PAST, PRESENT, FUTURE

WE MAY HAVE A COLOURFUL THEATRICAL HISTORY, BUT WHY HAVEN'T WE CREATED A CANON FOR THEATRE?

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While notable Singapore plays by equally noted Singaporean playwrights — including Kuo Pao Kun, Tan Tarn How, Stella Kon and Ovidia Yu — have been published in the past, one thing that is possibly missing is an official canonical list of Singapore's English-language plays. Despite the abundance of plays, the creation of such a canon is nowhere to be seen.

There are, of course, two things to note about canon-making. One, it is an evolving process that takes decades, often longer; and two, it is often a controversial decision, because of the subjectivity of art.

The works themselves being considered for inclusion must themselves be well-written — whether it is a conventional three-act play or it has other structures, whether it is realistic or symbolic, modernist or postmodernist. They must also have both a historical and intrinsic significance. By historical, the work ought to start something for the first time, set examples, and extend the possibilities of theatrical language. It should have a contemporary relevance and one indication is its continued restaging.

Emily Of Emerald Hill.

Any inclusion in the list should have an intellectual edge in terms of saying something worthwhile about Singapore; and written mostly, though not entirely, in English.

WHO TO PUT IN THE CANON

But which plays should be included in this canon? There are several obvious choices.

Lim Chor Pee's Mimi Fan, surely, ought to be in the list, because it was the first-ever English play. When Lim produced it in 1961, the theatre scene was dominated by expatriate clubs staging English and Western plays. Mimi Fan changed that colonial hegemony. Lim was the first to theorise about theatre and give voice to the idea of an indigenous drama written by locals.

He wrote: "A national theatre cannot hope to survive if it keeps staging foreign plays."

Another inclusion could be The Moon Is Less Bright, which introduced Singlish on the Singapore stage for the first time. The dramatist was Goh Poh Seng, chairman of the National Theatre Trust and founder of Centre 65. He was an arts activist, poet and novelist who believed in the idea of a national theatre.

"A nation which ignores and does not encourage its theatre, is, if not culturally dead, culturally pitiable," he once wrote.

Stella Kon's Emily Of Emerald Hill, of course, deserves a place. First staged here in 1985, it marked three firsts: It was the first monologue, the first play with a feminist bent, and the first play to go to the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. And it is the most performed play in the Singapore repertoire (it's been staged over 500 times).

Ditto Army Daze by Michael Chiang because it was our first comedy on a seemingly unfunny subject: National Service. It has proved enduringly popular because of its excellent use of Singlish, superb one-liners and lively stereotypes.

And then, there is Kuo Pao Kun. His The Coffin Is Too Big For The Hole is, like Emily, a monologue. But the interesting difference is that while Coffin has a realist base, it has an allegorical structure which makes a case for inclusion. By indirection, Kuo attacked the bureaucracy by showing how its laws curbed individual expression. After Coffin, Kuo came up with Mama Looking For Her Cat and Lao Jiu. With Mama, he introduced many new innovations such as symbolism (in the figure of the old woman and the Tamil man with their cats), as well as his knowledge of Bertolt Brecht and Jerzy Grotowski.

Kuo's Lao Jiu brought in Chinese elements, martial arts, folk stories and myth, and above all, puppets. He combined philosophy, criticism, languages and visual action seamlessly to give us a comprehensive play by a master dramatist at the height of his powers.

Other canon considerations could be Ovidia Yu's Woman In A Tree On A Hill; Tan Tarn How's The Lady Of Soul And Her Ultimate 'S' Machine; Eleanor Wong's Mergers And Accusations; Kuo's Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral and Off Centre by Haresh Sharma.

Lastly, if one may be so bold, this writer's One Year Back Home (1980), could be included, if only because it openly took on Singaporean politics of the moment, and dared to create a sympathetic opposition overtly criticising the government.

ESTABLISHING THE CONCEPT OF A NATIONAL THEATRE

However, compiling a canon is one thing: What do we do with it?

The obvious answer is to perform each play on a regular basis to see if they really belong in the canon. Performing the plays will show up their strengths and weaknesses, offer new and fresh interpretations, and ask the essential question: Is this really a classic play?

This is where a national theatre, or rather, the concept of a national theatre that rises above sectarian interests,

Descendants Of The Eunuch Admiral.

comes in. Its primary aim would be to compile and consolidate, in performance, a national canon of plays. The national theatre can also commission and stage new plays, and refine the canon. This can ensure we don't lose our theatrical past — and how it relates to the future. Kuo often reminded us in his essays and plays about the dangers of collective amnesia and the importance of remembering.

Every country, after a period of gestation, needs its classics. Singapore is relatively young, yet it tends to forget aspects of its past. Creating a national canon of plays takes the guesswork out of remembering. While this could seem like an elitist enterprise, it is an essential act of critical evaluation, of trying to ask what makes an evolving tradition of writing, what its features are, who the major players are and, perhaps more importantly, where do we go from here?