

ADVOCATE ARTISTS

Young theatre-makers
with a social conscience

Festival Youth Reporter:
Ang Kia Yee

For performance artist and art theorist Joseph Beuys, art was a tool for the transformation of society. He believed that we are all social sculptors: artists who create structures using language, thoughts, actions, and objects in society, and that the social sculptures we create can change society for the better. Young, emerging theatre-makers in Singapore seem to share this conviction in art as a tool for change. Youth theatre groups and companies such as Buds Theatre Company, Yellow Chair Productions and Bound Theatre have been putting up plays about social issues in recent years, and young theatre-makers are diversifying to take up administrative, production and facilitative roles on top of creative roles such as acting and directing.

"This most modern art discipline - Social Sculpture / Social Architecture - will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a sculptor, or architect of the social organism."

— Joseph Beuys

John Chow, an Applied Drama and Psychology student at Singapore Polytechnic, says that contrary to conventional perceptions, "theatre is not an irrelevant luxury of the high aristocracy...we must have theatre to help us see from different perspectives, develop empathy for people with insufferable human struggles. Theatre educates the mind on the philosophy and psychology of humans, how we arrive at our opinions of the world and each other as well as how we think, act and feel."



*Nonsense Devised and Performed by
Down Syndrome Association Singapore*

As xenophobia intensifies and politics become increasingly polarized globally, perhaps theatre is a medium that can facilitate discussion and potentially mediate conflict. Sim Yan Ying, an emerging youth playwright, says that "the stage is a safe, contained space to explore deep, difficult, contentious issues because what happens on the stage usually doesn't have real stakes in our lives. When it comes to social issues, we witness in the theatre the consequences of our prejudice and discrimination, and hopefully that prevents it from rearing its ugly head in our actual lives." The conviction of both John and Yan Ying is clear: theatre is a means to creating social good. It nurtures empathy and propels us to question why we think the way we do.

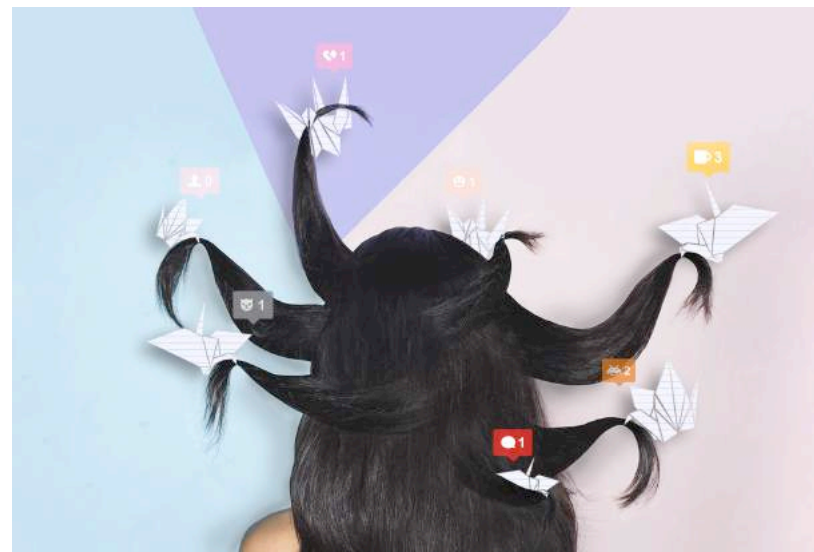


Without Reason, Written by Sim Yan Ying

Perhaps the emergence of this nascent batch of theatre-makers with a social conscience might

come as no surprise given the presence of local theatre companies such as The Necessary Stage and Drama Box, which centre their productions on social issues in Singapore. Other platforms like *M1 Peer Pleasure*, an annual youth theatre festival, enables artists like John and Yan Ying to be mentored by veterans in the industry; Yan Ying's upcoming original play, *Without Reason*, is an *M1 Peer Pleasure* commission. These young theatre-makers will build upon a space established and built by veterans, and potentially mature it further.

However, while they may be ambitious, they recognize that social shifts take time. Timothy Seet, Executive Director of UNSAID, sees long-term value in his efforts as a theatre-maker; for him, "social change is the hardest, but if we stop fighting, nothing will happen, people will still be pigeonholed. At least, if I fight, there's a chance for hope. I may never see it change, but I think it's the longer game we have to play, especially with social causes." UNSAID's upcoming original play, *How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis*, will also be presented at *M1 Peer Pleasure*, and draws upon crowd-sourced stories to address the issue of mental illness.



How Did I Mess Up This Bad: An Analysis,
Staged by UNSAID

While their intentions may be serious, these young theatre-makers create their work through a blend of hard work and play. For Hafidz Abdul Rahman who plays Hazmy, the male protagonist in *Without Reason*, acting is essentially about playing a character. He says, "I try not to intellectualize it and make it more complicated than what it truly is. Acting is a very visceral thing." Yan Ying found the late nights she spent writing *Without Reason* one of the most exciting parts of her process as a playwright. "Those were the times when I lapsed into a stream of consciousness mode of writing, because I was just too tired to think...I was just pouring everything out from my heart – delving into my insecurities and being vulnerable, drawing from my own past relationship experiences, and so on, without worrying whether the writing was good or bad."

Despite the presence of socially-driven plays, theatre is often categorized as a form of entertainment. In an interview with American Theatre magazine, theatre giant Stan Lai talked about the dual expectations of audiences: "People look up to the theatre as a temple where they can receive revelations for the soul; people look down on the theatre as a place for crude and quick satisfaction." As these young theatre-makers continue to develop their craft and produce work in the name of social good, perhaps the theatre will come to be properly recognized as a public domain for important discussions about the state of our society. The climb towards this ideal, where art will serve as a vessel of and springboard for self-reflection, empathy, and healthy debate, is probably an uphill one, but we mustn't give up.

Ang Kia Yee is a young writer and theatre-maker. Earnest and passionate, she is the co-founder of Make Space, a theatre collective. Her writing can be found at <http://ofsunflowers.wordpress.com>.