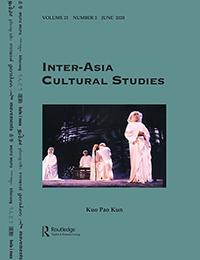
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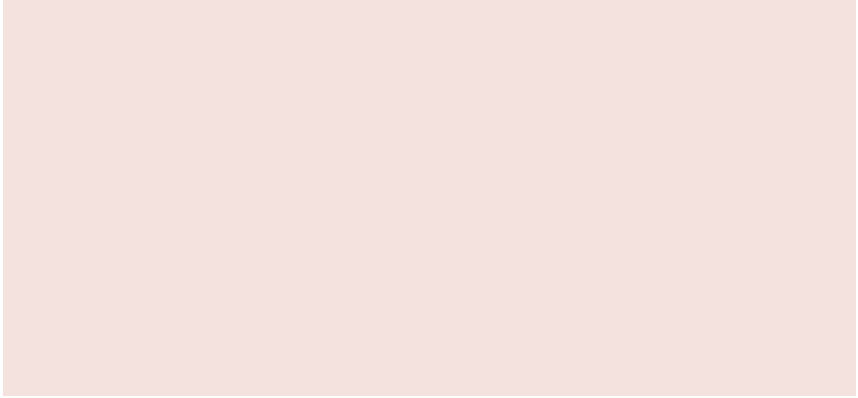
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Drawing from Grotowski and beyond: Kuo Pao Kun’s discourse on audiences in Singapore in the 1980s

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ABSTRACT

Much has been researched on Kuo Pao Kun’s multilingualism and multiculturalism. However, the analysis of Kuo’s discourse on audiences remains largely unexplored. Given his engagement with state policies on culture and identity formation, examining his discourse on audiences oﬀers a better understanding of both Singapore theatre and the Singapore state. Additionally, there is a need to make sense of the ways which theatre practitioners imagine audiences as it points to issues of subjectivity, audience participation and social engagement, especially in an economically driven society like Singapore where people are often positioned as economic subjects. Among the many Asian and Western dramatists Kuo drew inspiration from, Jerzy Grotowski was pivotal. This essay will also examine the impact of the latter’s ideas on how Kuo envisioned theatre and audiences.

KEYWORDS

Kuo Pao Kun; audiences and theatre; subjectivity; Jerzy Grotowski; cultural activism

The late Singaporean theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun (1939–2002) is well known for his commitment to multiculturalism, his humanism and his cultural activism. I focus on his discourse on audiences from his essays, speeches and published interviews by engaging with the following questions: how did Kuo see audiences? What social functions did he ascribe to theatre that would serve audiences? How did he understand the relationship between the artist and audiences? These questions are crucial, given his status as the “father of Singapore theatre” and moral stature among visual and theatre artists, stemming from a record of activism and artistic achievements (Wee 2004, 774).

The essay approaches audiences as a discursive category, following the argument that it is a “situ-ated role that people temporarily perform, and in their performance people produce representations of audiences” (Butsch 2008, 4). This understanding helps us to make sense of the implications arising from how and when Kuo was representing audiences and their relationships with artists. To better understand Kuo’s idea of audiences, it is useful to consider the various roles that he played. Other than being a playwright-director, he was also a public intellectual, arts reviewer, educator and cura-tor; he served on the consultative panels of government ministries. These diﬀerent appointments and experiences are closely related to his vision and practice of art, and that makes it impossible to dis-cuss his discourse on audiences in relation to a single or fixed role. Nor is it possible to focus solely on the texts in which the term “audience(s)” appears, for it is a social category that needs to be con-sidered in the light of the artist’s relation to society and the state. I therefore take an inclusive and contextualised approach to the archival matter that may carry implications of Kuo’s understand-ing of audiences.



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As the most important dramatist in Singapore theatre since the nation’s independence (Sasitharan 2000, 10), Kuo’s status is further boosted by his respected position as a representative of Singapore (regardless of race and language) in the global arena of cultural and intellectual exchanges (Quah 2002, 377). Given his social engagement as an artist and as an intellectual, it is all the more necessary to make sense of his discussions of audiences. First, no study has been carried out on this topic. Second, given Kuo’s engagement with state policies on culture and identity formation, examining his discourse on audiences oﬀers a better understanding of both Singapore theatre and the Singapore state. A study of Kuo’s ideas is a useful way to approach Singapore Studies. Third, the heart of Ray-mond Williams’s famous statement that “there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses” (1958, 289) points to the socio-political stakes extant in how audiences, as representations of people, are positioned. Williams wanted to produce a more radically democratic concept of cul-ture which challenged hierarchical classifications of people (Winter 2010, 46). Examining the rep-resentations of people in Singapore is highly charged because state discourse often positions people as the nation’s “only resource” (Mahizhnan 1999, 13; Lee 2015), and the state subjects the social body, following Foucault (1979), to “the repertoire of governmental techniques” of social cam-paigns, policies and the enactment of criminal laws (Comaroﬀ 2007, 64–65). It is within this context that I argue how Kuo’s understanding of audiences was, to a certain extent, a critique of the state disciplining of people to produce docile bodies (Foucault 1979, 138). His connection with the ideas of the Polish theatre director and theorist, Jerzy Grotowski (1933–1999), serve to clarify the former’s own stance on audiences.

This study largely covers the 1980s, after Kuo’s release from detention under the Internal Security Act in 1980. That decade is seen as a turning point for his theatre practice. Kuo himself asserted that the 1980s was a period when he came to see the use of theatre for reflecting and criticising life rather than as “part of a social-political movement.”1 C. J. W.-L. Wee suggests that while in detention, Kuo was disillusioned with the Cultural Revolution, and subsequently abandoned his earlier theatre practice not only because of his detention, but because he felt that the agit-prop theatre practice of the 1960s and 1970s no longer fitted the high-capitalist world of the 1980s (Wee 2012, xxx). In Kuo’s own words, pursuing the “Theatre that activates,” which “directly mobilises the audience to a high level of social and or political action—not always revolutionary but always actively contributing to the social and political change of the country,” had become unviable (Kuo 1996a, 171).2 This was largely due to the mass arrests of artists allegedly involved in anti-government activities in 1976, which contributed to the decline of a thriving Chinese theatre scene (Lo 2002, 397). While it is true that Kuo’s 1980s plays moved away from a more direct con-frontation with politics,3 this did not mean that politics ceased to matter to Kuo (Quah 2010, 148; Wee 2012). There is a continuity that can be traced in Kuo’s pre- and post-detention work.

This paper consists of four sections. First, I suggest that it is necessary to see how Kuo thought in the 1960s and the 1970s of the director’s role in forming community and contributing towards nation-building to gain a longer perspective of his artistic work. This is followed by sections on “live presence,” “communality” and “intellectualism.” Live presence is a key distinctive trait of theatre as Kuo, and is also closely related to the transience of theatre performance and the spon-taneity of audiences, and the relationship between the latter and performers. I argue that Kuo’s ideas of communality and intellectualism in the 1980s, both of which are made possible by the condition of live presence, are in fact a refashioning of his activism in the 1960s and 1970s. During Kuo’s detention without trial in 1976 for four years and seven months,4 he rediscovered Grotowski, whose ideas seemed pivotal to his post-detention artistic practice, given his renewed understanding of theatre as “more than a medium for criticism and education” (Kuo 1994, 60).5 While Grotowski’s influence on Kuo has been recognised (Jit 1990, 23–24; Wee and Lee 2003;

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Oon 2010; Wee 2012, xix), there is an absence of in-depth discussion of this topic, which would enable an understanding of how Kuo interpreted Grotowski for his own theatre practice and positioning of audiences.

While both dramatists were devoted to the creation of theatre which defied the conventions of their respective contexts, they diﬀered in emphasis and approach. Grotowski was primarily con-cerned with stripping theatre bare of its props by focussing on the corporeality of the practitioner, concomitant with the creating of “not-for-a-public ritual performances whose sources are almost totally ‘traditional’—that is, non-Western—cultures” (Schechner 1993, 246), and Kuo was more interested in positioning theatre as cultural reflection and intellectual engagement, drawing upon diverse Euro-Asian theatre traditions. Underlying the latter’s discourse was a humanism arising from a reflection on and critique of the Singapore state’s pragmatism and paternalism in a rapidly evolving capitalist-consumerist society.

Finally, this paper will illustrate how Kuo’s concepts of communality and intellectualism are inextricably intertwined within his artistic practice. Before the 1980s, Singapore theatre has been segregated linguistically into Chinese-, English-, Malay- and Tamil-language theatres. As a legacy of the colonial government’s divide-and-rule policy, this division extends to all segments of society and culminated in what sociologist Kwok Kian Woon described as “compartmenta-lization” (as quoted in Quah 2002, 378). Kuo’s discourse on audiences is not only closely related to his interventions in the oﬃcial top-down and non-integrationist multiracialism, but also challenges the subject positions set out by the state for Singaporeans through social engin-eering and arts policy for the formation of a particular idea of national unity.

The 1960s and 1970s: theatre as direct political critique

At stake during the 1960s and 1970s was the construction of Singapore’s new national identity. There arose the question of how diﬀerent racial and disparate social groups could come together as one. While Kuo was not directly involved in the student politics of the 1950s, the plays he subsequently wrote and directed were politically engaged. Quah Sy Ren notes that Kuo was inspired by the social idealism and activism in the recently established People’s Republic of China and by the anti-colonial struggle in many Third World countries (Quah 2010, 148).

Kuo’s cultural practice during this period was concerned with forging a sense of community with the displaced underclass, given their marginalisation in the government’s implementation of its post-independence economic agenda.6 The work produced was concerned with the struggles faced by the working class in Singapore.7 In 1965—the same year that Singapore became independent—Kuo and his wife, the ballerina Goh Lay Kuan, established the Singapore Performing Arts School (SPAS). Through staging multicultural performances in the early years of independence, they were already engaged in the practice of crossing ethnic and language boundaries (Quah 2002, 380–382). In 1971, the couple undertook what was called the “Go into Life” campaign, attempting to forge a relationship with the people who were the subjects represented in their plays—and also sought as audiences. Reminiscent of China’s “Down to the Countryside Movement,”8 SPAS students would spend time experiencing the life of the people from the lower classes in Singapore and West Malay-sia, which included workers, peasants, fishermen and clerical staﬀ.9 All this was undertaken in the spirit of “respecting those who labour,” even if it meant having to work through and accepting the suggestions of workers who did not not understand the practical issues in stagecraft.10

During this period, Kuo created a theatre that oﬀered an alternative approach to national identity formation, and his theatre urged audiences to be proactive in the building of an ideal home and

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nation, taking into account Singapore’s particularities (Quah 2010, 148). Fundamental to Kuo’s understanding of the “Theatre that activates” is the notion that theatre is a means for community building. His theatrical representation of a nation-state with its suppressed underclass struggling with quotidian challenges portrayed an image of Singapore contrary to the ideology espoused by the ruling People’s Action Party (PAP) government. Since independence, the latter had valorised the need for political pragmatism in relation to unremitting economic growth as its core goal; and growth was the best support for the socio-political stability necessary for national survival. An “ideology of survival” that served as the basic concept for the rationalisation of state policies was extended to the sphere of social life (Chua 1995, 4); and so, state policies on multiracialism and culture were linked to policy on economic development (Kong 2000; Bereson 2003). This oﬃcial ideology was epitomised by a form of performance Kuo described as the “Theatre that gov-erns” (Kuo 1996a) and according to Kuo, this is a “first rate political Theatre” driven by the “singular purpose of developing a highly focused … sense of nationhood, of togetherness” (Kuo 1996a, 169). This “togetherness” may be understood as “loosely observed mass loyalty to the nation” by the end of the 1980s (Chua 1995, 5), predicated by an oﬃcial divide-and-rule multiculturalism that categorised peoples into disparate racial or ethnic groups.11 In contrast, Kuo’s notion of communality can be understood as cultural resistance dedicated to the breaking down of barriers between diﬀerent groups and classes, and it was the live presence of theatre that shaped this understanding.

Live presence: precondition for communality and intellectualism

Grotowski’s (1968, 18–19) seminal work, Towards a Poor Theatre, raises a fundamental question: “What is the theatre? What is unique about it? What can it do that film and television cannot?” Kuo’s answer was that theatre’s live nature made it unique, and that what made theatre relevant to contemporary society. In his foreword to the programme of his 1982 Mandarin-language staging of the South African anti-apartheid play, Sizwe Banzi is Dead (1972), Kuo contended that it was the spon-taneity of theatre that distinguished it from television and film.12 Even though the images of these two media can be “remotely transmitted” across spaces, and that people can “backtrack in time” to review them, “[they] can never replace the most significant characteristic of theatre—the viewing of a play by audiences is a form of ‘live, direct participation’” (Kuo 2008 [1982], 25).13

During a 1982 forum on Singapore Chinese theatre, Kuo oﬀered a definition of this “live” charac-teristic: “Theatre is a live creation, live appreciation, followed by a live disappearance. The rehearsal period of a play can span from six months to even a year, but it is only actualised when it is per-formed in front of audiences” (as quoted in Chen and Zeng 1982).14 Central to the spontaneity of theatre is its transience and the presence of audiences; Kuo brought up in an interview most likely conducted between the late 1980s and the early 1990s: “A thousand people coming together for that moment of creativity, and you can’t do that without the audience, makes theatre a very, very special art form that I think is becoming increasingly important in contemporary society” (as quoted in Chia 2011, 43).15 It is only through an understanding of the conditions within which his theatre practice functioned that will allow us to appreciate what he thought to be at stake. The ruling party’s political pragmatism was a form of “instrumental rationality” that took citizens to be the city-state’s “only exploitable resource”—as “human capital” (Chua 1985, 31–33). Kuo thought that rapid economic progress and technological advancement had alienated people, and caused the mode of labour to be reductive, diminishing mental and physical activities. Television and film, whilst oﬀering the con-venience of seeing performance at home, reinforced a sense of “isolation” that denied people the

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opportunity for interaction; and so, being a member of an audience in a theatre could help eliminate this isolation (Chen and Zeng 1982).

Kuo drew inspiration from Grotowski from the 1980s onwards in his comprehension of the relationship between audiences and actors as being “nothing more than a confrontation between a naked actor and a single spectator” (Kuo 1994, 60): the confrontation is all that is “necessary in theatre to take place” (as quoted in Chia 2011, 43). This articulation was similar to Grotowski’s definition of theatre as “what takes place between spectator and actor” (1968, 32). For Kuo, this con-frontation was composed of “people’s sensitivities touching each other” (as quoted in Chia 2011, 43). However, Grotowski (1968, 19) claimed that theatre “cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, ‘live’ communion,” and is “an act engendered by human reactions and impulses, by contacts between people” (58). While what we have here is an ephemeral “commu-nion,” as people only become constituted as an audience when they enter the performance venue and come into “confrontation” with performers, after which they disperse, for Kuo it is—paradoxically— still the live presence in theatre that gives rise to the possibility of building communality and inspir-ing intellectualism in theatre.

Communality: humanising the alienated individual

Kuo argued that interaction was not only what defines the existence of theatre but is also, signifi-cantly, what fostered the “intimate” relations between people

because when the play is being performed, not only are the actors are interacting, but also the audiences oﬀstage, who are all interacting with and impacting one another. You will not be able to find this live creation and activity in other art forms. The mutual impact, collective creation, collective interaction of theatre is especially important in society today. (as quoted in Chen and Zeng 1982)

His thinking on theatre’s “collective interaction” was not only related to its supposed humanising eﬀects to alleviate the problems of urban alienation (Chia 2011, 43; Kuo 1996b), but, we will see, also associated with theatre’s capacity to enable critique and reflection.16 There was no conception of “art for art’s sake” for theatre, but rather, an (ongoing) insistence on the arts as a valuable social institution in a society in which “pragmatic” values were valorised.

Grotowski’s focus on what might be described as the spirituality of theatre audiences was for Kuo a way of humanising the individual in a capitalist society. However, Kuo did not constantly seek, in practice, the kind of involvement similar to “physical arrangements” in which actors performed among and within audiences often found in Grotowski’s productions. Nor was Kuo known to have actively practised the latter’s theatre of austerity that saw the use of lights, music and scenery as unnecessary (Grotowski 1968, 20). While Kuo brought his plays to “non-theatre” spaces like schools, community centres and shopping complexes in the 1980s (Ngui 1986)—a practice linked to his pre-detention, agit-prop theatre—he tended to stage performances in more conventional pros-cenium-arch theatres or in the black box (Kuo 2005). Additionally, unlike Grotowski’s disinclination to “satisfy a social need for contact with culture,” Kuo seemed more comfortable with the socialising function of the theatre, as it oﬀered the prospect of fostering communality.

In fact, in the mid-1980s, Kuo’s theatre company, then known as the Practice Theatre Ensemble, had even written to commercial companies and unions to suggest “theatre parties,” where employees could meet and socialise at plays, instead of the usual company barbecues and picnics (Ngui 1986). These eﬀorts may be read as attempts to increase audience outreach in the increasingly capitalist-con-sumerist 1980s, when film and television had become increasingly ubiquitous. Kuo observed how

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theatre actors and directors had quit theatre in great numbers and increasingly turned to the nascent television drama industry. The situation was so dire that there were only three to five Chinese theatre productions per year. The popularisation of television dramas greatly shook the confidence of theatre practitioners, causing them to feel that it was the end for theatre in Singapore (Chen and Zeng 1982). However, it was not audience quantity that Kuo was predominantly concerned with, but rather, the crucial interaction between artists and audiences.

Reviewing the open-air production of Medea in 1988, staged by the late William Teo (1957–2001), founder and artistic director of Asia-in-Theatre Research Centre, Kuo wrote warmly of how audi-ences continued to interact with players and other members of the audiences at the end of the play and eventually parted as “friends”:

Revelation! It was then that I finally found the word I had been groping for, for days.

Relationship.

Relationship is such an elusive word and so diﬃcult to define. Harder still to convince people that it is really important, because here in Singapore we are so preoccupied with facts and figures. (Kuo 1988)

His statement not only carried a tinge of nostalgia that alluded to a relationship between theatre practitioners and audiences that was more intimate in the past, but lamented that theatre had “trans-formed from an organic, community event into an alienated consumer item,” becoming “a blatantly consumeristic bond”: “Stripped naked, it looks something like this: advertisements canvass patron-age; money secures entrance; immediate parting after the show; no interaction between theatre-makers and theatre-goers, and less still among theatre-goers themselves” (Kuo 1988).17

Elsewhere, Kuo elaborated on his idea that the theatre is a vital platform where the audience, the creative impulse and the performative could coalesce:

From the perspective of performance, the intimate collectiveness stemming from people participating in the creation of a play, rehearsing and performing is precisely what is lacking in this cold, lonely society. Whether participating in a performance or watching one, we can be in touch with the community and strengthen our sense of community; our confidence will also increase. (as quoted in Chen and Zeng 1982)

In other words, it was through close interaction with audiences—building communality—that would enhance the significance of the work of theatre artists who were subjected to the compe-tition from television and film, and even challenge the idea of theatre as a consumer product. This stress on communality, as noted, harked back to the political engagement of his previous “Theatre that activates” undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s. An appreciation of theatre’s capacity during this period allows us to make better sense of Kuo’s discourse on audiences later in the 1980s. During the 1970s, audience numbers for Chinese theatre reached the tens of thousands for each production. For example, Singapore Children’s Playhouse18 had put up plays at the National Theatre for an audience about 3,400, and had restaged their production at least ten times, reaching more than 35,000 persons.19 The Rediﬀusion Youth Theatre Group also had a

production that witnessed an attendance rate of more than 20,000 in 1974 (Chen and Zeng 1982).20

According to Kuo, peddling tickets on the streets and in government housing estates had been a key outreach strategy that accounted for high audience turnouts in the 1970s (Chen and Zeng 1982). This meant bringing theatre to the people in a nearly literal sense. Additionally, audience engagement, as it were, was brought into the process of artistic co-creation, giving theatre a collec-tivist edge in the way fraternity was cultivated. As earlier noted, audiences were allowed to respond to preview and then respond to Kuo’s theatre productions in that period: “Workers from the

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various professions were often invited to advise us throughout the creative process; they and selected outsiders were also invited to critique our final work during and after the public perform-ances” (Kuo 1994, 60).21 It was only after multiple revisions and feedback sessions that the plays were finally staged (Chen and Zeng 1982; Quah 2005 , xviii-xix). The “worker friend” (gongyou) was a part of Kuo’s audience, a source of inspiration and criticism (Oon 2010). Kuo’s understand-ing of Grotowski in this regard thus also located the latter as the trailblazer who himself had imbibed and transformed Brecht’s assertion that “true art becomes impoverished with the masses and grows rich with the masses” (Kuo 2008 [1982], 26).22 Integrating communality and collective creation embodied the non-elitist ideal that saw audiences as equals, imagining them as thinking subjects imbued with the critical faculties to engage, create and question, rather than as consumers who “go to the theatre purely ‘to enjoy a good show’” (Kuo 1988).

Intellectualism: audiences as reflective and creative subjects

When Kuo thought of theatre’s capacity to provoke intellectual exchange, he went to Grotowski’s understanding that theatre audiences were a group whose spirituality and reflexivity should be developed:

At the core of Grotowski’s eﬀorts is to enable people to stand bare and naked on the stage, stripped of all obstacles, and allow audiences to be totally focused on the understanding and appreciation of the spiri-tual voices of humans. This kind of theatre is diﬀerent from the types of film and television that do not require us to exercise our mental faculties. (Kuo 2008 [1982], 26, emphasis mine)

Kuo also took the position that dance and music, though similar to theatre in inviting emotional exchange, lacked the ability to provoke intellectual dialogue (Chia 2011, 43). His confidence in the intellectual capacities of theatre audiences can be traced to as early as 1966, when he became the first theatre practitioner to introduce Brecht’s The Caucasian Chalk Circle to Singapore audiences (Lo 2002, 394–395; Quah 2002 , 380).

The staging of a Brecht play was seen as objectionable at the time, given the dominance of Sta-nislavskian realism in Singapore Chinese-language theatre—and Kuo recounts this in a 2002 inter-view (Quah and Tan 2011). As the lighting designer for the Old Tote Theatre Company’s staging of the same work, when Kuo was a theatre student at the National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) in Sydney, Australia, in the early 1960s, he was aware of the consequences of undertaking the destruc-tion of theatre’s fourth wall (Jit 1990, 14).23 His use of symbolic spaces on stage and the exposure of scene changes by the stage crew drew the ire of Stanislavskian followers (Jit 1990, 15; Quah and Tan 2011, 227). Kuo was chastised for staging Brecht, already denounced as a bourgeois dramatist in China and the Singapore Chinese theatre scene in the 1960s. Especially oﬀensive was the represen-tation of peasants as “unheroic figures” (Quah and Tan 2011, 227; Jit 1990, 15). Kuo recalled how he responded to the vitriol in Singapore that was fed by the political beliefs of the Cultural Revolution in China: “In a fit of anger, we restaged the play and left it to the audience to judge” (Quah and Tan 2011, 227).24 The play was restaged without changes, and the theatre “filled to capacity again” (as quoted in Lo 2002, 395). It can be seen that Kuo’s bold endeavour was driven by the assumption that audiences were capable of appreciating works that were seemingly diﬃcult.25 Importantly, it was a rebuttal against the politically-driven dismissal of the play simply because it as “formalistic theatre” (as quoted in Lo 2002, 395).

According to Kuo, his rendition of Brecht’s work was very close to realistic acting, and he then was “unaware of the aesthetic diﬀerence between Stanislavski and Brecht” (Jit 1990, 15). Whereas the

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former showed reverence for depicting the “real” as closely as possible, the latter rebelled against this by exposing how the real is not only theatrical artifice but also a matter of perspective for the audi-ence. Notably, Kuo did not totally eschew the methods of the former as his training at NIDA, rooted in conventional Western drama techniques, had reinforced his historically anchored practice of Sta-nislavskian naturalistic theatre (Jit 1990, 14–15). While he embraced the received values of natura-listic drama (Jit 1990, 15), the fact that he unapologetically restaged The Caucasian Chalk Circle demonstrated an intellectualism that challenged theatre convention and commonly held beliefs, dis-tinguishing Kuo from his peers in Chinese theatre.26

However, despite Kuo’s intellectualism, he was not against the idea of theatre as entertainment. In contrast, Grotowski believed theatre should be dedicated to the spectator with “genuine spiritual needs and who really wishes, through confrontation with the performance, to analyse himself” (Grotowski 1968, 40). Kuo was more moderate and non-elitist, for he thought it possible to fulfil the audience’s needs for both entertainment and critical thinking:

For a performance to attract audiences, the foremost [issue] is its entertainment value. However, the cul-tural levels of theatre audiences are higher and pure entertainment is insuﬃcient to satisfy their needs. While undergoing the process of cultural reflection, theatre audiences have even higher expectations. (Kuo 2007 [1989])

During the 1980s, when audiences of Chinese theatre in Singapore were dwindling, Kuo led his thea-tre group to perform xiangsheng (Chinese crosstalk), comedy and songs in 15 community centres (Ngui 1986), which could be understood as his answer to fulfilling diverse audience expectations.27 The use of humour in the plays he wrote in the 1980s also served this purpose of reaching a wide audience (Jit 1990, 21; 2000, 96).

What are the implications of how Kuo imagined his audience’s subjectivity, and the connections with his related idea of communality—and the need for a multicultural national identity? Against the attempts of the Singapore state to frequently represent and construct its people as “economic digits,”28 Kuo’s theatre practice was pivotal in the intellectual and creative turn towards renegotiating Singapore’s identity since the 1980s that took place in the arts—and principally in theatre until the late 1980s, when visual arts experiments became more pronounced. He stressed that theatre would serve the purpose of identity exploration: “We have to develop our character, minds and bodies; we have to look for identity in a new society, understand ourselves in a new light, and understand society. In an environment like this, the dramatic arts, particularly theatre, will be especially impor-tant” (as quoted in Chen and Zeng 1982).

After Kuo’s release from detention in 1980, the “new” not only meant a reflection of Kuo’s own artistic move away from the direct confrontation with politics. Key to his artistic practice was the presupposition that audiences were capable of appreciating symbols and images, instead of just relat-ing to direct commentaries on issues or events. Kuo called such theatre the “Theatre of allegory” (Kuo 1996a, 172–173) and argued that audiences could find theatre useful for making sense of their identity in a multiracial and multilingual society. In plays such as The Coﬃn is Too Big for the Hole (1984), Silly Little Girl and the Funny Old Tree (1987)29 and Mama Looking for Her Cat (1988), protagonists were depicted as subjects who reflected upon and undertook (indirect) critique of the social conditions within which they were trapped, and the plays ranged over issues of state bureaucracy, paternalism, modernisation and multicultural identity.

In No Parking on Odd Days (1986), Kuo used a Singapore vernacular speech constituted of diﬀer-ent languages that underpinned the uniqueness of the play. Significantly, the play exceeded Grotows-ki’s ideas on audiences. The latter’s acting exercises and methods were employed alongside language

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games in his creation and direction of the workshopped and devised Mama Looking for Her Cat, featuring a Hokkien-Chinese speaking mother who becomes estranged from her increasingly Eng-lish- and Mandarin-speaking children, the products of the state’s post-independence language pol-icies. Mama seeks solace by keeping a cat, and when she goes in search of her pet when it goes missing, she connects with a non-Mandarin-speaking Tamil Singaporean stranger, who has experi-enced similar problems with his own children. The play inspired a reflection of the communication systems and missystems in Singapore society (Jit 1990, 24). The state’s desire to develop Mandarin as the oﬃcial Chinese language, and to promote English as the new lingua franca in place of bazaar Malay, had consequences for family life. Mama attempted to display not only the consequences of language policies but also to reflect the actual multilingual condition of daily life. The key to con-sidering language in Kuo’s theatre practice is “how the performance in diﬀerent languages would be received by a linguistically and culturally diversified audience” (Quah 2002, 382).

Kuo also made the then-unusual move of getting culturally diverse actors to perform in Man-darin-Chinese, English, Tamil, Hokkien-Chinese, Cantonese-Chinese and Teochew-Chinese. Not only were the languages of Mama and the Tamil man mutually unintelligible, but there was also this bold assumption that the audience would be intelligent enough to have “understood the action” (Kuo 1996a, 172), regardless “whether the lines were fully intelligible” (Quah 2002, 385). This deployment of multiple languages, through reinventing the multilingual quotidian on stage, was arguably a form of defamiliarisation which enfolded into the play aspects of communality and intel-lectualism: Mama was not just about getting people of diverse language and ethnic backgrounds to congregate in a theatre, but also about inspiring them to question the taken-for-granted boundaries of oﬃcial multiracial policy. In contrast with state communitarianism which positioned the individ-ual as a docile subject inscribed by the interests of the state, Kuo imagined theatre audiences as intel-lectual and creative subjects.

I have argued that communality and intellectualism formed the cornerstone of Kuo’s ideas on audiences. Communality, premised on the condition of “live presence,” is a refashioning of his acti-vism in the 1960s and 1970s. What was hitherto a politically charged theatre practice had evolved into an articulation for communality and fraternity. To facilitate audience engagement in a fast-changing society, Kuo reinterpreted the ideas of dramatists who envisioned the relationship between audiences and actors in a way that was relevant to the capitalist-consumerist Singapore of the 1980s, when the practice of agit-prop theatre had become unviable. The issue was how to cultivate fraternity with audiences so as to counter the problem of urban alienation in an increasingly developed society. In the process, we can see that communality and intellectualism were both closely related and pointed towards the creation of an art that is also humanistically “useful.”

Even when the internet had become increasingly ubiquitous and enabled live digital communi-cation in the early 2000s, Kuo still maintained that it was the “real life interaction” and the “presence of life and the audience’s awareness of the life presence [which] makes all the diﬀerence” (as quoted in Klein 2001, 123). These ideas were by and large, Grotowskian, insofar as he described theatre as an “aesthetic communion” through which people come together to “share in a real life manner”: “It is about people looking at people, thinking about people, and feeling about people. It is witnessing the enactment of life” (123). The broader significance of this essay points to the exigency of understand-ing the ways theatre practitioners imagine audiences, for it raises issues of subjectivity, audience par-ticipation and social engagement, not only in a society like Singapore where people are often constructed as docile subjects, but perhaps, also, in the wider context of the emergence of immersive theatre which stresses audience participation more than ever.

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Notes

1. Kuo mentioned this at a forum for playwrights in 1997. (See Kuo 1997, 70.)
2. The “Theatre that activates” is one of the six types of theatre described by Kuo in his essay, “Uprooted and Searching,” and refers to the socially politically conscious type of theatre, which used to play a dynamic role in the great social, political movements of Singapore, especially from the 1930s to the 1970s (Kuo 1996a, 171).
3. See Rae (2020).
4. Kuo was detained for his alleged involvement in political subversion against the state. See Klein (2001).
5. Kuo reread Brecht and Grotowski during his imprisonment (Kuo 1994, 60). However, at the time of writing, there is no clear knowledge on when exactly he encountered Grotowski for the first time.
6. It is believed that such an undertaking led to his arrest during a nationwide crackdown on political dis-sidents in 1976 (Quah 2010, 159).
7. Examples of such plays included Hey, Wake Up!, Struggle, The Sparks of Youth, and Growing Up, staged between 1968 and 1975. See Oon (2010) and Quah (2010) for a discussion of these works.
8. Spanning across the late 1960s to the early 1970s, under Mao Zedong’s order, youths were sent to rural areas and mountainous regions to emulate the peasants and workers, so that all possible traces of bour-geois thinking and behaviour could be purged. This was known as the “Down to the Countryside Move-ment,” and the youths who were thus exiled became known as zhiqing (educated youths).
9. Cf. Kuo’s interview with Jacqueline Lo (2002) for his account on the campaign. Kuo and his wife also recounted their experience in the campaign during an interview with Quah and Tan (2011) in 2002. (Also see Jit 1990, 16.)
10. Kuo cited the example of a sunflower dance to which a worker implied that it was illogical for the audi-ence to be facing the dancers playing the sunflowers when the sun is behind the latter’s backs, thereby raising the tricky question of how should one distinguish between life and art, and whether one should disregard the worker’s opinion just because he “may not necessarily understand art” (as quoted in Quah and Tan 2011, 210).
11. Oﬃcial multiracialism in Singapore is underpinned by a non-assimilative CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) framework that positions each group as distinct (Siddique 1989, 575). Through pro-moting idea of “open culture,” Kuo oﬀered a radical way of reimagining the multiracial nation-building and the identity of its citizens (Kuo 1998; Wee 2003; Quah 2010) through rupturing the supposedly fixed links between culture, language and race (Quah and Ng 2008, xxiv). It meant celebrating the intermin-gling of cultures — past and present, local and global — beyond the constraints of racial and linguistic origins in artistic practice and policy (Devan 2000; Leng 2015).
12. The play, written by Athol Fugard, John Kani and Winston Ntshona, was co-presented by the Southern Arts Ensemble and Practice Theatre School — the successor to the SPAS — at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore on 21–24 February 1982.
13. All translations from Chinese-language texts are by the author of this article.
14. The discussions were transcribed and published by Chen and Zeng (1982) in the Malaysian-Chinese daily Sin Chew Jit Poh. In this article, Kuo addressed critical issues related to the functions and sig-nificance of theatre and his perceptions of audiences. This is an important source for my argument.
15. This interview is undated and the original source is unknown. Kuo suggested the individual may feel isolated in “big crowds — the MRT [Mass Rapid Transit], buses — crowds everywhere” (Chia 2011, 43). The MRT was launched in 1987 and hence the interview was conducted after that.
16. At a playwright’s forum, Kuo discussed the functions of theatre to critique and reflect. See Kuo (1997, 70–71).
17. Kuo’s critique of theatre as a consumer experience is expressed through his concept, the “Theatre that consumes.” Using examples of Western musicals such as Cats which, in the 1990s, despite high ticket prices, were successful in drawing local and regional audiences “to the world Theatre market [in Singa-pore] but does nothing to preserve or enhance the people’s sense of itself,” and “keeps them oblivious of their cultural displacement, consuming their own sensibility and sensitivity” (Kuo 1996a, 170).
18. Singapore Children’s Playhouse was a prolific Chinese theatre group established in 1965 which attracted huge audience turnouts until it disbanded in 1980.
19. Kuo was discussing the social impact of Chinese theatre at a forum. See Kuo (2001, 96).

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   1. Rediﬀusion was a British cable radio broadcasting service formed in 1928 and had operations in its colo-nies, including Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaya. The Singapore station maintained a Mandarin youth theatre group until it terminated service in 2012.
   2. See also Kuo (1997, 68–69).
   3. The quotation is from Brecht’s “Two Essay Fragments on Non-professional Acting” (1964, 149).
   4. The Old Tote, operating from 1963 to 1978, started as the standing theatre company of NIDA, and was the precursor to the Sydney Theatre Company.
   5. Goh Lay Kuan revealed that the staging of Brecht in 1966 led to the accusation of Kuo as the chief culprit for destroying everything Singapore Chinese theatre represented (Quah and Tan 2011, 227). Also see Jit (1990, 14–15).
   6. Kuo (2008 [1982]) also introduced the ideas of Brecht in his foreword to the programme for Sizwe Banzi is Dead in 1982. The impact of Brecht on Singapore theatre is assessed in Kuo (2008 [1989]).
   7. Kuo’s direction of plays taken from diverse countries in the 1980s, spanning the USA, South Africa, Malaysia to Hong Kong, showed his openness to “the construction of a pluralistic theatre” (Quah 2002, 380–381).
   8. Chinese crosstalk is a form of traditional comedy performance which usually involves two actors.
   9. The late prime minister Lee Kuan Yew was known for referring to Singaporeans as “digits” during the 1960s-1970s; see Lee (1966a, 1966b, 1971, 1983).
   10. For discussion of these plays, refer to Paul Rae (2020).

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Special terms

Gongyou

Sin Chew Jit Poh

工友

《星洲日報》

Xiangsheng Zhiqing

相聲

知青

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