

## Edwin Thumboo's "Difference": Some Dilemmas of Post-colonial Creativity

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### Abstract

Despite Edwin Thumboo's iconic status within the modern Singaporean artistic scene, observation of the highly vibrant creative and critical activity that has gone on/is still going on on that scene suggests, somewhat ironically, that he and his fellow artistes have throughout been proceeding, unrecognised, along significantly divergent paths. The paper argues that what Thumboo has to offer his fellow artistes/critics will remind them of things they cannot afford to forget, as they seem to have, if their work is to address what might be considered the main challenge of post-colonial creativity, namely, that of fashioning, out of their own available (modern *and* traditional) resources a distinct contemporary Singaporean creative voice, the voice through which they will be able to liberate themselves and their people from the epistemological, cultural and other forms of hegemony under which, through its interpellations, the dominant empire/capitalism constructed hierarchised global order is seeking to draw them. The paper supports its argument by appending an earlier unpublished paper by the author that supplies a theorised examination of activity in the Singapore theatre during the headiest days of its coming alive that predicts to its present state.

### Keywords

Post-coloniality, hegemony, creativity, voice, liberation, modernity/tradition

### Part 1: An Outline of the Issues

During the past two decades or so, I have been working towards an approach to the poetry (as well as the criticism) of Edwin Thumboo that, I believe, it might be useful, in fact even necessary, to invite interested people to engage with. Given the prolific amounts of critical writing and commentary that his work as poet and critic has near-compulsively stimulated since it first began to appear some sixty years ago and make its way into the consciousness of his people, my belief could well appear somewhat conceited. What after all might I

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possibly have to say about his work that has not already been said? And this, despite the unceasing demands for renewed critical engagement the new work that, constantly remaking himself and *Still Travelling*, across both ever-changing time and space, Thumboo continues to challenge us with, long after lesser mortals would have elected to retreat from active creativity, and from sight, under the misapprehension that their moment had passed.

The plentiful attention his work has always attracted, and continues to attract is, of course, by no means surprising. He is, after all, *the* near-institutionalised icon of a modern Singaporean creative scene that his own emergence and growth as writer and critic had, concurrently, helped very emphatically to launch on its way; though it is no diminution of the recognition of the profoundly catalytic, even seminal, impact of his work in this respect to acknowledge, too, that the accomplishment received not insubstantial backing from the considerable authority that he had garnered as a teacher and as an explicit articulator, perhaps even to some extent an unseen architect, of important aspects of the cultural ideology and policy of his emerging modern multicultural nation state as it made its way out of empire and sought to seek itself out on its own terms. The result was a massive national cultural awakening, as under the impetus given to it by all of this, the creative scene in the country burst into life, with large outpourings of creative activity, some of it very exciting indeed, being generated along all of its numerous fronts.

Little wonder that, though the Singaporean creative scene has since come a very long way from such beginnings, Thumboo and his work remain an inescapable presence in it. And yet, there is something significant missing from my account above. Even during the headiest days of the burgeoning of the arts that his work had helped inspire in his context, there had begun to appear, alongside the by then near-routine celebratory accounts of his work, critiques of it that seemed, paradoxically, to work in the opposite direction, calling into question its meaning and value, indeed its very rationale. We think particularly about the well-known controversy that took place around his famous Merlion poem at the turn of the century.

Such "dissent" is, of course, by no means necessarily a bad thing. On the contrary, it often is a sign of good health in the body creative and critical. In this particular case, it in fact greatly extended the scope and increased the depth of the entire discussion of Thumboo's work and achievement, bringing to our attention exciting new themes, issues and perspectives that greatly enriched the critical discussion of creativity in general in the country. We think especially of the highly stimulating contributions to the discussion of John Kwan-Terry, Lee Tzu Pheng (though, as it happens, she made hers as much through her own Merlion poem as through her other commentary) and Rajeev Patke. Leaving that aside, a lot of the controversy, far from diminishing the significance of Thumboo's writing seemed, rather, to reinforce its sheer inescapability on the

scene. It did so in somewhat like the intriguing way in which Shirley Lim (1982) had done a while earlier, when she had in effect sounded a provocative call to up and coming writers to as it were jettison Thumboo and liberate themselves from what she projected as his inspiring/constraining influence, so that they could search out their own distinct voices to the enhancement of the creative scene in general – if anything an acknowledgement, even while deploring it, of the overwhelming power of his presence on that scene.

There are, however, other paradoxes the “dissent” raises that are less easy to explain; and to live with. If we respond not just to the content but to the texture of the writing that continues to be unremittingly done on Thumboo’s work even in this second decade of the twenty first century, we seem to sense in at least some of it a certain lack of animation, a certain uncertainty about what to say beyond the familiar rehashes of what has already been said, as if it has issued more out of a compulsion to routinely genuflect before the icon than from an impulse to say something new about that icon’s writing that simply cries out for expression. And that is worrying; not, let me hasten to add, from Thumboo’s point of view (his place and accomplishment are secure), but for the way in which it seems, certainly to me, to indicate that this literary scene that he had played so critical a part in helping bring into being has, quite enigmatically, missed something very important about his work.

It is Koh Tai Ann (1991) who helps us place a firm finger on what lies at the heart of this startlingly ironic paradox. The spectacular material success of Singapore as it pursued modernist development had increasingly caused the younger generation of people growing up in it loudly and saturatingly surrounded by the uncountable physical manifestations of that success to acquire an impregnable sense of self-assurance and confidence. And this had helped render quite irrelevant to them the concerns and preoccupations that had inspired Thumboo and his generation of pioneering creative artistes in their struggles to construct for their fledgling nation and its people, as they clawed their way out of empire, a sense of their own distinct contemporary subjectivities and identity. But this is a reaction that misses completely what most distinguishes Thumboo’s work, the vision that assigns to it a kind of meaning that neither his country nor his people can afford to lose sight of except at considerable cost to themselves. This claim in fact lies at the very centre of the approach that, I mentioned above, I have been developing to his work.

To make sense of that claim, it is necessary to remind ourselves of some of the basics of the problematic not just of post-colonial creativity, but more, of the notion of post-coloniality itself that underlies it – though I immediately hasten to warn readers that Thumboo himself has little use for the notion as a theoretical construct, at least as it is drawn upon in mainstream discussions of literary and other forms of creativity. However that might be, it seems useful to

me in probing writing from former colonial countries like Singapore (and also Malaysia, India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and so on) to look at the acts of creativity in them from the viewpoint of how they link up with a major emancipatory project that all such countries found themselves urgently engaged in as they broke free of empire. The preceding centuries had seen the world being reconstituted by the structuring operations of (an emergent and consolidating) capitalism and empire riding on each other's shoulders into a unity outside of which no country could possibly set itself. That unity, however, was a grossly hierarchised one, within which the former colonies had been assigned unequal positions as the dispossessed "Other" by the structuring operations involved (Ahmad 1992). The liberatory challenge confronting the newly dependent nations now was to address the problems their membership of that contradictory unity had raised for them, with a view to wresting for themselves positions of equality and dignity within the unequal world order it had helped define.

This had an imperative material dimension, which tended to express itself in terms of the pursuit of such familiar notions as modernist "development," "progress" and so on, grounded in the kind of economic activity that capitalism had helped bring into being. But that was not the only dimension of the post-colonial project. Consubstantial with it was an equally fundamental epistemological, ontological, existential and political-ideological dimension, a seemingly "non-material" dimension, defining itself considerably by reference to how the pursuit of the material dimension worked. The problem was that the nature of that pursuit was determined essentially by a pure empirical instrumental rationality legitimating itself entirely on the basis of its own predetermined practical ends and their attainment. This mode of rationality, however, did more than simply legitimate that pursuit on its own self-sufficient terms. Operating through the new and different kinds of instrumentalities and functionaries that the new form of economic activity had helped generate, most notably the market forces critical to it and, also, the modern nation-state (in practical terms a national(ist) bourgeois state), it also helped naturalise and normalise, across the entire reconstituting global order, the world views, modes of knowledge and understanding, interests, concerns and so on of the then-emerging bourgeois forces who, historically, were at the helm of it all and who eventually came to assume hegemony within it.

In the case of the former colonial countries of the kind under attention, all of this came at the cost of the particular forms of knowledge and the distinctive perspectives on and understandings of themselves and of the meanings of their lives and existence that the individuals and communities that made them up had over the ages come to take control of from out of their own specific historical modes of evolution, being and existence. Such forms of knowledge and so on defined the distinct epistemological and other resources

that these individuals and communities were already in possession of for the purpose of working out how they would most want to fashion and live their lives in ways that would make sense to them.

It is all of this that what was described above as the “non-material” dimension of the post-colonial project entailed, involving an effort to retrieve, considerably from the inherited cultural traditions and modes of being and living of the peoples and individuals concerned, something of these resources as a counter to the interpellations of the dominant world order that would reshape their thinking and their understanding in ways that would serve the concerns and interests of those in hegemonic control of that order. (These latter forces, as it happens, have now been rendered even stronger by their effective spread across the globe by the transnationalisation of capital and by the servility to that dominant order of its major historically appointed functionary, the national(ist) bourgeois state.) Such endeavours to recuperate the indigenous forms of knowledge and so on vitally needed, of course, to keep well in sight Fanon’s salutary warning (1961/1968) of the futility, given the inevitable dialectical re-organisation that has taken place within history of the “pristine” sensibility and experience of all peoples and places, of trying to get back to a past from which they had already emerged.

The assumption that all of this is salient to the issue of artistic creativity rests, clearly, on a further assumption that the “texts” produced by such creativity bear an especial relation to it all, particularly to the task of fashioning for the communities of their producers and consumers an idiom or “voice,” as it were, for the construction, expression and exploration of their subjectivities and identities along lines that made sense to them. Joyce’s Stephen Daedalus supplies us with a most resonant metaphor for the characterisation of that task, when he speaks of his struggles to forge in the smithy of his soul the uncreated conscience of the race. The specific wording of the metaphor helps remind us very sharply of the “non-material” dimension of the whole issue, a non-material dimension that involved the recuperation of one’s own epistemological and other resources, both those inherited from the past and those acquired from the changing/changed circumstances around one.

It is against the background of such considerations that we might try to understand the paradoxes we have remarked on above, and more than even just them, some of the dilemmas of post-colonial creativity that they seem to point to. The modern nation state Singapore, we recall, had from the beginning unambiguously determined that along the material front it would seek out its destiny in terms of the notions of development and progress that had been set in place during the preceding centuries by the dominant unified modern global order that had taken shape under the workings of capitalism/empire. The spectacular material achievements of Singapore mentioned above were the outcome of its unwavering commitment to those notions and the methods of

instrumental thinking, decision making and action they entailed. But as we have noted above, this lay the nation open to the subversive workings of the dominant order along the various critically important "non-material" fronts, as, through the interpellations issued by its comptrollers, people were rendered vulnerable to epistemological, political-ideological, ontological, existential and suchlike forms of appropriation that could render them subservient to that dominant order and its modes of thinking and doing, with, of course, the degree of vulnerability increasing in proportion to the degree of material success attained and the strength of the confidence and assurance that success helped generate.

This in fact is the scenario that Koh Tai Ann describes above, representing what Thumboo has in more than one place referred to as the "problems of success" – "problems," because the reflex of the success has been a form of overriding and un-self-questioning confidence that has caused obliviousness of the price that might have been paid along the "non-material" front for the success. And if some of the major concerns of their own institutionalised icon have ceased to matter to the people who nurse that confidence, this is precisely because those concerns are, precisely, with the "non-material" dimension of the entire situation. Not that these have ever been his only concerns. Thumboo's commitment to his nation and his people as they made their way out of empire into their own has always remained responsibly cognisant of the material dimension of the struggle – but never at the cost of losing sight of its critical "non-material" dimension. Which is why so very much of his poetry, then as even now, seeks to bring integrally together the "new visions" of the modern Singapore and the "ancestral dreams" that supplied its diverse peoples with resources of their very own that they had inherited from the historical circumstances of their emergence. It is out of this dialectic in his work, emerging in turn out of the dialectics of his various situations (manifested as the various paradoxes we noted earlier), that Thumboo strives to create the kind of firm ground on which he and his people need to stand on if they are at all to answer firmly back to empire and its continuing neo-colonial depredations along both the material and the "non-material" fronts (see Kandiah 2005).

In a rather damning sense, this precisely is what not just Koh Tai Ann's new generation but, more disturbingly, too much of the "dissent" and the accompanying critiques have missed in Thumboo's work. From one point of view, the latter appear to be "progressive" and liberatory enough. Thumboo's overt identification in his actions and in various of his pronouncements with various initiatives of his modernising nation state are, understandably, taken as evidence of his endorsement of the grand narrative of post-Enlightenment modernism, and its patriarchal leanings. But that is to miss a lot of what else he is trying to do in his writing, something that will only reveal itself through close reading of the words on his pages, against the background of the larger

socio-political and other such issues that are necessarily intertwined with them, as well of the intertextual matters that might throw themselves in our way. But that ability to read seems to be exactly the ability that is fast being lost in the world of literary criticism, ironically because of the fashionable cultivation of *avant gardiste* post-structuralism, which one would have thought would direct attention sharply to the workings of the word within the “text,” serving as handmaid to *avant gardiste* post-modernism.

These latter two fashions, contrary to their own protestations among the more significant epistemological and ideological purveyors and transmitters of the interpellations of the dominant global order, have also other pernicious consequences. Serving in effect to valorise uncertainty, contingency, the eternal deferment of meaning, unrealisation, non-arrival, “non-identity,” radical relativism and so on, they get in the way of a recognition of Thumboo’s attempt to fashion an artistic idiom for his multi-linguistic/cultural post-colonial people, one that would enable them to speak back to (an always self-perpetuating) empire with a strong sense of where they stand within their surrounding modern realities and who, variously and non-homogeneously, they are, and can be. By releasing them in the name of liberation to drift loose on a vast unchartered ocean of neither-here-nor-thereness that, intriguingly, is totally at odds with the absolute sense of confidence generated by the material successes, this, again ironically given the claims made, plays directly into the hands of an ever-renewing patriarchal empire, as represented by the dominant, hegemonic bourgeois world order – a case of the accusers being found guilty of the very crime the accused is charged with, while at the same time failing to recognise that the accused’s own approach might have just that much better a chance of positively addressing the problematic of post-colonial creativity than they. The result is that intellectual license is given to the creative scene to totally set aside Thumboo, the declared icon and what he stands for, and to proceed headlong and with immense confidence along a different way from that which Thumboo has pointed to his nation. The way elected for instead is the way of a renewing empire that had from the beginning, it appears from the evidence, begun to be set in concrete both in the performance of creativity in the context and in its criticism. The present teeming artistic scene is undeniably a very lively, vibrant one indeed, and suffused with a blinding kind of glamour and glitter. But while it generates among its occupants an exhilarating sense of truly belonging within, even perhaps hosting, a very richly diverse and hugely lively global artistic order, it seems to show no particular concern with what could properly be heard as a distinct Singaporean voice, at the most fundamental level betraying rather compliance with the interpellations of the dominant world order. And it is here, perhaps, that Thumboo still has an important contribution to make, as he has always had, to those creating around him.

What is set down above constitutes not even the barest sketch of the approach to Thumboo's writing that, I mentioned at the start, I have been working at for some time now, and it is, very evidently, far too bare, and set down very inadequately. The claims made are large, and if they are to carry conviction they will absolutely need to be formulated with far greater care and supported, among other things, by careful detailed argumentation and close analysis of actual works produced, not just by Thumboo but also by the best of those writing around him, the work against which his writing needs to be placed in order to highlight the important differences between him and them on which so many of my claims are based.

In the circumstance under which I found myself needing to write this essay, however, there was no way in which I could at all have done any of this. These circumstances were that I had, all within a space of, literally, just fourteen days, to conceive of, write up and submit this paper for publication in time to meet the deadline for inclusion in the special issue of *Asiatic* that Mohammad Quayum was bringing out to commemorate Edwin Thumboo's 80<sup>th</sup> birthday – and all that in the midst of doing a large number of absolutely unavoidable practical chores that were both time consuming and exhausting in the extreme.

Fortunately, I had at hand a means of redeeming myself. Some 15 or more years ago, while I was yet resident in Singapore, I had written a paper on Singapore theatre that was never published owing to the lack of interest the editors of the volume in which it was to appear showed to make sure that the volume was in fact published. I reproduce this paper in full below (inclusive of its rather tendentious title), not simply as a "filler" but as something essential to the argument I have been trying to present above. Although written over fifteen years ago, it seems to me from my observations of the artistic scene during several visits to Singapore since, to be still entirely relevant today, indeed even more so because the massive sense of confidence and achievement, in no way conducive to self-reflexivity, that the current artistic scene obviously manifests. The relevance derives from the theorisation that the paper offers of the theatrical activity observed, the kind of theorisation that in principle predicts, hopefully illuminatingly, to the present scene, thereby helping account for and explain so much of what is going on by reference to basic underlying assumptions about artistic creativity under the specific conditions of post-coloniality. The paper, hopefully capturing some of the excitement and energy of the heady moment of extraordinary activity that the Singapore theatre found itself at the time, represents exactly the kind of detailed analysis and argumentation that, I recognised above, was needed to fill in the account I have set down above of the dilemmas of post-colonial creativity as experienced in Singapore. To the extent that it does fulfil the expectations I have here expressed of it, it will, I hope, help give my paper the solid content, roundedness and conviction that is needed.



## Part 2: The Illustrative Paper

*The Threshold as Entrance(?)/Deferment(?)/Non-arrival(?)/Plight(?)/Vogue(?)/....(?): "Liminality" and the English Theatre in Singapore*

When I first saw the term "liminality" in the title of the Conference at which this paper was presented, I felt that some kind of protest was in order, even in the innocuous form of the dissociation of myself from the event. The term (crudely translatable, for the moment, as "transitionality" or "the condition of being on the threshold") represented one of the newest lexical infiltrations of the world of the Singapore theatre and the arts, arriving within the critical vocabulary of that world from the post-modernist-structuralist discourse of the dominant global academic centres. It shared with similar esoteric terms that had already arrived or were about to arrive there from the same source (for instance, "appropriation," "difference," "disjuncture," "essentialism," "*le quotidien*," "metatext," "aporia," "totalizing" and so on) a certain intimidatory exclusive quality. It was a quality that seemed to proclaim the collective infelicity of all of these terms together in, particularly, the sphere of drama, which, if Synge was right, is the most collaborative of the arts. Critically included among the collaborators in this art are the large mass of ordinary people who, presumably, must form a significant part of the audience who provide it with its essential imaginative and experiential sustenance even as they receive such sustenance from it. But, it is just they whom these strange terms keep out of discussions of the art and consign to the silence of the margins; and this, in turn, raises significant doubts about the value, from the point of view of *understanding*, of the assumptions that the users of these terms make about the state and nature of the art on the basis of what *they* presume must be, or ought to be, the perceptions and concerns of the collaborators.

When one presumes, in this or any manner, one becomes presumptuous, which is always something undesirable. But, let us turn to other serious reservations that also require articulation. Representing as they do the latest in critical high culture (the term to use is, of course, *haute couture*), words such as those under comment here can have a strong seductive power over unwary minds. This power can be dangerous, for, to the extent that we succumb to it, we run the danger of being enticed into that state of "radical unsurpassable uncertainty" which, in the post-modernist-structuralist discourse, almost invariably lurks behind the words, though under the guise of an otherwise impeccable and laudable open-endedness. This is a dark-hued state whose accoutrements are ambiguity, neither-here-nor-thereness, meaninglessness, fragmentation, unrealisation, alienation, *angst*, *anomie* and so on, all of those actually modernist nullities which, many post-modernists/-structuralists would have us believe, define our contemporary human condition.

However, Thumboo and Kandiah (1995), and again Kandiah (1997), argue that luxuriating in such radically indeterminate states of mind could only

help subvert the task of post-colonial recovery and reconstruction that all former colonies, including Singapore, are inescapably engaged on, as much in the realms of artistic creation and expression as in the more "worldly" ones. Such states of mind would induce diversionary mystifications that would make it all that more difficult for these ex-colonies to see clearly through their overpowering negativism to the vital positions and concerns that validate their entire endeavour. It is in terms of such positions and concerns alone that they could properly identify the nature of the complex problems that their erstwhile subjugated condition had placed on them and arrive at the responses to these problems that they need to define, and anything that interferes with their proper understanding demands to be set aside. And, if the now-unfashionable Eliot (1933) was right in suggesting that a critical tradition is integrally tied to the creative tradition it comments on, re-affirming the concerns that most deeply inspire the creative writers, then the increasing intrusions of the post-modernist/-structuralist critical discourse upon the Singapore English theatre world must cause some perturbation.

Yet, in spite of the implicit association of the Conference with all of these uncongenial matters by its use of the term "liminality" in its title, my contemplated protest was not made and this paper *was* delivered. Moreover, it was written in language which did not always try too hard to eschew the "scary" terms referred to above, partly with the intention of showing that their sound and fury need not intimidate anyone, partly so that those who cannot say or hear anything at all without the aid of such terms but who determine too many things in the world of the arts to be disregarded might not feel that their crutches had been unfairly taken away from them.

The reasons for foregoing the opportunity for protest could not but have been compelling ones. The most telling among these is that even a casual glance at the actual practice of the Singapore theatre world might appear, at least initially, to provide incontrovertible evidence that liminality *is* indeed one of its essential defining characteristics, an inescapable fact of its existence. Such facts cannot simply be set aside. But that is not all. Even as we recognise that they might indeed be there, we experience certain misgivings that things are not entirely what they seem, inviting us to examine them for what they might actually mean, an exercise which cannot but enhance our understanding of the theatre world.

But let us start by looking at the evidence that, presumably, points to the relevance of the notion in the theatre world. Everywhere we look, we see an insatiable appetite for innovation, an enormous restless energy expressing itself, very excitingly it must be said, in ceaseless experimentation. This is a kind of experimentation that engenders, within what is objectively the tiny physical space that Singapore is, an extraordinary range of artistic performances, diverse in their forms, themes, techniques, aims, whatever. Within the space of any two

years, for instance, we can expect to see foreign plays, “home grown” plays, adaptations, problem plays, docu-drama, psychological plays, educational plays, forum theatre, monologue drama, “bite-sized” plays, absurdist theatre, “installation art,” multilingual plays, multi-focus theatre, multi-media drama, music theatre, musicals, café theatre, *avant garde* theatre, quarry, warehouse, shopping mall and other such site specific theatres, experiments with Asian aesthetics, including productions of Yuan *zaju* plays performed in Beijing opera style in English, and so on. (The terms I use in the preceding list are those that have been thrown up in discussions of theatre in Singapore.)

Such innovative and experimental diversity appears to be a hallmark of liminality, as the main advocate of the notion, Victor Turner (1974; 1979), describes it. In his account of the fundamentally processual social and cultural “rites of passage” which take place when individuals and groups move from one social state or place to another, liminality is the transitional or threshold state “betwixt and between the categories of ordinary social life” (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors* 53) and their familiar reference points. This state is marked by a rich variety of symbolic ritualistic or ceremonial activities which are directed towards loosening the cultural connections of the subjects or groups with the previously established social structure or order and detaching them from it. These are an essential step towards the attainment of the final state of the process, when what Turner calls “*communitas*” is established through the reaggregation of the individual or group and their return to a “new, relatively stable and well-defined position in the total society” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 16). *Communitas* is the ideal community in which essential, generic, encompassing human bonds surpassing the always “exclusive” ones of mere social structure (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 49, 150) are established, now displaying new kinds of boundaries, which, “ideally,” are “coterminous with those of the human species” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 44).

The ritualistic and ceremonial activities of people in the transitional liminal state enable this consummation of the process through “anti-structural” “play,” that is, play that is directed towards the dissolution of the “normative social structure” with its exclusive bonds (Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 20, 49). It is a state that represents a “free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combinatory rules may be introduced” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 21). In it, “people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 20), producing “innumerable... forms of topsy-turvydom, parody, abrogation of the normative system” and so on (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 38). This helps liberate individual human’s “capacities of cognition, affect, volition, creativity, etc.” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 40) from the necessary constraints the existing social structure places on them as a result of their social statuses and roles within it, and constitutes, therefore, an essential means of

attaining the desired goal of the establishment of anti-structural *communitas*. Post-Industrial Revolution societies carry these activities out in a "liminoid" state, rather than in a strictly liminal state, which is more appropriate to tribal and agrarian cultures (see below for some relevant comments on the differences between these two very similar states). But, as in the strictly liminal state, the genres of art people produce in this liminoid state "*play* with the factors of culture, sometimes assembling them in random, grotesque, improbable, surprising, shocking, usually experimental combinations" (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 36).

A lot of this almost appears at a superficial glance to underline the rightness of the term "liminality" for describing what is going on in the Singapore theatre. This receives reinforcement from a further fact. Since liminality, from what has been said about it above, is clearly "an ambiguous state," it "may be for many the acme of insecurity... the breakdown without compensatory replacement of normative, well defined social ties and bonds.... It may be *anomie*, alienation, *angst*, the three fatal *alpha* sisters of many modern myths" (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 43-44). In this respect, too, the Singapore theatre seems on the surface to justify the theme of the conference. The penchant of this theatre for uncertain or negative states of mind has previously been remarked on (Pandian, "What's Happened to Theatre?", "Limited by Angst" and "The problem is Quality"; Kandiah, "Seven Authors in Search of the Singaporean Play" 1994). In more recent times, however, these have, as it were, been elevated to the status of a mission and explicitly adopted as such in some of the most highly profiled theatre activity. This work, by some of the most exciting and dedicated theatre practitioners around, overtly sets out to "create a theatre with unanswered questions," through experiment and innovation which not just "blur... lines" but also, with a certain adolescently reckless insouciance, celebrate "incoherence and fractured surfaces" (Tsang "Celebration of Innovation"). Indeed, the particular habit of mind or perspective that all of this collectively gives expression to is considered by many inhabitants of the theatre world to be among its most distinguishing traits. More significantly, it seems to be becoming the basis of a kind of class system that is, deplorably, in the process of being nurtured into existence *within* the theatre world. This is being done through unequivocal claims that there is a "great divide" in the theatre world, with the theatre which most exemplifies the habit of mind and which, therefore, "challenges" people, being singled out for investiture as a kind of aristocracy of the theatre at the expense of the rest of the theatre, which "go(es) down easy," "pander(ing) to the audience with productions which offer little more than entertainment" (Koh Boon Pin "Year of the Great Divide").

The habit of mind unabashedly acknowledges its dependence on and derivation from "the whole idea of post-modernism" (and, we might add, post-

structuralism), which, as it happens, generates an art that, we are also, not insignificantly, reminded, “receiv(es) a lot of attention in the arts centres of the world – New York, Tokyo, London and Berlin” (Tsang “Celebration of Innovation”). And the notion of liminality itself, as Schechner’s essay on Turner reminds us and Turner himself affirms, seems to reflect very much the post-modern/structural turn of mind (Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* 7-20, 79). This reanimates the note of scepticism my paper began with, by hinting at the likelihood of a superficial and imitative fashionability, a certain irrelevance, with all that these entail. Obviously, however, scepticism alone is insufficient; we need to find out whether it is justified, and why. The theatre world seems to give us reason to believe that it is. For, while the practitioners show themselves to be quite immune to any weak-minded doubts about the relevance of these borrowings from post-modernism/-structuralism, their collaborators within their community, very significantly, show by their response that they are not so sure – “the public at large” are not too happy with this theatre, finding it “arty,” “pretentious” and “inaccessible,” so that “box-office takings” suffer (Pandian “What’s Happened to Theatre?”; Koh Boon Pin “Out to Create Theatre” and “Year of the Great Divide”).

The easiest temptation here, of course, is to blame this state of affairs on the collaborators, who might be accused of being driven by the philistinist demand for “sugar candy for the masses”; and, as one of the citations above indicates, some of the theatre commentary is not too averse to yielding to the temptation. The following remarks, however, clearly signal that this must be but an evasion, for they come from T. Sasitharan, one of the most thoughtful and enlightened of the arts critics around: “it is by no means clear to me that the quality of artistic output today is any better than it was seven years ago. That is, in fact, a generous estimate. By most accounts, the quality of work by the bulk of Singaporean artists is on the decline” (“Be Careful”). The remarks are all the more compelling for the very just (not simply generous) recognition that prefaces them, namely that “There is no doubt that the last twenty years of arts in Singapore, and the last seven especially, have been remarkable by any reckoning.”

Which places us at the heart of the paradox that, as I have expressed it elsewhere, the practice and criticism of the Singapore theatre show it to be caught up in, namely that while much is going on little seems to be happening (“Audience and Form” 4). For all the bustlingly confident activity that is taking place in it, the theatre world cannot seem to escape a persistent sense of insufficiency and non-arrival. This is a paradox that, crucially, we need to recognise, explain and understand if the theatre is to transform itself into a theatre of arrival which will have life within its community.

And as we attempt to do so, we begin to find out that, notwithstanding some of the observations made just a moment ago, “liminality” does not in fact

seem to be quite the right term to describe what is going on in the theatre world. Central to the notion is the issue of arrival within a community. This, after all, is what liminality is all about, with the symbolic ritualistic moves that characterise the state deriving all of their meaning and their "cultural creativity" from their "trembling" anticipation of the unstructured *communitas* of the future which they are the essential means of arriving at (Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 21, 41). Doubtless, this *communitas* is not to be seen in essentialist terms, or as an ultimate fixed or static "predetermined ordering." In its inextricable involvement with the processual anti-structural, it remains "intrinsically dynamic, never quite being realized" and, through the "ever-to-be repeated achievement of the process of regularization," perpetually arriving (Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 75, 68). At the same time, it remains decidedly "the consummation of (the) process," "the meaning of every part" of which is assessed by its contribution to the "total result" (Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 92-93).

But this over-riding sense of community, even in some kind of anticipatory or remote manner, is just what the energetic activity of the Singapore theatre world is wanting in. Almost all of it lacks the magicality of the moves of symbolic ritualism inspired by the irrevocable goal of *communitas*. It emerges, instead, as a frenetic symptom not of ever-arriving but of never-arriving, vigorous movement, but not, as in a rite of passage, to somewhere.

The absence of the sense of community that could make the difference is evident in the conspicuous absence of *connection* both among the different theatre practices themselves and between these practices and the public they are in principle at least directed towards. The offerings emanate in all their variety from separate little pockets of activity, each associated with its own group of people who are committed to doing their own thing as they choose, in ways that profile them distinctly and project them as prominent singular presences. No doubt, as will be noticed below, this activity does display certain common characteristics. But these are too often a symptom less of interactive fraternal participation in a collective endeavour defined by shared fundamentals than of a common submergence in certain socio-historically constituted external conditions which of their nature appear not to be too conducive to such togetherness. Ultimately, therefore, the activity emerges as a disparate set of highly individualistic initiatives pulling in different directions rather than as a communal endeavour that in richly diverse ways moves the theatre towards whatever ever-changing future it is seeking out for itself.

As regards the other matter of the relationship of these various practices to the public, what has already been said earlier indicates that the theatre, at least in its most visible and highly profiled doings, manifests this tendency towards counter-communality in its most untoward form. That it cannot responsibly avoid making discerning discriminations is undeniable. The world

from which it needs to draw its audience is the English speaking world which, by virtue of the realities of the historical evolution of contemporary Singapore, is an elite world, which has as a matter of unquestioning and unquestioned right assumed a dominant presence and position within the Singaporean landscape. It is also a prosperous world, which has made no great effort to shut its door on popular and middlebrow western material and consumerist culture. The image that many, though obviously not all, of its inhabitants project of it is too often, therefore, a glossy, glamorous one of designer labels, expensive cars, fast lanes, fast food, pagers, “hand phones” and other innumerable such fashionable gadgets, habits, styles and practices emblematic of vulgar affluence. The glitter of this image cannot, however, conceal its superficiality and its shallowness, and its incapacity for deeper concerns, all of which make it an unpromising source of sustenance for the theatre.

But, it is not only people who represent these tendencies who populate the world of the theatre’s potential audience, there are many others who, with or without “hand phones,” are profoundly engrossed in the things that matter in their everyday lives and in working out their own positions on them in the ways that make the most sense to them from their experience. It is just such people who would go to the theatre not for fashionable self-indulgence but in search of something of value that they can get from it while being entertained. But, it is they, “intelligent” earnest seekers, who find themselves “frustrated” by theatre which they cannot understand and are “alienated by”; and, as we shall see in a moment, it is precisely they who for that very reason stand condemned. There is a very revealing irony in the whole situation. The response of these people to the off-beat experimentality of the theatre derives from a candid recognition of its inauthenticity, its inability to stand up to the truth of their experience. This is just the kind of honest discernment that we would expect a theatre that stakes its claims for validity and acceptance on a self-professed open-endedness to see as promising input from its collaborators and to embrace very warmly. What we get instead is a remoulding of it as a destructive oppositionality, by translating it distortingly into an “instinctive... anti-intellectual desire to link anything artistic with obscurity and difficulty” (Koh Buck Song “Literature and the Arts Could Benefit”) and a demand for “productions which offer little more than entertainment” (Koh Boon Pin “Year of the Great Divide”). The outcome is exclusion of its “perpetrators” from the collaborative realm.

What the self-professed “open-ended” theatre reveals itself to be, then, is an exclusive, hegemonic, elite theatre which cannot respect its presumed collaborators enough to open itself to them and seek out whatever sustenance it might usefully draw from them, preferring rather to silence them and take upon itself the role of telling them what is good for them. Worse, what in our self-aware times is very difficult to believe, this elitism is even explicitly extolled as

something desirable: "Literature and the arts could benefit from more elitism" (Koh Buck Song "Literature and the Arts Could Benefit"). Not the slightest trace of sensitivity to the massive irony here, given the valorisations, in the post-modern gospels from which the driving ideas are derived, of *le quotidien*, which, surely, must involve the everyday lives of "ordinary" people? When, on top of all this, it is further recognised that the representatives of the elite who thus get selected for benediction tend to include, in the absence of the discerning protestors who have been banished from the scene, those who are more representative of the superficial, fashionable dimensions of elite life styles remarked on above, the whole situation begins to look even more preposterously unreal.

But we have still not seen the worst of it. Among those who are shut out of the collaborative endeavour by such exclusivity are not just the more discerning among the English-using elite, those from whom the theatre may be expected to derive its most immediate sustenance, but also the large majority of "ordinary" people who go to make up the community within which this elite has its existence. These are the people we would meet in the "neighbourhoods," the HDB estates, the wet markets, the *kopitiams*, the hawkker centres, at indigenous cultural happenings and so on. Through the vibrant vitality of their multi-varied contribution to the life of these places and occasions, these people play a major role in defining the unique character and experience of the community as a whole, those things which most foundationally define its distinctive identity. Without that community the elite will not even have a context out of which they may project themselves and their doings and validate them, and not just them but, indeed, their very existence, let alone their pretensions.

That is not all that the "ordinary" people contribute. Their words and practices, more immediately and manifestly than those of the elite, embody the memories of the great cultural traditions out of which all members of this community alike arrived to be what they are today. Through these, they have also contributed in large measure to the fashioning of the lens through which the elite as much as they learn to recognise themselves as distinct selves and to speak and explore the unique narratives of their lives and experience meaningfully and with conviction. Not least, this is because these lens enable them to see right back into the heart of their traditions and to access the deep-rooted resources of blood, imagination and intellect that they most immediately need for the creation of the contemporary metaphysics that will enable them to reconstruct themselves in the ways that their modern post-colonial realities challenge them to.

For all this, except where they serve some use or provide opportunities for ostentatious acts of patronage, these people tend to be consigned to a separate constituency, a constituency of Others who, if they are not invisible,



still remain essentially faceless and voiceless, at most the beneficiaries but never the originators of initiatives. This allows them, in spite of their large presence on the Singapore landscape, to be treated as if they did not exist, to be constituted as (near-)absences and, largely, ignored, or, which is worse, taken for granted. From the point of view of the theatre, this only helps sever access to yet another source of rooted communal sustenance, the experience of the people who so much make the place what it is – though it needs, of course, to be recognised that this access would, even for a sentient, non-elite *English* theatre, considerably be from the outside.

Clearly, the counter-communality which all of this reveals is strongly contrary to the nature of liminality. In the liminal state in traditional societies, the ritual subjects assume a very unostentatious stance within a “sort of social limbo,” as they are brought “to a homogenous social state” marked by “anonymity” through disciplinary processes of “levelling” and “effacement” which, “enforced by sociocultural ‘necessity,’ ” they are “obliged” to go through (Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 16, 40, 19, 18, 53, 39). It is thus that they arrive at a “sense of comradeship and communion, or *communitas*,” a state that is “undifferentiated (and) egalitarian” and combines within itself qualities of “lowliness... homogeneity, and comradeship,” thus ensuring that it truly is “a fact of everyone's experience” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 149, 150, 151). The contrast between all of this and the highly self-regarding individualistic activities pursued not obligatorily but as a matter of individual choice in the theatre world described above cannot be greater. These activities project the practitioners in very high profile, and wrest for them a place in the limelight that is all the more prominent for their singularity. In their exclusivity, they also, as we have seen, constitute a basis for claims for an exalted elitist separateness from the less equal people around them.

It might, of course, be possible to explain some of this by the fact that what we have here is a post-industrial community, the features of which cause the activity during the rites of passage to be liminoid rather than strictly liminal. Liminal phenomena, even while inverting the *status quo*, tend to be collective and “integrated into the total social process”; liminoid phenomena, on the other hand, tend to lay stress on “the individual innovator, the unique person who dares and opts to create” (Turner, *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 53, 40). They tend, therefore, to be “characteristically individual products” created, on the basis of the individual exercise of choices, by the “solitary artist” or by “particular groups” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 53, 51, 54).

For all this, even liminoid activity is not carried out “*ex nihilo*” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 51). It too is driven by the goal of anti-structural *communitas* and is directed towards the liberation of “what has been bound by social structure,” so that it too has “collective” or “‘mass’ effects” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 149, 53). However, since, unlike liminal activity, it tends

to be individual rather than collective and, also, to remain apart from the central social processes, its pursuit of its goal takes it beyond the mere inversion of the *status quo*, of which it is "highly critical," to its subversion (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 36). Thus it expresses itself in the form of "social critiques... of the mainstream economic and political structures and organizations," which often "put down... the central values" these express (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 54, 37).

If there is some faint evidence of any of this at all on the Singapore stage, it is in the realm of sexuality. Non-mainstream sex seems to be of absorbing interest to many practitioners, and four letter words or their technical counterparts indispensable to almost any dialogue, while opportunities are created to get the actors to take off as many of their clothes as the censors will allow them to get away with. In one play, there even was an act of cunnilingus on stage, made safe and seemly by being kept concealed from direct sight. Plays that, the way they are presented, would not make a novice nun blush seek out R(A) ratings as badges of distinction. It is often not at all easy to see the functionality, necessity or effectiveness, let alone the "meaning," of a great deal of this. The consequence is that it emerges a lot of the time as amusing, rather in the way that the little girl is amusing who picked up a word which the coyness of the adult response to it told her was naughty and then got great delight from by running all over the place shouting it out at the top of her voice although she did not have the faintest idea of what it meant. The amusement subsides, however, when we consider the response of the artists to the reservations expressed to the tendency by the collaborators, many of whom do not see that it has much point and who also find it so removed from the experience they know and value as to be offensive (Richard Lim "Criticise"; also *Life! The Straits Times*, 10 August, 1992). The fierceness of the contempt with which artists tend to dismiss the reservations of these people, who are presumably those on behalf of whom this activity is undertaken, calls into question its liminoid status. For one thing, it shows an obsessiveness that is inconsistent with the ability to choose, with the optionality that distinguishes the liminoid. More important, such fierceness never seems to find expression with any other subject, perhaps suggesting that what all of this activity is doing is facilitating an evasion of engagement with the issues that might really matter in the pursuit of *communitas*, by bringing about an "exasperating deflection of the serious into the trivial" (*Life! The Straits Times*, 1 April, 1992).

If this is true, then the Singapore theatre cannot be engaged in the liminoid activity of anti-structurally challenging the *status quo*, with the objective of liberating the "plurality of alternative models for living" latent in it (Turner *Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 27) and repossessing them for the creative transformation of it into *communitas*. On the contrary, it remains so very much a product of that *status quo* as to even effectively reproduce it, fundamentally

reaffirming through its activities the epistemology and ontology inscribed into it. A “distorted mirror image, mask, or cloak for structural activity in the ‘centres’ or ‘mainstreams’ of ‘productive social labour,’ ” what in effect the theatre does, therefore, is to “buttress, reinforce, justify, or otherwise... legitimate the prevailing social and cultural mores and political orders” (*Process, Performance and Pilgrimage* 27, 36). Doubtless, a lot of it deals with recognisable social problems, and even the musical *Mortal Sins* tried to invest itself with some weight by dealing with such a problem. But, this is never done in a manner that attempts to interrogate and challenge any structural fundamentals that might be involved at the more decisive human depths.

The argument presented up to now, by calling attention to the counter-communal nature of the theatre and, further, to the way in which it remains implicated in the *status quo*, indicates that what is going on can hardly be usefully accounted for in terms of liminoid or liminal activity, or even of some curious combination of the two. But this still leaves us with the task of explaining the heavy presence in the theatre of *alienation, angst, anomie*, uncertainty, ambiguity and so on, which, as indicated earlier, are included among the hallmarks of liminality. The first thing to note here is that uncertainty, ambiguity and so on are about the last things which may be associated with the Singaporean community within and out of which the theatre creates. The spectacular success story of Singapore, materially evident in everything around them that peoples’ eyes fall on, and woven into the fabric of their everyday life styles and experience, makes them unthinkable. In addition, the unremitting near-daily celebrations by the media of this success, supported by attested achievements and supplemented by graphic accounts of the often disastrous problems of other countries across the world, create a confident and optimistic first/best in the region/world-outlook, which has powerful imaginative actuality for very many people.

None of this is remotely conducive to negative states of mind; and yet they proliferate in the arts, crying out for explanation. Koh (1991) provides an explanation which is very relevant to my argument. This is that such states of mind are the consequence of precisely the success that the nation has achieved in recent times. The first generation of writers were true liminars. Their task was to take themselves and their people out of a colonial world into a new imaginative home of their own. That world had been created over just the preceding five centuries or so by the triumph of industrial capitalism and its spread and consolidation by empire. The result was the institution of a hegemonic global order which secured the pre-eminence of those at the dominant centres partly at least by reconstituting and subverting other cultures and other ways of seeing and doing things, mis-re-presenting them as shadows and absences, silencing their voices and consigning them to the irrelevant margins.

The task now for post-colonials was to turn around this whole homogenising and disempowering process and to try to rediscover their own distinctive voices and reconstruct their own distinctive identities and experience anew. That was the task that the first generation of writers directly addressed through what must be seen as a kind of liminal experimentation. However, the successful Singaporeans of our times, according to Koh, suffer none of the sense of disorientation and alienation that afflicted their predecessors. Confident in their material achievements, they have little interest in such reconstructive exertions and prefer to turn instead to the exploration of personal states of mind and suchlike. Some confirmation of Koh's claim is provided by the strong indifference with which Theatreworks' 1994 production of Lloyd Fernando's *Scorpion Orchid*, which dealt with the turbulent experience of Singapore's awakening to a sense of modern nationhood, was greeted – during its eight-day run; it played on an average to a house that was just 36% full.

But this still leaves open the question of why these new concerns needed to be so overwhelmingly negative. The most plausible answer, it appears to me, is that this is because they came as part and parcel of the whole success package. To make full sense of this statement, we need to recognise that the particular response which Singapore fashioned to the post-colonial challenge was very different from those of almost all other post-colonial countries, generating understandings, concerns, practices, modes of action and so on which in every sphere were strikingly different from those developed by any of the other countries. (As far as theatre goes, no more dramatic attestation of this fact can be found than in the papers presented at the first SEAMEO-SPAFA [Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization Regional Centre for Archaeology and the Fine Arts] Regional Seminar on Contemporary Theatre in Southeast Asia, held in the early '90s – the Singaporean contribution seemed to come from an almost totally different world from that of the other papers). In most of these other cases, the resistance and challenge to the way the world had been re-ordered by industrial capitalism and empire during the preceding five centuries tended, at least initially and publicly, to take the form of a fundamental rejection of it. This was usually done through a defiant gesture of seeming withdrawal from the prevailing order, and an overt repudiation of its essential defining features, including the language that most symbolised it, namely English.

Singapore was as concerned with such matters as any country. But it remained as pragmatic as ever and recognised the inescapability of the realities of the world global order into which all countries had been inextricably inducted during the preceding colonial period. It therefore chose a very different way. This was to enter right into that order and, accepting the concerns, thinking, methods, practices and so on that it had developed on their

own terms, to try to master and practice them as effectively, if not more so, than their creators. Singapore's unparalleled material triumphs give proof of the success of the strategy.

It would have been very surprising indeed if the artists could have so separated themselves from their context and its social realities and achievements as to reject its perspectives, methods, imperatives and so on in any significant way, particularly since they occupied a prominent elite position within it. Discussions of theatre in the press, which is a major forum of theatre criticism and opinion formation, not infrequently reveal as much, if not more, interest in the commercial dimensions of productions as in the artistic. Musicals, which sell better than most forms of drama for their glitter, "have become the most distinctly identifiable Singapore theatre form over the past seven years" and keep chasing more and more extravagant budgets, with *Mortal Sins*, for instance, almost touching \$500,000 ("The Singapore Musical: Singing Out Loud and Strong"). The most serious of artists show no compunction associating themselves with vulgar soap operatic melodramas catering unashamedly to the philistine section of the westernised elite mentioned earlier, like *Masters of the Sea*, which had to be seen to be believed. "Electronic gadgetry" (Tsang "Celebration of Innovation") and other technical devices, closely associated with Singapore's economic and technological miracles, often dominate productions, and a naive faith is shown in their capacity to compensate for the lack of quality and ability. In all of this and more, the artists show themselves to be very much creatures of the system and the triumphs it has achieved.

Given such considerations, it may be seen that the ceaseless energetic experimentation, the reluctance to stand still and ponder, which, it was remarked earlier, fills the theatre world can hardly be seen as an expression of the creative uncertainty of liminality or an attempt to subvert mainstream arrangements. Rather, it is something that is entirely in line with what is going on in the confident public and social world outside. In that world, the goals of development and achievement are clearly articulated, and the methods worked out with certainty and administered with relentless single-mindedness and tirelessness. We thus see constant planning, revision, innovation, construction, demolition, reconstruction, renovation, upgrading and so on everywhere we look, streets, building, parks, malls, schools, systems, whatever. What is going on in the theatre then appears to be but the artistic reflex of all this.

But, what the paradox of the theatre mentioned earlier indicates is that the approach and methods that prove themselves to be so very successful in the practical material world out there cannot reproduce anything like that success in the world of the arts. It is not too difficult to see why this is so. The kind of thinking they involve, single-mindedly logical, empiricist, positivistic, and often, linear and dichotomous, does indeed show itself to great advantage in the tangible world of material and physical reality. But, when it moves into the more

open-ended, complex world of human emotions and experience that is the province of the arts, it comes out looking extremely impoverished and reductionist, unequal to the demands made. Compounding its deficiency is a further matter. In the competitive, productivity and achievement-oriented world of materialism in which it is applied, it is put to the service of behavioural attributes such as pragmatism, unsentimentality, ruggedness, realism, meanness-and-leanness and hard headedness, which are quite frequently publicly extolled as the virtues to cultivate.

The problem is that these attributes are intrinsically incompatible with other qualities such as sympathetic openness and responsiveness to others, delicacy, sensitivity, compassion and similar emotions, insight, graciousness and so on, just as the positivistic, empiricist ways of seeing things associated with them are not too conducive to imaginativeness, creativity and critical awareness. It is just such matters that are of immediate concern to the arts. However, the particular combination of factors described in the preceding paragraph contributes to the creation of an essentially anti-liminal epistemology which totalisingly valorises the things that militate against the arts and excludes those that they most depend on. It is in other words an epistemology that can generate a triumphant physics but never a metaphysics. In the event, responses are entertained which almost appear to conceive of the artistic endeavour as something that will add products created by the artists to the material achievements that emerge out of the real, successful world operating in its own practical way, like decorative icing applied to a cake. As always with such linear, additive approaches, this one cannot comprehend the essential organic nature of things. It fails to see that artistic products get created necessarily from deep within the emotional, imaginative and other experience of human beings living their lives out in the realities of their contexts, not in some separate compartment which happens to give a place to the other, less tangible things which are needed for their creation.

The circumstances are very much those in which artists can be expected to engage in liminoid activity that will help rectify the situation. But, as pointed out earlier, the artists appear to fit themselves very comfortably into the system, indeed going on, on the basis of an acceptance of its basic terms, to assume, and not always implicitly, a privileged elite position for themselves within it. From here they make to direct developments in a manner that will benefit the many who omnipresently occupy the ground below. The least of the problems with this top-down approach is that it presumes to tell these "other" people how they should see and understand what in any event they know at first hand from the immediate experience of the lives they lead. This in effect helps hegemonically reproduce perspectives developed at the top, outside of these lives. Worse, it fails to recognise that, as noted earlier, it is the experience of these people which most significantly defines the unique quality and texture of

the context out of which artists must, largely though not exclusively, draw the emotional and imaginative sustenance essential for the creation of an art which matters. By removing these people into a separate constituency, passively recipient rather than actively participating and giving, the approach cuts artists disastrously off from some of the most immediate and significant sources of their creativity, deeply embedded in the everyday experience of these people and the community they help bring about.

It is surely such considerations that must, at least partly, explain the general, audience-detering lack of resonance in so much of even the most considered and purposeful of the work produced. Consider, for instance, Theatreworks' *Broken Birds* and *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral*, both of which in their different ways sought to stretch the possibilities of theatre in all of its various departments, innovatively and with versatility. While some of this was quite interesting, the final impression that both left was, however, that the various parts of the plays did not fuse together to define a satisfying experience. In fact, much of the often vigorous activity going on on stage remained quite remote experientially, issuing at best in very self-consciously cerebral terms. In the case of the latter, it happened that the cerebrality seemed to serve as a means of slipping through a view of the matters under presentation that mattered less to the "ordinary" people in its immediate audience than to those out there in charge of our dominant world order.

Indeed, this cerebrality, this wariness of experience and emotion seems to be a feature of many productions, often inhibiting empathy or the thrill of recognition. Given the separation of the theatre from the lived life of the world around it remarked on above, this is quite to be expected. It is interesting in this respect that among the plays that do seem to reach out with some success to their audience are those that do not quite shy away from emotion and experience. Thus Russell Heng's *Lest the Demons Get to Me* and Eleanor Wong's *Wills and Secession*, dealing respectively with gay and lesbian issues, both seem to communicate with some adequacy for the reason that they do not recoil from human feeling. But, that the answer to the problem lies not simply in the greater use of emotion but in a self-aware openness to the experience of the world around is indicated by a certain lack of conviction in the play *Block Sale* by Eleanor Wong. This play was heavy on emotion, an emotion that was clearly designed to draw on what the heartland occupied by some of the ordinary people involved could potentially offer for the purpose of addressing the human dilemmas raised by the very topical situation it dealt with. Unfortunately, in the theatrical presentation the emotion seemed to hold itself apart instead of blending naturally and integrally into the experience. With regard to this matter of the emotions, it is interesting, too, that easily the most effective scenes in *Broken Birds* were the exchanges between the *Karayuki* and the Interviewer projected on the screen, when, for once, a sincere and

spontaneous note of poignancy was allowed to be sounded. And here, too, in a manner which is significantly revealing of the point I am making about the non-recognition of the centrality of real experience in the world down there, the emotion seemed to be placed all wrong. Instead of helping heighten the poignancy of the actual situation of the victims whose plight was purportedly being enacted and examined on stage, it was self-indulgently diverted to the guilt of the Interviewer who was not sure of her right to intrude on that situation for her privileged professional purposes.

Cut off thus from the resonances of the experience of the actual lives of people in community, particularly the people who have been shunted into the other constituency, the theatre is too often found falling back on the self-conscious use of technique (stage devices and methods of various kinds) as well as technology (the hardware and gadgetry of the stage) as a substitute. A glance at the theatre commentary that has been produced in the early nineties will immediately reveal what a predominant place this occupies in the imagination of the practitioners. A great deal of this is non-functional, there for its own sake and, therefore, distracting – which is why it has sometimes invited such uncomplimentary terms of description as “glittery” or “gimmicky” (Pandian, “A Mishmash”), “artificial and construed” and “cheap tricks” (Chan, “No to Cheap-Tricks Theatre”). An attempt might possibly be made to dignify the distractions they create by a fashionable appeal to Brechtian alienation effects. But the attempt would fail, for we recall that the distractions of Brecht’s techniques were intended to remind audiences that they were watching a *performance*, so that they could the more fully see and *engage* with the experience presented on stage in *all* of its complexity.

But this is still not the whole of it. Technique and technology, as mentioned above, often function as substitutes for experience, tending to displace it and take on a life of their own. The second production of Ovidia Yu’s *Three Lonely Oysters*, for instance, resorted to a highly contrived use of cross sex roles that had absolutely nothing to contribute to the play. While the worthlessness of such gimmicks is too obvious, to the extent that they might have enticed some people to take them seriously, they would have made it just that less easy to see the weakness of content and thematic treatment in the play, something that was transparent in the original, more honest, presentation of it. Which points towards the most undesirable aspect of such gimmickry at a time when the theatre is seeking itself out, namely, that it often helps dress up work that lacks merit in misleading guises that call attention away from what matters qualitatively.

In a technologically advancing world, there is no doubt that technical matters would in any event assume considerable significance. The problem as outlined above is that these matters seem to have taken on a life and legitimacy of their own, overriding in the process matters of value and quality. This, it



seems to me, is a consequence of the theatre's separation of itself from the most critical source of its creativity and validity, the experience of the life around it, particularly as it is lived by the excluded constituency. This drives it, in the absence of things of its own to draw on, to depend more and more on what it can borrow from elsewhere. At the same time it deprives it of the finest filter through which it can pass whatever it takes in in order to find out whether it meets the exacting demands of relevance and meaningfulness in its context and, if not, in what ways it can be transformed to make it its very own.

Technique and technology are not the only borrowings that the theatre has been driven to fall back on by its severance from the fuller experience of its own context. As indicated above, they are not borrowings that could in any event have been dispensed with. But if, in their case, the price has nevertheless been high, it is even higher in the case of the other less tangible but vitally important things that the theatre seems to have been driven by that severance to borrow, equally with technique and technology, from the dominant centres associated with the mode of development the country has opted for. These include styles of treatment, ideas, concerns, themes and even problems, perspectives, modes of understanding and judgement and so on. It is this dependence on borrowing that appears to explain the consuming preoccupation with *anomie*, *angst*, uncertainty and so on – these represent the problems and perspectives prescribed from the original colonising centres which are the source of borrowing. The difference is that in those centres, such problems and perspectives are, presumably, genuine experience, not just fashionable garnishing. For, they are what the contradictions within the social, economic, political, intellectual, material and other historical developments in those centres over an extended period of some 450 years have, through the gradual process of natural dialectical growth, made an integral part of the psychological, emotional and imaginative worlds of the people who occupied them. While Singapore's extraordinary achievement has been that it has triumphantly crammed a great deal of these 450 years of modernist development, particularly in the realm of material things, into a mere 30 years, this has hardly guaranteed that it has grown into the same emotional, imaginative and psychological temper – other things apart, it has just not had the time. Indeed, the main psychological cast of mind it predominantly manifests seems to be the confidence mentioned earlier, nothing in any way like the negative impulses the theatre feels obliged to express. This must explain the false note that rings stridently through such expressions, driving many potential members of the audience to turn away from them as superficially fashionable posturings.

The inability of too much of the theatre to appreciate this response reflects perhaps the most important loss that its separation from the fullness of the experience around it has inflicted on it, namely the loss of that self-reflexivity that is another important facet of liminality. This would have allowed

it to hold up a mirror to itself in which it could have looked at its own deformations and, making the crucial discriminations, recognised them for what they were. All of the problems of theatre called attention to above ultimately reflect this loss. But, nowhere perhaps are its effects more felt than in the field of cross-cultural experimentation. Interculturalism is, of course, an entirely inescapable fact of existence in our increasingly interacting world (see, for example, the writings in Marranca and Dasgupta 1991), particularly so in the comprehensively multicultural context that Singapore is. And, indeed, there is no dearth of interculturalism in the Singapore theatre.

What is worrying, however, is the inability to recognise what the intercultural effort crucially implies or entails from the point of view of the *people* whose cultures have been taken into and reconstructed through it, the post-colonial people who constitute the audience out of which the theatre receives its sustenance even while sustaining them. Liminal thinking, and, certainly, the post-modernist/-structuralist perspectives it adopts on the matter, have very salutarily prised open the closures erected around cultures by the static, essentialist approaches adopted towards their study in earlier times. They oblige us to look at “the contextual and constitutive nature of culture” (Adam and Allen xiv), its inherent processuality. In doing so, they lead us to see in all contemporary post-colonial cultures the effects of their reorganisation through the dialectical interaction within them of strands drawn from diverse sources during the course of their historical evolution (see Fanon 1968).

All of this holds out powerfully “radical potential” for understanding the kind of cultural reconstruction that would make real sense to the post-colonial people whose cultures are being or have been reconstituted. Unfortunately, the negative and indeterminate relativism that, it was mentioned early in this essay, post-modernist/-structuralist cultural theorising indulges interferes with the proper realisation of that potential. For, instead of explicitly foregrounding “the complex economic, political and ideological materiality of cultural processes in time and space” and engaging frontally with “questions concerning how cultural power is woven into the very texture of everyday life,” this theorising has tended to “recurrently prioritize... cultural plurality and invention for their own sake” (Adam and Allen xv, xiv, xv). When such theorising is then uncritically transported as fashion into the realities of post-colonial settings, the cost in terms of failure of understanding as well as achievement could be very high. Doubtless, the cultural refashioning of the occupants of these settings and their experience through their historical encounters with formerly unfamiliar cultures in their distinct time and place has an indisputable creative and enriching dimension. But, the power differentials inscribed into the encounters have of their nature also guaranteed that not all of these encounters have had desirable consequences. The contest among competing cultural perspectives and concerns has not been equal. As a consequence, things of great self-

realisational value and potential to the less powerful contestants who have been compelled by history to become reluctant participants in the process have been or are being distorted, subverted or lost.

Any exploration of post-colonial cultural reconstitution through intercultural encounters cannot fail to remain sensitive to their dialectical nuances as just described, their enriching potential as well as their homogenising hegemonic capabilities. And, while showing such sensitivity, it needs also to be critically discerning of the nature of the tensions, interrogations, contestations, negotiations and reconciliations that are constantly in process within these encounters. So provided, it would straightaway recognise that in too many of the plays actually produced, the intercultural encounter in practice does not emerge as a process of creative negotiation and/or struggle, through which an enlarged cultural experience or consciousness is constructed. Rather, it often tends to become a means of putting the indigenous cultural traditions that are major players in the encounter on trial at the bar of Euro-American metropolitan liberal, individualistic values, indicting them for their deplorable failure to measure up and validating their banishment to the margins reserved for the Other. So, in Theatreworks' *Us in Singapore*, the traditional Chinese notion of filial piety, the traditional Malay notion of marriage within the community (going together with a knowledge of the Malay language) and the traditional Indian notion of arranged marriages are all eroded from an exalted, knowledgeable, liberal point of view. In, again, *This Chord and Others* by the Necessary Stage, traditional Chinese values are challenged, while the Sikh Sukhdev achieves self-realisation not only by cutting off his hair and getting rid of his turban, but also by shortening his name to Dev (Dave!). What price, then, the Sikh identity within this form of multiculturalism?!

It must be emphasised that the issue here is not that the traditional cultures are beyond interrogation or challenge, but that the entire struggle between them and the other cultures they were obliged to encounter, a struggle that assumes crucial significance within the effort of post-colonial rehabilitation, has been preemptively erased by a simple gesture of dismissal of them. Not once is there a hint of the possibility that there might be some positive potential in these cultures that the contemporary reconstructive effort demands to be drawn out in the process of their interrogation.

Consider, for instance, Chin Woon Ping's play *Details Cannot Body Wants*. It deals with the important theme of a woman grappling her way out of the manifold kinds of constraints placed on her throughout her life within the mainly traditional Chinese culture she grows up in, and groping towards recognition and acceptance of herself as she really is. Given the necessarily symbiotic nature of the contemporary post-colonial sensibility (Kandiah 1997), there is nothing exceptionable in this from the point of view of the intercultural encounter – the critique of facets of traditional Chinese culture by reference to

notions of individual feminine self-realisation, which, as it happens, are being developed with particular vigour at present in Euro-American cultural centres (though not only there, of course), is just. The problem, however, is that the presentation of the woman's struggle for self-realisation is in terms not just of an interrogation of traditional Chinese culture but of a total erosion of it. The attention is all on its dehumanising features and it is not even considered that, in the pursuit of feminine self-realisation, that culture might itself have had some humanising cultural capital of its own to offer as a counter to the negative features it indubitably displays. If such a possibility had been entertained and pursued, the whole exploration of the woman's realisation of herself would have contributed also to the fashioning of the contemporary metaphysics or epistemology or ontology that post-colonial reconstruction fundamentally involves. For, as the literature is increasingly making us aware, such reconstruction cannot ever remove itself from the issue of feminine rehabilitation. But, in the absence of recognition of any positive potential in the indigenous culture under interrogation in the play, the superiority of the culture that is most closely associated with the sensibility by which it is judged as lacking gets more than implicitly affirmed.

Too often, then, the intercultural endeavour seems, as it were, to reduce to an effort to exorcise the degenerate "Asian devil" within ourselves and to demonstrate how we could little-jack-hornerishly reproduce the qualities, values and behaviours associated with the culture we have procured from our (erstwhile) masters/mistresses. Even where this is not set up as an explicit agenda, the Asian experience tends often in presentation on stage to be filtered through the differently-coloured and altering lens of an overriding Euro-American sensibility. This renders it unrecognisable to those in whose lives and experience it has its grounding and co-opts it for purposes that are more suitable for those on the other side of the cultural encounter. Ong Keng Sen's production of the play *Three Children* by Malaysian playwright Lee Puay Tin, for instance, made use of all kinds of traditional Chinese operatic elements and ideas, but then fashioned them into a form which put them at the service of themes of alienation borrowed from the dominant centres outside of the context in which they had their life. Little wonder, therefore, that it left "many people in the audience shaking their heads in visible despair" over what they saw as an incoherent and "inaccessible form" which subverted the things that, they *knew* from their experience, had a different reality (Pandian "Limited by Angst").

The practice of much of the theatre does not, however, seem to show much recognition of such complexities of intercultural experimentation, however easily, as we have just seen, such recognition comes to the audience for whom its products are presumably designed. Given what has been said earlier on about the nature of this practice, this is not surprising, for it reflects the

truth of what the practitioners actually are. Much of the theatre is after all unresistingly accepting of perspectives associated with the successes that it is both a part and a result of. Moreover, much of it also seems to lack inwardness or resonance with the deep rooted resources of traditional experience and imagination that the excluded constituency, those it seems to have cut itself off from and see as separate from itself, have easy immediate access to. These are not conditions that encourage the kind of self-reflexivity that, by compelling one to test all one does by the touchstone of the felt experience of the life out there, will generate the profoundly complex transformative practice that the realities demand.

Little wonder, then, that, rather than transcreating an essentially symbiotic indigenous culture in meaningful contemporary terms, it appears in effect to project this culture as just a further bit of evidence of what one historian has described as “the triumph of the west” (Roberts 1985). This might indeed win it international recognition of sorts (as often used, the term “international” might well appear to be a synonym for “Euro-American,” with Australia a part of Europe). For, its readiness to operate in crucial respects in terms of norms determined in those centres would render it reassuringly non-threatening there. Not that all of it would be comfortably familiar to those centres. But the differences would appear in exotic orientalist colourings that confirm their Otherness, and in a manner that is both cognisant of its own incapacities and duly deferential to the centres. The result would be the subversion of the post-colonial effort into a comprador neo-colonial exercise that reinstates the distributions of cultural and other forms of power that the seemingly dismantled empire had established. Needless to say, the major losers would be the ordinary people from whom the post-colonial effort receives its primary validation.

And so, perhaps, the term “liminality” in relation to the Singapore theatre has its uses. If my talk about it above has not entirely been nonsense, then it might at least have led us to recognise again the familiar dangers of fashionability and phrase-mongering and the essential need to look beneath the surface of the esoteric terms we are tempted to borrow and apply as slogans, and to seek out the living content they might be assigned within the experienced realities of the place and time we occupy. In doing so, it might also have led us to a tiny glimpse of the complex nature of the post-colonial problematic that the theatre in Singapore, as much as the theatre in any other former colony, cannot but grapple with. And, however discouraging some major current trends might appear to be, it might also have given us much reason for hope. For one thing, the very regular public expressions of dissatisfaction with these trends show that there is critical awareness among people at large of the issues that matter. Moreover, the theatre world in Singapore is catholic enough to provide a significant place to not only the high profile theatre of glamour for which

privileged elite status has been claimed, but also to that other theatre which it seeks to devalue. Doubtless, this latter theatre sometimes succumbs to the temptation, very difficult to resist given the material conditions that prevail in the larger context, to try to emulate the fashionable theatre in some respects. But, the extraordinary energy with which it pursues its mission, matching that of the elite theatre, will guarantee that it will inescapably along the way be forced to confront and respond relevantly to the challenges the problematic raises. And, as the most satisfyingly wholesome sign of hope, this will be because although most ordinary people have been banished to the other constituency, they have not ceased to exist. They are vibrantly alive and kicking and leading lives full of their own meanings in those several arenas and places that only they can ultimately control. There is no way in which an art, whose very survival depends on the experiential sustenance it receives from the people among whom it cannot but exist, can remain oblivious of the demands they make on it. As long as they are around, and given the manifest dedication of the entire theatre world to its mission, we can remain sanguine that the Singapore will relocate to a genuine threshold from which it can move to becoming a theatre of arrival.

### **Part 3: Some Integrative Concluding Remarks**

It is likely that readers might require some clarification of how exactly the "illustrative essay" just concluded might contribute to the attainment of the end of the more encompassing main essay on Edwin Thumboo's poetry that is, after all, what constitutes my contribution to this special volume of *Asiatic*. That end was to offer for consideration a specific claim about Thumboo's poetic achievement and its significance. In outline, the claim was that Thumboo's poetry, issuing out of a strenuous struggle to create a distinctive contemporary Singaporean voice out of the dialectic of "ancestral dreams" and "new visions/beginnings" within his modern historically constituted post-colonial context, has much to tell his fellow creative artistes who shared that context with him about the nature of artistic creativity and its most critical challenges in such contexts, matters that their insufficient recognition of or concern with had exacted a considerable price from the viewpoint of the significance and value of their own otherwise undeniable artistic accomplishments.

There are several features of the illustrative essay that could well have caused this central argument of the main essay to be lost sight of. Its considerable length apart, its single-minded, self-contained treatment of work in a genre that is distinct from Thumboo's own specialised genre of poetry could well create a sense of disjointedness that might lead to it being seen as quite irrelevant to the argument. That irrelevance might, in turn, be felt to be compounded by its confinement of its attention to the dramatic and theatrical

activity of the last two decades of the twentieth century, leading to a possible suspicion that it is, consequently, dated. My own belief, however, is that the very opposite is the case, which is why in fact I have offered this composite essay as my contribution to this special issue of *Asiatic*.

To establish this, it would be necessary to bear in mind that a demonstration of the validity of my argument in the main essay requires at least the following: a clarification of the theoretical assumptions about post-colonial creativity that underlie the claims of the argument; a close reading of Thumboo's poetry (and also, for that matter, of some of his critical writings) to show how he responds to the demands of creativity made on him within his specific context; and, importantly, a broad examination of the large amounts of creative activity that have been and are going on (in English) around his work in that context, the activity by reference to which the uniqueness and especial distinction claimed for his own input into the endeavour might be demonstrated.

Clearly, these tasks require the kind of full-scale study of Thumboo's writing that can hardly be undertaken in an essay of this sort. What in the circumstances my essay has tried to do through its incorporation into itself of the illustrative essay, therefore, is to partly address the third of the tasks mentioned. The critical account the illustrative essay provides of the creative activity that was going on in one of the liveliest of the artistic genres of the surrounding context during, moreover, what happened to be an especially exciting period in the formation of the modern Singaporean creative scene, seems to supply a persuasive basis for the claim made for Thumboo's writing in the main paper and reiterated in the opening paragraph of this section. A lot of the activity described seems at a glance to itself have been quite consciously driven by a version of more or less the same dialectic out of which Thumboo's poetry was claimed above to have emerged. This is suggested by the very frequent invocations in the great deal of animated public discussion of it that took place at the time (this includes the discussion in several of the references cited above) of the notion of a new drama that would be a "home grown," Singapore/Asian drama (one strand of the dialectic) while simultaneously being also a drama that would claim a legitimate place within the cosmopolitan spaces of the larger globalised modern artistic scene (the other strand).

However, the ready adoption by the practitioners and thinkers involved of fashionable *avant-gardist* notions inveigled into the context from those cosmopolitan spaces, seems to have led them to opt for a resolution of their driving dialectic that comes down primarily on just one of its sides, involving the second of its strands mentioned above, at the expense of the other side. This reflects a vulnerability to the interpellations of the now-transnationalised dominant forces of the unequal global order constructed over the preceding centuries of empire, precisely the forces from whose epistemological,

ontological and experiential stranglehold post-coloniality is committed to extricating itself. It is here that Thumboo's writing stakes its claim, by pointing, through its very different and far more complex negotiation of the opposite strands of the dialectic, to how a truly distinctive, independent Singapore voice, subjectivity, identity and experience might creatively fashion themselves out in a way that is at the same time fully adapted to, but not appropriated by, the realities of the more encompassing modern global context within which they cannot but have their existence.

It remains to be added that the account of Singaporean drama that the illustrative essay provides us with on the basis of its examination of theatre activity and thought during the period it deals with seems to continue to be valuably relevant to an understanding even of the situation prevailing at present. This is because its theorisation of that practice and thought seems to enable it to predict with sufficient explanatory adequacy even to the current state of the theatre, indeed not only of the theatre but also of the arts scene in general. The energy, drive and intensity remarked on earlier remain as strong as ever; and, in addition, the scene seems to have acquired a felt sense of achievement that closely reproduces the sense of attained material success in the surrounding environment. A lot of this sense of achievement seems to be associated with the way in which, through daring investment of its available material resources, the city state has successfully set itself up as yet another of those glamorous, glittering cosmopolitan centres of art across the developed world at which artistic offerings drawn from across the globe are as a matter of course put on display. Reciprocally, some of its own artistic productions have been accorded a respected place within those cosmopolitan spaces across the world.

But the impression remains that that undeniable achievement has come at exactly the price predicted by the illustrative essay, namely a letting go, in response to the interpellations delivered from out of the cosmopolitan global centres, of exactly the indigenously embedded resources of imagination, thought, feeling and experience out of which, in dialectical interaction with the realities of the larger global community, a truly contemporary Singaporean subjectivity, identity and sensibility might fashion themselves in their own right. This takes place through an art that defines itself in terms that go well beyond merely the depositing, through the use of story lines, events, devices, characters, emphases and other such "furniture" extracted from the "local" context, of an exotic "oriental" or Asian flavour, on what fundamentally remains a "separate" experience largely prescribed from somewhere else.

Wee's impressive discussion (2004) of two comparatively recent theatre productions that have earned international plaudits, Ong Keng Sen's production of Kuo Pao Kun's *Descendants of the Eunuch Admiral* (1995/1996) and, somewhat later, of the Singaporean *Lear* (1997/1999), while admirable in its refusal to reduce the epistemological/cultural tensions of the dialectic



involved to a simple-minded dichotomous opposition between “Asia” and “the west,” supplies us with several acute observations that lend themselves to interpretation in support of the reading of the situation presented above.

Equally supportive evidence, though of a different kind, was supplied by Jean Tay’s presentation on her play *Boom* at the Singapore Writers’ Festival 2009, during which, speaking of two separate productions of the play, one, somewhat earlier, in Britain, and a second which was at that time under preparation in Singapore, she read out excerpts from the play. The excerpts represented those parts of her own script that had been left out of the productions by the two different directors involved, both, apparently, expatriate or non-Singaporean. The excerpts were very moving and eloquent, exquisitely evoking some of the essential texture and quality of the lived emotions and thoughts of many ordinary Singaporeans caught up not just in the problem of housing around which the play was built, but in the relentless erosion under the pressures of modernist progress and development of the homes that they had over the years lovingly built in their dwelling places out of their inherited resources. These were people who, in spite of their obscurity within the glittering, commodified world of the artistic centres and the shopping malls that are a hallmark of the material success of the city state, had historically given so very much to fashioning the distinctive character of the place. Yet, it is exactly the excerpts that spoke their experience that the directors, with their presumably superior cosmopolitan centre-derived expertise in the craft of theatre, had deemed fit to “expurgate.” And no one present, not even the playwright, thought a protest was in order. What price acquiescence in the interpellations of the hegemonic order?

Which spirit of docile acceptance displays itself again in the acquiescence (as revealed by the paucity of their numbers) by the current theatre audience in the institutional sidelining of the work of Elangovan. Non-conformist, even overtly anti-Establishment, this playwright has, in spite of his readiness to adopt in his productions some of the idiom of the *avant garde*, heroically battled over the decades to reaffirm in his work perspectives and concerns that are of critical importance for a fashioning of meanings and thoughts that would truly allow his compatriots to self-empoweringly draw out and realise their fullest human potential within the conditions of their local and global realities. The comparative indifference of the theatre audience to the alternative Singaporean theatre he is inviting them to collaborate with him in fashioning has something of note to say about the state of the art that is consistent with the argument developed in both the main and illustrative essays above.

Yes, Thumboo’s poetry does indeed continue to remind his readers of things that are too important for them to disregard or forget as they seek to autonomously constitute themselves in as meaningfully and complexly human a way as their post-colonial realities promise.

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