

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

PART 3: PANDEMIC – PANDEMONIUM AND PATIENCE

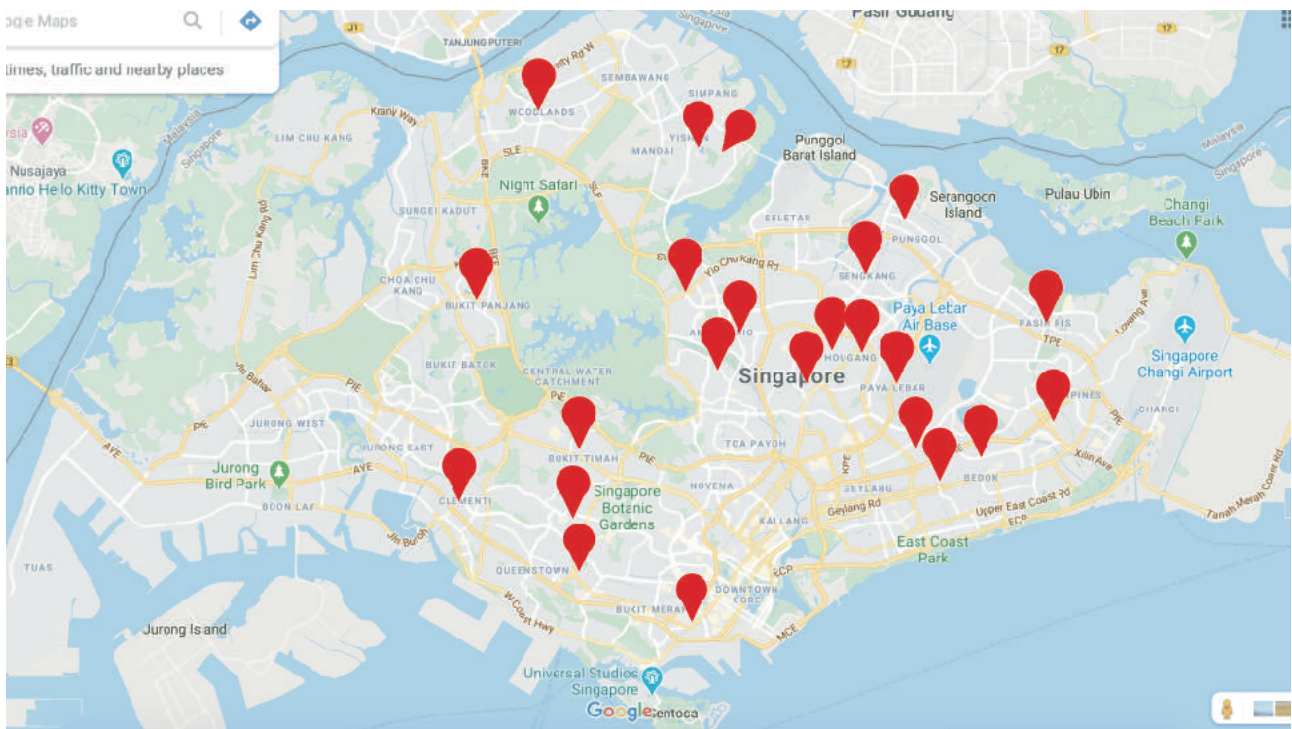


By Corrie Tan

With the rapid spread of the coronavirus pandemic in early 2020, *What If* began to face enormous obstacles around transitioning to a virtual rehearsal space. This transition from physical studio to online space began relatively early, with members of the team “Zooming in” to rehearsals weeks before Singapore’s “circuit breaker” for

COVID-19 came into effect. But Zoom and most video conferencing platforms are highly visual mediums that are poorly designed for non-sighted and partially sighted users. The pandemic also revealed how flippantly various governments or nation-states regard the access workers or volunteers who work with disabled practitioners, basically rendering them as “non-essential” workers when they are very much essential – for everything from taking notes to helping to adjust and handle electronic devices.

One of the first questions the group wrestled with on Zoom was how each person might be able to sense and/or locate the others in space in a proprioceptive way. Jing Hong’s first exercise on Zoom was to have one of the spatial designers, Moes, mark each member of the



The map that marked each participants’ location. Graphic by Moes Mulyadi.



creative and production team on a screen-shared map as little red dots. She hoped it would help give everyone a sense of where they were, quite literally, in relation to everyone else in space and time. We're often 20 tiny boxes on a screen, trying our best to pay attention to visual and aural cues – the particular crackle of someone's microphone, or the buzz of static cueing someone else's turn to speak. This online terrain has been a tough space to inhabit, particularly the difficult decision made by the production team to stage *What If* online as a series of mixed media pieces, ranging from short taped episodes to live performances to mediated participatory encounters. The festival and producers have had to react at very, very short notice to the pressures of Singapore's lockdown measures, while grappling with questions around live performance during a pandemic: How might this work maintain the magic of the live encounter? How can a group of collaborators make work without meeting in person? Who might be invited to join the team to contribute resources and expertise around online work? How might this affect the gatherings and assemblies of bodies that have become synonymous with theatre?

So far, my essay has largely focused on **artist-oriented practices** in the rehearsal room: figuring out how to adapt rehearsals to practitioners with disabilities instead of forcing practitioners to conform to structures that able-bodied practitioners take for granted. As the various parts of the production have started to take shape in May and June, **audience-oriented practices** of accessibility have come to the fore. There have been many discussions about who the work is for: Is it *really* for "everyone"? Would that even be possible, or would



that end up with a work that flattens itself to a kind of lowest common denominator? Would attempting to adjust the work to everyone inadvertently erase or efface the recognition of difference? How might the team be able to indicate that some work was more geared towards audiences who are non-sighted or partially sighted, or for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing? How might these decisions overlook or leave out audience members with other disabilities? Who might the production be able to invite in as a resource person around conventions of audio description or closed captioning?

As these discussions were unfolding, I struggled with my own discomfort about whether these discussions should have taken place earlier in the production, alongside scaffolding artist-oriented accessibility – or if these debates were a necessary part of the learning process that might eventually be resolved. One of the key ideas underpinning the directorial approach to *What If* is how practitioners can experiment with non-conventional forms of access, such as the attempt to build new ways of perceiving narrative into the production through layered sound design and emotive music (like the short piece by Beng Tian and Shawn I described earlier). This continues the trajectory of Beng Tian's explorations around audio description that began in *Not In My Lifetime?*. In an interview published in 2019, she described her process of experimentation:

In this production, we are also playing with how audio description (AD) is done. Conventionally, there would be an audio describer in a bio box, something like the commentator box in sports stadiums. But in the Black Box where *Not In My Lifetime?* is being staged,



there's no space to put the audio describer, and so I told him 'I have to put you onstage. And you're going to do audio describing onstage'. From there, we tried having him as a performer, and then from trying different ways, we realized it worked if his character is an old man reminiscing about the past. So the man is the narrator throughout the show, like an audio describer in a way, except he's describing in a storytelling format, instead of just being very factual in the conventional way of AD. However, as a character, I think he has the passport to be able to say things however he wants. So that is my tryout in using AD in a different way. I don't know whether by doing so can people fault me or blame me to say I have misinterpreted or misused the term "audio description". I'll only know whether this new way works or not once it's really out, and once I get the audience's feedback. (Chong Gua Khee and ArtsWork Collaborative 2019: 11)

In the end, *Not In My Lifetime?* was staged with a more conventional use of audio description following a test and feedback session with non-sighted audience members:

having the audio describer play a character and narrate meant that certain crucial details such as actions and facial expressions could not be fully conveyed, which affected the nonseeing audiences' experience of the story. Based on their feedback, Beng Tian decided to use the conventional way of placing the audio describer outside of the piece, and found another solution to the lack of a separate space for the audio describer. (Chong Gua Khee and ArtsWork Collaborative 2019: 11)

Before the pandemic arrived in Singapore, and when *What If* was still slated to be performed live and in a physical space, the creative team was considering designating certain areas in the theatre as “no-see” zones or “no-hear” zones for audience members. The reasoning behind these initial discussions was to see if the team could “level the field” for audience members, both disabled and non-disabled. These experiments have continued but in a slightly different form – the performers and designers are now working on online pieces that may emphasise visual components or audio components, or develop both along parallel tracks depending on what the audience demographics are. Audio description hasn’t been ruled out either, and each piece may involve different kinds of descriptions and narrations. The work is still ongoing.

Definitions and interpretations of audience access can differ widely from group to group and artist to artist. While I wrote about advocates of the **social model** of disability earlier, certain disability scholars are also critiquing this model, arguing that the social model might be “merely a variant of the medical model because it suggests that impairment causes restrictions and these restrictions result in social barriers for people with disabilities. In so doing, it risks implying that impairment and not oppression is the source of the exclusion of people with disabilities” (Sara White 2012: 115). Instead, some are now turning to what they call the **social-relational model**, understanding disability “through the theory of complex embodiment, which locates disability in the interactions between people with and without impairments recognizing power as only one component” (White 2012: 116). This has been especially heightened



during the pandemic we are all navigating. For instance, while long stretches of screen time induced by telecommuting and staying at home may feel like a mild frustration to non-disabled practitioners, this new environment may feel excruciating to disabled practitioners in ways that are unknowable and unrecognizable in ableist environments. The nature of disability evolves and shifts with every change in context in ways we cannot pre-empt, but that we must commit to adapting to.

The “what ifs” are endless – and relentless – at this point. But to me, a glimmer of hope lies in the patience that the entire group has cultivated over the past two months. A patience in the face of technical glitches and hiccups that still threaten to interrupt or exhaust us. A patience around working with each other through a screen when just weeks before we could sit shoulder to shoulder, could wrap a hand around the crook of another’s arm. I hope we continue to make a point of recognizing the discomforts of the screen in every rehearsal, so that we don’t use it as a crutch or try to force the unruly, vital force of performance where it doesn’t quite belong – but at the same time we make it a point to assemble, as we do, four times a week, in front of those very screens. It’s a small miracle to me that despite the pandemonium of this pandemic, *What If* has become a kind of weekly anchor: to drop in, check in, call and respond. I do hope *What If* remains an anchor for all involved, and doesn’t mutate into a burden. All rehearsals end with everyone breathing out, altogether, before leaving the Zoom meeting room. That small puff of breath – now otherwise so carefully trapped behind masks and face shields and shut doors – feels like one of the



tiny fragile things holding us together. What if we could keep it that way?



The cast and Julius doing a drop-in to end off rehearsal as Jing Hong (not in this photo) leads them through it. (The team in this photo: Ka Wai, Julius, Wai Yee and Shawn from left to right, top to bottom)

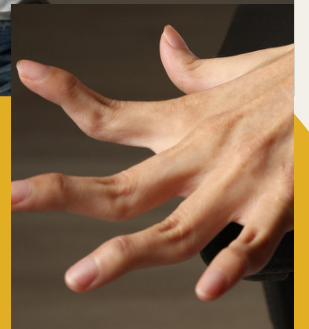
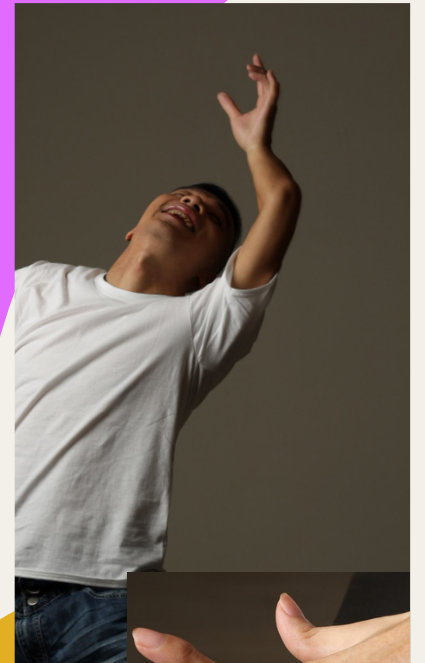


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