

[00:00:00]
[Theme Music]

INTRODUCTION TO EPISODE

[00:00:07]

Serene: Welcome to Backlogues. I am Serene Chen...

[00:00:10]

Charlene: and I am Charlene Shepherdson. We hope you've enjoyed listening to all the past episodes in the Backlogues pilot series. This is the wrap up episode of the pilot series, where we recap and reflect on the actionable takeaways from what we've learned from the many conversations we've had. We're excited to introduce this episode's guest shortly.

[00:00:27]

Serene: But before that, we just like to refresh your memories on what Backlogues is all about and reflect on its objectives, see how far we've come from episode zero. Backlogues, as you know, is an arts management podcast series, where we delve into the histories and the evolving practices of arts management in Singapore. For this pilot series, we focused specifically on the time period of the 1980s to 1995, an exciting time for the local arts ecosystem because of the crucial work of arts managers in the increasing professionalisation of the arts and cultural industries in Singapore. We will unpack what professionalisation means, with our guest very soon. For this pilot series, we also focussed on the fields of theatre and the literary arts. The first five episodes were hosted by myself, in which I had conversations with arts managers in the prominent theatre companies of the 80s' and 90s', as well as arts managers who worked on developing the infrastructure for the growing theatre scene.

[00:01:29]

Charlene: The last two episodes were hosted by myself, who spoke with key intermediaries in the literary arts world, which included librarians and book publishers who played a significant role in the capability development of literary arts workers, as well as fostering a reading culture.

INTRODUCTION TO GUEST: KOK HENG LEUN

[00:01:44]

Serene: We've chosen a special guest for this episode. He has been working in the arts in various capacities since 1990. He has taken on many arts managerial roles as well as artistic roles over the years. He was also very recently a Nominated Member of Parliament representing the arts and cultural sectors in the Parliament of Singapore. Please welcome Mr. Kok Heng Leun.

[00:02:08]

Heng Leun: Thank you! Wow, got this kind one?

[00:02:11]

Serene: I know, we get more and more high-tech! We get more and more connected. Welcome again, Heng Leun, to Backlogues!

[00:02:18]

Heng Leun: Thanks Serene and Charlene.

[00:02:21]

Charlene: So, one of the main reasons why we've chosen to produce this episode with him is that he has not only worked with many of our previous guests through the 1990s, but he has also

carried forward the legacy into the era of the 2000s and present day. His career has intersected with those of some of our previous guests.

In 1990, he joined the Ministry of Community Development as an officer.

In 1991, he was a programme executive at the then-newly-formed Substation at 45 Armenian Street.

A year after that, he joined The Necessary Stage (TNS) as their business manager and later became their resident director.

In 1990, he also founded Drama Box, a socially engaged, non-profit company known for creating works to inspire dialogue, reflection and change. Most people know him as Artistic Director of Drama Box, a post he has held for over two decades since 1998 and recently stepped down from.

PERSONAL BIOGRAPHY: HENG LEUN'S ENTRY INTO THE ARTS

[00:03:13]

Serene: Heng Leun and I met actually in the mid 1990s - Heng Leun - when you were in TNS. Okay, so just want to get that out of the way and give our listeners some history and some context. And of course I also know that Heng Leun actually studied mathematics at the beginning, right? So we are going to talk a little bit about that, okay? You actually majored in mathematics at The National University of Singapore. So could you maybe just give our listeners some idea of how you entered the arts in Singapore?

[00:03:45]

Heng Leun: I think, one of the very important things that happened in the eighties was, there were a lot of Chinese, or a lot of LDDSs, in schools. And those schools with the LDDS would also include drama, and you will realise that, that is where we actually do our practice or we learn our practice from. So when I was in NUS, there was a Chinese society and there was a drama group, and I was in the drama group. And that's where I learnt a lot there. Or I had to invent a lot of things when I was there. But we didn't invent from nothing. In fact, if you look at the history of Chinese language theatre, there were a lot of activities in schools in the 80s'. And they were sometimes also, if I am not wrong, also conducted by some of the practitioners who also did work in the 60s' and 70s'. So whatever they had at that time, there were a lot of what we call 集体活动 (ju ti huo dong) (collective/social activities), which means working collectively. So that kind of collectivism could be seen in a lot of how these Chinese LDDS are organised in Singapore. And I am more comfortable speaking in Mandarin, and actually I was born in a family where I only spoke dialects, so joining the Chinese LDDS was more comfortable for me as an individual, and that is where I started to do a bit of acting, organising...

[00:05:07]

Serene: And LDDS being the short form for... Literary...

[00:05:09]

Heng Leun: Drama Debating Society.

[00:05:12]

Serene: And I think maybe what was the precursor to the LDDS in the university were the LDDS in the JCs?

[00:05:12]

Heng Leun: In JCs and even in secondary schools. So when I was in secondary school, that was, that was... should be between '79, starting from '79. And I was in the LDDS and I learned choreography, harmonica, performed crosstalk, performed poetry recital - very structured, stifling... kind of poetry recital of that time, very different from what you get nowadays. So yeah, those were the things that we were involved in, in the 70s' or 80s'. Yeah.

[00:05:49]

Serene: But how come math and this? Was this your outlet from math? Was joining LDDs an outlet for you?

[00:05:54]

Heng Leun: Maybe it should be seen the other way, right? Doing maths actually seems the most practical thing in time, that you need to do. I mean, during that time, the things that people would be asking, are you doing a subject that will ensure that you at least have some career prospective? So you first think about what you want to study rather than what CCA you want to do. And that's always an afterthought, and I've never thought that I would actually work in theatre full-time. Never, ever, I've thought of working in a bank, I've thought of being teachers and everything, but never, that I would think that my life turned out this way.

HENG LEUN'S EARLY ENTRY AND UNDERSTANDING OF ARTS MANAGEMENT

[00:06:27]

Serene: And that's a really good segway into our discussion on arts managers. So just want to try and understand a little bit about what were some of the forces, I suppose, during that time, that kind of brought you into the area of arts management and theatre work?

[00:06:42]

Heng Leun: I think my three years in university, I feel as if I lived two different lives, right? So there is the everyday you go and attend lectures and tutorials, which most of the time I skip the lectures, attend the tutorials. So famous until all my friends are like, "eh, you're here for lecture today!" And then in the afternoon, I'll be at the arts and social science faculty area and I'll be doing a lot of organising... organising competitions, planning, and everything for the drama group. And I think that sort of preps you, or in a sense that you think that this is quite enjoyable work, you know, you really enjoy doing it. And when I started to look for jobs, I considered teaching, but, honestly, my dad says that has no future, because either you end up as a principal or nothing. Then he say, go and join another ministry.

So I saw an ad that says "cultural officer for MCD" during that time, so I applied and I was asked to go for an interview, and I went for the interview thinking that I would become a cultural officer, but realised that there wasn't an opening there. But what they asked me was, "why don't you become a community development officer? And then you can organise activities, cultural activities for the community!" That sounds enticing, right, interesting right? So I thought, "Yes!"; I took it up. But of course it didn't happen that way, I spent more time doing other kinds of work, which is not important here. But what happened was that by then, the kind of friendship we made in the Chinese society, in a Chinese drama group came together and everyone said "let's form a theatre company, form a theater group!". And during that time, I think that would be the late 80s', early 90s', that's where you know that the English theatre was like very active. You have TNS, you have Action Theatre and all those groups that you have mentioned in Backlogues. And I think that sort of also made us feel that, "hey, maybe we could do something." Well, we know about *[The Theatre] Practice*, we've seen Practice's work, we've seen, uh, people like Southern Arts and some of their work, so we thought that maybe we can add onto it and just continue to do what we want and then maybe we all grow old together with our kids and have this little group of people gathering. That's what we call as 同仁剧场 (tong ren ju chang) in Chinese and means people of the same interests coming together. And that was how it turned out.

Then I, I think when you start to form a company or a group... then I remember there was also the beginning of Substation. And I don't know what I did, but I went to volunteer for the opening of the Substation. So I was one of the crew there, I helped out in the opening show and I remember Pao Kun telling me, and I didn't know Pao Kun then, but you know, of course, you know who he is, and then he'll say, "Do you know anything about music?" I said "Not really..." Would you want to pick a music for the opening of that moment where Wong Kan Seng was hitting the gong. And I said,

"Okay?", so I went to the library, which in Backlogues number 6, you know, where you really realised that the library really has a lot of other collections, so there's music... And I really spent time listening to classical music, you know?

[00:09:46]

Serene: Which library is this?

[00:09:48]

Heng Leun: I was at the National Library... I was at the National Library. So I went to National Library, I was just going through all those things, all those materials there. And then finally, I picked something, I went to Pao Kun and said, "Pao Kun, is this okay?" He looked at me and said, "Okay, can." It was actually a Wagner's, it was a piece.. the one that Wagner in uh, Space Odyssey, what do you call it?

[00:10:08]

Serene: Nevermind, we go and find.

[00:10:09]

Heng Leun: Yeah, you go and find. And so, and then I was also the stage, I was the crew helping Ren Bao Xian, who was like a national treasure from China, a wonderful actor and a good storyteller and he was performing Pao Kun's *Coffin (The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole)* as well as Pao Kun's new work called *The Eagle and the Cat*, so that was a new monologue. So I was assisting him behind. So that started in a way whereby I got to know people in that community. Yup. And then when Substation had opening, I then decided to try, after a year in MCD, yeah.

[00:10:49]

Transition Music

HENG LEUN'S ROLE AS AN ARTS MANAGER AT THE SUBSTATION

[00:10:57]

Charlene: So, I guess my question is, as you were entering *[The]* Substation, what was your understanding of what arts management is?

[00:11:04]

Heng Leun: I think, like I said doing the Chinese society, you just have to organise everything. So I was like the chairperson of the group, so we had a drama competition, so you literally have to get people to come together and say, you want to put up a production in order to compete. You will have to help them to organise. You have to encourage them, you have to then set up the system, allowing them to have rehearsals and everything. And not only that, I also had to plan lessons to prep them so that, you know, they can be trained or they have... would have some skills when they want to direct their play or act in the play. Or then finally put our production at LT13 at NUS, and LT 13 was really very simple at the time, but you still need lightings and things like that. I think when I went into Substation, the idea here was that, okay, it is the job of trying to organise and put things together so that things can happen, as a program executive. Then my job was really to try to put things together, but there was, there were other things that I learned then when they're like, you have to do a lot of publicity, marketing, and the printing of publicity material, that one I know, but it's more of, you need to then have another kind of things to consider that is beyond the people whom you're working with. You have the public, and that's actually a very different kind of imagination that then the work has a relationship with the public and how the public respond to the work becomes part of the things that you need to take care of.

HENG LEUN'S MEMORABLE CAREER HIGHLIGHTS AS AN ARTS MANAGER AT THE SUBSTATION

[00:12:29]

Serene: Very interesting, because now we are talking also about that reaction, that kind of public engagement, which definitely becomes something that characterizes our vocabulary when we're talking about the arts and the relevance of arts in society currently as well. Um, Heng Leun, just wondering, since you've had such a rich experience and entry into the arts, what would be your most memorable experience in terms of arts management from your early days? Would you be able to share one or two?

[00:12:59]

Heng Leun: I've been trying to recall, in the earlier days you're referring to between the 80s' to... 95s'?

[00:13:05]

Serene: 95s', yeah...

[00:13:06]

Heng Leun: I think working in Substation was really interesting. I think Han Juan's sharing in Backlogues talk about the kind of time we had. Yeah. We sometimes have to go there early in the morning at 8:00 AM to be on radio show. You know, yeah, so there was a radio station, a Chinese radio station where every... can't remember, was it Wednesday? We'll go live to actually publicise the kind of events that will happen in Substation. Every Wednesday, I can't remember Wednesday or Friday, you have to be there early in the morning, and the previous night you may be just running some programmes until like 11:00 PM. We didn't have Mrs. Chua, yes, Mrs. Chua at that time, we were the one who had to close the door. We had to lock up. We had to do everything from locking up, doing all the cleaning. Sometimes on a Sunday, there may not be any cleaner and you will find us actually sweeping the floor. When you work in Substation that was bao ga liao, like what Serene has mentioned in... in... in Backlogues. At... at the same time, because you're working with so many different kinds of people, I remember there was one night, there was a 评弹 (ping tan), which is a very traditional Suzhou performance happening at the Guinness Theatre. And then there was a very avant-garde exhibition that was happening at the gallery. And then there was a rehearsal, a preparation for a rock band that happens the next day on Sunday, and sometimes Sunday you have a morning from 10:00 AM kind, you know, then they have the rock concert all the way to the evening. And there were times, so, so, there's that kind of moment where, you know, you suddenly like, everything is... is happening, diversity, that was really what it was. And I do also remember one of the days, one of the time, I think it was on a Saturday and there was a concert, and the rave that time was actually to do wall banging, the kind of dance where you bang onto the wall, and then I remember the next morning, I went to the toilet to check on the toilet, there were actually blood trails! Apparently people injured themselves and I was like, "Oh my god."

[00:15:08]

Serene: Black, blood trails?

HENG LEUN'S MEMORABLE CAREER HIGHLIGHTS AS AN ARTS MANAGER WITH THE NECESSARY STAGE

[00:15:09]

Heng Leun: Blood trails. People sort of, you know, when they were in the concert they were really high, but those were the times, that was very exciting there. Yeah. And of course, when I was in TNS, I think the most unforgettable moment was how, as a company, we have to manage the crisis that time when the press sort of accused the company of being linked to Marx's belief system. And I think that time, managing that was really difficult because of how the press write about it. If this press write about it, would we be able to appeal to another press to present the different possibilities? How do we manage the schools who have been supporting The Necessary Stage for so many years, actually had no problems with the work that we do, and how to assure them, you

know, that article contains only allegations and not true, and we were still very committed to what we were doing. And there were a lot of these kinds of management. And not only that, internally, how do you manage people inside the company, knowing that we're actually facing a huge crisis that may affect the future of the company? I think that period of about half, actually until even after the event, I think it's close to about a year of actually managing or working with the company and trying to manage everything and we had a festival show to go on, and we, were you involved in the *Three Years in the Life and Death of Land*?

[00:16:29]

Serene: No, I wasn't...

[00:16:30]

Heng Leun: Okay, so we were involved, we even had a festival show where we had to just keep our sanity, we have to focus on our tasks and continue through that. So, those were actually quite difficult moments actually, as someone who was in a company, I was the uh, what was I then? I was still the business... business manager. And then I was on my way transiting to become the artistic director of the Theater For Youth branch. And that was, but we had managed all those things in the company.

[00:17:01]

Serene: It sounds like the role grew right in front of your eyes, where you handle things from the programming, to the funding, to the press relations, to also your stakeholders, the ones who would be buying tickets. There's a lot of repercussion on reputation because that would also then determine whether or not the audience continues to come and continues to believe in the work.

[00:17:29]

Transition music

REFLECTIONS ON BACKLOGUES AND THE EVOLVING ROLE OF THE ARTS MANAGER DURING THE 1980S AND EARLY 1990S

[00:17:38]

Charlene: As mentioned earlier, we chose to focus in a time period of 1980 to 1995, because this was a time of professionalisation on the role of the arts manager in Singapore. What this meant was that the term arts manager began to be a formal and a full-time job title in many arts groups and companies and the arts manager was behind the development of the infrastructure that supported art making.

[00:18:00]

Serene: In particular, as the first two episodes with Arun Mahizhnan, and Tisa Ho, as well as the sixth episode with R. Ramachandran and Michelle Heng have shown, this was a period of the growth of public support for art work, including the beginnings of the Singapore Arts Festival, the release of our first cultural policy, the The Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts and the growth of state support for the arts, including the conceptualisation of a National Performing Arts Center, the formation of National Arts Council, and the rolling out of arts assistance schemes such as the annual grant scheme and the Arts Housing Scheme. In episode two, we also saw that in August 1985, the Cultural Affairs Division at the Ministry of Community Development ran what was possibly the first arts administration course in Singapore for staff from the public sector, including the National Theater Trust, as well as staff from the arts groups. We also saw the development of state support for specific sectors. For instance, in episode two, we heard about the Semi-Residential-Status-in-Theatre Scheme, which provided eligible artists and arts groups up to 12 days, annual, rent-free use of one of the Ministry of Community Developments theaters for rehearsal and stage performances, as well as priority booking of theaters a year in advance. This enabled theater practitioners and groups to produce new local productions, but this was also

because of the expectation to stage a production every quarter, or at least half of which should be new and preferably local work.

[00:19:36]

Charlene: In episode six, we saw the growth of Singapore's reading and writing culture catalysed by the many initiatives of the National Library, such as the deliberate growth of the Asian children's collection and the expansion of branch libraries around the island.

[00:19:48]

Serene: Before listening to our episodes, Heng Leun, just wondering, and then now having listened to all the episodes before this one, what sort of thoughts came to you in terms of the role, the essential role of the arts manager? Is it as custodian? Is it as defender? These are some terms that I'm thinking of, but perhaps we can hear from you.

[00:20:13]

Heng Leun: I think as I was going through all the episodes, Lucilla's episode was very interesting. And actually not only Lucilla, you hear it constantly either from Arun, Mr. Arun, or Tisa, or even when you were talking about Hedwig Anuar's contribution to the, uh, to arts management. The word has always been trailblazer, I think in the earlier years, and there was also something about somehow everything comes together nicely, you know, there were so many people joining forces and doing things together. Actually, my take was that. I'm not sure whether we are most creative in that time, but what I felt was that during those times when there was nothing, you just have to invent the wheels. You have to find ways to make things work. You listen to what Lucilla says, you literally had to make things work, if you listen to what Clarisse has said, when there was nothing, you just create. And that's why we were, in a way, building our own systems, building our way, our pathway ahead. And with people agreeing and being interested in what you do, we all come together. And I think there was this opportunity, like what Tisa always said right, "Oh, I was there right at the right time."

And I think in the late 80s' to the early 90s', that's where things were already percolating on the ground. And then that's where... then... when opportunities open, people come together and then, that makes things happen. And people became creative. They became enabler. They started to make things happen rather than saying that they were trying to custodian something. Because there were no boundaries in a way, right? No one said, "This could not be done." If you listen to how Tisa had conversations with Lee Wai Kok right, so she said, "Can we do this?" and then Lee Wai Kok will say, "Yes", "No", "Really, you want to do?" and Tisa will say "No, it won't cost a lot of money" like Juliana said, and then there it goes! So, the, the boundaries were not drawn and so people started to try to push things out. So there's nothing about I'm protecting anything, but actually I'm creating, I'm trying to define things. I think that goes also if you look at policies, this is my take uh, giving a lot of credits to us or to all the wonderful policy... all the wonderful arts administrators of that time... and managers of that time... was that I think the policies were playing catching up. Because we were creating, the policies were catching up and trying to define what this new thing is, how to define things, how to ensure that if money is given, how are they accounted for? And because these people were creating new ways of doing things right and they were creating new products, so the policies were really trying to play catch up. So the KPIs were defined according to what either theatre companies or, or people who were there think that will help them. So it's really a very different kind of ball game. So I would think that in the earlier years, they were actually really trying to define and creating possibilities. But when policies are much more developed and the policies start to play a different kind of relationship, that they are trying to see whether to support or whether to make them accountable, then the relationship changed. So once that changed, that means the people who works under this policy, who have to, uh, so that means the arts administrators that, the managers that are in various company, then have to auto sync at this time, learn to negotiate with these policies, then come in the role of being custodian, protecting the integrity of the companies. And I think that's how it evolves over the years. That's from my perspective. Yeah.

REFLECTIONS ON RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ARTS MANAGERS AND CULTURAL POLICY

[00:24:00]

Charlene: Do you feel like that change or that shift from policy playing catch-up or policy coming up first, do you think that has also changed the role in which the art manager then manages? Or like the professionalisation of the actual companies itself? Like for example, how the role of the arts manager actually developed for example, within schemes, or not?

[00:24:19]

Heng Leun: Yeah, I think definitely. I do think that in the end now, a lot of the managers are talking about, so what does this company want? So the arts scene are defined by companies, so that for me is interesting. I mean, going back to what Eck Kheng was talking about when he was talking about publishing, so am I publishing books or am I publishing authors? I think there's something for us to unpack and think about.

So are we protecting companies? Which legally, it is actually a legal entity, but they're not... doesn't necessarily means that it's an arts company, right? So where is the arts in this? And I don't think it's the fault of the arts administrators and managers. I think you all have alluded in, uh, to these issues quite a lot of time over these seven episodes; of about how government policies and companies are dependent on government funding, actually shaping the way then we see how we run the theatre company, how we manage artists, how we run things. So now, every time, you will be hearing the artists saying, "I want to do this, but then the SMMs say, it's like that", right, in this COVID time. So you realise that when the policies are there and then the artists have to run around along the policies. And I think that's how it had been for the last, especially the last 15 years, I think. Yeah.

[00:25:45]

Serene: Another way to reframe it would be to, are we putting the artist first? Are we putting the art first or are we sort of putting the company policies first? Because it does seem as if the role of the arts manager has been very much to harmonise with the grant structure, policy structure in the last 15 years, as you've brought out.

[00:26:02]

Transition Music

REFLECTIONS ON THE "SPIRIT" OF THE ARTS MANAGER

[00:26:12]

Serene: Let us talk a little bit about the impact of this on the can-do spirit or the must-do spirit that we were just talking about in the 80s' to 95?

[00:26:20]

Heng Leun: I'll go back to both Clarisse and Lucilla's, as well as Han Juan's interview where you realize that during that time, the role of the arts manager were less specialised. I think we've noted that now in, in your episode 0, Serene was talking about how sometimes even a play-read had 30 people sitting in the same room, yeah? And they all play different roles. The specialisation of the roles on one hand is good because everyone becomes better at a job, but there is a difference also when someone, if in the early days whereby we just try to work together to make things happen, and there's no rules so we try to invent ways that can make things happen and take, for example, the thick skin thing that, I think it was Lucilla, was talking about, just be, have to be thick-skinned, you ask, and things may be done.

Now it's slightly different. Now, actually the key word is actually engagement. We're talking about how to engage people, rather than now we just don't care lah, we just say, like now if I go out and

put on the Facebook and say, "Hey, I need some help." like that ah, "Some people can help me and do this?" I don't think it will work here. There are so many, much more thing that you will start to be thinking that, okay, is this a fair way of actually getting people to do work in the arts? Will they be paid? How will they be credited? And all those things are part of the parcel of how this things has happened. Last time, it will be different, right? It will be like, let's just get this thing done. So, strangely the sense of getting a task done were more important then, but now, though it seems that we would say that "I want to get this task done.", actually, it seems to be, "I want to get my duty done properly.", "My role done properly." And it's different because I think it's that the perspective has changed. I'm not going to say which is better, but I think it, it speaks of a different time that we're in. And that's why I think I was thinking about, we look at the literary scenes, I think Eck Kheng has sort of made a very interesting observation of how Sing Lit Station and singlit has actually evolved. And he said that that speaks something of the time, and actually wonder you know, I hope there was some more unpacking about what he meant by that. From my perspective, the idea of engagement has actually changed a lot of how we work now.

[00:28:48]

Serene: I'm thinking in terms of in the beginning, and the beginning not really being right at the beginning, but just marking the 80s'. If we say that this was driven by passion and hobbyists, there was a sense of very heightened ownership and creativity, and in a way, freedom, because a lot of things were not set in stone, at least in terms of policy and also in terms of money, it was scarce then, in some sense, it is as scarce now. However, like what you said here, there, there seem to be added responsibilities with the professionalisation of the entire industry. So I was just wondering, Charlene, maybe we can chime in here, you know, when we've listened to the stories of the arts managers working in the 80s' to 95, did you gain some insights as to what was, and what is now?

[00:29:40]

Charlene: I mean, I think I echo what Heng Leun was also saying in terms of... there definitely seemed to be more of, I think, filling of a need? There was recognition that this thing did not exist, but this thing needed to come to fruition and therefore we will make this happen. And because there was no precedent to it, you could create anything from it. Whereas I think, like for me as an arts manager in this time, it's about creativity within the limits you have in place with you. So you can still be creative, but I think having limits also forces you to be, in some ways, more creative with what's in front of you. And so I think the impulse is a bit different in that sense as well. In listening to like Michelle and Mr. Rama talking as well, Eck Kheng as well as Ms. Lim Li Kok, I think also, there seemed to be a lot more of hunger back then in terms of seeing this art, or this form of reading, or this form of consumption of art, because there was such a dearth of it that once it came up, that's why everyone came in to help because they recognised it immediately. Whereas I think now in a time where there's so much art around us, it's oversaturation. And then, so I think the challenges of finding things have evolved a little bit because then maybe that's where that engagement thing that Heng Leun is talking about comes in.

[00:30:53]

Serene: I think I definitely agree with what you're saying here. I think I also see it a little bit from the personal, what Lucilla mentioned earlier on about, she was giving some tips right about, to arts managers and things like that and I think it was very clear to me that as a successful arts manager, however you define that, I think one of the important things that really came through was to always know the goal of the hustle, right? If I'm doing this, what is my goal? What is in it for me as an individual? Which was one of the reasons why I think, despite the fact that it was always unstable finances, right, whether it is for the play that you're putting up or the book that you're publishing, it's also as much of whether or not you are going to be able to pay your own bills and things like. So the goal of the hustle.

REFLECTIONS ON HOW THE ARTS ECOSYSTEM IS A SMALL, INTER-CONNECTED WORLD AND THE IMPORTANCE OF COMRADESHIP

Serene: The other thing that I thought was really interesting was listening to the interviewees and understanding how small, in a way, Singapore is, because you hear the same names and they criss-cross in terms of the art forms. And it felt as if there was a very authentic sort of community building. I don't know whether or not I'm over analysing this as well, but in the period of the 80s' to 95 as well, I felt that it came at a time where the basics of nation building, right from 65, were kind of in place and therefore there was a little bit more room for people to consider. "Okay, the arts, let's think about this thing called, you know, our minds, our quality of life, the pursuit of literature, the understanding of ourselves as a new society, holding up that mirror through plays, through books, through stories, just wondering whether or not you want to chime in on this?"

[00:32:37]

Heng Leun: I think from 90s' to the 80s', yes, that's where we started to progress. And I think that new generation of leaders who, in a way, promised more to be more open, more consultative, also set contexts or a kind of background you know, that all these things may happen. I do agree that during that time that the communities are, because it's smaller, actually we know each other somehow, right. Compared to now, this community is so huge there are so many invisible presence. And I think we need... ought to do more to acknowledge this invisible presence. But during that time, because they're so small and there wasn't already a lot of work around, so what we needed to do is actually support each other in order to get things done. And I would think that during that time, when you live in an exciting time, what happened was that you'll never think about that in that way. You just realise that you... you just keep working, just keep working and you build that relationship, build and build and build, and that's why you see when it's so close to the... you see their relationships or their comradeship continue over the years, they became friends, they didn't become colleagues. Someone recently was talking to me, one of the younger practitioners and was saying that she saw that generation, the earlier generation very differently, because we seem to have a kind of a comradeship that is beyond just merely a kind of work relationship, that there was a kind of care that happens in some way. And of course I was a bit like, "Really? I thought you all still go out a lot. You all are very... I thought you would be... Honestly, I don't go out as often with Alvin, you know, as you all think so, you know. No, I only meet him whenever there is something there. Sorry Alvin, we're still good friends okay. But what I'm saying here is that, I guess those years of working together build a test of acknowledgement of each other's presence as part of a community.

[00:34:42]

Serene: That's so interesting. I, when you said, "Oh, I don't go out with Alvin as much.", I, it made me think about what were the avenues for socialising, that I remember anyway. And I think also some of those spaces are gone, right? You mentioned The National Library before, I mean, at least in the central location, it was a very homely place at Stamford Road and people would go in and you would bump into people, right? And then if you want to talk loudly, because you cannot talk loudly in the library, you will go to just below the banyan tree at, at, at, uh, S-11, and then you would catch up there. But a lot of these spaces also simultaneously started to disappear from Singapore. When I look at SMU, I think actually of the football fields that were there. And...

[00:35:22]

Heng Leun: Mhmm...

[00:35:23]

Serene: You remember? There were football fields?

[00:35:27]

Transition Music

REFLECTIONS ON WHAT OUR CULTURAL ASSETS SHOULD BE

[00:35:37]

Serene: This would be a good point actually to look at Backlogues and our focus, right? While Backlogues focuses on the arts manager, it's also very much about the arts ecosystem, the arts spaces, the formal, the informal spaces. And while tracing the growth of arts managers and the arts companies, such as TNS and Theatreworks and the Substation, even Landmark Books, we also contextualise the development within the larger ecosystem. For instance, we tried to provide information about the theater productions staged during the 1980s to 1995, as well as the venues used. And it brings to the forefront a question that I think you already alluded to, right? If they were, if they were coworkers and they were friends, what do we have to show for it? What are our cultural assets?

[00:36:26]

Heng Leun: Well, the theatre companies that we have are our cultural assets at this moment. I think the literacy or the publications that we have over the years, and of course the scripts and everything, those are important cultural assets. And I don't think we pay enough attention to this kind of cultural assets. We keep thinking... now that you talk about publishing, the first thing, which Eck Kheng's father pointed him to was all the inventories of kept books. It sounds scary, right, but honestly, when you come to think of it, they're so important you know, if they weren't published, they wouldn't be there, when Li Kok was talking about the 小人书 (xiao ren shu)(picture-story book), those each page and illustrations. My first exposure to theatre was actually the 小人书 (xiao ren shu)(picture-story book) in the 70s when in the 60s, groups like PPAS, Practice Performing Arts School and the children's theater troupe, 儿童剧社 (er tong ju she) and the youth theatre troupe, 青年剧社 (qing nian ju she), they actually published a lot of a lot of all this 小人书 (xiao ren shu) (picture-story book), based on productions that they did. So like for example, you would do a 东郭先生 (dong guo xian sheng), which is a story of this guy who is so benevolent that even if a mosquito bit him, he will say, "Hey, continue biting me lor". They perform these pieces and then they took pictures of it and then they would write a short paragraph and they then become what they call a 小人书 (xiao ren shu)(picture-story book). And I grew up on those things. They are all cultural assets that sort of influenced the way I see theater. Currently, the understanding of this assets sometime is that they are wastage, placed there and nobody would want to touch them. But the act of documenting them, that act of, importantly, whether through what medium, that act of allowing them to be accessed, allowing them to be critiqued, allowing to be written about is one of the most important cultural assets that we should build, and must continue building. So that's one. The other one of course is the kind of talent and the people we have developed over the years, whether it's in the creative field, the design, in arts management. And I think these are important assets that we need to keep on honing and keep, you know, developing. That bit, I truly, I do have a gripe, which I will do a talk about it now or later.

[00:38:49]

Charlene: Yeah, I mean, why don't you just talk about it now, yeah?

[00:38:50]

Heng Leun: I think in the earlier years, the 80s' to the 90s', that were those years whereby developing companies, theatre companies, and arts managers running all these companies, were actually the most important thing we needed to sort out, right? I remember we all were trained, in some way or another... So I remember I was also sent by The British Council, to the UK, to attend seminar, to learn how to bring in audiences and things like that. A lot of the training were very much about how to build the companies.

But if you look at cultural assets, besides theatre companies, what other things do we need? We need actually, spaces. We need spaces for productions to be shown. We need spaces where events can happen, where literary events can happen, where dance and whatever... all these artistic events can happen. And to run all these events, we need another group of... a kind of arts managers, that is different from running a theatre company. So at this moment, what I feel is most lacking is that we don't have that group of managers working outside of the bureaucrats. Because

if we can't run our own venues, if we don't know how to run our own venues, we take away this capacity and capability to build possibilities for ourselves. We need centres, we need spaces so that we can create interactions. We can create business opportunities. And this, all these, is a kind of a capacity that needs to be built actually within the community. But now, currently, all these are actually kept within certain organisations that are government-related and they operate in a very different setup, like AHL. And I think we actually need to shift as much of all these capacities and all these possibilities to the community so that more people, and they should be run actually independently by people, learn from their mistakes and they become better.

In a way, we had a few missed opportunities. We had missed opportunities in Substation. Instead of helping the Substation to grow, we expected Substation to grow by itself. And more restrictions were being placed, in the end Substation end up what they are now. Or we also have seen, you know, venues like Centre 42, whereby they were trying to run this organisation such that it is a place where people can gather and in some way, continue to survive. Instead of trying to solve the problems of how to keep this kind of structure workable, the easiest way for the bureaucrats was actually to take away the ownership and let them run it because then they were, in a way they say, take away the burden from the community. Actually we need these burdens for us to learn, we need to take up these challenges.

So I think nowadays, the whole idea of arts management has been very much focused on learn to run your theater company well, keep it, make sure it survives. But going into the future, this ecosystem cannot be just based on all these organisations anymore. We have more and more freelancers. Who are taking care of all these freelancers? We need more independent producers, but independent producers can't create work and then produce the work in a venue if there were no venue support. And in a way now, because of the way the venues are being run, if there were more independent venues, you can actually see more producers actually having better relationships with these venues and then create opportunities for freelance artists. So we are lacking of space, as well as managers who can understand working on the ground, the limitations of what it means to run, organise, enable a project.

One anecdote: there was a very senior NAC officer. She was at a very high level. And then when she retired, she started helping out arts school. So one day, she came to my office in Chinatown, and she said, "庆亮, 庆亮 (qing liang) or Heng Leun, Heng Leun ah.." Okay, then she said, "Can you help me to do something?", I say, "What?", "I need to print.". I said "Print? Photostat? Come, come, come, come to my office." And then she wanted to do the Photostat. Because she was helping another arts organization and their printer had problem and she didn't know how to manage it. So she told me, "Working at NAC, and now working with you guys, working in a group, now I understand where the problem is. When I was in NAC, if I have a problem with my fax machine, if I have problems with my internet, I call up the computer services and they solved my problem. If I have a printing problem, I'll say, "Hey, the toner don't have, can you go to sort it out?". But now, if I run a theater company, I actually need to make sure that the toner must be there because not all organisations can be like a 100 to 200 people, that manpower right? So she then realised that it is very different when you were really, really working on the ground unlike when you are a bureaucrat where you actually have a huge system behind you, invisible system supporting you. Okay. Enough complaints?

[00:44:18]

Serene: No, I mean, I think there, there's a lot of relevance in that. And in fact, one of the issues that we also want to look at in terms of Backlogues and how we will continue to develop this podcast series is also to point out what are some persisting issues and topics that were raised in our pilot that will continue to plague our arts ecosystem. Right? And this is looking at 1995 to the early 2000s. And even from 2000s all the way here to what we call affectionately, the COVID period, this is like the COVID generation, the COVID period, because of course there's a whole bit of digitalisation, right? Is that the new frontier, is that the, does that sound the death knell for real engagement, these are all questions that we can possibly ask. Charlene, want to weigh in on some persisting issues or topics raised?

REFLECTIONS ON PERSISTING CHALLENGES - MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

[00:45:08]

Charlene: I think some of the things that definitely have come up is, Heng Leun, earlier on in this episode, you were also talking a little bit about the mental health and that as an arts manager, having to have to manage that for your staff as well, while you're going through some difficulties. I think that's something that's still persisting today. And I think that in previous episodes pay has been alluded to quite a lot as well. So I think that's something else. And that's also kind of linked towards mental health as well. Right. Having quality of life and how that affects how you manage something.

[00:45:32]

Serene: That's interesting. You know, I think that if I had a pet project, not sure that I would be able to see it through though, I would probably be interested in a survey as to who was part of the arts industry before as an arts manager, but have left. And what reasons prompted the departure. Some of them do return for example, Clarisse right? And she cites going into teaching as one of the very natural area that she went into. And then now she has come back to working as a production manager in a freelance capacity. That's one. The other thing I suppose here, which Heng Leun has already mentioned, is that it seems as if formality and a structure is what we term as the arts industry. And I think while an industry is good for sustaining livelihoods and jobs, It almost feels as if you don't have a platform as a freelancer - so it could be as a freelance director, a freelance actor, a freelance playwright - you almost have no home or you don't have a regular enough platform to be able to work. And I would be definitely interested to see who are those, um, similar freelance producers, freelance art makers, who would be able to fill those gaps. It just feels as if there's something missing in that ecosystem to talk about people who... who do not actually belong to a formal structure.

[00:46:57]

Charlene: Hmm, and I think that's one of the reasons why I was also excited to be part of these Backlogues episodes, series as well, because one, as an arts manager, it can feel very lonely, right? Whether you are in the middle management or if you are just talking to people, because like actors and all talk to each other all the time right? But as managers, especially if you are within companies, you don't necessarily always talk about the process to each other. And I think when people leave the industry, that knowledge of how they worked and got through problems, kind of leaves with them as well.

So it's really nice for me that we're kind of documenting what happened in the eighties and nineties, but then me as a manager in this modern day, I am also trying to also remember not to romanticise the past because a lot of things that we've talked about, it is very easy to like gloss over all the difficult parts, which is why like, oh, and then everything came together and that's how it happened, that everyone alludes to, right? But actually, what was that messy middle that happened in between? Because it helps us to kind of get over that hump.

And I think what happens is because we kind of... sometimes... kind of like, oh, they got through in the end, so the expectation is that we as managers in this day and age can also get through in the end, given enough time to like see it beyond. But then this is why we have persistent issues because the issue is unresolved, you know what I mean? We just like, oh we got through it, so let's just move on to the next thing. And then the issue will come up again, but oh, we got through that. Yeah.

[00:48:12]

Serene: as a result, as managers are perceived to be quite resilient right? On the surface of it, yeah? If we could revisit the whole idea of mental wellness, Heng Leun, would you have any thoughts about how to tackle some of the issues of mental health impact on arts managers? And in

that sense... in that sense... how do we keep the knowledge? How do we keep the expertise within the industry?

[00:48:36]

Heng Leun: Wow. Well, Backlogues is one good effort! Good right?

[00:48:44]

Serene: Are you breaking the fourth wall?

[00:48:48]

Heng Leun: I... I think... uh, one is of course sharing of knowledge becomes very important. Two is building communities, it's very important. Three: really rethinking how arts personnel - sorry I mean people working in the arts - are being paid, and the financial... the work conditions have to be looked at. But yet at the same time, when you say that, you also know that in our work, it's slightly different from a nine-to-five work. And we are quite a marginalised community in a way. Quite a lot of the groups - whatever they do - are not even going to sustain themselves. So that means that we are working on actually very tight conditions.

To say that, can the government provide more funding? Yes, I still think they should. I still think they should. But what I think now is that we probably have to find more different ways of making sure that this community can continue to survive. Is there only one route - that everybody becomes very professionalised and being part of an industry? I think we have got to look at it in many different ways now. There is one group who probably can work within this industry. There is another group who has to probably think of a different kind of assemblage of existence, then they can happen.

So in a way, does art finally fall into a whole capitalistic system of rewarding, remunerating ourselves? Or can we think beyond that? Is there other ways of surviving - that in the end, we accept who we are, but yet be able to ...and don't have to feel as if, if we want to speak to the public, or you know... to your family member, you feel as if you are not dignified. I think it goes back to the question of how to find, how to actually express our dignity as an art maker, and be able to articulate the value of what art is really about.

Recently, I was reading this book - *Mushroom at the End of the World*, you know, and the rings of capitalism. So we are really looking at, ultimately, this must be an arts industry that have many various ways of actually seeing ourselves being rewarded, to give us wellbeing that we feel not necessarily just being comforted by proper remuneration, but you could do something that you feel you have invested your time, you have invested your effort, you are remunerated, but you do not have to do a lot but yet you feel, hey there is actually a lot of satisfaction, not just for yourself but for the people who actually watch it.

REFLECTIONS ON PERSISTING CHALLENGES: WHO IS AN ARTS MANAGER

Heng Leun: The other part which I have been thinking about is, of course, what is an arts manager, right? I think I have asked this question during our *[pre]*session together, I said, where do we stop in terms of who is an arts manager, do they go all the way to those policymakers at NAC or even at the ministry? Are they also artmakers? Then we also have to look at the remuneration between the arts practitioners or managers in the people sector, and also in the public sector. Are we paid the same? When we are not paid the same, then how do you address this inequality? Are we doing lesser? So how are we going to address this difference? Because in a way, currently, a lot of all these other administrators in the ministries, or even in the council, are also doing a lot of the work of what we are doing or should be doing. So in a way, they are being paid better than a lot of our colleagues in a theatre company. So how do we actually, you know, square this up?

[00:52:25]

Charlene: Yeah. And I think that for me, what you are saying also brings up my own complicated feelings about how with.... with like arts major companies for example, they have to be registered as an IPC or as an arts charity as well. Because then that brings up this complicated debate about whether artists should be earning any money from their art or not.

And then we're talking about the professionalisation of the sector, then do you then pen arts managers' rates to those as in the charity sector? Are we expected to kind of like to take a lower wage, because this is like a social good? This is a lifelong question that I have asked myself since I started my career. And not just because I'm also an arts manager, but I think the arts managers of today still work beyond the hours they are expected to, because they still hold on very passionately to their jobs, right? And that's like one of the hallmarks, like in a way, it's like a pride where like the more you work, the more you hold on to this idea of me as an arts manager. It's a bit of a convoluted, like over-productive badge of honour.

[00:53:17]

Serene: Absolutely. I think you've just highlighted the conundrum, right? That a lot of arts workers - and I use this term very decidedly - feel, because it almost feels as if you pay the price for liking your job. That's not to say that people who are in non-arts jobs do not enjoy their job, that's something to note.

But it almost feels as if there is a bit of a penalty for having that passion. And at the same time, of course, you don't want to be naval gazing, so you don't want to say, okay, my job is the most meaningful one in the world and therefore because I look at it with such romantically tainted eyes, then you know, I can accept anything. At the end of the day. I think the individual exists within the ecosystem as well. It's hard to separate the two, which is why I think Backlogues becomes the beginning of this discussion and this documentation of perplexing questions that continue to follow us in the arts industry.

REFLECTIONS ON PERSISTING CHALLENGES: THE NEED FOR A DIVERSE ARTS ECOSYSTEM

[00:54:09]

Heng Leun: And.. and I think in a way, if we want to work in the arts you must understand that we cannot see art in one single lens. There are going to be many shades of what it is. So there are some who think that you can earn a good living out of arts. And that means that the kind of work that you do is going to be like that. So what we probably need to do is to have more diversity in order for that to exist.

But currently in a lot of conversations, it keeps going back to... keeps going back to efficiency, keeps coming back to accountability, keeps going back. So it's sort of a limiting imagination of what this could be. So then that actually also limits arts workers, whether it's managers or whatever, in imagining their own possibility.

And there lies in, I think for people in the arts, quite differently from someone who worked within an industry, where it is so wedded into the whole capitalist structure or post-capitalist structure, is that one of the key value of the arts, is actually for people who work there, and if you are there enough, that one of the things that we always ask ourselves is - we keep reflecting and questioning ourselves and why we are doing this and what is it that we are doing. Because of that, strangely, we are never quite satisfied when we reach one point and we keep questioning what is the other possibility? I have always quoted Lu Xun, when artists are never satisfied with the status quo and in a way, when we are not satisfied with the status quo, somehow we also have to take our own responsibilities whereby we are going to question ourselves a lot of time and not rest on our laurels and think that we've achieved something, but we're constantly asking, how is this meaningful? Why am I doing it? And why am I doing it?

And I think we must prepare ourselves for that, for a better mental wellness, that it will help us to grow and think about diversity and yet not be too caught up and think you know ... and start comparing ourselves with other industries in other ways. And I'm not saying that we should not be valued as well as the others. We should be. Some will get this opportunity to get there. Some will not. Just that in any industry. Just that the product of art is much more heterogeneous than a lot of other products out there.

[00:56:27]
Transition Music

REFLECTIONS ON PERSISTING CHALLENGES: SALARY PROSPECTS OF ARTS MANAGERS

[00:56:36]

Charlene: So maybe, Heng Leun, as we are talking about like... some of the pain points that are still persistent today, maybe you could talk a little bit of the pay and salary was like, since this was the period of time where we were trying to professionalise the arts manager?

[00:56:49]

Heng Leun: I remember when I was working in MCD, actually I could afford a weekend car, by pay installments lah. Then I joined The Substation, I had to take a pay cut and give up the car. Then subsequently when I joined TNS, I think there was a pay cut. I think when you work in a theatre, especially in the earlier years, it could be really difficult. I think some freelancers are still experiencing it. The kind of - you have that little money inside your bank, right? So in that particular month, if you withdraw a certain amount, you can't use up the rest of the money. So I think you really have to watch out; do I withdraw \$20 or \$50, you know? Because if you have left \$10, which you can't withdraw because at least \$20 must be inside the bank. So these are the things you actually manage to the dollars and cents, when you try to survive during those times.

[00:57:45]

Serene: That was an interesting one also because according to *The Straits Times* article from 16 December 1995, called "Arts career? So-So Prospects" by Koh Boon Pin, so Heng Leun, your parents felt that TNS offered no job prospects to you. What did they actually say?

[00:58:00]

Heng Leun: I think first... I think they really thought that working in the arts is like playing masak masak. So in a way, it was like, have you played enough? Yeah. So it was also like, "it is not a stable job, go and work in the government department," [and] "since now you are in the arts, ok lah go and join the arts ministry lah, whatever. That offers more job stability." And I think my dad, until when he was.... til... he had dementia, and sometimes he would look at me and say, "uh, are you going to quit your job?" somehow, even when he had dementia, he never forgot that. So what I did, which is an interesting thing, "actually ah, Dad, I am now running a organisation that has a turnover of about a million." That sounds good, right?" Actually, you know, a lot of organisations now, their turnover is over a hundred thousand sometimes even to a million, especially those who are in a major grant. And then that sort of made him go umm, and then he kept quiet.

I think that there are ways of thinking about what you are doing. You think about yours as making art. You could also think about yourself running an organisation where you do have people whom you have to take care. So during this COVID period, Drama Box had to take care of our colleagues, making sure that they continue to be able to have salaries and continue doing our work. We also start to not to think about just our company, but those people where we are working with us. How do we create additional job opportunities for people in the freelancing to actually continue to survive during this difficult time? So I think that we start to think also, as managers you know, or people that run the arts, that you are not just taking care of all your artwork, but the

artwork involves human beings and people. How do you take care of human beings and people, and taking you out of that silo as well?

THOUGHTS ON THE CURRENT ERA: LIMITATIONS HELP TO PUSH POSSIBILITIES

[00:59:58]

Serene: Yeah. Do you think that this period that we are in... suppose we gave it a name okay? Let's say we call this constraints. Let's say we call this rigidity. Let's say we call it lack of funding. Let's say we call it - high inflation rate. Let's call it, arts workers are the least essential in society, in a poll that was done in 2020; this elicited a lot of very strong reactions on social media. Of course, let's say we give all these sort of placeholder names for this period of time. Is this actually the best time for creativity? Is this actually the best time for artists and arts managers to take back the responsibility of creativity?

[01:00:49]

Heng Leun: Can't we quote Charles Dickens in *Tales of Two Cities*? This is the best time, this is the worst time, right? This is the best of times, this is the worst of times. There's constraints. There's a lot of things being placed, because the system has been there. And they have become more and more nuanced, the systems. And so we actually spend a lot of time trying to game the system, right? I think you have talked to, uh, deeply to uh, with managers that have been talking about working with the numbers and various things.

But just not, I think Charlene mentioned about working with limitations. And this sort of reminds me of what Pao Kun would always say that, you know, think not as working with restrictions, but working with limitations. That means you may push the possibility. Restrictions already tell you what you can't do. But limitations say there are certain limitations but that doesn't mean that we can't do certain things right? Well, there may be some difficulties along the way, but we can think of creative solutions.

I think probably we need to, at this moment, we really need to rethink about how this ecosystem is going to move. I do think that the current policies are so occupied with trying to see how to manage these companies, like major grants and things like that, that the policies are not forward-looking enough for us to imagine how the arts scene is going to be like in the future. Whereby freelancers will be the most important thing, as important as some of the important theatre companies or organisations around. How do we actually create a system, or a viable sustainable system whereby this community develops itself to learn how to actually manage themselves?

So my proposition is still, give back the spaces to organisations. Appoint organisations outside of government-related corporations to run these spaces. Let them learn the hard way, the challenging way, the difficult way. And then take this opportunity for the arts community to appeal to our public, which is the other part of our imaginations. We have been talking about our own imaginations of who we are. We need to talk about the public imaginations of who we are, and realise that imaginations. Or reach the imaginations and bring them into that conversation. It is going to be a hard one, not an easy one. But Substation has indicated there is some way, some point we could do it. In some way, Esplanade, that has so much support from the government, but they seem more autonomous, slightly more autonomous in some way in their programme selection. But you do see the public going there to support them as a venue. Can't that happen with another independent... two or three more independent-run venues that are run by the public, by the people sector, and let the people sector have that capacity.

And the government? I'm not saying the government, you're not supposed to have support. You continue to support them to grow, instead of continue to develop your role of just being a custodian or even being someone to check on these groups.

[01:04:14]

Charlene: Um. and I think for me, like I actually have a more positive reaction to where we are in this age right now. For me, like... I think what Eck Kheng mentioned in his... in the podcast episode seven, was in the Sing Lit scene at least, is we have gotten more organised together and there is a lot more community working together. And that also makes me think like in the theatre scene, for example, there's a lot more organisation happening in terms of, for example, I think there was the care and intimacy group who are looking at, into the policies a bit more into how do we show care to each other in the scene. And then you also have the "better practices research paper" that was put out. And I think as arts managers, it is important for us to use these as like... ways to keep our ears to the ground, to look at how to reimagine what our space looks like as we develop and produce better shows, and to look at the capability development as well.

I think in some ways like, yes, it is overwhelming because there's so much to do, but in other ways it is also really exciting because there's still that space to grow and experiment where there is no limitation because it is also new. And I think having the Internet has also made us more aware of what's happening in other spaces so that we can see how it works in the Singapore context to develop that further.

[01:05:21]

Serene: I think what is interesting for me is the fact that there are a lot of young practitioners and young arts managers. Maybe they do not go by that label yet, arts managers, or they don't realise they are doing the work of many of the arts managers. Starting their little outfits... this could be because they do not find a possible opening in the more established companies or outfits, And to some extent, I think it is also because they do not necessarily inherit the kind of baggage, the kind of ... the kind of struggles that have come beforehand. And that can be a good thing. So in that sense, they go in with very fresh eyes. So it will be interesting to see what the space looks like, especially because there's that intersection between the training that they receive in some of these art schools and social media, as well as this renewed look at how to engage the public and even arts marketing, right? Some sort of marketing as well. So that to me, is where some of the diversity is coming in.

In terms of professionalisation, I think for myself, I have seen that because it was quite hard in the growing years for a lot of the more established companies to, in a way, get the company running and getting the shows to fulfill, right, certain grant obligations and policy guidelines and things like that, right? I think what is a slight shame is that it does appear that a lot of times arts managers might appear to be working in silo and as a result, those experiences, those best practices may not necessarily be passed down to the newer arts managers, the newer arts workers that are coming up. So it remains to be seen how that succession planning or that succession journey will happen in Singapore.

THOUGHTS ON CULTURAL LEADERSHIP

Serene: Um, Heng Leun, just want to ask you, after listening to the various episodes, do you have a favorite... that ... did any kind of resonate with you? Did any episode resonate with you more than the others?

[01:07:16]

Heng Leun: I would say that there's one episode that really makes me think a lot about leadership, which is episode six, talking about Hedwig Anuar and her interventions and her charisma and how she imagined all this possibility and bringing people together. It is so interesting because though she worked in the National Library, but you look at the way she operate. It's almost like she was a leader amongst this group of librarians. And I remember this quote or this sort of saying that "the librarian creates world, a world." And in a way that leadership also created a kind of a world for us to enter into the thing. And if you look at it in parallel, then you also look at during that time, whether it was Pao Kun, whether it was TNS or Theatreworks, they were leading a process of actually energising the scene. And they... they... in a way I always say that some of our practices,

they are actually a legacy of what happened previously. for good or for bad, right? Some practices, maybe we need to re-examine but some practices are good and we are continuing that, but they were definitely people who were taking the lead to actually push this through. And at the same time, because there weren't too many people taking the lead, it's easier to find the directions and to be articulate... you know... how it moves.

What is interesting now is that it is difficult to see in that way, especially in theatre because now many people are... each of us are doing so-called what we want to do. But you know, over the last few years, for example, if you look at the literary scene, you do see some movers and it is important to then, look at how these movers move and learn from there and then see how to actually leverage on it and move further.

THOUGHTS ON IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC AND THE FUTURE OF THE ARTS ECOSYSTEM

[01:09:11]

Serene: My personal feeling is actually in the two years of the pandemic, at its worst, we saw a lot of companies actually taking their own direction, whether it was to survive or to actually programme for this sort of new environment. Some went into a bit more publishing heavy, so the scripts of everything they have done, to actually document that. And that was one way. And then of course there were some who really embraced the digital and really tried to go that digital way. It will be interesting in future editions of Backlogues, if we ever get there, to be able to see what were some of these survival strategies that companies took.

[01:09:47]

Charlene: Yeah, and also maybe like a few years down the road as well, like how much has changed in the way we create and consume and engage with art because of this pandemic period as well.

[01:09:54]

Heng Leun: And I think maybe we need to start also, to think not in silo in terms of not just language, but discipline. I think, Serene and Charlene, you have also alluded in a way, is that now the idea of art has become more and more.... the discipline has become more and more fuzzy. You know, we... we... cross discipline and maybe some things will happen again. So in that same way, all these administrators or managers who are working within each of these disciplines, have to think and learn languages of all these border crossings. Um, and I think that's really not easy, but it's an interesting challenge and ought to open up possibilities.

CONCLUSION

[01:10:33]

Serene: Thank you very much Heng Leun, for being here today and sharing with us your views... your takeaways. Thank you for listening to all of our episodes of Backlogues. Our hope certainly is that many people out there will take their time and sink their teeth into Backlogues, the resources as well as to lend their ears to the hours and hours of recordings that we've done with all our esteemed guests, people who are very experienced with walk the road and have lots to share.

You have come to the end of the final episode of the pilot series of Backlogues: an arts management podcast series. Thank you very much for listening. If you'd like to learn more about any of the key events, people, institutions mentioned in this particular episode, head over to our website, at Backlogues.sg. That's B-A-C-K-L-O-G-U-E-S dot S-G to find out further information pertaining to each episode's content. You may find them under show notes on the respective pages for each of the episodes. Be sure to follow us on Facebook and Instagram at backlogues.sg, which will be updated every time a new episode is released. Share your comments with us by tagging us at backlogues.sg or using the hashtag backlogues.sg

01:11:50]

Charlene: This podcast series is presented by Centre 42 and Sing Lit Station, together with our researchers Dr Hoe Su Fern and Dr Cheryl Julia Lee. It is also supported by the National Arts Council of Singapore. Thanks for listening!