

FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

Singapore's Cultural Policy and Its Consequences

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ABSTRACT: This article explores the effects of Singapore's Global City for the Arts project on the local theater industry. It begins by describing the character of the Singapore state and its ability to meet the challenges of globalization. It then shows that while historically global in orientation, the city-state's early cultural policies were resolutely local and insular prior to the economic recession in 1985. From that year on, local arts and culture was driven by an economic rationale — eventually culminating in the birth of a globally oriented national cultural policy: the Global City for the Arts project. The author contends that the Global City for the Arts project has pressured the Singapore state into shedding some of its authoritarian practices in order to conform to international norms. However, the author also illustrates how certain theater companies with the requisite cultural capital for the Global City for the Arts project have benefited from the country's cultural policies while others that do not possess such cultural capital are marginalized. The article concludes by arguing that the Singapore state, in going global, exacerbates the economic disparity by accentuating preexisting inequalities and divisions in the local.

Introduction: The Singapore State and Globalization

The early claim in globalization literature that the state is teetering on the brink of irrelevance has given way to a belief that states are, instead, reacting differently to a new global trading order. And, more importantly, they are still utilizing existing practices and institutions to do so.¹ One of the clearest examples of this argument is the Singapore state. The Singapore government, not ready to reduce its role on either the domestic or international stage, continues to use its resources to meet the multiple challenges of globalization in order to remain a dominant feature in economic and national development.² Economic efforts in-

clude initiating “growth triangles” made up of neighboring Johor (Malaysia), the Riau Islands (Indonesia), and Singapore, and forging free trade agreements. On a political level, the Singapore government, among others, champions and affiliates itself to regional groupings such as the Asian-Pacific Economic Co-operation (APEC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Asean), and the Asean Regional Forum, in order to extend the conventional perimeters of the nation-state — or to “transnationalize”³ — thus challenging theories of state decline in the age of globalization.

The Singapore state has been described in a variety of ways: an “interventionist state,”⁴ a “developmental state,”⁵ a “paternalist state,”⁶ a “corporatist state,”⁷ and a “strong state.”⁸ Of these, it is perhaps the corporatist model that best describes Singapore’s mode of governance. According to Brown, state corporatism “refers to attempts by an avowedly autonomous state elite to organize the diverse interest associations in society so that their interests can be accommodated within the independent and organic national community.”⁹ This model aptly accounts for the ways in which the government elite manages interest-conflicts by defining and occupying a “neutral” position. For example, in the management of competing local ethnic interests, the government often portrays itself as “above” partisan politics in order to intercede as a supposedly neutral party.¹⁰ This coincides with the corporatist ideal of society as a

harmonious, well-regulated, non-conflictive society, based on moral principles and well-defined norms which are issued and maintained by the public authority, the state.... There should be some intragroup autonomy and self-regulation but the very existence of groups and their relationships with each other are granted and regulated by the state.¹¹

In this sense, the corporatist state is also an interventionist state.

This corporatist model also avoids descriptions of the state as a static or monolithic entity, and highlights the state’s strategies for incorporating individuals and groups. For example, since the early 1990s, a discernible shift from “exclusive corporatism” to “inclusive corporatism” has been evident in Singapore. Exclusive corporatism signifies a greater degree of authoritarianism where, according to Brown, “the state is dominated by technocrats-bureaucrats” and “where institutionalized co-operation is restricted to a small elite,” amounting to “a corporatist strategy of interventionist management.”¹² Brown adds: “[T]he ‘managerial egotism’ of state élites... persuades them that their interventions as ‘experts’ are necessary and fruitful, and that the non-expert masses are not to be trusted with autonomous political participation.”¹³ Goh Chok Tong’s succession of Lee Kuan Yew as prime minister in November 1990 is a popular marker of the beginnings of a more inclusive corporatist approach in Singapore. Inclusive corporatism, Brown explains, “is where the organic community is built on a more genuinely consensual partnership between state and society.”¹⁴ With inclusive corporatism a more democratic, but not necessarily liberal, process occurs “in which the network of corporatist institutions for controlled, mobilized participation is broadened to incorporate wider segments of society, to the point where it begins to provide the dominant basis for politics.”¹⁵ The induction of several highly accomplished individuals from different walks of life into

the incumbent party in 2001 — including former government critics (collectively known as the “Super Seven” ministers) — demonstrates the co-opting techniques of the corporatist state.¹⁶ Inclusive corporatism looks to remain useful with Lee Hsien Loong’s succession as prime minister in August 2004. Prime Minister Lee’s rhetoric of an “open and inclusive society” builds on Senior Minister Goh’s “kinder and gentler society,” but it stopped short of substantially empowering interest groups.

Rather than eschew global forces, Singapore has always engaged actively with them. With its colonial *raison d’être* and scant natural resources, the island depends primarily on global market demand for economic survival, prompting former foreign minister S. Rajaratnam to speak of the city-state as a “global city” as early as the 1960s.¹⁷ The country’s early global orientation is consistent with Abu-Lughod’s argument that contemporary global cities have managed to become “global” because of their historical characteristics.¹⁸

From Local to Global: Singapore’s National Cultural Policy

The Singapore government’s determined approach to the challenges of globalization extends to the local arts and cultural industry. Despite its openness to economic globalization, however, arts and culture in Singapore, before 1992, was not a national priority. Singapore’s unexpected independence from Malaysia in 1965 prompted the People’s Action Party (PAP) to hinge national survival on economic well-being, with industrialization, foreign investments, and employment requiring immediate state attention. To this end, Koh Tai Ann observes, “Material and social welfare, earning a living, and economic survival have always been Singapore’s mostly immigrant community’s primary concerns, and the arts have never been seen as a ‘basic need.’”¹⁹

Meanwhile, early interethnic tensions arising from mutual suspicion and the jostling of different interests between the country’s three main ethnic groups — Chinese, Malays, and Indians — led to the deployment of the arts as communal activities that offered opportunities for ethnic interaction as well as their utilization as symbolic public displays of “multiculturalism.”²⁰ According to the 1959 edition of the *State of Singapore Annual Report*, the Ministry of Culture had clear objectives for local arts and culture, namely, “The creation of a sense of national identity, the elimination of communal divisions and attitudes. The propagation of democratic values, conducive to the ultimate creation of a just society. The creation of a wide acceptance of a National Language.”²¹

The government’s single-minded intent for the arts and culture to serve nation-building purposes was demonstrated in the 1980s when the Ministry of Community Development assumed the portfolio of the Ministry of Culture. The role of arts and culture was reexamined when economic stagnation gripped the country in 1985. Experiencing one of the country’s worst economic recessions, the government set up the 1985 Economic Review Committee (ERC), which was headed by Lee Hsien Loong, who was then deputy minister of finance. Among the many recommendations the ERC put forth was that various service sectors be explored as potential growth industries. The ERC report singled out the potential for economic growth of the “cultural and entertainment” sector,

which included the performing arts, film production, museums, and art galleries. The ERC report was the beginning of a coherent national cultural policy in that its recommendations “represented the first explicit, albeit somewhat ad hoc, acknowledgement of the economic potential of artistic and cultural activities.”²² The use of arts and culture to spark economic growth is, of course, not unusual. The infusion of arts and culture investments into rust-belt or derelict industrial sites in Europe and the United States to inject “fashionability” and spin-off service industries into economically depressed areas,²³ is an international trend that the Singapore government has adopted, thus underlining the globalization of cultural policy.

This nascent cultural policy was developed four years later in the *Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts* (1989), which contained several recommendations that have altered the complexion of the arts and cultural landscape in Singapore. These recommendations included the establishment of a state cultural institution and a national arts center, realized, respectively, in the National Arts Council (NAC) and the Esplanade: Theaters on the Bay. The 1989 report “softened” the economic imperatives of local arts and culture by emphasizing their qualitative virtues, e.g., personal enrichment. Here, the arts were now deemed to “broaden our minds and deepen our sensitivities...improve the general quality of life...[and] strengthen our social bond,” while at the same time contributing “to our tourist and entertainment sectors.”²⁴

In 1992, Singapore’s cultural policy, at least in rhetoric, went global. That year, the Economic Development Board conceptualized the “Global City of the Arts” vision. Spearheaded by the Singapore Tourism Board and supported by the NAC and the National Heritage Board, the vision outlined plans to boost local arts and cultural industries in a bid to turn the city-state into a global cultural hub.

Further concrete policy directions were announced in the *Renaissance City Report*, released in 2000. Published by MITA with input from the NAC, the report announced a five-year S\$50 million MITA pledge of support to the local arts and cultural industry, but it drank as well from global city literature to compare Singapore with top-tier “world cities” like London, New York, and Tokyo, and with second-tier ones like Sydney, Edinburgh, and Hong Kong. With such comparisons, the Singapore government actively participated in the “social construction” of the global city. Taken together with the growing body of academic, urban development, and policy planning literature on this issue, the comparisons have contributed to the “discursive construction” of global cities.²⁵ The cultural policies outlined in the *Renaissance City Report* were designed to meet two specific aims: to position Singapore as “a cultural centre in the globalized world” and, at the same time, to provide a “cultural ballast in our nation-building efforts.”²⁶ Arts and culture was envisaged and packaged as a “pull factor” in the increasing international competition for skilled foreign workers and global capital, while, as an extension of its previous nation-building role, a more vibrant arts and cultural scene might help retain highly skilled and globally mobile Singaporeans.

The latter task was made all the more urgent in 1988 when a study by a local think tank, the Institute of Policy Studies, showed that a record number of



Performance artists Roy Payamel, center, and Geraldine Schubert strike poses in a performance at a shopping mall in Singapore, 10 May 2002. Government officials are worried that Singapore is being perceived as “a dull, boring place” and that as a result “talent will not want to come here” (Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong). (Credit: AP Photo/Naashon Zalk)

Singaporeans, most of whom were highly educated and skilled, were emigrating. The government’s task, in the words of a local scholar, was to “go global” yet “stay local.”²⁷ The seriousness of this task was reiterated by none other than Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong in his 1999 National Day Rally Speech: “People laugh at us for promoting fun so seriously. But having fun is important. If Singapore is a dull, boring place, not only will talent not want to come here, but even Singaporeans will begin to feel restless.”²⁸

The contemporary and globally oriented cultural policy of Singapore clearly continues to emphasize the nation-building and propagandistic role of arts and culture. What distinguishes this from previous policies is its new economic *raison d’être* as well as its increasing reflection of the government’s desire to be seen as abiding by international norms. For example, the city-state’s authoritarian and austere reputation has made it difficult to shake off its international image as a “Disneyland with the death penalty.” To continue adhering rigidly to draconian censorship regulations would deny the Global City for the Arts project any global legitimacy. Hence, in an effort to reconcile local standards with international norms, the government systematically loosened censorship regulations in the 1990s. A Censorship Review Committee (CRC), comprising academicians, journalists, and artists, and led by then NAC chairman Prof. Tommy Koh, was formed to reexamine local censorship regulations. A CRC report released in October 1992 recommended several changes to the way censorship was applied to the arts and entertainment industry. With regards to theater, it recommended a classification system, akin to that for cinemas, whereby violent or sexually explicit plays are given an “R(A)” [Restricted (Artistic)] rating.²⁹ This rating signified that the play was restricted to viewers over eighteen years of age. Interestingly, cinema audiences must be twenty-one

Table 1: National Arts Council General Grants Distributions, 1998-2003

FY 1998-1999	Discipline	Amount	Percentage
	Theater	\$333,300	33.4%
	Music	\$291,500	29.2%
	Visual Arts	\$192,500	19.3%
	Dance	\$66,000	6.6%
	Film	\$47,000	4.7%
	Arts Administration	\$34,700	3.5%
	Literature	\$33,000	3.3%
	Total	\$998,000	100%
FY 1999-2000	Discipline	Amount	Percentage
	Theater	\$887,885	42%
	Music	\$401,357	19%
	Dance	\$358,960	17%
	Visual Arts	\$254,038	12%
	Literature	\$192,042	9%
	Multidisciplinary	\$22,000	1%
	Total	\$2,116,182	100%
FY 2000-2001	Discipline	Amount	Percentage
	Theater	\$2,474,068	43%
	Dance	\$1,197,432	21%
	Music	\$1,054,702	18%
	Visual Arts	\$543,314	9%
	Literature	\$260,674	5%
	Multidisciplinary	\$195,000	3%
	Total	\$5,725,190	100%
FY 2001-2002	Discipline	Amount	Percentage
	Theater	\$2,942,616	44%
	Dance	\$1,462,700	22%
	Music	\$1,053,912	16%
	Visual Arts	\$755,967	11%
	Literature	\$269,754	4%
	Multidisciplinary	\$271,040	4%
	Total	\$6,755,989	100%
FY 2002-2003	Discipline	Amount	Percentage
	Theater	\$2,558,600	43%
	Dance	\$1,258,016	21%
	Music	\$802,271	13%
	Visual Arts	\$814,824	14%
	Multidisciplinary	\$312,000	5%
	Literature	\$264,500	4%
	Total	\$6,010,211	100%

Source: National Arts Council Annual Reports

and above to watch R-rated movies while the cut-off age for R-rated plays is eighteen. This discrepancy reinforces the popular belief that the government deems theater audiences to be a more select group than cinema audiences and one thus better equipped to withstand the onslaught of “corrupting influences.”

Another change was that theater companies with “good track records” need no longer send in their scripts for vetting by Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU) officers, though public entertainment licenses from the Singapore Police Force still needed to be applied for. The CRC report also recommended that contentious scripts be referred to the Drama Review Committee (DRC) under the NAC. The DRC, made up of academicians, theater practitioners, writers, and artists, was deemed more suitable to determine the artistic merit of scripts than the PELU. With the DRC, scripts were no longer subjected to police intervention but they were peer reviewed. In June 2002, the responsibility for issuing public entertainment licenses for local plays (as well as for films, pop concerts, and public exhibitions) was transferred from the Singapore Police Force to the Films and Publications Unit of the Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts (MITA). Meanwhile other licenses — for bars, cabarets, disco and karaoke lounges, and nightclubs — remained under the authority of the PELU and the Singapore Police Force.

The policy changes announced by the CRC, and highly publicized in the local media, raised hopes for cultural liberalization. The upbeat mood did not escape the international media. In July 1999 *Time* magazine found that “Singapore swings.” The magazine report went on to explain that “once notorious for tight government control, the city-state is getting competitive, creative, even funky.” Structural changes to censorship regulations seemed to have won the Global City for the Arts project some international recognition.

The above-mentioned examples of censorship liberalization need to be understood in the context of the Singapore government’s global desires. To become a Global City for the Arts, they must have — or at least give appearances of having — realigned “local regulations and mindsets in line with international best practices.”³⁰ Cities desiring to meet global expectations, for instance, need to develop local-global reconciliatory policies for international familiarity and standardization.³¹ These “reconciliatory policies” are central to a globalization process that, in turn, “challenges the traditional distinctions between the domestic and the international, the territorial and the non-territorial, and the inside and the outside, as embedded in conventional conceptions of ‘the political.’”³² In this way, the Singapore state continues to meet the challenges of globalization, while at the same time it is invariably conditioned and influenced by its demands.

The Global City for the Arts: Stratification of the Local Theater Field

The Singapore government’s drive to globalize the arts and cultural industry has accentuated existing local inequalities via the uneven distribution of capital — a characteristic of globalization. Of all the local cultural industries, the the-

ater field has economically benefited most from the establishment of the NAC and the Global City for the Arts project. The sampling of distribution of state capital grants in Table 1 above shows that theater has consistently received the major portion of arts grants.

In order to accelerate the globalizing of the arts industry, the *Renaissance City Report* announced two new grants schemes in 2000 — the Annual Grants and the 2-Year Major Grants. Within the theater field, these two grants, which complement the existing Project Grant scheme, are designed to identify and nurture local theater companies for the international stage and as national “flagship” companies for the global city. According to an NAC director, “we are saying that [Annual Grants recipients] would be our next group of semi-professionals or professional companies that we want to nurture into our ‘flagship companies’ as well. So our 2-Year Grants [recipients] are what you would call our flagship companies.”³³

This nurturing of potential flagship companies is a form of state-sponsored mobility as well as exclusion. An ex-NAC theater grants officer confirms this: “Our Project Grants [recipients] are those who get occasional support [from the NAC]. Annual Grants [recipients get more support], and finally we have our 2-Year Major Grants people [who receive the most support from the NAC]. So you could say that the Project Grants people are aspiring to Annual Grants and the Annual Grants people are aspiring to 2-Year Major Grants.”³⁴

The Project Grant is the lowest-tiered and perhaps the oldest form of state theater grant, going back as far as the Ministry of Culture in the 1970s. This grant, according to the NAC, “provides financial assistance to practising artists and non-profit distributing arts groups who wish to organize specific arts projects or events.”³⁵ Grants are given on an ad hoc and project basis. The NAC limits the amount of Project Grants to not more than 30 percent of a theater company’s total production costs.

The amount for the Annual Grant, the next level up, begins at S\$300,000. According to the NAC, this grant aims

to nurture a diverse range of full-time professional arts companies, which are artistically excellent and reflect the ethnic and cultural vibrancy of Singapore’s arts scene. The grant aims to meet part of the arts organization’s annual operating and production expenses to facilitate the development of professional staff and resources and assist in its long-term artistic and administrative growth.³⁶

The 2-Year Major Grant, which is top-tier and the most exclusive grant, supports the development of leading arts organizations in Singapore to develop, create and present innovative and artistically excellent programmes in the performing arts, nurture world-class artistic talent and build regional and/or international reputation for their work. The total grant given does not usually exceed 30 percent of the company’s total annual operating and production expenditure.³⁷

The amount for the 2-Year Major Grant may reach S\$800,000 per annum.

These three grant schemes form a hierarchy of capital distribution that, as Table 2 shows, has stratified the local theater field.

The allocation process of theater grants is as follows: The NAC invites prominent theater practitioners, academics, and critics to serve on its Arts Resource Panel (ARP) for two years. The ARP is

divided into various disciplines, namely, theater, literature, dance, visual arts, photo art, music, film, and multidisciplinary arts. Panelists from each discipline nominate companies from within their own discipline that they deem worthy of grants. The NAC then decides on the amount of funds and type of grant each nominated company receives. This does not mean that the selection process is transparent, however, as some ARP members feel they are not given enough information. According to a former ARP member, during the grants selection process, “There was no one, not even the [middle management] NAC administrators, who had a sense of authority about the whole picture.” We could nominate theater companies but did not know how much money was available for distribution. We did not know who was nominating who. Everyone was working with blinkers in a sense.”³⁸

Thus, the power to determine the mobility of a theater company and its funding lies firmly with NAC politicians and is not subject to public scrutiny. The NAC has full control over formal nominations and over budget amounts, as well as the exclusive right to determine the grant amount for each nomination. ARP members submit their nominations to the NAC individually without knowing who their fellow ARP members nominated. They are also not informed of the available grants budget for the financial year. No one group, except perhaps the NAC’s executive committee, has a sense of authority over the whole picture.

In other words, even though the nominations of the ARP are seldom rejected, and while there is no evidence of active discrimination by the NAC, there is little doubt that the balance of power lies with the NAC. Another ARP member states, “This gives NAC overall control. Everything is transparent from application to nomination until the [decisions over the] amount of money [each theater company receives]. The top people [of the NAC] can decide to give a theater group more money or less, based on say, politics or ideology of the group, but we would never know.”³⁹

The Beneficiaries of the Global City for the Arts Project

Most beneficiaries of the Global City for the Arts cultural policy have been modern dramas performed in contemporary settings by established English-language theater companies. Since their introduction in 2000, only eight different theater companies have been awarded the Annual and 2-Year Major Grants, while 113 theater companies received the Project Grants, many being repeat recipients. Of the eight Annual and 2-Year Major Grants recipients, five are established English-language contemporary theater companies (i.e., The Necessary

Table 2: Theater Companies Awarded Project, Annual, and 2-Year Major Grants

	2000-01	2001-02	2002-03
2-Year Major Grants	3	3	5
Annual Grants	5	5	3
Project Grants	35	30	48

Source: National Arts Council Annual Reports

Table 3

Theater Company	Language Medium	Grant Type (Year)
The Necessary Stage	English	2-Year Major (2000-03)
TheatreWorks	English	2-Year Major (2000-03)
The Theatre Practice	Bilingual	2-Year Major (2000-03)
Action Theatre	English	Annual (2000-01); Annual (2001-02); 2-Year Major (2002-2003)
DramaPlus	English	Annual (2000-01); Annual (2001-02); Annual (2002-2003)
Singapore Repertory Theatre	English	Annual (2000-01); Annual (2001-02); 2-Year Major (2002-2003)
Chinese Theatre Circle	Mandarin	Annual (2000-01); Annual (2001-02); Annual (2002-2003)
Teater Ekamatra	Malay	Annual (2000-01); Annual (2001-02); Annual (2002-2003)

Source: National Arts Council Annual Reports

Stage, TheatreWorks, Action Theatre, DramaPlus, and Singapore Repertory Theatre). It is thus reasonable to assume that theater companies nurtured for the international stage and deemed “flagship” companies by the NAC, as Table 3 illustrates, are predominantly established, English-language, and contemporary theater companies.

All of the English-language theater companies receiving the Annual or 2-Year Major Grants in 2000, 2001, 2002 and 2003 were formed in the late 1980s or early 1990s. They are considered “established” by local standards though some local Chinese-language theater companies have had a longer history.

One reason for the privileging of contemporary English-language theater companies is the global dominance of the English language, the language of “global consciousness.”⁴⁰ According to Scholte,

the growth of supranational spaces has spurred the development of English as global lingua franca. English has served as the chief medium of verbal communication in transborder relations. The language is now spoken by 1.7 billion people across the world, including many who have never set foot in a country to which English is native.⁴¹

The proliferation of English-medium transnational media networks like CNN, BBC, and MTV have also enabled this global consciousness to develop.⁴² The dominant status of English in the fields of international business, media, science, and academia is reflected in its status as the civil, business, and administrative language used in Singapore. English not only synchronizes the city-state with global markets, it is also the lingua franca for Singapore’s multiethnic and multilinguistic population.

Another reason for the privileging of contemporary English-language theater companies is the Western orientation of most global cities. With the exception of Tokyo, and perhaps the emerging Shanghai, conventional images and representations of vibrant global cities are predominantly European or American

ones. Such images and representations are also signifiers of global capital, which the Global City for the Arts project was designed to attract. This was emphasized in 1999 by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong who opined that “we should speak a form of English that is understood by the British, Americans, Australians, and people around the world.” But more to the point, “We cannot be a first-world economy or go global with Singlish.”⁴³ As such, Prime Minister Goh argued that local cultural products cannot be relevant to only Singapore for they would “surely lose money. If the characters [of local sitcoms] spoke Singlish, viewers overseas would not understand it.”⁴⁴ It is thus not surprising that the Singapore state seeks to emulate Western cities. According to Minister for Information, Communication and the Arts Lee Yock Suan, “Our aim is to be a global city for the arts...we look at the great cities of the world like New York City and London....These are places that people want to go to work in, to visit and to live in. We hope one day Singapore will be like that for this region.”⁴⁵

This combination of economic logic and global city emulation not only drives the Global City for the Arts project, it also informs cultural policies that, in turn, determine the selection process of theater grants. Given the need for mastery of English to tap into the world economy, the Singapore government actively seeks to engineer an English-proficient society with initiatives like the “Speak Good English” campaign, launched in 2000, the same year the *Renaissance City Report* was published. It is thus clear that when the *Renaissance City Report* states that “Artists in Singapore do not only engage in parochial themes that are relevant to Singaporeans, but are able to speak to a wider international audience, *as an Asian*” (emphasis added), this wider international audience is understood to be Western or white.⁴⁶

With English proficiency legitimized by the Singapore state, Western education and theater training is not surprisingly rewarded similarly. Almost all the artistic directors who are current recipients of Annual and 2-Year Major Grants have had overseas, predominantly Western, education or theater training. Living, learning, and sometimes working in major European and American cities, these individuals are located in the intellectual and creative *metropolises* of Western arts and theater. At universities and institutions — what Bourdieu calls “institutionalized” forms of cultural capital — local theater practitioners are imbued with the philosophies, techniques, references, and literature of Western theater, and are thus infused with Western cultural capital.⁴⁷

Returning to the local, these theater practitioners act as “forces from various *metropolises*,” with Western forms of training and cultural capital becoming localized in different ways. Such localization is prevalent in the fields of music, architecture, sciences, terrorism, spectacles, and political constitutions.⁴⁸ In using Western cultural forms and techniques, returning theater practitioners are recognized as “innovative” and are thus conferred symbolic capital from other agents in the field. According to a local theater critic, “Various styles in modern theater have been explored by local [English] theater companies. The Necessary Stage has been noted for its Brechtian influence, TheaterWorks is largely post-modern....They have managed to use such styles as vehicles to articulate local issues and narratives.”⁴⁹



Two images (above and p. 565) from The Necessary Stage's production of "god eat god" (2004). Playwright: Haresh Sharma. Director: Alvin Tan. One of the five major recipients of 2-Year Major Grants, The Necessary Stage has been noted for producing contemporary performances that show the influence of Berthold Brecht.

The Western cultural capital of returning practitioners is thus legitimized by the state. At the same time, it is supplemented by symbolic capital from fellow practitioners in the field. A playwright in a 2-Year Major Grant English-language theater company agrees:

The people from English-language theatre of the Eighties are considered "pioneers" for several reasons. We have kept in touch with the latest in terms of theories, styles and aesthetics, while many haven't for different reasons....I guess we have been the vanguard of local theater because of our innovations in local drama and openness to international trends.⁵⁰

Cultural exposure, for Ulf Hannerz, "entails an intellectual and aesthetic openness toward divergent cultural experiences, a search for contrasts rather than uniformity."⁵¹ Yet, practitioners from amateur or traditional ethnic theater practitioners who venture overseas for training are less likely to be seen to be "innovative" or "open to international trends" the way English-language practitioners are. As such, the over-representation of English-proficient and Western-educated artistic directors in the Annual and 2-Year Major Grants categories reflects the broader, more intrinsic economic interests of the Global City for the Arts project. Conversely, with the exception of the late bilingual dramatist Kuo Pao Kun, non-English language theater practitioners do not enjoy the same prestige and reputation for innovation as their English-language counterparts.

The ability of Annual and 2-Year Major Grants recipients to produce original local works has contributed significantly to their reputation. Indeed, theater companies like TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, and to a lesser extent, Action Theater and DramaPlus are firmly rooted in the local cultural scene and enjoy Annual or 2-Year Major Grants rather than Project Grants because of their



Singapore-rooted work. What distinguishes their brand of local works from those of smaller or non-English-language theater companies are higher production values as well as their appeal to local urban professionals. The difference between bigger theater companies and smaller ones is not only the greater levels of professionalism in their presentations, but also their capacity to put local stories and narratives in a modernist discursive framework. Singaporeans are told stories about themselves but in a Western format, with cultural references from both East and West. This format appeals to the well-heeled, well-traveled Singaporean.

Conclusion

A global city has to differentiate itself from other global cities in order to accentuate its identity. At the same time, it must exude enough familiarity for global tourists with mainstream tastes. Singapore has become part of the international circuit of impresario productions like *Phantom of the Opera* and *Les Misérables* if only to emulate the entertainment offerings of London's West End or New York's Broadway. Globalization's pressure on global cities to homogenize turns such cities into a global cultural corridor within which tourists, business people, and expatriates can consume and live. This global cultural corridor, to strain the metaphor further, contains a series of different cultural sites that have one thing in common — they are similarly dissimilar. Hannerz speaks of how global tourists look for the “home plus” experience, that is, the familiarity of home meshed with an easy-to-consume novelty.⁵² Similarly, the global cultural corridor brims with cosmopolitan-lite experiences while “limiting the dangers of intercultural encounters.”⁵³ As a Global City for the Arts, Singapore aims its cultural policies at, on the one hand, securing a place in this global cul-

tural corridor and, on the other, producing and championing cultural products with a local flavor that remain steadfastly and safely within the mainstream tastes of global tourists.

Contemporary English-language theater companies, most privileged in terms of state grants, clearly fit the dual objective of the state's "global" cultural policies. The ability of such theater companies to stage plays that articulate the issues and themes of Singaporean life in English endows them with widespread accessibility and a touch of novelty. Non-English-language theater companies and ethnic theater (e.g., Chinese opera or Malay traditional theater) are excluded from higher-level state grants by a selective logic that privileges the socio-cultural traits and management habits of established theater companies. Without English as a medium, these theater companies continue to be at a comparative disadvantage and find it difficult to be seen as flagship companies to be groomed for the international stage. Such theater companies are destined to remain local.

To be sure, the disadvantages of non-English-language theater companies are compounded by cultural and political factors. Chinese opera companies, for example, find it difficult to alter their *raison d'être* by performing in English, while contemporary non-English-language theater companies have much smaller audiences than their English-language counterparts because of linguistic divisions. Illustrating the latter point is an artistic director of an amateur Malay-language theater company, who says

You know, sometimes I feel damned by our language. Singapore has about 14 percent Malays. Of this, maybe 2 or 3 percent attend theater. Of this, maybe half bother to attend Malay [language] theater regularly. I always see the same old faces [at my plays]. I am sure the situation is the same with Chinese or Tamil [language] theater. Unless you are English [language] theater, I think you are condemned with a pygmy-sized audience.⁵⁴

The privileging of contemporary English-language theater companies over non-English-language ones also reflects the linguistic factor in Singapore's class divisions. Singapore's middle class is generally English-proficient, cultivated by an education system that emphasizes the mastery of English. As a result, its economic opportunities are greater than those of non-English-proficient sections of the populace. These class divisions are revisited and accentuated by the Global City for the Arts project.

In sum the Global City for the Arts project has turned a previously insular and resolutely local national cultural policy into one that is global in orientation. This outward-looking, perhaps even more liberal, cultural policy is however driven by an unwavering economic impulse. Furthermore, the *raison d'être* of early cultural policy — nation building — remains an integral part of the Global City for the Arts project. In an attempt to win international recognition for its efforts and to attract both global capital and skilled foreign workers, Singapore has shed some of its authoritarian censorship regulations. Yet, as a conductor of global processes into the local, the state replicates the inequalities and disparities of globalization.

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