

I am an Artist because I am an Artist...

Zizi Azah

In this essay I will discuss my how my journey as a theatre creator was shaped by luck, Frenchmen and charting the graph of my heart.

Beginnings

I was reeled into the world of theatre from the first year of being a student at Tanjong Katong Girls' School. Convinced that no other school activity suited me, I discovered the Drama Club and, by a stroke of luck, was accepted after having passed the entry auditions. I oscillated between pursuing different roles, from acting, to the technical, to creative writing. It was quite natural that at 16, I was not quite sure what I really enjoyed doing most in the theatre. All that was certain to me was my abject love for the beauty of theatre, its language, and all its magic.

There was something about the theatre that called to me at a very deep visceral level. So I found myself fighting tooth and nail with my mother to continue pursuing it at the Victoria Junior College (VJC). What I experienced in those two years in VJC under Mr John Lofthouse decided my fate – that my life would be a love affair with the theatre and performance creation. I learnt the history of theatre, read key plays, wrote and directed my first plays. The piece that I wrote and directed for a final individual presentation examination was the story of an abusive relationship told through a simplified form of Balinese dance, which I had learnt from a dance instructor friend. In the work, I deconstructed the strict gender codes of Balinese dance to create a narrative on the cyclical nature of abuse, disempowerment and entrapment.

For my group General Certificate of Education (GCE) 'Advanced'-level presentation, I co-wrote and performed a piece that was a social satire of racial stereotypes in Singapore entitled *Roar Singapore* (1998). Structured as a game show, it was driven largely by the fact that all of the members of my group were non-Chinese and we wanted to look at the commonalities of our experience of race in Singapore. What I learnt then was that satire was a far more interesting and 'freeing' way to approach potentially sensitive topics.

After my finishing 'A' levels, I got involved in professional theatre productions with The Necessary Stage, Teater Ekamatra, artist collective Kill Your TV (KYTV) and Action Theatre, amongst various arts groups. I took on jobs as a lighting operator, a stage crew member and a props mistress, and slowly paid my dues as a lighting designer and stage manager, and only started creating my own work after a good seven years of freelancing. After I had spent thousands of hours in rehearsal rooms and control booths, silently understanding the infinity of ways that theatre could be created, I finally worked up the courage to write and direct my own plays. Directly observing theatre artists such as Alvin Tan, Haresh Sharma, Tatsuo Kenishita, Alfian Sa'at and Alin Mosbit was monumental in my learning the craft of theatre creation.

Existence Precedes Essence

One of my greatest life-changing moments was discovering existentialist philosophy as a second-year philosophy major in the National University of Singapore. The first realization was that I existed before (and by extension, in spite of) any meaning or essence of myself – of any identity that I wanted to assume. Jean-Paul Sartre's theory of Being and Nothingness – the idea

that life is the burden of existence because of the nothingness that we create in our perception of the world and not of the world itself – greatly changed how I viewed the world.

Sartre's philosophy of Being-in-Itself and Being-for-Itself, whereby Being-for-Itself reveals the 'I' to be in a dynamic relationship, where one's being in the world affects the world and vice-versa; and Being-in-Itself reveals that the 'I' is separate and distinct from the world. The tension of Being hence arises from the former directly antagonizing the latter constantly in life. This has greatly shaped how I create work as an artist today.

I now instinctively separate my relationship with the world into these two categories, simultaneously allowing my sense of Being to fluidly be impacted by my relationship with the world, and yet at the same time steadfastly holding onto a instinctive sense of who I am as an individual. More importantly, the work that I create tends to look at the tensions that exist in the very struggle to want to live a life you can fully control, given the irrefutable knowledge that life is completely beyond your control.

The above was the case in the very first play that I wrote, *How Did the Cat Get so Fat?* (2006). The initial impetus of the play was simply to see how the Singapore national pledge¹ is relevant to Singapore society. I started by picking out key words and ideas from the pledge that I felt Singaporeans aspired to, and these were *equality, democracy, faith, justice and equality, prosperity and progress*.

I then looked at people I knew and life stories I had heard that were related to these key words. One character was based on a friend, a 60-year-old cleaner who wanted desperately to enjoy life but found himself working double shifts and still being unable to pay electrical bills which kept going up month after month. Another character was based on the too-many and too-often-appearing reports of maid abuse by female employers in the national newspapers. Another character was a Malay taxi driver who, in spite of his great dream for his university-educated daughter to be more successful than him, found that she was denied educational and job opportunities because of her race. Yet another character was inspired by middle-aged housewives who excessively grocery shop in bulk in Johor Bahru,² to the point where they end up throwing away rotting food because they buy too much.

What I finally found, however, was that at the heart of it, everyone just wanted to be happy and to be free. Still, the complexity and tension between the very simple desires and the structures of society, both real and imagined, created suffering in varying degrees, in some cases for the characters themselves, and in other cases for the people around them. The play wanted to question whether all the classifications that our society is based on, through the agency of the national pledge, work for or against us in the simple wish to be happy and free.

¹ [Editor's note:] The Singapore National Pledge was created in 1966, and it is recited by schoolchildren every school day. It runs thus: 'We, the citizens of Singapore, pledge ourselves as one united people, regardless of race, language or religion, to build a democratic society based on justice and equality so as to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation.'

² [Editor's note:] Johor Bahru (JB) is the capital city of Johor state, the southern-most state of West Malaysia, directly north of the island-state of Singapore. The island-state is linked to JB by both a Causeway and a bridge.

The struggle for freedom is particularly intriguing for me, and I am particularly fond of Sartre's philosophical theory of Bad Faith, which is the importance of acting in accordance with one's consciousness of freedom and with the acknowledgement that with the burden of choice, one must volitionally make free choices with authenticity. I recognise that freedom is a responsibility that the state of being human demands. I also recognise that freedom exists like overlapping circles in a Venn diagram, and I am only free in so far as another is free.

The second play that I wrote, *Above Us Only Sky* (2008), dealt with the lack of physical freedom. The play was initially inspired by the Israeli occupation of Palestine and my attempt to understand how millions of people were (and are still) literally living within the walls of a prison that were constructed around their homes. I found it very difficult to accept that the freedom for one group of people was more important and valuable than that of another group of people. It did not make sense to me that one person deserves more freedom than another because of a perceived 'given' right – and in the name of 'justice', trying to right the wrongs of history and politics.

Finding a style and form for the play was very difficult because in spite of all my research, I did not find myself equipped to write a play that was naturalistic and realistic. The final play became a simple story of three sisters, Maya, Yin and Khad, who are all named after key female figures in Indian, Malay and Chinese folk traditions. The three sisters live in a fictional city, Nowits, that is in danger of starving to death, surrounded by a wall built by a group of hostile people.

Through the fight for ideological freedom by the youngest of the three sisters, I examined how physical freedom may be transcended by a freedom of the mind and spirit. In a lot of my research, one of the most amazing recurring facts that I found was that, in spite of the violence, bloodshed and suffering, the people of Palestine hope keenly for and dream of a peaceful future. In the final scene of the play, the three sisters go to the spot on the wall where their father was brutally murdered by his own people and plant magic beans. While they have seemingly been driven mad by their hunger, it is only an absurd hope, in all its impractical futility, that keeps them going.

In tandem with Bad Faith is the philosophy that to achieve an authentic state of being, one must consistently and consciously make free choices. Key to this is the awareness that to be free is to choose without reason – that I choose vanilla ice cream because I choose vanilla ice cream. It is this state that I constantly try to achieve for myself and remind myself of, to maintain an expectation of integrity of myself.

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The yearning and striving for an authenticity of being made me question the alarmingly unified and glorified aspirations of the wonderfully consumerist world around me, and this became the inspiration for my play *Suap* (Malay for 'feed'). *Suap* is actually a play that I must admit was written out of need to literally rage against the machine. At the time, I had just left a job in a big organization and was reeling from having observed ugly corporate politics, greedy individual consumerism and general snivelling behaviour.

The set up of the play was that of a timeless garden where three people compete to become king, all the while being goaded on by the Master. The text of the Master, which was projected on the wall and not spoke, was taken from a speech Ehud Olmert made to the Israeli Knesset in

2006 explaining a military defeat. The reason I chose the speech was the power of convicted righteousness in the tone and choice of words, laced with the bloated irony of future triumph and victory.

The three characters, Ahmad, Tini and Zaki, who were named after typical characters found in primary school textbooks, competed in showings of beauty, wit, brutality and aggression. The play uncovers the bloodthirsty and selfish hopes for survival and success of each of the three characters. Tini eventually successfully kills Ahmad and Zaki after manipulating them with her sexuality and promises of loyalty. In the final scene of the play, she jumps with joy and screams that she has won and she will now be the King. After a moment, the Master tells her to 'begin again'.

The guiding principle for me in this play was to really push the idea that the cycle of competition in consumerist capitalist society only made sense as a cycle and literally does not lead humanity anywhere. Except to an empty, futile and wasted existence.

Ball and Chain

I have always found myself unhealthily concerned with women's issues and a lot of my work has looked at gender roles and expectations in society. *In Search of Wonderland* (2009) examined how gender roles affected the hierarchy of power in a family and its impact on the mother figure. Written completely in verse, the play was the story of five siblings who live in a dying house, which is a symbol of the mother. The hierarchy of power led to varying states of denial and the inability to face hard truths of reality, eventually resulting in the house crumbling. Largely absurd in the text creation and presentation, the play was instigated by a need to understand the oftentimes illogical nature of family dynamics.

Heart(h) (2010) similarly looked at gender roles and expectations placed on women of different generations. Four women are trapped on the bridge between Heaven and Hell, and the only way they can get off is by sharing their past with each other and absolving each other of their mistakes and choices. The characters were from different time periods of Malayan³ and Singapore history, and were all connected with each other in some way or other. What I wanted to achieve with the play was to confront how gender roles that women have been taught and sold have governed our behaviour largely because we are taught that those roles are virtuous and will lead us to 'heaven'. The internalization of gender roles stunts our growth as individuals with a right to be free to determine our own life paths.

The Gunpowder Trail (2011) – an adaptation of a short story by Claire Tham – similarly dealt with gender roles as informed by racial and religious structures in society. While the original story was about a Chinese mother and daughter, my play changed the story to that of a Malay mother and daughter. That change actually allowed me to explore gender roles in a different light than the original short story, framing it in a different cultural context. I explored the dynamics of expectation and duty in a mother-daughter relationship, looking varyingly at the struggle for the right to determine one's life with the duty to those around you.

³ [Editor's note:] *Malaya* was the colonial-era name for West Malaysia; it gained independence from British colonial control in 1957 to become the Federation of Malaya. In 1963 the Federation of Malaysia was formed, which included Singapore, the former British North Borneo and Sarawak; Singapore left the Federation in 1965.

Charting the Graph of My Heart

Thus far, I have spoken of the plays that I have written. I am simultaneously a theatre director and have had the privilege of directing a number of great plays written by wonderful writers. *Nadirah* (2009, 2011) by Alfian Sa'at was to pay tribute to the late Malaysian filmmaker Yasmin Ahmad,⁴ and spoke beautifully about faith and love. It was the story of Nadirah, who is having difficulty accepting her Chinese-Muslim convert mother's relationship with a Chinese Catholic man. In directing the naturalistic play, I used a naturalistic staging to deepen the script into the current societal context. It was important to me that the audience went into the world of the mother and daughter and engaged closely with them.

Two of the plays I directed were created in close consultation with the writers. The first was *Charged* (2010, 2011), which came from a collaboration with Chong Tze Chien. Initial creative meetings discussed racial stereotypes and tensions in Singapore. The final script was about a Chinese soldier who shoots a Malay soldier in camp, and then himself, over the Chinese New Year holidays. The play looked at different accounts of the other soldiers who were on guard duty with them before the incident happened. What I loved about the play was that it looked at racism in a no-holds barred way and Chong had written it in such a way that it played with warped sense of reality. As the director, I chose a sparse staging with a minimal set, consisting of two metal lockers, four chairs and one interrogation table. This was so that the space could fluidly transform to become different realities seamlessly.

The next play which was created with a similar process was *Mata Hati* (2011), which was written by Robin Loon. Initial creative meetings discussed racial stereotypes in the civil service and in society at large. The final script was about a Malay minister who was on the fast track to a high-level post, until caught in a compromising situation, which destroys his career; the play also looks at his subsequent relationships with his loved ones. For the staging of the play, I worked intently on creating a meta-text to the performance by using basic elements of physical theatre. The purpose of this was to expand the narrative of the play beyond the text and to create a concurrent and multi-layered narrative in the space.

I have a soft spot for Theatre of the Absurd and have been lucky enough to direct two Eugène Ionesco plays, *Rhinoceros* and *Jack, or the Submission*. Both plays had ludicrous premises and contexts, wicked wordplays and reflected on the most important fact of the human condition – that life is absurd and must be celebrated with exhilarating joy. *Rhinoceros*, about a whole town of people turning into rhinoceroses, was about herd mentality and authenticity. For the staging I took inspiration from the great German Expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari*, using a lot of stark colours and angled lines both in the set and costumes. The actors were also directed to walk in specific lines of action to literalise the theme of conformity.

Jack, or the Submission on the other hand was about marriage and the ideal of what a beautiful wife should be – and Ionesco's conclusion was a wife with three noses! The whole stage was turned into a fashion runway and the costumes were designed to be high-fashion pieces. The whole idea was to play with current notions of how female beauty is shaped by the fashion industry.

⁴ [Editor's note:] Yasmin Ahmad (1958-2009) was a Malaysian film director, writer and scriptwriter. Some of her films depicted love that crossed ethnic-cultural barriers.

As a director, I find it difficult to pinpoint my style or to say precisely that I have a specific method of working. I simply listen to the beat of the text and am frequently inspired by actors working on the floor with the text. I tend to not give the actors specific movements but prefer to work from the emotional truth that comes from the character motivations and journey. For me, what is very important is that the actors are truthful in performance and that the performance is organic. I tend to use a lot of music to assist in highlighting or counterpointing the action onstage. I see music as a great source of inspiration because music can present intangible emotions that go beyond the description of words. The one thing that I firmly hold on to as a director is that I must open up my emotional antenna and chart the graph of my heart. I believe this is the only way to create theatre that is visceral and palpable.

Teater Ekamatra

In my practice both as playwright and theatre director, I have discovered time and time again that theatre exists because we exist. The existentialist claim that existence precedes essence is true in theatre – the truth and the essence of human existence come to light on the theatre stage. And that light I hope will illuminate space beyond the theatre. Teater Ekamatra was 21-years-old when I took over as Artistic Director, and in the three years since then, the character of the company has changed profoundly. Teater Ekamatra now creates bilingual work, choosing to define theatre neither by language nor by typical notions of race as determined by society. We instead choose to create work that is driven by a consciousness of the fluid dynamism of identity, acknowledging the tensions of the society we live in, and creating bridges between those tensions to find new truths.

Conclusion

Albert Camus, one of the greatest Existentialist writers, wrote: 'A guilty conscience needs to confess. A work of art is a confession.' This best summarises my artistic principle when it comes to creating theatre. My conscience is affected by an encounter, the guilt bubbles up in me, and I find myself having no choice but to create art that exorcises my guilty conscience. I fully believe that an artist is responsible to her society and must function to serve that society. An artist must not take her freedom to create lightly but carry it as a burden on her back. Like Sisyphus, an artist will discover that creating art is exhausting, futile and ultimately meaningless. But, it is rolling the rock up the hill again and again that matters.

Zizi Azah is a playwright and theatre director. Currently the Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra, she has helmed over 15 productions in English, Malay and Peranakan. A lecturer at LaSalle College of the Arts in playwriting and dramatic literature, she is also the author of the children's book Fatimah and Her Magic Socks. She is the proud mother of a tumbling toddler who is discovering that life is indeed, beautiful.