

THEATREWORKS

presents

# GOH LAY KUAN & KUO PAO KUN

Conceived and directed by  
Ong Keng Sen



From 14 Sep 2012  
National Museum of Singapore  
Performed in English

In conjunction with:  
A Life of Practice - Kuo Pao Kun Exhibition by the National Museum of Singapore;  
The Kuo Pao Kun International Conference

# 菩萨心肠罗沙面

(The heart of a Goddess and the face of a Devil)

– Kuo Pao Kun on Goh Lay Kuan

## FROM THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SINGAPORE

Mr Kuo Pao Kun exemplified great humanity – he was bravely steadfast to his ideals and by being so sacrificed fifty five months of his freedom; he unconditionally dedicated his life to his work, his students and to Singapore theatre; and he looked in the eye every challenge, adversity and setback with clarity, strength and kindness. A meticulous documentarian, Mr Kuo left us an abundance of notes, letters and manuscripts, so that in years to come we could get to know him better, as we grow wiser, like him. The eponymous exhibition presented by the National Museum of Singapore offers you five-month space and time to understand the man through these means.

However, we would like you to see him through the eye of one person, the one who was ultimately the closest to him. She is Mdm Goh Lay Kuan, Mr Kuo's wife, friend and comrade in arms. It takes a strong personality to live with another. *Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* (previously *The Red Ballerina*) is jointly presented with TheatreWorks as a way of remembering a mentor and a great man, who humbled us all with his uplifting spirit and compassion for humanity.

Lee Chor Lin

Director, National Museum of Singapore

## BIOGRAPHIES

### Lim Kay Tong

Actor

Lim Kay Tong is a veteran actor and a familiar face among his native Singaporean audience, with a long string of stage and performance experiences under his belt. His experience in theatre, film, and television both locally and abroad speak volumes about his passion for acting. Lim has an endless line of stage credits, and they include *The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole*, *No Parking On Odd Days*, *Dance and the Railroad*, *Longing*, and *Broken Birds*.

Kay Tong's film and television credits are no less impressive. A recognised actor to many, he has acted in local and foreign films such as *Shanghai Surprise*, *Dragon: The Bruce Lee Story*, *Mee Pok Man*, Emmy nominee *A Bright Shining Lie*, *Brokedown Palace*, *The Photograph*, and *Perth*. He has also delighted audiences over the years with his acting in several popular drama series and miniseries such as *Frankie's House*, *Growing Up* and *The Pupil*.

Currently, Lim sits on the Board of Directors for TheatreWorks, Singapore's first English language professional performance company, which he also helped to found.

### Karen Tan

Actor

Karen is privileged to have worked The Necessary Stage, Action Theatre, luna-id, Escape Theatre, SRT's The Little Company, Sumunda (KL), Five Arts Centre (KL), The Finger Players, Teater Ekamatra, ABVTri, Toy Factory Theatre

Ensemble, Wild Rice, Dramabox, and Cake Theatricals, in a career that's obviously gone on too long.

*Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* is Karen's 11th production with TheatreWorks, after *Mixed Signals*, *Mimi Fan*, *Private Parts*,



*The Lady of Soul and Her Ultimate "S" Machine*, *Pulse*, *Broken Birds*, *The First Emperor's Last Days*, *The Spirits Play*, *Machine*, and *Red Ballerina*.

Karen just loves a love story that goes on, till death do they part...

### Andy Lim ("stage" LIVE)

Lighting Designer

Andy Lim is a lighting designer/technical manager based in Singapore. He works extensively in and outside of Singapore, with numerous experiences touring productions in festivals/venues around Asia, Europe and North America.

Andy has designed and technical managed for various professional theatre and dance companies, as well as college productions. With TheatreWorks, he has been part of *120* (2007), *Vivien and Her Shadows* (2008), *RPM* (2009), *Diaspora* (2009) and *Friends' Season* (2010). His other theatre credits include *Macbeth* (2011), *The Magnanimous Cuckold* (2010), *Pinocchio—The Musical* (2010) and *It appears that...* (2010). Andy works in film too, notably with Singapore artist Ho Tzu Nyen in *The Cloud of Unknowing* (2011), *Endless Day* (2011), *Zarathustra: A Film For Everyone And No-One* (2009/2010) and *Earth* (2009).

Andy is also an aspiring visualist, and a close collaborator with multi-disciplinary art group Collective Mayhem.

*I've always seen it as my responsibility to help others, like the old kaypoh that I am. I've often lost sleep just worrying about how to sort out someone's life.*

*Of course, I've been taken advantage of. There was someone who claimed to be ill, and we gave him money to help with bills and medicine. After a while, we discovered that he'd saved what we gave him, and bought a flat! And here we were, living in a rented flat ourselves! It was actually funny.*

*I once asked a Buddhist abbot why I was like this, so easily angered. He said that I needed to understand that there is no fairness in this world. We must somehow find fairness in an unfair world. Buddhism has taught me that Man determines the amount of fairness in the world. The fairest thing we all can do is not to hurt each other.*

-From Goh Lay Kuan's oral interviews at the National Archives of Singapore

## AN INTRODUCTION

At the heart of what we do at TheatreWorks lies an artistic commitment to the engagement of cultural memory, as found in the independent struggles of artists, personal life stories, and history's forgotten personalities. The company has created numerous documentary performances, from the true love story of Wan Kwai Pik and Siew Kam Fong in *To My Heart With Smiles* (1989); to the plight of karayuki-sans working in Singapore in *Broken Birds* (1995); to Cambodian artists who survived the Khmer Rouge genocide in *The Continuum: Beyond the Killing Fields* (2001); to Australian POWs during World War II in *Sandakan Threnody* (2004).

The company has always been interested in the documentation of its own history as well as the work of seminal Singapore artists. This underscores the immediate urgency to begin the gargantuan task of archiving the performing arts in Singapore as a permanent repository of cultural legacy that will inspire the next generation of artists and their creations. It is crucial to ask: how does one document the work and life of living Singapore artists? How does one capture the ephemeral traces of each live theatrical production beyond its occurrence?

*Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* was first staged as a work-in-progress titled *The Red Ballerina* at TheatreWorks 25th Anniversary in 2010. Work began in March 2010, from the public oral interviews of Madam Goh Lay Kuan at the National Archives of Singapore. 43 reels were recorded in 2000. Discovered almost like lost treasure (loan records showed the tapes had not been accessed for years), director Ong Keng Sen, actress Karen Tan and a team of transcribers and translators spent laborious hours listening to Madam Goh's words. They also met Madam Goh in person, who granted permission to use the interviews for such artistic

purpose. However it was decided, during the creative process, to only utilise the archives rather than the casual conversations with Madam Goh.

In parallel, Ong and actor Lim Kay Tong read all of the late Kuo Pao Kun's plays in English. Another extensive process began to surround Madam Goh's archival interviews with fragments of these play-texts to suggest private worlds, fantasies and realisations. These fragments were further supplemented by Kuo's notes, personal writings and letters to Madam Goh during his detention years from 1976-1980. Madam Goh herself was detained in the same period, albeit for a shorter time.

In tonight's performance, the actors will offer viewpoints into Madam Goh's journey and growth from childhood to fledging ballerina in Australia to professional choreographer and dance educator. They will chart the milestones of her life, work, beliefs, and the challenges she faced. The writings of her husband Kuo hint at the shared artistic, philosophical, emotional and spiritual beliefs that the couple was immersed in. Their everyday hopes, inspirations, stresses, trauma of living in Singapore are reflected in this creative partnership. The piece creates some of the solitude which surrounded their lives as individuals trying to stay true to their beliefs.

This documentary performance *Goh Lay Kuan & Kuo Pao Kun* hopes to share the successes and struggles of 2 pioneer artists here, and in doing so, stress the need for documentation and the historicisation of arts in Singapore. Let's not wait for artists to die and then memorialise them nationally. Theatreworks proposes to listen to the living too; and through the lens of both living and dead artists, give attention to Singapore society.



**Ong Keng Sen**  
Director

Ong Keng Sen, artistic director of TheatreWorks (Singapore), is a well-known performance director and has actively contributed to the evolution of an Asian identity; as well as the

subsequent transglobalisation of the Asian aesthetic in contemporary arts. He studied intercultural performance with the Performance Studies Department at Tisch School of the Arts, New York University, and holds a law degree. Presently he serves on the Awards Committee of the Prince Claus Fund for Culture and Development in Amsterdam. An important part of his work is in research with emerging artists, the latest being the mentorship programme for the Spielart Festival Munich and his upcoming curation of Sri Lankan

contemporary dance makers in Colombo. He also takes part actively in lecture and conversation programmes, as well as teaching in various universities which include Das Arts, UCLA, the University of Amsterdam MA International Performance Research Programme (2011 and 2012) as well as being Adjunct Associate Professor with the National of University of Singapore.

A Fulbright Scholar, Keng Sen is also the first and only Singapore artist to have received both the Young Artist Award (1992) and the Cultural Medallion Award (2003) for Singapore. He was awarded the prestigious Fukuoka Asian Arts and Culture Prize 2010 for his work in Asian contemporary performance.

He last worked with the National Museum to curate the immense Night Festival for the National Museum/Singapore Art Museum: *New World*.

## Credits

We thank the National Museum of Singapore and its director, Lee Chor Lin, for giving a safe haven to working artists in Singapore to continue to create.

### **GOH LAY KUAN & KUO PAO KUN**

Conceived & directed by Ong Keng Sen

#### Starring

**Karen Tan** as Goh Lay Kuan

**Lim Kay Tong** as Kuo Pao Kun

Text assembled from interviews of Madam Goh Lay Kuan and texts of Kuo Pao Kun

Lighting Design by **Andy Lim** ("stage" LIVE)

Producer: Tay Tong

Production Stage Manager: Cody Chen

Technical Manager: Andy Lim ("stage" LIVE)

Sound Engineer: Alan Matthew

Project Manager: Mervyn Quek

Production Crew: Jed Lim, Muhammad Hidayat B Aziz,  
Norzaidi Zazali, Steve Kwek, Yap Seok Hui, Zoulaikha Joehari

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#### **Special Thanks To**

Madam Goh Lay Kuan for sharing her art and life stories

The Estate of Mr Kuo Pao Kun

Hoo Kuan Cien

Pei Qin Thong

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Lee Foundation

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