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[Theme Music]

## INTRODUCTIONS

[00:00:07]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** Hi everybody, welcome to *Backlogues*! My name is Charlene Shepherdson. I am a writer and arts manager in Singapore. With me today, we have Serene.

[00:00:16]

**Serene Chen:** Hi everyone, my name is Serene Chen. I am an actress and am very happy to be one half of *[the] Backlogues'* hosting team. So Charlene, what is *Backlogues* all about?

## WHAT IS BACKLOGUES?

[00:00:28]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** So, *Backlogues* is a series of conversations about the evolving practice of arts management in Singapore. So through dialogues with cultural workers who are integral to the growth of the arts, we shed light on the unsung world of the arts manager and discover just what it means to enable the arts behind the scenes.

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**Serene Chen:** So what is actually, this endearing term that we have now called arts management? Just to give everyone a kind of sense, it's broadly defined as enabling the arts to happen. Ah, ha. So this can be anyone who acts as a connector between artists and audiences, but also producers and your technical crew... yourself, Charlene, all these are individuals whose roles involve creating some kind of problem-solving and building bridges between artists and the audience and maintaining this lovely arts ecosystem.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** I have thought about how in Singapore at least, they don't always go by the term arts managers. And I think this is a reflection of the different roles that they play in the arts ecology. So if you have your business development managers, you have your general managers or company managers, and then you have your production managers, like you mentioned. Or even you have your ads managers who are working in the arts council specifically. And they all have different roles and they are all looking at different things, whether it is policy or whether it's the actual day-to-day or if it is going out to meet at other companies so that we can create cross-collaboration events.

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**Serene Chen:** Yeah, I think that is so true. I think of the stage manager who also rigs the lights and who also comes down and adjusts the tape on the floor – the markings – and then tells the set designer that this part has got shadows sticking out and blocking my actor. This is the other thing about that terminology, the way that they speak: "my actor"... "my dresser"... right? That there's this kind of this feeling of taking care of the people whom they are overseeing. That's quite nice. It's a sense of tribe.

## BACKLOGUES IS ABOUT THE EXPANDED NOTION OF THE ARTS MANAGER

[00:02:16]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah, and I think it's also interesting how it's not just maybe the people that you would normally associate with who the arts manager takes care of; but also the other peripheral people in the arts that you may not necessarily think of – whether it's the booksellers, whether it's the editors, whether it's the marketing person that you're also working with. And I think

it's very important when we're talking about arts managers to expand that idea of who we work with or who we engage with.

[00:02:42]

**Serene Chen:** Yeah, and as you were saying that about the literary industry and then in the theatre as well, I am also reminded that there are some of these roles that we automatically think of people for, but they may not even have a name at this point in time. For example, every organisation, particularly an arts organisation, needs a person who knows lobangs<sup>1</sup> or has the ability to get discounts – so important!

And there's no name for this person. Very interesting as we talk about people who fill these roles. The bigger term for it would be ancillary roles, but definitely so important for this thing that we call arts management.

[00:03:18]

**Serene Chen:** I think for myself as an actor, the arts manager is the problem solver, *[it]* is the person that I go to when I have a problem that I can't solve.

An example is that I remembered when I wanted to come back to work and rehearse for plays. And then I was breastfeeding. Yes, Yes, very unglamorous. I would go to the arts manager and say okay, so I can't rehearse from this time to this time, because it would be four hours and I would have to go and pump my milk out and this person will make it happen.

[00:03:46]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah, and I think a lot of times when people think of arts managers, they maybe think of like purely stage managers. So what happens behind the scenes, but there's so much more to the work, right? There is the curation of work; there is the inviting or in my case I call it the stalking of people to look for because you have names that you want to invite, but then you have to find a way to contact them.

[00:04:04]

**Serene Chen:** And this is a bit easier now that there is social media, but even then, it's sometimes not so easy. The arts manager is the one with the tentacles, the tendrils, the one who reaches out and finds those connections.

[00:04:16]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah, and then after you make those connections happen, then there is all the work that is involved for the event or post event as well - whether it is the conversations you want to bring to the stage or to the table as well.

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**Serene Chen:** That's right. So this is an entire ecosystem of people that we want to discover and actually collect their memories and the oral histories.

## WHY DID WE DEVELOP BACKLOGUES?

[00:04:25]

**Serene Chen:** Why is this important? I think one of the things that we talked about in our discussions leading up to when we were developing *Backlogues*, we were thinking that there is actually a lack of information about the arts manager in Singapore. Would you agree?

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** I think definitely. Firstly, there are maybe a few schools which you could learn arts management, but then if you go to a Chinese New Year reunion and your relatives ask

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<sup>1</sup> "Lobang" is a word from the Malay language. It is commonly used to describe an opportunity or deal.

you, "what do you do?" And then you say, "Arts manager." And then they are like, "What is that? Do you direct the stage? And we are like, "No, that's a director's work."

And then also I think with arts management, within that span as well, if I go to a school and go, "I am looking for interns for my workplace, and we are a lit[erary] arts organisation." They'd be like, "Oh, actually our interns only know how to do arts management for music or for theatre. We're not quite sure how to bring them to lit arts as well."

But there is so much arts management that has to happen in the literary arts as well. Yeah, so I think there is always room to learn more about it. And I think what's more important is the history of arts managers, and how the practice was being professionalised. Because even if there were no standard operating procedures right, because we're all like Swiss army knives, there is no one way that fits, it changes with each production that we have, with each event that we might need to do as well.

Yeah, so I think it's just interesting for me to try and also understand the shared community of practice and understanding what came before. What is the history to some of the practices that I'm doing right now? Why are things the way they are? And also like with the pandemic, which is a very relevant thing around us, how does that change our practices moving forward?

[00:06:03]

**Serene Chen:** Sure. And I think for me as an actor, I think it's easy in that sense to find reviews, pictures, articles written about theatre performances, dance performances... things like that. Those are the things that are captured because they are very much upfront. And you're right, the people who sit in the roles, which are very clear, like the director or the actors or the stage managers, those have a label. The arts manager doesn't really.

Given that culture has always been important to the state, I think arts managers really need to be put to the forefront because we are continuing to develop the arts in Singapore. And when this generation of arts managers decides to pass the baton, there must be people to pass the baton to.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yup, and that leads straight into capability development. So one of the things that we are hoping with this podcast series is really to groom future arts managers and intermediaries - to give them background knowledge and context-specific knowledge of what we have done, what has worked in the past, what has not worked... so that we can kind of all grow together as a community.

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[Music Transition]

## WHAT IS ARTS MANAGEMENT?

[00:07:13]

**Serene Chen:** Great! So we have a lot to talk about. Where shall we start from?

[00:07:19]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** I feel like there is a big elephant in the room, which is in the first place: what is arts management to you, right? Cause we're talking about how arts management is evolving and there's so many different things and there are so many definitions, [so] what does it mean to you?

[00:07:31]

**Serene Chen:** What does arts management mean to me? After that anecdote that I first threw in, I think arts management is actually the act of making the arts happen and the arts is so diverse, right? You are from the literary scene, you began in the theatre scene though.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** I did. So I think way back in the late nineties, early 2000s, I was part of a youth drama group. Yup. And so we met every Sunday and that's where I learned to act, but also we did a lot of backend technical theatre things. We were learning how to do things like lighting. What does it mean to be an arts manager? Or just behind the scenes, like with the stage and just things like that. So I would say that was probably my first taste. Yeah, and eventually I moved into the literary arts where you know, I did spoken word. So there were open mic events and stuff like that.

[00:08:25]

**Serene Chen:** I think for myself, when I first started doing theatre, there were definitely very few roles backstage wise. And in the admin side of things, I think there were also much fewer. Well, when I rocked up for rehearsal, there wouldn't be so many people around. But I think it's very different, looking at the current situation where when you come for a first read, there are like 30 people in the room, depending on the company of course. Sometimes there can be as many as 30 and everybody seems to have quite a well-established role, because I think that the role of the arts manager has actually grown over the years.

So you can actually take charge of many things, it could be on the stage, it could be behind the stage. It could be from your home as well in terms of marketing. So really very diverse.

One of my earliest memories, and I have a couple... one of my earliest memories was the late Elsa Lim and she worked for a company called Action Theatre, and she worked very closely with Ekachai Uekrongtham and he works as a film director now in Thailand. What was very interesting was that she was really picking up all the publicity pieces. She would get us to go for magazine shoots, and things like that. That was quite different for me because before that all the theatre I had done was very guerrilla style. It was very sort of school-based. So it was like, wow, this is quite special. I'm getting my photo taken and someone's doing my makeup and things like that. So this was one of my first experiences.

Another very memorable experience that I had was also early times. This was in maybe 1990... I'm going to say, I think it's 1994. I could be mistaken. And this was where The Necessary Stage, took a Mandarin play that we had done here to Taiwan. It was the first touring show that I had ever done. And I remember that we went with a very lean team because it was like, okay, with this amount of money, it's either we go with the set or we go with the full number of actors or the costumes will have to be like that no more, no less. And that's fine because we were all very psyched up. And we went to Taiwan and it was great because the weather was turning chilly and all that. And so it was very collegiate. It was like we were a bunch of friends going for this tour together and putting up a play at the same time.

The interesting thing, however, was that we were on standby – [it was] about 15 minutes to the show – and our stage manager, who was also the production manager and the costume person, Lee Sia Ang, she was my classmate in university and by then we had just graduated... I remember at 15 minutes to the show, my co-actor's button from his pants fell out. Okay. What do we do? And at that time we didn't have handphones. And so I couldn't call her and tell her that does that happen, but she had to delay the house. So we had to – luckily for us – we found somebody who was in the backstage and we said, "Hey so-and-so, do you think you could run to the sound box and tell her that this has happened?" And she basically held the house and then she ran all the way backstage. She quickly took out her sewing kit. We didn't even know where the sewing kit was. She took up the sewing kit, she threaded the needle and then she sewed that button back. And then she ran out to call the cues.

[00:11:34]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** She was a true-blue arts manager because she handled everything.

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**Serene Chen** She handled everything. It's called "bao ka liao",<sup>2</sup> right? And I think the amazing thing I have to share with everyone is that we opened the house on time.

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<sup>2</sup> A Singlish term borrowed from the Hokkien dialect language, which is commonly used to describe "doing everything, covering all roles."

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** Wow.

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**Serene Chen:** 15 minutes.

## WHY IS ARTS MANAGEMENT IMPORTANT?

[00:11:47]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** I think based on what you're saying as well, the arts manager is definitely a connector or a bridge between the different things that happen as well. I think shortly after that, after working in the youth theatre group that I was in, I started actually... I was in poly[*technic*], just after I graduated, which was in 2005, I think that's the first time I heard or saw what an arts manager or programmes manager did. I was working for NUS as a marketing assistant. And so I got to really see what it was like to put up an event and I was like...wow...there are jobs like this? I wish I had a job like this back then, or I wish I knew that you could study for jobs like this.

[00:12:21]

**Serene Chen:** And I think it is exciting for a young person to be discovering all these things. And in the corporate world, they would call it networking. And I suppose this is our version of networking because you are getting to understand who is from what company, what style they have, how they work and who they could put you in touch with.

So, in my earliest job, I was working for the arts radio station, then called Passion 99.5. And this was a collaboration between the National Arts Council and the then-Radio Corporation of Singapore. So I was like a shared employee in that sense. Very interesting. Because at that point in time, I would always... it would be normal to interview people every day, right? So it depended on whether or not it was an actor, a singer, a dancer that I was interviewing, or maybe a director, but sometimes also an arts manager.

And that was where I think I met some of the most... should I say, pivotal movers and shakers of those times. And we'll get to the times and the time periods very soon. I think I met people who were at the point in time walking towards the opening and the building of the Esplanade. So very interesting. I met some local arts managers. I also met some who came in from Australia – Jeff Street, who was then helping to put together the Esplanade. I also met, Lena St. George-Sweet, who was, back then she was with the British Council. So these were people that I felt very fortunate and very lucky to be speaking to as a young person who's entering her first job.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah, but it also reminds me of... I think when you're just starting out in the arts and everyone is new to you, I remember how grateful I would be if someone would be like, oh, you should meet this person. And then they would be just like, oh, you really like this element or oh you write about the environment or you write about heritage, then I should connect you with this person. And then from there an event forms.

There is this magic in bringing people together and to draw out the themes, like... oh, if you like this, then you should meet this person. And I feel that's such an important role in the whole ecology of the arts, right? It's bringing together different things, especially in Singapore where the arts, I guess, traditionally could be quite siloed, right? So theatre would be doing their own thing, the lit art does their own thing, the visual arts does their own thing...in the last few years you can actually see the bridging starting to happen. And I think a lot of it has to do with arts management as well. This going out of your comfort zone and bringing people in, or to invite a new audience in or to bring your arts out into a larger context.

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[Music Transition]

## WHAT IS THE CONTENT OF BACKLOGUES?

[00:15:01]

**Serene Chen:** I think it's a good time for us to focus on the content of *Backlogues*. So we will have eight episodes packed with stuff. We will be interviewing people... the movers and shakers... the pioneers. What else will our listeners be able to expect content-wise?

[00:13:59]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** We first need to see *Backlogues* as this big project that will be eventually filled with many moments in time of arts management. But for these first eight episodes, we were looking at this particular period in time in the 1980s, where we started to professionalise the role of the arts manager.

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**Serene Chen:** So the other broad periods, which we won't be looking at in these eight episodes will be:

- i. the beginning period, the 1965 period, which we call taking root, where arts management starts to take root...where the arts starts to take root in the post-independent Singapore.
- ii. Post-1980s...I think we also looking at 1995 onwards because there was some diversification and globalisation: more groups, more theatre companies. Our books and things like that were also traveling overseas, getting a new audience as well. So that's the post-1995 period, diversification and globalisation.
- iii. 2012 onwards, this word 'community' started to become very important, right. There was a bit more collaboration, less siloed, as you were mentioning earlier on.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** And also, maybe less like production, right? So the idea of communities is also kind of like... about more process-based work, which is a very interesting development in our current times as well.

Yeah. Circling back to what you can expect - so those are all the four time periods, but within the 1980s that we're looking at for the eight episodes, each episode would be an audio recording with at least one key person that we consider as someone working behind the scenes and they either helped to enable the literary arts or the theatre ecosystem to flourish during the 1980s to the mid 1990s. Sometimes it will be with one person. Sometimes it'd be with a group of them.

[00:16:49]

[Music Transition]

## WHAT IS THE METHODOLOGY USED TO DEVELOP BACKLOGUES?

[00:16:57]

**Serene Chen:** This is a podcast, so we're very interested in excavating the oral history. Now oral history is interesting. I came across oral history really as a term to be bandied when I started my first job in radio. The medium was about sound anyway, oral history was a way to capture the past, right? So for example, the earliest radio personalities like your Lee Dai Sor and things like that. Why is oral history wonderful?

Oral history is an established... it's a credible research method. It is used to systematically collect memories and knowledge of past events and periods. We are able to get close with interviewees with personal experience, right. In this case of what goes on behind the scenes, such as the day-to-day operations, the activities required to enable the artistic process.

We will also get the interviewees spoken-first opinions and insights on the historically significant events. And I think this. Going to be very interesting because if you look, if you compare this with say, newspaper cuttings, those tend to be headlines and just major highlights.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah. I think I'm really interested in the in-depth account of the experiences, because a lot of my work as a writer as well is about delving into these archives and all histories and creating work from them...to bring the richness of what they're saying into texts. So, I think when it comes to arts managers, that's even more interesting because I think a lot of the times when we're recording on page, we're concerned with page length and things like this. And so you find a way to edit it down. Whereas with oral histories, because we're actually talking to them, we'll also be able to really get their ideas on the interpretations of the events during that period of time, how did certain events within the state affect the way that they approached the arts or maybe even, in spite of [them], they created things.

[00:18:43]

**Serene Chen:** I like that part very much, because I think it really speaks to the creativity and in a way, the survival skills that our early arts managers all displayed. One of the things which I think is interesting is that the oral histories will also be a very good complement and a very good resource for people who are trying to research this area. I think I've met students in my work where they're like...oh, I want to find this information, but it doesn't appear on Google. But of course it doesn't appear on Google, because actually the way that it's captured in oral history is so much richer and it's got so many details that actually will take a very long time to compile and put into say a Wikipedia page. So that should be interesting as well.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah, and it will be about stuff like the impact of the growth of our state infrastructure, and how some things have been institutionalised as well as about the development and engagement of audiences.

And here's the kind of things where if you read on your own, it's like...oh okay, it's a bit dry. But to hear how someone lived and breathed within these rules that were coming up and how did they work around it or, how did it actually help them further and really hear that story first-hand from someone? I think that makes it a lot more memorable.

I think this certainly makes this art history part of things alive because you're actually talking to someone about it, right? And it's literally like going up to someone, and be like, I want to hear about how you dealt with this situation? What happened and why, and how do you come out from that then? Which is something that I think for a lot of people in my generation, who were born in the 1980s and above, a lot of what we are talking about in the 1980s in this period of time – anyway, I was in kindergarten, right up till 1990, which I was just before *[I entered]* primary school. So I haven't been able to talk to any of these people about it.

[00:20:20]

**Serene Chen:** You're absolutely right. I think this makes history come alive, as you say. It's a story. And I think it would make studying for exams a lot easier if we got to study in this way.

## MORE PERSONAL SHARINGS ABOUT ARTS MANAGEMENT

[00:20:30]

**Serene Chen:** When was the first time you heard of the term arts manager?

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** This was in my first full-time job. So this was at NUS Centre for the Arts. It was called a programmes manager. And this was in 2005. Yeah. Prior to that, it was just kind of like, you would hear things like stage managers and lighting designers, but you never really thought of that person who is behind the scenes.

And I think with most arts managers, they prefer to actually not be front and centre, right? They like to be behind the scenes. And In fact, the more shadowy they can be, the better, which is where I prefer as well. And it's kind of like the person that moves things along and fills the gap in between.

And I think as someone who was born in the eighties, from the eighties to the period we're talking about was all my kindergarten and then just entering primary school. So it's very interesting for me looking back into what is essentially my childhood, how the 1980s was such a growth period for the arts. So that's where we started developing audiences, it's where resources were actually spent on developing artists. At this period of time we were seeing the start of local theatres and local publishers, like Landmark Books, where they were actually investing into the capability development of creators as well.

We had state resources like the National Library; branch libraries were going out to lesser developed areas. We had festivals happening, local plays started coming out. I can't imagine a time now where in 2022 where local plays weren't a thing. And the fact that the 1980s was the first time you actually heard something that was in your context and not imported from somewhere else, or was a classic that you learned from school. How about you?

[00:22:03]

**Serene Chen:** I shared earlier on some names of memorable arts managers. I think for me, the arts manager in the 80s, 90s - and back then I was in school - I would hear about them by reputation and it would feel, I think to me on the outside, it felt like the arts managers who were remembered and talked about were the ones who were trailblazers. They were very strong creatively; even if they were also very strong administratively. And they were almost arm-in-arm with the artistic director of said-theatre company. It was an interesting time, I think definitely as a student as well, I had the opportunity to watch plays, and it was interesting because you also got to see people who look like you and sound like you that were on stage.

So there was a lot of hope and a lot of buzz generated. And I think a lot of the credit has to go to the arts managers who are really working behind the scenes. They developed a lot of the pioneering actors who began to professionalise. They began to develop some of the new audience members who continue to not just patronise individually but some actually became very long-time patrons as well. There was the beginning of state support and infrastructure leading to Arts Housing being born as well, arts festivals, as you mentioned earlier. So, just to give some historical context as to what that sort of pioneering arts manager was like as well.

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** Yeah, I'm really looking forward to our discussions.

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**Serene Chen:** And learning a lot more about the stuff that we don't know.

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[Music Transition]

[00:23:47]

**Serene Chen:** How has your understanding of arts management evolved from the time that you say you were in primary school till now as a person working in the scene?

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**Charlene Shepherdson:** I don't think it existed in primary school for me. So I came from an IJ<sup>3</sup> school and we had "Book and Music Week" where we put out choral presentations. So the idea of arts management then for me was, okay, you would pick a book, you would decide what poem you would do for the choral and then you organise people. And what I didn't know at the time was, it was called stage managing where you'd be like, "okay, you speak and you point," and the secret hand signals for counting one-two-three... your turn... kind of thing.

And then this evolves into like walkie-talkies and the "okay, actor you're next" kind of thing. And the line cue. But now, I think my understanding of arts management has grown so wide. And I think it

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<sup>3</sup> Short form for Convent of the Holy Infant Jesus, which was a congregation of Catholic girls' schools established in Singapore since 1854 by an order of French Catholic nuns.



also comes partly from my interest in dramaturgy and what it can be. So it's also research, it's also interpreting things, it's also making connections with people.

But it's also learning to let go. I think in my earlier years when I was an arts manager, I was like, everything must be controlled and everything must be that, but then you see the magic happening when you let things find themselves in the serendipity of a moment or in connecting people and then seeing how that flies.

So I'm actually really interested in how that worked in the eighties? And I think with this new generation of arts managers and art creators coming up, I think it's very important for us to capture that magic of the eighties and what it was like for them, so that this information and this cultural knowledge can be transmitted, rather than we all start from scratch. But we're building on and making this larger tapestry of what arts management is and can be.

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**Serene Chen:** One of the things for me is how I see arts management has as having grown. I often tell my students who are curious to let's work backwards. So if now you're holding the handphone to take down your notes, how do you think the stage manager did it before? Because it didn't exist when, we were starting to perform. Now, for example, your lighting designers and all, they need to know AutoCAD. I think it is lighting designers only, but probably not, it is probably the stage managers as well. And before that, there was a whole lot of diagrams, you have to print out a script, write all your cues at the side.

I think my understanding of arts management is that it continues to evolve with the new hybrid type of arts that we have and the kind of technologies that are coming in.

I think when I first began doing theatre, there was really not much in terms of what you could do with multimedia, for example, but now you can create so much and for the actor, the work has changed a little bit, significantly. I can only imagine that has changed multi-fold for the arts manager because they're having to plan everything and then execute everything and then tear down everything as well. So that's really interesting to me.

The other thing I think, which is a big burden on the arts managers - probably always has been, it's just that as an actor, I was probably blissfully unaware - is the kind of budgetary responsibility. Yeah, so much budgetary responsibility.

## CALL TO ACTION TO SUPPORT BACKLOGUES

[00:26:48]

**Serene Chen:** So, I'm very excited and I hope that our listeners are also buzzed by what we have shared and that you will join us for the eight episodes. If you have any thoughts and you'd like to contribute some content or some stories to us, we'd be so happy for you to check out our website. Do check out our webpage that's Backlogues – B A C K L O G U E S-Dot-SG. If you're interested in the expanded timelines of what we've talked about, for instance, outside of the 1980s, then do check out our resources page also on backlogues.sg.

[00:27:21]

**Charlene Shepherdson** Yeah! And I think what we would really like for you to take into as part of your practice as you're listening to this as well, is that at the end of every episode, always feel free to go back to the website again, which is backlogues.sg, so that you can find out all the additional information to add layers to the conversation we just had with our guests.

And if you are interested to continue listening to us, do look for us on your favourite podcast listening platform. And if you haven't already, you should subscribe to our feed so you know when every episode comes out, we'd always be willing to hear from you, and your experiences, whether its arts management or any thoughts that you have, you can contact us on the website or on our social media platforms. We're on Instagram at backlogues.sg. And if you would like to share with us your thoughts, we'd love to hear from you.

[00:28:00]

**Serene Chen:** So until our next episode, I'm Serene.

[00:28:03]

**Charlene Shepherdson:** And I'm Charlene, and this has been *Backlogues*.

[00:28:06]

[Theme Music]