

At Cake, Our Art Experiments are as Much about Reflection as They are about Trying Something New and Adventurous...

Natalie Hennedige

At Cake, our art experiments are as much about reflection as they are about trying something new and adventurous. In getting together, we discover possibilities in the intangible space that Art defines. Each work propels the next. As artists we keep evolving and the mystery of the future offers a powerful invitation to venture forth and boldly experiment.

We examine life and existence in the Now. As artists we find ourselves articulating in our own ways the violence, injustice, corruption and depravity that exist in the world. We also articulate the triumphs, the beauty, simple truths and hope that the world offers. It's all about living between tensions – 'the world oscillates between extreme optimism and despairing pessimism'.

We create by allowing our views to be influenced by what's happening within ourselves, within the Singapore context and within the world at large. Our art stems from the personal and reaches out to wider complexities that encompass the contemporary world and its concerns. The more anchored we are in our own truths and experiences, the more honest and sensitive we are in articulating outward perspectives.

It is vital to celebrate the beauty of process. We are designed to keep discovering and we are always in process. Process is a continual reflection on the past in order to venture towards a mystery, an unknown. This *unknown* is both compelling and terrifying. The commitment to the unknown and to the importance of process represent a decision to remain a little on the wild side, never settling, always exploring and discovering new things. Art provides a powerful space where we can speak with great honesty, openness and vulnerability. It's a necessary space.

As artistic director of Cake, I arrived at this place outlined above through a process of growth and discovery that spanned ten years. I first encountered theatre in junior college where I took theatre studies as a core subject for my General Certificate of Examination 'Advanced' Levels. By that time, at 19, it was clear to me that this was the path I wanted to take. After my 'A' levels, I enrolled in the LaSalle College of the Arts to pursue a Bachelor of Arts in Drama, and after that, found my way gradually into the Singapore theatre scene. After a couple of years as a freelance theatre practitioner, I was invited to join The Necessary Stage as an associate artist and eventually as a resident director. After four years at The Necessary Stage, I decided to start Cake Theatrical Productions, with a commitment towards developing experimental theatre as way of injecting vigour and diversity into Singapore's artistic landscape. At Cake, we have steadily moved from production to production with a spirit of inventiveness and deep artistic exploration. At each stage, we are single-minded about remaining true to our artistic belief that theatre must be potent, relevant and challenging.

Nothing in 2007 was a meditation on love and death. Leading up to *Nothing*, the motif of death wafted through preceding productions in direct and indirect ways. In *Animal Vegetable Mineral* (2005), Cake's first production, a man deals with his sister's suicide. In *Queen Ping* (2006), the disgraced mother-dictator is stoned to death with hundreds of ping-pong balls. In *CHEEK* (2006), a

girl chooses death over subservience, and in *Divine Soap* (2006), contemporary artists encounter the passing away of the traditional art form of *Bangsawan*.¹

Nothing opened with a speech that framed everything else that followed:

People in the affluent city snap up property like hyenas. They make for shopping marts in throngs, like Mecca. Their children are vexatious, poisoned. They attend school and learn discontent, ingratitude. The people believe in slavery and that God is prosperity. They reproduce by the millions and clash, creating a symphony of grunts, hisses and screams that can be heard even in the dead of night. The more they clash, the more they hate. Yet, freakishly, they march forward to the same beat. There are so many of them. They scuttle onward like roaches. But there are those who withdraw. They quit, recoil, vacate. They are heart-broken, hollow losers. Empty. Failures. They have stopped. They seek. Nothing. This is a play about them.

Here, more directly than before in earlier productions, we were homing in on a type of Singapore and the deathly soullessness that follows a skewed value system.

For the Singapore Arts Festival 2008, we created *Temple*. This started with an image: the inside of a sports hall. The lines on the floor that demarcate the various playing areas, in particular, were inspired images or symbols of symmetry and ritual – those that we have retained for ages and those we continue to generate daily. Reflecting on previous works – *Animal Vegetable Mineral* in 2005, *Queen Ping* in 2006, *Nothing* in 2007 – there was something of a common strain running through the characters written into the pieces. All were flawed, fractured, in search of something larger than themselves. Mostly, they hardly knew what it was they sought; yet like tumbleweeds in tumultuous wind, they eventually arrived at some sort of rest. For *Temple*, we decided to explore ‘fracture’ on a mega-scale, taking on, as our subject, a fractured world.

We created, as a premise, a mythological universe where everything was at odds. Seven people find refuge in an abandoned sports hall and shut the doors. The hall becomes their sanctuary. They assume that they have gained immunity from the corruption of the world outside their hall. Yet, the hall is no sanctuary. There is no sanctity to be found. No purity. It is an oppressive, unsettling place housing desperately despairing people. In day one, the characters go about their interactions without seeing each other, as if there were imaginary shifting walls between them. One set of characters, a family of four, finds that their home or sanctuary is defiled. Another set, a couple, find that the sanctity of their marriage is blemished. The third set is actually an individual – a woman whose ideals about martyrdom dissolve when she comes face to face with her fear and weakness.

Mid-way, the characters hear a terrifying sound. They must leave everything behind and go. The world is at odds and they journey into the wilderness to find refuge. Instantly, the imaginary walls break and they become aware of each other. Under these new circumstances, they receive the dawn of day two. Previous relationships and commitments no longer apply. They are levelled by this new experience and they become a new society. They make a law – let no one open the doors of the hall. They begin to exist as a community feeling quite proud and infallible as the chosen ones living in their pristine hall.

¹ [Editor’s note:] *Bangsawan* is sometimes described as ‘popular Malay opera’. The form of entertainment oriented was popular in the 1920s and 1930s in Malaysia (then-colonial Malaya) and Singapore. The music that was played was a combination of Malay and Western elements.

Days three, four, five and six examine the rapid transformation of the society from a proud new body to warring members. Finally, day seven comes and the piece comes to a close with a sense that either the world had just ended or is just beginning.

In 2009, we created *Cuckoo Birds*, an original work in collaboration with Malaysian arts collective, Five Arts Centre.² It was our first venture making a work with artists outside of Singapore. An aim was to fuse the artistic vocabularies and philosophies of both companies. We centred on the theme of violence, although at first it was the topic of crime that got us talking. In early discussions, we learnt that various members of Five Arts Centre and other people they knew living in Kuala Lumpur and other places in Malaysia had been recent victims of crime and random violence. Everyone had a story to tell – handbags snatched; homes broken into; family members tied up at knifepoint; random attacks and beatings for no apparent reason. We went deeper and started sharing stories that galvanised our respective experiences within our separate societies. The Revathi Masoosai detention case in Malaysia³ and the AWARE saga in Singapore⁴ offered strong material for discussion and exploration.

On the floor, we began to explore the ways in which violence manifests itself – violence both overt and as an undercurrent; violence in the things we do, say and feel; violence in ordinary and extraordinary situations and settings; violence in feelings of extreme vehemence or fervour, and so on. We drew from personal stories and stories in the news and we made up stories inspired by events too real and too close to fully come to grips with. It was rewarding to create this work and then have the opportunity to share something that spoke to audiences in both Malaysia and Singapore.

In 2010, we celebrated Cake's fifth year by presenting an event entitled *The Art of Living in the In-Between* in a rented shophouse over five days. The work reflected the inspirations and fantasies that have catalyzed five years of our art making. It included theatre performance, installation, performance art, sound art, workshops and a short film. All these components came together to offer audiences a multi-dimensional and multi-faceted sense of the breadth and depth of our art-making style and growth over five years. The main performance component, a concoction based on all our previous works, jammed ten of Cake's most vivid characters into the same world, reflecting a choral of voices deeply rooted in a Singapore identity with a fantastically far-reaching outlook.

² [Editor's note:] For more information on the Five Arts Centre in Kuala Lumpur, see <<http://www.fiveartscentre.org/>>, accessed 5 June 2012.

³ [Editor's note:] The online Malaysian new site, *Malaysiakini* reported that: 'Revathi Masoosai, an ethnic Indian, was detained by the Islamic Religious Department in southern Malacca state in January [2007] and sent for religious counseling in a rehabilitation center after they discovered she had been born to a Muslim family. Revathi, 29, was born to Indian Muslim parents who gave her a Muslim name, Siti Fatimah. But she claimed she was raised as a Hindu by her grandmother and changed her name in 2001, opposition Democratic Action Party officials have said. Malaysian Islamic law regards people born to Muslims as being Muslims themselves.' ('Malaysia: Islamic Courts "Rehabilitate" Members of Other Faiths', reprinted in <<http://www.wluml.org/node/3628>>, accessed 1 June 2012; also see Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development, 'Malaysia: Backsliding on Protecting the Freedom of Religion', 10 July 2007, <http://archive.forum-asia.org/index2.php?option=com_content&do_pdf=1&id=625>, accessed 1 June 2012).

⁴ [Editor's note:] 'In late March [2009] a secretive group of conservative Chinese Christian ladies surreptitiously took over the executive council of AWARE (Association of Women for Action and Research), an advocacy group that has done much to promote women's rights. Half of the new council attend the same church. They were jolted into action by AWARE's alleged pro-gay agenda, particularly in sex-education courses taught at some schools' ('Taken Unawares: Liberals Rally to Take on the Christian Right', *Economist*, 7 May 2012 <http://www.economist.com/node/13611576?story_id=13611576>, accessed 1 June 2012). Also see Terence Chong (ed.), *The AWARE Saga: Civil Society and Public Morality in Singapore* (Singapore: NUS Press, 2011).

Embedded in all our works are textures, nuances and elements infused with the energies of our cultural, political and societal experiences.

The event was also a reflection of the artistic partnerships we had nurtured over time. Brian Gothong Tan, David Lee, Rizman Putra, Philip Tan, Suven Chan and Fared Jainal had been almost constant collaborators over numerous productions. Coming together was a way of celebrating the artistic partnerships that had developed over time and opened new possibilities for collaborating and discovering possibilities in the future.

In 2011, we found another opportunity to deepen our artist practice. In collaboration with The Substation, Singapore's first independent contemporary arts centre, Cake launched the *Decimal Points* series, a series of art experiments that fuel artistic creation through process and exploration. Over the course of two years, four artistic experiments are made, each helmed by an individual artist from a different discipline. Brian Gothong Tan, David Lee, Philip Tan and Rizman Putra, were invited to create a work from the vantage point of their respective disciplines – multimedia art, graphic design, sound art and performance art respectively. Each work in the *Decimal Points* series challenges the artist to create and articulate what they want, in the formats they want, with full artistic freedom. In the third year, 2013, and in collaboration with all four artists, a new work will be brought forth, enriched by a two-year span of research, exploration and creation.

The above approach reinforces our commitment to process as a means of deepening our craft. We work very closely with all our artistic collaborations and collaborators so as to allow for an artistic evenness and consistency. We always seek to reinforce artistic partnerships built on trust and understanding with an increasing pool of collaborators in various fields, adding to the depth and richness of each new work.

Our tenacity and constant desire to attain new possibilities is such that we are always ready and prepared to take Cake to new ground. This playfulness, aliveness and energy keeps us buoyant and allows us to remain an interesting oddity – which may seem a strange quality to cherish, but is, in fact, one of the very things that we hold close and are happy to embrace as part of our identity as a theatre company in Singapore.

Natalie Hennedige is the Artistic Director of Cake Theatrical Productions in Singapore. A recipient of the National Arts Council Young Artist Award in 2007 and the JCCI Singapore Foundation Culture Award in 2010, Hennedige conceptualises, writes and directs for the theatre. She develops varied works, ranging from intimate experimental theatre pieces to multidisciplinary art experiences and theatrical spectacles in outdoor public spaces.