

INTRODUCTION TO BACKLOGUES

[00:00:09]

Serene: Welcome to Backlogues, an Arts Management podcast series where we delve into the histories and evolving practice of Arts Management in Singapore. The world of arts management is a vast and wide-ranging one, and this podcast series is a humble attempt at beginning to map this world and chart this world. This pilot series focuses on the management of the theatre and literary art worlds, a process that brings texts to the stage or page. It also focuses on the time period of the 1980s to 1995, an exciting time for the local arts ecosystem because of the crucial work of the arts managers in the increasing professionalization of the Arts and Cultural industries. Head to our website at backlogues.sg, that's backlogues.sg, for more information and resources.

RECAP OF PREVIOUS EPISODE

[00:01:04]

Serene: In previous episodes of Backlogues, we explored the rise of a few English language theater companies in the 80s'. Groups such as TheatreWorks and The Necessary Stage.

CONTEXT-SETTING FOR THE THEMES TO BE COVERED IN THIS EPISODE

[00:01:13]

Serene: In this episode, we'll be delving into the histories of two other slightly different institutions. Firstly, the bilingual language theatre company known today as The Theatre Practice, formerly known as the Practice Performing Arts School, PPAS, and secondly, The Substation, one of Singapore's oldest and well-known multi-disciplinary contemporary art centers. Some of our listeners who were already familiar with these names would know that both of these iconic institutions were the brainchild of Kuo Pao Kun. He's of course arguably one of the most prominent and pioneering artistic visionaries of Singapore theater. Kuo was a playwright, a theatre director, a dramatist, an arts leader, and of course, a recipient of the cultural medallion too. Kuo's dedication and kindling of local theater has influenced generations of artists and practitioners. For instance, he himself taught a whole generation of directors, including Action Theatre's Ekachai Uekrongtham, The Necessary Stage's Alvin Tan, Asia-in-Theatre Research Circus', the late, Mr. William Teo, and Theatreworks' Ong Keng Sen. Many of Kuo's works have also entered the canon of Southeast Asian literature and have been performed by international theatre companies from across the world. We also very briefly touched on some of Kuo Pao Kun's history with The Substation in our conversation with Mr. Arun in Episode One. And today we're delighted to be able to speak with another arts manager who has worked closely with Kuo, both at the Theatre Practice and at The Substation. So please welcome Ms. Wong Han Juan!

INTRODUCTION TO WONG HAN JUAN

[00:02:52]

Han Juan: Thank you; thank you, Serene!

[00:02:54]

Serene: Hi Han Juan. I'm really excited to speak to you today. I think it's been many years since I spoke with you. You've been one of these stalwarts, I think, in arts management. I've met you in different, different contexts. We'll, obviously, for the sake of our listeners, we'll go through some of those as well. I'm excited to speak to you also because I think at points in time, we're going to actually speak in Mandarin.

[00:03:15]

Han Juan: Okay!

[00:03:16]

Serene: 舒不舒服用华语来讲? [are you comfortable to speak in Mandarin language?]

[00:03:18]

Han Juan: 好的, 好的! [Yes, yes!]

[00:03:19]

Serene: 这样比较舒服对吗?! [Isn't this more comfortable?!] Yeah, I should explain that Han Juan is very effectively bilingual. And of course, in this episode we're looking at Chinese theater in Singapore. We're also looking at The Substation, so I think there'll be opportunities for us to look back at the memories and 回顾回顾一下, 对吗? [Let's reminisce a little, am I right?]

[00:03:34]

Han Juan: 好, 好。 [Yes, yes]

[00:03:36]

Serene: Let me give our listeners some history about Han Juan. Han Juan, you've had a prolific career as an arts manager at a number of theatre companies over the years. Can you run us through what the early years were like for you, how you began?

[00:03:48]

Han Juan: Okay, actually I've always wanted to work in fields related to arts and culture. So somehow, when I went to see a performance by The Theatre Practice, that time it was called Practice Theatre Ensemble (PTE).

[00:04:03]

Serene: PTE...

[00:03:48]

Han Juan: Yes, PTE. So they did a show called Lei Yu (雷雨, Thunderstorm). It was directed by a very famous director from China. It was this play that I went, and they had this leaflet where they say they're going to recruit people for the ensemble. So there was a whole list of names, you know like stage managers, actors, and designers, blah, blah, blah. Then I saw this word "admin person", something like that, 行政管理之类的 [jobs related to admin management] hor. So I said "Oh, that one I can do!"

[00:04:36]

Serene: Okay!

[00:04:37]

Han Juan: Because I studied business management in, in, in business administration, in university. So I thought oh this is something I can do. I wrote in, to, to apply for a job.

[00:04:46]

Serene: What year was this?

[00:04:49]

Han Juan: 1988. So I got a call from the theatre manager, that time it was Lin Shu Fen, it was the manager. So I got interviewed, and guess who was the one who interviewed me?

[00:04:59]

Serene: Okay let me guess, Kuo Pao Kun himself!

[00:05:02]

Han Juan: Yeah, Mr. Kuo Pao Kun. I was so surprised, because I saw him, I read about his shows and in interviews in newspapers, so I didn't expect that he would be the one to interview me. So, I can't remember what we talked about, but I remember we had the interview at Sommerville Walk,

which was where PPAS first was set up in the space la. So I got a job, but somehow, because the ensemble was not formally set up yet and they were still kind of like, need to raise funds, and the school was having a lot of classes and I guess it was more generating more income. So I was put under the school and I was working on more admin staff, admin matters. So you may say that was my very first arts management job. Then later on when The Substation was up, again they need staff. What happened was actually after a year in the school, I wanted to leave. I wanted to leave, but that time the manager of PPAS, Ms. Tan Beng Luan, she asked me do I want to do I want to go to The Substation and work. Because at that time when I left, when I decided to leave PPAS, The Substation was in preparation stage.

[00:06:16]

Serene: That's right, because it began in 1990?

[00:06:18]

Han Juan: Correct, it was launched in 1990, uh, September, if I'm not wrong, yes. So I think I was fortunate as well, or fated, because they actually had a staff, they actually had a first staff of The Substation, a development executive. She left somehow after a few months, so there was a vacancy. So that's why Ms. Tan asked me whether I want to be, to work in The Substation. So I said, "oh, why not? It's something different." So I decided to take on the job. I was first working as a program executive, then later on promoted to program manager. Then after two years, again, I guess I was burned out. I really was burnt out, I guess, so decided to leave again. And then there was a short period because they were looking for a manager, so they asked me, can I be the acting manager? So there was a short period, maybe less than a year or so, I was also the acting manager of The Substation. Then after that there were also a few years I was working in more as a freelance arts manager. Okay. I think about three years or so

[00:07:20]

Serene: With The Substation?

[00:07:22]

Han Juan: No, freelance. And I was working with different companies.

[00:07:25]

Serene: Sure.

[00:07:26]

Han Juan: Yeah. Why? Because I somehow was thinking if I had a chance to be a freelance person, I could work with different people, different artists, and I have a choice to work with, on different projects. So that's why I decided to become a freelancer. Also at the time freelancing was quite new concept at the time, somehow. I was freelancing for a few years before I got an offer at the National Arts Council (NAC). Actually, I was also working on a contract basis with them first on an Arts Festival project, one particular project. So I was working with them for a few months for that project. Then the festival director, or the deputy director Chua Ai Liang, So she asked me whether I want to be full-time with them. I was full-time with the festival, the Singapore Festival of Arts for a few years. Then after that I was on contractual basis also for NAC also, for different things, for the community arts, for silver arts and long story. Also freelancing now, here and there. So basically my work in arts management encompasses like different kinds of working... uh... models. It could be part-time, it could be contractual. It could be... actually later on I didn't really do much full-time already, basically contractual or part-time.

[00:08:36]

Serene: Yeah, actually these different models that you brought up are very real today as well.

[00:08:43]

Han Juan: Yes, yes

[00:08:44]

Serene: I think that there are a lot of young people who go in, they start out as freelancers, if they have a chance to get onto a full-time arts position, whether it's with an institution or whether a theatre company, they try to do that. And then there's always a bit of flexibility going into a part-time mode or a freelance mode, as you say to try and sample what is out there. Could you tell us maybe when you started in the 80s' and the 90s', when this was a very new concept, what were some of the pressures that you faced that caused you to move into a contract situation or go freelance? What were some of the pressures that you faced?

[00:09:15]

Han Juan: Okay. Of course the main pressure is financial position. Because when you do freelance work, your income is not stable. Because your job is probably a few months, and then, unless you diligently look for projects, but then sometimes projects can extend.

[00:09:32]

Serene: Yes, yes, that's true.

Han Juan: So basically it's unstable income, that's the main reason. Of course, you do have other issues like your friends, they don't understand what is freelancing. They will think that you're being lazy. I had that experience because when I started out on freelancing, there was one day, you know lah freelancers, they can wake up anytime. I mean, not say any anytime, because they don't have structured working hours, so they don't have to wake up before 9am, go to work or what. So I remember a friend called me one morning, and I think it must be after 9am, and I told her, "oh 我刚刚睡醒 eh" [oh, I just woke up]. Then she said "huh 你为什么刚刚睡醒?" [Huh, how could you have just woken up?]. So she... kind of... scolded me. Like she 不谅解, 你懂我意思吗? [She didn't understand, you know what I mean?]. So I feel a bit, uh, like I do feel a bit like, yeah, and a bit upset. Like why, why you say that to me. Also, some of the 长辈 [elders], like my parents also, they keep on wondering, why am I not having a stable job?

[00:10:23]

Serene: Sure, yeah, of course they don't realise that you work until late at night. Right?

[00:10:26]

Han Juan: Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

[00:10:27]

Serene: Erm, you know 通宵嘛, 对吗? 做到通宵。 [Overnight. Right, work overnight?]

[00:10:29]

Han Juan: But I think... it is people who have this mindset that you must have a stable job, you must have stable income. I think that's a mindset that a lot of Singaporeans have. But for me, no, I do feel that how I live my life is my own also my choice. Okay, I can do part-time, I can do full-time, I can be contractual, I want to just rest, also can. So I think at the time I really have that kind of thought, and I do face, face criticism from friends and, and family, my parents. And even... I even remember Professor Eddie Kuo, he was on our board. So he also asked me, "你这样子, 可以生活吗?" [Can you really survive like that?]

[00:11:07]

Serene: Mhmmm, 问得好, 问得好。 [Well asked, well asked]

[00:11:08]

Han Juan: A lot of 质疑 [question], a lot of doubts from people. But of course now, probably not right? Maybe still, haha.

[00:11:12]

Serene: I guess it must be, the cost of living is still very high. There's still a lot of expectation in terms of career growth and all

Han Juan: Yeah, yeah, correct, correct.

[00:11:21]

Serene: So, 以前是这样, 现在可能还是这样。[It was like this the last time, and it still might be like this now.]

[00:11:23]

Han Juan: 还是这样。 But at least people may be more understanding now.

[00:11:25]

Serene: Correct, because they have more numbers.

[00:11:27]

Han Juan: Yeah, they know what is freelancing about, yeah. People can accept that now, but at that time, I think a lot of people still do not know what is freelancing. Yeah, and they don't, they don't agree to what you are doing with your time.

[00:11:39]

Serene: Yeah, yeah. And it's interesting also because incidentally, your own brother also works in theatre, right? Patrick Wong. He was all with The Substation, as a technical manager.

[00:11:48]

Han Juan: Yes, yes, he is. In fact I was also the one who introduced him to The Substation. What happened was our, our technician left, so we were looking for a technician, right? So I asked my manager, that that it was Tina... Tina Chen. So I asked her, what kind of qualification do you need? So she told me, oh, what, some engineering, blah, blah. So I was thinking, eh my brother also had this education background. Then I said, just ask him la. And that time he was actually working in some factory. So, oops. So he was, he had this graveyard shift. So he would, at night, sleep in the daytime. In reality, he didn't really enjoy. So I just asked him "eh, I had this job at The Substation, you want to try?" Then he just came already. So that's it, the rest is history.

[00:12:32]

Serene: Not bad, not bad. So your network was right next to you.

[00:12:36]

Han Juan: Sometimes you just feel that, you know, 真的是人生的机遇真的是很奇妙的。[Fate is really so mysterious] Sometimes I just think about that.

[00:12:43]

Serene: Yeah, yeah, okay.

[00:12:44]

Han Juan: So yeah, so he was, he became my consultant, in-house consultant, technical consultant. Every time I have technical question, which I cannot like, I'm not a technical person, so if I have any technical problems, I will just go home and ask him. "Hey Patrick, what happened? This designer want this and blah blah blah. Can we solve this? So, yeah, he's my in-house consultant.

[00:13:04]

Serene: Ah, that's wonderful, right? The fact that you can tap on his expertise as well?

[00:13:08]

Han Juan: Yeah.

[00:13:09]

Theme Music

[00:13:19]

Serene: I thought it would be a good opportunity for us to also talk about the Chinese language theatre, at that point in time. As I mentioned in previous episodes of backlogues, we actually covered a few English language theatre groups that emerged in the 1980s. But what was the state of Chinese language theatre at that point in time? Its history is... is notably less smooth sailing, I would say here in Singapore. It's closely tied to the state's shifting language policies over the '70s' and the '80s', Chinese language theatre was actually very prominent and popular from the early 1910s to the late 1970s. It played an important role in the cultural lives of Chinese immigrants to Singapore. And in 1965, just before Singapore attained independence, the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS) was set up by Kuo Pao Kun and his wife, the dancer Goh Lay Kuan. In the 1970s, the company would play to full houses with some of their productions reaching out to as many as 30,000 theatre-goers. Even the PAP's Cultural Bureau would put up Chinese performances to support the Party's ideology. This is a leaf from our history books. What was your relationship to Chinese theatre, Han Juan?

[00:14:28]

Han Juan: Because I was working at PPAS then, and because PTE is part of the school. So I was now and then will be asked to help out at the performances. I remember the very first show that I helped out was *Mama Looking For Her Cat*. Yeah. When I joined them, PPAS, during 1988, yeah, they were already rehearsing. I remember I saw people like Sasi (*T. Sasitharan*), Yang Shi Bin... a few of them at the studio, rehearsing.

[00:15:03]

Serene: Ang Gey Pin?

[00:15:04]

Han Juan: Yes, Gey Pin as well, and Jian Hong as well. Yep, if I'm not wrong. So Swee Lin,

[00:15:11]

Serene: Neo Swee Lin?

[00:15:12]

Han Juan: One of the first cast, yes, yes, I was asked to help out at the front of house, for *Mama Looking For Her Cat*. So that was my very first experience at a Chinese theatre performance. So we were at the Singapore Conference Hall and they actually built a three, 3-sided stage with stagger seats. Yeah. So it's like my first experience doing front of house and people were asking me 这个位子坐哪里, 那个位子坐哪里? [Where is this seat? Where is that seat?] I was like, oops, a bit blur. So you, of course, later on you understand that you really, you need to understand the show, whichever part of the work you, you are, you really need to know. For example, if I'm a front of house person, I really need to know what are the seats and where are the seats or whatever, that kind of thing. And anyhow, that was my first encounter la.

[00:15:58]

Serene: Right? Yeah. So, um, before Theatre practice you, did you watch any Chinese language theatre?

[00:16:01]

Han Juan: Oh, yes, yes, when I was in school? I told you, just now, that I watched *Thunderstorm*, *Lei Yu* (雷雨, *Thunderstorm*). But even before that, I think I, I did watch a couple of shows. In fact,

when I was in school, I was very involved in performing arts because I was in Nanyang High School. Every year we have this National Day show and every class must do something. So I remember we did Chinese dance, sing songs and what have you. And I remember I also directed a play.

[00:16:35]

Serene: So the early years really had an impact as well, right, in terms of your, thing.

[00:16:39]

Han Juan: That's kind of built up. You build up some interest in the performing arts through all these activities in schools.

[00:16:45]

Serene: Sure, sure. We were talking about the state's shifting language policies and in the, in the history books, it talks about how there's an adverse impact on Chinese language theatre. This was mainly because English was replacing mother tongues as the main language of instruction in schools. And in 1979, the government actually started a campaign to replace Chinese dialects with Mandarin as the preferred mother tongue, with the former labeled as a problematic hindrance to communication between Singaporean Chinese of different dialects. This was despite Mandarin being a language with no innate connection with most Singaporeans Chinese, yeah. Additionally, the mass arrest of 1976 saw Kuo Pao Kun and his wife, Goh Lay Kuan, amongst others, detained for years under suspicion of being involved in a communist plot. This meant that Chinese language theatre practitioners became less active and perhaps a little bit more cautious. Productions also became less experimental and socially engaged. So compared to the growth of English language theatre, Chinese language theatre audience numbers dwindled, and there were fewer productions. So Han Juan, just now you mentioned "Mama Looking For Her Cat," that was actually multi-lingual. So you had Mandarin, you had Malay, you had English, dialects as well, yeah, including Teochew, Cantonese and Hokkien. Would you say that that was a landmark production?

[00:18:11]

Han Juan: Yes. It is a very, like a breakthrough as well in the theatre. Yeah, it received very good response, positive response, from the audience. It's not just the language I think, it's also the content itself. Yeah.

[00:18:25]

Serene: And everyone's looking for the same cat, and no matter what language you're using. It becomes a bit of a metaphor, right. What are we searching for?

[00:18:33]

Han Juan: But of course the language part, I guess you kind of like built a 共鸣, 共鸣怎么讲? [Resonance, how do you translate that?]

[00:18:40]

Serene: empathy 是吗? [Is it?] A common understanding.

[00:18:43]

Han Juan: You can identify with it, oh, that's how we speak in, in the real actually. We speak in jumbo language. Yeah.

[00:18:50]

Serene: Yep, that's the Singapore identity.

[00:18:512]

Han Juan: Correct. And then I think the beautiful part about the play is about this mama and the Indian man, which is, which was played by Sasi. They actually spoke different languages. Mama was speaking in Hokkien, but Sasi was speaking in Tamil. But they can communicate.

[00:19:08]

Serene: But yet, they can communicate. That's the wonder of it. Yeah.

[00:19:12]

Han Juan: Yeah, so I think that part also touched a lot of people's hearts, that real communication, or sometimes it's beyond language. And theatre is exactly that, I feel sometimes. Theatre is also, it can be beyond language. You don't really have to understand the language of that theatre production, but you can feel for it. You can feel, if you're sensitive enough and you're open enough, you really need an open mind. Yeah. For me, sometimes I go and see... like... Cantonese play. I don't really understand fully the language, but I can still appreciate.

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Serene: That's right.

[00:19:43]

Han Juan: Or even opera. Yeah, yeah.

[00:19:45]

Serene: The emotions is something that is, is fairly universal. And if they are able to touch you right, they're able to draw you into the content as well.

[00:19:52]

Han Juan: Correct.

[00:19:53]

Serene: There was also a notable period in the 1980s, and that was the 1982 production of *Little White Sailing Boat*. That was part of the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1982, and it brought together 16 Chinese language theatre companies. This was written and directed by corporal Kuo Pao Kun, with support from veterans like Tay Bin Wee and Low Ing Sing. The production aimed to bring the groups together with the hope that the collaboration would raise production standards and a renewed interest in Chinese language theatre. Of course, this is... was because we were talking about how there was a bit of a waning, right? There's a bit of waning interest in Chinese language due to the shifting policies. So following this production, a federation was set up as a sustainable platform for collaboration and to strengthen Chinese language theatre, through sharing of resources and greater interaction. Four combined performances were actually held in the 1980s. However, the younger audiences continued to shun Chinese language theatre, apparently finding it quite archaic and dated, and also the language a bit alienating. And apparently this federation finally closed in 1996. Do you remember anything about this federation, Han Juan, and how audiences were reacting to Chinese language being in the theatre?

[00:21:07]

Han Juan: I wasn't very involved in the... these few major productions by the federation, but I think I remember watching the *Little White Sailing Boat*, 小白船。

[00:21:16]

Serene: *Little White Sailing Boat*, 小白船。

[00:21:20]

Han Juan: It was really a quality production because you really pull in all the good talents of the Chinese theatre. So I think the audience response was also very good. So I suppose, because everybody was saying that "oh, Chinese theatre is dwindling, audience is dwindling, because Chinese language is not..."

[00:21:37]

Serene: Was given less emphasis right? Was it given... I feel like I remember this part of my life, where I used to hear this song on radio.

[00:21:47]

Han Juan: 小白船? [Little White Sailing Boat?]

[00:21:48]

Serene: 小白船, 当然, 那个是folk song, 不过 [Little White Sailing Boat, at that time it was a folk song, but] also this one... [sings song in Mandarin] Okay, I don't know if this was the year, but this song was very much part of, that, that radio memory.

[00:22:08]

Han Juan: That era! Yes, yes... we all had the same...

[00:22:12]

Serene: Was just wondering if you remember that period of...

[00:22:15]

Han Juan: Yes, yes.

[00:22:16]

Serene: Under the federation that we were talking about, in 1986, okay, there was apparently this play called *Kopitiam*, and this was first directed by Kuo Pao Kun, Lin Jin Xiong and Lin Jen Erh at the Victoria Theatre. This was 6th June 1986. It was produced on behalf of 23 Chinese language drama groups, including the Singapore Amateur Players, the Singapore I-Lien Dramatic Society, Life Drama Society, Chuen-Lei Literature and Arts Association. This was one of the works that was done during the time of the federation.

[00:22:52]

Theme Music

[00:23:01]

Serene: In 1986 there was also the founding of the Practice Theatre Ensemble, PTE, yeah. Han Juan I was just wondering if you can share with us a little bit about the history of this PTE.

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Han Juan: So it was set up in 1986, correct?

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Serene: Yes that's right.

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Han Juan: So it's actually under Practice Performing Arts School.

[00:23:19]

Serene: PPAS

[00:23:20]

Han Juan: So it wasn't, Yeah, PPAS. So it wasn't formally registered yet at that time. It was under the school, because school... the school was running classes, dance classes, theatre classes. So I think the school made a bit of, a bit of money, which can support the operation of the theatre ensemble. So I remember the very first, the first group of professional actors ever at the ensemble, including Gey Pin... Ang Gey Pin, De Liang.

[00:23:49]

Serene: Zhu Xiu-Feng

[00:23:50]

Han Juan: Zhu Xiu-Feng, yes!

[00:23:50]

Serene: That's a Channel 8, one of the Channel 8 veterans.

[00:23:53]

Han Juan: Yeah she became, she became a TV actress and also Lim Jen Erh, who was more the director, the script writer. So these were the few full time members of the group that time. And they also had a theatre manager, Lin Shu Fen.

[00:24:08]

Serene: Oh, yes, that's right. Lin Shu Fen was the manager at that time.

[00:24:09]

Han Juan: Yeah, the manager at the time.

[00:24:13]

Serene: And there were also some other members like Goh Guat Kian, Yu Juan

[00:24:16]

Han Juan: Yes, Yu Juan... correct, correct.

[00:24:17]

Serene: and Lin Tian-Fa, too many names already.

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Han Juan: There could be some more part-time, or I would not say part-time, how to say, yeah, part-time basis.

[00:24:26]

Serene: Yeah. The part-time members that I have was Johnny Ng, Huang Jia Qiang.

[00:24:30]

Han Juan: Yes, yes, they are very regular part-timers with The Theatre Practice.

[00:24:32]

Serene: Correct, and the other name that you mentioned, Yang Shi Bin...

[00:24:37]

Han Juan: Yeah Yang Shi Bin, correct, yeah, yeah.

[00:24:38]

Serene: Yeah. Okay, the Practice Theatre Ensemble actually came together as a bilingual semi-professional theatre troupe. It allowed company members to train and further develop their artistic skills. In 1997, it was later renamed to The Theatre Practice. So this is the name that we now know. And the first public performance of PTE back then was a Mandarin production of *Fire Raisers* by Max Frish, translated and directed by Kuo Pao Kun himself as well. Looking at the highs and lows of the 1980s and the 1990s, Chinese language theatre would then see a resurgence in the new millennium with companies such as Toy Factory and Drama Box turning full-time in 2000. And some of the names that are associated with Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble at that point in time, would it be the current artistic director, Goh Boon Teck, right. And I think also a Chinese actor, and I think he's a TV anchor now, Jeffrey Low, right? These were some of the original ensemble members of Toy Factory. And some of the names associated with Drama Box, 戏

剧盒 [Drama Box's Mandarin name], would be Kok Heng Luen, Raymond Leong, Wong Chee Wai, set director, as well as Li Shiju, some of these names as well. Han Juan, I think you've worked with some of these companies before as well. Tell us at what capacities.

[00:25:57]

Han Juan: Yes, yes. Actually I worked with Toy Factory. Yes, not with Drama Box... Toy Factory. So I was actually working with Toy Factory on their very first musical, *I Have A Date With Spring*, 我跟春天有个约会 [I Have A Date With Spring].

[00:26:12]

Serene: Is that the one with Sharon Au?

[00:26:14]

Han Juan: Yes. That's the one that she, she premiere, her debut, her debut on stage.

[00:26:20]

Serene: 脱颖而出是吗? [Stand out, right?]

Han Juan: 对对, er yeah, 脱颖而出. [Right, right, er yeah, stand out]. It's after that she was recruited by the TV station, yeah. So they were actually celebrating the fifth anniversary, Toy Factory. So they decided to do this musical, uh, Mandarin musical, *I Have A Date With Spring*. So, I was invited to be the producer of the musical. And then I remember we did open auditions, so Sharon Au was... was the last person to come for the audition.

[00:26:50]

Serene: Oh, okay.

[00:26:51]

Han Juan: Yea, quite drama.

[00:26:52]

Serene: Was this your first time being a producer? Because before that you had been a program executive, you had been the acting manager at The Substation and things like that. So it looks like you went through many different roles.

[00:27:02]

Han Juan: Correct, possible, yes, possible as my very first producer job, yeah, yeah. It was quite a good experience. We actually had fun pulling together all the different talents, cast members to do the show. And we also went on TV to promote the show, yeah. And the show was actually held at Drama Center, the old one, the one, the one at Fort Canning. And I remember we actually, somehow we sold out the 10 shows, somehow.

[00:27:32]

Serene: Sounds like you weren't expecting to haha,

[00:27:34]

Han Juan: And then you... we didn't expect, really we didn't expect that, because we didn't really have like big cast, no famous cast, because Sharon Au was not famous at that time, yet.

[00:27:40]

Serene: It was her first time, right?

[00:27:41]

Han Juan: Yeah, so the only person, maybe well-known is Zheng Zhan Lun, the xinyao singer.

[00:27:47]

Serene: Ken Tay, 是吗? [Is that right?]

[00:27:48]

Han Juan: Mhmm, yeah, yeah, yeah. He was a little bit well known in the xinyao circle. I think the TV appearance to promote the show helped us a lot. Yeah. So we, we, we sold out 10 shows, and we even added one more show. So a lot of people were like, oh, why, why this show can sell out? People were puzzled, why? So...

[00:28:09]

Serene: And the tickets were not cheap at all, they were at \$60 and a \$100. This was the year 1995, and it was held at the old Drama Centre, right?

[00:28:20]

Han Juan: Drama Centre, yes, yes.

[00:28:21]

Serene: Of course there were some slightly cheaper tickets for students.

[00:28:24]

Han Juan: Concession, yeah, yeah.

[00:28:35]

Serene: They will priced at \$15, \$20, \$25, right? Interestingly, they were on sale at TicketCharge. You don't hear that entity anymore. And of course you could of course walk into The Substation and buy tickets, right. They tear it out from a booklet for you. Okay.

[00:28:39]

Han Juan: Okay, okay, yeah. The Substation was one of the outlet, I guess, it was one of the outlets.

[00:28:40]

Serene: It was one of the outlets, yeah, correct. Well, what do you see the numbers as a sign for Chinese theatre? How did you interpret the numbers, of tickets being sold?

[00:28:48]

Han Juan: Um, frankly, sometimes I do feel, even though we keep on saying that Chinese language is like, okay, audience for Chinese theatre is dwindling, we have been saying that, right. But then I also feel that the content, sometimes is the content. For example why I *Have A Date With Spring* can, can be a sellout because it's really the content, I feel. Because it's a very happy, it's a very is a very 温馨 [heartwarming], a very warm kind of, heartwarming theatre show, and a lot of oldied, Chinese oldies inside the, inside the show. And then of course it talks about love between the sisters, the sisterly bonding between them. 就是它很温馨, 它的, 它有, 就是有家人之间的爱, 朋友之间的爱 [It's just very heartwarming, it's, it's, there's familial love, platonic love]. And then people can identify with that, okay. And of course the songs, all this old melody song, oldies, bring back a lot of memories, good memories for the people. So that's why when people saw us on TV, when we promote 我跟春天有一个约会 [*I Have A Date With Spring*], I think that attracts people.

[00:29:50]

Serene: I see, I see.

[00:29:51]

Han Juan: So even though we don't have big cast and... but then you sell out. So I also feel that it's the content.

[00:29:56]

Serene: Right.

[00:29:57]

Han Juan: The other example I want to tell is 天冷就回来 [If There Are Seasons]. It was also sell-out. They even do, I think three rounds, was it three rounds, three, 重演三次。 [Acted three times]

[00:30:07]

Serene: Reruns?

[00:30:08]

Han Juan: Reruns, and they all sell-out, because of 梁文福的歌 [Liang Wern Fook's song]. I mean, I have the say that is the main selling point lah, but also the story is incidentally also written by Raymond To, 杜国威.

[00:30:20]

Serene: Yeah, Raymond To is the playwright for other things. 对。 [Right]

[00:30:21]

Han Juan: 都是很温馨的, 都是很温馨的戏 [all very heartwarming, all very heartwarming shows], you know. It doesn't show you very big, major, 它没有大起大落的情绪 [It doesn't have very big ups and downs].

[00:30:29]

Serene: 对 [Right]。 So it doesn't, in a way it doesn't force you to be, to be very uncomfortable, 会吗? [Will it?]

[00:30:34]

Han Juan: Yes, yes. So 就很温馨 [it's very heartwarming], and then people can relate to that. And I think people like that.

[00:30:41]

Serene: 你说的那些歌曲 [The songs that you've mentioned], the songs that you've mentioned here, that, I suppose, makes us think about the popular culture at that point in time.

[00:30:47]

Han Juan: Exactly, also.

[00:30:50]

Serene: And, and, 是不是跟新谣的, 新谣的时段有一些的关系? [Does it have to do with xinyao, the xinyao period?], the rise of xinyao in Singapore in the 80s'?

[00:30:56]

Han Juan: Yes, yes, xinyao, xinyao was very flourishing during the 80s' I think, during the 80s'. So a lot of school students will engage in xinyao, writing songs, even form their own groups. Actually when I ask around, some of my friends, I was very surprised, they all have a group before or they write songs or they sing song. So they have that part of, uh, experience and become a good memory for all of them. So xinyao was, to me, it is a collective memory, for a lot of Chinese language people. So I think when you go for, for example you go to uh 天冷就回来 [If There Are Seasons], this, this musical, I think a lot of people go there because of the nostalgic feeling, the atmosphere and the songs that bring them good memories, about that, that period of time when they can write their songs, express themselves, yeah

[00:31:42]

Serene: Mhmm yeah, it sounds like there was some kind of parallel growth at that point in time as well that they could ride on as well. So 天冷就回来 [If There Are Seasons], the English title which some of us may remember is, *If There Are Seasons*, and suddenly that one has been rerun several times by The Theatre Practice.

[00:32:00]

Theme Music

[00:32:10]

Serene: Now I just going back to 1995 again, in the same year of *I Have A Date With Spring*, the resurgence of Chinese theatre kind of bounced back, especially in August 1995. There were no fewer than six Chinese language plays in that year. Wong Mei Lan, assistant artistic director of PTE attributes to the mix of new companies, with young people, and then also older dominant groups eager to be active once again. For example, even in the schools, this was a new thing in Nanyang Junior College, the Chinese society alumni staged its first performance that month. There was also a new youth drama group of the Hokkien Huay Kuan. It had its debut performance in July. And then with a more established or older group, the 22 year old Singapore Broadway Playhouse staged *The Land Of The Forgotten Soul*. And you had the Arts Theatre of Singapore, formerly the Singapore Amateur Players, one of Singapore's oldest Chinese drama groups, staged a children's production in September. Mr Koh Chong Chiah, chairman of the Arts Theatre of Singapore, attributes it to the booming China economy as well, bringing along a recognition of the importance of Chinese language, and therefore that caused a bright light on Chinese theatre. This is kind of really interesting because some of the developments in The Theatre Practice, you know, PTE, PPAS actually led to a resurgence and the burgeoning of new groups like Toy Factory, like Drama Box, but also contemporary dance like ECNAD and puppetry, The Finger Players, 十指帮 [The Finger Players]. And from The Finger Players, also Paper Monkey. So it's a, quite an interesting time because it almost feels like that work in the late 80s' and 90s' that Pao Kun and The Theatre Practice was doing kind of jump-started a bit of the interest in developing work that had a bit of a Chinese base. Yet differences between Chinese theatre and English theatre, perceived by audiences then, also reflected the sold-out audience sizes. Chinese theatre perceived to be more conservative or less dynamic, was unable to command a sufficiently large audience base. PTE would draw about 4,000 people a year to its productions and a popular English theatre company, like say The Necessary Stage would expect to attract as many as say 10,000. So that really shows you how the language policy and the development would impact the growth of language streamed theatres here in Singapore, yeah. I have a question for you, Han Juan, what were the conditions like when you started to work, and I'm referring to the point that you joined. For example, in 1986, Practice Theatre Ensemble was founded, it was a bilingual semi-professional theatre troupe. This allowed the company members to train and further develop their artistic skills. And in 1988, Practice actually moved into Stamford Arts Centre under the National Arts Council Arts Housing Scheme. So since you joined in 1988, what was your experience working from Stamford art center? What were the conditions like?

[00:35:11]

Han Juan: Actually, I was with the school, but I will always be roped in to help with the ensemble performances. I remember they were doing this tour. "Day I Met The Prince", 我要上天的那一晚, 是吗 [Day I Met The Prince, right?], okay, Day I Met The Prince, which was very popular. I remember they toured to many schools. I had this vivid memory that I have to help them carry the speaker, yes.

[00:35:35]

Serene: Wah, wah, hard labour.

[00:35:38]

Han Juan: And I cannot imagine how come I can, how come I can, now that I recall, it's like 那个时候我是那么壮 [I was so strong back then], now I cannot do already, of course. So yeah, I had that memory, you know, carry the speaker ourselves. So you can imagine how hard it was at that time. We had to do, one person have to do a few things, yeah.

[00:35:55]

Serene: Right, multitask.

[00:35:57]

Han Juan: Yeah, but you see, I was officially the school staff, but I still had to go and help the ensemble. And I also remember we had to go and give out flyers at the street.

[00:36:07]

Serene: Publicity, publicity, and arts marketing.

[00:36:08]

Han Juan: Publicyt, yes, yes. So that's why some people cannot tahan this kind of thing, especially if you are grad, especially you say, why am I doing this thing, you know standing on the road and give out flyers.

[00:36:17]

Serene: Yeah, in the arts community, we have this term saigang, menial labour, or the direct translation is shitty work, right?

[00:36:22]

Han Juan: Saigang, yes... yeah... Then, then, the other thing I can tell you, is at that time, my manager, Shu Fen, he even told me he, he told me jokingly, but I was like "huh", he said, "下个月薪水不懂怎么办" ["I may not be able to pay you next month"], and I was like, "huh"

[00:36:43]

Serene: Next months pay, I don't know how, the literal translation, meaning that you might not get paid the next month.

[00:36:48]

Han Juan: Something like that, it's like, oh my God. It's like, I think he just meant to casually, it's a casual remark to me. Maybe it's just that, he doesn't mean to scare me or what, I guess not. But because I was like young and, you know, new staff there, I was like "huh".

[00:37:02]

Serene: So you were really like living from hand to mouth?

[00:37:03]

Han Juan: So it was tough...Correct. So for the company, I mean the school running the ensemble as well, I think financially we are quite difficult. I mean, we have to raise funds all the time and I remember we have a few board members, they were very, very kind to us. They are very supportive. Sometimes they will really like our bank liddat. It's like, if you need money, I think they would just call, I mean my manager will call them and then a cheque will come.

[00:37:28]

Serene: Ah, so the board members were the one who were...

[00:37:39]

Han Juan: We really had very good, we really had very good, how to say, 天使 [Angel], angels, angels around us

[00:37:33]

Serene: Angels, right

[00:37:35]

Han Juan: They are not there to be famous or what, they just support us for the sake of supporting the arts, yeah. There were a few members, a few board members. They are like that, you see? So we were quite fortunate, yeah. So that was roughly the situation.

[00:37:47]

Serene: Okay. So there's financial challenges.

[00:37:49]

Han Juan: Financial. We also manpower, we always lack of, not enough manpower. So, like you said, saigang lah, everyday have to do everything. Yeah, I remember I had to design the flyer sometimes, and I'm not designer, okay.

[00:38:01]

Serene: Can I ask you about 1994? "*Where Love Abides*", you were the company's publicity manager. Is this where you had to do publicity, you had to design flyers? What was the experience?

[00:38:12]

Han Juan: No, I was not the publicity manager, I was freelancing as you know. Okay, when I was freelancing, I do quite a lot. I did quite a lot of work for Practice at that time, because I think they didn't have a manager. Very difficult to get manager. The manager came one week, then left. Yeah, I remember that.

[00:38:32]

Serene: Why was it so difficult to get a manager?

[00:38:34]

Han Juan: I think it's really because it's really a thankless job? You have to raise funds, you got to do everything. And then because short of manpower... it's really tough... really tough. I remember we had a manager, was it Pei Hwee, Tan Pei Hwee. She was probably longer, she stayed a bit longer, but if you had somebody that maybe not from an arts background, they probably can't stay too long. So yeah, I remember this guy, he came just one week and he left the job suddenly. So for quite a few months, a few years or so, they don't have a manager. So I was employed to be the production manager or the producer. So a lot of, during my freelance years, I do quite a lot for Practice Theatre Ensemble. Because at the time, Pao Kun was very active also. Other than the major productions, he also did... he also did shows for the Arts Festival. And also that time there was this culture, Chinese Cultural Festival by the SPH, Singapore Press Holdings. So I think Pao Kun was also very actually involved with the planning of the programmes. So he also brought in Chinese productions, like 太平天国 [Taiping Heavenly Kingdom], 李國修的那个屏风表演班 [Hugh Lee's Ping-Fong Acting Troupe], Stan Lai? So a lot of these shows I was doing either project management or I was a producer.

[00:39:48]

Serene: I see, I see. So you worked very closely with Pao Kun.

[00:39:53]

Han Juan: Pao Kun and Theatre Practice. So [for] *Where Love Abides*, I was the producer or the publicity, I can't remember now.

[00:40:00]

Serene: I think you were doing companies' publicity at that point in time.

[00:40:03]

Han Juan: Okay, okay, okay, yeah, yeah. Sometimes I would just do publicity if they have the production team already, so I'll just do publicity.

[00:40:10]

Serene: 好辛苦哦! [How tiring!] You had to do a lot of things. It sounds like the one thing that sustains a lot of the arts managers, and even probably today, is passion.

[00:40:20]

Han Juan: Yeah. I think it's the interest in us. And the good thing is because we kind of start from scratch, because we also did, you know, all those stage management work. Because I think I also did station management before for the school production, the school production, you know, the end of the year, where all the kids went to the stage to perform, I was stage managing those shows. So, because we learn, we start from scratch. So we pick up the skills along the way.

[00:40:43]

Serene: Yup, yup.

[00:40:44]

Han Juan: So in a way you asked me to stage manage... stage manage a show, I can do that too. Not my forte, but I can.

[00:40:49] **Serene:** Yes, but you can do it. Somehow, you...

[00:40:50]

Han Juan: So publicity, I can do also.

[00:40:52]

Serene: Just hantam, as they say, just do.

[00:40:54]

Theme Music

[00:41:04]

Serene: "Where Love Abides" or 人间有情 [Where Love Abides] was staged in 1994, you were the company's publicity manager. It was showing for three nights, 28-30th October, 7:30pm at the Victoria Theatre. This was about the proprietor of an old fashioned umbrella factory and his relationship with his family and his employees. The story was about all facets of love, love between father and son, husband and wife, and lovers. And there wasn't an antagonist in the play, very much like what you described earlier on. It was the largest production. Since Lao Jiu from four years before that. There were 18 actors playing about 20 roles, bringing together the largest cast since Lao Jiu. In Lao Jiu there were 27 people acting, and it was staged during the 1990s, Singapore Festival of Arts. And the cast, veterans, included Teo Ngak Seng, Wong Yik Looi and Johnny Ng, 黄家强, [Johnny Ng] right? as well as younger ones, for example, Nelson Chia, who is of course today, the artistic director of Nine Years Theatre, 九年剧场 [Nine Years Theatre]. This play was written by Hong Kong playwright Raymond To. It was the second time that the company was staging a play by a Hong Konger, and one of the issues I think was always the shortage of scripts, it was always a problem. And Hong Kong scripts were a good source for theatre practitioners to tap at that point in time. There were some issues with props. Apparently the play spans over three generations and a lot of the items were very, very difficult to acquire. You can just imagine the stage managers having to hunt high and low, but that was the kind of curiosity and the kind of creativity that I think stage managers would have to expend, and to, and to use. The design crew had to make their own paper bags and paper money, had to hire specialists to tailor clothes and make wooden chairs. The umbrella factory in Malaysia sponsored the production of the umbrellas needed for the play. And the production costs came up to \$60,000. And that was quite

average for a play at Victoria Theatre, at the point in time. It involved many big name designers, of course, such as Kuo Pao Kun as artistic director and lighting designer, his daughter, Kuo Jian Hong as the set designer. While she did lighting sets and costume designs for place such as *The Silly Little Girl and The Funny Old Tree* in the past, the target audience at that point in time was everyone, right? Because the theme was universal, it was hoping that those who were not competent in Mandarin would not have a problem in understanding it. And, and I suppose, thereby, you know, being won over to continue to, to keep watching, um, theatre in Singapore. Taiping Tianguo, or *Heavenly Kingdom* was another play that Han Juan mentioned. You were the project coordinator, Han Juan?

[00:43:43]

Han Juan: Yes, yes

[00:43:45]

Serene: About a man traveling back in time to the Taiping Revolution, that's 1850s-64. Wow. Going backwards.

[00:43:51]

Han Juan: It was part of the Chinese Cultural Festival, I think, by SPH.

[00:43:55]

Serene: Yeah, by SPH back then. Okay. This was performed 10th to 12th March. So it's looks like a three-day run is quite common for these so-called invitations to festivals. It was held at 8:00 PM at the ACS (Independent) Centre for Performing Arts at Dover Road. Ticket prices, interestingly, they seem so affordable, as I'm reading it now, tickets were \$11, \$21, \$31, \$41 was the most, most expensive. And these were available at The Substation, Seng Yew Book Store and Practice Theatre Ensemble. Again, this is also very interesting because, where you could buy tickets from, they will not necessarily your online sources. They were actually your brick and mortar shops. The ones that really support it, the arts.

[00:44:40]

Han Juan: Correct, I, I remember doing that too, bringing that stack of tickets to the different outlets, and you need, you really need their support. I remember tea houses was one.

[00:44:49]

Serene: Mhmm, 茶馆 [Tea house]

[00:44:51]

Han Juan: 茶馆 [Tea house], yes. 茶渊茶馆 [Tea Garden Tea House], they were very supportive. And where else? Bookstore, bookstore, 青年书局 [Youth Books]. Yeah, so yeah that time we have to do that too.

[00:45:02]

Serene: You have serial numbers which you have to chop right?

[00:45:03]

Han Juan: Serial numbers, yeah.

[00:45:04]

Serene: And then after that, when you sell the ticket, you need to tear carefully along the perforated lines

[00:45:07]

Han Juan: Tear, along the, correct, correct. Yeah, it was very interesting. And then we have the draw, sorry, not draw, 画那个座位, 座位表 [Draw out the seating arrangement]

[00:45:16]

Serene: Oh, okay.

[00:45:17]

Han Juan: which are the seats that are available here? You have to,

[00:45:19]

Serene: You have to actually highlight, on the seating arrangement.

[00:45:20]

Han Juan: Highlight, yeah. So we attach the seating plan also with the tickets. We'll do that too.

[00:45:25]

Serene: So interesting. So now 你的手工非常好 [Your ability to make things is very good].

[00:45:32]

Han Juan: Okay. Talk about 太平天国 [Taiping Heavenly Kingdom]. I remember the very first night or rehearsal, Li Guo Xiu [Hugh Lee] was... was.... suddenly, he... he lost his voice. We all like freak out because, oh my God, tomorrow 要表演了啊 [tomorrow is the performance], then he just suddenly lost his voice. I think - too stressed or what. He was the director, he was also the main person of the 屏风表演班 [Ping-Fong Acting Troupe]. So immediately we have to get this Chinese Sensei to come around to the backstage and help him. And then the Sensei has to standby every night to, to, to support him ah.

[00:46:06]

Serene: Did it come back, his voice?

[00:46:08]

Han Juan: I think he came back, but of course not his perfect condition. I mean, so this is a little story I remember.

[00:46:14]

Serene: No, it's great, it's great!

[00:46:15]

Han Juan: Also, during that show, we had this celebrity, 曾国城 [Sam Tseng]. He was such a busy person. He arrived only on the, if I'm not wrong, on the night before the show start.

[00:46:26]

Serene: Right, right. But no problem. Just walk him into

[00:46:27]

Han Juan: Yeah, just walk in and he did his show. Yeah, yeah, anyway, yeah.

[00:46:31]

Serene: I guess I want to say also a point about marketing back then, even though marketing was probably something that was a bit newer in the arts. There were posters, there were flyers, there were program notes in both Chinese and English, which was a very, very big step because the idea of trying to be inclusive and to kind of educate the audience, if they were more well-versed in one language or the other.

[00:46:54]

Theme Music

[00:47:00]

Serene: I would like to also speak a little bit about Mr. Kuo Pao Kun's vision. Now, of course, listening to how a lot of people referred to him, right, it was always in a very respectful way. 郭生, 郭生 [Mr. Kuo, Mr. Kuo], right?

[00:47:13]

Han Juan: Yes, yes.

[00:47:15]

Serene: Because obviously he was a teacher, right. He was a teacher at PPAS, and so was his wife and things like that. But also this came out of a real deep respect for his beliefs and his artistic vision. In 1985, as far back as that, he had a vision of an art center that would be accessible to all forms, artists and cultures. And this was, of course, as we now know, it'd be, it came to pass as The Substation. The following year in 1986, 45 Armenian Street was allocated under the Arts Housing Scheme to The Substation. We spoke in an earlier episode with Tisa Ng about this. It became the first property under the then new Arts Housing Scheme to receive a capital grant of \$1.07mil for renovations. So proposals were called and Kuo Pao Kun's proposal was chosen as it went beyond an individual group's needs. Unlike the rest who were looking for rehearsal spaces. So his vision was also for the space to be multidisciplinary and multicultural, which was a fresh concept, then. Juliana Lim and Tisa Ho-Ng were then deputy director and assistant director in the Ministry of Community Developments Cultural Affairs Division. They made the case to allocate the space to be managed on a 10-year lease rather than a one 3-year lease, which was the norm for the scheme at the point in time. And in 1990, The Substation was opened with the slogan, "A Home for the Arts". It was called "The Sub", very affectionately nicknamed, "The Sub". It came in at a time where artists were beginning to feel the need to create their own spaces, rather than relying on the government. And there was a whiff of a DIY, do-it-yourself, indie punk scene, especially in the music scene back then. One of the unique aspects of The Sub was the diversity of genres in its programming. It was a key venue for the production and staging of young experimental and contemporary works in dance, literature, music, theatre, and visual arts. And I have a quote here. "The Substation is a home for the arts. So it should accommodate any kind of arts – traditional, contemporary, experimental and pop. So when people come to The Substation, they get to meet different artists, they get to meet different kinds of arts. Isn't that good?" And this quote is by Kuo Pao Kun himself. Han Juan, how was it like working with somebody who had a vision that was so, kind of expansive, 很广 [very expansive], how did you, how did you work to help him fulfill this vision?

[00:49:46]

Han Juan: Wow, 一言难尽 [indescribable].

[00:49:53]

Serene: 你可以有很多“言”，不用“一言”。 [You can say it in however many sentences as you like, do not need to limit yourself to one.]

[00:49:53]

Han Juan: Like you said, he's really a person with great visions I feel, and he's very embracing, I really feel. In fact, The Substation is really a center that embraced all the arts forms, experimental, contemporary, as you've just mentioned. And it can be very interesting. You walk in one weekend at The Substation, maybe you will see a rock band in the garden, but then there's this opera troupe in the theater, and then maybe a modern dance in the, in a practice at the studio. So you see, it's a very interesting, kind of like 交错, 你懂吗 [Interaction, you know], 就是 [it's like]

[00:50:28]

Serene: Interaction?

[00:50:29]

HJ: Interaction, and a different kind of people, different kinds of art forms. So it can be very exciting, and stimulating. To me is, is really eye opening, as well, I must say. Because you really, at that, for me, even though I worked just a few years with, with The Substation, it really opened up a whole new world of what is art-making, especially experimental work, especially work in progress, because these are the things that maybe not so, how to say, common at that time, maybe, it's still new concept. For example, we were talking about work in progress, Pao Kun encouraged showcasing of work in progress. Okay.

[00:51:05]

Serene: Mhmm, not so much on the end product, but what is the step, all the steps leading up to...

[00:51:07]

Han Juan: Correct, correct, yes correct. Yeah, the process itself. So to me, it's, I learned really a lot and it opened up my world of art making as well. So it was also during that time that I learned to appreciate experimental art, and I learned to appreciate all kinds of music. Because at that time, I don't know whether you, y'all, you all remember, there was a long period that rock music was kind of banned in Singapore, but somehow we organised a big rock concert at the garden and it was packed, fully packed. People couldn't get into the, the garden, and they would 爬上那个墙, 围墙 [Climb up the wall]

[00:51:48]

Serene: Climbing up the wall, the wall

[00:51:50]

Han Juan: And I think trees in the carpark, something like that.

[00:51:52]

Serene: Climbing up the trees to watch, to watch the concert. Wow.

[00:51:53]

Han Juan: To watch the concert, yeah. I can't remember was it charged or free, but anyway, it probably is free, that's why there were so many people coming. Or even if you charge, you probably have a small fee. Anyway, so it was so packed and, but then there was, you know, when you talk about rock, people would think about chaos and noisiness or whatever, but then the crowd was very, very well-behaved somehow. Yeah, there was no chaos, and basically I feel that I really start to appreciate different kinds of music and get to learn, get to know more people from the different genres as well.

[00:52:27]

Serene: Yeah, I want to give some context to our listeners for what you mentioned about the rock music being banned. Many rock songs were actually banned because at the point in time, the government had a [Anti]-Yellow Culture Campaign. And this Yellow Culture actually was talking about the fear of Western, foreign influence on Asian values. So there was some attempt to, in a way, protect the indigenous audience, I suppose, from that. And early on, also, what you had mentioned about this idea of showcasing works in progress. It was a very important development in the Singapore art scene because, and I quote "In Singapore, it's always the product that's important. There should be recognition, even respect, in Singapore for people who produce worthy failures than mediocre success. I think we are too product- or result-oriented. I think that the process is as important as the product. You need to have a good balance between the two." This is a quote by 郭生 [Mr. Kuo], Mr. Kuo Pao Kun as well.

[00:53:28]

Han Juan: Yes, correct, yes, yes. We all know this very well by now.

[00:53:30]

Serene: We know this very well. How do you think that this actually impacts the generation of arts managers that came through this period of time? How did it affect the way that they supported artists after that, in terms of understanding the needs for experimentation and the need for doing works of progress?

[00:53:50]

Han Juan: I just feel that, I guess it encourages people, or the artists, to really, to open up and be more creative. Oh, the other thing that I think Mr. Kuo also emphasized is the multi-disciplinary kind of collaboration

[00:54:05]

Serene: To learn from each other right?

[00:54:06]

Han Juan: Correct, he always, he always encouraged that as well, to learn from each other. And also you will get, 我们常讲, 就是碰撞, 不同的源流文化的人, 那个会碰撞出一些火花來.

[00:54:16]

Serene: Collisions. Okay, alright.

[00:54:22]

Han Juan: Some kind of stimulation in... and some kind of chemistry will... will happen. I think that's very important. So one, work in progress, work in process. The other one is multidisciplinary collaboration. So I feel, after that, I feel that more artists or even theatre companies, production companies, they will start to be more courageous, more, more open to do a collaboration with different artists from different disciplines, and also to be more, to be also more ready to show their work in process works as well. Yeah, I think so.

[00:54:52]

Serene: Perhaps this also contributed to a mindset of independence, right?

[00:54:57]

Han Juan: Yes.

[00:54:58]

Serene: The idea of creating, being open, being unafraid to embrace different things so that it could actually lead to more creativity.

[00:55:06]

Han Juan: Correct, and also, maybe also, because of that, more artists are willing to come up and be on their own. You mentioned that Toy Factory, Kok Heng Leun, Drama Box, ECNAD

[00:55:18]

Serene: 十指帮 [The Finger Players], The Finger Players, Paper Monkey...

[00:55:20]

Han Juan: 十指帮 [The Finger Players], yes, yes. Actually, most of them, more or less, were related to Practice before, either trained by Mr. Kuo, or, even Finger Players, did you know that they were actually once under Practice?

[00:55:30]

Serene: Right, right?

[00:55:31]

Han Juan: Yeah. It was only after a few years that Pao Kun encouraged them to come out on their own.

[00:55:36]

Serene: So maybe you will know this story better than I do, but, so I learned this by reading. So the Lao Jiu, The Ninth Born, came from this puppetry family. I, I know two of the sisters.

[00:55:49]

Han Juan: Ah yes, Tan Beng Tian.

[00:55:51]

Serene: Tan Beng Tian, yes, and I know Tan Beng Chiak, and I believe Tan Beng Luan, was the GM

[00:55:57]

Han Juan: Yes, yes, GM of Practice at that time, yes. So Beng Tian was... was doing the puppetry part. Beng Chiak was one of the sisters in... in the show, yeah, okay. The three, the Tan, we always call them the Tan sisters.

[00:56:09]

Serene: 陈家姐妹 [Tan sisters]

[00:56:09]

Han Juan: 陈家姐妹 [Tan sisters].

[00:56:12]

Serene: Yeah, okay. So speaking of *Lao Jiu*.. after *Lao Jiu*, which was staged at the Singapore Arts Festival, actually the 12 ensemble members came out from that show to begin Toy Factory Theatre Ensembles. So back to what you were saying about how 实践 [The Theatre Practice], The Theatre Practice, actually kind of birthed a lot of these groups as well. In 1991, The Finger Players left The Theatre Practice to establish itself as a separate entity. Obviously, at that point in time, Kuo Pao Kun encouraged them to go independent so that they could apply for their own funding. Because as we know, finances were always a big problem and Theatre Practice could not support the group, which had actually four full-time puppeteers at the point in time. The original members of The Finger Players were Tan Beng Tian, Benjamin Ho, Lee Wai Ying, Ong Keng Sen. Subsequently, also, Benjamin left The Finger Players to begin Paper Monkey Theatre, which is also a puppetry troupe.

[00:57:10]

Han Juan: Correct, yes, correct.

[00:57:11]

Theme Music

[00:57:22]

Serene: Han Juan, I'm going to take us to a quote by T. Sasitharan, who succeeded Kuo Pao Kun as the AD (Artistic Director) for Substation. And he said this before, in a time where performing spaces were limited and mostly managed by the government, The Substation, which was led by artists and for artists, was "a tremendous leap of imagination". Do you agree with this quote?

[00:57:47]

Han Juan: Yes, yes, of course, yes.

[00:57:49]

Serene: But yet it was so difficult, right? The Substation was always having to fundraise, for example.

[00:57:55]

Han Juan: Correct, yes, you're right.

[00:57:57]

Serene: So was it worth it? To have an art, to have an arts space led by artists for artists, and yet have to struggle with the whole fundraising aspect?

[00:58:05]

Han Juan: I, I don't really think it that way, I mean, to think whether it's worth it or not, it's really part of the package I feel. I think when you do arts, is, is you just have to be prepared that it's going to be a hard life, unless you do commercial arts, arts that sells very well. Okay. So if we're talking about doing theater, even other forms of arts and visual arts, literature arts, you really have to be prepared that you have to do a lot of things yourself. For example, you have to raise funds, you have to run publicity and things like that. So fundraising is always the number one problem for the artists. So when I was a producer, why they engage me as producer? Because 请你去帮我们找钱 [Please help us look for money.] So that was the first thing they asked me to do.

[00:58:48]

Serene: 为什么找你找钱呢? 你是不是有很多 [Why did they ask you to look for money? Is it because you have a lot of] kang tao? A lot of, a lot of you know, leads to fundraising.

[00:58:53]

Han Juan: I suppose, I suppose you know after the years of, you know, experience in theatre work and doing, writing letters to all the foundations and banks and whatever. So you sort of accumulate a bit of experience lah, you know looking for money or raising funds. And then a lot of artists, they don't do all these themselves. In fact, they will tell you “我不会做” [I don't know how], don't even know how to write a proposal, that kind of thing. So that is also a common problem for artists. So that is why we need arts managers.

[00:59:21]

Serene: Yeah, did you feel you had to beg for money?

[00:59:23]

Han Juan: In a way, yes, yes. So that's why there was this journalist who came to interview us, or film us at The Substation and she was close to us. So once we were talking, had a little chat at the, at the cafe, and we talked about my job as an arts manager. So she concluded that, that, she said that 我觉得你们很像, 你们就像高级乞丐 [I feel that you guys are like, you guys are like high class beggars].

[00:59:44]

Serene: High class beggars, 高级乞丐 [High class beggars].

[00:59:45]

Han Juan: High class beggars, so I can, so that, that phrase somehow become a very, I just remember it for the rest of my life like that. And I always tell people that 我是个高级乞丐 [I'm a high class beggar] as an arts manager. I mean, you can look at it in a positive way, some people would think it's, it's negative lah, but I always feel that, I look at it, I feel that it's more like, uh, 轻松的方式 [a carefree way of] you know thinking about my work, the lighter angle, I would say so.

[01:00:08]

Serene: Sure. I'd like to just give a bit of information to our listeners as well about the state of funding and what was the push for having to continually fundraise. The Substation at that point in time was the first collective center for the arts. It opened in September, 1990. It needed \$430,000 at least, a year, okay, annually, if it wanted to continue its programmes of experimental theatre, arts exhibitions, workshops, lectures, concerts, and arts markets, and to pay operating costs and salaries for nine full time staff. So one thing's for sure, passion still has to be paid for because you have to put food on the table, you have to pay for rent. More context, revenue from renting out its facilities and from courses conducted was expected to bring in something like \$170,000 annually, and that would still leave the station short of \$260,000, which it hoped to raise by attracting regular sponsors. This information was taken from The Straits Times article of 6th December 1990. So I'm just wondering in the following year, 1991, do you recall any specific fundraising projects?

[01:01:24]

Han Juan: Uh, yes. I think we had one, run by.... , is a jog, some kind of jog-a-thon, I don't know whether you knew about it, it's a jog-a-thon thing.

[01:01:34]

Serene: Walk-a-june? Was it something like walk-a-jog?

[01:01:37]

Han Juan: Walk-a-jog, okay, walk-a-jog, yes.

[01:01:38]

Serene: June 1991.

[01:01:39]

Han Juan: Okay, that was, I think run by the volunteers, and I remember it was led by Valerie Tay.

[01:01:47]

Serene: Oh, oh okay.

[01:01:48]

Han Juan: Yeah, she was the head volunteer, and she was like, you know, get us organised. I mean, I was a staff, but you know, she was the one who organised all the volunteers. And I remember the t-shirt we had was designed by Goh Boon Teck. I wonder how many people had this, still has this T-shirt?

[01:02:03]

Serene: Maybe collector's item?

[01:02:04]

Han Juan: So, yea, okay anyhow, so that was the very first, I think one of the first major fundraising project that we initiated lah... like by the volunteers.

[01:02:15]

Serene: Right, were there also like golf tournaments? I seem to recall there was like a golf tournament, calligraphy donated by some local artists. Mr. Chen Chong Swee, Mr. Ho Kah Leong, who was back then Senior Parliamentary Secretary (Information of the Arts). I think there might have been images of the exhibition, right?

[01:02:34]

Han Juan: I think there was, okay, so there was an exhibition, now I recall. It was an exhibition, visual arts exhibition, with the artists donating their works including Ho Kah Leong. You just mentioned Ho Kah Leong, was one of them I remember now. So yeah, that was one, one of the efforts that we have done. I think also the Chinese group, 新风相声学会 [Sin Feng Xiang Sheng

Society], they also did a show, and with, with the ticket proceeds donating to The Substation. So they, this is also an initiative initiated by them.

[01:03:02]

Serene: Was it a Chinese crosstalk?

[01:03:04]

Han Juan: It's a Chinese crosstalk by 新风相声学会 [Sin Feng Xiang Sheng Society], 黄家强 [Johnny Ng], Yang Shi Bin, that group? Yeah so the crosstalk group.

[01:03:11]

Serene: Mhmm, so in Chinese called 相声 [Crosstalk].

[01:03:13]

Han Juan: 相声 [Crosstalk], yes.

[01:03:15]

Serene: And that was, I think, also more popular than, than compared to now.

[01:03:20]

Han Juan: Crosstalk?

[01:03:21]

Serene: Crosstalk.

[01:03:22]

Han Juan: Yes, yes, you're right, yeah.

[01:03:23]

Serene: Yeah. In 1991, it is also documented that The Substation also received a \$1.1 million grant from the Guinness Breweries. Wow. How did we find, how did we find this sponsor in Guinness Breweries?

[01:03:39]

Han Juan: I don't really know how we got them.

[01:03:41]

Serene: But it's very interesting! I always wondered about the theatre being called Guinness Theatre.

[01:03:46]

Han Juan: Guinness Theatre, yes, yes. Because it was part of the term of sponsorship. This one must ask Tan Beng Luan, how they come about. But I do know, because Guinness Theatre, you know, Guinness is a liquor, alcohol, and then people always have these not so good link with alcohol.

[01:04:03]

Serene: Right, right.

[01:04:04]

Han Juan: So I remember there was some argument among the board, whether we think we should accept this sponsorship. Yeah. But I think in the end Mr. Kuo has convinced them lah that somehow that we will accept this sponsorship. So...

[01:04:18]

Serene: So actually...

[01:04:19]

Han Juan: So I think the good thing is because they agreed to not to interfere with the programming. They agreed with the programming direction. So the only term is we have to name the theatre as Guinness Theatre for 10 years, the naming rights was for 10 years, if I'm not wrong. So it was called Guinness Theatre, and I was the one who managed the theatre bookings.

[01:04:41]

Serene: I'm sure that there were many that came forward, and in recognition of their contribution, it was renamed the Guinness Theatre, actually, I think more than 10 years, if I seem to remember working there.

[01:04:50]

Han Juan: Yes, you're right.

[01:04:52]

Serene: Yea, because they were an early patron right?

[01:04:53]

Han Juan: They didn't take down the sign, yeah, I think they didn't take down the sign, that's it.

[01:04:57]

Serene: Haha they didn't took down the sign. Yeah. But that probably paved the way actually for uh more emerging sponsors. Interesting you mentioned Tan Beng Luan, she was the GM back then and she allowed donors to sponsor various areas of The Substation, you know, such as its garden for \$400,000, the dance studio for \$150,000, or the seminar rooms, the smaller ones upstairs, a \$100,000 each, over a 10 year period, which could be named after them. But apparently only Guinness stepped up to do this.

[01:05:28]

Han Juan: Yeah.

[01:05:29]

Serene: And in, in being able to do this, they also agreed to having no say in the programs that they run, but this effort actually encouraged more enlightened sponsors in the arts, who are more interested in showing off the arts rather than themselves. So that was interesting. Mr. Kuo Pao Kun was Artistic Director from 1990 to 1995. 1995, The Substation re-registered as an independent non-profit company, breaking its link back then with Practice Performing Arts Center, which also managed the Practice Performing Arts School and Practice Theatre Ensemble. And following that T. Sasitharan took over as the Artistic Director. He was Artistic Director from 1996 to 1999. Thereafter, a string of other artistic directors from 2000 to 2009, there was Audrey Wong and Lee Weng Choy, 2010 to 2015, Noor Effendy Ibrahim, 2015 to 2019, Alan Oei, and 2020, Raka Maitra and Woon Tien Wei. In 2021, Raka Maitra continued after the building was returned to the National Arts Council. And at the end of 2021, the artistic director post was taken up by visual artist, Ezzam Rahman.

[01:06:43]

Theme Music

[01:06:54]

Serene: So in one of our earlier conversations of Backlogues, with Mr. Arun, he mentioned how Mr. Kuo Pao Kun appreciated having him around because of his critical acumen as a manager. His organisational sensibility complimented Mr. Kuo's artistic sensibility. And Arun also emphasised the importance of an arts manager as being crucial to the survival of an arts company. As much as the artists, our conversation with Arun also discussed the release of Singapore's first publicly available

cultural policy document, the Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts, or ACCA for short. This political identification of the significance of culture led to a focus on developing cultural talent in the early 1990s, and the challenges of attracting and retaining cultural talent was also noted. So Han Juan, do you remember actively having to engage either the policymakers or external stakeholders in your time as an arts manager?

[01:07:53]

Han Juan: During that time at The Substation, I think I was really working more with artists than, than the other external people, because Beng Luan was the GM and Mr. Kuo was the AD. So they, they were the people who, who talked to more, who talked more to the policy people or the council people.

[01:08:13]

Serene: Mhmm, okay. And I have a quote here from an ST (The Straits Times) article called "Thankless Jobs" by Hannah Pandian in Straits Times, you remember Hannah Pandian?

[01:08:22]

Han Juan: Yeah, yes, yes, of course, of course.

[01:08:24]

Serene: This is a 1993 article dated 5 February, and she wrote: "Arts administrators in Singapore often find themselves doing odd jobs like making coffee and cleaning toilets. No wonder the turnover is so high" What kind of turnover have you seen in your job as an arts manager in arts organizations?

[01:08:43]

Han Juan: Have I mentioned this already? At the Practice Ensemble, Practice There Ensemble, there was a manager who came, and he only stayed for about a week and he left.

[01:08:52]

Serene: Wah, one week.

[01:08:55]

Han Juan: Yeah. So it, there was, that's why there were a few years Practice Theatre Ensemble was having difficulty recruiting a manager. Yeah. At The Substation, I remember the admin person was also kind of high turnover, the admin person, the admin assistant, the, these executive jobs, you know supportive staff also high turnover,

[01:09:17]

Serene: Right, would you say that the push factors are high workload and low pay? Were these the reasons?

[01:09:24]

Han Juan: Yes, I must say, because I think, for arts management, the salaries, we all know is always lower than market rate. Okay. But it may be decent enough for you to have a, a decent living, okay. The other thing is, of course, overload of work. I wouldn't say overload of work, is really a lot of work. For example I remember when I was a programme executive at The Substation, because there will always be program, even at night, somebody have to stay behind to lock up. So the staff have to take turns. So we will on shift, I think, shift to have to stay behind, to lock up. So can you imagine, in the Guinness Theatre, the show may end as late as 11pm or 12am, by the time they pick up and leave, but the next day you still come back, come back and work, I don't 10am, 9am uh, 10am or so. So, and then if you have events over the weekend. So that is why it's very easy for staff who work on programming or events to burn out quite easily. So I feel.

Serene: Mhmm, okay. This is at the tail end, I have a quote here from Ms. Tan Beng Luan, she says, "But how can you appreciate the arts when you are faxing or making coffee?" Yeah. Um, she actually gave up her job as a project coordinator in the oral history department to work for The Substation for, for two years. I'm just also wondering whether or not one of the reasons is because we have a small cultural pool of talent. I have a quote here from the then Minister of Community Development, Mr. Wong Kan Seng, during the 1990 budget debate. He says, "However much we do, the results will depend on the pool of talent we have in Singapore, and the quality of our talent. As our population is small, our talent pool for the arts is necessarily limited. Furthermore, those who were talented in the arts may not want to pursue an artistic career, preferring a more financially rewarding one, yeah.

[01:11:13]

Han Juan: Yeah, I think that's very true, partly because we have a very small population. That's why the talent pool is small. Talking about arts managers, also... it's... I always feel that arts manager is very tough because it's really more artist manager.

[01:11:30]

Serene: Artist manager.

[01:11:31]

Han Juan: You manage the artists, you know, you manage the artist, you manage the actors, director, as well as designers, and yeah. Okay, also, I feel that arts is a unique product, it's really a unique product. So there are challenges to, so-called, market the product, or to even manage this product, these arts. So I guess that's why very few people will want to take up the kind of challenge to, to do, to go into arts management. But I suppose now, more and more, there are more and more people that are aware of this profession, also more passion in this job, and also we have training courses on arts management. So hopefully we have better qualified arts managers, not like us, we are actually on the job training.

[01:12:14]

Serene: On the job training, yeah. It's quite telling when I look at some of the older quotes from articles, Mr. Tay Tong, who was then, Theatreworks' then administrators, said, "you are not going to be in the limelight, there is no glorification, no adulation. You have to get your own satisfaction."

[01:12:31]

Han Juan: Correct, yes. You have, you really have to have that passion in arts in order to go through all these hardships in, in your work.

[01:12:40}

Theme Music

[01:12:50]

Serene: Let's talk about some of Kuo Pao Kun's seminal works. In 1984, he wrote his first English play "*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*". It was first staged in Marine Parade library on 16th November 1985. And this idea first emerged during preparations for production at the 1984 Singapore Arts Festival. So several writers had been asked to contribute to a showcase of homegrown plays, titled "*Bumboat!*". And of course, one of them was Mr. Kuo Pao Kun. So the play he wrote eventually became "*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*", and during a 2000, a year, 2000 interview with The Straits Times, he actually shared, "It was written in about 4-5 hours. It just flowed out. I still remember that experience - it was wonderful.", yeah. *Bumboat!*'s American Chinese director at the time, Tzi Ma, he tried but could not fit the piece into the framework of the production. And Mr. Kuo Pao Kun called it a blessing in disguise because it paved the way for a stand-alone production of *The Coffin*. That first draft was written in English and as he reworked it, he then wrote a Chinese version as well, first performed by Zou Wenxue. An actor, Lim Kay Tong, who originated the role in English, had been involved in *Bumboat!*, and had a taste of an early draft of "*The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*" in rehearsal before it was actually removed from that showcase. And then

Mr. Kuo Pao Kun approached him one year later for the lead role, and that was how it was staged at Marine Parade library in 1985. Han Juan, have you ever had a chance to glimpse, what were the behind the scenes process of rehearsing with Pao Kun in the director's seat?

[01:14:26]

Han Juan: Ah, yes, yes. Occasionally, hardly because I have to see the rehearsal to understand the play so that I can write my press release and my publicity copy. So I do watch them once in a while. I mean, usually I would watch, for every shows, I would definitely watch the rehearsal, yeah.

[01:14:44]

Serene: I see. And then he had "*No Parking on Odd Days*" in 1986, and this was, again, first, it was first directed in English, by Kuo Pao Kun at the Shell Theatre on the 3rd of June in 1986. So you've seen his Mandarin work, you've seen his English work, you've seen his multi-lingual work, right. What's your personal favorite?

[01:15:06]

Han Juan: Oh, wow. Okay. I think maybe *Lao Jiu*? Yeah, *Lao Jiu* is my favorite work.

[01:15:12]

Serene: 为什么呢? [Why is that so?]

[01:15:14]

Han Juan: Because I think *Lao Jiu*, it really reflects the society that we are facing, the issues that we are facing. For example, in the play, it talks about 精英主义, 精英制度 [Elitism], how to say that in English? 精英[Elite]? You know we always emphasise on the cream of the society.

[01:15:32]

Serene: Mhmm, okay, cream of the crop.

[01:15:35]

Han Juan: Yeah. Yeah, we always, yeah.

[01:15:36]

Serene: Academic scholarship.

[01:15:38]

Han Juan: Yes, yes. We always, I think in our society, always talk about 精英,精英主义 [Elite, Elitism]. So in the play, *Lao Jiu* was supposed to, he was supposed to have a scholarship, remember? In the play? But he gave up, he decided to go for his passion, which is puppetry. So I think in Singapore, 精英制度[Elitism] is one. The other thing is we always go for what most people are doing, meaning I want a safe life, I want a very stable job, stable income, and then get married, get children.

[01:16:05]

Serene: Tried and tested rule?

[01:16:09]

Han Juan: But ... but here *Lao Jiu*, he had a dream, and he decided to go against his family wishes to go for his dream. So I think that part is quite powerful to me lah. Yeah. That was why *Lao Jiu* was actually also very well received at the time, because I think Singapore students all have the pressure in study and things like that, right? So a lot of people like they do not have the courage to go for their dreams because they will have disagreement from their families and things like that, which is what *Lao Jiu* is facing because his family didn't agree to him, because he has this great scholarship, but he declined the scholarship. He wanted to go for the, for his art, his passion.

[01:16:47]

Serene: He wanted to make puppets, he wanted to do puppet shows.

[01:16:50]

Han Juan: Yeah, exactly. So I thought that was a powerful theme for me, actually, Lao Jiu. And, of course, the other thing is the multi again. It's multi... multi-disciplinary. We have puppetry, as well, we have the hand puppetry, shadow puppetry, I remember we have Chinese percussion in music.

[01:17:07]

Serene: Mhmm, yes, because you had the, you had the Chinese musicians.

[01:17:10]

Han Juan: Because of the puppetry show, yeeah, we need the musicians as well. So it was, I thought it was one of the best productions that Mr. Kuo has produced really, and created a lot of impact.

[01:17:21]

Serene: Mhmm, yeah. Just if we can walk down memory lane a little bit as well, what did you take away from working with him? He's considered the doyen of Singapore theatre and Singapore Chinese theatre.

[01:17:33]

Han Juan: Okay. I feel that he's a person with a big heart. Okay. And he has this 一视同仁 [Treat everyone equally], he treat everyone equal. In a way you can say he's a person with a great humanity. And then I have these incidents that I always remember when I was in school, working with the Practice, Practice Performing Arts School. Remember I was telling you, I, I was, I have to write receipts, every term? Every month? I can't remember. When the students pay the fees, I have to write receipts. So, as you know, we are always short on manpower, during weekends, there was one day I was the only person I think, in, in the office. I had to write receipts, but it was such a busy day. I was very busy, 忙不过来 [To have more work than one can deal with], okay. Probably also selling shoes and ballet gear at the same time, and then Pao Kun was so nice. He came to me and he asked me, I think he was the other one in the office lah, at his own cubicle. And he walked to me and he asked me 你需要帮忙吗 [Do you need help]?

[01:18:29]

Serene: Mhmm, do you need help?

[01:18:30]

Han Juan: Then I said, okay, 你帮我开收据 [Help me to issue receipts].

[01:18:34]

Serene: Okay, you asked him to write the receipts.

[01:18:35]

Han Juan: Yes, and then he like, he was, 他愣了一下 [He was stunned for a moment]

[01:18:39]

Serene: Okay, a bit stunned, is it?

[01:18:40]

Han Juan: A bit stunned for a while, just a second or two, he said, "Okay". So, because I think I was busy with somebody else, maybe, couldn't handle everyone at the same time. And true enough, he sat down, and wrote a few receipts, helped me and wrote a few receipts. So I wonder who are the, which are the, which parents have received the receipt signed by Kuo Pao Kun,

precious now. So he's such a person. And the other thing is he really treated, as I mentioned, he treat everyone equal, no matter if you are a stage crew, publicists, or, he really treat everybody equal. So I thought he's really a great man.

[01:19:23]

Serene: Who would you say are some individuals that help you on your journey as an arts manager?

[01:19:29]

Han Juan: Mr. Kuo Pao Kun influenced me quite a lot. Also his wife, Mdm. Goh Lay Kuan, because she was a principal of Practice Performing Arts School. So I was also working quite closely with her. I think, yeah, both of them influenced me quite a lot to really be more giving, embracing. And also because you all probably already knew, they'd really had a hard time, a tough life, so I really feel that no matter the hardship you're going through, you really have to be positive and gather your own strength and carry on in your work.

[01:20:03]

Serene: Mhmm, mhmm, yeah, well, in the same way that he helped you, I suppose he also admitted to his shortcomings, right? He said... he once said, "I am not a good planner. If I were, we would never have gone into something like The Substation. Every planner will say it cannot be done! It never left my mind that The Substation could end any time before the thing was launched. We just went on, knowing that the next day or the next week could be the last." So in a way, it's this spirit of, let's just try it first?

[01:20:33]

Han Juan: Yes, exactly.

[01:20:34]

Serene: Let's try, and then yeah. If it can be done, then we'll find out.

[01:20:35]

Han Juan: Yeah, let's try, because if you don't try, we don't know. You get it? I think that's the spirit sometimes when we were at Practice, we just try.

[01:20:43]

Serene: Wonderful. The other thing about Mr. Kuo was that he really believed in the importance of arts education, not just to bring in income for theatre companies, but also it was important to grow and professionalise the ecosystem. I have a quote here that says "Increased attention to the arts has also shown up more inadequacies. The priorities for national arts spending could be better placed [...] To compensate for neglecting of the arts for too long, a comprehensive national arts education scheme for the young and the adult population would ensure the rapid growth of a massive, well-informed audience. Very soon too, it would nurture a large pool of talents for professional selection, while at the tertiary level, this would ensure enough performing arts teachers are produced to man the classrooms, well-researched critics to guide the public, and well-trained artists to boost the performing arts professions" This was made in a speech in the 1990s, as well. So I think goes towards what you had suggested that he... he was a man of vision. He had a big heart, and in some sense, would I be right to say that he was a bit of a mentor to the arts managers of those times?

[01:21:52]

Han Juan: Yes, yes. I think he's mentor to not just arts managers, but a lot of artists. And we always have this word for his influence, we call, we always say that we have been "*Pao Kun-ised*". Have you heard?

[01:22:05]

Serene: No, never!

[01:22:06]

Han Juan: Okay, me, Heng Luan, we always say that we are a generation of being *Pao Kun-ised* already. So we are influenced by Pao Kun, Mr. Kuo. So I keep on calling him Pao Kun, he's so close to me. I think that is why we have more arts groups after the initial years of the Chinese theatre, the Practice Theatre. We've mentioned Drama Box, Toy Factory, Finger Players. I think they are all influenced and inspired by Pao Kun. The, the... his spirit of pursuing your dreams and overcome all your hardships.

[01:22:39]

Serene: Would you have any advice for up and coming arts managers?

[01:22:43]

Han Juan: Find a reason to stay on a job, find a good reason, whether it's for the money or for the arts, or the AD that you admire. You must find a reason. I think for any job, you must find a reason that you think that this job is worth my while to stay on. So I suppose for arts managers, it's really the passion, I have to go back, it's still the passion for arts. That you want to see arts being enjoyed by people, arts being promoted to more audiences, and then, especially good and quality arts being produced and created.

[01:23:18]

Serene: Yeah, and would you have any, um, wishes for the Chinese theatre scene in Singapore?

[01:23:24]

Han Juan: Oh wow, okay. It's very difficult.

[01:23:32]

Serene: 用华语来讲吧。用华语来讲吧，对。有带什么希望吗？[Why not use Chinese to explain? Use Chinese to explain, that's right.]

[01:23:33]

Han Juan: Chinese Theatre ah? 很难，不懂怎样讲，很难有那个希望。[It's very difficult, I don't know how to say it, it's very difficult to have those wishes.]

[01:23:41]

Serene: 很难有希望？为什么呢？说一说。[Very difficult to have wishes? Why? Let's hear you out.]

[01:23:42]

Han Juan: No, because I think, first of all, I remembered this. 为什么 [Why] Chinese theatre, not so popular, because of this stigma, stigma 对吗？就是说 [Right? They say] Chinese language is not as cool as English language. I think we are being affected by this stigma. So a lot of young people, they would think that, oh, Chinese Theatre, ew. They will think it's Cheena, and it's like, not cool. Somehow, we have that in this society, yeah. So that is why there's this challenge to promote Chinese shows, yeah.

[01:24:17]

Serene: What can the arts manager do about it?

[01:24:21]

Han Juan: Marketing lor, maybe do some marketing, repackaging. Good question.

[01:24:26]

Serene: 可能就是，可能就是这个原因所以就 staged 了很多 musicals. 天冷就回来，还有我跟春天有个约会。Maybe this is 它的那个出发点。[Maybe it's maybe it's because of this, that's why there

were a lot of musicals staged. If There Are Seasons, and I Have A Date With Spring. Maybe this is its starting point.]

[01:24:35]

Han Juan: 对,对。 [Right, right] Maybe I think, I think we have to also look at what are the demands, or the interest of young people nowadays, what do they like to see? You still have to do shows that are relevant to the society or relevant to the young people. You have to create content that meet the demands, or the interests of the people at large, I think, yeah, whether Chinese or English, language lah, I think, yeah,

[01:25:01]

Serene: Thank you very much.

[01:25:02]

Han Juan: Thank you!

[01:25:03]

Serene: Thank you so much. You've just come to the end of another episode of Backlogues, an arts management podcast series. This episode concludes the theatre-focused episodes of the pilot series of Backlogues, where we spoke with arts managers who were pivotal to the development of the theatre scene. We heard firsthand experiences and learned from the stories of arts managers working in some of the emerging theatre companies. Goh Su Lin and Clarisse Ng some of The Necessary Stage, Lucilla Teoh of TheatreWorks, and Wong Han Juan of The Theatre Practice and The Substation. We also heard from those in government agencies and other institutions who were just as crucial to the growth of the local theatre scene. Arun Mahizhnan, who was deeply involved in the evolution of Singapore Arts Festival and the genesis of the National Arts Council, as well as Tisa Ho-Ng, who was so integral to the many developments in cultural policy and the original brief for what would become The Esplanade. Those whom we managed to interview for this podcast series first came to work as arts managers through volunteering, or started with projects before continuing into full-time positions in our organisation, or in companies championing the arts in Singapore. The conversations so far also highlighted how they persevered and stayed on because of their intrinsic passion for the arts. They were the so-called unsung heroes who toiled tirelessly behind the scenes, often on seemingly thankless jobs, yet tasks like raising funds, adjusting technical aspects for the stage, selling tickets or cleaning up rehearsal spaces are extremely integral to the development of the thriving ecosystem and eventual professionalisation of arts management. We've also come to see now that the work of arts managers is interconnected and interdependent. In this 1980s focus, the individuals whom we interviewed had their paths crossed. For example, Tisa was a board member of The Necessary Stage when Su Lin and Clarisse were in the company. Arun was on the steering committee of the Singapore Arts Festival when Tisa was artistic coordinator at the 1990 edition. I myself first met Han Juan when we were both working at the radio station. We hope listening to these episodes has given you an opportunity to map out the generations, interweaving the threads in the rich tapestry of arts management. There was still so much more to explore when it comes to arts management within the theatre scene. But from this point in the series, Charlene Shepherdson will take over as host for the subsequent episodes on the literary arts. If you'd like to learn more about any of the key events, people and institutions mentioned in this particular episode, head over to our website [@backlogues.sg](http://backlogues.sg). That's B A C K L O G U E S dot SG to find further information pertaining to each episodes' content. You may find them under "shownotes" on the respective pages for each episode. For more resources with regard to arts management in Singapore, head to the resources page on the website. Be sure to follow us on Facebook and Instagram [@backlogsg](https://www.instagram.com/backlogsg), which will be updated every time a new episode is released. Share your comments with us by tagging us [@backlogues.sg](https://www.instagram.com/backlogues.sg) or using the hashtag #BackloguesSG. If you've enjoyed what you heard today, and would like more, do support our fundraising efforts. We are raising funds to support the operational costs of manpower, equipment, and resources in order to keep this podcast going, you may find the donation link on our website as well as our social media channels.

This first podcast series is presented by Centre 42 and Singlit Station together with researchers Dr. Hoe Su Fern and Dr. Cheryl Julia Lee. It is supported by the National Arts Council Singapore. Thank you for listening.