

# Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore:

Cultural Intervention  
and Artistic Autonomy,  
1990 – 2006

Ng How Wee









*Theatre can change only theatre; it cannot change society. But if you change the theatre, you change a small but very important part of the society. [...] When you change theatre, you change for its audience a certain way of seeing, a change in perception, a special kind of perceptivity.*

**Eugenio Barba**

Dedicated to Quah Sy Ren, Kok Heng Leun, Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma for showing that a special kind of perceptivity is possible.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book is originally a monograph published in 2011, which was in turn adapted from the thesis I wrote for a Master's programme in Nanyang Technological University's (NTU) Chinese Programme division. That course was originally meant to be a part-time three-year programme, and commenced in 2004. However, due to my work as a full-time teacher back then, I took an additional one and a half years to complete this academically rigorous programme, finally doing so in 2009. During these years, when the workload seemed too heavy and the time constraint too tight (I blame the perfectionist in me), I considered giving up on this scholarly pursuit on several occasions. The book you are now reading is the result of repeated revisions, and its completion was only possible because of help and encouragement from many people.

I am extremely grateful to my thesis supervisor, Associate Professor Quah Sy Ren, who offered me guidance during those years. He not only prompted me to think about issues from various angles, but also imparted valuable knowledge and academic skills in the process. In many instances, he was more like a loyal friend, constantly offering support and encouragement.

I also extend my gratitude to Professor Chen Kuan-Hsing and Professor Yow Cheun Hoe for their feedback and guidance, which benefited me greatly.

Whenever I felt weary and thought of giving up, Drama Box's unwavering commitment to social engagement and humanistic care for minoritised groups motivated me to get back on track. Drama Box co-founder and then-artistic director Kok Heng Leun's patience and generosity in responding to all my inquiries touched and inspired me. I would also like to express my gratitude to all past and present members

of Drama Box, including Danny Yeo, Lee Shyh Jih, Tay Jia Ying, Raymond Leong Thim Wai, Li Xie, Koh Hui Ling, Josephine Lee, Lim Ai Ling, Rachel Lim, Jacky Liu, Goh Seok Ai, Ang Hwee Sim, Evelyn Chia, Tang Tuan Choon, Zhang Shanshan, Entia Seah, and everyone else who contributed to my research. Whenever I needed more information, they were always eager to point the way.

I am especially grateful to Wang Shujuan and Xing Weiyu from NTU's Centre for Chinese Language and Culture for their careful proofreading of the 2011 manuscript, which made the publication process much smoother.

Alvin Tan, the artistic director of theatre company The Necessary Stage, also offered much valuable feedback. His critical approach to society and theatre impressed upon me the need to think more deeply about different issues, and I am deeply grateful for his insights. I would also like to thank those who agreed to be interviewed, including Han Laoda, Huang Wenhong, Johnny Ng, Kenry Peh, Ling Poh Foong, Lim Hai Yen, Tan Tarn How, Paul Rae, and Sha Najak. The firsthand information and insights they shared have greatly enriched this book.

I would also like to thank my former colleagues at Nanyang Junior College for their support, understanding, and encouragement while I was writing my thesis.

Most importantly, I thank my parents and Yang Yang for their unconditional support, which allowed me to concentrate on writing this book.

The path of academia is boundless, and I will continue to pursue it while embracing challenges with humility.





*This pioneering study provides an essential guide to the formative years of Drama Box, a leading Chinese-language theatre company in Singapore. How Wee Ng presents a compelling narrative of how Drama Box has emerged as a prominent force in the field of theatre for social intervention, effectively amplifying the voices of marginalised communities and establishing itself as a foremost advocate of cutting-edge, socially oriented artistic practice. Ng's in-depth analysis of Drama Box's most influential works during this pivotal period, and his meticulous examination of the social, political, and economic contexts of their productions, illuminate the remarkable balance the company has achieved in its engagement with government policy, censorship, and financial imperatives, while fiercely defending its artistic autonomy. As well as unveiling the remarkable history of Drama Box, the book offers readers a unique lens through which to understand the complex relationship between the arts and state authority, and the broader socio-cultural and political landscape of contemporary Singapore.*

**Professor Rossella Ferrari**

University of Vienna, Austria; author of *Transnational Chinese Theatres: Intercultural Performance Networks in East Asia* and *Pop Goes The Avant-Garde: Experimental Theatre*

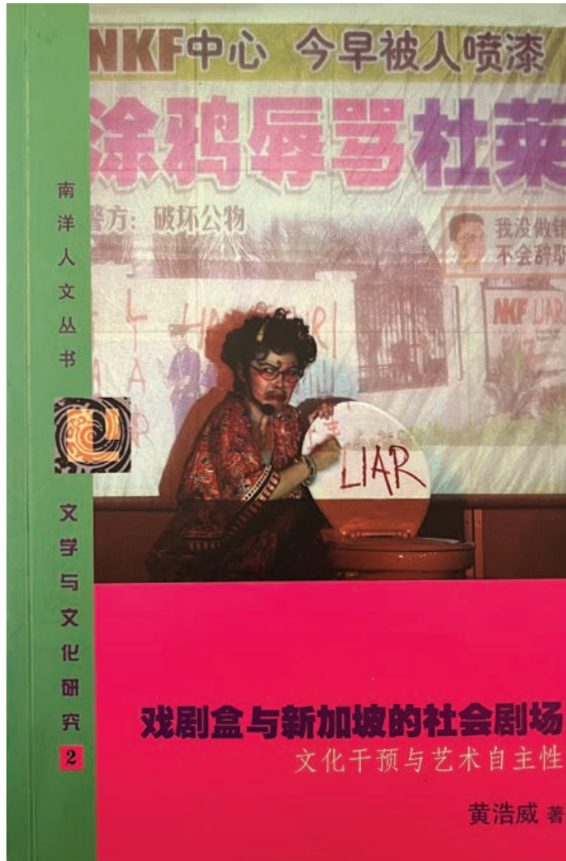


Figure 1: *Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore: Cultural Intervention and Artistic Autonomy* Book Cover

## PREFACE

# Is Theatre Enough? Rethinking Sustainability and ‘Call and Response’ in Drama Box’s Practice

This book is a translation of my Chinese monograph, *Drama Box and the Social Theatre of Singapore: Cultural Intervention and Artistic Autonomy* 戏剧盒与新加坡的社会剧场:文化干预与艺术自主性, and focuses on the titular theatre company’s practice from 1990 to 2006. However, it is more appropriate to view it as a new publication, for reasons I will describe later.

As a researcher who has followed Drama Box’s work for many years, I have had the privilege of observing and critiquing its performances, and enjoying many conversations with the company’s staff, partners, collaborators, and sponsors. I also collaborated with Drama Box as a playwright for *Farewell: The Body in 16 Chapters* (2013) and as a co-playwright for *Fugitives* (2002). In no way does my creative involvement and Drama Box’s status as the publisher of this book affect my capacity as an academic examining the company’s practice. I have strived to be critical where necessary.

Although multilingual plays were sometimes featured in Drama Box’s repertoire towards the end of the period examined in this book, its productions were predominantly Chinese-language plays for Chinese-speaking audiences. When my Chinese monograph was published in 2011, it was the first and only published monograph about this company. While that is still true, Drama Box has evolved in profound ways since then. Since 2022, it has been co-led by artistic directors Koh Hui Ling and Han Xuemei. Drama Box has become a dynamic arts organisation that engages with and represents diverse linguistic and cultural communities, and its practice is increasingly participatory, interactive, immersive, and multidisciplinary. In 2022, it also became the subject of two more books: *Drama Box: 30 Keywords* (Quah 2022), and *Changing Places: Drama Box and the Politics of Space* (Rajendran and Gough 2022).

When former Drama Box artistic director Kok Heng Leun mooted the idea of this book project a few years ago, he suggested that English-language readers within and beyond Singapore – including the company’s partners, co-creators and collaborators – would find the translated monograph “interesting and useful,” as it would enable them to “understand Drama Box’s history and practice.” He had observed such interest when taking part in dialogues, both in Singapore and abroad (interview with author, December 20, 2021).

While I was fascinated by his proposal, I was also a little concerned about how readers would relate to the book’s focus on the company’s earlier history and practice, as much has transpired since 2006. This led me to reflect on the purpose and significance of this publication. Other than offering a historical account of the company’s past practice, what other purposes can it serve?<sup>1</sup> Where does it stand in relation to the two books published in 2022? How might it contribute to dialogues across different fields? To address these issues, it would be fruitful to turn to the question, “Is theatre enough?”

Adrian Jackson, renowned for founding British theatre company Cardboard Citizens and translating Augusto Boal’s publications into English, raised this very question during the launch of *Changing Places*.<sup>2</sup> Underlying his query are issues related to the purpose, capacity, and sufficiency of theatre, which may be useful for making sense of the Drama Box’s practice from 1990 to 2006. That was a time when life was more analogue and less driven by electronic devices perpetually connected to the Internet. A few key developments demarcated the company’s trajectory during this period: the transition from amateur practice in 1990 to full-time professional operation in 1998; the reversion to part-time operations in 2003; and the resumption of full-time status in 2005, after which it received the National Art Council’s Annual Grant in 2006.

While the Annual Grant, later renamed the Major Company Grant, was a boon for Drama Box’s financial sustainability and operational stability, it was also a bane in the sense that it obliged the company to fulfil annual key performance indicators. The sufficiency of theatre as defined by the state’s capitalist neoliberal values became one of Drama Box’s key concerns. How could it best practise theatre that adequately met targets in production output, audience numbers and ticket sales, while not compromising its commitment to representing voices of minoritised communities and undertaking social advocacy, when this latter position often ran contrary to reaping financial rewards? Central to this question are the purpose and capacity of theatre; that is, whether certain strategies are enough and appropriate for advocating social causes.

This monograph demonstrates how the notion of sufficiency manifested in

the ways the company attempted to strike a balance between community theatre and mainstream theatre, not only in terms of production output, but also how much these two forms could appropriate from each other to maximise audience outreach and social impact.<sup>3</sup> This book examines a period when Drama Box produced more mainstream theatre in conventional venues such as proscenium theatres, and when the distinction between the two genres were more pronounced than in its present practice, with the understanding that community theatre is generally understood “in relation or opposition” to mainstream theatre in Singapore (Terence Chong 2011).

The notion of opposition also finds expression in the company’s earlier stance when representing oppositional politics. This book undertakes close readings of the Drama Box productions that took on such representations, and discusses the resulting challenges the company faced, including those related to funding, censorship and bureaucracy, as well as the strategies adopted by Drama Box for overcoming these challenges. While I analyse the company’s more oppositional stance towards mainstream politics, I also highlight how it benefited from state funding and arts housing policies. In other words, Drama Box is an active participant in the national plan to develop Singapore into a ‘Global City for the Arts,’ which suggests its relationship with the state is not always oppositional.

Also examined in the book are Drama Box’s collaborations and partnerships with government agencies, arts companies, communities, and local businesses. This enables us to make sense of the strands in the company’s early artistic trajectory, which would dovetail with its sustainability strategies from 2006 onwards. This can be understood as a gradual and concerted shift from its earlier position, which was relatively more antagonistic,<sup>4</sup> to one that became more reflexive. Such a shift finds resonance in the views of Alvin Tan, the artistic director of Singapore theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS). In an interview, he addressed the postmodern and pluralistic condition of contemporary artistic practice and highlighted the importance of moving away from a solely oppositional (i.e., anti-establishment) stance. Recognising that artists now operated in a “more complex world” where “everything overlaps, contradicts and is interconnected,” Tan called for art to be “reflexive and not just reflective.” Speaking about TNS’s intercultural plays, he noted:

We don’t privilege one position or the other in the play, they coexist and the contestation, if any, stays unresolved challenging the audience to deal with the differences and to imagine ways to bridge them. The spotlight is no longer on the creators but turned onto the audience. (Teo Eng Hao 2014, 14)

Over the last 17 years, the conceptualisation, creation, facilitation, and production of Drama Box's works of community theatre – such as *IgnorLAND* (2007-), *Project Mending Sky* (2008-), *Both Sides, Now* (2013-), *The Lesson* (2015-) – have increasingly involved members of different communities, and “in-depth ethnographic interviews and research draw out the marginalised narratives of a community, and audiences are drawn into the work to ponder issues of history, conservation, and political agency” (Oo 2022, 35). This approach follows Jan Cohen-Cruz's ‘call and response’ approach, which describes engaged performance as requiring “not just theatre craft but organising skills as well, in order to make relationships in contexts that take the work beyond the actor and the spectator” (2010). Such an endeavour requires the artist to practise “vulnerable listening,” which recognises the importance of “the role played by facilitation in negotiating different viewpoints and creating a space where the consequences of votes cast and decisions made can be lived with respectfully” (Delgad 2022, 13).

Much of Singapore theatre is still staged within conventional venues, and almost always indoors. In its community projects, Drama Box addresses the question of whether theatre is enough by freeing it from the constraints of prosceniums and black box theatres, and entering open, public, and unconventional spaces such as parks, cemeteries, and hospitals. In considering strategies for its continued existence, it does not focus only on financial viability and prudence. The company's refashioning of unconventional spaces for theatre performances increases both audience outreach and social impact, and is now part of its holistic and methodical approach to sustainability. This notion of sustainability is practised in three ways. First, Drama Box creates works over a few years that are all part of a thematic series, to maximise its impact, vitality, and creativity. Second, it intensifies collaboration with partners, exchanging resources, skills, and knowledge to strengthen its social engagement with a broader swath of society. Third, it positions itself as part of and contributing to an international network of Chinese-language theatre practitioners (Teo Qi Wen 2022, 202).<sup>5</sup> All these new developments are discussed in detail in the two aforementioned books about the company.<sup>6</sup>

I argue that a fourth dimension of sustainability is evident in Drama Box's endeavours to address the paucity of intellectual discourse in Singapore's public sphere. It is not just the practice of theatre that should be freed from all limiting forms and spaces, the company believes; it also holds the view that there is never enough theatre research. In 2011, Drama Box launched an online newsletter to “provide insights into Drama Box and local theatre,” “through dialogues and engagement

with theatre lovers” (Teo Eng Hao 2011). This project evolved into the e-zine *Draft*, which featured intellectual discussions about theatre practice and arts policies in Singapore. Accepting the invitation to undertake academic writing about a socially engaged theatre company is thus integral to the public discourse it seeks to generate, not least because such writing becomes one of the many answers that correlates to Drama Box’s wider ‘call and response’ strategy across creative and intellectual realms. This enables intellectual critique of its creative practice, and offers a more diverse range of perspectives found in academia’s multi-positionality, which could possibly contribute to the company’s conceptualisation of creative ideas and refinement of strategies going forward.

In my re-reading of my original Chinese monograph, I found the writing style to be often cumbersome, sometimes superfluous, and even awkward. I can only imagine how challenging it must have been for Liew Khai Khiun, Shelly Bryant, and Wong Chee Meng, who contributed to the translation at different stages, to undertake this project, let alone how readers of the Chinese original might have found it difficult to read. Therein lies a strong case for this book to be viewed as a new publication, rather than a translated copy. Firstly, in translation studies, there has been an increasing emphasis on recognising translators as authors.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, translation is shaped by its target readership, and offers the possibility of increased audience engagement, including new readers who will bring new interpretations and insights. Thirdly, this book irons out inconsistencies and discrepancies that were not spotted in the Chinese original. For these reasons, this new monograph is titled *Drama Box and The Social Theatre of Singapore: Cultural Intervention and Artistic Autonomy, 1990-2006*. This not only differentiates this monograph from the Chinese publication, but also highlights the specific temporality of this study, and acknowledges the company’s ongoing developments from 2007 onwards.

I am not only thankful to the translators, but also to Tay Jia Ying, Jo Lim, and Khaw Han Chung for managing the project, Hong Xinyi for proofreading the manuscript, and Ng Yong Yi for the gorgeous book design, and Tan Ngiap Heng for consenting to the continued use of his photography on Drama Box. My gratitude also goes to Kok, an exceptional activist who believes in the value of academia in offering critique and feedback to theatre practice, and whose work I have found intellectually inspiring in profound ways. His assistance and support during the publication process have been invaluable. To have a theatre company commission this book is humbling and a privilege. Last but not least, I would like to thank Drama Box co-artistic directors Koh and Han for supporting this project. The understanding is to produce a text that is

academically rigorous but still appropriate for the general reader, the wider academic community, and policy-makers who are interested in socially engaged theatre, with the potential to make a difference in society. This is also a story of how a small theatre company evolved from amateur practice to full-time professional operations, and how it produced exciting works to represent diverse minoritised voices under the challenges of globalisation, censorship, limited funding, and neoliberal arts policy. It is also an account of how arts groups, small and medium enterprises, non-governmental organisations, and government agencies can work collectively to make art for cultural intervention. I can only hope I have succeeded in telling this story, and you, the reader, shall be the judge of that.

There are endless and exciting opportunities for more research about Drama Box. Other than examining how Drama Box will engage with the state's launch of the Our SG Arts Plan (2023-2027),<sup>8</sup> and how the company's strategies will evolve in relation to present and previous arts policies, it will also be interesting to study its productions about minoritised and marginalised people in the context of recent legislative changes in Singapore, such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality in 2022<sup>9</sup> and proposed changes to the law related to domestic violence.<sup>10</sup> These themes often feature in the company's repertoire, and the question of how theatre can adequately address the repression and trauma of minoritised groups remains highly pertinent, even as the state appears to have redressed some legal injustices.

Over the years, in response to new challenges and changing conditions, the company revised its mission statement on several occasions. It now reads: to "create works that inspire dialogue, reflection and change." Drama Box aims to emphasise "marginalised narratives and make space for the communal contemplation of complex issues," and "tell stories that provoke a deeper understanding of Singapore's culture, history and identity."<sup>11</sup> What these goals mean, and how they pan out through in-depth ethnographic studies of audiences and practitioners, could also be future research topics.

Is theatre enough? For Drama Box, it never is; and there can never be too much theatre research either.

London, 2023



- 
- 1 For a discussion of Drama Box's documentation practices, including the representation of history in its productions and the publication of play autobiographies, see Teo Eng How (2022).
  - 2 To view an online video of the launch, see Drama Box (2023a).
  - 3 For a discussion of how Drama Box has juggled community theatre and mainstream theatre, see my chapter "Mainstream," in *Drama Box: 30 Keywords* (Ng How Wee 2022).
  - 4 Drama Box's mission statement in 2003 included "opening up senses to prevent one from being too deaf to listen, too mute to speak and too blind to see," which was illustrative of a relatively didactic stance that presupposed the theatre practitioner was more socially conscious than and intellectually superior to the audience. For a discussion of this mission statement, see the introduction of this book.
  - 5 It is worth noting that Drama Box's establishment of an education arm, NeNeMas, in 2004 promoted theatre-in-education in schools, which not only contributed to the company's income, but also resulted in many NeNeMas participants becoming audience members for its shows. Drama Box also launched ARTivate in 2007 to nurture young theatre practitioners, some of whom later joined the company full-time. Both initiatives should be viewed as integral to Drama Box's sustainability strategies. For a discussion of ARTivate, see Yeo Mui (2022).
  - 6 For a detailed chronology of the company's milestones from 1990 to 2020, see Tay Jia Ying and Koh Wai Ann (2022).
  - 7 For a discussion of the translator as author, see Anthony Pym (2011).
  - 8 See National Arts Council (2023).
  - 9 *When cloud catches colours*, staged in May 2023, is an example of Drama Box's recent attempts to engage with the lingering trauma and discrimination faced by queers after homosexuality was decriminalised.
  - 10 At the time of writing, the proposed changes of the Women's Charter (Family Violence and Other Matters) Amendment Bill were still under consideration. See *The Straits Times* (2023).
  - 11 See Drama Box (2023b).

## FOREWORD

This is a much-delayed English translation of a monograph about the works of Drama Box from 1990 to 2006, written in Chinese by Dr Ng How Wee, and based on his Master's dissertation.

Translation is never easy. For a book that covers not just theatre, but also its accompanying social, cultural and political contexts, the translational process needs to concisely reflect the densely layered complexities articulated by How Wee. So, I consider this translated text to be a very rich work, undertaken with great pains to ensure that the translation does justice to the original text. Many thanks to Wong Chee Meng, Shelly Bryant, and Liew Kai Khiun for taking on this challenging endeavour. Without them, this translation would never have happened.

I have had the privilege of reading this monograph again and again. Each reading is like a relearning experience. The book critiques the works that Drama Box created together with many collaborators during our first formative 15 years. I say formative, because those were the years when we were still finding our way, learning what theatre-making and theatre practice could be. We just 'do.' Then we reflected. Sometimes, we reflected while we were 'doing.' Or, more often than not, we were not even thinking, though we said we were thinking. In retrospect, our approaches seem rather naïve and simplistic.

As the artistic director of Drama Box during those years, I take pride in my achievements, however scant they may appear, and take responsibility for the shortfalls along the way. It is a privilege to have a monograph written by someone who can cast a keen and critical eye on your work. How Wee made some astute observations about Drama Box's work. Some of his observations reflected what we felt then; some presented alternative readings that I wasn't so sure expressed our actual intentions. Nevertheless, it is important for us to know that the works could be read in those ways.

For a start, we did see theatre as a space for raising social consciousness. But we never really imagined our efforts as an intervention, and neither did we intend the broader social and political impact we have made, as described by How Wee in this book. In fact, after all these years, I still think Drama Box has had more success in engaging individual and specific organisations within communities, than in effecting

systemic shifts. I think our naivety in our formative years was important and precious, and this innocent curiosity pushed us to explore paths that have made us wiser in the process. I definitely hope we will not lose this curiosity as we continue to evolve.

This book is part of a compendium of three books about Drama Box. The other two publications are: *Drama Box: 30 Keywords*, edited by Associate Professor Quah Sy Ren, which gives an overview of how our artistic practice evolved over 30 years; and *Changing Places: Drama Box and the Politics of Space*, edited by Dr Charlene Rajendran and Richard Gough, which critically assess the last 15 years of our work. Taken together, these three books offer a much fuller reflection on our practice. It is again our privilege to have so many friends spend time on examining the work of this ‘small box.’

Many thanks to a number of friends for sharing their thoughts about this book: David Diamond (who is so instrumental in the Theatre of the Oppressed work that Drama Box does), Professor Rossella Ferrari, Mok Chiu Yu, Janet Pillai, Associate Professor Quah Sy Ren, and Assistant Professor Yu Shan-Lu.

This work is also a labour of love by many other people: Jia Ying, Han Chung, Jo Lim, as well as Kah Gay and the team from Pagesetters. Thank you Hong Xinyi for contributing as a copy editor by vetting the most minute details and editing the translations that has made reading a pleasure. I would also like to thank Yong Yi for the wonderful book design.

Finally, thank you, How Wee, for permitting us to publish the translation of the work. Consistently challenging us to think more deeply by offering your wonderful insights and inputs, you will always be both an enduring critical observer, and an endearing friend of Drama Box.

Kok Heng Leun

Artist and Founder of Drama Box

## CONTENTS

06	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS
10	PREFACE: “Is Theatre Enough? Rethinking Sustainability and ‘Call and Response’ in Drama Box’s Practice” by Ng How Wee
18	FOREWORD by Kok Heng Leun
<hr/>	
24	PREFACE (2011)
28	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> From ‘Theatre That Activates’ to Community Theatre
44	<b>CHAPTER 1</b> Artistic Autonomy in the Renaissance City
76	<b>CHAPTER 2</b> Allegorising Hegemony: <i>Yi Xin</i> , <i>Steel</i> , and <i>White Songs</i>
104	<b>CHAPTER 3</b> Theatre That Transcends: Wrestling with Power Intermediaries in <i>News Theatre</i> and <i>Fugitives</i>

136	<b>CHAPTER 4</b> Advocating for Sexual and Gender Minorities: From <i>Another Tribe</i> to <i>The vaginaLOGUE</i>
178	<b>CHAPTER 5</b> Commercialising for Cultural Intervention
212	<b>CHAPTER 6</b> Engaging the People: Community Theatre
264	<b>CONCLUSION</b>
274	BIBLIOGRAPHY
306	BIOGRAPHIES