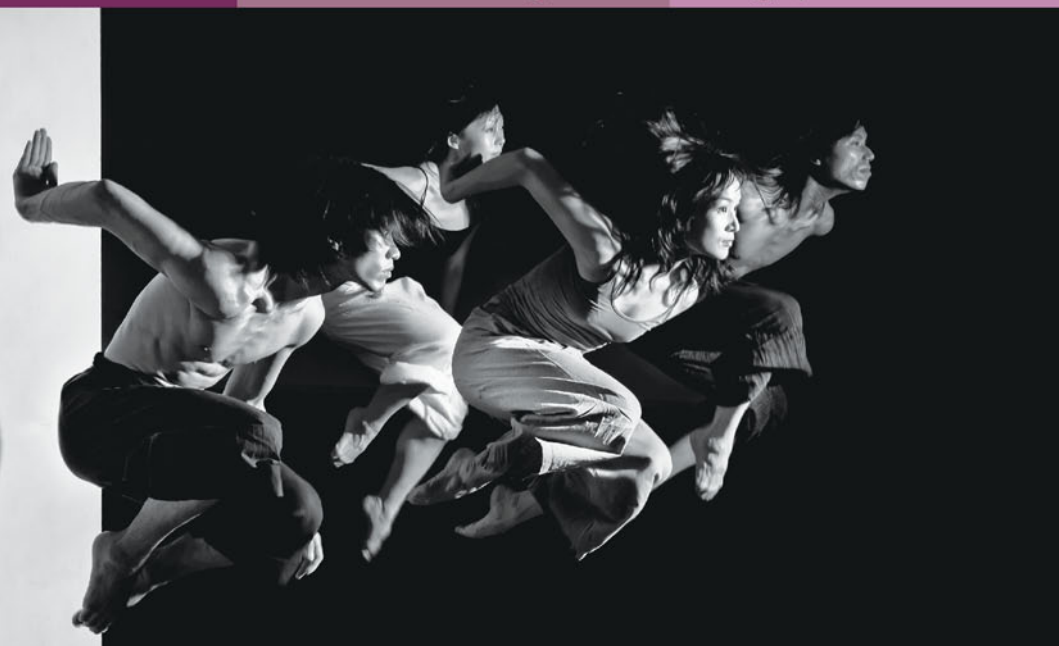


CELEBRATING DANCE IN ASIA AND THE PACIFIC
Series Editor: Stephanie Burridge

EVOLVING SYNERGIES

Celebrating Dance in Singapore



Editors: Stephanie Burridge and Caren Cariño
With a Foreword by Chan Heng Chee

ROUTLEDGE

Evolving Synergies

Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific

Series Editor: **Stephanie Burridge**

Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific is a series that presents the views of eminent scholars, journalists and commentators alongside the voices of a new generation of choreographers working from tradition to create new forms of expression in contemporary dance. It documents and celebrates these artistic journeys that work within the framework of rich and complex cultural heritages. The Series is published by Routledge and supported by the World Dance Alliance Asia-Pacific.

Also in this Series

Beyond the Apsara: Celebrating Dance in Cambodia

(Eds) Stephanie Burridge and Fred Frumberg

ISBN 978-0-415-56445-8

Traversing Tradition: Celebrating Dance in India

(Eds) Urmimala Sarkar Munsri and Stephanie Burridge

ISBN 978-0-415-61709-3

Sharing Identities: Celebrating Dance in Malaysia

(Eds) Mohd Anis Md Nor and Stephanie Burridge

ISBN 978-0-415-67836-0

Shaping the Landscape: Celebrating Dance in Australia

(Eds) Stephanie Burridge and Julie Dyson

ISBN 978-0-415-69984-6

Identity and Diversity: Celebrating Dance in Taiwan

(Eds) Wang Yunyu and Stephanie Burridge

ISBN 978-0-415-64348-1

Moving Oceans: Celebrating Dance in the South Pacific

(Eds) Ralph Buck and Nicholas Rowe

ISBN 978-1-138-01682-8

Evolving Synergies

Celebrating Dance in Singapore

Editors

Stephanie Burridge

Caren Cariño

 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON NEW YORK NEW DELHI

First published 2014 in India
by Routledge
912 Tolstoy House, 15–17 Tolstoy Marg, Connaught Place, New Delhi 110 001

Simultaneously published in the UK
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

© 2014 Stephanie Burrige and Caren Cariño

Typeset by
Solution Graphics
A-14, Indira Puri, Loni Road
Ghaziabad, Uttar Pradesh 201 102

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data
A catalogue record of this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-138-79613-3

Contents

<i>Foreword</i> by Chan Heng Chee	ix
<i>Preface</i> by Stephanie Burridge	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
Introduction <i>Stephanie Burridge</i>	xv
1. The Evolving Cultural Ecology through Dance <i>Caren Cariño</i>	1
2. Chinese Dance: Cultural Resources and Creative Potentials <i>Chua Soo Pong</i>	17
3. The Matrix of Cultural Identities in Indian and Malay Dances <i>Siri Rama</i>	31
4. To Live, to Dance, to Be: Two Decades of Singapore Dance Theatre and Beyond <i>Goh Soo Khim and Bridget Tracy Tan</i>	48
5. Creative Dance Education: A Personal Account <i>Lim Mei Chian</i>	64
6. Youthopia: Dance and Young People in the Lion City <i>Peter Gn</i>	84
7. Dancing with Community <i>Kavitha Krishnan</i>	101
8. Looking Out: International Focus <i>Robert Liew</i>	114
9. Regional Networks and Cultural Exchange <i>Stephanie Burridge</i>	124

10. Dance and New Media <i>John Mead</i>	140
11. Interconnections: An Overview of Contemporary Dance Scene from the 1990s to the Present <i>Melissa Quek</i>	159
Artist Voices and Biographies Collected by <i>Sarah Ng</i> Santha Bhaskar, Shahrin Johry, Kuik Swee Boon, Lee Mun Wai, Angela Liong, Lim Fei Shen, Low Mei Yoke, Raka Maitra, Joavien Ng, Ming Poon, Neila Sathyalingham, Janek Schergen, Nirmala Seshadri, Ricky Sim, Jeffrey Tan, Ryan Tan, Albert Tiong, Antonio Vargas, Som Said Sri Warisan, and Zhuo Zihao.	177
<i>Index</i>	223

As an Indian girl growing up in Singapore, I was encouraged to learn Bharatanatyam to connect with Indian culture ... I have striven to bring contemporary relevance to the classical form. I believe that placing it in a modern context could transform it from a museum piece into an organic art form that is timeless and universal.

— *Nirmala Seshadri*

Traversing between Western classical movement forms to more esoteric alternative physical practices, my interpretation is usually a product that reflects the process of examination. I strongly believe that artists should play an active role in taking on the responsibility to build an infrastructure for arts awareness, appreciation and growth within the community.

— *Ricky Sim*

I believe that we must understand the evolving role of a traditional performance in a rapidly transforming and multi-cultural society like Singapore. There is a deep bond between tradition, art and community. Practitioners of traditional art and culture must not only reflect the mastery of their artistic and cultural traditions representing the history and lineage of those traditions but at the same time appreciate the wider issues of viability and dissemination of these distinctive forms of knowledge to a wider audience.

— *Priyalatha Arun*

Most importantly, I am human and I try to accept all flaws and bring them into the works that I create. A choreographer is sometimes like a scientist, experimenting and exploring the edges of the creative universe.

— *Albert Tiong*

My passion has become to tell a story using the flamenco repertoire and extending when called for my ballet and contemporary background to make flamenco dance entertainment for my audiences, ... Now I am in Singapore at the age of 72 sharing my experiences ... breeding a new generation of flamenco dancers. After 50 years of my dance career, I still consider myself a student.

— *Antonio Vargas*

I became a dancer in the first place because I wanted to experience the intense beauty of dance as an art form, not as an observer, but firsthand.

I wanted to walk through the stage door, not the front door. I wanted to become a dancer to physically move through space and be something uncommon! I wanted a place at the table of my own to experience for myself.

— *Janek Schergen*

When I create, I get inspired by music, talents, societal issues and events — things that provoke me, things that matter to me and to people, and that plants a strong desire in me to tell others about it . . . dance should bridge lives, improve lives — it should be relevant.

— *Ryan Tan*

Never have I seen Singaporeans so alive, discussing issues close to our hearts with such urgency . . . Contemporary dance can play a vital role in this national discussion because it provides outlets for opinions to be aired creatively. Perhaps it will be in these times that the elusive Singaporean identity in contemporary dance will be strengthened.

— *Lee Mun Wai*

Foreword

Professor Chan Heng Chee

These are exciting times for dance in Singapore. The styles and genres of dance practised here are diverse and span across our many cultures, incorporating both the traditional and the contemporary, catering to different levels of engagement and practice. The number of dance organizations and professional dancers has also grown, with arts institutions like the LASALLE College of the Arts, the Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts and the School of the Arts significantly contributing to Singapore's pool of young and upcoming dancers.

Dance in Singapore has also seen greater visibility in recent times as increasingly more performing platforms are emerging. This includes annual fixtures like the Esplanade's *dans* festival, which features high quality international works and regular performance seasons by our local dance companies. Most primary and secondary schools offer dance as a co-curricular activity and at the recreational level; classes offered at community centres, private studios and dance companies are also thriving with young aspiring dancers, serious dance hobbyists and seniors.

Research and documentation are important aspects of the development of our arts. It informs us of the past and shapes our way forward. This book, *Evolving Synergies: Celebrating Dance in Singapore* is a noteworthy contribution to the discourse of the local dance scene. It succinctly captures the evolution of Singapore's dance landscape



Professor Chan Heng Chee
Chairperson,
National Arts Council

and its place in the city-state's social, cultural and historical development. Like all great nations that have written their respective histories in the arts, Singapore too has its own story to tell.

Professor Chan Heng Chee is currently Ambassador-at-Large with the Singapore Foreign Ministry and Chairman of the Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities in the Singapore University of Technology and Design (SUTD). A member of the Presidential Council for Minority Rights, she holds a B.Soc.Sc (Hons) First Class from the National University of Singapore, an MA from Cornell University and a PhD from the National University of Singapore.

Professor Chan served as Singapore's Ambassador to the United States from 1996 to 2012. She was Singapore's Permanent Representative to the United Nations from 1989 to 1991 and was concurrently High Commissioner to Canada and Ambassador to Mexico. Her previous roles included Executive Director of the Singapore International Foundation, Director of the Institute of Southeast Asian Studies, and Founding Director of the Institute of Policy Studies.

Professor Chan received a number of awards, including the Public Administration Medal (Gold) in 1999; the Meritorious Service Medal in 2005; the Distinguished Service Order in 2011; Honorary Degrees of Doctor of Letters from the University of Newcastle, Australia in 1994; and the University of Buckingham (United Kingdom) in 1998. She was twice awarded the National Book Awards in 1986 for *A Sensation of Independence: A Political Biography of David Marshall* and in 1978 for *The Dynamics of One Party Dominance: The PAP at the Grassroots*.

Preface

Dance in the Asia-Pacific region is a diverse cultural matrix where new contemporary dance occurs alongside continuing traditions such as tribal, folk and court dances and ritual practices. A continuum that expresses all aspects of life, tradition and change, dance is also a 'meeting point' for modernity and post-modernity, history and 'post-history', the present and the future where complex aesthetic and philosophical challenges are negotiated. Artists are addressing these challenges with integrity and subtlety through developing unique performance styles that are constantly evolving. Working through an empathetic approach that is grounded in regional traditions, the choreographers from the countries of the Asia-Pacific region are at the forefront of developing a new international genre of contemporary dance with unique movement vocabularies and narratives. No dance lover, practitioner or scholar can ignore the dynamism and explosion of creative energy from this region.

The books in this series discuss the meeting points, intersections and integration of dance cultures and how choreographers, performers, associated artists and companies of the region choose to imaginatively invent, blend, fuse, select, and morph these multiple influences. Pedagogy, training, production resources, logistic support and, in some instances, imposed restrictions such as censorship all impinge on the artistic process — above all, the passion to create, the need to perform and the desire to be heard underpins all art. In dance, the body is a powerful means of dialogue that, through embodiment, encapsulates signs and symbols of place and belief. Rather than emulating Western dance forms, there is a palpable confidence in personal creative expressions that are valued, applauded and enjoyed — the Asia-Pacific choreographers are making evocative and enigmatic dance theatre that touches a human chord and implicitly shows the power of dance to move and inspire us. The complexity of these developments may not seem a big step

to outsiders, but to those versed in the traditional forms, these small steps represent giant leaps.

How does an identity emerge from such eclecticism in the Asia-Pacific region? Dance that is thematically inspired by unique narratives and regional ‘storytelling’ traditions, history and social issues occurs alongside predominately abstract choreography constructed from a diversity of movement vocabularies from the East and the West. Choreographers are incorporating imagery that is metaphorical, symbolic and iconic to make poetic statements about their world. In this amalgam, memories are embodied, constructed and deconstructed, encoded and decoded into new themes and movement vocabularies in powerful and poignant moments. For instance, across the region, one of the greatest epic stories of all time, the *Ramayana*, a tale that is reinterpreted from India, to Bali, Thailand, Cambodia and beyond, is explored in myriad ways. It is revisited and interrogated by practitioners through film, drama, dance and the visual arts — there is much to contemplate and debate in the interpretation of the characters and the intricacies of the story line that reveals universal aspects of human frailty such as the struggle between good and evil, weakness and power, lust and greed, the masculine and the feminine and the search for the soul.

It is timely to be inspired by the breadth and diversity of dance in the Asia-Pacific region. The *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* series focuses on themes of evolving contemporary choreography, tradition and change, intercultural research and practice occurring through artist exchanges, pedagogy, revitalizing and preserving cultural heritage — rich areas for research with implications to readers throughout the global village. An important focus is to highlight the artists’ perspective on their work and its cultural and philosophical context through the inclusion of a number of artists’ essays in each volume. These insights give invaluable information about the inspiration, intention and cultural connections for the dancers and choreographers. It is also an opportunity to present their thoughts on the dichotomy between the preservation of dance in their communities and the desire to choreograph contemporary dance informed by traditional and classical forms.

There inevitably remain many tensions, dilemmas and uncertainties for both the artists and the audiences where familiar ground is

constantly shifting as audiences engage with the new Asian contemporary dance. Rapid changes and the shock of the new may be uncomfortable to some but exhilarating and liberating to others.

Ultimately, despite divergent views and the polarities of the traditional and the contemporary, there is a sense of respect for all that dance offers — for fellow artists and the passion they share. Audiences in the Asia-Pacific region and across the world are witnessing continuing traditions that bridge and celebrate rich cultural heritages alongside new explorations and eureka moments for both established and developing choreographers. The words of Carl Wolz, the founder of the World Dance Alliance, epitomize the philosophy and content of this series:

Celebrating the variety, the depth and the beauty of human difference through the art of dance.

— Singapore, WDA conference 2001

Stephanie Burridge
Series Editor

*Stephanie Burridge, trained at the Laban Center (UK), holds a BA in Anthropology/Arts History from the Australian National University and a PhD in Contemporary Dance from the London Contemporary Dance School in association with the University of Kent, UK. As Artistic Director of Canberra Dance Theatre (1978–2001) she commissioned Australia’s leading choreographers, composers, visual artists and performers, and was awarded the first Choreographic Fellowship at the Australian Choreographic Centre, an ACT Lifetime Achievement award and received Australia Council funding over several years. She lectures at LASALLE College of the Arts and Singapore Management University, has been a research consultant at the National Institute of Education, is the author and editor of numerous publications and articles in journals on dance and education including *Shifting Sands: Dance in Asia and the Pacific* (2006). She is the series editor of the Routledge series, *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* — books in the series include *Cambodia, India, Malaysia, Australia, Taiwan, and the South Pacific*.*

Acknowledgements

This book has been published in association with the World Dance Alliance Asia Pacific, the Institute for Southeast Asian Arts, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (Singapore), and the World Dance Alliance Asia Singapore. It is supported by the National Arts Council, Singapore.

The World Dance Alliance (WDA) serves as the primary voice for dance and dancers throughout the world and encourages the exchange of ideas and the awareness of dance in all its forms. Part of the strategy of WDA Asia Pacific is to contribute to the research and heritage of affiliated countries throughout the region.

We would like to acknowledge the outstanding contributions that the authors, artists and photographers have made to this book, which is a vibrant account of the current dance scene in Singapore and one that reflects on the history, the context of developments and future prospects. Special thanks to Bridget Tracy Tan and Sarah Ng from the Institute for Southeast Asian Arts for their support and invaluable input to this project. The editors are indebted to Ambassador Chan Heng Chee for her thoughts and insights in the Foreword to this volume.

Finally, the editors would like to thank Routledge India, for their foresight in commissioning the *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific* series, their ongoing support, their patience and understanding of the complexity of putting such a rich collection of voices together.



Introduction

Stephanie Burridge

Singapore is a meeting point for dance from the East and the West. With myriad festivals, performances in theatres, the community, schools and site-specific spaces, Singapore is a vibrant player in the evolution of Asian contemporary dance which is burgeoning throughout the region. In the Singapore context, storytelling, personal reflections, memories, and local histories have been the basis for dance choreography with artists drawing from eclectic, embodied backgrounds. Its extensive calendar of events encompassing companies and soloists from diverse dance practices and rich cultural traditions ensures a dynamic dance scene that confronts audiences with a complexity of forms, concepts and productions. Indian, Malay and Chinese dance vocabularies and a variety of Western contemporary dance techniques come together in an amalgam of creativity to make new poetic statements about our world through movement. Dance is emphatic 'glue' in the political and social landscape promoting harmony across racial, religious, ethical, and philosophical lines. This evolving synergy of seemingly disparate parts parallels deeply-rooted cultural values that come together in the celebration of national days, marks the calendar of religious events and engages schools and communities within an ethos of tolerance and cohesion. Geographically a small island, Singapore's heritage is defined not only by trade and waves of immigration, but by British colonization, occupation by the Japanese during Second World War, the three-year relationship as part of Malaysia, and finally the struggle for independence achieved in 1965.

'Unity and diversity' is a catchphrase that is often used to describe many aspects of Singapore, whether associated with the rich heritage of food, the multiracial mix of its people or the complexity of the local arts scene. Since Independence, waves of immigration, industrialization and urbanization have advanced at a rapid pace. The government's direction in the development and nurturing of

artists has encouraged both traditional forms along racial lines and contemporary dance practice. Individuals, companies, projects, overseas exchange, and professional training have all been supported through a variety of funding schemes and grants. The post-colonial search for identity has dominated thematic directions in dance, moving beyond community affirmation of ethnicity, evoked through the performance of traditional Indian, Malay and Chinese dance, to free expression led by individual choreographers wanting to address current issues and concerns about place, space and time. Narratives with a literal approach to storytelling are danced alongside abstract choreography rooted in exploration, experimentation and artists working with new technologies. Some artists have embraced globalized future dynamism and energy; others look back and reflect on lost languages, places and the encroaching buildings that squeeze personal space. For example, Angela Liong, Kuik Swee Boon and Low Mei Yoke have all created choreography that explores people and communities seemingly lost in the pace of living, climate change and environmental concerns about the loss of habitats that are being rapidly eroded in the face of development. Other Singaporean dance artists have sought to make sense of their world in the face of increasing globalization and the rapidly moving flux around them.

The body, as a representation and corporeal statement, foregrounds the line between embodied narratives and the metaphoric form it symbolically assumes in performance. Together with mainstream patronage for dance, a younger and perhaps more adventurous audience has shown a curiosity for performances that were once deemed radical, confrontational and provocative. Under current rating guidelines, the most extreme of these productions are commonly rated 'Restricted 18'. Over many years, however, controversy has been rare in the Singapore dance scene; rather, it has revelled in presenting the body in many guises largely side-stepping confrontations that have often occurred in local theatre and the visual arts where ratings for shows, and censorship issues, are regularly raised.

International interaction and collaboration has always been a part of the Singapore dance world, with a combination of local touring and cultural exchange projects through regional networks

and major performance companies touring Singapore. The chapter on cultural exchange outlines examples of recent regional activity, while Robert Liew's international focus chapter looks at some game-changing visiting performances that have toured independently or as part of the Singapore Arts Festival or the relatively new *da:ns* festival initiated by Singapore's premiere performance venue, Esplanade Theatre on the Bay.

In this volume, Caren Cariño introduces the themes of cultural identity, multiculturalism and Asian values that underpin much of the discussions in the other chapters of the book. This 'evolving cultural ecology' is brought into focus in the context of Singapore's rich dance heritage from the Chinese, Malay and Indian communities.

The Singapore dance scene acknowledges the impact of immigrants on the quality and sustainability of the current dance ecology; artists from India such as Santha Bhaskar and Neila Sathyalingam have established world-renowned schools and remain seminal influences to their many students who have become the next generation of Indian dancers and choreographers. A new generation of artists, working creatively with the Indian, Chinese and Malay traditional dance forms, not only bring fresh perspectives to the formal elements of each but also add local stories and expand the notions of tradition. For instance, Kavitha Krishnan works at the forefront of dance in the community sector across a range of abilities and services. Som Said has been instrumental in preserving Malay dance traditions and working tirelessly in the areas of community dance education and participation. Eminent scholars such as Chinese dance expert and Chinese Opera specialist Chua Soo Pong contribute their expertise locally and internationally through teaching, touring their creative work and speaking about the Singapore dance scene at international conferences. Their thoughts and expertise have been presented in this volume. Indian dance practitioner and academic Siri Rama creatively presents the evolution of the Indian and Malay dance sectors through a theoretic model in a 'matrix of cultural identities', in an exploration of commonalities, variance and interconnections between the two forms.

In parallel to this wave of immigration, Singaporean dance artists have continually sought new horizons in the search for further training in contemporary dance techniques and post-graduate

academic studies overseas. To this day, many of our most influential choreographers, performers and teachers have completed dance degrees in the UK, USA, Australia, and Hong Kong, amongst other places. Fortunately, many have returned to leave an indelible footprint in their homeland — Lim Fei Shen, Goh Soo Khim, Danny Tan, Ricky Sim, Jeffrey Tan, Melissa Quek, Lee Mun Wai, Christina Chan, Tammy Wong, and Zhuo Zihao, to name a few. Influential dance educators such as Peter Gn, Theresa Pee and Lim Mei Chian have also studied overseas, while the book editors, along with New Media exponent John Mead, have been attracted to Singapore to make long-term commitments to dance as teachers, choreographers, writers, and advocates.

The personal journeys of many of Singapore's Cultural Medallion recipients and Young Artist awardees for dance are narrated in the stellar collection of 'Artist's Voices and Biographies' in this volume. Pioneers such as Santha Bhaskar, Neila Sathyalingam, Angela Liong, Lim Fei Shen, Low Mei Yoke, and Som Said inspire a new generation of company directors like Kuik Swee Boon, Ricky Sim and Albert Tiong, while young dancers and choreographers Jeffrey Tan, Shahrin Johry, Lee Mun Wai, Christina Chan, and Zhuo Zihao inspire with their creativity and performance. Independents led by artists such as Joavien Ng and Ming Poon push boundaries and ask questions about life, art, dance and performance, while Raka Maitra, Nirmala Seshadri and Antonio Vargas work both within and outside of their traditional dance forms to create new dance languages and stories that resonate within a local context. This is an exuberating, exciting cohort of passionate artists forging new paths in performance, education and community projects in Singapore and beyond. The voices of experience guide the way with cultural icons and national treasures recognized for their contributions and ground-breaking, courageous creativity. Engaging and inspiring, the Artists' own voices emerge as they tell their stories in this most important feature of this volume and also in the other titles in the Routledge series *Celebrating Dance in Asia and the Pacific*.

Singapore's best known choreographer, the late Goh Soo San, is introduced through the history of his family recounted by his sister; also a Cultural Medallion winner and a founding Artistic Director of Singapore Dance Theatre (SDT), Goh Soo Khim. The chapter makes

wonderful reading as she recounts the tale of a family of dancers growing up through periods of change in Singapore's political and social history. The SDT is the city state's flagship dance company with an enviable repertoire of classical ballets and contemporary works by Singaporean luminaries such as Goh Choo San, as well as leading international choreographers. The story of SDT continues through its current Artistic Director, Janek Schergen, who shares his history and vision for the company in his Artist Voice.

There are many more extraordinary individuals who tirelessly share their creativity, talent, skills, and experience with this continually changing landscape of movement. Dance in Singapore continues to evolve with a creative confidence that is engaging audiences and revitalizing an interest in all forms of dance, from contemporary to hip-hop, Indian, Malay, and Chinese dance. Singaporean choreographers work through their embodied cultural 'memories' and embrace multiple dance traditions — these co-exist and merge not only with Western contemporary dance forms but also with dance practices from across the region. Professional contemporary artists and companies give regular performances, hip-hop and hybrid dance forms thrive in community centres and on the stage, while the unique Singapore Youth Festival sees thousands of students participate in dance performances. Innovations in movement vocabulary, juxtaposed with cultural and personal narratives and storytelling traditions, celebrate a deep-rooted understanding of tradition that underpins radical changes in Singapore's contemporary dance scene.

This page intentionally left blank

1

The Evolving Cultural Ecology through Dance

Caren Cariño

The development of dance in Singapore is a reflection of the country's evolving cultural ecology throughout its history. While not all developments in dance can be reduced to state instrumentality, it is important to acknowledge the political strategies that may have influenced or coincided with it. During Singapore's colonization by the British, for some dance was a conduit to maintain a connection with their homelands, while for others it represented a form of identification with their British colonizers. When Singapore gained independence in 1965 after a brief merger with Malaysia, the government harnessed the possibility of dance as a vehicle to forge tolerance between the major cultural populations: Chinese, Indian and Malay. During the 1960s and 1970s, while the government focused on the country's economic development that included foreign investment, dance was a mode to promote Singapore's multicultural society locally as well as abroad. Coinciding with the Asian values discourse in the 1980s and 1990s, dance reflected Singapore's expanded Asian identity as its landscape embraced more Asian cultures. In the late 1990s, after Singapore recovered from the Asian economic crisis and began to grow in confidence, dance as an art was finally acknowledged as one of the important signifiers of a culturally vibrant society. Today, in the first 14 years of the 21st century, dance is both a representation of culture as well as an art form and exemplifies Singapore's maturing cultural ecology. Documents such as the 'Report of the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts' (1989), 'Renaissance City Report' (2000) and 'Report of the Arts and Culture Strategic Review' (2012) provide insights that consider the aspirations of Singapore through the arts, including dance.

Cultural Identities

Dance has played an important role in forging and fortifying Singapore's cultural ecology. During its initial colonization by the British (1819–1945) Singapore was viewed by some immigrants as a destination where they came to work rather than to settle permanently and create a new culture or nation.¹ Eventually, for the Chinese, Malays and Indians who decided to stay and make Singapore their home, dance served the purpose of providing a sense of community. According to Singaporean historian Wang Gung Wu, the growing number of Chinese born in Singapore readily adopted the Western culture, converted to Christianity, displayed loyalty to the British Empire, and established a Westernised community.² It was in this cultural climate that ballet was introduced in Singapore.

After the Second World War (1942–45), during which time the Japanese occupied Singapore, when the British returned to rule, dance was linked to national identity. There were sentiments of anti-colonialism and dance became a means to create a multi-cultural society based on the Chinese, Indian and Malay cultures. Thus, cultural dance organizations were established, including the Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society (1949), Bhaskar's Arts Academy (1952), Nrityalaya Aesthetics Society (1952), Sriwana (1955), Bengali Association (1956), and Perkumpulan Seni (1958). Furthermore, Singaporean Chinese, Indian and Malay dancers learnt each other's dance forms, signifying their unification. Chua Soo Pong, a Singaporean dance scholar, for example, notes that the

most important contribution made by [the Bhaskar Academy of Dance, an Indian dance organization] was its ability to attract the Chinese student activists, who were in the 1950's, keen to learn the non-Chinese arts, cultures and languages, as part of their mission to create the new Malayan culture.³

¹ William Peterson, *Theatre and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore*, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2001, p. 53.

² Robert Young, 'The Ambivalence of Bhaba', in *White Mythologies Writing History and the West*, London: Routledge, 1990, p. 147.

³ Chua Soo Pong, 'Singapore', in Zainal Abiddin Tinggal (ed.), *The Dances of Asean*, Brunei Darussalam: Asia Printers, 1998, p. 195.

At the same time, those who were British-influenced continued to assume a British nationalistic allegiance and promulgated the development of ballet. Maudrene Yap was the first Singaporean teacher to obtain an advanced certificate from the Royal Academy of Dancing (RAD), a ballet syllabus produced in the United Kingdom. She went on to found a ballet school before migrating to the United Kingdom in 1954.

The RAD system of training dancers was strengthened through the efforts of Goh Soo Nee. After graduating from the Sadler Wells Ballet School in the United Kingdom (now renamed the Royal Ballet School), Soo Nee founded the Malaya School of Ballet in 1956 with Blossom Shek. Together they established dance studios in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur and Penang. In 1958, they founded the Singapore Ballet Academy (SBA) with Frances Poh (who took over Maudrene Yap's ballet school and co-founded the Frances School of Dancing with Florrie Sinclair in 1954) and Vernon Martinus.

Then, in 1959, Singapore was granted internal self-governance at the helm of Lee Kuan Yew (before it gained independence in 1965). The government implemented several projects towards the creation of a New Malayan Culture including the People's Association, a grassroots cultural organization formed in 1960 to foster racial unity and to establish a bridge between the government and the people through its numerous community centres. This was the precursor to other cultural initiatives involving dance still to come.

Singaporean Identity

Singapore quickly moved towards self-governance that culminated in a brief union with Malaysia (1963–65) and finally independence in 1965 when it ambitiously attended to nation-building — establishing political and economic stability as well as a Singaporean identity based on cultural tolerance between its Chinese, Indian and Malay populations. Chua Soo Pong explains the development of dance during this time, under the leadership of the then Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew (1959–90), as increasingly playing a role in

anti-colonial campaigns, in political competition between the ruling government party and its opposition and in forging unity. It is doubtful

that performing arts [including dance], can be totally cut off from the cultural roots and emotional importance of the three major ethnic groups.⁴

The annual Singapore Youth Festival (SYF), organized by the Ministry of Education (MOE), was inaugurated in 1967 as a platform to advocate Singapore's cultural diversity. Students participated in dance as an extra-curricular activity (later termed co-curricular activity). Chinese, Indian, Malay and international dance forms that included ballet, contemporary dance, tap and a variety of other cultural dance forms were presented by primary and secondary students every alternate year at the SYF.

Multiculturalism

Singapore's economic development, which began in the mid-1960s and continued into the 1970s, saw the government's economic policy encouraging foreign investment which was paralleled in dance through multiculturalism. Foreign performing groups were presented in Singapore. At the same time, Singapore's traditional Chinese, Indian and Malay dance forms were promoted overseas through the government-supported National Theatre Dance Company established in 1968.

In Singapore, cultural dance companies continued to be established, including Majlis Pusat (1969), a Malay dance group, while two companies became full-time: the National Dance Company in 1970 and the People's Association Dance Group in 1971. Dance in the community continued as a popular activity organized by the People's Association through its community projects and community centres offering lessons in a variety of dance forms: ballet, jazz, tap, modern dance, ethnic dances, and dance for children. Also in 1971, Goh Soo Nee's sister Goh Soo Khim, who was spotted by the Australian Ballet School where she garnered a place as the first Asian dance student in 1964, took over the helm to direct the Singapore Ballet Academy (SBA).

⁴ Chua Soo Pong, 'An Overview of Southeast Asian Performing Arts: Issues of Cultural Identity', in Chua Soo Pong (ed.), *Traditional Theatre in Southeast Asia*, Singapore: UniPress for SPAFA, 1995, p. xxii.

Other initiatives during the 1970s include the annual Chingay Parade (1973), a procession featuring dance among many displays, in celebration of the Chinese Lunar New Year, organized by the People's Association.

Besides Malay dance group Pusparama Dancers (1975, later called the Rina Dancers) and Indian dance group Apsaras Arts Ltd (1977), cultural performance groups were also formed at the National University of Singapore (NUS) in 1977, comprising students and alumni. The NUS Chinese Dance group was founded with Ding Hong as Artistic Director/resident choreographer together with Zhou Lei, technique instructor. The Indian Dance group was established under the guidance of its Artistic Director and resident choreographer Santha Bhaskar, an Indian dance pioneer in Singapore. The Festival of Arts (later renamed Singapore Arts Festival) was also inaugurated in 1977 by the National Arts Council (NAC), presenting local and international cutting-edge and mainstream dance performances.⁵

In 1979, the NAC implemented the Cultural Medallion award to 'recognise individuals whose artistic excellence as well as contribution and commitment to the arts have enriched and made a distinction to Singapore's arts and cultural landscape'.⁶ As of now, dance awardees include Madhavi Krishnan (1979), Goh Soo Khim (1981), Goh Choo San (1986), Som Said (1987), Lim Fei Shen (1988), Neila Sathyalingam (1989), Santha Bhaskar (1990), Ying E. Ding (1992), Goh Lay Kuan (1995), and Angela Liong (2009).

Asian Values

Cultural dance representing the three major cultural populations in Singapore continued to grow. Dance organizations formed during the 1980s include Temple of Fine Arts (1981), NUS Malay Dance group (early 1980s, renamed the NUS Ilsa Tari in 1998) headed by Osman Abdul Hamid, a Singapore young artist award recipient and choreographer for the People's Association Malay Dance group,

⁵ The Arts Festival was put on hold for 2013 to review its role and relevance in Singapore's evolving landscape.

⁶ See <https://www.nac.gov.sg/talent-development/cultural-leadership/cultural-medallion> (accessed on 20 October 2013).