

WORKING HIS MAGIC

A zest for engagement and connection has defined theatre veteran ONG KENG SEN's artistic journey, discovers ZARA ZHUANG

ONG KENG SEN was already a full-fledged lawyer completing his pupillage at Lee & Lee when he decided a career in law just wasn't for him. While working on case files, he was also at the time artistic director of independent theatre company TheatreWorks. In fact, he had been directing the beloved 1988 musical production *Beauty World*. "I think that was a strong turning point," the 53-year-old recalls. "You have a foot in so many worlds and now it's time to get serious about one."

"I think the trajectory of being a lawyer in Singapore is very clear — pupil, legal assistant, partner, profit partner and so on — but the road map of being a theatre artist was less so, and to me it felt more idealistic that we were fighting for something more transformative and unknown."

Though he was keenly interested in law, he discussed with the firm's legal partners that there would come a time when he would have to pick one of two loves. "I'm quite singular focused in some ways," Ong explains. "I believe in multiplicity, but I also believe you can only give your best if you actually commit yourself." It didn't help that disillusionment had set in while he was working on a civil law case involving medical negligence. "I saw how law could be manipulated [to the point] where there's no

justice," he lets on. "It's about who can afford the law, and I'd say I left the legal profession so I could remain enchanted."

This hope has remained with Ong nearly three decades on. As it turns out, staying positive and faithful in the face of doubt, strife and gloom is the theme of this year's Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA), the fourth and final edition with Ong as festival director. "It's harder and harder for individuals to stay enchanted, because the world has changed so much and there's bad news every day with what's happening globally — it's an age of disenchantment," Ong explains. "This isn't about Disney and fairy tales, but to stay engaged, be connected to issues and still fight for what you believe in."

The fallout from the Brexit vote, the election of Donald Trump and the botched roll-out of his travel bans led Ong to overhaul two-thirds of the programme he had curated for the 2017 festival, in order to present a more timely, relevant and powerful creative response to global events and sentiments. "The world had changed so much, so it made me realise I had to redesign the programme in response," he says. "We can't continue to make art as if nothing has [happened]."

Though the 2016 edition of SIFA welcomed a record 155,000 visitors across its main and O.P.E.N pre-festival segments, this year's goal is not to improve on that figure, but to forge intimacy, depth and engagement through art. *Guilty Landscapes III* by Dutch theatre and visual artist Dries Verhoeven will see an actor stationed in the Netherlands, who portrays a war survivor in Homs, Syria, connect via live video link with a member of the audience in Singapore for 10 minutes at a time; *O.P.E.N Kitchens* will welcome groups of 25 into local

homes to prepare a meal together and connect over food. "When you do productions for one person or 25 people in a kitchen, you can't expect to have 155,000 (festival attendees) anymore," he explains. "So it is a way we try to deepen the experience of art every year."

Ong was tapped to helm the revived festival, which started as the Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977 and closed in 2012, when he was three years into his five-year PhD programme in theoretical discourse at New York University. Though reluctant to interrupt his studies, he acknowledged he had personally benefited from the arts festival since he first attended it in 1980. Seeing it get the axe was painful, so he felt compelled to contribute to getting the event back on track.

But long before he stepped foot in the Singapore Festival of Arts, Ong had been bitten by the theatre bug. The youngest of six children born to post-war immigrants from Putian, China, Ong would interact with his nieces and nephews by acting out Cantonese soap opera scenes; their favourites were tragic ones depicting communicating last wishes while on one's deathbed. In the late 1960s he would accompany his mother to watch open-air opera staged near temples in the Jalan Besar neighbourhood, where they lived. "You see multiple realities



happening — onstage [*the actors were*] in full Chinese opera regalia and make-up, and all of us were in our singlets and T-shirts and shorts on the streets,” he recalls. “It’s not a closed environment of being in, say, Victoria Theatre; it’s not a pure aesthetic experience but a conflation of many different visual and aural worlds, and that was productive for me as a space of hybridity and imagination.”

At Anglo-Chinese Primary School, Ong was recruited into a new drama club — founded by a *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*-type of teacher, he adds — and performed at the age of eight in its production of an operetta based on the song *My Grandfather’s Clock*. Next came play reading in secondary school literature class and taking part in school drama festivals. He switched his intended university major from pharmacy to law (“I wanted to be in something where I could use my theatrical

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skills, and there’s this fallacy that law school is very theatrical because you’re arguing law cases all the time.”) and went on to serve as president of the NUS Varsity Playhouse, running three productions a year. Ong also directed the 1996 local hit movie *Army Daze*, established in 1990 the TheatreWorks Writer’s Lab to develop and encourage local playwriting, and spearheaded a Flying Circus Project to connect regional and international artists and audiences.

What drives Ong’s passion for theatre is his belief in the human stories and empathy for

characters and their narratives: He was moved from seeing *Plenty* by David Hare, a portrayal of a former British secret agent’s disillusionment with civilian life, as an 18-year-old NSman, and he connected with Nora’s dilemma and realisation in Henrik Ibsen’s *A Doll’s House*, a play he studied during literature class at university. And having often acted in female roles as a child taught him compassion for the other.

“So much of the ostracisation of the individual — *The Ugly Duckling*, *Dumbo* — is what’s happening a lot in Singapore, this fear that the individual who is different will cause us trouble, but in the end he can transform our world through some magic possibility,” he says. “And I think this idea of excessive rational control reduces this magic possibility, that’s why for me enchantment is an important [*theme*] with which to conclude [*the season*].” ■