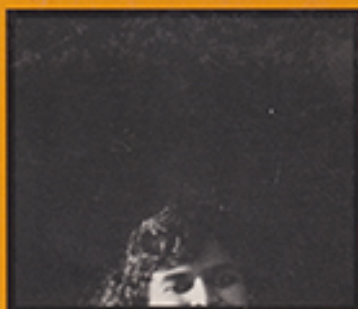


THEATREWORKS

presents



Us in Singapore

Directed by Krishen Jit & Lok Meng Chue

Created in collaboration by Kala Anandarajah
Ho Kah Wai Lee Chee Keng Sharon Lim
Robin Loon Noraizah Nordin Enrico Varella

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created in collaboration by

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ho kah wai

lee chee keng

sharon lim

robin loon

noraizah nordin

enrico varella

set designer

chan man loon

lighting designer

lim yu-beng

production manager

tay tong

technical manager

lim yu-beng

stage manager

neo kim seng

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poster & programme designer

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US

September 10 - 19, 1993

Drama Centre

in Singapore

THEATREWORKS

93.94

I have been working in Singapore over the last five years mainly as a theatre researcher and director. My stance so far has been that of an outsider. I have remained true to my own cultural sensibilities as a Malaysian and behaved very much like a warmly-received and curious guest in Singapore. I believed that *Us in Singapore* marks the beginning of my new relationship with Singapore. I have been compelled by the project to take up a new and even more stimulating posture.

I have many gracious hosts guiding me to enter this new culture. First of all there are the five actors - Enrico, Kala, Kah Wai, Nora and Sharon - whose life stories and emotional and psychological sensitivities have opened up a whole new world for me. The two writers, Lee Chee Keng and Robin Loon, have taught me how to deal with the linguistic and cultural repertory of young Singaporeans born after 1965. My co-director and my friend Lok Meng Chue is an added buffer against cultural boo boos I might make in Singapore. TheatreWorks has been open enough to permit me to create any kind of creative interaction that I wished to have with the company in Singapore.

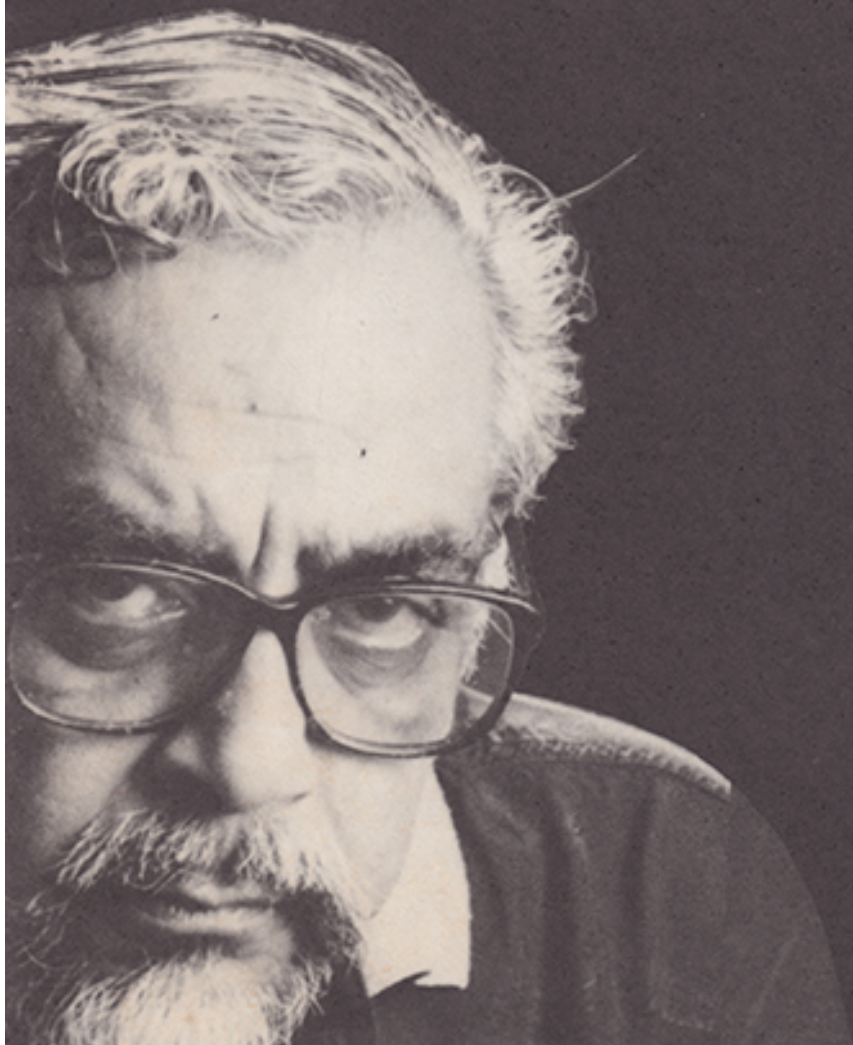
I am now living in two cultures, at least for the time being. These days whenever I go north across the causeway I carry something of Singapore with me in my cultural baggage and vice-versa. How long this will last I cannot say. I do know that a life of cultural ambiguities is rare and will not be tolerated for long in our present world of narrowing cultural and ethnic boundaries. Therefore I am going to enjoy this cultural adventure as long as I am permitted to do so. For a theatre director living between and betwixt two cultures is heaven-sent for it helps to incite that creative distance essential to directing.

krishen jit

Krishen Jit, with over 30 years of extensive experience in Malay and English Theatre, is considered by many to be the doyen of Malaysian Theatre. Currently, he teaches at the University of Malaya. He is also the drama critic for the New Straits Times and a founding member of Five Arts Centre.

Krishen produced the original production of Usman Awang's *Uda dan Dara* and directed Syed Alwi's *Tok Perak*. His major directorial efforts include Kee Thuan Chye's 1984, K.S. Maniam's *The Cord* and *The Sandpit* and Dick Lee's *Nagaland*. For TheatreWorks, he directed David Hwang's *M. Butterfly* and co-directed with Ong Keng Sen, Leow Puay Tin's *Three Children*.

His latest effort in Malaysia *Us: Actions and Images* played to critical acclaim in May this year and has been invited to the 5th Cairo International Festival for Experimental Theatre in September 1993.



When I was asked whether I would co-direct with Krishen, my heart skipped a beat; here is the man who completely challenged the way I view acting and have shaped the way I now look at theatre and whom I still continue to learn from, in more ways than one. Together, we set off on a journey with great anticipation; not knowing what we will encounter along the way or what the final result would be. That was part of the thrill and challenge of this whole project and it has turned out to be very rewarding and a real eye-opener for me.

I must admit that I have been slightly alienated from the 'younger' crowd and have been ignorant about some of their "struggles". Through this project I have come to learn about some of these struggles and realised that they are true reflections of the "struggle" that this young country of ours is undergoing. It may not be there on the surface but it is definitely "simmering" just under the surface.

To present this "struggle" in a dramatic manner seemed at the same time both very exciting and daunting. But under the guidance of Krishen coupled with the commitment of the actors and writers, what is being presented in its final form tonight is first and foremost the combined efforts of a team of "explorers".

It is with the aim of exploration that we have discovered and in some cases, rediscovered, the various worlds inhabited by our forefathers, our parents, our neighbours and ourselves. This discovery has been at most time exhilarating, illuminating, frustrating, painful but never for a minute, boring. We hope to share with you this discovery and welcome you to come along with us on this journey with open hearts and minds.

lok meng chue

Lok Meng Chue has been a full-time staff with TheatreWorks since 1991 and have during that time acted in most of the productions and also administered the Springboard series of workshops. In March 1992, Meng Chue received a British Council Theatre Fellowship Grant and attended workshops and visited various festivals and performances in the United Kingdom.

Some of Meng Chue's notable roles include Nina Perez-Valle in *Trip To The South*, Choo Bee Lian in *Fried Rice Paradise* and Lim Ah Lian in *The Moon Is Less Bright* and Girl #2 in *Three Children*.

Meng Chue directorial debut was the comedy revue *The Complete Space Travellers' Guide to Singapore (Abridged)*. She was the chorus leader and assistant director in *Trojan Women*. She recently directed *Dirty Laundry* in the SPH Young Playwrights Series II



the making of us in singapore

robin loon

When Krishen asked me to be a part of *Us in Singapore*, I jumped at the opportunity immediately. There were many many reasons—impulse is one. Then there was the chance to work with Krishen no less; plus the experience of working in a devised play. Perhaps most importantly, I had a gut feeling about the project. I somehow knew that we will be making a significant statement—about theatre in Singapore; about life in Singapore.

All of us were a part of an ensemble—the actors, the writers, the directors and the stage-manager. Together, we went through a few phases. The first phase of the rehearsals involved all five actors and the two writers in a series of improvisations and games. These were followed immediately by story-telling sessions where we would share our thoughts, histories and feelings. It was an intense ten days. Everyone was put on this emotional roller-coaster as we burrowed into ourselves and confronted whatever feelings and traumas that we had about ourselves. This was an important phase in the rehearsals. All the actors identified their problems both as individuals and as part of their respective communities. Having highlighted the problems, the agenda was set for the next phase which was to translate and express these problems into a dramatic setting. Personally, I came also to one conclusion after the first phase of rehearsals—that I was never meant to be an actor and that I will be better off just writing. I thought that writing will be one thing I can do well. That was before I entered the second phase—the scripting phase.

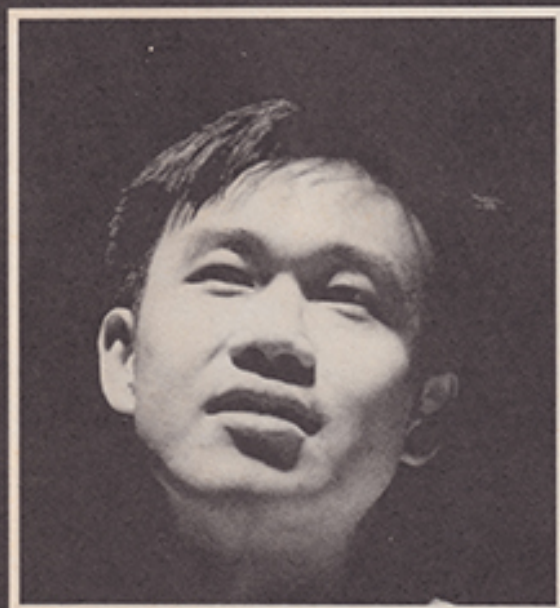
"Then again," I thought to myself, "what's so difficult about scripting a devised piece? Just take dictation and transcribe, right? Nothing can be worse than the ten days I've just gone through." Obviously, I was wrong! "If I wanted just dialogue, why should I need you and Chee Keng? I can write dialogue!" said the sagacious Krishen Jit. To be fair, Krishen wasn't all that cruel—he did give us two guide lines: 1. To pursue those stories which have a strong dramatic centre that can be expressed in theatrical terms; and 2. That the stories must



have a larger social relevance—they cannot be just purely on the personal level. After receiving the imperial edict, Chee Keng and I set about writing scenes for the stories which we have heard. Just like the actors in rehearsals, I had to dig deep into my feelings and unleash my imagination when I wrote. It was difficult, to say the least. There was the problem of being true to the actors' feelings and attitudes when I write. Then, there was the problem of fictionalising events to express those attitudes and feelings. At first, both problems seemed irreconcilable. How can I possibly achieve a fine balance between fiction and reality? And, to say the things that are unsaid? Instincts, that was my only resource. I spoke to the actors individually, got them to talk about themselves and to tell me whatever they were willing to share. Slowly, I realised that it was not events that were important, it was their attitudes towards them that was crucial. To capture and to express that very attitude became the prime task. That freed me from sticking strictly to actual history and events. Because events will be true when the attitudes are honest, open and affecting. So the ground-work and the ground rules were set, time to get cracking. Then came the third phase—what I call the RE phase of the rehearsals.

Chee Keng and I will offer some new scenes, and the directors and the actors will work through them. Simple enough, right? Wrong! There was a lot of Rethinking, REsearching, REdiscovery, RErehearsing, REShaping, REwriting, RErewriting, and not the least REGurgitating (real and metaphorical) to be done. Together, we worked towards finding the core of the scene and its central image and conflict. As we rehearsed, the actors were made to learn their lines there and then. They were also made to enact and react the lines minutes after they have learnt them. The immediacy of the process meant that the actors had to be quick, instinctive and go with their impulses on stage. The actors and directors explored all the possibilities with the text and if the lines did not work, I would have to re-draft them. Most of the time, I had to re-work them there and then in order to continue the flow of the rehearsal. At most, I was given a day to draft a completely new segment or scene. This only meant that I was on my toes and stressed-out all of the time. All in all, I'd say I have written an average of seven drafts per segment. But the exciting thing was that with each draft, new things were being discovered. Not only did it make the rehearsals fresh, but also extremely exhausting. Everyone was struggling to find new things, establish new meaning in the things we do.





Only 25 this years, Robin Loon still aspires to be rich and famous. He has written all of 6 plays. *Absence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder*, *Famous Five Goes On An Adventure*, and *Watching The Clouds Go By* were products of the Theatreworks Writers' Laboratory. His other three plays: *Solitaire*, *Let's Have Dinosaur* and *Rhapsody* were written in his salad undergraduate days. *Us In Singapore* marks his maiden voyage into the uncharted waters of devised plays. He was last seen struggling in the deep end.

Slowly, the group grew tighter. We trusted each other more and began to feel each other's presence in everything we do. It wasn't all cherries and champagne, of course. Many of us either got frustrated, irritated, disturbed or traumatised; most of the time, we were all four. We snapped, shouted, hurled verbal and physical abuse at one another. But no matter how tired and pissed-off we were, we never gave up. Perhaps it was because we had already put in too much work to give up then; but more importantly, all of us had something we wanted to say—as individuals and as a group. That determination kept us going up till now.

Phase Four: the real thing approaches. After ironing out the basics of the script, the actors took over and began fine-tuning the playing and the staging. Krishen did not believe in stage-blocking—only movements that came instinctively from the actors themselves. So the actors blocked themselves wherever their true emotions brought them. The actual stage arrived and the actors were slowly getting use to playing in the round. Technicalities came in: clarity of voice and projection; sensitivity to the space and the audience; and most of all, a directness in communicating and sharing with the audience. That did not mean that the writers were taking a break. Far from it! The scenes changed even as the rehearsals began to consolidate into the performance. New scenes were added, lines replaced and images re-considered. In other words, all of us worked together towards a fuller shape of not only each segment but the overall vision of the piece itself. We had to make sure that what we wanted to say through this play comes out directly and openly. The project was slowly coming together. But we knew that work can never stop. Just as we discover new things in every rehearsal, the play will never stop changing even when it goes into performance.

So here we are, phase five—the performance itself. Looking back at the many meals we had together as a group; the pain of rehearsing till 2 a.m. everyday; the joy of discovering something important in the play and in ourselves; I know that the whole process has strengthened us not only as performers but also as people. Now we're ready to go on to our own phase six, seven, eight, nine . . . with an understanding that we will never stop searching, never stop discovering and never stop realising what we are. We feel that we have made a difference, it's up to you, the audience to validate not only *Us* the cast, but also *Us* as one people.

When Meng Chue told me about the opportunity of working with Krishen, I immediately said "Yes!". I knew what the project was about, but working with Krishen is a chance not to be missed. Even after the first meeting with Krishen, I still did not know what I would be doing, or where the project would eventually take us. I only knew that a substantial part of the stories in the play is going to be based on true life stories. The uncertainty of the project attracted me.



us for me

lee chee keng

I was involved in two somewhat similar projects *Surrounds* and *A Memory Search*, which had also looked into the past. So writing for *Us in Singapore* is not something entirely new for me. What's more, as we would be telling stories, this is going to be more direct than the other two previous projects which were also about the past, and hence should be easier.

The first time the team met and talked about our expectation of the project, Krishen was surprised that nobody showed any fear. "What was there to be scared of," I thought, "it's just going to be another play about people, their past, and what they feel about what they are now."

When rehearsals started, it was what Krishen had described. We told stories, did improvisations, and shared our thoughts and feelings. Not very different from any other rehearsals, except that all of us were pleasantly surprised by the individual frankness and sincerity. It was a good start.

As more stories were told, and the process of writing the script started, I began to sense the greater demand of this project. There is a greater plane beyond all these personal stories and improvisation sessions. "What makes you think that these stories are worth the audiences' time?" we had to constantly ask ourselves this question.



Only 21 this year, LeeChee Keng has been an active member of the local drama scene. Effectively bilingual, Chee Keng has written plays in both Mandarin and English. His Mandarin efforts include *Life's Elsewhere* and *Room Within*. He reworked *Room Within* in English for the Writers' Lab. The English version, *Breaking Through* was staged by Theatreworks as part of a double bill in the SPH Young Playwright Series II in July this year. A member of both the SPH Chinese and English Writers' Laboratory, Chee Keng is hopeful that he will bridge the gap between the two languages in his future efforts.

This is a very stressful project in every sense of the word. Besides the long hours of rehearsals, we had to look out for things which we tried to ignore, block out, or pretend that we do not know. When these events were being dramatized, the cast had to go over the scene over and over again — often pushing themselves to the edge of frustration — just to get the sense of the scene across. The trust and support for one another kept the team together through the entire process. I was often touched by the frankness among the team members. The openness often led to confrontation and challenges, but also brought resolution at the end of the day. It is a working style I look forward to experiencing again.

As I look back, I cannot say that anyone of us has become a better person, but each of us has changed. I believe it is an experience that we will find hard to forget, and would like to share with everyone.



kala anandarajah is a lawyer.

She has acted in her school days but this is her debut in a major production.



ho kah wai is a student.

He is a co-founder of Toy Factory Theatre Ensemble which was responsible for the puppetry and visual effects in Practice Theatre Ensemble's and TheatreWorks' productions of Kuo Pao Kun's *Lao Jiu*. Besides acting in Toy Factory's productions, he has also acted in *Those Who Can't, Teach* for The Necessary Stage.



I never did have my brothers. My mother, courage and asked n she did. It was exciti seemed. When we read cupboard. I used to adm if you cannot play with



sharon lim is a pupil in a law firm.

While studying in the UK, she was involved in various stage productions. Upon her return last year, she plunged straight into Asia In Theatre Research Circus production of *The Tragedy of Macbeth*.



noraizah nordin is a student.

Noraizah's acting debut was in The Stage Club's *Twelfth Night* and *Witch Queen*. This was followed by *Trojan Women* and Robin Loon's *Absence Makes The Heart Grow Fonder*.



All my pets met with a rubber band. I'd put Li boy did it S-T-I-N-K! T me to school in their co the statue of Jesus be cream sticks. Kitty cho wrong track), Kewpie. Kewpie II my hamster shoulders and learnt how

enrico varella is a training officer.

He was first seen on stage as Johari in the 1991 TheatreWorks' production of *Army Daze*. His short plays *Conversations in the Dark (I & II)* were presented in the 1991 Fortnight Theatre. He is a member of TheatreWorks' Writers' Lab. As a writer, Enrico has contributed numerous articles to magazines and newspapers.





Finally at twenty, I had a dog of my own. We unimaginatively named him Snappy just to suit his temperament. Snappy very quickly became the sixth member of the family. He was always the first one to greet us when we returned home. He slept with me to Amma's aghast. He got along superbly with the cats - well actually he was afraid of one of them! When he was a month old, he fell sick and had to be admitted to the vet for a week. It was my ritual to visit him at least once a day. Snappy gradually became very attached to me and began snapping at children and even adults when I played or spoke with them in close proximity. The vet said that he had become dangerously temperamental and had to be put to sleep. I refused to be home when Papa took him to the vet on 3 January 1987. It was my first loss in life.

own toys. Most of them are merely hand me downs from my
ought me my first and only toy, a teddy bear. I plucked up my
y mother to buy it. I was only five years old then. Surprisingly
g to have my own new toy. However, things were not what it
ed home, my mother kept the beautifully wrapped teddy bear up on the
re that bear from afar and wondered what was the point of buying a toy
. I never did get to play with that bear but years later, my niece did.



Oh no, the green bus is gone. I want to go home to see my doggie. There is no one in the playground. I'll go this way. It's how the bus goes. This is where Harry lives. His *ma che* always holds the umbrella for him. When he comes to the bus, we all say "Harry *hou mou*!" Turn here. This road goes to Teck Leong's house. It's very hot. I'm thirsty. "Nice doggie. Where do you live? Why are you growling at me? Don't chase me. Bad dog. Help! Oww!" I cut my knee when I fell. "Thank you for helping me to chase the dog away, sir. No. I'm not lost. I'm walking home. No. I can't get into your car, I don't know you. No. I don't want any sweeties. Go away!" The bus has never taken so long. I want to go home. I want my mummy. Oh no, there is blood on my pink panther socks. It's so far. The bus turns here. That's my house. "Mummy I'm home!"

early death. My first pet was a dead lizard which I shot down with a
ty in a box, bring it to school and freaked the girls out. After a week,
ry and Tippy my pet terrapins had on a few occasions accompanied
ourful Lego blocks home which I created. I buried them at the foot of
ind the CHIJ (Victoria Street) chapel and made crosses out of ice-
ed to death (something about the milk which I fed that went down the
y bunny survived a week and then got stuck behind the cupboard,
ed from stress. Snow, the stray pigeon loved to perch itself on my head and
o tap on my door. One day, it laid an egg, flew off and never came back.



I grew up with many adults under one roof. My home used to harbour the strangest tenants: unwed mothers, a show-girl, an abusive mother, a stud, prostitutes, etc. I learnt gin rummy watching them gamble, learnt to swear in foreign tongues, and bonded with all the children under the same household. Although Mom caned us when we were bad, I hated it when other kids got punished. There were two Malaysian brothers I got to know well. The younger, was small, weak and very temperamental. His brother told us that his father used to beat the crap out of him with his belt. It was believed that he suffered some internal injuries which led to his stunted height.



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TheatreWorks is an independent Singaporean theatre company which develops and nurtures professional theatre skills. It is dedicated to reaching a broad section of the community and to taking Singapore theatre abroad. The company recognises its responsibility in encouraging awareness on human and social issues. Ultimately, TheatreWorks is inspired by and dedicated to sharing the Magic of Theatre.

TheatreWorks (S) Ltd. is a non-profit organisation. It was incorporated in February 1985 as the first English language adult professional theatre company in Singapore.

TheatreWorks has over its eight years of existence produced critically acclaimed and successful productions. The company is recognised for its refreshing interpretations of plays and its experimental approach. The successful fusion of Western and Eastern dramatic traditions in its productions has also earned its reputation as being an innovative theatre company.

The company continually ensures a balanced repertoire and a varied programme for its audiences. This can be seen from its popular and entertaining plays like *Army Daze*, *Beauty World*, *Fried Rice Paradise* (attracting an audience of 20,000) and its alternative theatrical productions of *Madame Mao's Memories* and *3 Children*. In 1990, the company presented the landmark *Retrospective of Singapore Plays 1960-1990*, articulating the national heritage of English language drama. In February 1992, TheatreWorks toured Japan and Kuala Lumpur with its production of *3 Children*. The company also presented *Madame Mao's Memories* at the invitation of the Traverse Theatre for the Edinburgh Festival. *Beauty World* was performed in 4 Japanese cities including the Tokyo International Theatre Festival in September/October 1992.

As a pioneer theatre company, TheatreWorks realises its responsibility to provide opportunities for, and impart skills to practitioners. In providing a continuing training programme for theatre practitioners, TheatreWorks initiated and organised in 1990 the Springboard programme. Springboard is a comprehensive training programme for theatre skills conducted by theatre professionals from the UK. This programme is sponsored by the British Council and the National Arts Council. TheatreWorks also organises workshops and lectures by both local and foreign theatre practitioners - in 1992, George Bigot, an actor from the acclaimed Theatre du Soleil conducted an acting workshop and Italian theatre practitioner Dr. Luigi Lunari gave a series of lectures on Italian Theatre, and in 1993, Kelantanese Wayang Kulit master, Tok Dalang Hamzah Awang Amat conducted a month-long workshop on wayang kulit music and puppet making.

The company has also forged closer ties with Singaporean playwrights by establishing the Writers' Laboratory. This project has been sponsored by Singapore Press Holdings. The Writers' Lab has just completed its second year. The laboratory serves to nurture and encourage new writing and works on the basis of public dramatised readings by actors to test new plays. It focuses on 'process' rather than 'product' with the writers working closely with actors and directors. The fruits from the Lab can be seen in the plays staged in the *Theatre Carnival On The Hill* and the SPH Young Playwrights Series I and II. The best plays have been published in a compendium entitled *Fat Virgins, Fast Cars and Asian Values* by Times Editions sponsored by Singapore Press Holdings.

In February 1993, TheatreWorks launched another new and exciting training programme, this time for young directors. This year-long training programme is called the Directors' Laboratory. Its main aim is to nurture and develop new and upcoming directors by providing a conducive environment for them to learn their craft. The programme consists of on-the-job training where each director will work on their proposed project with the assistance of the Laboratory's Artistic Directors, Ong Keng Sen and Krishen Jit from Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. The Directors' Laboratory is sponsored by Rothmans of Pall Mall (S) Pte Ltd.

Besides working with the Singapore creative community, the company has developed exchange programmes with foreign theatre companies like the Malaysian Five Arts Centre, the American South Coast Repertory, Indonesia's Teater Ketjil, Philippines' Tanghalang Filipino, the Japanese company Jiyu Geikijo and individuals such as David Hwang & Maria Irene Fornes from the United States, David Britton from Australia, Francis Reid and Simon McBurney from the United Kingdom, and Blake Brooker and Denise Clarke from Canada. In its Asean season, there were exchanges with top Asean artists like Malaysia's Krishen Jit, Marion d'Cruz and Wong Hoy Cheong, Indonesia's Arifin C. Noer and Philippines' Tony Perez and Nonon Padilla.

TheatreWorks receives support from corporate patronage, special project sponsors, the British Council, the USIS, the National Parks Board and the National Arts Council. The company's pioneer sponsors are Tams Studio and Glaxo who have been with the company since 1988. Hotel accommodation in 1993/94 for foreign visitors is sponsored by The Westin Stamford and The Westin Plaza. All corporations who have and are sponsoring the theatre company's productions and projects are distinguished by their enlightened leadership and sound corporate philosophies. They are the first to publicly recognise the necessity of a professional theatre company in the context of developing a culturally vibrant environment in Singapore.

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