

YOUNG ARTIST
AWARD
2013

KOH HUI LING
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Born in 1979 in Singapore, Hui Ling began her theatrical pursuits with the Singapore Hokkien Huay Kuan Arts & Culture Troupe in 1988. In 2002, Hui Ling joined Drama Box as teaching assistant and made her theatrical directorial debut in 2007 in *MOMO*. In 2005, she founded Drama Box's education arm NeNeMas and later served as artistic director of Drama Box's youth arm ARTivate, mentoring and empowering youths with an interest in theatre-making and community theatre. Since 2012, Hui Ling has been Associate Artistic Director of Drama Box, overseeing all youth, education and community-related work within the company.

A recipient of the 2013 Singapore Youth Award, Hui Ling strongly believes in the power of drama in raising social awareness and developing civic responsibility. As a practitioner and advocate of applied theatre, Hui Ling creates theatre programmes which address social issues, promote social understanding and bridge communities. Such programmes include Forum Theatre *A.I.D.S* (2005), *Problem Gambling* (2006), and *Flies In My Ear* (2005) addressing at-risk youth issues, and *TOMORROW* (2011) focusing on issues faced by the elderly. In these Forum Theatre pieces, Hui Ling collaborated with different community groups to professionally engage and facilitate spectators and actors on and off stage to create an interactive platform for critical discussions of social issues.

Hui Ling also improvises drama techniques to facilitate language learning for teachers and students. She has developed and led numerous innovative Drama-in-Education programmes, such as *Blind Men & Elephant* (2006), as well as Theatre-in-Education programmes, such as *What Matters* (2008)

to deepen the understanding of theatre-making. She continues to be involved in NAC's Feed Your Imagination programme with Esplanade-Theatres on the Bay to connect the arts community with the education sector, and educate youths on social issues through theatre.

Her sensibilities and innovations in drama education and applied theatre have made her a sought-after speaker and advisor on the local and international stage. In 2007, she presented a paper, *Drama-In-Education in Chinese Language Learning in Singapore* at the 6th World Congress of International Drama/Theatre and Education Association (IDEA) in Hong Kong, and was later selected as International Researcher for Special Interest Group in the 7th World Congress of IDEA in Brazil in 2010. In the same year, Hui Ling graduated from University of Exeter (UK) with an MA in Applied Drama (Distinction).





A CONVERSATION WITH KOH HUI LING

How did you first get into the arts?

I started my theatre journey at a speech & drama class when I was 8 years old, and have been exposed to Chinese Language theatre ever since. I had great teachers who were also practitioners in the professional field (this I found out only later). At 19, I began my teaching journey at the place I grew up learning theatre and found my calling in Theatre/Drama Education—Drama Box. We had a youth group at the speech & drama school, and we created and experimented with our own theatre performances. This experience inspired my belief in engaging young people with the arts; and was what drove me to start Drama Box's youth wing, ARTivate.

My love for Community Theatre has definitely got to do with the atmosphere of being IN the crowd. I was first exposed to this when I performed in a Drama Box's community tour performance and the responses from these non-paying audiences were electrifying and magnetising. They reminded me very much of the old street wayang days and I was hooked ever since. I love being in the community, exploring and experimenting different levels of engagement methods through the use of theatre/arts.

What are the biggest challenges you face as an artist?

My field in Community Theatre/Applied Theatre seems to be relatively new in Singapore, although practitioners before me have done many works that were sadly undocumented. As such, one of the challenges is to understand the work and its value, which then impacts the language and understanding when we pitch or speak to sponsors. This, in turn, is linked to the financial sustainability of the projects and the company.

Another challenge is the issue of censorship. Many of my works push boundaries as I deal a lot with sensitive and marginalised issues and communities, and performance in public spaces. It is a constant struggle and negotiation with the authorities concerning the importance of bringing to light the challenges these marginalised communities face, the social responsibility we take on as artists and the faith and maturity of our audiences.

What motivates you to continue despite these challenges?

The community and people I work with; especially the non-theatre audience and performers. The smiles on their faces, their generosity in sharing their stories, and their humility. They always think I "teach" them so much, but they never realise that all of them are my teachers in life; I have learnt so much from them.



Photo Credit: Drama Box

When you set about creating a new work, what inspires you?

A story I have heard, a piece of news I read, a book I may have chanced upon. Because I do theatre that engages in social issues, observing the surroundings, the people and the society are keys to my work.

Describe a work you have produced that you love. How did you know it was ready to meet its audience?

I guess with many 'art works', a work is never ready until it meets the audience. Then the process of editing starts again, so I guess it is this constant creation-reflection-editing-recreating that keeps the work alive.

What do you hope your audience gets out of your work?

A different perspective of perceiving life and its possibilities.

What advice would you give if approached by an up and coming artist who wanted to learn from your experience?

"Talent is cheaper than table salt. What separates the talented individual from the successful one is a lot of hard work."
— Stephen King

WORDS OF APPRECIATION

“ I have always wondered if my mother ever regretted sending me to speech & drama class when I was 8 but without her belief in the arts, my sister and I would have led very different lives. So first of all, I would like to dedicate this Award to my parents for allowing me the freedom to pursue a career in theatre 10 years ago, accommodating my wilfulness. I certainly hope I have done them proud with this Award.

Next, to my loved ones for their unwavering support and understanding of my erratic schedules and late nights.

Thank you NAC and the panel for the recognition; I hope more practitioners who practise non-conventional theatre forms will be given this same attention in the future.

My mentor Kok Heng Leun who has given me the space to create, dream and experiment, for his time, advice and faith in me. To my lovely dearest comrades at Drama Box, Jo, Nicole, Amanda, Danny, Jiaying and Xuemei, without whom none of my works and dreams would have been realised. To the pioneer batch of ARTivate, for your passion and my crazy family in *Dua Dai Ji*, for being a constant creative stimulus. To all the practitioners who had been part of my practice, I am humbled by and grateful for your generosity in sharing of your ideas and ideals. Thank you for being an inspiration and being a friend.

Lastly, to all the partners and participants of my workshops and performances, thank you for teaching me about life. ”

Koh Hui Ling