



NATIONAL GALLERY SINGAPORE PRESENTS

NATIONAL LANGUAGE CLASS

BY SPELL#7

Date 22 – 24 January 2016

Venue City Hall Chamber



Chua Mia Tee
National Language Class
 1959
 Oil on canvas
 112 x 153 cm

GALLERY DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE

Dear friends,

Welcome to this staging of *National Language Class*, a production by spell#7 and Buds Theatre.

The play is based on a painting of the same name, by Singapore artist Chua Mia Tee. This painting holds a special place in National Gallery Singapore's collection and exhibitions, and in our buildings. On a blackboard in the painting are two phrases: "*Siapa nama kamu?*", meaning "what is your name?" and "*Di mana awak tinggal?*", meaning "where do you live?" These questions are simple yet rich with layers of meaning and suggestion, fundamental to our basic sense of identity.

The phrase "*Siapa namu kamu?*" is also the title of the Gallery's long-term exhibition on Singapore art: *Siapa Nama Kamu? Art in Singapore since the 19th Century*, which explores the influences and practices that have shaped and transformed Singapore art.

Chua Mia Tee is undoubtedly a key artist in Singapore's art history. Also in the painting are other central figures in this extensive story: Lee Boon Wang, Koeh Sia Yong and Ong Tian Soo, whose works hang in the same exhibition, and Lee Boon Ngan, who went on to become Chua Mia Tee's wife and whose portrait by him is displayed only metres away from *National Language Class*.

From 1959 to 1965, S Rajaratnam was Singapore's Minister for Culture and had his office in City Hall. On the walls of his office hung *National Language Class*, an apt reflection of Singapore's transition from colony to independent nation and the attendant issues of national identity that come with that.

For *National Language Class* to be exhibited in City Hall again, this time as part of a major exhibition on Singapore art history, is befitting, a homecoming of sorts.

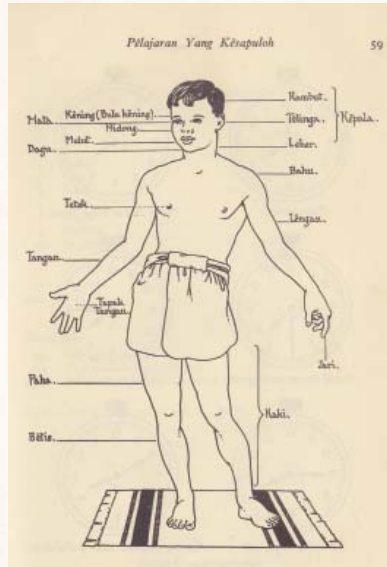
With this painting's strong significance, it is not surprising that it has inspired another art form – theatre. To stage this production in City Hall Chamber, one of the most historically important parts of the Gallery, is poignant and brings to bear the weight and substance of the many events that took place here.

Does art imitate life, life imitate art, and what happens when art imitates art? Does one inject the other with meaning? Like the exhibition *Siapa Nama Kamu?*, the play is an invitation – to consider and experience the connection and separateness between two art forms in their capturing of themes, change and reality.

Enjoy the performance.

Dr Eugene Tan
National Gallery Singapore

ARTISTIC DIRECTOR'S MESSAGE



In 1959, artist Chua Mia Tee painted a group of Chinese students learning Malay in anticipation of a future that never happened. When I first saw the painting in 2005, I was taken aback that the students were learning Malay – and then I was taken aback that I was taken aback.

How could the past be so at odds with the present? And how did this past continue nevertheless to bear upon the present, in perhaps hidden ways that a theatre show might bring to light? I approached Noor Effendy Ibrahim, and early versions of *National Language Class* were presented at the opening of the Drama Centre, and in Bangkok.

It was then that we realised the show had “legs”: that there was something going on that we couldn’t quite put our finger on; that it provided a way of talking about things we couldn’t say; that out of simple questions about who we are and where we come from, a world unfolds – or unravels.

In subsequent versions, the show really focused on describing and re-describing the scene in the painting. This gives the performance a systematic, almost mathematical, structure, and makes it adaptable to different formats and locations. The performance has been presented on the move, in a participatory installation and, now, in the historically significant City Hall Chamber, where so many important statements helped speak a nation into being.

But we have also come to realise that the success of the show stands or falls on the emotional journey of the performers and audience, and their ability to discover more basic human truths that can’t be reduced to simple issues of race or ethnicity. In the end, *National Language Class* is not only a play about national identity; it’s a play about people, and who they are when they open their mouths and sound comes out.

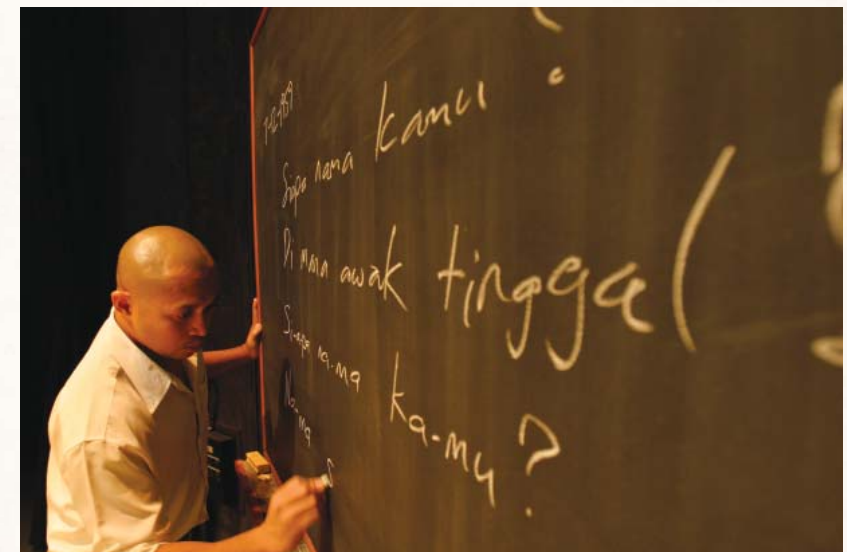
Paul Rae
spell#7

ABOUT THE PLAY

National Language Class is inspired by Chua Mia Tee’s iconic 1959 painting of the same name, showing a group of Chinese students learning Malay. It stages multiple readings of this seminal work, in a bid to come to grips with an important moment in Singapore’s history.

Interactive and inventive, the performance begins by recreating the scene shown in the painting. As it develops into a power-play between teacher and pupil, the performance shifts between humorous and menacing, tender and explosive, asking: What is the relationship between who you are and the language you speak? And what does it mean to take a new language as your own – or to give yours away?

This 2016 rendering of *National Language Class* takes place in the newly restored City Hall Chamber, a site that reverberates with the echoes of major political events in Singapore’s past.

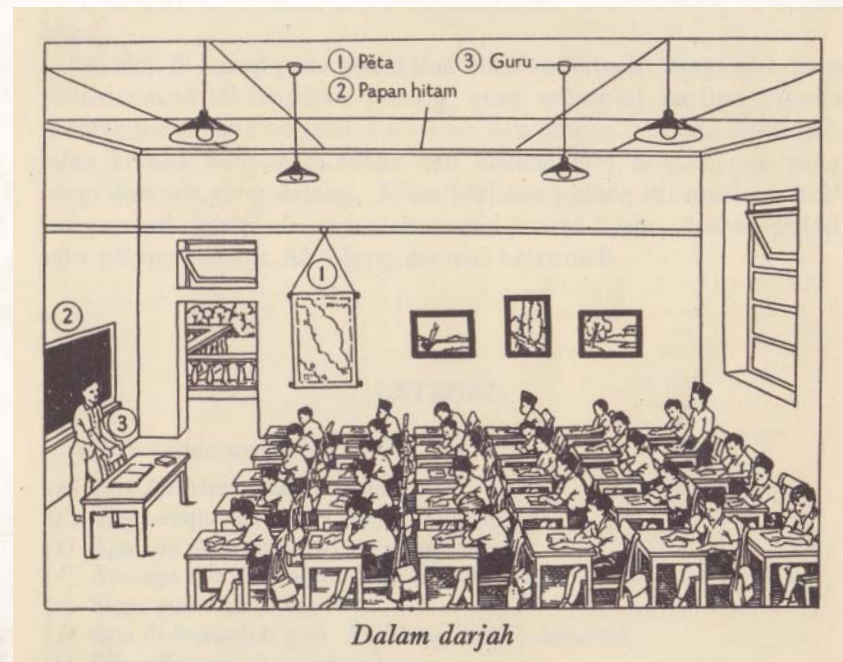


CONTEXT AND PERSPECTIVES

"The great moments in the history of education have always been those in which adjustments and adaptations have had to be made to new demands. To those who are in Singapore the learning of the Malay Language is not a new endeavour, but with the Malay Language becoming the National Language of the State we must now learn it more systematically and intensively.

If it is true to say that in the world of education today the struggle is not to find the techniques for giving every advantage to the suitable and willing student but to find the techniques for fostering the will in the student, then this series of 'Simple Malay Conversations' serves both the greater and the lesser purposes. In Book III the conversations are built around situations that come within the experience of most people such as the dialogue between two persons. Therefore, it will serve its purpose as a useful companion to those who are interested in the Malay Language and help us realise our urgent aim of a common language on which to found a Malayan nation."

S Rajaratnam, Foreword to *Simple Malay Conversations* (1961)



"The process of Malayisation was taking off in the late 1950s and the Ministry of Culture, established in 1959 with S. Rajaratnam as the Minister of Culture, was promoting *Bahasa Melayu* through the 'Use National Language' campaign. The fervor of the students in [Chua Mia Tee's painting] *National Language Class* to learn and adopt *Bahasa Melayu* as the 'national language' of Malaya in place of other languages, illuminates the social and political significance of language due to its relation to culture and identity. The embrace of *Bahasa Melayu* by non-Malay communities as their national language in Singapore was seen to embody their determination to sever their cultural and political loyalties to China (often referred to as the Motherland) for the creation of a new Malayan culture, now regarded as their homeland."

Seng Yu Jin, "Social Realism During the Malayan Emergency" in *From Words to Pictures: Art During the Emergency* (2007)

"In a situation where Malaysian political leaders inherited political power rather than won it by force, it was in...debates on national culture that some of the most intense struggles for independence occurred. They questioned the capacity of the English language to weld polyglot communities into a multi-racial whole, they questioned the nature of 'multiracialism' itself. Of the alternative reconstructions of national identity – through education, art, performance, literature – the most important was the reformulation of the Malay language as an agent of national mobilisation. It was the establishment of Malay as the singular idiom of public life, and the processes of social and political change which underlaid this, that finally defeated the colonial project. Yet the new ways in which colonial power was wielded left a deep impression in the political imagination of Malaya. The devices of colonial state-building became tools to plague their inventors' heads."

T N Harper, *The End of Empire and the Making of Malaya* (1998)

"Before the play began, as we filed into the small auditorium, Yeo's Chinese student welcomed us, in Mandarin. At one point, she asked me: "*Ni hui jiang guo yu ma?*" (Do you know how to speak the national language?)

The question was more fraught than it seemed. To the Mandarin speaker, "*guo yu*" ostensibly means the language of China – China's national language. As an ethnic Chinese, you could say that linguistically my "*guo*" is China. But in every other aspect of my being, it is not. I am Singaporean. But my national language is one which I do not speak well...The play asked: "What is your name? Where do you live?" It could very well have been asking, "Who are you? And where do you come from?"

Ong Soh Chin, "Who are you? Where do you live?," *The Straits Times*, 19 August 2006



Ini Meja
Meja ini berat
Saya hendak angkat meja ini
Tolong saya
Tolong saya angkat meja ini
Mari tolong saya angkat meja ini
Itu kerusi
Bawa kerusi itu
Bawa kerusi itu ka-mari
Tolong bawa kerusi itu ka-mari
Kerusi itu tidak berat
Kerusi itu ringan
Suroh Hasan
Suroh Hasan angkat kerusi itu
Hasan tidak ada kerja
Panggil Hasan
Ka-mana dia?
Chari dia

This is a table
This table is heavy
I want to lift this table
Help me
Help me to lift this table
Come and help me to lift this table
That is a chair
Bring that chair
Bring that chair here
Please bring that chair here
That chair is not heavy
That chair is light
Ask Hasan
Ask Hasan to lift that chair
Hasan has no work
Call Hasan
Where has he gone?
Find him

“Lesson 3” in *Learn Malay with Radio Singapore* (1960)

“To live together in the world means essentially that a world of things is between those who have it in common, as a table is located between those who sit around it; the world, like every in-between, relates and separates men at the same time.”

Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (1958)

ABOUT THE COMPANIES

National Language Class is a collaboration between **spell#7** and **Buds Theatre**.

spell#7

spell#7 was established in 1997 by Kaylene Tan (Singapore) and Paul Rae (UK). Over the years, the company has developed a distinctive and inventive focus on the ways history, culture and politics intersect in everyday life through intimate theatrical performances and environmental soundworks. Past shows include performances: *Duets* (The Substation, Esplanade Presents The Studios), *Duets II* (The Substation), *Tree Duet* (Bangkok Fringe Festival, Singapore Theatre Festival, Singapore Showcase at The Edinburgh Festival Fringe), and *Family Duet* (Esplanade Presents The Studios) and audio works: *Desire Paths*, *Dream Home* (Singapore Arts Festival, In Between Time Festival, UK), *Sky Duet* (Singapore Biennale) and *Ghostwalking* (Arts Creation Fund).

spell#7 is currently based in Melbourne, Australia.

Buds Theatre

Buds Theatre was established in 2007. A not-for-profit theatre company with the aim of providing a platform for young theatre graduates to practice their craft and refine their skills, it received charity status in 2013.

The company has gained recognition across the region as an incubator for aspiring young artists and practitioners of excellence. It has also provided schools with quality education and theatres with fringe and community performances since its formation.

PRODUCTION CREDITS

Original concept and design

Paul Rae, Noor Effendy Ibrahim and Yeo Yann Yann

Lighting Design

Petrina Dawn Tan

Director

Paul Rae

Set Design

Kate Pocklington

Production Manager/Assistant Director

Claire Devine

Stage Manager

Rebecca Lee

Actors

Noor Effendy Ibrahim
Tan Wan Sze

Assistant Production Manager

Kaylene Tan

Researcher

Ella Parry Davies

Special thanks to:

Buds Youth Theatre, CS Lite, Evan Tan, Lim Eng Siang, National Institute of Education, The Playtent, and Sushma Goh, National Gallery Singapore’s Director (Projects & Facilities Management Group) for sharing her memories of the City Hall Chamber.

ABOUT THE CREATIVE TEAM

CLAIRE DEVINE

Production Manager/
Assistant Director

Claire is Co-Artistic Director of Buds Theatre and The Playtent. For the past 18 years, she has been working as an actress, director and theatre educator in Singapore. She is also a mentor for the MOE-NAC Artist-Mentor scheme providing educational development for teachers and teaching programmes in theatre. Claire graduated from Guildford School of Acting and Dance, UK.

REBECCA LEE

Stage Manager

Rebecca is Co-Artistic Director of Buds Theatre and Director of The Playtent. An actress, production stage manager and theatre educator in Singapore, her recent theatre credits with Buds Theatre include *Pigeons* (2015), *Death and Dancing* (2008/2014), *Shades* (Bangladesh, 2011), *The Acid Test* (2012) and *Cock* (2012). Rebecca graduated with a BA (Hons) in Acting from LASALLE College of the Arts in 2008.

NOOR EFFENDY IBRAHIM

Actor

Effendy is an interdisciplinary artist. He has created solo and ensemble art projects and performances in several countries, and worked with arts groups and collectives including Teater Kami, Teater Ekamatra, Teater Artistik, Cake Theatre, spell#7 and Maya Dance Theatre in Singapore and Five Arts Centre and The Actors Studio in Malaysia. From 2001 to 2006, he was Artistic Director of Teater Ekamatra, a Singapore-based contemporary Malay theatre company, and was Artistic Director of The Substation, Singapore's first independent contemporary arts centre, from 2009-2014.

KATE POCKLINGTON

Set Designer

Kate is an artist and conservator. Her work focuses on the parallels between humans and nature, and the human "condition" of anthropocentrism (the belief that humans are the superior species). Her credits in Singapore include *Exhibitions 4x4* (Marina Bay 2013), *Truth or Dare* (The Substation, 2013), the creative design for *The Mountain* (M1 Fringe Festival, 2014), an interdisciplinary collaboration with Lucy Davis' *All The Way Down* and *Nanyang Meadows* (Singapore Art Museum, 2014) and the set design for *Pigeons* (Buds Theatre, 2015). She also designed and painted the *National Language Class* installation for the opening of National Gallery Singapore (2015). Kate graduated with a BA (Hons) in Conservation and Restoration from the University of Lincoln, UK.

PAUL RAE

Director/Concept Designer

Paul is Co-Artistic Director of spell#7. In addition to *National Language Class*, his most recent performances include *Tree Duet*, *Dream/Home* and *Family Duet*. From 2007 to 2014, he taught on the Theatre Studies Programme at the National University of Singapore, and is currently Associate Professor of Theatre Studies at the University of Melbourne. Paul is the author of *Theatre & Human Rights* (2009), and the Senior Editor of the academic journal *Theatre Research International*. His next book is entitled *Real Theatre: Essays in Experience*.

PETRINA DAWN TAN

Lighting Designer

Petrina is a lighting designer who has worked on productions including *In The Next Room / The Vibrator Play* (LASALLE College of the Arts), *The Tin Can People* (NAFA English Theatre), *Pigeons* (Buds Theatre), *The Way We Go* (Checkpoint Theatre), *Intermezzo* (Singapore Dance Theatre for Dans Festival 2014) and *Innamorati* (Toy Factory). She was Associate Lighting Designer for *The Nightingale* (Singapore Repertory Theatre) and Assistant Lighting Designer for RED (Blank Space Theatre), *Cook A Pot of Curry* (Wild Rice) and *The Art of the Brick* (ArtScience Museum). Petrina was a recipient of the Georgette Chen Scholarship (2009) and the NAC Arts Scholarship (2010) and graduated with a BA (Hons) in Lighting Design from LASALLE College of the Arts.

KAYLENE TAN

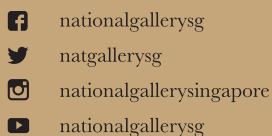
Assistant Production Manager

Kaylene is a writer, director and performer with spell#7. She was Creative Director for the National Museum of Singapore's Singapore History Gallery audio tour and received the NUS-FASS and The Old Parliament House (TOPH) Writing Fellowship in 2008. She has taught at the National University of Singapore and LASALLE College of the Arts, and worked with young writers on projects for the NUS Arts Festival (2012, 2013) and Singapore Arts Festival (2012). Kaylene has also written and produced videos for various other cultural and heritage institutions in Singapore.

TAN WAN SZE

Actor

Wan Sze is a freelance theatre practitioner. She was a member of The Finger Players' artistic ensemble from 2002 to 2004, performing with the company in, among other plays, *Turn By Turn We Turn*, *Book of Living and Dying*, *suitCASES*, *Cat Lost and Found* and *Twisted*. Wan Sze was part of the team that received the President's Design Award 2007 for *0501* and Best Ensemble Acting at the 5th Life! Theatre Awards for *Furthest North Deepest South*. Her other stage credits include *Ignorland of its Time*, *Old Maid*, *HERstory* and *K* (DramaBox), *Body X* (Li Xie, Danny Yeo & The Arts House) and *Nocturnal Wanderer* (Lumenis Theatre Company & The Arts House).



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