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Nelson Chia: cultural translator, ensemble builder

Theatre, Music & Dance



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By Corrie Tan

As part of the *Asian Theatremakers* series



Nelson Chia in *Offending the Audience* at Esplanade's *Huayi* 2017.

You know a Nine Years Theatre production when you see one.

There's the smell of precision about it, from the calibrated ensemble to the period-perfect set pieces. Every single performer seems to be breathing in and out in perfect sync. The language is

exact, the direction exacting. The company has made significant strides since it stormed onto the Singapore stage with its debut production of Edward Albee's *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* at the 2012 edition of Esplanade's *Huayi – Chinese Festival of Arts* ([/festivals-and-series/huayi-chinese-festival-of-arts/2018](#)). The Chinese-language translation of the American classic was the company's first provocation: What does it mean to take a location- and period-specific play and not only translate it, but situate it in a different cultural context?

The company's artistic director Nelson Chia has never intended for these cultural relocations to be smooth or seamless. He is interested in the frictions they produce and the new forms they create. Under his tenure, Nine Years Theatre has become synonymous with these cultural and linguistic experiments, but also for its focus on actor training and what it means to build a disciplined ensemble of performers with a shared theatrical and physical vocabulary.

While Nine Years Theatre has evolved in its breadth and scope, these pillars of the company have not changed since its inception. When Chia established Nine Years Theatre with his wife, company director Mia Chee, they were clear from the start about its focus on the transcultural and training the actor. Chia told me in an interview in late 2011:

“

I like doing these western plays because I find that there is always a weird tension in doing transcultural work... You may ask me – are they Americans? No, they're not. Are they Chinese? No, they're not. So what are they? Well, they are people speaking Mandarin, living in a world that is similar to New England, but not. They may not be any of these things. Or they may be all of these things. After a while the stage will take on a logic of its own. ”

He later continued:

“

I'm very interested in the status of the actor and the work of an actor ... When the Esplanade asked me what I wanted to do for
Huayi
, I thought, I want to do classic plays. We have new plays, platforms for new plays to be staged and written, but I thought, actors need classic plays – as well as the audience. Classic plays, once in a while, give actors the boost to move up. They pose a certain kind of challenge [...] I wanted to do a classic play in Mandarin. ”

This ambition has persisted throughout the years, sculpting a theatre company that has not only sought to reinvent the classic and build a new kind of ensemble, but also established a Mandarin theatre company with a strong, unshakable identity and a willingness to adapt in an evolving, multilingual theatre industry.



Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?, part of *Huayi* 2012. Photo by Jack Yam.

Discipline, luck and hard work

Chia didn't start out in the theatre. The son of a housewife and a businessman, he was hardworking and disciplined as a student, which made him a good fit for the uniformed groups in secondary school. His plan was to eventually sign on as a regular with the Singapore navy. He appreciated the steady promotion up the ranks and believed it was a career that suited him.

Then in 1993, his younger sister spotted an audition notice by Toy Factory Productions, a fledgling theatre company at the time, and coaxed Chia into accompanying her. Lim Chin Huat from dance group Ecnad was leading the audition. Copy his movements? I could do that, Chia thought. He was called back, his sister wasn't.

He took part in his first theatre production, an experimental theatre piece set in a swimming pool atop the Pan Pacific hotel, and also went on to perform as part of the ensemble in Toy Factory's popular production of *Titoudao*, which follows the real-life triumphs and tribulations of a Hokkien opera starlet. Something clicked in him. He'd applied for a Singapore Armed Forces scholarship to study at the National University of Singapore, but this discovery of the stage was an epiphany. In 1995, he gave up the scholarship and the navy, and enrolled in the university's theatre studies programme.

During his theatre career, Chia has excelled as a performer and a director, as well as the occasional translator, frequently working with Toy Factory, The Theatre Practice, and Wild Rice. The

theatremakers who would go on to heavily influence his artistic trajectory included the late [Kuo Pao Kun \(/tributesg/performing-arts/kuo-pao-kun\)](#) and the late William Teo of the Asia-in-Theatre Research Centre. The former taught him deep character work, the latter the playfulness and the organisation of the ensemble; the former's plays have now become Singaporean classics, the latter was drawn to adapt classics with a strong Asian sensibility, such as *The Mahabharata* or *The Conference of the Birds*.

In 2006, while pondering how actors might be able to continue to train after completing their formal education in the theatre, Chia attended a workshop where he had his first proper encounter with the [Suzuki Method of Actor Training \(http://www.scot-suzukicompany.com/en/philosophy.php\)](#) and [Viewpoints \(http://siti.org/training\)](#) – both rigorous, physical demanding systems of actor training that cultivate the actor's body and mind. This was another revelation, which he elaborated on during a 2014 interview with me for *The Straits Times*:

“

I saw the SITI Company, how they trained in Viewpoints and they trained in Suzuki, how they train before they rehearse, or they train when they're not rehearsing. And I thought, there are actually people who do these things, and these things are repeatable, like ballet or sports exercises. There are things you can do, and maybe you might discover new things as you get better. I thought, hey, a method is what I need. A system is what I need. ”

In 2008, he flew to New York for a month-long formal workshop with the SITI Company; several years later, he trained in the Suzuki Method and performed in the Toga Festival with the Suzuki Company of Toga in Japan. He was astonished to observe how the Suzuki Company actors worked together as a whole, taking care of the maintenance of the company's premises but also handling up to three different productions in a single day without flubbing a line.

Chia's visions of the work an ensemble could create led him to become a founding member of the performance collective A GROUP OF PEOPLE, which attempted to produce democratic collaborative pieces led by each member in turn.

They found uneven success, with interdisciplinary, boundary-breaking work that both baffled and delighted, and the collective was visibly stunned when they won The Straits Times Life Theatre Award for Production of the Year for their small-scale experimental piece *A Cage Goes in Search of a Bird* (2010).

While A GROUP OF PEOPLE folded in less than four years, the possibility of such collaborative methods of working and regular training stuck with Chia. He thought these different strands—training the actor, building the ensemble, reviving the classic—might be able to cohere in a different form, and Nine Years Theatre was born shortly after.



Nelson Chia's adaptation of *ART* by French playwright Yasmina Reza at *Huayi 2014*. Photo by Jack Yam.

Expanding the notion of the 'classic'

Chia's focus on the classic and canonicity would evolve as the company matured.

The early years of the company saw them wrestling with the western canon, from 20th century American psychological realism to 16th century French farce, from Henrik Ibsen to Maxim Gorky. There were some hits and several misses as the company experimented with genre.

Chia's direction seemed to shine brightest in talky socio-political dramas, where he transformed large, unwieldy ensembles into well-oiled symphony orchestras, modulating every sentence and cadence with such care that every single audience member—even those who did not understand Mandarin Chinese and had to rely on English surtitles—would be clear on each character's intent and trajectory.

The company's award-winning sophomore production, Reginald Rose's courtroom drama *Twelve Angry Men*, sat on every single "best of 2013" list in Singapore as a "[master class in direction](http://www.inkpotreviews.com/2013reviews/0217,twel,ml.xml)" (<http://www.inkpotreviews.com/2013reviews/0217,twel,ml.xml>) and ensemble work.

This continued with Ibsen's searing takedown of the tyranny of the masses, *Enemy of the People*, where Chia tested out the company's newly minted Ensemble Project.

The company envisioned a group of ensemble actors who would train together, regularly and systematically, for the long term, drawing its foundations from the Suzuki Method and Viewpoints. This continues to be supplemented by regular workshops in speech and diction, directing and dramaturgy.

The company wanted to emulate other models of ensemble-based theatre companies while creating their own approach to the ensemble, drawing from predecessors such as Bertolt Brecht's Berliner Ensemble, Anne Bogart's SITI Company, Tadashi Suzuki's Suzuki Company of Toga, Putu Wijaya's Theater Mandiri, or Peter Brook's Theatre des Bouffes du Nord – but also citing dance companies and their core groups of performers as an inspiration for long-term ensemble work.

This ensemble core does not preclude other performers from being a part of the Nine Years Theatre repertoire, and the company has often worked with actors beyond the fold for productions such as Yasmina Reza's *Art*, Moliere's *Tartuffe* and Gorky's *The Lower Depths*.



A scene from *Twelve Angry Men*. Photo by Jack Yam.

A turning point came in 2016 when the company put up two Asian contemporary classics: Hideki Noda's *Red Demon* and Stan Lai's *Red Sky*. This was a marked shift from the western repertoire of the company's earlier years as it began to induct contemporary regional work into its canon.

This was followed by something even closer to home – the translation and adaptation of Singaporean playwright Haresh Sharma’s brilliant and unflinching *Fundamentally Happy*, a tense two-hander that draws from very specific cultural tensions in terms of race and religion in Singapore to examine the issue of pedophilia.

Some of the dramatic choices were, I felt, contentious: Did the adapted work efface certain aspects of what were written as very specific racial and religious relationships between the two characters? Did the added dimension of both characters speaking Mandarin distract from the provocative power of the original text? Did replacing a Malay-Muslim character with a Chinese-Muslim convert constitute some sort of cultural appropriation?



Actors Lok Meng Chue and Timothy Wan as Habiba and Eric respectively, in *Fundamentally Happy*, part of *The Studios* 2017. Photo by Tuckys Photography.

Nevertheless, Chia’s decision to take on the challenges of local interculturality demonstrated a willingness for his Mandarin theatre company to step beyond the domain of the dominant mother tongue and struggle with the problematics of translation in a multilingual, multicultural context, opening the company up to critique but also to constructive engagement.

This canonisation of Singaporean work continued, first with the company’s double-bill of two popular Kuo Pao Kun monologues (*No Parking on Odd Days* and *The Coffin is Too Big for the Hole*) – performed for the first time in Cantonese and Teochew and reclaiming the loss of Chinese dialects in

Singapore's broadcast media and on the stage.

This was followed by Chia's adaptation of Yeng Pway Ngon's critically acclaimed 2011 novel *Art Studio*, the opening act for the 2017 Singapore International Festival of Arts. This painstaking passion project distilled 240,000 words into a three-hour show, gamely tackling a multi-generational timeline and several decades of dense personal and political histories in Malaya.

Art Studio was generally well received, as were its "faultless performances" (<https://artsequator.com/art-studio-by-nine-years-theatre-back-to-the-page/>), and won Chia comparisons with the Taiwanese powerhouse Stan Lai, whose sprawling, beautifully imagined work often also spans generations and pays close attention to the passing of time.

An excerpt from Nine Years Theatre's *Fundamentally Happy*, written by Haresh Sharma, translated and directed by Nelson Chia, at *The Studios 2017*.

New languages and hybrid forms

With its 2018 production *Cut Kafka!* (</festivals-and-series/huayi-chinese-festival-of-arts/2018/cut-kafka>), a collaboration with Singaporean contemporary dance group T.H.E Dance Company and co-directed and co-choreographed with its founder Kuik Swee Boon, Nine Years Theatre is venturing into experiments with movement theatre.

This feels like a natural extension of the company's current practice, given that both methods of actor training that the company relies on are rooted in physicality and movement.

The Suzuki Method draws from an eclectic array of influences, including ballet, martial arts, and traditional Japanese and Greek theatre; Viewpoints grew out of the postmodern dance world and was adapted from theories introduced by the choreographer Mary Overlie.

There's a touch of the classic about it too, with its homage to the 20th-century literary giant Franz Kafka and his body of work.

Chia isn't only an intermediary across languages and cultures, he's also interested in the translation of form: how the oeuvre of a literary icon is reimagined anew in movement (*Cut Kafka!*), or how a novel treads the stage (*Art Studio*).

In making sense of how a work exists in its original cultural, linguistic and aesthetic context and how it can be transplanted into another, the sands are constantly shifting, the lines constantly redrawn.

It takes a keen eye and a steady hand to navigate these border crossings such that the new work is as respectful to the source as it is resonant in its new environs.

Under Chia's leadership, Nine Years Theatre has been bold and nimble in its approaches to the expanded classic and in exploring new ways for an ensemble to develop work together, taking its wild successes with its productive failures.

In Mandarin Chinese, 'nine years' (九年) is a homonym for 'many years' or 'a long time' (久年); there's little doubt that the group will continue to reinvent itself for the long run – while staying true to the traditions that have given it its firm foundation.

Cut Kafka!, by T.H.E Dance Company and Nine Years Theatre, is on at Esplanade Theatre Studio from 1-4 March 2018. [Get tickets >](#)

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About the writer

Corrie Tan is the guest editor of ArtsEquator, an online platform for arts writing and criticism in Southeast Asia. She was previously theatre critic and arts correspondent at The Straits Times and has also written about theatre and performance for The Guardian, The Stage and Exeunt Magazine.