ibid
[115] In a TEY workshop that I participated in 2018, British theatre-maker Sarah Argent explained in our conversation that she uses a dramatic structure for her work for babies such as *Baby Show* and *Out of the Blue*. Her belief is that such an approach can frame the 'story' that the artist desires to tell.

This is also a good example of how works that grant agency to children can challenge the commercial world and provide an alternative experience to large-scale musicals or performances that are tied to a set of criteria. Given that a TEY production like *Baby Space* works best in an intimate setting, one of the implications is that commercial producers are less likely to programme these types of performances since they might be less financially feasible. As Poh points out, the young audiences would definitely not have 'access to such a unique experience', if not for the funding support of the NAC.[116] Placing the child at the centre, rather than profits, therefore inverts the hierarchical divisions between the different sectors, and prompts new questions on how TYA can keep children thinking, questioning, exploring, appreciating and discovering in an increasingly saturated market. The unshackled freedom of entertaining children without the need to present concrete/ educational goals not only invites them to engage in a playful and open-ended experience, but also enables them to explore and discover new ways of being in the world. By introducing a theatre practice and aesthetic experience that privileges improvisation, participation, and spontaneous play, it demonstrates how a space like The Artground can take on ambitious and forward-thinking projects that can resist the commodification of creativity. This will widen the cultural appetite of children, expose them to more fluid art forms, open their minds to various artistic experiences, which, in return, can potentially renew and expand the field of TYA in Singapore.

The GroundBreakers: a slower way of working

Playful and curious encounters at The Artground are not just for the children, but also extend to the artists who create these activities for them. In October 2017, three months after its opening, The Artground launched the GroundBreakers, a residency programme that offered artists the opportunity to discover different ways of art-making and a space to create new work for children and young people. The aim of the programme was for practitioners to conceptualise and test different ideas that could 'break new ground', and provide children 'aesthetic experiences that are thoughtfully designed and considered'.[117] The residency was not just exclusive to theatre-makers; artists from all disciplines were

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[116] Poh, Luanne. Interview, The Artground, 11 July 2017.

[117] The GroundBreakers. The Artground website. Accessed on 16 Nov 2017 from https://theartground.com.sg/groundbreakers/

invited to send in their proposals. Artists were also given the freedom to work in any of the spaces at The Artground so that their development was not limited to just the White Box. As part of the selection process, the artists were required to pitch their ideas to a panel of children, who would deliberate, score and ultimately select the projects. The practitioners would then embark on a one-year process and be given the following:

- Access to The Artground for development and devising events
- A project stipend between S$3,000–S$5,000, depending on the nature of the project
- Ability to present work-in-progress to targeted age-groups as part of the developmental test-bedding process at The Artground and/ or at pre-schools
- Feedback from educators, parents and/ or children at each stage of development
- Opportunities to share and network with overseas artists presented by The Artground [118]

At the time of research, the programme was fluid and open where the artists could plan and adapt it according to their own needs. As a way to guide the artists, the Artground proposed a draft model[119]:

Month 1: Confirmation of selected artists and first meeting
Month 2: Artist spends two weeks developing the idea in The Artground
Month 3: A work-in-progress showcase with the target audience during 'Weekends at The Artground' Receive feedback from parents/ children (via videos, drawings) Discussion with The Artground team
Month 4-7: Professional development with local and overseas artists

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[118] Ibid
[119] Ibid

Month 8: Artist comes back for 2nd stage of development, test-bedding, feedback and discussion
Month 12: Feedback and evaluation

Figure 30: The GroundBreakers 2017/2018 Programme

This structure reveals how the GroundBreakers is different from the conventional approach of theatre-making in Singapore. The programme does not demand the artist produce a final product, but places an emphasis on the creative development. It adopts a flexible and open method that allows them to improvise, experiment and engage with ideas and practices that might not necessarily lead to any outcome. In other words, it prioritises the 'doing', rather than the 'done'. Anthropologist Tim Ingold offers an insightful perspective in considering the importance of the creative process. In his book, *Making*, Ingold expresses his frustration with contemporary scholarship in the fields of art history, anthropology, material culture studies and archaeology, where, he suggests, an overwhelming focus has been placed on the completed or finished object (e.g. a painting, sculpture, photograph, or play). Ingold contends that when works of art are studied in this way, 'we might learn much *about* art from the analysis of its objects', but 'nothing *from* it' (2013, p.7, emphasis in original). Reading creativity as a novel object, he argues, does not take into account the messiness that happens during the making, and abandons the processes and materials of production that the objects emerge from. To counter this, Ingold has persistently argued that creativity should be read 'forward' rather than in reverse, and to 'follow the paths along which it leads' (2013, p.7). This means paying attention to the ongoing processes involved in the artist/ maker's practice that relates with the 'movement of growth or becoming' of the work (2013, p. 7).

Ingold's work was influential to my thinking about the speculative, experimental and open-ended processes of creative practice. This view treats the 'making' as a valuable process, recognising that ideas and knowledge can emerge from 'being *with* the practice' (2013, p.13, emphasis in original). To a large extent, the GroundBreakers, as a process of making and discovering, also resonates with the idea of the studio that Hawkins talks about. The

studio, she argues, allows artists, musicians, and craft practitioners to engage with creative practices that are not necessarily linked to the 'traditional structures of the creative industries', reflecting more overlooked stories of production and consumption (2017, p.101). She goes on to suggest that the studio is a space of practice that involves a whole series of 'collection, documentation, rumination, development and information' (2017, p.79) and is 'a complex and ever-changing terrain of creative production' (2017, p.101). Thinking about the GroundBreakers from these perspectives thus shifts TYA from market-ready products to embracing practices that are never complete or closed; wherein the work is entwined with the situated nature and social and material conditions of its making. It recognises that creativity is always evolving, that it emerges from the culmination of multiple processes, and takes into account its improvisational qualities that shuttle between inspirations, ideas, reflections, and knowledge. My aim here is to resituate the critical gaze away from the outcome of the making process and highlight three ways in which the incubation programme can encourage new ways of working and engagement.

Firstly, as I have explained earlier in this chapter, the idea of a TYA/ arts centre for children emerged from conversations amongst TYA practitioners who were driven by creative ambitions rather than economic gains. One of the concerns is that, in a competitive climate, artists and companies are pressured to create work that can meet the demands of the market in order to survive. Additionally, since most of the TYA activities take place within the urban centre, producing a work requires high financial costs (e.g. rental of rehearsal space, promotion, paying a production team, and hiring a venue). To combat this, the TYA artists sought a space where they could take risks and create works that were not tied to educational outcomes or economic pressure. In some ways, the GroundBreakers has responded to these concerns. Since the programmes are heavily subsidised by the NAC, it removes the financial obligations and risks from the artists. By moving the making away from the frenzied space of productivity, this environment invites them to slow down and become fully immersed in the creation process. It offers them the time and space to explore, reflect and research, rather than fall back onto formulaic and stale approaches of art-making. In his book, *Originals*, American psychologist Adam Grant advocates a slower process of working and thinking – what he calls 'procrastination'– and discusses how such an approach can boost creativity. He refers to prominent figures such as Leonardo Da Vinci

and argues that procrastination is a common habit of creative thinkers and great problem solvers. He states:

> Along with providing time to generate novel ideas, procrastination has another benefit: it keeps us open to improvisation. When we plan well in advance, we often stick to the structure we've created, closing the door to creative possibilities that might spring into our fields of vision. (2016, p.104)

This suggests how a slower process of working can give time for ideas to mature and enable artists to imagine, dream, learn and evolve as they go long; although it must be recognised that such an approach requires a level of discipline as well. By embracing improvisation as a way of doing, designing and making things, artists are able to focus on doing things well rather than doing more things; paying attention to quality rather than quantity.

Secondly, the GroundBreakers insists that the selected artists engage with the audience as part of the creation process. One advantage of the programme is that artists are given the opportunity to present their ideas/ work-in-progress to parents, children and other artists as a way to gather feedback. These showings are open to the general public, but priority is given to children from the local neighbourhood and underprivileged communities. This is not commonly practised in the theatre since it requires additional resources and time on the part of the artist or company. Nick Wilson, who examines the relationship between creativity and the cultural and creative industries, provides a useful perspective to reflect on these interactions. In 'Social Creativity: Requalifying the Creative Economy', he moves the emphasis away from the economic imperatives of the creative economy and individualistic notions of creativity, and calls for a consideration of 'social creativity' that focuses on the 'collective and relational nature or creative practice' (2010, p. 373). Attending to social creativity, he suggests, invites 'interaction across boundaries' that can enable 'the reproduction and/ or transformation of social values, and the realisation of human beings' creative potential' (2010, p.373). The feedback sessions chime well with Wilson's idea of 'social creativity'. It challenges the top-down approach of making TYA by creating a feedback loop between the artist and audience, and, in doing so, enables new ideas and forms of knowledge to be socially produced. These dialogical encounters not only inform the creative

process, but, very much like the other activities found at The Artground, shifts the audience from passive consumers to active producers and co-creators, encouraging a constant re-evaluation and rebalancing of the status quo between adult and child. What is particularly interesting about these sessions is that children do not just write their comments on pieces of paper. Rather, they are encouraged to use a range of mediums such as one-minute videos, crafts and drawings to express their thoughts and feelings. Poh points out:

> We want children to be more involved. Sometimes, it is difficult for them to express themselves through words, so we tried to find new ways that are innovative and not necessarily verbal. It's time we include children's voices. We want to show them that they can be creative and they are important to the creative process…. Hopefully, this will inspire them to be artists and art-makers in the future. [120]

This innovative approach not only makes the process more interesting and engaging, but also takes into account the embodied, sensory and unsaid. Hawkins, who examines the material and immaterial processes of the studio, states that it is not only a space for creation, but also an archive – 'a space for ongoing as well as finished projects, colour, paintings, scraps, scribbles, prototypes, ideas, chaos and order language' (2017, p.73). In the context of the GroundBreakers, this idea of the archive is useful and applicable to both the artist and the audience. On the one hand, the collection of objects, videos and drawings are useful material that inspire the artists to move the work forward. On the other, the artefacts that are produced by the children are also works of art in their own rights. Poh shared that these artworks would be displayed around The Artground 'for all to appreciate and enjoy'.[121] In ways like this, this feedback loop not only contributes to the making of TYA, but also creatively engages and empowers children in the process.

Finally, the GroundBreakers is not an isolated place of production. The Artground, as I explained, is located within the Goodman Arts Centre and forms part of an artistic cluster. Furthermore, as the programme's structure illustrates, artists are given the opportunity to

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[120] Poh, Luanne, Interview, The Artground, 11 July 2017.

[121] Ibid. The team seeks permission from the children and parents before displaying the artefacts.

connect with local and/ or international artists between the fourth and seventh month of the programme. What this means is that the artists do not work alone, but can engage and tap onto a wider creative network. For example, artists can choose to work with other artists from different disciplines who reside in the Goodman Arts Centre, or collaborate with people from other sectors such as teachers and social workers in the region to develop the work. In doing so, it moves ideas of creativity from the impulse of individuals to a more distributed social phenomenon. These connections and exchanges amongst a group of people can help facilitate an active and supportive relational community. Such a way of working, as Wilson suggests, allows:

> …more choice about potential practices and therefore better decision-making and more creative practice; being better able to work with uncertainty and multiple perspectives (allowing better dialogue, collegiality and teamwork); and resolving personal/ professional dilemmas, and recognising and using the power of emotion. (2010, p.376)

Edensor and his co-authors also point out that working between groups in close proximity can generate positive benefits. These 'networks of creativity', they suggest, resist concepts of creativity that are limited by spatial enclosures to develop a more open understanding of the transitory and fluid nature of creative practices (2007, p.16). They assert that creative currents can flow through networks and increase the potential for 'new and emergent forms of activity across a range of sites and locales' (2007, p.15). This theoretical understanding underpins the intention and practices of the GroundBreakers. By connecting local and international artists, it brings together multiple artistic forms and perspectives that can help deepen the quality of the artistic work. As a network, this way of working resists hierarchical structures and bounded places, and encourages social and creative relationships that are built on reciprocity. By engaging with others and experimenting with different artistic and dramatic forms, it can ultimately contribute to collaborations and practices that are rhizomatic and dynamic, recognising that creativity is an ongoing cultural and social process.

Since the introduction of the GroundBreakers programme, *Sunny Islands* – one of the incubated projects that took place between 2018–2019 – has toured to different community

centres and spaces. The artists of the project have also worked with children from The Rainbow Centre, a social welfare organisation, to develop a children's version of the performance called *This Is My Sunny Island.* These three aspects illustrate how the GroundBreakers programme can generate an environment that is conducive for future works of creativity. It operates as an interdependent system of activities and highlights the 'making of' TYA as a social and relational practice reliant on cooperation, collaboration and participation in a shared space. It is not a rehearsal for productions, nor a training ground for practitioners to pass time while waiting for work in what they perceive to be 'serious' theatre. Rather, it is a space that allows artistic freedom and insists on collective creation in which different groups of people come together to exchange and share ideas, skills and knowledge; although it must be recognised that the artists of the GroundBreakers ultimately select and put the materials together. Importantly, this programme emphasises the slow-brewing of ideas and working out through trial and error, which reflects Ingold's idea of creativity as knowledge-building and 'the improvisatory creativity of labour that works things out as it goes along' (2013, p.10). In this context, making space for creativity does not lie in fixed forms or a particular individual, but on cross-fertilisation between people, place and ideas. This open and creative platform thus challenges producing commodities for the art market and expands the possibilities of TYA, prompting questions of what it can become.

Creative limitations and the future of The Artground

My research and experience illuminate how The Artground has offered artists and children an alternative space to play, create, and discover. Throughout this chapter, I have demonstrated how, by focusing on the wider contextual parameters of play and prioritising creative practices that are non-hierarchical and experimental, artists have created enriching and diverse experiences for children that can deepen their sense of curiosity and widen their self-expression. Commercial forms of entertainment might get more attention because they get bigger budgets or greater visibility in the press, but a smaller organisation like The Artground is equally an important cultural engine that can develop new forms of theatre and cultivate imaginative experiences. This is something ongoing and cannot be measured or equated simply in economic terms. It would be misleading, however, to imply that The Artground is a solution to all the challenges of TYA or a model that is thriving. There are, inevitably, political challenges and implications as there are creative opportunities. At the

time of writing, I was told that the NAC has reduced its funding for The Artground. This has led the team to rent out the White Box for birthday parties and children's events on some of the weekends as a way to sustain itself. The Artground has also since reduced the number of artists that can participate in the GroundBreakers programme due to the lack of resources. Additionally, the installations would only be changed once a year instead of every four months. What this means is that there are less cultural activities for children and creative platforms for artists. Importantly, it also presents a risk of reproducing operations of the commercial theatre and exploiting the arts as a commercial business.

This illustrates how The Artground operates as part of the wider economy and is vulnerable to variation and change. As much as it is a site that can challenge the commodification of creativity, its activities are also tied to material, financial and political conditions. Hawkins, who examines creativity at the margins, suggests that it is often the very 'edginess' or otherness of these spaces to wider narratives of the creative city that constitutes their very attraction for the creative sector (2017, p.241). Ironically, she states, it is also what eventually undermines the same marginality (2017, p.242). I am not suggesting that The Artground operates at the margins, but this perspective illustrates its precarious situation. What is pertinent to point out here is that the relationship between creativity and the practices at The Artground is volatile and must be carefully negotiated. It must also be recognised that The Artground is a site that was built and sought out as a requirement rather than a choice, an essential way to advance artistic practices rather than generate profits. These alternative and innovative ways of working, if taken for granted, can face the dangers of being subsumed by dominant capitalist trends and forces, requiring TYA practitioners to once again renegotiate their place and artistic identities. Perhaps, TYA's ability to genuinely reimagine and reinvent itself depends on maintaining an even balance of power between capitalism and TYA's capacity to move, excite and provide an imaginative future. As Mould argues:

> Capitalism's greatest lie is getting us to believe that the ground that it seeks to stabilise and profit from is barren and devoid of life…. Don't believe this lie. Believe that creativity is about searching for, giving space to, and trying to realise the impossible. (2018, p.202)

This hopeful view revitalises the fact that The Artground still plays an important role in sending a message to the state, industry, and general public that the arts for children and young people holds a valuable cultural position in society. In an environment that is dominated by global capitalism, it can offer an equitable space to develop artists who understand that the future of TYA and the arts for children is dependent on their social role as art/ theatre-makers. This space that brings together a range of people, knowledge, ideas and practices is a catalyst for igniting new ways of working, and can continue to provide an alternative and valuable ground for TYA. Above all, decentralising creative activities from the urban centre has enabled children living in the neighbourhood direct and equal access to the arts, and, in doing so, has enlivened the local community. It is by rethinking and redrawing the boundaries of creativity, and asking how new insights into children's participation and engagement might inform theatre practices, that has the potential to move the sector forward.

Chapter Six
Implications and Possibilities

My research has examined the relationship between TYA and Singapore, and has illuminated its position in the cultural landscape where education, commerce and politics intersect. TYA, as a new and diverse field, offered me the opportunity to take on numerous directions. Prompted by my own interest and professional practice as a festival manager, I was curious to examine how broader economic, political and social circumstances shape the ways in which TYA is produced and received in Singapore. Growing up in Singapore and watching the transformation of the city, I was inspired by the ways in which creativity interweaves with the economy, policies, urban landscape, business, the arts, and communities. This impulse led me to invoke creativity as a central framework in my thesis. On a theoretical level, I was influenced by the works of cultural geographers and theatre studies scholars, and conceptualised creativity as a socio-spatial practice to examine TYA as a material, embodied and 'placed' practice. This framework opened up possibilities to consider how approaches to creativity, as Hawkins suggests, can be harnessed both to the 'neoliberal production of urban spaces and economies', and connected to the 'avant-garde creative practices as practices of activism and resistance' (2017, p.336). This way of thinking was particularly useful in the context of Singapore as it allowed me to explore the overlapping boundaries between the commercial and social role of TYA in a fast-moving and global environment, as well as how such practices might shape the cultural lives of children. In doing so, it enabled me to make connections between TYA and the different sectors, revealing some of the challenges and opportunities in the field.

In Chapter Two, I identified how the beginning of the twenty-first century saw the rise of TYA companies alongside policy changes and economic development that favoured this growth. Building on this, I showed in Chapter Three how I Theatre, as an example of a TYA company, balances between art-making as an economic necessity and an artistic practice. Using *The Rainbow Fish* as a case study, I demonstrated how market forces and funding structures might put pressure on TYA artists to commodify, but they have also found ways to adapt to these circumstances and retain their core values. In Chapter Four, I pushed forward the idea of a cultural landscape where mega-musicals and events inspired by the

West have been burgeoning. Given this context, I illustrated how the commercial world has the potential to shape consumption patterns and exploit children's imaginations. Reflecting on my role as a festival manager, I provided a perspective on how the ACE! Festival, as an artistic form and cultural practice, might offer an aesthetic and social alternative to the commodification of creativity and culture in the Singaporean context. In Chapter Five, I showed how TYA can be precluded from the clutches of commercialism, using The Artground as a case study to illustrate how a space can be used as a valuable and alternative site for creativity. I showed how the location and politics of this place have a particular importance to artists, and how the treatment of an activity will determine whether children become passive consumers or active participants. By critically reflecting on its ethos, working practices and activities, I proposed that The Artground has the potential to redefine and expand the possibilities of TYA. Following from van de Water's proposition (as well as the claims of many other TYA practitioners and scholars) that TYA is a marginalised field and that the work has always been perceived to be less worthy than theatre made for adults, part of the work of this thesis has been to challenge this preconception, which has often remained unquestioned and unscrutinised within the academy, and show that TYA does have an important role in society. Across the chapters, I have demonstrated that TYA is not a fixed form, but a set of shifting practices that has responded creatively and resiliently to different periods and contexts. My main argument in this thesis is that, where policies and political circumstances might encourage the commercialisation of TYA, artists have also found innovative ways to generate new forms of participation and spectatorship that are imaginative, emotionally and socially engaging.

In this chapter, I shall consider the wider implications of my research in two broad ways. Firstly, I will discuss what I learnt throughout the process of the PhD whilst addressing some of the methodological limitations and implications. Secondly, I will revisit the TYA landscape and reflect on how the *Arts Master Plan* has expanded the boundaries and practices of TYA in Singapore. Here, I shall propose how these shifts might offer future lines of enquiries. In the final section, I will offer some concluding thoughts about TYA.

Research and methodological implications

This thesis contributes to an understanding of the broad narrative of TYA in Singapore and how socio-political circumstances shape the ways it is produced and received. When I reflect on the work of this thesis, the metaphor of 'pathway' resonates clearly in my mind. Not only was it a term used in the *Arts Master Plan* to chart the direction of the arts and cultural sector in Singapore between 2015–2019 (2014, p.4), but it also describes the multiple routes I had to pull together to steer my research in one clear direction. One of the challenges I faced when beginning my research was finding previous work and scholarship on TYA in Singapore. As I stated in Chapter One, while designing and presenting work for children has been around for decades, research into this field has been largely ignored by the academy. Therefore, I found myself stumbling into a new territory, which was both exciting and daunting. As a result, I had to traverse different disciplines, making links between cultural geography, theatre and performance studies, education and management. This treading of multiple pathways was necessary to understand TYA not just in relation to professional theatre, but also to the intricacies and complexities of the creative process, although this was of course also guided by my own knowledge and interest. Unsurprisingly, as further questions arose there appeared many more pathways to explore, and thereby making new connections.

Throughout the research, I have been overwhelmed by the generosity of the TYA community. Rather than claiming that my practices, perspectives and principles are universally shared, I have sought to bring to the fore as many stories, values, beliefs, and practices in the cultural sector as have yet been recorded. In turn, what I have contributed to the growing field of TYA is a study that has captured and taken seriously its history, spaces, practices and processes. As I mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, my representation of TYA and TYA artists in this study is inescapably shaped by my own subjectivity, and inevitably there are as many omissions as there are inclusions. In particular, the language barrier has limited the scope of this study. I intended to include Malay and Tamil productions in this study as a way to illustrate the cultural diversity of Singapore and widen my analysis. Many of these performances that I witnessed during the fieldwork did not have any subtitling, which did not impact their target audiences, but my lack of language skills made it difficult for me to understand the cultural intricacies, references and nuances

of the subject matter. Furthermore, the theatre-makers from these communities that I approached declined to participate in the study – some were uncomfortable communicating in English, while others could not spare the time. Hence, including these performances in my study would not have done the art and artists justice. Anthropologist Giampietro Gobo, who discusses the politics of access in ethnography, states that the role and identity of the researcher is constantly constructed during the research process, regardless of his or her intentions and efforts. Since I did not speak Malay or Tamil, nor had a translator, I had to redesign my research approach and continually negotiate the field in other ways. This aptly reflects what Gobo calls 'getting in' and 'getting on' when entering the field (2008, p.131). These moments were at times confusing and disheartening, but they also brought about unexpected insights as well as challenged ways of thinking that I had taken for granted. Witnessing Malay and Tamil performances made me step out of my comfort zone and allowed me to gain a broader understanding of TYA in Singapore. In the process, I learnt to appreciate the beauty and richness of other forms of TYA, as well as discovering how these non-English folktales share very similar themes and lessons. For example, both *The Legend of Bukit Merah* (a Malay TYA production) and *The Magic Sari* (a Tamil TYA production) had a similar story about a boy who saved his village and highlighted the importance of filial piety and courage. Although I did not include these performances in my study, it is important to recognise the voices and practices of these artists and companies within the sector, and acknowledge that the work they do is equally valuable and is moving the field forward.

In this thesis, I employed a mixed-method approach that brought together data from the archives, interviews, personal experience, recorded documents and performance analyses. This was necessary to make connections between TYA and the wider political and material structures of the city, as well as reflect on my own practice and position at times. Since part of my intention was to bring past practices into the present as well as understand the beliefs and cultural attitudes of theatre practitioners towards TYA, I focused mainly on gathering stories from adults, rather than children. This decision was also motivated by my professional interest in wanting to understand the richness and diversity of the practice as well as the type of performances that are available to children. However, I do recognise that a valuable extra dimension to this research would have been to interview children and/or record their thoughts and feelings after watching a performance. While I have sought to

interpret and analyse their responses by being there in the same space, gathering their voices might have enhanced the communicative interaction and provide new insights. This is not a new methodology in TYA research. Matt Omasta has used semi-structured interviews with adults and children in his study to understand the relationship between 'artist intention and audience reception in theatre for young audiences' (the title of his article). The primary purpose of the interviews, he states, was to 'determine what attitudes, values, and beliefs the participants believed were embedded within the production and what effects (if any) they hoped and/ or believed the production would have on young people' (2011, p.34). Similarly, in 'Interviewing Children After Performances', Jeanne Klein discusses how this methodology can help evaluate children's emotions, level of empathy and understanding of the performance. She proposes that researchers ask more critical and self-reflexive questions (e.g. How do you know? What do you think?), and to approach the interview in an ethical manner. In exploring children's experience of theatre, Matthew Reason takes on a more innovative approach. Inspired by approaches in art therapy, he proposes the use of drawing as a way to engage children on deeper critical and creative levels. These pictures, according to him, can be used as a basis for exploratory conversation or reflection (2012, p.122). He goes on to suggest that using drawing in relation to a theatre experience can also enhance children's experience through 'memory, observation, interpretation and invention' (2012 p.121). What future research might consider are conversations and critical engagements with young audiences in order to open up wider understandings of the practice as well as spectatorship. In particular, this approach might be useful at The Artground to investigate how children respond to more experimental and challenging performances – a valuable area of research that is beyond the scope of this PhD.

When I started this research, I was mainly interested in exploring performances for children that were already made. As a festival manager, there was always pressure to create, programme and produce in order to keep up with productivity and profits. More often than not, the focus was largely placed on the performance/ final product itself rather than the unpredictable process of creation and stretching the limits of what is possible. As the fieldwork progressed, it made me reflect deeper on my own research processes and practices. Stepping away from the busy environment and spending a sustained and long-term period of time reflecting, researching and writing about TYA allowed my role to shift

from producer to observer, and worker to thinker. Time allowed my research to become a process of discovery where methodological and conceptual ideas were informed by conversations, observations, memories, and scholarship. This influenced my thinking about the 'hidden' and 'overlooked' aspects of TYA. I started to pay more attention to the 'making of' TYA, and discovered how a slower and collective process of working can create community and a sense of common purpose, as well as generate innovative forms of participation and spectatorship. This process also revealed how the messiness and complexities of theatre-making can produce new patterns of knowledge and creative moments of unknowingness that are valuable to both theory and practice. Following from this, I hope to have contributed to an appreciation of what these processes have uncovered through what geographers Chantel Carr and Christopher Gibson call 'slow-scholarship'. In their article, 'Animating geographies of making: embodied slow scholarship for participant-researchers of maker cultures and material work', Carr and Gibson note that accounts of making as a social and economic process, and as a material transformation, are coming to the fore in the field of geography. They offer a reflection upon a series of methodological concerns around researching bodies-at-work. 'First-hand knowledge', they suggest, 'creates richer field experiences' (2017, p.8). They also extend an opportunity to welcome 'different forms of knowledge into the academy' (2017, p.8). Time, they argue, is needed to think, reflect and discuss ideas with co-workers as that work gradually unfolds, and that this process requires 'contemplation of slow scholarship strategies' (2017, p.7). They write:

> Commitments to the manual work of making, and not just interviewing subjects, are dependent on the need to find ways to make slow scholarship possible – to work within and beyond the typical constraints of time and administrative concerns for documented consent, safety, and security – as well as to validate the auto-ethnographic, exposing the personal to critical peer review. (2017, p.7)

At the time of writing, theatre companies in Malaysia (e.g. Hong Jie Jie, Little Door Festival), Thailand (e.g. Studio 88) and Indonesia (e.g. Papermoon Puppet Theatre) have adopted the model of the GroundBreakers as a way to encourage slower brewing of ideas and practices. This is also practised elsewhere in the world, such as The Egg Theatre in Bath, UK. Interestingly, the artists are called 'scholars' during their incubation programme. The idea of

making and doing, in my opinion, opens up an exciting and valuable arena for future research. 'Slow-scholarship' speaks well to the 'making of' TYA, especially considering the practitioners' relationship with one another (and children), the environment and their ability to improvise, take risks, and invent. By disengaging from the final 'thing' that is produced, 'slow-scholarship' recognises that creativity is developed over time and can offer a fresh perspective to a valued and valuable part of TYA.

The aforementioned metaphor of a pathway also chimes well with the force of creativity as a 'maker and shaper of places, people and knowledge', according to Hawkins, that has the potential to 'remake worlds'. (2018, p.343). Engaging with creativity thus opens multiple routes and opportunities that can enable us to research, think and live differently. While popular and commercial forms of entertainment might continue to dominate the market, I also discovered in my research that there are emerging experimental practices, community projects and site-specific works that aim to engage and excite children in new ways. All these illustrate a sector that is shifting and expanding, and redefining the possibilities of TYA. As I mentioned in the introduction, the *Arts Master Plan* coincided with the period of this PhD and provided me with rich insights as well as the opportunity to look back at the TYA landscape. In the next section, I shall reflect on some of the implications and consequences of the policy and suggest future possibilities.

Policy implications and future pathways

With the implementation of the *Arts Master Plan,* predictably, there is a range of implications that relate to funding, audience development, artists capability development, and spaces such as The Artground. Since writing this thesis, there has also been an influx of TYA activities over the past few years that include ethnic performances for children, festivals, international collaborations, residency programmes and workshops. One of the most prominent efforts to recognise the value of TYA is the introduction in 2016 of the 'Best Production for the Young' award, which is part of the M1-The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards. This event, inaugurated in 2001, was set up by the national newspaper and the NAC to honour the artistic contributions of theatre-makers in Singapore. On a national level, this new prize for TYA elevates its cultural status and illustrates the government's social commitment and investment in the younger generations. By having this standalone award,

it highlights that TYA is now seen as equally valuable as any other form of theatre in Singapore. In the article, 'Life! Theatre Awards: Visual treats for kids', journalist Nabilah Said applauds the introduction of the award:

> Making a theatre production for kids is not child's play. Often, the effort put into the writing, acting, directing and production design is similar to staging an adult theatre production…. This year, for the first time, an award for Best Production for the Young will be given out at the M1-The Straits Times Life! Theatre Awards 2016. It gives much deserved attention to the best performances created by Singapore companies for audiences aged 12 and younger.[122]

This award is indicative of the collective progress of the TYA community and is a welcome result of the monumental efforts involved in pushing the sector forward. While, arguably, much more needs to be done, this recognition from the state sends a signal to the wider community that TYA holds an important and respected position in the cultural landscape. Looking back, the rise in activities for children makes the world of TYA seem even wider than I remember before embarking on this research. The months just before I concluded my fieldwork coincided with the mid-year school vacation in Singapore (May-June 2018) and provided me with an excellent opportunity to revisit the field as well as converse with teachers, parents, and policymakers. While it is not unusual to see a range of cultural activities for children during the school holidays, I was surprised by the dramatic increase in international TYA festivals. These festivals included ACT 3 International's I Festival, Flipside by The Esplanade, Gardens by the Bay Children's Festival, and The Artground's inaugural 100 and 100 More Festival. There were also other children's arts festivals of different types and sizes organised by various museums and heritage centres. As a former festival manager, I was simultaneously heartened by the efforts and worried that this spike in popularity might saturate the TYA sector, resulting in events competing for audiences. Notably, alongside the usual popular fairy tales, I noticed more organisations were taking risks and including experimental and less well-known works in their repertoire. Of all the different shows I saw

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[122] Said, Nabilah. Life! Theatre Awards: Visual treats for kids. *The Straits Times Online*. 29 March 2016. Accessed on 31 Aug 2018 from: https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/life-theatre-awards-visual-treats-for-kids

during that period, I wish to highlight *Puno (Letters to the Sky)* – a TYA production by Indonesian company Papermoon Puppet Theatre – that was part of The Artground's inaugural 100 and 100 More Festival. This performance was particularly intriguing and prompted me to reflect on some themes that are worthy of future investigation.

Puno (Letters to the Sky) is a non-verbal puppet production. It is set in a small village in Indonesia and tells the story of the tender relationship between Tala and her father, Puno. Against an intricate and detailed backdrop, the performers skilfully manipulated the puppets with precision and finesse, taking the audience into the everyday lives of the two characters. As the story unfolded, Puno, who was suffering from an illness, became visibly weaker with each passing day. Despite his pain and suffering, Puno chose to hide his fragility from his daughter as he did not want her to worry. These moments of powerful paternal love were depicted through simple gestures such as Puno buying an ice-cream for Tala, holding her hand, and sacrificing his own food for her at the dinner table. Before passing away, Puno wrote a letter to his daughter and placed it on his desk. The next morning, Tala, is devastated to discover her father had died. Left all alone, she revisited all the places that she once shared with him. In the final scene, she finds and reads the letter that he wrote, which reveals a touching message: Puno tells Tala that he will always be watching over her, and that whenever she is feeling sad and lonely, all she needs to do is to write a letter to the sky, and that he will read it. As the lights dimmed and the music began to swell, the audience caught a glimpse of the spirit of Puno floating above Tala, suggesting that he has kept his promise. This incredibly touching, bittersweet moment was met with sobs and tears from the audience, including myself. At the end of the performance, origami boats, with actual messages written by people who have lost their loved ones, were lowered from the ceiling into the audience for them to read. Before leaving, audiences were also invited to write messages to their loved ones.

Puno (Letters to the Sky), 2018. Source: Papermoon Puppet Theatre

Despite the beautifully portrayed story of a loving relationship, which clearly stirred up a lot of emotion in the audience, adult members of the audience I spoke to after the performance had mixed views of *Puno (Letters to the Sky)*. Some commented that exploring the idea of death was not age-appropriate for young audiences, while others felt it was important to provide a space for children to reflect on difficult subjects. Singapore, a largely conservative society, has discouraged the public portrayal and discussion of sensitive issues such as death, gender, religion and race relations. This is to avoid any potential political tensions that might disrupt a sense of peace and harmony in society. Consequently, TYA companies usually avoid such themes in their performances, and stick to stories that are deemed 'safe' by the state and general public. These forms of self-censorship, as I previously mentioned, are connected with economic issues such as funding and box office sales. *Puno (Letters to the Sky)*, albeit an Indonesian TYA production, illustrates how less mainstream works are coming to the fore in the city-state and challenging cultural stereotypes and ideas of what TYA should be.

The question about what is appropriate for children is an ongoing debate in the wider field of TYA. A perspective on taboos in TYA is offered by van de Water, who argues that, as a result of TYA content being predominantly controlled by adults, children are unable to freely participate in the arts and cultural life. Referencing her personal experience of translating *The Wagging Finger* – a Dutch production about a child's disability – she calls this production 'the most irreverent play for children' as the subject matter was misrepresented on stage and had pushed all the wrong buttons (2014, p.79). In spite of its absurdity, she

points out that the production offered an opportunity for both adults and children to confront questions of right and wrong as well as consider 'their own moral position and values' (2014, p.79). Sharing a similar view, Mexican playwright Karen Zacarías states: 'Theatre offers an entertainment, an escape. But at the same time, it really needs to offer tools for kids to deal with the real world' (quoted in Omasta and Adkins, 2017, p.45).

While most TYA productions in Singapore are set in fantasy worlds and have happy endings, *Puno (Letters to the Sky)* offered a different theatrical experience by addressing complex themes and playing out the relationship between parent and child in a very tangible and poetic manner. What is worth considering here is how embracing and dramatising difficult topics can encourage deeper engagement and meaningful dialogues. In his book, *When Dreams Come True,* literary scholar and folklorist Jack Zipes argues that stories can help children and adults confront human struggles and provide them with hope for social and political change (2007, p.2). He asserts the transformative power of stories:

> Instead of petrifying our minds, they arouse our imagination and compel us to realise how we can fight terror and cunningly insert ourselves into our daily struggles, turning the course of the world's events in our favour. (2007, p.31)

Although Zipes is referring to fairy tales, his view is equally applicable to TYA. An analogy might be useful to illustrate this. After the performance, I noticed a parent sobbing uncontrollably outside the theatre. Her daughter, who was about six years old, reached into her dress pocket, took out a piece of tissue and offered it to her. She placed her hand on her mother's shoulder and told her that her deceased grandmother would not want to see her looking so sad. This moment exemplifies both the profoundly emotional impact of the performance and, crucially, how children are more resilient than a lot of people give them credit for. It also suggests that, when careful aesthetic and ethical consideration is applied, a performance can create a meaningful experience that enable audiences to confront and deal with the complexities, struggles and challenges of the real world. High quality performances that deal with these matters are not only good TYA, but good *theatre* that can speak to both adults and children. Judging by the audience's intense concentration and emotional response, the production had a multigenerational appeal that dealt with a

culture-spanning theme. For me personally, it was less about the narrative but rather the shared experience between the adult and child that made this production especially moving and transformative. It brought adulthood and childhood closer together, and revealed different layers of connections between them. Matt Omasta and Nicole Adkins, who discuss taboos and TYA, state: 'In this area perhaps more than others, there are no "right answers"' (2017, p.52). Embracing challenging themes and situating them in the real world can provide a useful framework for more meaningful TYA works, as well as open up new pathways for research.

Another area that has been developed in Singapore's theatrical landscape is that of accessible and inclusive work. While the *Arts Master Plan* did not explicitly chart this route for TYA, the combining of creative practice, place, and community have inspired artists to integrate ideas of social inclusion and community-building in their work. Just like with The Artground, other artists have moved away from the buzz and seductive charm of the urban centre to create and present TYA in less privileged communities and unconventional spaces. While increased funding in this area of work is a likely impetus for this shift, such practices remain noble in their intentions to reach out and fill the cultural gaps in certain parts of Singaporean society. The performance on stage only represents part of the creative efforts of TYA, and so there are lots of ways for the field to grow and reach new audiences. Here, I want to draw attention to two examples to illustrate how practices outside of theatre buildings have charted new territories that can benefit the future of the sector and inspire research.

The first is a partnership between ACT 3 Theatrics, the National Arts Council (NAC) and Very Special Arts (VSA) – a local charity organisation dedicated to providing opportunities for people with disabilities to get involved in the arts. In 2017, these three organisations worked together to form a semi-professional company called Very Special Theatrics. The aim of this unique partnership between theatre practitioners, policy-makers and social-workers was to create work *for* and *with* children with special needs and to provide them with equal opportunities in the arts within an inclusive environment. Chandran, who was tasked to steer the company, states that members of the public should judge the participants based on their ability and not 'pity them because of their physical or cognitive

disabilities'.[123] Since its inception, Very Special Theatrics has worked with children with diverse abilities from different communities and has presented a range of work in community centres, special needs schools, and foster homes. Most notably, the organisation collaborated with No Strings Attached Theatre of Disability (NSA), an Australian company, to create a production called *My Home Is Not A Shell*. This performance explored the relationship between the idea of home and caregivers, and brought together participants of different abilities from Singapore and Australia. It was showcased at the True Colours Festival in March 2018 – Singapore's first international festival for 'artists with disabilities'.[124]

The second example is a theatrical production for babies called *You Can Reach The Sky*, which was created by theatre-makers Ellison Tan and Myra Loke in 2017. This project was inspired by *Baby Space* and was first conceptualised and performed at The Artground. The performance takes place in the round and on a soft woolly mattress, and is set in an abstract and surreal world. Like *Baby Space*, this production is a multisensory and kinaesthetic theatrical experience that invites children to play with different objects such as cloth, recycled paper and bubble wrap, and interact freely with the two performers and environment. What is unique about this work is that it has since toured to various infant care centres and social welfare organisations such as the Rainbow Centre and Cherie Hearts, reaching out to babies and caregivers who might not have the opportunity to visit the theatre. Due to its strong spirit of social advocacy, this project was awarded the Certification of Recognition by the Minister of Culture and the General Secretary of the Singapore Kindness Movement.[125]

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[123] Nanda, Akshita. 'Greater push for arts to engage audiences, art-makers of all abilities'. *The Straits Times Online*. Aug 29, 2017. Accessed on 30 June 2018 from: https://www.straitstimes.com/lifestyle/arts/arts-embraces-all

[124] True Colours Festival. Website. Accessed on 1 July 2018 from: https://sagg.info/event/true-colours-festival/
[125] Singapore Kindness Movement website. Accessed on 1 July 2018 from: https://www.kindness.sg/press/singapore-kindness-movement-calls-singaporeans-redefine-greatness-new-campaign/

Fig 25: *You Can Reach the Sky*, The Artground, 2017

These two examples (amongst others) illustrate a growing interest in community engagement and an effort to embrace children and art-makers of all ages and abilities. While some theatre practitioners and organisations might still believe that TYA is a commercial venture, there has been a paradigm shift in the cultural sector where social engagement, inclusive practices, and civic participation have taken the lead. There are, of course, many reasons for this shift. One cynical view could be that the government is still motivated by the creative city agenda. As Florida argues, 'every single human being is creative' and 'aligning economic and human development is the key to the prosperity of the city' (2002, p.400). Unlike factors of production such as land or capital, creativity, he contends, 'cannot be passed down from generation to generation' (2002, p.318). Instead, it needs to be constantly 'fermented and reproduced in the firms, places and societies that use it' (2002, p.318). Sociologist Can-Seng Ooi, who examines the relationship between the arts and political pragmatism, notes that countries and cities that pursue the creative economy are also celebrating diversity, tolerance and civic-mindedness. However, he takes a dim view of the Singaporean authorities, asserting that the government's aim is ultimately to 'make Singapore into the art and cultural capital of Southeast Asia' (2010, p.406), with the 'rhetoric of democracy' primarily serving the 'promotion of the creative economy' (2010, p.414). Embracing a spirit of inclusion where all parts of society can benefit from the arts could indeed be a calculated strategy by the government to harness *all* of the nation's human resources for future creative and economic capacity. However, I do not see it in this way. Although there are still visible attempts to justify financial and audience numbers in policy-making strategies, many companies and cultural organisations have inherited a spirit

of altruism and enabled people from all backgrounds and cultures to get involved. Beyond TYA, there is a wide range of initiatives in the cultural sector that encourages social inclusion and community-building.[126] For example, the NAC has partnered with the Agency for Integrated Care (AIC) to promote the well-being of the elderly by integrating arts into community care. Workshops and programmes, such as guided trails of historical sites, have been created especially for less well-off families, adults and children with special needs, vulnerable youths, and seniors. Superhero Me, a ground-up inclusive arts movement, also launched an exhibition that featured the imaginative artworks and stories of children from diverse backgrounds, including children with special needs and those from low-income families. Furthermore, Senior Minister of State, Sim Ann, said in her speech at the Committee of Supply debate:

> We will continue to improve arts access and opportunities for persons with disabilities. Our shared heritage is what binds us as a nation and it belongs to us all. Looking ahead, The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth will continue to work closely with our partners and fellow Singaporeans to make Singapore a caring and inclusive home.[127]

My view is that both the authority and the wider arts community are genuinely committed to finding innovative ways to engage with different communities and offer equitable artistic opportunities to all. By bringing such works into the communities, it not only shapes and builds social relationships, but also makes these spaces more positive, liveable and culturally vibrant. As Hawkins contends, the force of creativity has the potential to 'make places and build communities' (2017, p.160), and 'even bring about the possibility of change' (2017, p.193). Of course, some projects that set out to be inclusive and artistically engaging have sometimes missed the mark. But like any other artistic endeavours, taking risks, improvising and figuring things out along the way is part of the process. To quote Hallam and Ingold, creativity is 'always in the making', rather than ready-made (2007, p.3). Part of the success

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[126] Ann, Sim. 'Cultivating a caring and inclusive society for all'. The Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth Website. 8 March 2018. Accessed on 1 June 2018 from: https://www.mccy.gov.sg/about-us/news-and-resources/speeches/2018/mar/cultivating-a-caring-and-inclusive-society-for-all
[127] Ibid

of creating works that are genuinely inclusive therefore lies in having conversations and finding ways that can encourage the exchange of skills, stories, and ideas across different communities, artists and stakeholders.

In this section, I have illuminated how TYA is no longer just limited to the stage or informed by commercialism. Rather, its aesthetic practices are also orientated towards social engagement and cultural participation. Crucially, this is beginning to redefine children's relationship with professional theatre. It is not my aim to provide a comprehensive list of practices and performances that has emerged from the *Arts Master Plan*. However, what is worth highlighting here is that all of these are influenced by a society that is transforming and embracing diversity and inclusivity. While some of these practices have started to blur the lines between theatre for/ by/ with children, it nonetheless reflects an expanding field that is committed to engaging and empowering children and young people in different ways. Whether it is experimenting with interdisciplinary forms, exploring challenging themes or creating work that promotes social cohesion, it raises some questions about what it means to act and think creatively in different spaces (e.g. community centres, the streets, schools) and how TYA can continue to respond to a changing social climate. This can spark meaningful dialogues across the various sectors and inspire the next generation to live, work, and play in imaginative and innovative ways.

Final reflections: changing worlds and geographies of hope

What does it mean for a child to enter into a creative encounter, to be invited into a new arts experience? Why is this so important for every child?

In this space of mutual receptivity, we find connection, we find surprise and we find deep learning. We leave these encounters changed. We have touched what makes us human, in ourselves and in others.

This is the precious moment the arts give us. As theatre artists we need to find ways to invite children and young people into these encounters with a generous spirit, desiring to listen to the audience as much as we want them to listen to us.

And when this happens, then we feel the connection start to grow… we find common ground, we see the big picture, we have flashes of insight and we feel that flush of shared feeling we call empathy. We have a sense that we matter, that others matter, that what we are exploring together, matters.

In this age where more and more people are being shunned, turned away at borders and airports, rejected because they come from a different class, ethnicity, language group or religion, it is the artist who has the capacity to provide a sense of belonging, of connection.

And every child needs that.[128]

At the time of writing this final section (during the Covid-19 lockdown), there is a growing apprehension about social inequalities, racial divides, political instabilities and the uncertainty of a post-pandemic world – not just in Singapore, but globally. Children and families are confined to their homes, and the theatres and arts centres have shut, without any concrete information about when they will reopen. In response to this, artists have found innovative approaches to present and create work for children virtually. Some have streamed recorded performances, while others have re-created the 'live' experience of theatre on-screen (e.g. interactive story-telling sessions, dance parties in the living room, drama activities). I have wondered if, and why, TYA still matters in this challenging time; especially when watching a performance via a streaming device will not have the enchantment of a live theatre experience. There are no concrete answers, and it would be naïve to assume that all children will have the same response to a streamed performance or a simulated experience. But perhaps that is the point: TYA, as I have showed in this thesis, has always been fluidly responsive and adaptive to political, environmental and social change. Therefore, it will continue to penetrate into the cultural lives of children and be the subject of many future debates. The tireless efforts in trying to capture children's

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[128] Hardie, Yvette. Message for The World Day of Theatre for Young Audiences 2020. *ASSITEJ International Website*. Accessed on 1 Jun 2020 from: https://www.assitej-international.org/en/the-world-day-of-theater-for-young-audiences-2020/

imaginations by both the local and global TYA community illustrate that there is still a strong desire to cultivate creativity in the next generation and create a better future for them. I chose the above passage by Yvette Hardie, president of ASSITEJ, for my conclusion because it is a timely and urgent reminder that, despite the ongoing uncertainty, TYA, more than ever, can offer a space to encourage social imaginaries, confront shifting and shrinking boundaries, and, most importantly, activate an optimistic response to the unknown future. As Hawkins states, 'creativity offers the means to participate in the making and creating of other possible worlds' (2017, p.335). Whether it is live or digital performance, I believe that TYA still holds a valuable cultural position in society and can continue to generate 'creative encounters' for children to navigate and converse about the world they live in. Hardie's message captures this optimism and evokes a strong sense of hope. Here, I am reminded of the words of Kathleen Gallagher. In her article 'Beckoning Hope and Care', Gallagher expresses her idea of hope in this way:

> Not sentimental, saccharine fantasies of an unlikely future, but hopes grounded in present social relations, politically clear-eyed, critically and affectively engaged. (2015, p. 424)

This statement is an invitation to think and a provocation to act. Indeed, what this unique field offers is the opportunity for practitioners to celebrate its diversity and collectively work together through different ways in which boundaries can be pushed until others in the broader community and audiences at large understand the work and its potentials. And it is precisely this impulse that has led me to pursue unchartered territories, stories and practices. Beyond this research, I have stepped out of my comfort zone and collaborated with different artists to create a multidisciplinary work that can reach out to children in the heartlands. On a regional level, I have also forged networks with artists, producers, and cultural organisations from across Southeast Asia to share ideas and develop creative approaches to making TYA. My appeal to TYA in Singapore is for artists and companies to confidently strive towards their unshackled artistic ideals, and nurture a strong sense of positive anticipation that, collectively, change will happen. TYA needs to break away from fixed mindsets, fire up the imagination, embrace conversations and artistic exchanges that go beyond national borders. It needs to remove financial and physical barriers and include

those that might have been previously neglected. It needs to erase dichotomies and oppositions, and embrace connections and solidarities – forging deeper connections and learning from one another. It is only then that we can push the boundaries of TYA, and shape a world of children's theatre that we aspire to having. It is my hope that this research has contributed to the field of TYA as its creativity continues to unfold and evolve.

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Appendix A
List of Interviews

Byrnes, B. Personal interview. Skype, 6 March, 2017.

Chandran, R. Personal interview. ACT 3 Theatrics office, 15 November, 2015.

Chiam, I. Personal interview. Skype, 23 January, 2017.

Choe, J. Personal Interview. I Theatre office, 12 July, 2016.

Chong, T-C. Personal interview. The Finger Players office, 15 March, 2017.

Lim-Yang, R. Personal interview. ACT 3 International office, 18 December, 2015.

Lim, M. Personal interview. Singapore Drama Educators Association office, 6 April, 2016

Ong, B-C. Personal interview. Temasek Primary School, 24 April, 2016.

Osman, M. Personal interview. The Drama Centre, 28 May, 2016.

Performer (anonymous), Personal interview. The Drama Centre, 11 April, 2017.

Performer (anonymous), Personal interview. The Finger Player office, 14 April, 2017.

Poh, L. Personal Interview. The Artground, 11 July, 2017.

Seward, B. Personal interview. I Theatre office, 10 August, 2015 and 20 June, 2016.

Sharifah, S. Personal interview. I Theatre office, 20 June, 2016.

Tan, J. Personal interview. ACT 3 Theatrics office, 15 November, 2015.

Tan, J. Personal interview. The Drama Centre, 2 May, 2016.

Thelander, D.A. Personal interview. The Artground, 11 July, 2017.

Appendix B
List of Emails

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Teacher (anonymous). Email. 3 June 2012. Retrieved on 2 May 2016.