

The Maker's Assembly: Conversations

A report about the climate of making in the Singapore theatre scene

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Preface

About The Maker's Assembly: Conversations

The Maker's Assembly: Conversations is the final session of the 2020 series of The Maker's Assembly, an initiative by The Finger Players to gather like-minded makers to gather and exchange ideas.

In *The Maker's Assembly: Conversations*, we hope to consolidate ideas towards creating a more conducive environment for makers. Due to the COVID-19 regulations, this session had to be a closed-door event to keep the participant capacity manageable.

This report looks at the climate of making in Singapore theatre and the ideas towards creating a more conducive environment for makers. It is not representative of the opinions of the entire community of makers in the local theatre scene. But rather, this report is created to share the conversations and ideas that were generated by some of the makers in Singapore theatre, with the hope to continue building a stronger maker community.

Attendees

The persons who attended *The Maker's Assembly: Conversations* were as follows (in alphabetical order):

1. Auderia Tan
2. Benjamin Ho
3. Bright Ong
4. Chan Silei
5. Daniel Sim (Organiser)
6. Grace Lin
7. Jo Kwek
8. Marc Andre
9. Merissa Tang
10. Myra Loke (Organiser)
11. Natalie Therrian
12. Oliver Chong
13. Tan Beng Tian
14. Sim Xin Feng
15. Victoria Lim (Moderator)
16. Yeo Fu Bi

The session was documented by Ke Weiliang.

Programme Rundown

On 6 March 2021, our programme was as follows:

| | |
|---------------|---|
| 1 - 1.15pm | Personal introductions of each participant |
| 1.15 - 1.35pm | Sharing of survey results |
| | Sharing of thoughts about survey results and framing the structure of the small-group discussions |
| 1.35 - 2.10pm | Small-group discussions |
| 2.10 - 2.30pm | Group sharing of their discussions |
| 2.30 - 3pm | Free response amongst participants |

Pre-Programme Survey

Prior to our session on 6 March 2021, we sent out a survey to find out about the challenges faced by makers in Singapore theatre. We had 13 respondents, some of whom were unavailable to attend the 6 March session. The survey questions were as follows:

- 1) Name
- 2) Which of your previous roles in theatre have required you to work as a maker?
- 3) What are the challenges you face when making in Singapore?
- 4) What is the biggest challenge that you face? And can you elaborate why?
- 5) How have you attempted to overcome or resolve the challenge mentioned above?
- 6) As a maker, what improvements do you hope to see? How do you think that can be possible?

Based on survey results, the following three categories were identified for discussion:

- Space and Equipment
- Community Building
- Training

Space and Equipment

Survey Findings

Rental costs

- Most companies that hire freelance makers do not provide a budget for the latter to rent a fully furnished workshop space to work in.
- Given their current income levels, however, most freelance makers cannot afford to permanently rent such a space.

Spatial constraints

- Most makers have little choice but to work inside their own homes. However, the lack of height, width and depth inside their homes makes it impossible for makers to create large set pieces and backdrops in a conducive manner.
- Because of the noise generated, makers living in public housing find it especially difficult to carry out works like drilling, hammering and spray painting in their own homes without disturbing their neighbours.

Equipment

- Some makers, especially the emerging ones, do not have the financial means to buy their own equipment.
- Even for more experienced makers, most of them typically own equipment that is at best suitable for woodworking, but not metalworking. The lack of access to a wider array of tools makes it difficult for them to innovate.

Guiding Questions

- What are you willing to give for a workshop space?
- Are you willing to contribute to a communal space?
- Are you willing to open it up to everyone?

Discussion

Potential sources of physical spaces

- In the long-term, there is a need to look beyond the National Arts Council (NAC) for support, and search for external networks of people who believe in 'investing' in the work of makers - be it our immediate friends or landlords - who are willing to provide physical spaces for free or at a low cost.
- In the short-term, we should look at partnering with existing workshops that already have the equipment that makers can use.

External communal spaces shared by multiple makers

- Is it feasible to have communal spaces that are shared by multiple makers, rather than pre-owned by a single entity?
 - Such a space could function like a "shop court" with stalls like a food court, where each maker has a designated area to keep their own stuff.
 - There can also be a common area where equipment (e.g. spray booth, dust collector, compressor) can be shared on demand.
- Who should be in charge of managing the scheduling of when these communal spaces are used?
- Is there a need to appoint someone to gatekeep/supervise the day-to-day maintenance of communal spaces, or do we trust individual makers to be responsible for looking after the spaces as if it were their own?

Ownership of equipment

- Should freelance makers engaged by companies be expected to have their own equipment, or should companies be expected to supply such equipment to the freelance makers they hire?
 - There is no right or wrong answer to this question, and it can go either way. In general, it is reasonable for companies to expect the freelance makers that they engage to already have their own equipment that the latter is already comfortable using. However, companies should pay for the cost of raw materials that the makers to build set/props/puppets/etc. for the production that they are hired for.
 - That said, for machinery that is not easily portable, companies that frequently hire freelance makers to build set/props/puppets/etc. for their shows should consider investing in such equipment.

- On a macro level, whether or not freelance makers and/or companies possess their own equipment affects more than just the quality of the set/props/puppets/etc. being built. It also potentially influences whether companies decide to hire them.
 - Will companies gravitate towards hiring a less-skilled maker who owns a multitude of equipment that many people do not have?
 - Or would they hire a better-skilled maker who might not be able to afford their own equipment?

Community Building

Survey Findings

Lack of understanding about the work of a maker

- Several companies, and even some theatre practitioners, do not understand the extent of work that goes into making, especially when something has to be built or tailored from scratch.
- This results in a lack of interpersonal empathy towards makers and overly frequent budget-cutting requests.

Lack of recognition for work done

- While designers tend to be more visibly credited, makers tend to get overlooked because of the relatively menial, hands on nature of their work.
- Even the smallest of props should be regarded as an important element in storytelling for the stage, rather than a mere decorative object held in the hands of an actor.
- There needs to be a shift in mindsets, where makers are not regarded as occupying a lesser role in a production – and it will help if those in positions of ‘power’ (e.g. directors and producers) speak up for them.

Guiding Questions

- Are makers undervalued by theatre companies, clients, the larger theatre community, or even ourselves?
- How do we solve this problem of being undervalued, and can it be solved?
- How do we want to be valued?

Discussion

Imbalance of power

- Compared to designers, makers who are on the ground doing the menial work of creating set/props/puppets/etc. seem to be underappreciated by their collaborators.
- In an ideal world, collaborators in positions of power should use their voice to give more credit to makers for the good work that they do, be it in terms via softer interpersonal interactions or payment for the work done.
- That said, when a conflict does arise between a company and a maker - some companies tend to take the easy route of replacing the maker altogether, rather than take the effort to hold fair negotiations. At the end of the day, the odds are almost always stacked against the maker.
- At the end of the day, the level of tangible/non-tangible appreciation accorded to makers really boils down to the types of priorities that companies choose to have.

Transparency in rates of payment

- The perennial dilemma: charge by hourly rates, or charge an overall fee for the project?
 - It is most ideal to charge an hourly rate when you embark on a gig that merely requires you to clock in/out at specified timings, and do not require you to bring work home to do.
 - For gigs that require any form of pre-event planning, it might be better to charge a project-based fee, which accounts for the expertise you bring to the planning process. Calculating fees by the hour for such gigs can be problematic - if you work faster because you are more skilled/experienced, you might end up being paid less.
 - An hourly rate may not be something you eventually submit to client, but it can be an interesting exercise to figure out how you value your work.
- In either case, it would be helpful if practitioners came together to share the rates that they currently charge for freelance gigs, and the skill sets/work standards required to warrant charging those rates.

Unions/associations representing makers

- Is it sustainable for makers to step up and organise unions/associations to represent their rights?

- What are some industry standards that such unions/associations would want to advocate for?
 - Rates of payment for makers?
 - Reasonable budgets that should be given to makers to make set/props/puppets/etc.?
 - Definitions of differences in responsibilities of a designer and a maker?
- Must such unions/associations be formalised, or is it OK for them to consist of loose collectives of people?
 - Right now, industry standards are largely in the form of unspoken understandings between practitioners who have been around in the industry for some time.
 - The upside of maintaining formalise unions/associations is that it can be a one-stop resource and information portal for makers that are new to the industry.
 - The challenge of maintaining formalised unions/associations is that everyone is already occupied with their own individual practice, and hence no one has the headspace to prioritise the day-to-day operations of the union/association. Over time, the union/association becomes dormant, until a crisis arises.

Training

Survey Findings

Lack of interest in being a professional maker

- Younger practitioners nowadays are less interested in carving a career out of making, let alone undergo training, because of the manual labour involved and the less than proportionate remuneration that makers get from their work.
- On the other hand, it also feels as if some experienced makers gatekeep their trade and teach/pass on their skills to younger practitioners with inflexible strings attached.

Lack of formal training platforms

- The lack of formal training platforms means that for the longest time, most makers learn in a largely unguided, DIY manner - be it watching YouTube tutorials, or simply learning on the job.
- Learning in such an unguided, DIY manner has its own pitfalls, because it becomes difficult to track one's learning progression. Additionally, it is difficult for the maker to know if their skills are up to industry standards.
- Ideally, a centralised, state funded workshop would organise structured training programmes that makers know they can return to every time they wish to upskill.

Opportunity costs of taking time out to train

- Many budding makers start out by taking up internships with companies or veteran makers. Unfortunately, these internships usually do not pay enough to decently cover living expenses.
- As a result, budding makers end up taking up other paying jobs just to be able to financially afford to take up said internships. This, however, means that budding makers cannot spend as much time as they like honing their skills.

Guiding Questions

- Are we required to know everything?
- How can we tap on one another's specialisations?

Discussion

Importance of learning the basics of multiple trades in the theatre industry

- There is value in having a broad-based theatre-making education - e.g. you might prefer specialise as a maker, but you should try doing stage management/production management/costume design/etc. at least once in your career. This is because knowing what your collaborators can/cannot do will give you the vocabulary to communicate your production-related needs to them.

Learning from other specialists/people we are not familiar with

- Presently, it is very common for theatre practitioners to take every paid job that comes their way and muddle through, even if they don't already have the required skill sets for it.
- Even when collaborations do happen, the tendency is to default to working with the same collaborator over and over again, rather than be on the constant lookout for other collaborators who might better fit the next project. Hence, it might be helpful to collate a centralised directory of makers and their respective specialisations in theatre.

Mentoring younger/new makers

- Given how niche the industry is, makers across the board need to have the willingness to learn and share. Right now, skills are not being imparted because some makers want to learn, but are not willing to share.
- Is it ethical for an apprenticeship to happen without any stipend being paid to the apprentice, on the rationale that they are already benefiting in terms of education?

Educating production companies of the differences between specialisations

- Companies who hire freelance theatre makers in general should be educated about the differences between theatre-related specialisations. Presently, many companies are overly focused on seeing a tangible 'return on investments', that they do not empathise with the case-by-case challenges/needs of each specialisation and end up cutting costs at the expense of artistic quality.

Tapping the expertise of those outside the theatre industry

- To expand the possibilities of what can be staged in the theatre, it is important to network with makers outside of the theatre industry (e.g. woodworkers, 3D printers, etc.), so that we can experiment with their technology and possibly incorporate them into theatre-making.

END OF REPORT