NEW ASIA THEATRE
A PROSPECTIVE MODEL FOR THE “UPROOTED AND SEARCHING”

by

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ABSTRACT

Recent events in the theatre world in Singapore have raised the prospects of a
New Asia Theatre. In the center of this phenomenon is Ong Keng Sen’s Lear, which
has been acclaimed as a possible model for this ideal. This dissertation would
demonstrate that despite being well received and hailed as a paradigm of “New World
Theatre”, Lear actually does nothing in aiding Singaporeans in defining their
traditional roots and culture.

Lear is the direct result and a reflection of the cultural uprootedness of
Singapore. Out of this cultural mish-mash exists a desire to recreate a theatre form
from the traditional art forms through New Asia Theatre. The question, then, is that
while a culturally uprooted Singapore can inspire a ground-breaking production such
as Lear, can Lear, on the other hand, contribute anything to alleviate the cultural
barrenness of this city-state? Has Lear, as it claimed, redefined or recreated a theatre
form from the Asian perspective?
This dissertation would demonstrate, through an analysis of the feedback from reviews that while *Lear* was a visually inspiring production, it contributed very little in terms of contents towards recreating a New Asia Theatre. New Asia Theatre, at this juncture, remains an exploration that is morphed by the constantly evolving present while rooted by tradition; it is constantly negotiating between internal/traditional/secular Asian and the external/contemporary Western. In the age where the duality between the East and the West collide, *Lear* is the attempt to find the middle ground in this new social paradigm which is essentially global.

In the process of being global, one must first be national. As expressed by Edwin Thumboo in an interview with Ban Kah Choon from the Straits Times with regards to the conflict between being national and global,

"You mustn't forget that there is a structure of construction as well as deconstruction. I see national as important to us and to nations who need it, usually at the time of their formation or revival. And is it not wonderful to be national before becoming international? ....Unless you have roots, you are going to write an international stylized poetry which could be placed anywhere." ¹

Ban Kah Choon  
*His pursuit of passion,*  
(comment by Edwin Thumboo)

*Lear*’s failure arises from the failure to secure national roots before reaching towards the international.