

YOUTH EMPOWERMENT THROUGH THEATRE

: An Interview with Ong Si Ying

Ong Si Ying is a young theatre practitioner with a bright future ahead of her. She has been involved with *M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival* and The Community Theatre (Beyond Social Services), and is a co-founder of Unmute Theatre. In mid-September, we sat down with her for a chat about her experience as an applied theatre practitioner.



Si Ying engaging in a community dialogue that was part of *M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival* launch in 2015.

What motivates you the most in your work as an applied theatre practitioner?

SY: The stories from the people. I was with The Community Theatre for two years, and every year, we would either collect stories from the ground, from Izzaty [the community worker], or we would go for house visits. The residents were so open and vulnerable, which means, they really trusted us with their stories. It made me feel that, if they cherish what we are doing so much, all the more we must take their stories seriously, and produce something that is of value to them.

Tell us more about your experience with The Community Theatre.

SY: What I really enjoyed about working with them was how from a group of people, they became a family. We thought that we would have to scaffold a lot of things for them to share. But once we asked them questions, they were like open books, and they would share what they have been through and were not ashamed of it. They are like a family, they trust each other a lot and there is so much rapport in what they do.

How do you feel about them exploring the theme of Poverty in Singapore?

SY: I am so happy that they are involved, because this is their story. For people in The Community Theatre, this is their life, this is what they have been through since young. So I think they will be able to provide a very thought-provoking, yet heart-wrenching piece for us to reflect on and to rethink our privileges. I'm very excited to see what they have come up with!

How have you used these values [from working with The Community Theatre] to shape your practice now?

SY: I've grown more sensitive when listening to the stories of others. The Community Theatre creates a very safe space, so I'm hoping to be able to replicate that in workshops that I facilitate or attend. By lending a listening ear, acknowledging stories, and letting people be safely vulnerable. Yet, at the same time, not letting it become a place where they dump their emotions. So, it's a balance. It has to be safe for people, so that they won't be so emotionally affected by it, after that. I think that's what The Community Theatre achieves.

What are your favorite moments from working with Beyond Social Services and M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival?

SY: I really like how the youth come together through *M1 Peer Pleasure Youth Theatre Festival*. The amazing thing about ArtsWok is that they bring people together, like the three schools and the theatre ninjas. In a sense, all the young theatre-makers are coming together in one place

Do you have any words of advice for youth planning to set out on the same path as you?

SY: You have to have a thick skin when you're young, and just put yourself out there. I think it's good to be shameless sometimes. Just write in and put yourself out there. Don't be afraid of hard work. It is going to be difficult. When I was studying, I was taking on multiple projects. I was working with Babes [Pregnancy Crisis Support Ltd], The Community Theatre, and producing my own show. I would leave the house at 7am and come home at 11pm for three months straight. Every single day. But I just loved it. It's very tiring- I must acknowledge that. But at the same time I loved what I was doing. You've just got to be unafraid of hard work. Most of the time, you don't get paid, because you're amateur. If you don't get paid, you will have to support yourself in some other way.

to showcase something. That is wonderful, and something uncommon.

With Beyond Social Services, it is those rehearsal sessions, where we make silly jokes over mundane things. Yet, I cherish it so much, because friendships were forged through that ...



Bonding with the youths from The Community Theatre! (Siying is in front)

You co-founded Unmute Theatre. What does the name mean to you?

SY: Unmute. We named it because we wanted to voice out issues that are not normally talked about. So, we want to unmute it, and let the voice of that issue be heard.

We have touched on topics like gender stereotypes and body image. Another piece was called *Pressure Cooker*, which was about the pressures of being an artist, and having to juggle between things. All of that was drawn from personal experiences. We chose topics that were close to our hearts. We wanted to work on something that resonated with us, instead of jumping on the bandwagon of whatever that is popular for that season of the year.