

MAPPING 'WHAT IF' – WALKING, STUMBLING, REORIENTING, ACCOMPANYING

PART 1: IN BRIEF – DISABILITY AND PERFORMANCE IN SINGAPORE



By Corrie Tan

Trying to map the terrain of *What If* is a little bit like trying to map a tiny planet in a constant state of dynamic evolution. This new devised work, created from scratch around a central theme of “what if?”, started out as an open-ended process with no fixed outcome in mind. Five designers and five performers with disabilities were



After all the casts have presented, the What If team sit in a circle to respond about what they have experienced in their presentations.

invited to be a part of and to shape this restless, relentless environment – adapting to the changes within it, but also the changes around it in a particularly anxious, unsettling time.

What If is embodied by several concentric circles of participants – there are the performers, designers and co-directors (Okorn-Kuo Jing Hong and Tan Beng Tian), as well as a wider circle of people supporting and surrounding those at the heart of the work, including access workers, stage managers, videographers, family members, interns and volunteers. In the rehearsal studio or our Zoom meetings, there can be more than 20 people in the “room” at any given time.

We're a mountain one day and a volcano the next, or perhaps a squishy amoeba trying to absorb as many ideas as possible, before a meteor arrives and cracks open the surface of everything we've been trying to do before. The open-ended title of "what if" also adds to this swirl of possibility. The responses to this invocation are endless and were threaded throughout the creative process and various rehearsals. Over the course of the rehearsal process, the cast members have asked: "*what if* it is what it is?", "*what if* you lost everything you worked for?", "*what if* the body is a symphony?", "*what if* we are not as connected as we think we are?".

What If is part of a significant growth in discourse around disability and performance-making in Singapore – both in terms of visibility and long-term practice – over the past decade. These include discussions around dismantling the medical and charity models of disability and proposing a **social model of disability** instead. In August 2013, Singapore ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). To mark this milestone, Deaf educator and practitioner Alvan Yap reflected on common but discriminatory stances towards disability in Singapore, and has also provided some useful definitions of the various models of disability in his essay published in *TODAY*. These include the **charity model**, that negatively and inaccurately views "the entire disability community... as pitiful, helpless and financially dependent"; as well as the **medical model**, that over-emphasises cure and "the medical issues and biological 'defects' linked to the particular disability", resulting in "a narrow focus on making the person with disability as 'normal' as possible", where in many cases "there is no fix to be found". Yap



advocates the **social model**, where it is the responsibility of society “to accept and adapt to the disability” (Yap 2013). This is echoed in the work and practice of artist and disability activist Kaite O’Reilly, who has worked closely with Singaporean performance company Access Path Productions. She writes: “I consider disability a social construct—I am a woman with a sensory and physical impairment, but it is society’s attitudinal and physical barriers which is disabling, not the idiosyncrasies of my body” (O’Reilly 2017). In *Feminist, Queer and Crip* (2013), disabled scholar Alison Kafer puts forward a political/relational model of disability, which sees disability as a site for “collective reimaging” (2013: 9), and moving away from temporary and flawed “disability simulations”, voyeuristic, sympathy-inducing encounters that do not “[account] for how a disabled person’s response to impairment shifts over time or by context, or how the nature of one’s impairment changes, or, especially, how one’s experience of disability is affected by one’s culture and environment” (2013: 4).

There are other groups in Singapore that have been actively championing an intersectional approach to disability and performance-making. These include: Superhero Me, a non-profit arts movement that aims to make the arts accessible to children from less privileged and special needs communities; Access Path Productions, who have created ground-breaking disability-led work such as And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore ‘d’ Monologues (Singapore/UK, 2018) and the site-specific Self-Portrait: A Performative Tour (2020); as well as The Finger Players’ Not In My Lifetime? (2019), directed by What If co-director Tan Beng Tian. There’s also the Access Arts Hub, a

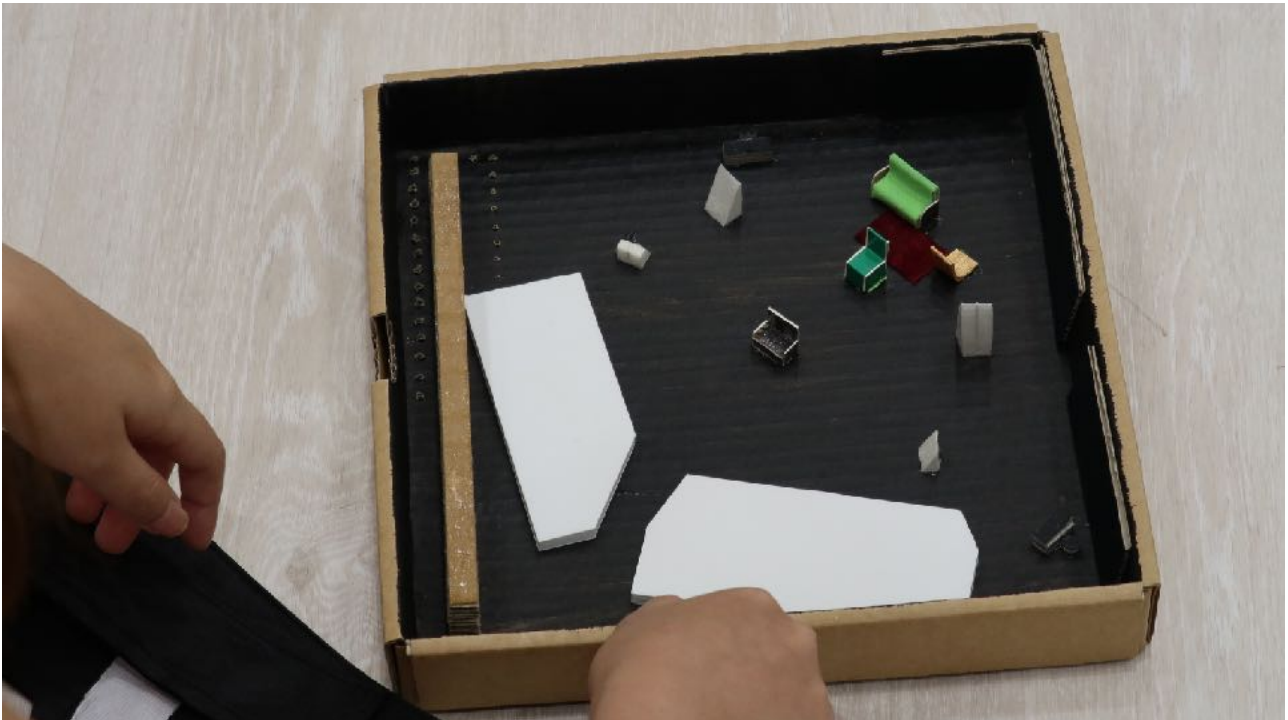


consortium of individuals and organisations who seek to make the arts more accessible and appealing for persons with disabilities. This shift away from the charity and medical models and towards a social-relational model of disability is also reflected in how artists have begun to reconfigure their performance-making approaches. Artists and companies in Singapore are figuring out – often through difficult conversations and learning from mistakes – what shared practices and systems of care can be developed and implemented while making work collaboratively.

There are two strands of accessibility practice at work in *What If*:

(1) One is **audience-oriented**: how to create work that adjusts and adapts itself to audiences with disabilities, instead of making them work twice as hard to experience a work or unable to experience certain parts of a work. Some of the current conventions of accessibility include: *touch tours* for non-sighted or partially sighted audience members, where one can explore the set or theatre space prior to a performance and handle materials such as props, costumes or set pieces; *audio description* for non-sighted audience members where either in-person narrators or recorded narration describe visual elements of the performance as much as possible so that audience members are privy to as much information or context about the work; and *closed captioning*, where detailed descriptions of sound, music and dialogue are projected adjacent to the performance space for Deaf or hard-of-hearing audience members to read.





Audience-oriented: A touch tour model Tan Beng Tian showed during a workshop to equip volunteers and crew with the knowledge and sensibilities to support our upcoming production involving a cast of persons with disabilities. This model helps the blind and vision impaired navigate the space during a touch tour. Photo from Artswok Collaborative.

(2) The other is **artist-oriented**: how to establish a process of making that is ethical and adaptive to the access requirements of practitioners with disabilities. This might include: hiring *access workers* who support practitioners with disabilities as an integral part of the rehearsal process; making sure rehearsal and performances spaces are in locations that are *accessible to artists with mobility requirements* (e.g. outfitted with ramps, tactile ground surface indicators or lifts – or located on the ground floor); or establishing a





Occasionally, Yi Wei, Yennefer's¹ access worker will join Yennefer in her presentation in the devising process. Here, they used props associated to "land" to present a short piece.

safe rehearsal space for all artists and practitioners to raise concerns, including paying attention to the power dynamics in the rehearsal room, and being sensitive to both what is said and what is not said.

What I've listed here isn't exhaustive, of course, but are examples of the kinds of considerations and configurations that question what we take for granted as "best practices" in performance. These practices are also always contextual – there is no one-size-fits-all solution – and practitioners will have to mould and readjust these approaches as their work unfolds.



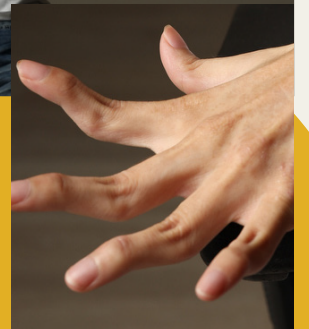
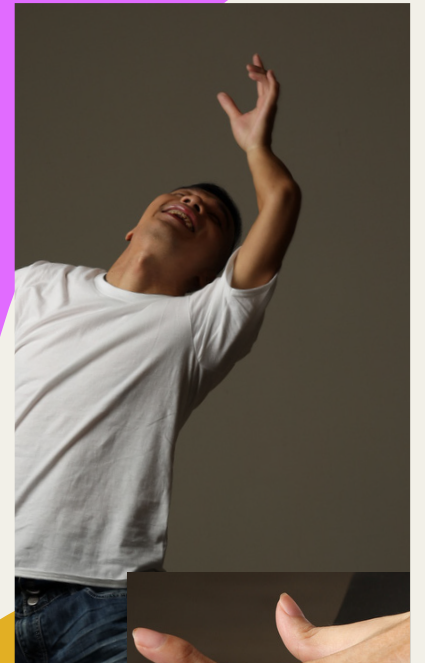
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4, 8, 11 & 15 AUGUST 2020