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“Manufacturing a Renaissance:”
An Ethnographic Study of Controlled Creativity in Singapore

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelor of Arts in Interdisciplinary Studies from
The College of William and Mary

by

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There is a unique bronze sculpture in Singapore called the “Fountain of Wealth.” It stands more than 42 feet high and was once listed by the *Guinness Book of Records* as the “World’s Largest Fountain.”¹ It is called the “Fountain of Wealth” because it is shaped like a massive brass ring (or in this case, a bronze ring) already caught and kept in the palm of the winner’s hand. It has become a tourist attraction because there is a belief that those who circle the fountain three times, while touching the waters, will become wealthy. I use the “Fountain of Wealth” as a metaphor for Singapore’s quest to become a “global arts city.”² The structure of the fountain represents the nation’s formulaic approach to an arts renaissance, and the tale of circling the waters to find fortune is the allure of Singapore’s new campaign of becoming a global cultural center. At first glance, Singapore’s artistic transformation appears amazing, just like the sheer size of the “Fountain of Wealth.” There is an abundance of cultural festivals and theatrical performances – a veritable waterfall of opportunities – yet I noticed that the longer I stayed in Singapore, the more I realized that the lure of wealth and artistry is actually a fabricated manipulation and that shiny ring was really a lasso used to corral creativity into a standardized enclosure.

Unlike an artist who waits for inspiration to strike before creating, Singapore is the arts manager concerned about the business side of artistry and has already designed a plan to gain world recognition as a global center for the arts. Just like the fountain, which was designed around the principles of *feng shui*, where everything has a place to promote balance and harmony,³ Singapore developed a master plan in 1990, called the Renaissance City Report, to place itself at the forefront of the arts world. The Renaissance City Report is a how-to guide on developing culture and the arts in a

“Renaissance Singapore.” Like visitors who circle the “Fountain of Wealth” three times, officials have redesigned Singapore’s artistic master plan three times, hoping for success. Officials currently have their sights set on 2015 when the government expects to realize its goal of bringing Singapore “one step closer to being a Distinctive Global City for Culture and the Arts” as well becoming an “International Magnet for Talent.”⁴

The act of a government controlling its own artistic transformation seems to go against the very idea of creative freedom. Yet that is how Singapore is manufacturing its renaissance, through controlled creativity. Singapore’s renaissance is like a manufacturing plant where the Renaissance City Reports are the blueprints, the local artists are the factory workers in an assembly line, and their creations (dances, plays, films, or music) must fit certain molds that feed through the machine that is Singapore. Dr. Kirpal Singh is a professor of creative thinking at Singapore Management University and says that “an over-conscious approach to anything tends to destroy that very thing or at least reduce its impact and originality.”⁵ Therefore, Singapore’s rigid approach to artistic achievement clamps down on innovation instead of fostering it.

It was Singapore’s promotion of a cultural blossoming that drew me to study there from August to December 2010. I enrolled in an exchange program at the National University of Singapore (NUS) with the goal of researching modern dance. I wanted to see how an art form that had been developed in America would translate, transform, and be appropriated by Singaporeans. I took dance classes, attended various performances, and expected to interview local dancers and choreographers, but I had a tough time getting anyone to talk to me. Although at the time I was frustrated by their silence, I now realize that their reluctance to speak actually spoke volumes about the culture of

repression in Singapore. This essay encompasses the three ways I observed creativity and control in Singapore: the first details my experience with silence while in Singapore; the second focuses on a film I made about a Singaporean performer; and the third documents how I transformed what I learned about Singapore into a dance.

I initially made contact with Ecnad, a modern dance group that formed in 1996. I emailed the company while I was in the United States, requesting an interview and received a response agreeing to one when I arrived in Singapore; however, when I arrived and requested a specific date and time for an interview, I never got a response. I then started taking classes with T.H.E. (short for The Human Expression) Dance Company, a modern dance group that formed in 2008. I asked several times if I could interview the company's founder about what it was like to be an artist in Singapore, but was ignored. I made my first request after a class that the founder's wife taught. She told me to send her husband an email but I never got a response from him. So after the next class, I went up to the founder and personally asked him for an interview. However, he subtly avoided engaging in conversation with me by saying that I needed to speak with the company's media spokesperson. I asked when I could meet with the spokesperson and was told he would show up at one of the following classes, but he never did.

Not only did I try talking to those two professional modern dance companies, but I also attempted to interview the members of the student dance groups I had joined at the National University of Singapore. I asked to interview the choreographer of NUS Dance Ensemble. He agreed to an interview before our next class, but we never spoke because he arrived late to that class and then left before I could catch him. He also failed to show up for the next few classes and when I emailed him to reschedule the missed interview,

he never responded to my request. I also tried to speak with the president of NUS Dance Synergy, but she was reluctant to talk with me because she did not believe that student dancers had the authority to comment on Singapore's artistic vision. I was not able to convince her that students should be seen as budding talent and that their views are important, because they are the next generation of Singaporean artists. Singapore's talent base is also so small that local dance companies often request help and gain new members from current university students.

I also met with silence from the organizers of Singapore's da:ns Festival. Since the event is supposed to highlight the diversity of dance opportunities in Singapore, I thought someone would surely want to talk with me and promote the festival. I emailed the marketing department of the da:ns Festival requesting an interview and received a response asking for a list of questions. Because I wanted personal interaction and not electronic correspondence, I asked one of my professors at NUS if she could get me in touch with a person face-to-face since she had connections with the festival organizers. However, her assistance only got me another email requesting the name of the person who originally responded to me. Perhaps that person got in trouble for even answering my original email. I will never know because even though I sent in a list of questions and the name of my original contact, I never got a response granting an interview. My professor at NUS apologized for not being able to connect me with anyone and said she did not know why everyone was being so "tight-lipped."⁶ I was also confused by the silence because with the recent government endorsement of a 'Singapore Renaissance' I assumed everyone would be eager to talk about all the opportunities supposedly surrounding them.

So why was everyone being so quiet? One reason could be what anthropologist P.H. Gulliver calls “avoidance behavior.” It is the act of avoiding a person or situation to prevent conflict or a negative reaction that, in the case of Singapore, pits artists against lawmakers. In Singapore, the government wants to appear open to creative expression so artists put on a semblance of satisfaction with the rules, but there is conflict between what they want to do and what they are allowed to do. One example is the government’s position on graffiti. Singapore wanted to show it had a progressive attitude by sanctioning graffiti, but then dampened the effect by only allowing it on designated “graffiti walls.” In essence, the Singaporean government took away the freedom of space and mobility that artists normally enjoy when they create. In the summer of 2010, Singapore’s stand on graffiti was in the media spotlight when a Swiss man was sentenced to caning after tagging a subway car. The man’s lawyer argued that the graffiti was graphic art and pointed out that subway workers did not report the incident for several days because they thought the brightly colored graffiti was an advertisement⁷. The man on trial had previously sprayed on state-sanctioned graffiti walls but he wanted more freedom and mobility of expression. His arrest shows how Singapore’s artistic renaissance is really only a label that allows creativity in a controlled environment and that state censorship breeds silence and conformity.

The dancers, choreographers, and festival organizers I tried to interview may have been using subtle tactics of avoidance, such as not responding to emails, so as not to stir up trouble for themselves. T.H.E., Ecnad, and the da:ns festival all receive government funding and Ensemble and Synergy are part of NUS, which is a state school. Artists who appreciate the current promotion of culture do not want to lose government support, so

activities that could disrupt the system are ignored. The problem with such an avoidance attitude is that “nothing is done directly to attempt a resolution of the issues.”⁸ Avoidance behavior becomes acceptance of the dominance and control of the Singaporean government and controversy, which could be a catalyst for creative change, is repressed.

Singapore is known for its many rules and regulations, and is jokingly referred to as a “fine nation”⁹ because of the many fees associated with different acts that constitute breaking the law. Some of those punishable acts include jaywalking, littering, and the sale of chewing gum. The habitual compliance of citizens to obediently following the rules and not speaking out against them may be another reason why no one would talk to me. By not publicly complaining against restrictions and allowing the system to simply guide their lives, Singaporeans lost the power of their voices and willingly became silent cogs in a machine. The acceptance of authority is contrary to creativity because true genius oversteps conventional boundaries to push society forward into a new direction and “without creativity there can be no real progress.”¹⁰ I was hoping to discover that the country’s recent support of the arts meant that its reputation for repression was unfounded, but my experience with silence only confirmed Singapore’s reputation for censorship. Singapore may claim it allows total artistic expression, but it still controls creative output in the form of a regulatory body known as the Media Development Authority. One of the MDA’s functions is to “ensure that content meets with community standards [and] relies on public feedback to be alerted to possible breaches.”¹¹ So not only does the government repress deviation, but it also expects its citizens to police each other, creating a society that fosters conformity.

A final reason why people may have been hesitant to talk to me may be because I was still considered an outsider or a stranger. I was only in Singapore for four months and since it was my first time in the country, I was constantly introducing myself to new people and customs. While there I began to lay the groundwork for a network of key informants, but ethnographic studies usually take multiple visits to document a culture. Anthropologist Wayne Fife writes that long term observations “are necessary [when doing fieldwork] in order to gain some understanding of the unwritten ‘rules’ that govern human interactions among a specific group of people.”¹² I was told by one of the student dancers in NUS Dance Ensemble that I should have studied there for a whole year because new members do not get to perform until their second semester. Theatre historian Joseph Roach writes that performance can allow cultural transmission through a shared memory of collective participation and that kinesthetic awareness – bodily knowledge, habit, custom – is distinctive from textual knowledge.¹³ Performing on stage together creates a special bond between dancers, and that is an experience I missed out on, which could have strengthened my relationship and opened the lines of communication with the student dancers. Dance is a physical process and perhaps a shared experience of moving on stage, without the need for words, could have deepened my understanding of Singaporean artists.

It was only through a chance encounter with another American that I was able to interview a Singaporean performer named Gani Karim, and get an emic or “insider” perspective on life as an artist in Singapore. Linda Tom is the American I met who helped me out. She married a Singaporean guitar player, named Dominic Wan, who has worked on several musical projects with Gani. Without Linda and Dominic’s friendship I

would have remained on the periphery of the local arts scene, but they helped me gain access to and the trust of an established Singaporean performer that I had been unable to get on my own.

Gani agreed to be the subject of a short ethnographic film I made in the fall of 2010. The film was the final project for a Visual Anthropology class I was taking at NUS. The assignment was to film a personal portrait of an individual, and during the process I learned how filmmaking can enhance field research (capturing actions that can be seen and heard over and over again) as well as distort it (the act of editing a film and picking and choosing what to portray). In the film, *Reflections of Gani*, he appears to be very open about life as a Singaporean performer, but it is important to notice what is not said, and to focus on the images as well as the words, to gain a more complete story.

I initially thought Gani made a great subject because, as a multiple minority individual, his life story would be about resistance to the Singaporean culture of control. He is an artist, which he says already puts him on the “fringes of society”¹⁴ and he is categorized as a racial minority. But despite Gani’s willingness to speak on camera, he avoided truly expressing his feelings whenever we approached a controversial subject. For example, when Gani talks about his childhood, the light-hearted tone of his voice does not reflect the real pain of the ridicule he experienced being born of “mixed parentage.” He even laughs when he describes being cast as the “monkey god” because he was “the only dark one in an all [yellow-skinned] Chinese neighborhood.”¹⁵ Gani’s reluctance to express dissatisfaction with the racial politics in Singapore continues my theme of avoidance behavior to prevent clashing with the Singaporean government. Asian Studies author Carl Trocki writes that Singapore’s attempt to create a multiracial

society is actually a “way for social management.”¹⁶ Those who dispute Singapore’s multiracial system are seen as instigators of “racial violence...[and a]...threat to Singapore’s ‘survival’”¹⁷ Gani’s hesitation to speak out about the prejudice he experienced is self-preservation under a controlling government.

Gani’s work as an artist should provide him with an outlet to express resistance. When performers step on stage they transcend social boundaries and can become an accepted ‘other.’ Art normally provides the opportunity, as W!ld Rice Artistic Director Ivan Heng has said, to “imagine other possibilities.”¹⁸ But voicing resistance under the guise of theatrical role-playing can lead to punishment in Singapore in the form of funding cuts. The W!ld Rice theatre company is known for producing edgy plays with political themes. It recently staged *Animal Farm*, with Gani playing Boxer, the horse that represents the loyal laborer. Heng says George Orwell’s tale parallels the Singapore experience and the issue of power. Heng likens the pigs’ revolt to post-colonial Singapore after British rule, and the pigs’ manipulation of rules to Singapore’s authoritarian government.¹⁹ The comparisons angered officials in Singapore which is why W!ld Rice was punished with reduced funding this year. The chief executive of Singapore’s National Arts Council stated that the cuts were necessary to “weed out critical or non-conformist views,”²⁰ but by setting boundaries on critical expression the government is also setting boundaries on imagination.

Singh has expressed reservations about the government’s materialistic approach to the arts.²¹ He believes that for true creativity to flourish, the Singaporean government must deviate from its business model plan for the arts which is more concerned about the bottom line: art for money, rather than art for art’s sake. The original Renaissance City

Report justified supporting the arts because of the possibility of future economic gain. And the second report included a chart detailing the role of various government agencies to promote “Arts for Arts’ Sake” or “Arts for Business’ Sake.”²² Singaporean artist, Amanda Heng, is also worried about the fast pace of the country’s ‘renaissance’ plan. In an interview with *The New York Times*, Heng said that true art must be nurtured over time, not forced to happen,²³ and that by following a formula to jump start a renaissance, Singapore has created a paradox over wanting creativity and demanding control at the same time.

Singapore’s cautious government is a reflection of its Chinese majority and leadership. According to a recent Singapore census conducted in 2010, the Chinese make up 74% of the population followed by 13% Malay and 9% Indian.²⁴ Historian C.M. Turnbull writes that Singapore’s first Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew, who is of Chinese descent, set up the government based on strong Chinese traditional values: “insistence on discipline, hard work, competition, self-reliance, respect for worldly success, and desire for material gain.”²⁵ In 1965, when Singapore found itself thrust into independence after separating from Malaysia, Lee set himself up as the ‘father’ guiding a fledging nation. Historian James Minchin writes that Lee publicly cried during a televised press conference announcing the separation, and tears continued to flow for days after “once [the] island suddenly found itself alone in the world,”²⁶ but the Singaporean people supported Lee and their allegiance meant that Lee, going forward, “had no need to justify or excuse the running of Singapore as a tight ship.”²⁷ Terry McCarthy, a journalist who specializes in East Asia, writes that “Lee lives by the conflict theory of management: you

either dominate or are dominated.”²⁸ But Lee’s philosophy of control, while positively turning Singapore into a successful economy, has been lopsided.

The past push for economic gain has turned into a present-day realization that despite its wealth, Singapore has become a nation of followers and not leaders. Singapore has been struggling with the repercussions of blocking creativity: it can mimic, but not innovate. As Trocki describes, “One unfavourable side-effect of the government’s careful management of society has been the stifling of initiative.”²⁹ Singapore is considered a clean, orderly, Westernized, and English-speaking oasis compared to the rest of Asia. But in its attempt to create an ideal environment for its citizens, officials also scrubbed away any semblance of originality to create a controlled society. Ethnomusicologist, Katherine Meizel, says that in the United States “failure is part of the American Dream narrative [because mistakes only fuel ambition] to get up again and try to succeed.”³⁰ But I learned a Chinese expression from a classmate at NUS, Benjamin Low, who is also a musician, that he says describes the Singaporean philosophy to failure: “it is better not to do anything than to fail.”³¹ The saying seems to sum up Singapore’s aversion to risk and why its attempt at a renaissance only scratches the surface. Without allowing artists to truly test boundaries or fall down, Singapore is closing itself off from creative genius and inspiration.

Throughout the film, *Reflections of Gani*, Gani talks about his faith and how it influences his performances. By using music or performance as a focal point to turn into oneself, Gani gains strength and escapes or transcends the government’s restrictions on creativity. Ethnomusicologist Philip Bohlman writes that “musical and religious practices actually repair the disenfranchisement and resist the crush of colonialism and global

cultural economies.”³² The Singaporean government endorses all religious practices as a way to prevent clashes in a multiracial society, and by linking his performances to a religious experience; Gani is legitimizing his artistic expression through the government’s tolerance of all religions.

During the process of filming Gani, I discovered that despite his openness to talk about religion, performing, and his family, he remained silent about his social life. Although I spoke with Gani about his love life off-camera, he was reluctant to talk about it on film. That is why I chose to use pictures of Gani in extravagant costumes and makeup, and then included the pole-dancing, to imply his homosexuality yet never have it verbally confirmed. It is the attitude Gani has adopted in his own life. He has not officially “come out” to his family as a gay man, yet they know without him having to say anything. Gani’s reservation about discussing his sexual preference is a reflection of Singapore’s prohibitive stance on homosexuality.³³ The nation even has a penal code – section 377A – which criminalizes sexual activity between men.³⁴ However, Singapore’s government has in recent years realized that its discrimination against alternative lifestyles helped create the artistic vacuum it is now trying to fill. Even Lee Kuan Yew has spoken about tolerance toward gays because “homosexuals are creative writers, dancers. If we want creative people, then we have to put up with their idiosyncrasies.”³⁵ Lee’s comment is like a parent who is resigned to teenage acts of rebellion as long as the child remains in school and gets good grades. The catch is that for gays in Singapore, there is still the penal code that could be enforced, making them criminals, so gays know they live under an appearance of tolerance, but in reality, remain marginalized.

Gani approved of my hinting at his homosexuality and I felt it was necessary, because as an ethnographic filmmaker, it is important to portray the subject as ‘whole’ as possible. I viewed my film as an academic media text, but I learned firsthand that despite Singapore’s claim of supporting the arts and diversity, even scholarly research can be seen as ‘threatening.’

The professor at NUS, Jacqueline Elfick, who helped produce *Reflections of Gani*, originally wanted to have “NUS Department of Sociology” listed alongside her name in the movie credits. But after she showed my film to the department chair and several other faculty members, she was told that the film was “too controversial” and that the NUS Sociology Department did not want to be affiliated with the project. The concern was that Gani could be seen as “queerifying Islam”³⁶ because he is a gay Muslim artist and the other NUS professors feared a backlash from the Singaporean Muslim community, despite Gani’s consent to his portrayal in the film. My intention was not to create controversy but anthropologists Ilisa Barbash and Lucien Taylor write that “the very act of filming is a political endeavor” and it is important to keep in mind how “filming might affect people’s lives and relationships to each other.”³⁷ Despite my film being part of an academic endeavor, NUS school officials did not want to support it which led to a stifling of my expression as a scholar and as an artist. My own experience with repression gave me a personal understanding of the process of self-censorship artists in Singapore deal with on a constant basis. I had to come back to the United States before I felt I could once again express myself freely.

Since returning, I have shown my film to other people and there is a more positive response here than in Singapore. In fact, most people do not find any controversy

at all between Gani's faith and his sexuality. The responses I have received have focused more on Gani's performing abilities in dance and singing. People have told me that they see my film as offering an artistic view of Singapore which contrasts with the country's normally staid image.

Filming a Singapore performer offered me more insight into the role of creativity in Singapore, but it was only when I returned to the U.S. that I truly felt released from a restrictive box.

I used my experiences of artistry and expression in Singapore to choreograph a dance that would reflect the monotony lurking beneath Singapore's inviting exterior. The goal was to employ dance as a way to embody the controlled creativity of Singapore. Anthropologist Mary Douglas writes that "the human body is always treated as an image of society and that there can be no natural way of considering the body that does not involve at the same time a social dimension."³⁸ Dance can allow an experience of a society, without words, by adopting a kinesthetic approach to understanding culture.

Before traveling to Singapore, I already had in mind a dance with a trio to represent the country's three main ethnic groups: Chinese, Malay, and Indian. I originally saw the dance as a way to celebrate the cultural diversity in Singapore, but while there I noticed the racial tensions simmering underneath the veneer of multiculturalism. Even though Singapore promotes a unified national identity, it also creates social isolation by forcing citizens to identify with an ethnic category: Chinese, Malay, or Indian. The dual nature of the Singaporean identity can be seen in the bilingualism of its people. The unifying language that everyone learns in school is English, but depending on a child's ethnicity they either also learn Mandarin, Malay or Tamil as their secondary or 'mother

tongue.’ Multiracial children, like Gani, are given the option to choose their secondary language, but their physical appearance typically places them in a specific racial category. For Gani, even though he looks Malay, his parents chose for him to learn Chinese since that is the dominant group. The Chinese majority receives preferential treatment and as historian Joseph Stimpfl writes, that has created resentment in Malays who find it hard to succeed under “Chinese control [because they are] forced to live in a Chinese environment.”³⁹

I decided to incorporate the subtle discrimination of racial minorities into the title of my dance. “Rojak,” is the name of a Singaporean dish – a fruit and vegetable salad in chili sauce – that is made up of a variety of ingredients. Rojak in Malay also means “mixed-up” and is a pejorative to describe multiracial children. The term has since been reappropriated by people like Gani, who identify with a “Rojak Nation,” to celebrate their unique blend of ethnic heritages. My use of the term “rojak” also reflects Singapore’s postcolonial society. A former British colonial port, Singapore is a blurring of East and West creating a hybrid nation. Marwan Kraidy, a professor of global communication, defines hybridity as involving “the fusion of two hitherto relatively distinct forms, styles, or identities, cross-cultural contact, which often occurs across national borders as well as across cultural boundaries.”⁴⁰ Because of globalization, cultural fusion – or being a hybrid – is seen as a positive instead of a negative.

The music I chose for the dance was created by a Singaporean composer named Mark Chan, who coincidentally left Singapore for more artistic opportunities in Hong Kong. The song is called “Aku Berdo’a” which in Indonesian means “prayer.” Gani sang back-up vocals on the song and it was used in one of his stage performances. I chose the

song as a tribute to Gani and his faith (the title “Prayer”) and also because I thought the song had a meditative feel to it. I wanted the audience to be lulled into a sense of security just like the citizens of Singapore without realizing the true meaning of the song’s lyrics:

When I closed my eyes slowly
 I heard voices flowing into my heart
 Voices of death
 Unhappy voices of dead people

Lives were cut off
 They have eternal hatred
 It stays forever inside their soul, inside their body
 For the buried people
 At the end of death’s road, there is a door of life.

I prayed, I prayed
 I prayed for them
 I prayed⁴¹

In my dance, “death” in the song lyrics symbolizes the repression of creativity and the “unhappy voices” are the Singaporean artists who keep silent about their discontent and “it stays forever inside.”

Singapore has a paternalistic government, so the choice of three female dancers expressed resistance to Singapore’s patriarchal society and allowed me to translate “the female body [into] a text which could be read as a cultural statement about gender/power relations.”⁴² The costumes of the dancers were bright pink, purple and blue and they wore makeup that emphasized their eyes because I wanted to give them a striking appearance, a façade of beauty, which in reality was a mask. The dancers’ costumes and makeup are meant to distract the audience from the repetitive movements the dancers are performing. Every motion is repeated to each side, and the dancers all maintain a certain prescribed distance between each other to represent the controlled environment of Singapore. There are no surprise counts or actions in the dance because the intention is symmetry, unity,

and conformity to mimic Singapore's planned renaissance. It was a challenge as a choreographer to keep the movements so balanced, because we do not naturally move in perfect formation, but I needed to convey the monotony and boredom of controlled creativity.

The dance starts with the trio moving slowly in unison: from a kneeling position, the three bow, and then lift their arms up in a position of submission. The dancers seem to offer no resistance until they stand up, run together, and then break apart. One dancer drops to the ground pushing and sliding backwards, another spins several times, and the last turns to face the back, twists slightly to the audience, and then moves her arms over her head diagonally. The unison in the beginning represents the compliance of Singaporeans with the authoritarian government. When the dancers break apart, it symbolizes the attempts of artists to express their creativity and individuality, but they do not succeed because there are too many restrictions, rules, and regulations. So they fall into place, like the dancers end up doing, shuffling along behind each other.

It is interesting to note that in Singapore, there is a separation between what is "Western" and "Asian." Western dance includes ballet and modern and Asian dance encompasses all of the traditional folk dances from Singapore's surrounding Asian neighbors. Currently, Singapore gives preferential treatment to Western dance companies. I noticed the bias while attending the da:ns Festival at the Esplanade, Singapore's premiere performing arts venue, from October 8-17, 2010. European dance companies from France (Lyon Opera Ballet), Spain (Eva Yerbabuena Ballet Flamenco), and the United Kingdom (Hofesh Shechter Company) all performed in the Esplanade Theatre, the main stage which is also the biggest. Meanwhile Singaporean dance companies (such as

the Singapore Dance Theatre), and other Asian performance groups (dancers from Bali, Cambodia, and Japan), were relegated to smaller side stages inside and outside of the Esplanade complex.

One reason for the unequal treatment of dance groups could be that Singapore strives to be recognized as a global arts center, on the same level as New York City, London, and Paris. And modern and ballet are the promoted dance forms there, not Asian dance styles. Those cities are also popular destinations for Singaporeans to study abroad, and only the best and brightest go to those places because there is a merit system when assigning destinations for students. Meritocracy is a core belief of Singapore's Minister Mentor, Lee Kuan Yew. Trocki writes that Lee believed "it was necessary for the government to nurture an elite [and]... The members of this elite had to be selected on the basis of merit [which] became one of the guiding principles of the educational system."⁴³ The elite can only gain elite status after they have traveled abroad and it is that desire for foreign approval that sometimes makes it hard for local Singaporean artists to gain recognition at home. Gani told me artists have to get approval overseas first because Singaporeans do not have an appreciation for the performing arts.⁴⁴

Another reason is that Singapore is still cultivating its artistic talent and its dancers are not yet of the same caliber as foreign artists. The founder of T.H.E. Dance Company, Kuik Swee Boon, and many dancers in NUS Dance Ensemble and NUS Dance Synergy only started dancing when they became university students. Singaporean men also get delayed two years before they can start higher education. When they turn 18, Singaporean men must undergo military training called "National Service." The lag in dance training affects a dancer's flexibility and technique. Gani also told me that growing

up in the 1970's there were no institutions in Singapore to study the performing arts, such as the LASALLE College of the Arts which was founded in 1984.⁴⁵ Tommy Koh, Singapore's Ambassador-at-Large and arts supporter, describes the Singapore Renaissance as a transformation from "cultural desert to "cultural oasis."⁴⁶ But the rapid push for the arts in a relatively short period of time, only 20 years starting in 1990, has created a gap in what the government promotes and what Singaporean artists can achieve because of limited training.

Since foreign artists are considered better talent, Singapore expects their performances to attract a larger audience and sell more tickets. The preferential treatment of Western dance companies at the Esplanade is a symptom of the government's view of the arts as a revenue source rather than as true cultural inspiration. Sociologists Kian-Woon Kwok and Kee-Hong Low wrote about Singapore's renaissance and its cultural policy. They note that the Esplanade (which opened in 2002), is run "like a corporate company taking care of the business bottom line."⁴⁷ Their view is shared by one of my professors at NUS. Evelyn Ng is a native Singaporean who teaches Theatre Studies and also helps organize events at the Esplanade. She told me that festivals at the Esplanade are planned according to a formula, so the performances are just slots to fill instead of a true interest in promoting the arts.⁴⁸

Evelyn was one of the first people to make me aware of the creative restraints Singapore imposes on artists. It was a joke, among my friends and family, before I left for Singapore to warn me "not to get arrested" because the only thing they knew about Singapore was the caning of American teenager Michael Fay in 1994 for vandalism. Yet the possibility of arrest was no longer funny when I was actually in Singapore. While

discussing our final project (a short film) Evelyn warned the class, in all seriousness, not to get arrested. She told us not to film in subway stations because some former students had done that and she had to go to the police station to get them. She also told my class that if we did get arrested, she would pretend not to know us. The last comment was meant as a joke, but behind the laughs there was still the very real threat of possible arrest. I also had a Thai language professor who spoke the name of the current Prime Minister of Singapore, Lee Hsien Loong, during class. She was harmlessly using his name in a sentence demonstrating correct grammar, but she proceeded to nervously giggle and then looked around the room carefully to see if there were any cameras recording her voice or image. The professor did not say anything offensive about the government, but her apprehension reflects the self censorship and denial that is a normal part of life in Singapore.

The movements in my dance were inspired by a combination of my own dance background (I was trained in ballet, modern, jazz, tap, and Thai classical dance); the dance companies I took class with in Singapore (T.H.E. Dance Company, NUS Dance Synergy, and NUS Dance Ensemble); and the performances I saw at the Esplanade's da:ns Festival. However, my main influence comes from the choreographer of NUS Dance Ensemble, Zaini Mohammed Tahir. His dance style is a fusion between Asian and Western dance forms, specifically his training in Luigi jazz technique, ballet, modern, and Indonesian classical dance. When I went to Singapore to study modern dance I wanted to see how the American art form had been appropriated and Zaini Mohammed Tahir's movements were the only unique adaptations that I discovered. He blended the

Asian emphasis on swirling hand gestures with the Western focus on leg movements, such as pirouettes and leaps, to create a new form of Asian contemporary dance.

The movement style of NUS Dance Synergy and T.H.E. Dance Company was similar to what is taught in modern classes in America. The motions flow out of a ballet base and there are no intricate hand or arm gestures. The emphasis is also on contact with the floor. While the movements might have been familiar to me, classroom etiquette was uniquely Singapore. The dress code was the first difference I noticed. In America, dancers are encouraged to wear tight fitting clothing so teachers can see their bodies and correct their technique, but in Singapore the dress code is a loose shirt and sweatpants which hides the body. Another difference I noticed was class size. In America, the largest dance class I ever attended included about 30 or so students. Classes held at NUS were double that size. The goal of the class was not individual attention but a group experience. The style of teaching also differed in Singapore. In America, I am used to teachers creating different variations and routines for students to learn at every class. Whether it is at the barre in ballet or a new floor combination in modern, I expect to be challenged with something new. But that is not the case in Singapore; students learn a series of dance steps and then spend the rest of the semester perfecting the routine. The lack of variation ties into my view of Singapore as a place that mimics and perfects but does not innovate.

The choreography for my dance was a challenge at first for the dancers. They had never been exposed to Asian dance forms, so they were not familiar with moving their fingers and hands. One gesture that required a lot of practice was a hand movement called the "lotus." It was a motif used throughout the dance. It is a Chinese dance move that involves cupping the hands, palms facing, and then twisting the wrists so that the hands

pivot around each other – like a flower blossoming – before the hands are closed together in a prayer position. I used the motif of the lotus to symbolize Singapore’s cultural blossoming that keeps getting pruned back by government restrictions.

After the Dance Minors’ Concert on April 15 and 16, 2011, I asked audience members about their reactions to the performance. Most people remarked that the dance was “pretty” and commented on the vibrant eye makeup and colorful pants the dancers wore. Their comments confirmed that I had been successful in translating Singapore through dance – a place where monotony is covered up by artificial enhancements. Trance and ritual possession is an integral part of Indonesian dance ceremonies⁴⁹ and I tried to achieve a trance-like state with my dance. I wanted the music and the dancers’ movements to soothe the audience, just like the Singaporean government subdues artistic creativity. But instead of a calming effect, some people remarked that the energy of the dancers was what drew them into the performance and the music and movements just enhanced the effect.

Singapore has been described as a “red dot on the map,” but despite its small size, it has transformed into a financial powerhouse and has its sights set on becoming a global arts center. Although it has yet to release enough control so that true artistic creativity can flourish, many people have already been lulled into a belief that freedom has arrived. As my musician friend Benjamin told me, he sometimes “forgets” that he is not in a free country. My experience documenting Singapore’s controlled creativity through observations and interactions, filming a local artist, and choreographing a dance allowed me to peer through the façade that Singapore presents concerning its renaissance. For true cultural blossoming, there must be a loosening of restrictions and perhaps Singapore’s

acceptance of art and culture will foreshadow political changes to come for the tiny nation. The “Fountain of Wealth” combines metal (man-made machinery) with water (emotional outpouring) to create harmony in *feng shui*. True wealth for Singapore could be when its citizens tap into a fountain of creativity that is not restricted or enforced in any way by the government.

Notes

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