

Arts

Research

The Arts and Disability in Singapore: a journey of dynamic partnership between the United Kingdom and Singapore through the British Council. (Dawn-joy Leong, 2020).

PREFACE

The British Council Singapore's Arts team has endeavored to inspire people to develop full and equal access to the arts via awareness and skills development, and to create an appreciation of inclusivity as central to the vitality and dynamism of the arts. Our Inclusive Arts campaign is underpinned by two key principles prevalent in the UK, namely the social model of disability and the creative case for disability.

By pioneering initiatives that cultivate a more inclusive and diverse arts scene, share expertise from the UK, encourage the production of high-quality and innovative art work, our aim has been to contribute to removing a homogenous image of the arts scene and to foster disabled artists and leaders.

Inclusivity, diversity and equality are at the core of the British Council's ethos and part of building respect and understanding between the UK, Singapore and beyond.

- Dr. Sarah Meisch Lionetto, Director of Arts and Creative Industries, British Council Singapore

INTRODUCTION

The British Council has for many years played a crucial role in building a strong cultural relationship between the United Kingdom and Singapore. With the Arts as agency, and drawing on the United Kingdom's well established arts scene, the British Council has facilitated dynamic, creative exchange, learning and development between arts organisations and artists in the two countries, establishing mutual trust, respect and understanding. At the centre of these activities are three main values: fostering inclusion, embracing diversity and upholding equality. Building upon a strategic agenda that combines research and awareness-raising projects and events, the British Council began in 2015 to focus specifically on the Arts and Disability and Arts and Ageing, with a view of contributing to a more dynamic and inclusive cultural scene in Singapore, where disabled artists and patrons are able to access equal opportunities to participate in and benefit from the arts.

The Arts and Disability discussion encompasses the artistic practices of disabled artists whose work may or may not highlight the topic of disability, disability arts that centre specifically around disability, and disability-focused community art making. Many artists with a disability prefer to focus solely on their art form, without drawing attention to their disability, which is of secondary importance to the art itself. Disability arts as a genre emerged from the disability arts movement and is defined as art made by disabled artists about aspects of their lived-experiences of disability. Non-disabled artists do not engage in disability arts, but proliferate the field of community art making, where focus is on art education and training for disabled persons, therapeutic services and facilitation. The Arts and Disability movement eschews the traditional Charity Model viewpoint of disability as aberration or a focus for pity, but vigorously promotes the Social Model of disability, in which one is disabled by the failings of society to provide adequate access to equity and autonomy, and stigmatises and discriminates against persons viewed as disabled, disadvantaged or different from the general perception of the normative.

This report begins with an overview of the British Council's contributions to the Arts and Disability scene in Singapore through its dedicated inclusive arts programme in six sections. The overview will begin with descriptions of the key events as follows:

1. The Arts and Disability Forums 2016 and 2017, and the Arts and Disability International Conference and True Colours Festival in 2018;
2. Sync Singapore leadership programme;
3. Two ground-breaking performances;

4. An important publication;
5. Other significant milestones, all of which marked the emergence of fresh trajectories, including reactions and responses to the work that the British Council has seeded in this growing segment of the wider arts scene in Singapore; and
6. The Knowledge is GREAT Lectures;
7. A Networking and Discovery Trip to the UK in 2019 by Peter Sau and Dawn-joy Leong.

Crucial to the development of the arts and disability conversation in Singapore have been the Arts and Disability Forums in 2016 and 2017, and the Arts and Disability International Conference in 2018, in which the British Council played prominent roles. Also influential were the Knowledge is GREAT Lecture series which provided insights on the history, theory and practice of the arts and disability in the United Kingdom. Another ground-breaking event which the British Council led in collaboration with Very Special Arts, the National Arts Council and the Singapore International Foundation, was the Sync Programme in 2019, a week-long leadership training programme for disabled artists. Two ground-breaking performances were also important contributions to the development of the arts and disability: “And Suddenly I Disappear” by Kate O’Reilly was performed in Singapore and in the UK at the Unlimited Festival in 2018, and Project Tandem, an experimental work-in-progress show led by Singapore theatre director, Peter Sau. Throughout the year, the British Council continued to support access and inclusion of disabled people in the arts with many other events, such as the Singapore Writers Festival 2016, in which the British Council provided sign language interpretation for the Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing, a first in the history of the Singapore Writers Festival.

After the overview, there will follow a discussion of the significant impact of the British Council’s Inclusive Arts Programme on the growth and development of the Arts and Disability in Singapore, with views from an arts administrator, a disability scholar and a few disabled artists in Singapore, all of whom participated and benefitted from the British Council’s support and collaborative efforts in nurturing and developing access and inclusion in the arts in Singapore.

The final section of this report will look at questions raised and possible trajectories moving forward into a thriving, accessible and inclusive arts environment in Singapore.

OVERVIEW

1. THE ARTS and DISABILITY FORUMS / CONFERENCES

The Arts and Disability Forum 2016

29-31 March 2016, The National Gallery Singapore



The Arts and Disability Forum 2016 co-organised by the National Arts Council, the British Council and the Singapore International Foundation, and supported by the National Gallery Singapore, launched in March, 2016. It was the first of its kind in Singapore. Institute of Policy Studies senior research fellow, Dr. Justin Lee, who was also a panel discussion moderator and speaker at one of

the segments in the forum, described it as an inaugural event that raised awareness for the arts and its potential for the disability sector in Singapore.¹ Traditionally, arts practices that included or focused on disability in Singapore were mostly 'community arts' efforts, where non-disabled arts practitioners created programmes they felt would be supportive or beneficial to persons with disability. These programmes were channels through which disabled people could receive interventions, therapeutic experiences and perhaps even learn a few important life skills along the way. The Arts and Disability Forum 2016 brought to the foreground various diverse endeavours by Singapore arts practitioners in the field of 'arts for the disabled community, and introduced additional perspectives and practices from the UK novel to Singapore.

Keynote speaker from the UK, Jo Verrent, Senior Producer of the Unlimited programme, shared fresh perspectives on disability: Verrent described herself from the viewpoint of the

¹ Justin Lee, "Arts and Disability in Singapore", 5 October 2016, IPS Commons, Singapore. <https://ipscommons.sg/arts-and-disability-in-singapore/>

social model of disability as a person disabled by the society in which she lived, and not simply by a medical condition; in this way, every person in society must share the responsibility of ensuring everyone is given access and inclusion. The Unlimited programme was set up to provide funding for high-quality, professional level work by disabled artists whose art may or may not centre around themes of disability, but are nevertheless controlled and shaped from within their unique paradigms as artists with disability.

“The Arts & Disability Forum 2016 was an important step in shaping a more inclusive society. Disabled people have as much right to be represented as any other group in our communities. By involving disabled people equally—as artists and audiences—we can all benefit from the sharing of our perspectives. Any cross-border exchange is also useful such as the exchange between the UK and Singapore at this forum. When we see how other societies work, we look even harder at ourselves.” Jo Verrent.²

In her Keynote address, Verrent emphasised the importance of providing the disabled adequate access to the arts, not merely where it comes to physical accessibility of buildings containing art to appreciate passively, but opportunities to experience the arts directly in person and actively participate in art-making. With open avenues of access, disabled people may bring their interests further beyond passive participation and find access to more formal training and development in the arts, with the view to becoming professionals, for example, artists, arts administrators, teachers, therapists or technical support crew.

Second UK Keynote speaker, Claire Cunningham, a multidisciplinary performer and choreographer, shared from her personal journey and process in changing perceptivity around dance and the expression of the body. A crutch-user growing up among non-disabled people, Cunningham said she very much wanted to be ‘fixed’ so that she would no longer have her disability. It wasn’t until she met choreographer Jess Curtis that she realised it was not necessary to have a perfect body to approach dance. Through Curtis’ mentorship, Cunningham began to incorporate her upper-body strength and the use of crutches as part of a unique signature. Cunningham’s speech was an empowered one, speaking from experience about the value of mentorship, the importance of adequate opportunity, funding and people in positions of authority who believed in her and opened

²Audrina Gan, “Art that Binds”, Singapore Magazine, Singapore International Foundation, Issue 2/2016. <https://singaporemagazine.sif.org.sg/art-that-binds>

doors along the way. According to Cunningham, three important factors contributed strongly to her artistry. The first was meeting and spending time with Jess Curtis, a non-disabled choreographer with a mastery of traditional dance technique combined with a firm grasp of how to help disabled bodies access this training. Second, was being mentored by a disabled artist, Bill Shannon, who had a deeper understanding of the specific ways in which a disabled body moves and functions, being himself disabled. Lastly, Cunningham emphasised the importance of taking the time to delve deep into self exploration in order to find her own individual artistic voice. Pointing out that change does not come about without risk, she urged the audience to embrace their lived-experience of disability as an important part of personal identity. Cunningham also recommended progress alongside allies; partnerships with non-disabled supporters and especially gatekeepers like producers, curators, venues, funding bodies and organisations that will help disabled artists gain proper exposure and chances to show their work.

In addition to two keynote speakers, Barbara Lisicki and Zoe Partington from ShapeArts conducted an access workshop and audit trail, giving participants in-person experience of how to approach the various access needs at arts events, from fundamentals of accessibility, to considerations for physical access and programming access. The event took place in the National Gallery Singapore, an institution which has remained active at the forefront of access and inclusion, and supported many community arts initiatives and pioneering efforts by disabled artists in Singapore. The immediate and dynamic impact of the ShapeArts workshop was reflected in the feedback received from participants:

“(I will) implement some of the key points towards our series of upcoming training session for staff on engaging with people with disabilities.”

“Thanks for organising this forum cum workshop! More training to build capability in reaching out to disabled people in the arts sector would be much appreciated.”

“(I will) change / reframe my practice as a drama teaching artist / ask if there are disabled participants attending workshops and what accessibility requirements are / reworking specific drama activities for inclusiveness / how much structure vs imagination and visuals, audio instructions, cues etc.”

Local Singapore arts practitioners invited to speak in the panel sessions were Alecia Neo, Jean Loo, Michael Cheng, Quek Ling Kiong, Twardzik Ching and Ranae Lee-Nasir, artists and arts practitioners concerned with community arts and outreach in their various fields. In his reflections on the various aspects of the Arts & Disability Forum 2016³, panel moderator and speaker, Dr. Justin Lee, mentioned the need to move beyond the current emphasis on the instrumental usage of art, where art is seen for mainly as a service provided to the disabled community, into encouraging artistic development in individual artists with disability for the sake of creative expression, an invisible, less immediately tangible or measurable goal. With this ideal, art transcends its mundane, pedestrian worth to become cogent agency for generating greater understanding about disability, enabling empathic exchange and instigating deeper philosophical enquiry into its social benefits across diverse communities. In other words, the arts needs to become an impactful force in the fabric of society.

Collaborative partners had this to say:

"We appreciate the British Council for bringing in industry experts to share best practices and innovations in the intersection between arts and disability." – Jean Tan, Executive Director, Singapore International Foundation.

"[Since the first ADF] we have observed progressive shifts among arts practitioners, cultural institutions and audience [that have] has made the arts accessible to and more engaging for people with disabilities." – Elaine Ng, Senior Director, Engagement and Participation, National Arts Council.

The British Council played an important role in this seminal forum by bringing from the UK to Singapore the two Keynote speakers, Jo Verrent and Claire Cunningham, as well as Barbara Lisicki and Zoe Partington from Shape Arts. Verrent and Cunningham introduced distinct concepts and perspectives which many in Singapore had never encountered before, such as the emphasis on the Social Model of disability and disabled leadership, and Lisicki and Partington provided straight-forward practical guidance on how to begin along the pathway of access and inclusion in the arts for all. Jo Verrent will return to Singapore in the coming years to further develop the ideas planted in this significant inaugural event.

³ Justin Lee, "Arts and Disability in Singapore", 5 October 2016, IPS Commons, Singapore. <https://ipscommons.sg/arts-and-disability-in-singapore/>

The Arts and Disability Forum 2017

20-21 April 2017, Enabling Village

"This forum has the potential to remove barriers (that may limit persons with disabilities' participation in arts)."

"The conversations over these two days will be valuable in establishing partnerships and networks that can advance the arts and disability sector." - Ms. Grace Fu, Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, welcome address.⁴

The Arts and Disability Forum 2017 took place at the Enabling Village, from the 20th to the 21st April. With the theme, "Shaping Perspectives and Enabling Opportunities," this forum aimed to focus on the importance of creating stronger social inclusivity through the arts and highlight practical ways ahead for meaningful collaborations within the arts and disability platform. Once again, speakers from the UK took centre stage. This year's keynote speakers were Dr. Alice Fox, Head of the School of Arts, University of Brighton, and Glasgow-based Singaporean theatre-maker, Ramesh Meyyappan. Dr. Fox shared from her vast experience in education and inclusive arts practice, and introduced her ideas on social inclusion, emphasising the crucial roles of the social model and the affirmative model of disability in good arts practice. According to the social model of disability, the responsibility of society is to remove or change societal structures that restrict and disable people, so that those disabled will no longer face difficulty in finding access and inclusion. The affirmative model, provides another layer to the social model by 'reclaiming' the identity of disability, such that disabled people begin to self-identify with their disability and no longer view disability as something to be ashamed of, but rather as part of a multifaceted personal identity. Both models need to work together in order for progress to be made, not merely for the disabled, but together with the disabled. Ramesh Meyyappan is well known to Singapore, the internationally acclaimed actor-director shared about his journey as a deaf actor, describing his early days in Singapore in Hi! Theatre, Singapore's first theatre for the deaf, and onwards through his studies in the UK and eventually basing himself as a professional artist in Glasgow. Many talented Singaporean artists with disabilities who wish to seriously pursue a future in the arts are forced to look outside of Singapore, because there is no adequate support for disabled artists in terms of professional training, exposure and recognition in Singapore. At his panel discussion session, Meyyappan called attention to the progress made in the UK in the area of the Arts and Disability, and stressed the importance of creating accessibility and inclusivity from the

⁴ *Bridging the Gap between the Arts and Disability*, The Straits Times, 21 April 2017. <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/bridging-the-gap-between-arts-and-disability>

very inception of any arts project, and not merely as an afterthought. One example is to make sign language an integral part of a show, rather than just providing off-stage surtitles, the latter of which would distract attention from the performance and reduce enjoyment of deaf or hard of hearing audience. Meyyappan also emphasised the importance of collaboration that transcends disability foci.

“These collaborations are important as they let others, including Singaporeans, understand how they can work with a deaf person like myself. Hopefully, they will see that it is no different from collaborating with those who can hear.”

“For me, inclusive arts involves sharing the same stages and platforms and not having separate events for the deaf or the disabled.” - Ramesh Meyyappan.⁵

In addition to the strong UK presence, this year’s Arts and Disability forum extended to a regional scope by featuring Myra Tam from Arts with the Disabled Association Hong Kong, an organisation which endeavours to popularise the arts and encourage education and training towards excellence in arts practice among people with disability in Hong Kong. Tam showed participants videos about her work in Hong Kong and shared how her association facilitates tactile experiences for the blind and visually impaired so that they may be able to access art work multi-dimensionally.

There was also a main panel discussion on Day 1 on “The Impact of the Arts on Spaces, People and Communities,” with local Singaporean panellists Dr. Belinda Yuen, Professorial Fellow, Lee Kuan Yew Centre for Innovative Cities, Singapore University of Technology and Science; Dr. Felicia Low, Director, Community Cultural Development; Dr. Michael Thaddeus Tan, Assistant Professor, School of Art, Design and Media, Nanyang Technological University; Natalie Alexandra Tse, Executive Director, SAtheCollective; and panel facilitator, Low Kok Wai, Lecturer of Drama and Theatre Studies, University of Brunei Darussalam.

In the latter half of Day 1, forum participants chose from several ‘break-out’ sessions to engage in more in-depth and lively discussion on pertinent issues. On the second day, there were two activity-filled workshops, by Dr. Alice Fox on Inclusive Art Making and Myra Tam on Tools, Considerations and Approaches in Programming for Diverse Audiences.

⁵ *The Art of Inclusion*, Singapore Magazine, Issue 2 / 2017. <https://singaporemagazine.sif.org.sg/the-art-of-inclusion>

The 2017 forum brought a diverse range of local, regional and international speakers together to explore inclusive art-making and discuss accessibility issues through generating conversations across sectors in focus group discussions, encouraging networking and exchanges with like-minded practitioners and organisations for meaningful artistic collaborations in the Arts and Disability, as well as the building of participant capacity and capability in the area of programming. A post-forum publication capturing the key learning points and photographs from the event was published by and is available for download.⁶

**Arts and Disability International Conference, 2018;
True Colours Festival - The Asia Pacific Celebration of Artistes with Disability, 2018.**

The Arts and Disability International Conference was on the 22nd and 23rd of March, and the True Colours Festival on 23rd and 24th March 2018. The British Council was a principle partner of the True Colours Festival and the Arts and Disability International Conference, jointly organised by the National Arts Council and Very Special Arts Singapore, presented by The Nippon Foundation and UNESCO, and supported by the Singapore International Foundation.

Performing artists from Singapore, Kazakhstan, India, China, Korea, Malaysia, Cambodia, Australia, New Zealand and Japan took part in the True Colours extravaganza at the Singapore Indoor Stadium, including guests from the United Kingdom, Canada and the United States of America. The President of Singapore, Her Excellency Halimah Yacob, was the Guest of Honour, and invited the Drake Music Scotland Digital Orchestra to her residence, the Istana, after this concert. Drake Music's performance was especially powerful and ground-breaking in showcasing the creative potentials of artists with severe physical disabilities through innovative use of technology and dynamic creative direction.

Smaller multimedia concerts were held at the True Colours Village situated at the open area a short walk away. This was the first time that such a large number of artists with disabilities gathered in Singapore to participate in a united event featuring indoor and outdoor activities including information and demonstration booths set up by various disability-focused organisations, with large and small concerts, and family-friendly performances running throughout the two days. The Drake Music Scotland Digital Orchestra, the first national disabled youth orchestra to join the Association of British

⁶ <https://www.sif.org.sg/publications/arts-and-disability-forum-2016-post-forum-publication>

Orchestra, was supported by the British Council and part of the main True Colours Concert; Drake Music also had a demonstration and information booth at the outdoor area, which was one of the most popular stations throughout the day, attracting crowds of visitors all eager to learn about and try out Drake's unique technological approaches to music making for the disabled.

The Arts and Disability International Conference was the first of its kind in the ASEAN region, bringing together more than four hundred international local arts practitioners, researchers, artists, industry leaders and policy makers in a programme featuring dynamic exchange of ideas and rigorous discussions, preceding and complementing the True Colours Festival. During one of the Break-Out sessions at the conference, Drake Music Scotland's Pete Sparkes shared about how their varied programme of activity throughout Scotland has proven that people with disabilities have great potential to make wonderful music. Sparkes also talked about the mutual benefits of collaborations with other arts companies and music composers, which help to create better performances and enhance audience experience.

2. SYNC Singapore leadership programme: Jo Verrent and Sarah Pickthall

9-12 July 2019, 10am - 5pm, Enabling Village.



2019 was an important year for disabled artists in Singapore. In 2018, the previous year, the British Council supported the Executive Director of Very Special Arts Singapore, Maureen Goh, to attend the Unlimited Festival, featuring British playwright Kate O'Reilly's work "And Suddenly I Disappear", a UK-Singapore collaboration, which took place at the Southbank Centre, London, UK. The show later toured different parts of the UK. The

Unlimited Festival is a celebration of different genres of art created by disabled artists. This experience led to Very Special Arts, collaborating with the British Council, the National Arts Council and the Singapore International Foundation in 2019 to bring the highly acclaimed Sync Programme to Singapore. The topic of disabled leadership in the arts had also previously been introduced to Singapore by Jo Verrent, co-founder of Sync and Senior Programmer of Unlimited, during a Knowledge is GREAT Lecture on 22 May 2018, in which she shared about the Sync Programme as a rigorous training foundation for disabled artists aspiring to be leaders in their own fields of practice.

The Sync programme was founded by Jo Verrent and Sarah Pickthall. Pickthall is an individual and team coach in the area of disabled leadership, a consultant helping organisations become more accessible and inclusive; and the leader of Cusp.Inc, an internationally recognised agency for inclusive arts practices and digital projects. “Sync”, in this case, is short for “syncopation”, a musical expression that places emphasis on a beat that is not usually emphasised. That disabled people can and should take on leadership positions in their professional fields of practice is a concept that disrupts established perceptions and practices, a kind of syncopation, which results in pleasant alternative rhythmic patterns, freedom the piece of music from the traditional tyrannies of beat and pattern. The Sync programme focuses on the strengths and eclectic perspectives of disability, and features a concrete and practical pedagogy that includes personal coaching sessions as well as intensive group learning, discussions and creative problem solving, all of which is geared towards developing and refining leadership principles and practice. Prior to Singapore, the Sync programme was also conducted in South Korea, organised by the British Council. Sync Singapore took place in 2019, three years since the first Arts and Disability Forum, a timely inclusion that would push the conversation forward into “Nothing About Us Without Us,” the inevitable practice of disabled leadership in the platform.

Sync Singapore took place over five full days, from the 8th to 12th July in 2019, at the Enabling Village. Preparation for the programme began with an individual coaching session with Sarah Pickthall for each artist participant via Skype, ahead of the workshops. During the full-day, week-long workshops, participants learned how to refine theoretical and empirical approaches to their own artistic practices, and how to contemplate and design pathways towards individual development as leaders in the arts. There were group activities, where artists shared ideas for problem solving, as well as individual coaching sessions with Sarah Pickthall. Artists also learned how to conduct their own coaching sessions as part of learning how to mentor and lead. Upon completion, participants became part of a growing prestigious “Sync Alumni” whose international members include highly successful artists across all genres.

"I am grateful to be part of the Sync Singapore Programme. I was able to meet with nine other Singaporean disabled artists for the first time, including blind and autistic people and I learnt a lot from their life experiences. I am inspired by Singapore's efforts to support disabled artists to develop their leadership and hope to embark on new collaborations with artists here. The programme motivated me to transform myself from an artist to an art producer, and eventually to lead art for all!"- Anuar Lim, Malaysian participant.

3. PERFORMANCES

And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues - 2017/2018



"I am so grateful for the support and advocacy of our project and all the efforts you are making."- Kaite O'Reilly, UK Director of Unlimited Commission.

Kaite O'Reilly was also in Singapore in 2017 and again in 2018 to work on the development of *And Suddenly, I disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues*, a UK-Singapore theatrical dialogue about difference, culture and the lived-experience of disability and humanity from different sides of the world. This ground-breaking project set a precedent in the disability arts scene in Singapore as the first multilingual, intercultural, disability-led theatre production created between the United Kingdom and Singapore. O'Reilly led the team with internationally respected director and actor-trainer, the late Phillip Zarrilli, joined by Sarah Beer, veteran disability arts practitioner, and Ramesh

Meyyappan, Singapore-Born actor based in Glasgow. The team in Singapore included principle collaborator, theatre actor and director, Peter Sau, with artists Grace Lee-Khoo and Lim Lee Lee. This work was a year-long collaboration which culminated in performances in Singapore and the United Kingdom in 2018. *And Suddenly, I disappear* was selected for The Unlimited International Commissions 2017/2018 which were supported by the British Council.

And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues was developed over two phases. The research and development phase of the work began with rigorous gathering of narratives of disability from different perspectives and cultural contexts. Playwright Kaite O'Reilly combined over seventy interviews from the United Kingdom with Peter Sau's collection of stories from disabled people in Singapore, and created a script of fictionalised monologues. These were delivered using multiple languages: English, Chinese, Welsh, British Sign Language and Singapore Sign Language. There was also intensive workshop sessions for the team. In the second phase, the script was further refined and crafter for staging and touring. *And Suddenly I Disappear... The Singapore 'd' Monologues* had its sold-out premier in Singapore on 25 May 2018, at the National Museum. The team toured the UK afterwards, commissioned by the UK arts body, *Unlimited* and the marked Singapore's debut performance at *Unlimited* at the Southbank, London.

The Singapore 'd' Monologues was developed in residence at Centre 42's Basement Workshop from March to October 2017 (Phase 1) and May 2018 (Phase 2).

The performances were as follows:

30 September - 1 October 2017:

Showcase to a select group of audience at Black Box, Centre 42, Singapore.

25 - 27 May 2018:

World premiere of *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues* at National Museum Singapore Gallery Theatre, Singapore.

5 - 6 September 2018:

Southbank Centre, London, UK.

8 September 2018:

The Old Fire Station, Oxford, UK.

9 September 2018:

Attenborough Centre, Leicester, UK.

11 - 12 September 2018:
Chapter Arts Centre, Cardiff, UK.

Project Tandem - 2017/2018

21-22 July 2018 - Centre 42

14 November 2018 - Eden Hall



The British Council also supported a parallel project, *Project Tandem: Making a Stand*, led by Peter Sau, principle collaborator for *And Suddenly, I Disappear*. A cast of thirteen emerging artists with different disabilities were brought together for the first time in Singapore, in a new, experimental verbatim theatre, offering a previously unavailable mentorship platform for disabled artists.

Relevant learning points emerging

from the development processes of *The Singapore 'd' Monologues* were applied to this new work. Some of the actors from *Project Tandem* were handpicked to appear in *And Suddenly, I Disappear: the Singapore 'd' Monologues*.

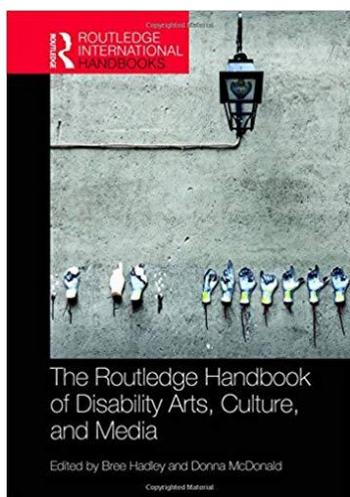
Project Tandem: Making a Stand premiered as a work-in-progress, co-supported by the National Arts Council with a Creation Grant, and Centre 42.

On 14 November 2018, some of the cast from *Project Tandem: Making a Stand*, together with an additional performer, myself, Dawn-joy Leong, re-created the show at Eden Hall, the residence of the British High Commissioner, organised by the British Council. This was yet another important milestone in the development of the Arts and Disability platform in Singapore, where invited audience witnessed - many for the first time - in a private, intimate session a professional promenade theatre performance by a cast of disabled artists with different disabilities presenting eclectic narratives from their lived-experiences.

“Congratulations, what an achievement and meaningful event! Hard to describe the emotions after such a life-changing experience.”-
 Laurence Harel, Director Encore The European Season.

“Last night’s performance by Project Tandem was truly inspiring and deeply moving.” - Ms. Suon Kuok, Shangri-La Group.

4. PUBLICATION: Moving Beyond the Art-As-Service Paradigm: The Evolution of Arts and Disability in Singapore



In March 2019, a chapter co-authored by the British Council was published in the Routledge Handbook of Disability Arts, Culture and Media. Entitled, “Moving Beyond the Art-As-Service Paradigm: The Evolution of Arts and Disability in Singapore” the chapter traced the evolution of inclusive arts in Singapore, from its beginnings within the community and participatory arts sphere, into the recent movement advocating for more professional development support for disabled artists, and looked into the future of disabled-led arts in Singapore. Using examples in the UK and Singapore, the authors posited the potential for emancipation for disabled artists via disability arts.

The authors of this chapter were: Dr Justin Lee, Dr Sarah Meisch Lionetto, Dr Alice Fox (UK), Shawn Goh and Joanne Tay.

5. OTHER EVENTS

Charles Jenck: The Architecture of Hope

3 November 2015



In November 2015, Charles Jencks, architectural theorist, landscape architect, designer and co-founder of the Maggie’s Cancer Centres in the UK, delivered the lecture, “The Architecture of Hope”, about his work in designing comfortable, accessible and uplifting environments for the cancer centres, which provide free support and information to people with cancer and their families. Co-presented by the British

Council and the National Council of Social Service in collaboration with the World Architecture Festival, the event hosted at the Social Service Institute marked the beginning of five years of continuous, active and vigorous involvement in growing and nurturing the Arts and Disability and Arts and Well-being scene in Singapore.

Singapore Writers Festival 2016

5-13 November 2016



In May of 2016, the British Council partnered with the Singapore Writers Festival to present an inaugural access programme that introduced sign language interpretation for Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing participants at selected events where they were also provided with complimentary festival passes. This was the first time that sign language interpretation was made available at the Singapore Writers Festival, marking another important milestone for Singapore with help from the British Council. Members of the Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing community were appreciative in their feedback.

“I’m a freelance writer and editor (who have previously worked full-time in the publishing line). So the SWF is an event I always wanted to attend, but communication was a barrier back then.

For this edition, I was able to follow the two talks I attended, and even had the chance to ask a question (directed towards Sonny Liew) - thanks to the sign language interpreter. It was an enjoyable and insightful experience indeed. I look forward to attending future SWFs.”
- Alvan Yap.

Film Screening: Notes on Blindness

27 November 2016



Later that year, on 27 November 2016, as part of the British Council's Inclusive Arts Programme, the film, “Notes on Blindness” was screened at Filmgarde, Bugis+. This film is based on the audio diaries of English professor John Hull, who documented the first three years during which he

gradually became blind. The directors of the film, Peter Middleton and James Spinney, worked with the Royal National Institute of the Blind to produce an audio enhanced version for blind and visually impaired audience. In an unprecedented cinema access initiative for Singapore, the smartphone app, 'Movie Reading', was available for users to download an audio description track of the film and hearing-impaired users could experience the film through subtitles.

Liz Atkins: M1 Fringe Festival 2017

4-14 January 2017



The British Council supported Liz Atkins at the M1 Fringe Festival, which ran from 4th to 14th January 2017. Atkins has excoriation disorder, commonly known as 'skin picking disorder', in which the person compulsively picks at their own skin to the extent of causing skin lesions, scarring and mental distress. This condition is substantially disruptive to daily life

and affects around one in twenty people. Atkins, an active advocate for the disorder and an internationally acclaimed artist, delivered two public talks at the LASALLE College of the Arts and library@esplanade, and a talk cum walking workshop at the Khoo Teck Phuat hospital, reaching out to a wide range of audiences. The artist also carried out her performance work, #CompulsiveCharcoal, throughout the week while traveling around Singapore on public transport: On the MRT, Atkins made one-minute charcoal drawings on free newspapers, advertisement brochures or magazine paper during her commute, and then handed the finished pieces to fellow commuters, together with a special postcard containing information about her condition. The act of drawing, Atkins explained, helps to keep her hands and fingers busy, thus reducing the compulsive skin picking.

#CompulsiveCharcoal is not a passive vehicle for advocacy, but rather an active and dynamic way to reach out to people, who get to witness in person the artist's act of drawing, and also receive a gift (of the drawing) from the artist together with additional information.

European Union Film Festival 2017: ELECTRICITY by Bryn Higgins

14 May 2017



On 14 May 2017, the British Council presented “Electricity” by Bryn Higgins, a film about a lived-experience of epilepsy, at the European Union Film Festival, held in the National Gallery Singapore. The European Union Film Festival is the longest-running foreign film festival in Singapore, an annual showcase of European films, offering eclectic perspectives and insights into the

cultural diversity and creativity of countries in the European Union. This year’s festival was from 11th to 21st May.

European Union Writers Festival: accessibility support

25-26 May 2017

Shortly after the European Union Film Festival was the European Union Writers Festival, which took place on the 25th and 26th of May, at the LASALLE College of the Arts. The British Council provided unprecedented accessibility support in the form of sign language interpretation for Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing participants.

Bamboozle Theatre Company

19-21 September 2017



From the 19th to 21st September, the British Council and the National Arts Council jointly presented the Bamboozle Theatre Company at a free three-day workshop for special education teachers and arts practitioners featuring the company’s famous Bamboozle Approach to theatre making programme. Founded in 1994 by Christopher Davies and Sue

Pyecroft, the Bamboozle Theatre creates multi-sensory experiences for children and youth with moderate to profound learning and emotional regulation difficulties. On Day 1, the Bamboozle SPED Workshop introduced their techniques to special education teachers for application to school settings and during creative education classes. The second day’s programme presented a Foundational Bamboozle Approach Workshop for artists new to the disability sector on how to work inclusively in theatre. On Day 3, the Advanced

Bamboozle Approach Workshop focused on artists already experienced in working with persons with special needs. Topics in this workshop included how to start and grow an inclusive arts company, the ethical issues involved in working with children with special needs, translating educational skills into artistic creation, and a practical session in which participants worked on a miniature multisensory piece.

Singapore Writers Festival 2017

3-12 November 2017



At the 2017 Singapore Writers Festival, having set the precedence in 2016, the British Council once again provided sign language interpretation and free festival passes to the Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing, for full access to the programmes offered by the festival.

There was more publicity this year by the main organisers reaching out to the Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing community. Many more Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing participants were able to access the event, and subsequently expressed their delight and appreciation in their feedback.

"I am one of those who have benefited from the arrangements made for the deaf/hard-of-hearing community. I myself found the sign language interpretation and note-taking very useful, enabling me to access information almost real-time (save for the minor hiccup of wifi connectivity, which is beyond anyone's control). Thank you for making such arrangements to enable us to access our interests on a comparable footing with the hearing community. On top of that, you had also communicated with Applause Pictures for the City of Ghosts screening, which resulted in free entry for us, which was very unexpected, and a pleasant surprise. I hope this encourages you and your team to persevere and continue to make the arts accessible to all." - Benedict.

"For the first time in my life at my first-ever SWF, I had thoroughly enjoyed the film producers', writers' and authors' sharing on their books, thoughts and experiences in their narrations & film documentaries." - Shi Yi.

Carol Rogers: House of Memories - workshops

21-24 January 2018

Carol Rogers, Director of Engagement at National Museums Liverpool, well-known for her advocacy for access and inclusion in museums, was supported by the British Council to meet with various key stakeholders in the arts and ageing / arts and wellbeing scene in Singapore.. Rogers also led two workshops at the National Museum about the importance of community engagement in inclusive museums, and introduced the award-winning House of Memories programme for persons with dementia, their carers and healthcare professionals. This visit led to the subsequent signing of a Memorandum of Understanding the following year between the British Council, National Museums Liverpool and the National Heritage Board, to develop a House of Memories Singapore programme to support people living with dementia and their caregivers. .

European Union Film Festival 2018: ‘Breathe’ by Andy Serkis

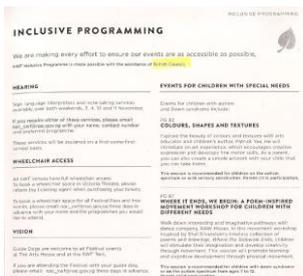
16 May 2018



The British Council presented the film, ‘Breathe’, by Andy Serkis at the 28th European Union Film Festival. ‘Breathe’ is a story about polio and disability advocacy, and how a man discovered he had polio at the age of twenty-eight. Helped by his wife and her brothers, and innovative ideas of an inventor, the courageous couple managed to emerge from the hospital ward and live a full and meaningful life traveling, raising their son and helping others with polio. The film was accessible to Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing audiences through subtitles.

Singapore Writers Festival 2018

2-11 November 2018



The British Council partnered with the Festival to provide access to the festival via sign language interpretation for the Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing, and made the festival more accessible to wheelchair users, as well as including programming for children with special needs. Since the introduction of sign language

interpretation in 2016 this year's festival marked significant growth to the scope and importance of accessibility at the Festival.

Art@Eden Hall: Chloë Manasseh

21 January 2019

8 March 2019

21 May 2019



On 21 January 2019, The British High Commission, in partnership with the British Council and ArtPorters presented new works by Singapore-based UK artist, Chloë Manasseh, inspired by her family's historical ties with Eden Hall. Chloë's grandfather, the world-renowned British architect Leonard Manasseh, was born at Eden Hall decades ago. Eden Hall is now official home to the British High Commissioner in

Singapore. Chloë Manasseh's art is a blend of lived-experience and imagination, and she is Eden Hall's first Artist-in-Residence.

Later in the same year, on 8 March, Chloë Manasseh conducted a workshop for selected Very Special Arts members, as part of Art@Eden Hall's art outreach and engagement programme. Four children from Very Special Arts experimented with papier mâché, paints and mixed materials to create flower pots and paper flowers, while guided by Manasseh. The British Council pledged to partner with Very Special Arts on future Art@Eden Hall community activities.

The closing of the Art@Eden Hall residency took place on 21 May 2019, with an auction of one of Manasseh's paintings, for the benefit of Very Special Arts, in a joint British Council and Very Special Arts partnership programme.

Alice Fox: Shaping Inclusive Museums

16 March 2019



Dr. Alice Fox led an exclusive lecture and workshop session presented by the British Council, followed by consultancy for museum professionals at the Rainbow Centre on 16 March 2019. In this lecture, Dr. Fox introduced various projects and programmes she had done with museums in the UK, including

site-specific works with persons with learning disabilities and the elderly, and also the philosophy and strategic practices behind the Tate Museum's Tate Exchange Programme. This two-hour session provided museum professionals and other arts administrators insights into the inclusive practices in the UK and the kinds of access supports that can be used to reach wider audiences and make the museum collections more accessible to all members of the community.

“House of Memories” Memorandum of Understanding

29 April 2019



On 29 April 2019, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed at the British High Commissioner's residence, Eden Hall, between the British Council, National Heritage Board and National Museums Liverpool to develop a museum-led dementia awareness training programme in Singapore.

Through this memorandum, the National Museums Liverpool undertake to co-develop a Singapore version of its signature “My House of Memories” digital app for people with dementia, tapping on artefacts in the Singapore National Collection managed by the National Heritage Board as a valuable resource.

Objects are powerful agencies for recalling deeply engrained memories, and the My House of Memories app draws on this by providing access to memorable objects from social history in the National Collection to people with dementia, their carers and healthcare professionals in the field. The objects will be selected in consultation with the end-users, and will be first developed in English, with plans for translations into all of Singapore's official languages thereafter. The National Heritage Board will include the My House of Memories adaptation into their Silver Hubs initiatives at its institutions, as part of a suite of age-friendly programmes for seniors. Together with the development of the app, there will also be training sessions for healthcare workers, family members and carers of people with dementia on how to improve care experiences for themselves and the people they are looking after. Silver Hubs activities include visits to the various institutions managed by the National Heritage Board.

Carol Rogers, Director of Engagement at National Museums Liverpool, was in Singapore to sign this memorandum, and also delivered a Fireside Talk at the National Museum on 30 April 2019.

European Union Film Festival 2019: Power in Our Hands

11 May 2019



The UK's film in the European Union Film Festival in 2019 was "Power in Our Hands", Angela Spielsinger, a groundbreaking documentary film tracing the history of the Deaf/deaf and hard of hearing community's fight for civil rights in the United Kingdom. This film, which was part of the British Council's Inclusive Arts programme, was shown at the National Gallery Singapore.

When Disability and Digital Collide: Sarah Pickthall

15 July 2019



Presented by British Council, Singapore International Foundation and Very Special Arts, this public talk by Sarah Pickthall took place after the Sync Singapore programme, at the International Involvement Hub. In this talk, Pickthall shared with the audience, which comprised a mix of arts administrators, policy makers, community arts practitioners and disabled artists, about her work in the digital and disability arts.

Sarah Pickthall and Jo Verrent began Short Circuit in 2013, a research project on the results and impact of digital presentation and disability arts. The meaning of 'Short Circuit' in this instance, refers to the 'path of least resistance'. This project placed Deaf/deaf and disabled artists together with digital artists and producers, with impressive outcomes. Through the use of digital presentation, disabled artists are able to acquire necessary access for expanding their networks and possibilities. Digital expression also provides yet more tools through which less obvious perspectives may be brought to light and, furthermore, new methods through which artists with disability may create accessible art for everyone.

Singapore Writers Festival 2019

1 - 10 November 2019.

The Singapore Writers Festival 2019 was helmed by their new director, Pooja Nansi, who has been hailed by many as the progressive-thinking - the "wokest", according to an article



in the Business Times.⁷ The theme of this festival was “In a Language of Our Own”, a wide-ranging exploration of language and its many forms, such as verbal articulation, text, physical, visual etc. Access and inclusion was one of the main foci this year, and an artist and work supported by the British Council in 2018 was key feature in this year’s festival line-up. UK playwright Kaite O’Reilly presented a

miniature lecture-performance of *The ‘d’ Monologues* on 2 November at the Arts House. In this session, O’Reilly recreated segments of the original work with local artists Grace Lee-Khoo and Danial Bawthan of Access Path Productions, followed by a brief lecture on inclusion and diversity, and a short discussion afterwards. There was substantial press coverage of this event, with mention of *The ‘d’ Monologues* as one of the most highly recommended events in the festival.

The SG Magazine named *The ‘d’ Monologues* as one of the “7 unmissable events of the Singapore Writers Festival 2019.”⁸ It was listed as one of the highlights of SWF by the Business Times,⁹ and recommended for “Those who aspire to be ‘woke’” by Buro Magazine.¹⁰

Introduction to Participatory Arts and Inclusive Classroom Pedagogies - A Theatre for Development Training

12 November - 10 December 2019; 16-20 December 2019.



The British Council, Singapore International Foundation with local company EnCre8, presented a series of workshops and webinars by UK’s Jodi-Alissa Bickerton, Creative Learning Director at Graeae Theatre and Singapore’s Grace Lee-Khoo, Access Path Productions. This programme took place over two weeks, the first week comprised three-hour sessions each day, and the second week four-hour sessions; with a specific focus on participatory theatre making for special education teachers, social workers and others interested in gaining practical insights into how theatre making can be part of their outreach programmes. The objectives were to

⁷ SWF: *Writing a New Chapter*, The Business Times, 18 October 2019. <https://bt.sg/4fVL>

⁸ 7 unmissable events at the Singapore Writers Festival 2019, SG Magazine, 10 October 2019.

<https://sgmagazine.com/things-to-do-singapore/news/7-unmissable-events-singapore-writers-festival-2019>

⁹ SWF: *Writing a New Chapter*, The Business Times, 18 October 2019. <https://bt.sg/4fVL>

¹⁰ *Singapore Writers Festival 2019: New director, headlining authors, key programmes, and other highlights you need to know - Play on words*, Buro. <https://www.buro247.sg/culture/news/singapore-writers-festival-2019-new-director-headlining-authors-key-programmes-and-other-highlights-you-need-to-know.html>

harness creative potential through theatre practice while upholding and affirming the Social Model of disability. Guest trainers were well-known UK playwright and dramaturg, Kaite O'Reilly; Singaporeans Lily Goh, Deaf/deaf artist-musician and Daniel Bawthan, Rapper / Beatboxer. Participants included arts professionals and emerging artists, with and without disability. A highlight was the creation of a 'Manifesto' by participants, containing inspired declarations such as these:

“Every disabled person should have the right to live in a society that enables them to achieve their full potential.”

“All disabled people should have the right to vote in elections!”

“All disabled people should have the opportunity and resources to chase their dreams and fulfil it.”

International Museum Day 2020

18 May 2020



International Museum Day 2020 was celebrated on 18 May, with the theme, “Museums for Equality: Diversity and Inclusion”. The International Council of Museums and the British Council developed a programme of events and activities for museum staff and audiences around the theme of diversity and inclusion post-COVID19. Museum leaders around the world, including the National Gallery Singapore’s CEO, Chong Siak Ching, were invited to contribute brief provocations or reflections to inspire novel ideas and action.

6. Knowledge is GREAT Lectures



Throughout the year, the British Council hosted and supported the empowerment of disabled artists and arts practitioners through lectures and workshops where there was experiential learning, sharing of information and ideas, lively discourse and networking. These smaller events were essential additions to the larger-scale forums, conferences, performances and

leadership as they served to strengthen and amplify the continual progress towards creating an accessible, inclusive and dynamic Arts and Disability culture and practice in Singapore.

Nik Powell, Inclusiveness in Film

1 December 2016

On 1 December, 2016, Nik Powell, producer and director of the National Film and Television School, UK, delivered the lecture, “Inclusiveness in Film”, for the British Council’s ‘Knowledge is GREAT’ Lecture Series. The lecture addressed the pertinent question, “In a world that is seemingly less and less inclusive, how do we make the film industry more inclusive?”. Sharing from his own experiences in film-making and examining how ‘convergence’ can both help and hinder the process of inclusivity, Powell highlighted various role models and pioneers in the field who managed to surpass limitations and challenges of the time and open the way forward for filmmakers of the future. Nik Powell was co-founder of Virgin in the late 1960s, and has produced more than forty-five feature films, including Oscar and Bafta winners, like the ‘Crying Game’, and is the director of the UK National Film and Television School, an Oscar and Bafta winning school and top international film school in the world. At this event, the British Council continued its regular accessibility practice of providing sign language interpretation for deaf and hard of hearing audience members. This lecture was co-hosted by venue partner, the LASALLE College of the Arts, Singapore.

Dr. Alice Fox: Journeying Together through Inclusive Arts

22 April 2017, Mandarin Oriental Hotel

On 22 April, Dr. Alice Fox delivered the Knowledge is GREAT Lecture, a fringe event of the Arts and Disability Forum, on “Journeying Together through Inclusive Arts.” In this lecture, Fox shared a series of case studies and novel ideas about delivering dynamic contemporary approaches to inclusive arts in education, museums and galleries. Some topics included skills and knowledge required to be a self-aware arts practitioner, as well as making more effective use of ‘expanded listening’ techniques by using materials, physical motion and space to support excluded groups into finding a sense of belonging. As part of a commitment towards access and inclusion, the British Council again provided sign language interpretation at this event. The lecture took place at the Mandarin Oriental Hotel, and was jointly organised by the National Arts Council and the Singapore International Foundation.

Bamboozle Theatre

22 September 2017, The Artground

Christopher Davies, the Artistic Director of Bamboozle Theatre delivered a ‘Knowledge is GREAT’ lecture at The Artground, in tandem with a workshop. In this lecture, which was open to the public, Davies shared more on the work of Bamboozle Theatre and how to open up creative possibilities to children and young people with complex special needs through the Bamboozle Technique. There was also a demonstration at the end of the session. In line with usual inclusive practice, the British Council provided sign language interpretation at this event.

Kate O’Reilly: Nothing About Us Without Us - What Can Singapore Learn

17 November 2017, Singapore Art Museum

“Nothing About Us Without Us – What Can Singapore Learn from Three Decades of the UK’s Disability Arts and Culture?” was the title of the Knowledge is GREAT Lecture delivered by UK playwright, Kate O’Reilly, on 17 November 2017, at the Singapore Art Museum. O’Reilly, who is an acclaimed playwright, disability advocate and artist, shared her extensive experiences in disability arts and showed videos of some of her works, including “In Water I’m Weightless” (National Theatre Wales / Southbank Centre / Unlimited Festival), spoken / visual languages in “Woman of Flower”s and other work from her selected “Atypical Plays for Atypical Actors” (Oberon), which exemplified her use of the ‘aesthetics of access’ in her performance works. There was also a discussion session at

the end of the lecture on the differences and intersections between disability arts and culture, arts and disability, and inclusive arts.

Kirsty Hoyle: What relaxed events tell us about who the arts are for

21 February 2018, Esplanade Recital Studio

2018's first Knowledge is GREAT Lecture was delivered by Kirsty Hoyle, founder and director of Include Arts, at the Esplanade Recital Studio. Hoyle's lecture, "What relaxed events tell us about who the arts are for", detailed the historical progress of relaxed events in the United Kingdom and internationally, as a development in service provision and also access and inclusion for the neurodivergent. In this lecture, Hoyle shared stories about audience impact and diversification, urging attendees to think about the provoking questions, "Who's not here? Why not? How do we change that?" when planning arts events. Hoyle also conducted a two-day workshop at the Singapore Repertory Theatre about disability equity, access, sensory stimuli in the environment, basic concepts for relaxed performances and creating accessible marketing and materials for a cohesive approach to audience development.

This event was a British Council collaboration with the Singapore Repertory Theatre and the Esplanade - Theatres on the Bay, in conjunction with National Theatre's acclaimed production of *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-time* that took place at Esplanade, Theatres on the Bay, from 29 March to 8 April 2018.

An important development that emerged from this event, and a training workshop with Hoyle organised by the British Council was the establishing of the Access Arts Hub in Singapore, a consortium of individual artists and arts organisations with the shared agenda to make the arts more accessible, appealing and inclusive to people with disabilities.

Jo Verrent: Disability Leadership

22 May 2018

The British Council, in partnership with the Singapore International Foundation, presented Jo Verrent in a Knowledge is GREAT Lecture on Disability Leadership. Verrent is a Senior Producer of Unlimited and co-founder of the 'Sync' programme, run in Singapore, that provides leadership training to disabled artists. Many artists who have been through Sync have gone on to successful careers. For a nation to properly develop diversity in the arts

and culture, there needs to be disabled artists taking the lead in various areas, bringing the arts beyond the traditional models of simply 'showcasing' disabled people making art in programmes led by non-disabled decision makers, directors, producers and programmers. The evening lecture was preceded by a three-hour workshop in the afternoon, led by Verrent, aimed at arts producers and programmers who were interested in accessibility and inclusivity in their practices. Both the workshop and lecture were held at the Singapore International Foundation premises, the International Involvement Hub.

7. Networking and Discovery Trip to the UK in 2019 by Peter Sau and Dawn-joy Leong.

25 November - 2 December 2019

The British Council supported theatre producer/director Peter Sau and myself on a networking and discovery trip to the UK in late 2019. The purpose of this trip was to follow-up on established connections and make contact with new artists in the view of future collaborations and exchange between the UK and Singapore in multi-disciplinary disability-led arts. During the week-long trip, we met with individual artists and collectives in Oxford, London, Canterbury and Liverpool, practising across different disciplines. We caught up with Sarah Pickthall, Jo Verrent, and Ruth Fabby (formerly Gould), and shared updates. In Oxford, we met Autistic multi-form artist, Sonia Boue, with three artists from the Shadowlight Artists at Film Oxford. Neurodivergent artists are a minority in the Arts and Disability landscape, especially those with intellectual or learning disability, who are often left out of the disability conversation even by disabled people. Autism and neurodiversity are special foci of my own research and practice, and it was important to me that this connection be established, in order to bring a fuller balance of representation to the platform. Of the three Shadowlight artists, Richard Hunt captured our attention with his meticulously detail-rich art, a blend of painting and mixed media on canvas. Boue and Hunt have worked closely together on several projects, and their synergy and style closely mirror the work I have begun with a Singaporean artist with Down Syndrome, Cavan Chang, whom I met through Project Tandem. It is my hope that there would be an opportunity for a collaboration with them in the future, to further explore UK-Singapore cross cultural juxtapositions with blended symmetries, intersections and divergences from the viewpoint of neurodiversity, which is a relatively new introduction to the domain of disability arts practice even in the UK, but previously unheard of in Singapore prior to my taking the lead in Singapore's first neurodivergent-led art and design residency at the National Library Board's library@orchard in 2019.

We also met with Aaron Williamson, a Deaf multidisciplinary artist who teaches at the Oxford Brookes University. Williamson describes his work as informed by his disability, addressing the disability arts audience but also the wider mainstream:

“It is not effective by calling on non-disabled people’s sense of responsibility to understand all the different minority sectors of society. To alert the mainstream audience’s attention to our existence, I need to do something more unusual. There has to be something interesting about the work I create for a non-disabled audience to go and experience it. I always inject ‘crip humour’ into my work by playing up to and exaggerating stereotypes. While most like it, sometimes my work creates confusion and anger for mainstream audiences since they do not feel we could be capable of humour.”

In London, we met with Laura Dajao, a wheelchair dancer, choreographer and Associate Director of Sardines Dance Collective; and James Lake, a cardboard sculpture and amputee, who travelled to London from Plymouth to meet with us.

One of the British Council's areas of interest is research, and practice-based research, as evidenced by the publication of the paper, “Moving Beyond the Art-As-Service Paradigm: The Evolution of Arts and Disability in Singapore”. It was therefore necessary to follow this trajectory, which led us to Professor Nicola Shaughnessy of the University of Kent in Canterbury. Shaughnessy is Professor of performance specialising in contemporary performance, autobiography, applied and socially engaged theatre, and heads “Imagining Autism”, a large-scale work exploring Autism and gender, with a focus on the lived-experience of Autistic women and girls, through an inclusive and community engaged approach. Shaughnessy introduced us to three Autistic artists involved in her project and we discussed possible avenues for collaboration and exchange of knowledge, research and training strategies with Singapore in the area of Autism and the arts.

DISCUSSION

The British Council has played a significant and crucial role in the development of the Arts and Disability in Singapore since 2015. At this time of writing, it is now 2020, five years have transpired since the first Inclusive Arts Programme, beginning with Charles Jencks' "Architecture of Hope". Along with important partnerships and collaborations, the British Council has been unwavering in supporting the development of this neglected arts space of disability, access, inclusion and diversity in Singapore. This section will discuss the milestones and key factors that have urged, encouraged and propelled the development of the Arts and Disability platform onwards, evaluate changes and feedback from artists, arts practitioners and partners in the field. As with any 'living' and dynamic process, while research and practice attempts to address evident needs and challenges, yet many more questions will emerge, and it is impossible to come to a rigid conclusion.

There are two main evident areas in which the British Council's Inclusive Arts programme has impacted the arts scene in Singapore:

1. Empowerment through active participation in forums, conferences, large-scale events, performances and leadership development.
2. Equipping & support via continuous educational opportunities like lectures, talks, and workshops.

This approach has resulted in developing a collective awareness, understanding and knowledge among all practitioners in the field and stakeholders; and nurturing and equipping individual artists' perceptions and professional development.

EMPOWERMENT

Experiential Learning: Arts and Disability Forums / Conference (2016-2018)

Here in Singapore, there is no established Arts and Disability tradition apart from the prescribed 'showcases' dictated by non-disabled organisers under the archaic Charity Model. The concept of equity, autonomy and robust representation of disabled leadership and presence in the arts is novel, and the practice was non-existent until very recently, thanks to the efforts of the British Council in forwarding this agenda.

When in conversation with various arts practitioners about the topic during the many events and programmes supported by the British Council as part of their Inclusive Arts outreach, some common questions have been repeatedly asked.

- Why must there be a specific category of ‘Arts and Disability’, and why do disabled artists or disability arts need a separate platform or focus?
- Why can’t disabled artists just be artists like all the rest, since art is art anyway? Why specifically “Arts and Disability”? Do disabled artists and ‘disability arts’ need a separate platform or a ‘special’ focus? Why can’t disabled artists just be artists like the rest of us, since art is art anyway? There is really no such thing as disabled, aren’t we all just ‘diffable’?
- Why should there be disabled-led arts or disabled leadership in the arts at all? Aren’t the current showcases and events, from the minor works to large-scale festivals, or the many community arts outreach programmes enough? What more do disabled artists want?

The answers themselves are interwoven threads of trajectories emerging from disability studies, artistic thinking and the act of art-making.

Before we begin to ponder the viability or necessity of having a specific, defined category within the wider arts discourse and practice for Disability, one needs to consider what ‘Disability’ actually means. Disability is a very specific entity that, whether approached as a whole or on the individual level, functions differently from the normative. It is also eclectic and heterogeneous in that different disabilities manifest differently, within their own broader set of functionality and challenges, as well as individual states of Being. To reject or ignore the presence of Disability is to deny persons with disabilities their rights to exist in their form of presence, and it thereby invalidates the individual’s identity. In Singapore, the most common way of looking at disability is through the lenses of the Charity Model and the Medical Model. The Charity Model considers disability as something to be pitied and benevolent towards; and under the Medical Model, disability should be cured or fixed via medical means or therapeutic strategies. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disability (CRPD), however, overturns these models by emphasising that the state of disability is imposed by society’s stigmatising and discriminatory systems and therefore the responsibility of society towards persons with disability is to re-instate their human rights to full access, inclusion and participation in society. One of the main focuses

of this Social Model of Disability is intrinsic capability and empowerment, a concept that is relatively new to Singapore.

Through the introduction of experienced artists and arts practitioners from the UK supported by the British Council at major, larger-scale events like the Arts and Disability Forums in 2016 and 2017, and the Arts and Disability International Conference in 2018, Singapore delegates were able to gain awareness about how the social model of disability has been a powerful agency for the growth and development of the Arts and Disability platform in the UK. The forums and conference served as strong anchors and signposts for gaining information, and knowledge-equipping, with some opportunities for hands-on experiential learning during the various workshops conducted by UK experts in the field.

The keynote speaker in 2016 was Jo Verrent. In her keynote address, Verrent emphasised the necessity of access to the arts, not merely physical access to performances but also direct access to training, education and experience in art-making. Clare Cunningham, the second keynote speaker, added to this the need to connect with mentors and partnerships with other practitioners like producers, directors and arts administrators in order to gain experience and exposure.

Looking back on the first Arts and Disability Forum of 2016, one of the panel speakers, Dr. Justin Lee, Senior Research Fellow at the Institute of Policy Studies (who also led the Routledge publication), said in a recent interview in retrospect that this forum helped him understand better the diversity and range of arts and disability practice, and the viability of the different models of inclusion presented. Prior to this event, disabled people in Singapore had already been enjoying access to community and therapeutic arts. Verrent's sharing and keynote speech offered disabled people a tangible and attainable goal, reaching beyond passive participation to actual active and dynamic arts practice and consumption. Cunningham's emphasis on finding exposure via well-established channels and platforms is important, especially for disabled artists, because of their vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, where there may be predatory behaviour by less known arts groups offering the chance of 'exposure' to disabled artists in exchange for free labour, or even plagiarism. Having access to and support from official arts bodies help disabled artists to improve their professional skills, and to present their work free from the dangers of competition and predation. An added dimension of mentorship further safeguards the emerging artist and provides the nurturing environment which is essential to every artist making their way in the industry, but is all the more crucial for the disabled artist, who on the one hand faces unique challenges and obstacles, and on the other hand has distinct

qualities that, when identified and cultivated, has cogent potential, as can be seen through Cunningham's own testimony.

The 2016 Arts and Disability Forum became a preliminary 'breaking of ground', introducing and inspiring towards concepts of representation, and setting the bar higher by pushing beyond mere awareness towards direct participatory endeavours of disabled persons in the arts. This fundamental message of full access and inclusion seeded in 2016 gradually grew and unpacked over the course of the next five years. In 2017, Dr. Alice Fox suggested yet another layer to the social model of disability, the "affirmative model", which in essence is an active unpacking of the social model in art-making and consumption. Singapore-born, UK-based artist Ramesh Meyyappan provided cross-cultural context by sharing his experiences as a Deaf/deaf artist breaking down barriers and emphasised the need to consider and implement practical accessibility and inclusive strategies from the very start of any production or programme, rather than as a merely tokenistic after-thought. The overall theme of the 2017 forum centred 'Disability' within the Arts, and highlighted the importance of disabled presence. Dr. Alice Fox put it succinctly, thus making a strong case for having a specific platform for disability in the wider domain of the Arts:

"Inclusive arts is treating people as people, not labels. We are doing it not because we are kind, we are doing it because we need it."

This statement was in itself a challenge and disruption to the trenchant Charity Model holding sway in Singapore, which has been refined to a high 'art' with powerful campaigns throughout the year garnering large sums of money for a plethora of charitable causes. That disabled people should be respected as equals in society and that equity and justice are needs and rights are alien and even confrontational to the prevalent collective 'charity' perspective in Singapore, and anything too 'foreign' is viewed with a great deal of suspicion and wariness by all, from leaders in authority to the layman, and even by many disabled persons themselves so used to being tokenised in exchange for charitable support that the thought of independence becomes a frightening one.

During the question and answer segment (2017), I asked the panel, as an Autistic artist-researcher, about the position of disability within artistic discourse in Singapore, suggesting that it should not only be situated within the social sector of applied arts for therapeutic purposes and community engagement, but should also be owned by the arts sector and encouraged to thrive as part of dynamic professional arts practice. I also asked the National Arts Council whether they offered any specific support for disabled artists embarking on disabled-led arts practice and research. Panellist Dr. Felicia Low responded

by sharing about her own difficulty with a lack of arts-focused research in her area of work with dementia patients at the Changi General Hospital, and expressed her interest in working with artist-researchers in the area of the arts and disability. Dr. Michael Tan said that the arts and disability discourse should be looked into and advised anyone interested to approach relevant stakeholders for funding and support. The National Arts Council replied that the NAC was open to supporting strong proposals for research in the arts and disability, including those led by disabled artists. From the panel's responses, it is apparent that disability had not at the time been thought of as intrinsic or included in the wider professional arts, whether in theory or practice.

To date, in 2020, the NAC still does not offer specific strategic support to artists with disability, despite the learning and awareness generated by the forums and conference since 2016, and more recently my own repeated attempts to engage them on this topic. The consistent reply to my questions and suggestions have been to direct me and my fellow disabled artists to apply for their existing grants. The NAC's "Our SG Arts Plan (2018-2021)"¹¹ mentions "disability" and "disabilities" only six times each over more than a hundred pages, and every mention was a cursory association with community arts activities or about making the arts more accessible to disabled audiences. In a recent meeting with the NAC and the MCCY conducted online via Zoom, which included leading arts professionals, I once again highlighted the cause of disabled artists. I suggested that disabled artists have great potential to lead the way forward in the "new normal" that has emerged as a consequence of the COVID19 pandemic, because of our various coping mechanisms developed from lived-experiences of disability. I suggested that NAC should organise workshops in which they pay disabled artists to share strategies with other arts professionals on the topic. I also put forth the idea of a special grant scheme for disabled artists which would offer necessary supports according to their specific needs, while encouraging the pursuit of professional excellence in their practices, thus lifting disabled artists out of the Charity Model of dependency, producing work of unreliable quality. The NAC and MCCY representatives each gave a polite general reply, respectively, that the workshops were a possible development for the future, but they rejected the possibility of the grant without any further discussion. Since the first Arts and Disability Forum in 2016, a great deal of awareness has been generated, with growing interest in the topic of disabled representation and leadership as crucial components of access and inclusion. However, large official arts organisations in Singapore like the NAC and MCCY are still uncertain about the actual activation of this new-found awareness. This reluctance to embrace

¹¹ *Our SG Arts Plan (2018-2021)*, National Arts Council Singapore. Download available on website: <https://www.nac.gov.sg/aboutus/Our-SG-Arts-Plan-2018-2022.html>

progressive change is not confined to the arts, but is endemic in the entire disability sector in Singapore. As such, the following statement by Ramesh Meyyappan can easily be misconstrued:

“For me, inclusive arts involves sharing the same stages and platforms and not having separate events for the deaf or the disabled.” - Ramesh Meyyappan, Arts and Disability Forum, 2017.

Some disabled artists choose not to be confined by or within the ‘disability’ framework, preferring instead to allow their artistry to speak for themselves. However, these are mostly artists, like Ramesh Meyyappan, who are already well-established, and have had adequate opportunities for learning, training and professional exposure together with accommodations for access and inclusion as part of the rights of disabled people in the USA, UK, Australia and Europe. My own research and practice journey is similar to that of Meyyappan’s. I have not specifically practised within the context of Arts and Disability or disability art; although my research output is in the area of Autism, Neurodiversity and intersections with Multi-Art Praxis, my material practice outside of Singapore has mostly been shown within mainstream artistic spaces, with references to my Autistic identity. This is because I had opportunities that are not available to most disabled artists in Singapore. For example, the University of Hong Kong, where I pursued my Masters in Philosophy in Music Composition, accorded me great leeway to determine how I wanted to approach my research, and what kinds of accessibility channels I needed to create for myself. When I was awarded a full PhD scholarship at the University of New South Wales Art and Design in Sydney, Australia, I was allowed to acquire a trained and certified psychiatric assistance dog to help me with self-mitigation of my autistic sensory anxiety, and administration even went as far as to allocate the quietest and largest studio space at the far end of the common post-graduate room, around which I built a barricade so that I could work undisturbed. The position at the far end was to accommodate my hypersensitivity and the larger size of the studio accommodated the addition of Lucy in the space. The vast majority of disabled aspiring artists in Singapore do not have at their disposal anything close to the kinds of supports and accommodations for access and inclusion as Meyyappan and I had. In Singapore, much progress has been achieved in terms of access for persons with physical mobility disabilities such as wheelchair ramps and lifts, and even tactile flooring for the blind, but the general understanding across all levels of society of other disabilities is limited. I returned to Singapore in late 2016 with my assistance dog, Lucy. We travelled together in-cabin on a Qantas flight from Sydney, Australia. Official documents and permissions were not difficult to arrange for, in both Australia and Singapore, and upon arrival, we met with highly efficient and knowledgeable access staff at Changi Airport. However, when we stepped outside of the highly efficient internationally

acclaimed airport, I found we were not welcome anywhere in Singapore. Guide dogs for the blind have been around for almost a century, but in Singapore, there are only eight guide dog teams and public access has been a monumental struggle. Thanks to the determined work of advocate Cassandra Chiu, guide dogs have recently been allowed access in public transport, museums, galleries and public recreational spaces. In addition, privately owned and run buildings such as shopping malls are strongly encouraged by the government to welcome guide dogs, but there is no law to protect the right to access. Lucy is Singapore's first assistance dog other than a guide dog, and we have only been able to enjoy very limited access, mostly limited to disability focused spaces or events. I was at a private event organised by the Australian High Commission with Lucy in 2019 when we met a board member of the Singapore Guide Dog Association. She was extremely surprised to learn that guide dogs are not the only kinds of assistance dogs for disabled persons. This situation reflects the widespread ignorance in Singapore at all levels of society about disability and the rights of the disabled to access and inclusion.

This is why, in order to attain any level of prominence as an artist without specific reference to disability, the disabled artist in Singapore needs, first and foremost, a 'bridging passage' through which their artistry may be refined and they may acquire training and education in their fields of practice with the correct accessibility and inclusivity in place. It is this 'bridging passage' that is missing in Singapore, which perhaps those in leadership have yet to comprehend, hence the repeated suggestion that disabled artists can simply avail themselves to whatever resources are already in place for the non-disabled. This thinking is why Meyyappan's advocacy for the 'normalising' of disabled artists' oeuvre is easily misunderstood and even sometimes used as an example to negate requests for any additional or specific support for the disabled. Meyyappan's view presents a quantum leap into an ideal future, where disabled artists are well equipped enough to make the choice to practice in the mainstream, beyond the Arts and Disability platform, but there is no mention about the arduous yet crucially necessary process and developmental stages. It is a 'success story' that Singapore applauds and aspires towards, but without (as yet) being willing to provide the necessary empowerment to disabled artists to achieve.

The term 'diffable' is a popular one in Singapore, however in the context of disability studies and the disability movement, the notion of 'diffability', is actually a deep-seated ableist construct that values ability above disability, and thus seeks to deflect attention to the fact that the conundrum of disability in an ableist society requires serious addressing. Disabled people have rights to very specific access and inclusion, and to have these access and inclusion supports made available to them in all aspects of life, but especially in the process of learning, training and professional growth. Saying that we are all 'diffable'

exonerates society from the duty of providing access and inclusion for the disabled, it is not unlike expecting wheelchair users to run in the same race as non-wheelchair users, without their wheelchairs, based on the erroneous premise that everyone is basically operating from the same paradigm and happily 'diffable'. In a society like Singapore, hard-nosed activism is frowned upon, therefore, the arts is an all the more cogent agency for conveyance of innovative and progressive concepts, perceptions and knowledge that is more indirectly provocative and less confrontational than dry advocacy or activism alone. The British Council's efforts in sharing insights and experiences from the UK models has helped tremendously to shake up archaic preconceived notions around both disability and the arts in positive and gentle ways.

Dr. Justin Lee remarks, in a recent interview (2020):

“The lessons from arts & disability also have general relevance for thinking about disability in general, and for appreciating in great depth and detail what meaningful inclusion is in a specific sphere of social life.”

In addition to sharing with Singapore the historic achievements and current activities of disabled artists in the UK, there has also been increasing emphasis on disabled-led arts and disabled leadership in the arts.

Why must there be disabled-leadership in the arts? Aren't the disabled served well enough through the plethora of community arts programmes in Singapore run by various social service agencies and enterprises? How about the grand showcases organised every year featuring disabled people acting, singing, playing music - isn't this good enough for disabled artists, who are receiving training and exposure, and some even being paid to perform?

First and foremost, the fundamental premise for respectful access and true inclusion is exemplified by the practice of this motto: “Nothing About Us Without Us”. The next issue to unpack is the huge difference between community arts / therapeutic arts and disabled artists practising their artistry. Sometimes, disabled artists may be 'discovered' during the course of community or therapeutic arts, other times disabled artists can contribute to this genre too, but being a professional artist who happens to be disabled, or a disabled artist specialising in 'disabled art', is not the same thing at all. Community arts programmes do not offer formal, intensive artistic training, they mainly serve a social service role, and tap into the positive benefits of engaging in art activities without the exacting standards

required by formal scholarship and training in reputable institutions. Not every disabled person taking part in community / therapeutic arts aspires to become a professional artist, but some do, and if so, what happens next? Without adequate support, the aspiring artist encounters near insurmountable barriers: if the person cannot afford the high costs of an overseas education, or be able to win a scholarship to pursue their artistry outside of Singapore, then in Singapore, they are either accepted into various arts courses by 'disability-friendly' institutions as tokens but left to their own devices to flounder, sink or swim, without due access and inclusion accommodations, or they are simply rejected at the time of application usually because the institutions do not have the adequate provisions for the disabled artist to learn and thrive. In actual fact, there are no available avenues for disabled artists in Singapore to pursue higher education or professional training in the arts, and even those who accept disabled students as tokens are a small minority that do not have any staff or instructors trained in disability support. Furthermore, there is a general resistance to employing disabled professionals in Singapore, and hence the negation of disabled leadership in the ecology of learning, training and practice across any field or discipline. An artist like Ramesh Meyyappan, while enthusiastically celebrated when he returns to perform and give talks in Singapore, will not easily be accepted in the arts leadership with the same enthusiasm. My own return to Singapore is a prime example of this conundrum face by disabled artists who have managed to receive training and experience outside of Singapore and wish to contribute to contribute to the arts scene upon return. That is not to say there is no representation at all, but whatever limited disabled-led training there is on offer to emerging disabled artists have been the result of the hard work of individual freelance artists and small social enterprises, most of whom have benefitted from the British Council's work in this area of inclusive arts in Singapore.

The 2018 Arts and Disability International Conference and the True Colours Festival provided awareness building for people to see that artists with disability can be arts professionals in their own right. The arts in the context of disability need not be confined to utilitarian purposes eg. therapies and social services, but disabled people - when given the right opportunities and training - can also be highly skilled artists too.

One of the musicians who was invited to play at the casual performances, James, an Autistic, self-trained flautist in the Irish folk tradition, said that it was a much appreciated opportunity to be able to perform publicly and work with remarkable technical crew who were professional, understanding and willing to work around his specific sensory needs, like adjusting the lighting, positioning of microphones etc. As an artist with disability, he felt encouraged and empowered to develop his technique and stage presence, and wishes there could be many more such opportunities to present artistry while learning on-the-job

and aspiring towards professionalism. James has been accepted into a Masters programme in the UK to study the flute and performance.

Although the achievements of Singapore's disabled artists have been regularly showcased in events and celebrations, these nevertheless only provided a narrow platform of exposure for disabled artists and situating disability in the arts. There is as yet no disabled leadership in any of these initiatives, neither consultation with any established and experienced disabled artists during the planning and design of these showcases, public performances and exhibitions. This is clear indication that the Charity Model of disability still holds sway. One example of lack of disabled consultation was the use of strobe lighting for a few seconds in one of the showcase items of the main concert. It was obvious that the producers and directors had no notion that strobe lighting can induce epileptic seizures which may be fatal, and should never be employed in any event created for and about disabilities, especially when employed without prior warning. Apart from epileptic seizures, strobe lighting also triggers severe autistic hyper sensory anxiety and there is a high likelihood of serious meltdown as a consequence. If planning and execution of arts events included actual disabled professionals in the field at the topmost levels of authority, these mistakes may have been averted.

The importance of disabled representation and leadership has consistently been supported and emphasised by the British Council in all their programmes and events. The Knowledge is GREAT Lecture series contributed dynamically to the ongoing conversation around the arts and disability. Of particular note were Kate O'Reilly and Jo Verrent. Kate O'Reilly's lecture, *Nothing About Us Without Us*, introduced concepts crucial to the progress towards disabled leadership based on justice and equity. Verrent reiterated the same proclamation and provided tangible and successful examples from her own work, especially in the area of leadership training. The principles behind the disability movement's mantra are very new to Singapore, and its clarion call is still met with wariness and some disbelief. It is therefore imperative that Singapore's arts community learn from disabled artists in the UK sharing their experiences about their struggles and progress towards agency and representation.

What if providing full access and inclusion to disabled artists became part of common practice in Singapore? What if it became a 'new normal' to have disabled artists lead the way forward, or at the very least where disabled artists are seated at the same decision-making tables as the non-disabled, and to feature disabled artists in shows, musicals, dances and exhibitions? As iterated previous paragraphs, first and foremost, there needs to be a transitional training ground for potential leaders, and this is best served within the

context of a specific designated Arts and Disability subgroup within the wider Arts arena. Theoretical foundations are necessary for any forward-looking movement, but theory without practice serves no purpose. Once again, the British Council has opened the way forward both in theory and in practice.

Performance: putting learning into practice.

From 2017 to 2018, the British Council supported a ground-breaking UK-Singapore collaboration, *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues*. Written by Kaite O'Reilly, the team was led by O'Reilly, the late Phillip Zarrilli, and Peter Sau, featuring a cast of disabled artists from the UK and Singapore. This work premiered in Singapore and subsequently went on tour in the UK with support from the *Unlimited Festival*. This work and its performances were impressive on many levels. It was the very first time Singapore had experienced accessibility so expertly interwoven into the aesthetics of the work, such high levels of professional artistry from disabled artists and witnessed first-hand a production that was disabled-led.

Peter Sau also led a concurrent production, a work-in-progress experimental theatre with a cast of thirteen emerging artists with different disabilities, *Project Tandem: Making a Stand*. The two performances supported by the British Council allowed for cross-cultural partnership and exchange, as well as the opportunity for the artists to unpack the learning and knowledge gleaned from the Arts and Disability Forums and Conference, as well as the numerous talks and lectures organised by the British Council. Theoretical understanding became practice, even if rudimentary at that stage. This is integral to growth and development for any arts professional, and even more meaningful to disabled artists in Singapore, who do not have much in the way of choice where it comes to accessible and inclusive training. I was invited by Peter Sau to perform with the team when they presented a condensed version at Eden Hall later that year, in November. This was a small private event, but nevertheless important in that it presented an opportunity for invited guests to experience a professional standard show by disabled artists in Singapore. The guests would be used to the extravagant Charity Model showcases of 'disabled talents', but this event offered a perspective of autonomously curated disabled-led artistry that most would not have experienced before, as well as direct in-person conversations with the disabled artists, who were all enthusiastic about sharing their lived-experiences. For the artists, it was a learning opportunity and experience that was greatly appreciated. Even though I have performed my own solo works variously in Cardiff, UK, Hong Kong, Australia and Singapore, this was the first time I had worked with a team of disabled artists in the context of theatre, directed by someone other than myself. I could see that much of

what we learned during the forums, conference, and lectures supported by the British Council was diligently put into practice. The performance drove home the need for more opportunities for disabled artists to practice and the urgency for disabled leadership in the arts in Singapore.

For the Singapore artists, *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues*, was a golden opportunity to learn and participate in the powerful process of unpacking theory into practice. *Project Tandem: Making a Stand* provided a nurturing environment for disabled emerging artist within which it was 'safe' to experiment, learn and refined practice. It is not enough to talk about potentials and show examples of how others are engaging in arts making, there must be practical opportunities through and in which artists may unpack ideas into action.

One of the artists mentored by Peter Sau to perform in *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore 'd' Monologues* was Grace Lee-Khoo.

"I remember the moment when I quietly told myself that I would never be the same again after working with the dazzling trio Kaite O'Reilly, Phillip Zarilli and Peter Sau."

"Talking the talk naturally led to walking the walk."

*"We celebrate differences and diversity in experiences, physicalities, voices and energies in the theatre. We are who we are, and we make the work that reflects our process, our camaraderie and common humanity. With *And Suddenly I Disappear: The Singapore/UK 'd' Monologues*, we have made something that refuses to conform to the mainstream gaze and unconscious bias about what theatre should be."¹²*

Khoo's testimony, and that of others, like myself, who have been given the opportunity to actively participate in the unpacking of theoretical learning in the form of performance, attest to the success of the British Council's Inclusive Arts Programme. It is not enough merely to attend forums and conferences, disabled artists need to be given space, time

¹² Grace Khoo, "Grace Khoo on the making of *And Suddenly I Disappear...The Singapore/UK 'd' Monologues*," *Disability Arts Online*, 3 September 2018. (<https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/opinion/grace-khoo-on-the-making-of-and-suddenly-i-disappear-the-singapore-uk-d-monologues/>)

and expertise to acquire necessary skills, to experiment and reach beyond the Charity Model's mould into empowered creativity.

Disabled Leadership: Sync Singapore

In 2018, Maureen Goh, Executive Director of Very Special Arts Singapore, was supported by the British Council to attend the *Unlimited Festival* in the UK. In a recent interview, Goh described her experience:

“I was very impressed by the quality of production funded by Unlimited called, And Suddenly I Disappear, and wanted to learn more and see more. Some of the productions just blew my mind. I saw possibilities and opportunities and the standards and quality that I could expect. I saw what we could do better in Singapore. I love Jess Thom’s performance of Samuel Beckett play, Not I. I saw the necessity of accessibility to complete the performance and how it was incorporated into the creative aspect of the work. I saw a lot of hard work and leadership from the actor with disability. Wow! “

Goh realised the necessity and potential of disabled-led arts, and that such empowerment inevitably leads to higher standards of artistry and unique, creative perspectives.

“I saw that many of the productions at Unlimited needed leadership from the disabled community and individuals themselves. So, one step forward for Singapore is to bring in the SYNC team who had the experience and credibility to convince and influence the arts and disability community here in Singapore. I felt this would be one small change that we could implement within our means.”

This led to a collaborative effort by the British Council, Very Special Arts, the National Arts Council, and the Singapore International Foundation, to bring the Sync programme to Singapore in 2019.

Since the British Council's inaugural partnership in the Arts and Disability forum in 2016, and subsequent forum and conference in 2017 and 2018, there has been lively discussion around the topic of disabled leadership in the arts, but no concrete action plan for actual leadership training until 2019, with the Sync programme.

Nine disabled artists, eight from Singapore and one from Malaysia, were gathered together in this intensive and rigorous full day, week-long training programme conducted by Jo Verrent and Sarah Pickthall. Originally meant for artists with considerable experience, the Sync Singapore participants were a heterogeneous group with some artists just on the cusp of emergence and others already well established in their own practices. This unusual situation is due to the simple lack of experienced disabled artists in Singapore, most of whom have left to practice their art outside of Singapore. Nevertheless, the programme was seminal to Singapore as the very first time disabled leadership in the arts was not merely recognised as a concept but practical training was being finally offered to disabled artists on how to become leaders in their own practices. The programme came at the right time, preceded by three years of preparation by the three arts and disability forums and conference, numerous lectures and other side events organised by the British Council. Jo Verrent and Sarah Pickthall were by then well-known names to the Singapore arts community, and disabled artists were keen to move forward to the next plane in their professional journeys. Each participant was encouraged and uplifted in different ways, as evident from their responses.

Lim Lee Lee, emerging artist who was mentored by Peter Sau in *Project Tandem* and was chosen to perform in *And Suddenly I Disappear*, had this to say about her experience at Sync Singapore:

“I am no longer fearful of expressing myself ... so long (as) the message I want to deliver is clear and gets across to the recipients.”

Another emerging artist, who chose to remain anonymous when interviewed, remarked that the Sync Singapore programme helped to empower her on multiple levels, personally and strategically:

“It has given me the courage to be confident and feel less pitiful about myself, and that has led me to becoming more adventurous in my artistic explorations.”

“It got me started on conceptualising ideas and penning them down rather than brushing them off when the idea strikes.”

My own experience, from the viewpoint of a more established and experienced researcher-artist who has presented, exhibited and performed in the UK, Australia, Hong Kong and Singapore, was surprisingly uplifting and beneficial. I was greatly impressed by the way Verrent and Pickthall framed all the learning points, their methodology in getting

the knowledge and understanding across to the participants and the genuine care and passion for the participants alongside a strong vision. A key takeaway from Sync Singapore, for me, was the realisation that my own intrinsic leadership style was actually very different from the way I felt compelled by force of circumstance to lead, and this friction was causing considerable problems for me, one of which was burn-out from too much vigorous advocacy, which required a great deal of networking and political manoeuvring, activities not suited to my intrinsic Autistic paradigm, and insufficient creative endeavour. Sync Singapore helped me to disengage from the effects of burn-out. During the programme, I was led to reflect upon the self-harming ways in which I have been operating and re-centre my professional focus while refreshing my *modus operandi* in ways that paid proper heed and respect to innate functionality. It was also energising to be among fellow artists - even though we were a mixed group in terms of professional experience and artistic style, the shared purpose and collective vitality was emancipating.

SUMMARY

Pioneering the Arts and Disability

The purpose of this report is to document and reflect upon the role of the British Council's Inclusive Arts Programme in the development and advancement of the Arts and Disability platform and movement in Singapore. It is evident that the British Council has played a crucial and indispensable role in this area, and a great deal has been achieved in the last four years. Where there was once barren ground, there is now an increasing awareness about the position of disability in the arts. Although Singapore had an already well established platform for showcasing talents of disabled artists, the introduction of the Social Model and Empowered Model through examples and inspiration from the UK have created positive challenges to the archaic practices, and freed up mental and practical spaces - fertile ground - in which new ideas and strategies may take shape and form.

Many disabled artists in Singapore have become better informed and equipped, and have gone on to create more artistic works and generate further discourse, as direct and indirect results of the pioneering work by the British Council.

A number of important outcomes emerged from *And Suddenly I Disappear: the Singapore/UK 'd' Monologues* and *Project Tandem: Making a Stand*:

Grace Lee-Khoo and Natalie Lim formed Access Path Productions, a social enterprise aimed at providing community arts services. The organisation is disabled-led, by Khoo, who is hard-of-hearing, and their outreach programmes are conducted by associate artists, all of whom are disabled. Access Path has also created works with and for the National Gallery Singapore, and is active in theatre practice, joining with mainstream practitioners in performances and projects.

Peter Sau has refined his approaches in the area of producing and directing for disabled artists, and led various projects following from *Project Tandem*. His most recent work was *Something About Home*, a commission by the National Gallery Singapore, which performed to full capacity at all four shows in January. *Something About Home* was the first professional promenade theatre show in Singapore with a cast of artists from the newly formed Disabled Artists' Collective. Sau is currently working closely with Very Special Arts, a major collaborator with the British Council in the arts and disability platform.

After living and practising overseas for more than a decade, I returned to Singapore, and attended my first Arts and Disability Forum in 2017. It was through this, and other subsequent events organised by the British Council, that I became actively involved in the Arts and Disability arena in Singapore. Prior to this, although my research is in the area of autism and neurodiversity, part of which may be associated with disability studies, my practice has been in the mainstream arts and not specifically disability arts. Like Ramesh Meyyappan, I was operating as an artist who happened to have disabilities, in my case, Autism and medical disabilities. Since 2017, however, through the 2017 Arts and Disability Forum, I became increasingly immersed in the Arts and Disability space, inspired and influenced by the British Council's Inclusive Arts programme on the one hand, and on the other by my own connections with disabled artists in the UK, via my work in autism and neurodiversity advocacy and arts practice. In 2019, I formed the Disabled Artists' Collaborative, with the support of the Disabled People's Association, where I serve as a Board Member. I met Peter Sau via Project Tandem, a work supported by the British Council and subsequently worked closely with him. We found that we had very similar visions and experiential knowledge influenced by the disability arts movements in the United Kingdom. That same year, with the help of Peter Sau, I led and directed Singapore's first disabled-led neurodivergent art and design residency at the National Library's library@orchard. After Sync Singapore, I was advisor and principal performer in *Something About Home* and at the same time created an immersive installation for the National Gallery, *Clement Space, 2020*, a calm room designed from principles and concepts based on intrinsic Autistic function and needs. I was also invited by Ruth Fabby to be one of the curatorial judges for the Disability Arts Cymru Art Prize and Creative Word Award, 2020.

Many Sync Singapore alumnus went on to participate in ground-breaking work, in their various fields of artistic practice.

Unfortunately, the Arts and Disability Forum 2020 was postponed because of COVID19, and will most likely take place online near the end of the year. The arts world is now looking at other ways of producing and disseminating art, one powerful channel being digital presentation.

The Way Forward

Once new ideas are introduced and change is initiated, it is imperative not to lose momentum gained, and this is where we are at present. With the advent of the COVID19

pandemic, all the old ways of operating are now being shaken up and artists are now called upon to be flexible in myriad ways. The Arts and Disability scene in Singapore is growing in strength and cogency, but there is no place for complacency. The new digital medium is especially suited to some disability paradigms, and this has opened up new opportunities for disabled artists to produce work and have their work made known on a wider scale than before.

I have initiated conversation with the National Arts Council and Very Special Arts regarding the creation of separate nurturing and accessible 'space' for disabled artists, and talks are ongoing, despite the hesitant responses from the NAC. The main challenge centres on the issue of disabled leadership in the arts in Singapore. At the moment, there is still a great deal of resistance and wariness among the non-disabled mainstream in response to the very concept of disabled artists in leadership positions. Sync Singapore helped to raise the issue from its prior obscurity in a practical way, but most disabled artists in Singapore are still insufficiently trained and not yet ready to take on leadership roles. Similarly, those currently in authority and leadership positions are insufficiently informed and under-equipped to accept and provide for disabled leadership. What the platform needs, looking forward, is more rigorous theoretical and practical training specific to leadership, as well as broader avenues for skills training, exposure and practice, for Singapore's disabled artists, together with vigorous education for non-disabled arts administrators and persons in current leadership positions. "Nothing About Us Without Us", as expounded overtly by Jo Verrent, Sarah Pickthall and Kaite O'Reilly, and emphasised by the other speakers and practitioners from the UK, is not yet a firm reality in the Arts and Disability in Singapore, but the hope is that the journey towards this goal will be smoother and firmer in the near future.