

The Expediency of History and the Management of Nature

by C. J. W.- L. Wee

Tree Duet, described by its creators as 'a performance about how we remember in a city of forgetting', is part of the changes in the way artistic practice is coming to terms with history, culture and a constantly changing environment in today's Singapore.

What are these changes? In a book entitled *Our Place in Time*, the writer Janadas Devan has argued that 'Singapore, in many ways, is the product of forgettings...Forgetting is the condition of Singapore.' Devan was thinking about the 'problem' of Singapore's foundation in 1965. Long a British colony, it was always assumed that decolonization would involve a political merger between island Singapore and mainland Malaysia. That happened in 1963, but within two years, the arrangement had become untenable. So for Singaporeans, independence marked an abrupt break with their previous history and identity as 'Malayans'. On top of that, 'Singapore' itself is not a simple cultural entity. As the editors of *Our Place in Time* put it in 1994: 'We have inherited conducive conditions for material advancement but also disembodied fragments of past forms of cultural life. In effect, we became cultural orphans, isolated from the sources of knowledge from which ideals, visions and moralities develop.'

The expression 'cultural orphan' was also closely linked with the late playwright-director, Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002). It is a phrase that suggests a process both of forgetting and of being forgotten, and, in the context of *Tree Duet*, raises the question of whether Singaporeans may be 'orphans of nature', too. As the low-rise colonial cityscape of post-'65 Singapore became transformed into an industrialised, financial centre dominated by high-rise public housing blocks and what the geographer Ooi Giok Ling calls 'managed nature', the problem of 'forgetting' intensified. 'Nature' and 'Culture' alike were put to the service of nation-building, and there was little space for the independent development of 'arty-crafty' high culture, or of wildlife habitats.

These days, culture and history are no longer put use by the state in quite such obvious ways, and some threatened ecosystems have been granted a measure of protection. In a post-Cold War world where neo-liberal capitalism has become dominant, 'culture' and 'nature' have become economic resources in their own right. The performing and visual arts, television dramas and historical memories of the way we used to live are used to enhance education, foster cultural tourism, and contribute towards making society 'innovative' for a knowledge-based, 'creative' economy.

In striving to make a performance that, as Paul Rae puts it, stays 'true to trees', spell#7 has created a work that cuts across some of these conventions. *Tree Duet* spans the pre- and post-independence period, as well as exploring the diversity of attitudes toward time that co-exist in contemporary Singapore. It melds the personal and the public, and combines music, objects, anecdotes and reportage to stage an encounter between two people who share a life and home, but who come from different cultures, and have divergent ideas about belonging.

History can become a form of commercial nostalgia by which a 'happening', 'global' city can be forged. But it is also a more layered and multi-level affair that younger artists can work through for visions of culture not tied in exclusively to nation-building or the exigencies of a globalized economy. And what remains of the 'natural world' provides important points of entry to other times and meanings, including those of the future.