

Theatre Changes Lives One Performance at a Time

In preparing for the project pitch, my group and I chose to engage the community of elderly workers in hawker centres, a choice that held deep significance for me. I have long been inspired to support working seniors in our society, and hawker centres felt like a natural focus, given their accessibility, necessity, and presence across Singapore's neighbourhoods. To understand their daily interactions, lived experiences, and challenges, I made observational visits to hawker centres in Chinatown People's Park Complex during lunch hours over the recess week. During the visits, I watched as the elderly hawker workers performed physically demanding tasks, such as standing for long periods, lifting tall trays, and cleaning numerous tables. Many appeared to be in their sixties or seventies, showing signs of fatigue and occasional irritation, possibly anticipating the end of a long workday. One elderly worker even had a brief argument with a young person over tray return rules! This firsthand observation deepened my appreciation for the elderly hawker workers' resilience and contributions to our community and reinforced my commitment to promoting empathy and respect for elderly workers in hawker centres through the pitch.

As the leader in the group's planning for the pitch, I conceptualized an immersive theatre experience set in open spaces of heartland malls to replicate the bustling atmosphere of a hawker centre. This choice of setting was deliberate, chosen not only to replicate familiarity but to evoke a visceral sense of shared space, where audiences could connect more authentically. Within this recreated environment, a performance comprising three vignettes spotlighting unique, challenging aspects of elderly hawker workers' lives would unfold. Each vignette reflects a different dimension of their daily

struggles—physical exhaustion, generational disconnect, and financial hardship—offering audiences a layered and comprehensive insight into their realities. To deepen engagement, I advocated for a participatory experience where audiences could actively shape the narrative progression through live action-based voting. By choosing the directions of each vignette, audiences would not merely be passive viewers, but they will bear partial responsibility for the unfolding of each story, fostering a sense of connection and accountability. This interactivity would be paired with Q&A sessions and one-on-one conversations with real elderly hawker workers, bridging the emotional gap between performance and reality. I also led my group to design other thoughtful touchpoints, such as a lucky draw with hawker food vouchers named after the elderly hawker workers, goodie bags as tokens of appreciation, and animated reflection stations, where audiences could pen words of encouragement to these seniors, providing a moment of introspection, reminding us of the power of simple gestures of respect and empathy. I felt I was effective in the role, and my group members were equally driven and proactive in contributing ideas to make the theatre concept creative while ensuring it resonated meaningfully with the audience. They conducted research on potential stakeholders to partner with for the pitch's execution, brainstormed ways to attract and retain audience engagement, conducted more hawker centre observations, and explored how we could better engage the elderly workers in hawker centres. Their contributions shaped each element, enhancing the immersive quality and grounding the pitch in both realism and relevance. Together, we refined the vignettes to capture nuances that might otherwise go unnoticed, moments that reveal not only the physical and emotional toll of the work but also their quiet resilience and humanity. After several weeks, we had our initial draft.

Reflecting on how the initial draft went, while it was challenging to coordinate our schedules and consolidate our ideas at times, it was incredibly rewarding to collaborate with like-minded individuals who shared a commitment to such a meaningful community engagement project. Working together, my group transformed a simple concept into a layered, immersive theatre pitch that was not only creative but deeply rooted in empathy and social awareness. Each team member's dedication brought unique insights and strengths, which collectively enriched the pitch beyond what any of us could have achieved alone.

The initial draft evolved into a stronger final pitch, inspired by a memorable moment in Workshop 5 when my group was tasked with creating two tableaux: one to illustrate potential crises elderly workers in hawker centres might face, and another to convey the team's pitch in engaging them. During discussions with Ms Peggy and other groups, I realized that my group could deepen our engagement with the community of elderly hawker centre workers by speaking with them more, listening to their experiences and insights, and gathering their reflections. I could compile a short video representing their stories to play at our theatre performance and even invite them to participate as characters in the play, bringing their voices directly to the audience. The discussions not only highlighted the challenges elderly workers in hawker centres face, such as disputes with rude people and criticisms of being slow, but also revealed moments of gratitude I believe ought to be amplified in our pitch, such as young people stepping in to assist them when they accidentally drop their supplies. These discussions were incredibly enriching, as they not only reinforced our core message—to cultivate greater public empathy for the challenges elderly workers face, fostering patience, respect, and a stronger sense of community harmony—but also provided invaluable insights to add into the final pitch.

After the final pitch, I felt a strong sense of accomplishment, as the insights gained throughout the process surpassed my expectations. I learnt that Theatre, when used responsibly for engaging communities, becomes more than a form of entertainment; it becomes a powerful bridge to connect people, address social issues, promote empathy, and foster collective understanding. The Theory of Change, a key framework for community-engaged theatre, clarifies how each step serves a greater purpose and demonstrates that theatre's impact grows when each action aligns with meaningful outcomes, making the journey as purposeful as the outcome. Collaborative leadership is also equally instrumental in community engagement, highlighting the importance of co-creation and shared respect in the overall creative process. By actively speaking and listening to the target community of elderly hawker centre workers and involving them in my group's key decisions, I witnessed how shared ownership deepened their connection to the project pitch, bringing authenticity and relevance to the pitch. Through storytelling and representation, I learnt how theatre gives a voice to the marginalised, sparks essential conversations to advance interests, fosters connection across divides, builds relationships, and helps communities become a little kinder and more understanding of one another.

GEN2001 has been a journey of discovery, revealing the Promise of Theatre in bringing positive change to society. My first takeaway is that theatre does not require dazzling performances or grand stages to make a lasting impact, as I once believed. Sometimes, it is as simple as a narrated script, an empty space, or a shared moment that invites reflection. In Workshop 1, I witnessed the duality of theatre and the profound power of dialogue and storytelling to evoke kinaesthetic empathy. Two classmates embodied Sharon, an insecure and domineering boss, and Ying Wen, an independent yet

vulnerable employee. Even though they were only reading from scripts, their energy, representation, and emotions made the scene feel incredibly real, bringing the tension between the characters to life. This surge of emotions was important to me because it allowed me to reflect on what I would do or how I would react if I were in such a real-life situation.

My second takeaway is that storytelling in theatre has the profound power to significantly transform and impact many lives, including my own, which I underestimated coming into the course. During Workshop 3, I encountered *The Giving Tree*, a seemingly simple children's story that delivers a profound message about love through selfless giving, resonating with people of all ages. By building a house prototype with papercut apples, cardboard branches and paper tree letters, it made me reflect on moments in my life when I have been like the boy, seeking support, and other times when I have been like the tree, giving freely. This was important to me as it highlighted the need to set boundaries to avoid feeling overwhelmed. Similarly, *The Giving Tree* has touched lives worldwide, inspiring numerous adaptations such as the Southeast CDC's Bonding Project in 2011, an Applied Drama initiative at Singapore Polytechnic in 2012, and the National Drama Conference in London in 2013, among others. These adaptations illustrate theatre's ability to convey universal truths, resonate with diverse audiences, reach out to people from various walks of life, and inspire a little hope to everyone around us.

My third takeaway is that theatre, when centred on community engagement, transcends mere entertainment to become a powerful catalyst for empathy, dialogue, and social awareness. I saw this not only in my pitch, but also in the work of other

impactful theatre groups that bring stories to life for the benefit of society. The Sensorium Theatre, for example, improves the lives of young people with disabilities by creating sensory-rich performances tailored to their needs. The Main Wayang Company brings Peranakan culture to the forefront through musical docudramas like *Siapa Baba*, using song and dance to build cultural awareness. The Glowers Drama Group crafts plays like *Kampong Chepedak* and *Chap Lau* to reconnect seniors with their heritage and foster a sense of belonging and optimism. The Theatre Arts Programme works with prison inmates, using theatre to improve language, rebuild character, and uplift individuals through values and self-expression. Each of these examples shows that theatre, when rooted in community, becomes a bridge between people, generations, and perspectives. It's about making space for voices, celebrating diversity, and sparking reflection. This is the power of theatre's community engagement: it doesn't just tell stories but it changes lives, one performance at a time.

My three takeaways reveal yet again the Promise of Theatre in bringing positive change to society. These lessons will stay with me beyond this course, shaping how I approach stories, engage with communities, and understand the world. The next time I see a play, I will recognize its deeper potential—not just as a performance, but as a force for empathy, awareness, and connection. Theatre has shown me that it can inspire us to care, to act, and to envision a better world. And that, I believe, is its greatest promise.

(1709 words)