



FALSE STARTS

I come from a country so small in size that non-Singaporeans laugh in disbelief when I tell them you can drive across Singapore on its east-west highway in thirty to forty minutes. A few decades ago, Singapore was an even smaller place for its inhabitants - my mother describes her childhood in the 1920s and '30s as encompassing a few streets within Chinatown. Now we have cars, buses and trains that zoom us to work/school and back to live in the suburbs and you are unfortunate if a one-way journey lasts more than an hour.

Yes, Singapore has changed much since my mother's childhood. But in some ways I feel that life then and now is not so different, circumscribed by my own hamster cage of routine. I work 8.30 to 5.30 in an office. After work, I go out, i.e. I do theatre-related work, exercise, hang out with friends, watch theatre/movies or do the quintessential Singaporean thing: prowl the many malls and shopping centres, eat and shop/window shop. Or after work, I visit my sister's place or go home and read/armchair travel via cable television. That's it.

Of course, I have travelled overseas and to various places. I just don't have the occasion to travel often and for long stretches of time. Physically staying put has been my norm. So I have always admired people who globetrot constantly-migrate/ live overseas for long periods. Why do they get to travel, and not I? What does it feel like to be constantly on the move? How different is life beyond Singapore? What are these foreign places and people like up-front? And the supreme *sua ku*¹ question: what

is snow like?

FROM SINGAPORE TO SCANDINAVIA

November 2000: after twenty months of planning, I left Singapore to spend two months in Porsgrunn, Norway as a guest of Grenland Friteater, followed by about a month's stay at Odin Teatret in Denmark for Transit III. This journey represented many personal firsts: it was the longest period I've stayed away from home to date; I experienced snow for the first time; and because of the nature of this trip and the public funding I received, I was conscious of my role as a cultural envoy.

In typically Singaporean *kia su*² mode, I was very well fortified to face three months of a Scandinavian winter: two solo performances, two suitcases, one laptop plus two huge and three small airmailed boxes of props, food, gifts and extra clothes. Theatrically, I fazed the Norwegians with my dialect-speaking *Ah Beng*³ improvisation during a three-week acting workshop. Some audience members in both Norway and Denmark found *Cotton & Jade*, my main solo piece, confusing and superficial; others thought that it gave great insights into Chinese family life/traditions. In contrast, I showed a video I co-wrote, about the first Singaporean baby to be born in the new

1. In Singlish (Singapore's unique brand of English), to be *sua ku* means to be an ignorant, unsophisticated, country bumpkin.

2. *Kia su-ism* is the downside of Singaporean efficiency and competitiveness - we cut queues; we rush to board subway trains; we pile our plates at buffets, etc.

3. An *Ah Beng* is a Singlish term used to describe lowly educated Chinese youth with an attitude.

millennium, and audiences enjoyed it.

LET'S LIMBO

As the plane to Scandinavia lifted off the ground, I felt as if I had pulled free of gravity. Out of Singapore, I did not have to think or worry about the usual concerns of juggling work, family and making theatre. Keyed up by busy Singapore, I had to consciously slow down and become acclimatised to the slower rhythms of Porsgrunn. Geddy Aniksdal observed after some time that I was walking straighter. I had time to read and write: I completed three scripts.

But everything seemed so unreal. By December, I was tired of my cultural envoy role, of being "on display", of constantly describing the peculiarities of Singapore. Life revolving around Grenland Friteater, the fire station and Geddy's home seemed too simple. Being a small town, Porsgrunn lacks the number of shops and shopping centres present in Singapore - so I could not indulge during my free time.

RE-ENTERING REALITY

As my plane travelled back to Singapore, I felt reality's tractor beam clamp hold of me, dragging me towards it. Its grip tightened as I resumed work, reconnected with family and tried to keep my various resolutions to continue practising theatre/organising events. Through stress, I began to hunch again and put back all the weight I lost in Scandinavia and more. The three Scandinavian months seemed more and more like a remote, restful interlude.

In retrospect, what did I really achieve in those months away? Sure, I met new people, experienced new places, ate new food, realised I like cooking and grew my hair. But beyond these elements, was it worth the time and expense? Was my trip such a milestone in the annals of Singaporean theatre history? Did I improve Singapore's standing, make a

difference to someone's life, or learn anything really new, theatrically and otherwise? Have I changed at all? Perhaps I am silly to ask such huge questions and expect such significance to be placed on a three-month stay overseas.

Since returning, it becomes apparent to me that what counts is not so much the trip itself, but rather the coming back or aftermath - how you live your life after the actual travelling. For instance with my new small window of experience, I keep returning to a question central to my existence as I interact with my daily reality now: how much of the theatre and accompanying lifestyle that I've witnessed overseas is applicable to my existence in Singapore? Do/can I return to full-time theatre? What form of theatre do I want to practise? What kind of personal training should I adopt? What new solo work shall I create next? Or should I just give up theatre and lead a completely different life?

IN SEARCH OF RELEASE

Unfortunately, these questions are not easy to answer and I change my mind almost daily about how to deal with them. Maybe the simple solution is not to place weight on travel at all, but to let go and float and allow the wind to blow me where it will. To get away from the heaviness of it all, I am planning a trip to Bali in the next two weeks, my first time there. I should treat it as a pure holiday and just hang loose and not get involved with theatre. I want to see Wayang, I want to collect masks, I want to meet up with Kerensa whom I got to know at Transit, but, but, but there I go again...

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