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## 2006: **Politics increases its stage presence?**

*A significant number of arts events this year will touch on hot-button issues like race, religion, political expression and civil liberties. Have censorship boundaries shifted?*

By Hong Xinyi

ARTS REPORTER

AT FIRST blush, it looks like the 2006 arts season is off to an interesting start.



On Jan 7, The Straits Times reported that three former political detainees will share their experiences and writing at an arts forum.

Entitled Detention - Writing - Healing, the forum is one of the events lined up for the M1 Singapore Fringe Festival, a 12-day arts festival organised by theatre company The Necessary Stage (TNS).

OPEN CLIMATE: Ex-political detainees Michael Fernandez (above) and Said Zahari (below) will speak at a forum, entitled Detention Writing Healing.

Former journalist and opposition politician Said Zahari, lawyer Tan Jing Quee and former trade unionist Michael Fernandez, all former detainees, will speak at the forum.

At the same event, playwright Robert Yeo will also discuss his well-known trilogy of plays, *Are You There Singapore* (1974), *One Year Back Home* (1980), and *Changi* (1996), which were among the first Singaporean productions to explore the issues of

opposition politics, the role of the Internal Security Department and freedom of speech.



Due to take place on Feb 26 (at the Esplanade, no less), the occasion is described as 'a landmark gathering' in TNS' publicity materials.

The forum is one of 12 live festival events that has yet to receive a public entertainment licence from the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit. TNS said this was due to the fact that the company has not yet made their payments for these applications.

Another Fringe Festival event under this category is a reading of plays by former members of Third Stage, a defunct theatre group with a controversial history.

In 1987, founding members Wong Souk Yee and Chng Suan Tze were arrested under the Internal Security Act for participating in a conspiracy to overthrow the Government.

Both were detained for over a year and, upon their release, had to promise that they would not do theatre for two years. That effectively spelt the end of Third Stage, which was established in 1982.

In the Jan 7 ST story, Mr Said, 77, expressed 'surprise' at being invited to take part in the Detention - Writing - Healing forum.

'Such an event would not have taken place in the country even five years ago,' he remarked. 'Perhaps there is a slightly more open political climate now.'

Despite the uncertain status of these two events, recent developments suggest that such a sentiment may not be far off the mark.

The festival, which has the theme Art & Healing, will offer a plethora of home-grown and foreign productions tackling socially conscious, and sometimes overtly political, themes such as the challenges of living in a Westernised culture for a Malay-Singaporean woman, the experiences of migrant workers in Singapore, the reign of the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the horrors of apartheid South Africa, and the Israel-Palestine conflict.

All of these productions have already received arts entertainment licences from the Media Development Authority (MDA).

Also in February, amateur theatre group The Stage Club will be putting on a production of *Never The Sinner*. A 1992 play by American playwright John Logan, it is based on the true story of two rich teenage boys (who were also lovers) in 1920s Chicago who killed a boy for the thrill of it and sparked off a media frenzy.

Ripe with controversial themes like the role of the death penalty and homosexuality, it is perhaps not surprising that it took five weeks - the usual vetting process is about two weeks, according to Stage Club president Daniel Toyne - before the play was granted an arts entertainment licence.

When asked, MDA said the application forms state that applications take at least four weeks to process, and five weeks was not an unusually long period.

In April, Escape Theatre will stage *Death And The Maiden*, a 1991 play by Argentine-Chilean dramatist and human rights activist Ariel Dorfman that explores themes about



At the same event, playwright Robert Yeo (above) will discuss his plays which explore hot-button issues.

both political and sexual repression. At press time, Escape had not yet submitted an application for an entertainment licence.

This year, Yeo will also premier an opera entitled *Fences Of The Heart*. It tells the story of a star-crossed romance between a rich Singaporean playboy and a devout Malaysian Muslim girl Nora Ibrahim, who meet as students in London and return home just as the July 1964 race riots erupt in Geylang Serai.

All these productions come on the heels of a year which saw its fair share of productions that touched on hot-button issues.

There were a slew of war-related plays, including The Stage Club's staging of British theatre director-actor Joan Littlewood's 1963 anti-war musical, *Oh! What A Lovely War*, and a reading of British playwright Irwin Shaw's 1936 anti-war play, *Bury The Dead*, staged by more than 20 local theatre practitioners in an explicit anti-Iraq war statement.

Experimental group Agni Koothu restaged two plays, *Mines* and *Flush*, by local playwright Elangovan without much fanfare and incident, despite the fact that the former skewered the concept of military defence and patriotism, and the latter delved into the politics of race, both without disguising their very Singaporean context.

In contrast, in 2000, Elangovan's *Talaq*, a play about an Indian-Muslim woman's abusive marriage, did not get a licence to perform after complaints from the Indian-Muslim community.

The Fun Stage also staged *Human Lefts*, originally intended to be a tongue-in-cheek post-modern meditation on the death penalty.

However, creators Benny Lim and Brian Gothong Tan were told by the MDA that the references to the death penalty were too sensitive, as the play would have been staged on Dec 3, a day after the execution of Australian drug trafficker Nguyen Tuong Van.

Nevertheless, in an ironic twist, the play was given the go-ahead after it became an experimental take on the topic of censorship.

Three of last year's most popular mainstream productions - the satirical comedy sketch show *Chestnuts Episode III*, the cabaret *Dim Sum Dollies* and the pantomime *Oi! Sleeping Beauty* - also contained heavy doses of political references, including jokes about the National Kidney Foundation scandal.

What seems to be happening is encouraging. The arts scene, or at least certain pockets of it, seems to be moving towards more politically-engaged material, without for the most part encountering knee-jerk slaps on the wrist by either the relevant authorities or the more conservative sector of the public.

Nevertheless, there are important qualifications to be made for that statement.

For one thing, many of the productions mentioned are either foreign productions (like the groups brought in by The Fun Stage and TNS) or stagings of foreign scripts by local troupes (Never The Sinner, Death And The Maiden).

For another, many of the local plays that were staged were either re-stagings, or packaged innocuously as mainstream fare with a political barb or two slipped in for laughs.

To say this is not to negate the artistic and social merit of any of these productions, or to deny the possibility that these may well be conscious strategies in an environment where artists are still not quite sure how far they can go when it comes to self-expression and critical stances.

But these factors nevertheless help cushion these productions from the explicit sensitivities of current issues.

The real test will come when a play tackling today's thorny topics, and written and performed by Singaporeans, passes the censors unscathed.

It has been a peculiar but exciting fact of Singapore's cultural life that theatre - not film, not television, not literature - is the medium which responds with the greatest speed and thought to the controversies of Singapore's milieu.

So, loaded jokes, restaged musings, and forum pontifications are all very well and good, but surely our times are interesting enough for something new and brave and ambitious, especially in what is increasingly looking like an election year.

Elections are a time for a tussle of ideas, robust debate, for a renewed reckoning of how we define ourselves as a society and a nation.

It would be wonderful if there was a fresh cultural touchstone that could help to enrich that process. And it would be even better if such a creature, if it came into existence, were presented to Singaporeans in its entirety.

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