I hadn't intended to become a culture professional. My real ambition was to be a diplomat. I was absorbed by the world that was outside my own, and avidly followed the political developments and crises of the day that were no less dramatic than what one might have found on a theatre stage. I needed a place where I could be in touch with the moving world, and the only place I saw that offered this opportunity was the foreign affairs ministry. But as luck would have it, a piano music certificate among my application papers convinced the government recruiters that I was better suited to culture than diplomacy, despite the fact that I had read politics, history and philosophy at the National University of Singapore, and picked up French and Esperanto.

That was how I came to be Assistant Director for Music and Literature at the Ministry of Culture in 1984, soon after leaving university. This turned out to be the best thing that could have happened to me.

Ching-Lee Goh

Strategic intent with artistic integrity

Ching-Lee Goh is recognised as a key personality behind the arts renaissance in Singapore. She is the former Director of the Singapore Arts Festival. She co-founded the Association of Asian Performing Arts Festivals and was its Chair for several years. She also developed Singapore Season, a programme showcasing Singapore's arts overseas. Today, Ching-Lee is the Executive and Artistic Director of CultureLink Singapore.
I did become a diplomat, albeit a ‘cultural diplomat’, with the added bonus of engaging with artists and the arts. I was to find myself combining art and diplomacy to win friends and goodwill for Singapore’s arts both at home and abroad. Those same interests in history and current affairs were to provide helpful contextual resources for my future role as a festival director.

My childhood was invaluable in provoking my first creative ideas as a festival programmer. Living next to a Taoist temple, I was no stranger to stage performances and ritual spectacles—a childhood experience similar to the one described by Maria. I used to watch temple mediums dance themselves into a trance, practice self-flagellation, slash their tongues and write in their own blood. The Chinese street opera troupe would set up its wooden stage in front of our house and perform over several days for the temple gods and the neighbourhood. Itinerant food vendors flocked to the area and did a roaring trade. Unknowingly, I had grown up living the life of festivals with no inkling that I would one day come to create festivals of a different kind.

This childhood memory must have sparked the idea behind the Festival Village which I created as the centrepiece for the 1997 Festival of Asian Performing Arts (FAPA), which I was unexpectedly entrusted to direct. FAPA started in 1993 to alternate with the larger and more prestigious biennial Singapore Festival of Arts. Its intention was to focus on Asian work and take it from under the shadows of the international western productions in the Singapore Festival of Arts. Unfortunately, the consensus was that this was not working and FAPA was perceived as ‘second class’ and the ‘poorer cousin’ to its big brother, with audience numbers trailing behind it.

I had become disillusioned with the artificiality of traditional Asian and folk performances on the modern stage and wanted to re-contextualise them in a more authentic setting. I also wanted to reconnect urban Singaporeans with the memory of their rural roots and to remind them that village performance traditions, while threatened, remained very much alive in Asia. Part of my inspiration also came from a performance of the Balinese trance dance, the Calonarang which I saw in a village in Bali. This had left me in awe of performance traditions in communities where the distinction between art and life, between villager, farmer and performer, was still indivisible.

I invited the Kecak Dance from Bali to the inaugural 1997 Festival Village located at the Fort Canning Park, a semi-sacred hillock in the heart of the city. I also invited the Jiangzhou Drums from China, aboriginal singers and dancers from Taiwan, and the Indian folk theatre Yakshagana. Working with theatre director William Teo and a team of designers, we used simple natural materials such as wood, bamboo and fire to create the stages and village ambiance. The perimeter of the fort was ringed with cauldrons of fire (improvised from woks), and the Village reverberated
with chants, drums, dance, and epic stories from the
_Ramayana_ and _Mahabharata_.

There were moments of serendipity, as when
Balinese performers draped park sculptures with black-
and-white chequered sarongs in homage of the spirits
believed to inhabit them; when Taiwanese aboriginal
dancers circled around a bonfire specially lit for them;
or when the thumping of the giant Jiangzhou drums
in rehearsal solicited an ‘approving’ answer from the
heavens that unleashed an enormous storm before
opening night. This was the beauty of the _Festival
Village_ where the real, spiritual, cultural, ritual and
social dimensions blended magically. It captured
the public imagination and was a huge success.

FAPA in 1997 saw attendances rise from its pre-
vious 60% to more than 90%, an outcome that exceed-
ed everyone’s expectations, including my own. This
also reflected the positive reception given to contempo-
rary Asian work presented in theatres, showing Asian
tradition under a different light. Ironically, this most
successful edition of FAPA was to be its last, as the arts
minister had decided to merge it with the Singapore
Festival of Arts to create an annual festival with an
‘Asian flavour’. Although at the time I was disappoint-
ed, in retrospect it was not an unwise strategic decision,
and there was the satisfaction of knowing that FAPA
had exited on a high note. From my own perspective, I
had passed the ‘test’ of directing my first major interna-
tional festival and this paved the way towards future
responsibility for the larger festival, a prospect I hadn’t
until then had the audacity to contemplate.

Looking at Singapore’s economic success and its
lively arts and entertainment scene today, it is hard to
imagine its former epithet as a ‘cultural desert’, or to
recall that its GDP was lower than some African coun-
tries’ when it gained independence in 1965. We were a
tiny, vulnerable island state, with an immigrant society
made up of disparate ethnic communities. We were
‘cultural orphans’ cut off from our mother cultures in
India, China and the rest of the Malay archipelago.
Our forefathers mostly hailed from poverty-stricken
parts of Asia and for them the pursuit of the arts and
culture was an alien concept.

When I joined the civil service in 1984,
Singapore’s cultural and artistic landscape was not
dissimilar to the one Serina Chen describes in Taiwan.
Cultural and artistic activity was in the hands of ama-
teur groups and societies belonging to clan, neighbour-
hood, school or university structures, many of these
formed along ethnic or linguistic lines. There was little
notion of ‘professional’ arts organisations or ‘profes-
sional’ arts management, and this wasn’t helped by the
lack of formal arts training institutions. The only profes-
sional arts organisation at the time was the Singapore
Symphony Orchestra formed in 1978, of which more
than half the musicians were recruited from overseas.

Cultural policy was oriented towards nation-
building and creating inter-racial understanding and
tolerance through displays and performances by local cultural groups. This was the environment in which the Ministry of Education was to create the first Singapore Festival of Arts in 1977. It was an entirely local affair. After its transfer to the Ministry of Culture in 1978 it became a biennial festival that began to introduce international content.

1984 turned out to be a seminal year in Singapore’s cultural history, when the government announced it wanted to build a “culturally vibrant society” by 1999. This was the first time the government had unequivocally placed arts and culture on the national agenda, feeling politically and economically secure enough to turn its attention to the ‘softer’ areas of national development. It was also a response towards a more affluent and better educated generation that aspired towards self-fulfilment beyond material gratification. This paved the way for a 1989 cultural blueprint by the Advisory Council on Culture and the Arts that eventually established national cultural institutions like the National Arts Council (1991), the National Heritage Board (1993), a host of new museums and the green light for the building of an arts centre now known as the Esplanade—Theatres on the Bay (which opened in 2002).

The Singapore Festival of Arts, because it preceded these institutions, presided over much of Singapore’s cultural landscape and shaped its development through the 1980s and much of the 90s. It was the largest and ‘craziest’ single arts event, a surfeit of paid and free performances in theatres, concert halls and open public spaces—the only time in the year when people could enjoy a diversity of high-quality international classical and contemporary music, dance and theatre performances. This fuelled a public demand for quality performances and established a base of festival goers and arts enthusiasts.

It also helped stimulate a professional theatre scene with the founding of the country’s first professional companies like Act Three, TheatreWorks, The Necessary Stage, and the Singapore Dance Theatre in the mid 80s. The Festival Fringe brought the unusual and the bizarre into the streets. New art genres and events were introduced—installation and performance art, a film festival, a writers’ week, and the first Singapore musical—all of which subsequently developed identities and trajectories of their own.

The Festival did important work in pooling local talents for new Singaporean drama. A new wave of plays instilled confidence and pride in a fledging theatre community, including the Samseng and the Chettiah’s Daughter (a local adaptation of the Threepenny Opera), Kopitiam by theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun who unified a cast drawn from disparate Mandarin theatre groups, and Beauty World by TheatreWorks, the first Singaporean musical that has since become a Singapore theatre classic. At the same time, international theatre productions created new encounters that reverberated throughout the arts community.
By the late 90s, the arts scene in Singapore had grown in depth, scale and scope. The festival grew to become a cultural juggernaut stretching over four to six weeks. Though no longer the only importer of international performances, it remained a sought-after event. By 1999, Singapore was enjoying most of the trappings of a “culturally vibrant society”, and was eagerly anticipating the completion of the Esplanade Theatres. After the 1997 Asian financial crisis, arts and culture were included in the economic strategy to turn Singapore into a cultural and entertainment hub that would help attract investment and global talent. This was to culminate in 2000 with another national blueprint, the Renaissance City Plan that saw special fund injected into arts organisations, arts tourism and the creative industries.

It was at this juncture in 1999 that I was asked to direct the newly renamed and annual Singapore Arts Festival. By that time, I had more than ten years experience managing a portfolio that included cultural policy and research, management of music, literature and visual arts events, and international cultural exchanges. Additionally, I had obtained an MA in Arts Management from the City University of London and was among the first ‘trained’ arts administrators and cultural ‘bureaucrats’ in Singapore.

As a cultural planner, I came to regard the festival (and all other events of the National Arts Council) not as an end in itself, but as a means and a developmental tool towards advancing the interest of artists, audiences and Singapore itself. The Festival had been an important catalyst in engineering cultural change in Singapore, and I wanted to carry on in the same spirit with a new agenda. My personal goal was to think with a planner’s mind but act with a heart for artists, and to marry strategic intent with artistic integrity.

As the foremost arts event in Singapore, the Festival’s raison d’être is to be compellingly different from everything else that happens in Singapore. Its explicit remit is to instigate change, and to positively alter behaviour and perception, even if this means encountering resistance. Singaporeans lead sheltered lives and need to be encouraged to experience worlds that can awaken and shake them out of their comfort zones. The Festival would be a travesty if it were to replicate existing work. Instead, it should fill the gaps in our cultural scene by treading new territories, taking the road less travelled, and inviting people on special journeys that can enrich and enlighten them. At the cusp of the new millennium after 20 years of existence, how could the Festival continue to make a difference to the cultural life of Singapore? What would be the next phase of change, where would the Singapore Arts Festival go from here? How could we re-imagine it?

The answer was immediately clear. It was to nudge artists’ work and audience sensibilities. The Festival would be a place where artists and their ideas took centre-stage and would be artist-led rather than
Strategic intent with artistic integrity

limitations and cultural differences, Singapore is a living laboratory and the perfect setting for exploring concepts of hybridity and alchemy. Interdisciplinary works that cross geographical, political, cultural and linguistic boundaries could find their natural home here. An openness to innovation and experimentation, resulting in rich discoveries, convergences or collisions, would give the Festival its vital meaning.

My first festival in 2000, New Inspiration, had many firsts. It was the first time a Singaporean work opened the event. It was also the first time it entered into co-commissions and co-productions with international partners. The opening performance, Desdemona, an intercultural deconstruction of Shakespeare’s Othello by Singapore’s foremost theatre director Ong Keng Sen, was co-produced by the Adelaide Festival, and for the first time a Singaporean festival work premiered outside of Singapore. It was also the first time an international artist outside Singapore was commissioned, taking a big leap with Robert Wilson’s multimedia music theatre Hot Water.

I sought to break away from cultural stereotypes and conventions that had become commonplace, replacing the flamenco and the butoh with radically different companies like La Fura Dels Baus from Spain and the Japanese contemporary dance company Pappa Tarahumara. I invited contemporary Asian dance which was new to Singapore, like Taipei Dance Circle (they performed on a stage bathed in baby oil) and the
new bharatanatyam Chandralekha Dance Company. We also pushed political boundaries with a ‘retrospective’ of two works by Singaporean playwright Kuo Pao Kun, who is regarded as the father of modern Singapore theatre. Jailed as a leftist activist, his two enduring satires about bureaucratic rigidity, The Coffin Is Too Big for the Hole and No Parking on Odd Days, were once frowned upon, and one was banned for a time. I commissioned not one, but four double-bills by different directors in the four languages of Singapore as a homage to Kuo’s search for multilingualism in Singapore theatre.

The 2000 Festival was among the most controversial. Opinion was sharply divided. People loved or hated it and there was little middle ground. Desdemona’s opening in Singapore had one audience member walking out, calling it ‘shit’ before slamming the door. Even Robert Wilson was referred to as a ‘conman’ by a paper. Another major paper asked “Is the Festival Too Avant Garde?” and carried mixed or negative reviews of most of the productions. Perhaps this reflected the paper’s inexperience in reviewing unfamiliar forms. This was evident in the fact they assigned two reviewers to Hot Water—one to review its merits as a classical concert performance by the pianist Tzimon Barto, and the other to review it as a piece of theatre, rather than reviewing it as a single integrated work.

But rather than landing me in hot water, the controversy actually generated excitement and sparked discussions that had been sorely missing from the Festival for some time. I did not set out to ‘shock’ or cause controversy, but simply did what I thought was necessary to update the Festival in the new millennium. The public was jolted into an awareness and acceptance of this ‘new’ Festival. It felt as though a glass ceiling had been broken, allowing more room for a new wave of artistic work to be shown.

The following nine years were exciting and exhausting. I continued to promote the innovative, presenting artists and ideas that would reveal something ‘new’ to the Singapore audience. The Festival celebrated not only the big, but also delighted in the small, not only the ‘brand’ names but also the emerging ‘unknowns’, not only the beautiful but also the ugly, and not only the ‘sunny’ spots but also the dark corners of the human experience.

Like Frie and Thorunn, I eschewed programming on a single theme. Fidelity to a theme may help marketing but can end up stifling artistic content. Attempts to broaden the programme can lead to tenuous connections that weaken the theme or render it redundant. I prefer the freedom of exploring several thematic strands with recurrent interests in history, memory, migration, conflict, urban realities and globalising societies. Performances that are purely abstract with their own aesthetic language can flourish within this framework.

I felt my particular role and responsibility was to seek out good art, wherever it could be found. This
meant looking in places that are culturally marginalised or where art is least expected. This responsibility was all the more significant given Singapore’s own marginalisation in the cultural world. Indeed, some of the most memorable shows came from the unfamiliar. These included *The Wall* from Palestine, *Segreta y Malibu* from Argentina, the *Architecture of Silence* from Slovenia, and *Class Enemy* from Bosnia.

We took delight in productions that attempted to bridge the past and present, the old and the modern, the virtual and the real, east and west, as well as juxtapose parallels of universe, cultures and languages. We coined the term ‘intercontinental world premiere’, when *Play on Earth* by Station House Opera was simultaneously premiered in Singapore, the UK and Brazil with three separate casts ‘conjoined’ across time and space through live video streaming. There was also *Awaking* that embraced the literary and musical worlds of Shakespeare and his contemporary Tang Xianzu, the author of the *Peony Pavilion*, both of whom died in 1616.

While developing new approaches in defining the main programme within theatres, we did not lose sight of the need to connect with the segment of the public who are not yet ticket-buying arts participants. We expanded the Festival’s outreach activities, creating performances in public places where people lived, worked, played, shopped, and commuted. The cityscape provided the malls, parks, subway stations, street junctions and neighbourhood corners that came alive with a variety of performances. Our skyscrapers, greens, and water bodies became inspiring settings for large-scale aerial and theatrical spectacles. What people often did not realise is that these events constituted 70-80% of the Festival’s output, in effect assuming the proportions of a parallel international street festival.

After years of feeling the cultural ‘cringe’ of being a small nation, it was time to stand up for Singapore’s artists who had started to come of age. I wanted to explore a new phase of commissioning that would create the ‘international’ Singaporean work which would not only be relevant locally but also have a resonance outside Singapore. Very few of the Festival’s commissions in its previous 20 years had been shown outside. Could we create more works that could tour beyond our borders? Could we defuse the long-standing tension between ‘local’ and ‘international’ by having a Singaporean work that would be both? Could we banish the negative perception of Singaporean work by encouraging bold and innovative ideas? Could we nurture these ideas by giving them the resources to help them succeed, while also allowing room for failure? How could the Festival make a difference to Singaporean artists, and how could these artists make a difference to Singapore?

My interest was to ‘put the money where my mouth was’ by investing a greater proportion of festival funds into worthy and ambitious ideas by Singapore’s artists. Collaboration between different
companies was actively encouraged in order to break away from their ‘silo’ habits and to encourage positive creative tensions. We also introduced foreign collaborators into their projects, and persuaded other festivals to join in commissioning and presenting these works, many of which were inter-cultural and inter-disciplinary projects.

This meant taking the necessary risk of subjecting Singaporean premieres to the harsh pressures of being judged alongside the polished work of visiting companies. I took inspiration from the words of Kuo Pao Kun that “it is better to have a worthy failure than a mediocre success”. I worked with artists who had a shared interest in exploring a ‘new Asian’ contemporary sensibility, and who could work in collaborative and inter-disciplinary partnerships with regional and international artists. Among them were Singapore Dance Theatre, the Singapore Chinese Orchestra, Drama Box, TheatreWorks, Toy Factory and composer Mark Chan. Younger Singaporean artists were given platforms like Forward Moves (dance) and Full Frontal (theatre) where the Festival produced their work, so they could focus their energies on the creative aspects without worrying about administrative and technical management.

The Festival had its fair share of successful and unsuccessful commissions. However, I was satisfied that we were rewarded with a number of works that broke new ground artistically, as well as receiving the co-commissioning support of international festivals, and seeing Singapore-made productions tour overseas. Singaporean works were also clustered together to present a ‘showcase’ to which we invited international festival curators. Robyn, Carla, and Jonathan Mills were among the first festival directors to make regular visits to Singapore and for whom Singapore represented a new source of content from Asia. With our help, Carla invited a slew of Singaporean artists and works which we branded ‘Singapore Season at the New Zealand International Festival’ in 2004.

The Season’s success in New Zealand helped spawn the Singapore Seasons in London (2005), and China (Beijing and Shanghai 2007), that evolved into major culture-cum-trade diplomatic initiatives. Singapore music ensembles, dance and theatre companies and film-makers were presented at major venues and festivals in these cities. At the same time, parallel trade and business forums organised by Singapore’s economic agencies and their local counterparts took place alongside these events. For a country where business usually came first, I took pleasure that for once, business was subordinated to the work of the artists who took centre-stage. The Seasons were a way of levelling up the playing field for Singapore artists whose own merit ultimately secured their engagement with local presenters.

We also championed an Asian festivals’ network that was missing in Asia, as part of our contribution.
were determined to show up despite the health risks and travel advisories. There was a sense of solidarity and determination that the Festival must go on. In times of adversity, people need more art, and this was where a festival finds its home and meaning for humanity — bringing people together to heal and uplift the human spirit.

Even though I was working within government, I was fortunate to be given considerable freedom to make artistic decisions. Nevertheless, one of my regrets is that it was still not my time to show some great works that would have been too daring for Singapore society and its censors. I would have liked to show Jan Fabre’s *Je Suis Sang* (*I am Blood*) with its explicit nudity, and DV8’s *I Want to Be Straight with You*, highlighting gender and sexual discrimination. In later years I sensed less support to push political and artistic boundaries with successive administrations at the arts ministry. While in 2002 I was able to commission the play *Causeway*, a satirical exploration into the fractious political relations between Singapore and Malaysia (it had to be sanctioned at a very high government level), I would have found a similar venture difficult in later years. I had to sense the mood of my political masters and if I exercised some degree of self-censorship, it was to protect the festival and to await a more opportune moment in the future.

One of my greatest prides is the creation of the Singapore Festival Orchestra (SFo), which I consider Singapore’s third professional orchestra (after the
Singapore Symphony Orchestra and the Singapore Chinese Orchestra) made up of mostly professional freelance musicians. The Orchestra was born of a desire to support a growing pool of young musicians in Singapore (in particular hiring many of the first graduates of the newly established Conservatory), to wean the Festival from the increasingly expensive international symphonic orchestras, and to develop instead multi-media concert experiences that would attract new audiences. In a few short years, the SFO was put to the grind accompanying dance companies to performing the hugely successful video game symphonies under the baton of international conductors. The musicians’ enthusiasm and their hunger for more work was a great reward.

One exasperating experience was the ‘festival bashing’ in my later years by a certain section of the media who regarded it as too ‘avant garde’ and hence ‘inaccessible’. This over-generalisation did not reflect the diversity of the Festival programme nor recognise the significant support it already enjoyed. The 2008 festival which the paper headlined ‘a flop’ (based upon selective statistical reporting) was artistically among the most satisfying in my career. I was flooded with grateful emails from those who were moved and transformed by their experience. While we will always need to educate the public that a festival’s success cannot be defined by numbers alone, I had expected a deeper understanding of the arts from a mature paper.

If the 2008 edition was a more introspective festival, then the 2009 festival was a highly extrovert one. Responding to the doom and gloom of the financial crisis, we explored the idea of ‘play’ with programmes like Sutra by choreographer Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui that featured Shaolin monks, H3, hip hip hop stripped down to its bare essentials by Bruno Beltrao, and Les Sept Planches de la Ruse by Compagnie 111 inspired by the Chinese game of tangram. While these were no less ‘avant garde’ or esoteric to a more traditional audience, the programme struck a chord with the public. The Festival reached 92% attendances, the first time in 20 years that it had surpassed the 90% mark. The outcome exceeded my expectations, repeating the surprise I had experienced at the 1997 FAPA. It also confirmed again that in times of economic adversity, people need more, not less art.

In all my time with the festival, I have never underestimated the Singapore audience. We are fortunate to have a relatively young arts-going audience, with 70% aged 40 and below. Like Icelandics, Singaporeans are ‘world travellers’ (Thorunn), are well-educated and well-travelled, and do not carry a heavy cultural baggage. It is an audience that has been exposed to a diversity of performance programmes over the years, and their curiosity for different experiences has stood the Festival in good stead.

I had indicated to my superiors that I wished to make way for a new director after my 10th edition that took place in 2009. A decade seemed a natural and
logical point, and it also made perfect sense to exit the same way I had entered the festival world in 1997— with a strong public reception of the programmes. Like Frie, I did not want to outlive my usefulness. I had achieved a number of my original goals and it was now time to pass on the mantle to someone else.

Since leaving that position, I have worked as an independent arts advisor, programmer, agent and presenter via my agency CultureLink. I am enjoying the freedom and flexibility of working outside a government structure. In retrospect, my departure proved a timely decision as recent cultural policy shifts have pointed to a narrowing of artistic imagination that would have compromised the ethos I had previously thrived in.

The current cultural climate has taken a more parochial and insular turn, in contrast to the open and holistic policies in pursuit of the ‘global arts city’ vision of the last two decades. While this may be intended to re-balance culture policy in the post millennial decade of globalisation and in an uncertain economic climate, the recalibration may have tipped too far. The overriding focus on community or grassroots arts, in a new blueprint drawn up by the Arts and Cultural Strategic Review Committee, could potentially short change a generation of Singaporeans of a more diverse and fulfilling cultural life. There appears now to be another glass ceiling above the one that was broken a decade ago.

The Singapore Arts Festival is not likely to remain unaffected by these policy changes. As I write, the National Arts Council has decided to cancel the Festival for one year in 2013 in order to review its future in alignment with the direction of the new blueprint. It will return in 2014, although in what form and spirit is unclear. There is speculation that future festivals could be programmed by a committee of artists, or that it will be transferred to the Esplanade, Singapore’s performing arts centre that already organises more than 10 festivals.

My wish is to see the festival develop into an independent arts organisation setting its own artistic course. My hope is that it will find its own niche to rise above the din and remain a vital force for artists and audiences in Singapore and beyond. It is also because of, rather than in spite of, a busier arts landscape that the moment has come to liberate the festival from the burden of being all things to all people, in order to pursue a clear and unapologetic vision and purpose. Far from a diminishing role, I see the festival as having a strong life ahead. The best is still yet to come.

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