



WHAT'S PLAY GOT TO DO WITH LEADERSHIP AND COMMUNITIES?

A case study co-authored by Chong Gua Khee and ArtsWok Collaborative
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INTRODUCTION

“The ability to play is crucial for today’s leadership and management, since it can enhance leaders’ ability to be creative and promote ongoing innovation and organisational change. Modern organisations have been described as systems of continual self-renewal in which ‘change’ is a routine process rather than an outcome or endstate. Many scholars have defined leadership as different from management ... leadership seeks to promote organisational change, creativity, and innovation. For organisations to change and develop, we need to develop leaders that can encourage ongoing experimentation, risk taking, openness, creativity, authenticity, imagination and innovation.”¹

In recent years, there has been more widespread acknowledgment in Singapore that play is important – for instance, in 2014, then-Education Minister Heng Swee Keat asserted that “play time is not a waste of time”, and that “in fact play brings very important values in developing the self-confidence and social skills of our children, in stimulating their curiosity to explore the world around them and in nurturing their creativity.”² However, the growing discourse in Singapore about play has largely focused on children³ alone, which runs counter to the many publications by writers and researchers in the field of play about the psychological and sociological benefits and

significance of play to all humans,⁴ be they young children or adults.

Going a step further, leadership researchers such as Ronit Kark have proposed that being able to play is a necessity for those who want to lead in today’s complex world (see opening quote). This is because apart from supporting individual leadership skill development, playing also facilitates the crucial process of community building – be it within the context of one’s own team/organisation, or with specific communities that an organisation might work with. Where there are people, whether in organisations or in communities, there is dynamism. Tackling issues and addressing important questions in communities require openness, adaptability and innovation. From this perspective, it can be argued that being playful is not only important for today’s leaders, but also for community development workers in Singapore. With Singapore remaining as “one of the most unequal among developed societies”, there is a need to introduce new approaches in galvanising communities, addressing issues in communities and building strong social networks.⁵

¹ Ronit Kark, *Games Managers Play: Play as a Form of Leadership Development*. (Academy of Management Learning & Education, 10(3), 2011), 517.

² Eileen Poh, “‘Play’ important in early childhood education: Heng Swee Keat,” <https://www.todayonline.com/singapore/play-important-early-childhood-education-heng-swee-keat>, (Feb 23, 2014).

³ Ang Yiyi, “Child development expert says movement is essential for kids to develop skills for life,” <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/more-play-time-needed-on-journey-in-learning>, (Jan 23, 2017).

⁴ For more in-depth reading, see Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play Element in Culture*. (Beacon Press, Boston, MA, 1955); Kenneth H. Rubin, Greta Fein, and Brian Vandenberg, *Play*. E. Mavis Hetherington (Ed.), *Handbook of child psychology: Vol. IV. Socialization, personality and social development*. (Wiley, New York, 1983), 693-774; Anthony D. Pellegrini, Danielle Dupuis, and Peter K. Smith, *Play in Evolution and Development*. (Developmental Review, 27(2), 2007), 261-276. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dr.2006.09.001>

⁵ Seow Bei Yi, “Social mobility, ageing are Singapore’s big challenges: Tharman,” <https://www.straitstimes.com/politics/social-mobility-ageing-are-spores-big-challenges>, (Jan 28, 2018).

As such, in hopes of encouraging more playful approaches to leading and working with the community, as well as emerging leadership within communities, this piece seeks to first provide an overview of play through the lens of research, and then to concretize how play looks like in practice in Singapore through three case studies. Specifically, three local arts practitioners who work with communities – for whom play can be seen to be part and parcel of their practice – were interviewed. Their responses provide glimpses into their processes and guiding principles, as well as point to advantages and challenges of a playful approach to working with community. Finally, this piece attempts to highlight common insights across the three practitioners, so as to provide a ‘play kit’ of perspectives for anyone interested in community development work to consider.

THE 'PLAY KIT': WHAT COUNTS AS PLAY?

Interestingly, while there is little dispute amongst researchers that play is beneficial, there is actually no consensus to date regarding a formal definition of play – although observers in studies “agree reasonably well on what play is, even if they have not been trained to do so”.⁶ Instead, a common approach by researchers has been to consider play as comprising of a combination of criteria. That is, an activity can be experienced as more or less playful depending on the number of criteria that is fulfilled.⁷ Over the years, some criteria that have been proposed include:

Krasnor and Pepler (1980)⁸:

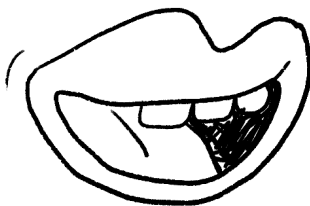
- Positive affect
- Intrinsic motivation (play is done for its own sake)
- Nonliterality (the element of pretense)
- Flexibility (so there can be variations in form and content)



Peter Gray (2012)⁹:

“Play is activity that

- (1) is self-chosen and self-directed;
- (2) is intrinsically motivated;
- (3) is guided by mental rules;
- (4) is imaginative; and
- (5) involves an active, alert, but non-stressed frame of mind.”



Scott Eberle (2014) suggests “not to think of play as a thing... but as a series of connected events”,¹⁰ and proposes that there are six basic elements that can cover the field of play:

- Anticipation
- Surprise
- Pleasure
- Understanding (development of empathy and knowledge)
- Strength (of mind and body)
- Poise (physically but also in intellectual, emotional, and social ways)



⁶ Peter K. Smith and Ralph Vollstedt, *On Defining Play: An Empirical Study of the Relationship between Play and Various Play Criteria*. (Child Development, 56(4), 1985), 1047.

⁷ For more in-depth reading, see Linda Rose Krasnor and Debra J. Pepler, *The Study of Children's Play: Some Suggested Future Directions*. (New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development, 9, 1980), 85-95. <https://doi.org/10.1002/cd.23219800908>; Rubin et al, *Play*, 1983.

⁸ Krasnor & Pepler, *The Study of Children's Play*, 1980.

⁹ Peter Gray, *The Value of a Play-Filled Childhood in Development of the Hunter-Gatherer Individual Play*. Darcia Narvaez, Jaak Panksepp, Allan N. Schore, and Tracy R. Gleason (Eds.), *Evolution, Early Experience and Human Development: From Research to Practice and Policy*. (Oxford University Press, New York, NY, 2012), 352-370. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199755059.003.0022>

¹⁰ Scott G. Eberle, *The Elements of Play: Toward a Philosophy and a Definition of Play*. (American Journal of Play, 6(2), 2014), 214-233.

WHY PICK UP THE 'PLAY KIT'?

BENEFITS OF PLAY



©ArtsWok Collaborative (2019) in *What's Play Got To Do with Leadership and Communities?*

For elaborations on each benefit, please refer to [Annex A](#).

ASSEMBLING THE 'PLAY KIT': 3 CASE STUDIES

Having established what play consists of as well as its benefits, what *does* a playful approach to leadership and community development in Singapore look like, and what difference does it make? In the interviews conducted in January 2019,¹¹ three arts practitioners discuss how they view play, how it is woven into their work and the way they lead projects with the community, as well as the resulting impact and challenges. Though their overall approach is very much in line with the current push in Singapore towards strengthening ground-up initiatives¹² and community development, the specifics of their practice depart from 'conventional wisdom'.

Rather, their practice is more in the spirit of play – embracing not-knowing and accepting failure as part of the process, honouring and trusting in the process; and negotiating co-creation efforts. Despite these less conventional approaches, the three of them are very much recognised as trailblazers and effective leaders in working with the community, suggesting that these elements of difference are precisely what should go into a 'play kit' for other leaders and community workers.

SOCIALLY ENGAGED THEATRE PRACTITIONER

KOH HUI LING

Koh Hui Ling is a theatre practitioner who finds meaning in the process of community engagement and the participation of non-artists in the art-making, evident in her works such as "[IgnorLAND of its Time](#)" (2014) and "[IgnorLAND of its Loss](#)" (2016). Her desire to create alternative avenues for public dialogue has led to the development of "[GoLi – The Moving Theatre](#)", Singapore's first inflatable moving theatre that transforms spaces into vibrant places for arts and culture. As the Associate Artistic Director of Drama Box, she also oversees the development of Drama Box's youth engagement work and has developed a set of Drama-in-Education and Theatre-in-Education programmes for youths, teachers and adult-learners. Recognised for her contribution to community, youth and culture, Hui Ling was given in 2013 the Young Artist Award by the National Arts Council Singapore, and the Singapore Youth Award by the National Youth Council, and in 2015, Ten Outstanding Young Persons of the World Award (Singapore) by the Junior Chamber International.



"It's... about letting go and being comfortable with not knowing what the end is going to be"

¹¹ These three case studies draw from interviews, which have been edited and condensed for clarity. For Hui Ling and Shiyun, their case studies also include material from their presentations at previous Greenhouse Sessions by ArtsWok.

¹² For instance, Central CDC launched a \$250,000 fund in 2015 to encourage community initiatives, in a clear recognition that there may be areas where the Government is not able to take on.

QUICK LINKS TO DIFFERENT CASE STUDIES AND INSIGHTS

[INDEPENDENT ARTS PRODUCER,
LIN SHIYUN](#)

[PUPPETEER AND DIRECTOR,
TAN BENG TIAN](#)

[INSIGHTS](#)



Production photo from *IgnorLAND of its Time*.
Image by Zinkie Aw for Drama Box.

Just to dive in, what does play mean to you?

Free, curiosity, spiritual, intuitive, listening.

How does your understanding of play feature in the way you work and/or lead the work you do in the community?

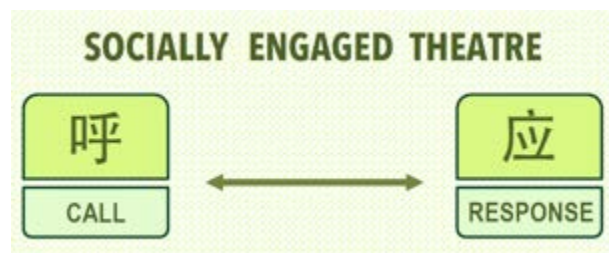
As an actor, I learnt that one of the golden rules of improvisation is to make your partner look good. So I believe in collaborative work and processes, and it's important for me to allow for failure, to allow experimentations, and to listen to the community's suggestions and navigate that with the aesthetics required of an artwork. Everyone is a leader and has a strength in something, so it's just how we manage the tensions and relations while allowing everyone to shine. And to do that, it's then also about letting go and being comfortable with not knowing what the end is going to be when we embark on an art project.

So how do you view your role when engaging in play with communities?

I see myself as one of the stakeholders – that we as artists also have a vested interest in the community. And, as part of the community, we want to build shared experiences and memories of past, present and hopefully future. Artists are vessels or conduits where differences and similarities are contained/travel through, and we can play an objective role in mediating, inspiring, and provoking boundaries within the communities, while maintaining a very keen and open ear.

How do you decide which communities to engage with?

For me, it is a two-way process. It could be that the community, having watched or resonated with Drama Box's work, becomes interested in 'playing' and invites us to work with them. Conversely, it could be myself as an artist reaching out to the community because of my own personal connection to the space, or because the community has a connection to current social issues. Drama Box's guiding philosophy is about the call and response, so either the community or the artist can be the initiator.



Are there challenges or barriers in trying to work in this way with the community?

Sometimes, some of the things we think would work really well artistically may not be agreeable to the community members at that point in time. So we may lose an opportunity to feature that particular aspect but yet, we need to respect the community's concerns. Many times, a bigger struggle is *time* – time for life and the work to develop, and for the community to recognise the importance of their stories.

Since Drama Box first had the impetus to move into the community, we've adjusted, quite a few times, the way we work with communities when we realised more and more things. For instance, after moving into the community and doing Forum Theatre plays, we started to realise that 'we don't own the content', and that the community whom we are representing on stage should be there to be the voice, not us. Therefore, we started to incorporate the community into the performance itself.

One thing that I was inspired by when I went to study was that we need to look beyond interest groups, and instead go into a geographical area and look at people in a larger context, to see the complexities of relationships. So for *IgnorLAND of its Time*,¹³ we

¹³ *IgnorLAND* is a site-specific project that aims to excavate shared memories of a place, and bring unknown or forgotten stories to the people. In *IgnorLAND of its Time*, performance-tours and heritage trails brought audiences to the Bukit Ho Swee estate, and explored the question of how much has changed in Bukit Ho Swee, and what has stayed the same since the infamous fire in 1961.

started to experiment with community engagement practices, going into the community and talking to people. Audiences attending a show tend to think 'oh, the process is your research process', but for us, it's actually a community building, development, connecting process, because so many stories emerge through the process. So it also became important to me that we highlight the process itself in our work, to make the invisible process of building a relationship and workshopping with the community visible to the public, because the process is as important as the work.

But there are also wonderful moments that emerge from working this way?

Yes. In the middle of rehearsals for *IgnorLAND of its Time*, we were notified from the production end that we were facing some issues with venues, and the community performer we were in rehearsals with immediately sprang into action, sharing our woes and calling up his network to clear the path for us. It was very touching to have witnessed him owning the production as well.



Production photo from *IgnorLAND of its Time*; featuring a community performer. Image by Zinkie Aw for Drama Box.



INDEPENDENT ARTS PRODUCER LIN SHIYUN

Lin Shiyun is an independent arts producer who has managed and produced works spanning across art disciplines. She initiated 3Pumpkins, an arts company that investigates existing art practices and finds creative approaches to work with children and the public. 3Pumpkins has to date produced participatory theatre and installation works for children, and most notably spearheading "[Let's Go P Lay OutSide!](#)", a social practice that encourages the building of community support among children from low-income neighbourhoods through playful activities and performances in public playgrounds.

"Play is very much about the process; during the process, we discover things – about ourselves, about the participants, and we can then co-create the objective."

QUICK LINKS TO DIFFERENT CASE STUDIES AND INSIGHTS

[SOCIALLY ENGAGED THEATRE PRACTITIONER, KOH HUI LING](#)

[PUPPETEER AND DIRECTOR, TAN BENG TIAN](#)

[INSIGHTS](#)

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From Toa Payoh, your initiative "Let's Go PLAY OutSide!" (LGPO) has now developed a second 'base' at Boon Lay. What does play mean to you, and why is it important?

I think play is very important here in Singapore because we tend to work based on short-term goals. We see the tangible objective or the goal post, then we design a way towards that. For me, curiosity is important. But when you are fixated on a goal, your curiosity and sensitivity to details is almost dead at some point. And so, programmes wind up being designed to achieve abstract ideals, rather than responding to the needs of the community.

In a recent LGPO session, there was a bit of a bullying case so we wound up having a conversation around that, which led us to discuss who the playground belongs to. And the children said the playground belongs to the government, which meant that they don't actually value each other as a community. That was very important to know, but the conversation on citizenship wasn't something planned. It happened during a process, which reveals the problem, and informs the goal. In that sense, play is very much about the process; during the process, we discover things – about ourselves, about the participants, and we can then co-create the objective.

My big picture is about how to make people happier, feel better; how we can work together to feel better. So then what's the best way to get there? For me, it's about playing and being attentive to the process whereby emotions and thoughts are expressed naturally. But I think it's very important to take time to build the relationship in a community. The trust is very important. If you don't have trust, you cannot play.

How do you kickstart the process though? Are there specific strategies you use?

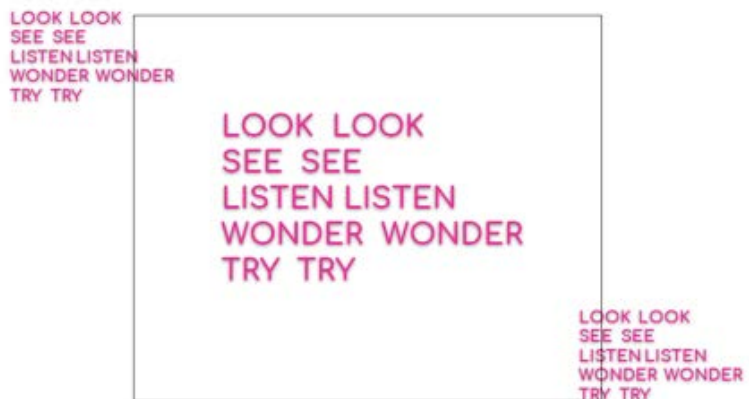
Yes, it's quite similar to creating theatre whereby first you establish a space and time. So at LGPO, we meet at a regular time every week or fortnight. The 'characters' - children or adults - understand this premise and choose to enter to interact with one another. As facilitators, we bring in stimulus to encourage creative expressions. This stimulus can be an interesting person, a story, a question, an art form, a roll of yarn. However, we always make sure that if the community brings their own stimuli, for instance if a child expresses a distress about the amount of rubbish in the neighbourhood or brings an old make-up palette, we attend to these first.



First session of LGPO in Boon Lay (June 2018), where children are invited to draw and express anything they wish on an open scroll. A few "naughty" children would typically write vulgarities and draw obscene images, which are not censored but used as entry points for conversations. Image courtesy of 3Pumpkins.

Do you have certain principles that guide how you work?

My work is very much about this (see below) – look look see see listen listen. You don't have to respond immediately. Sometimes you may feel very inspired, so then you respond. There is always a decision whether to respond or not, but what you see, what you look, what you listen, they all stay inside you, and later on you might think to try something and to see what happens. So this is a process that keeps going on and on, which informs me in my practice.



What are some challenges or barriers you've experienced in working this way with the community?

My first challenge, like many artists in social practice, is this constant self-doubt about whether

I am an artist or a social worker. Through arts-based engagement on the ground, you get to know the intricacies of both societal and family problems. Yet, intervention is limited by the role we play, as well as resources we have. So, this year, I'm trying out another format for LGPO, working closely with South Central Community Family Service Centre to look at how we can form an effective partnership. The work definitely requires a scaled approach over a long period of time to move larger communities to benefit our children. Sometimes, these larger communities may not want or may not be able to collaborate with each other, and we just have to accept that these two groups cannot talk to each other. Then we have to find other ways, and that's playing as well. So patience, perseverance, as well as a constant reflection and transformation of the way we work is needed if we are serious about social change. LGPO may seem very much like child's play but the work consumes my thoughts all the time, and it's not uncommon for me to feel inadequate or burnt out.

Another challenge is that the work is very much about free play and participants don't always attend every session, so assessment of the work becomes rather difficult. This is why we usually define our performance indicators quantitatively or according

to tangible short-term goals, which can be measured easily. I've very recently learnt about measuring impact using a life-skill assessment scale where you can measure the effectiveness of the art for social change, so it could just be about whether a child displays better initiative or attentiveness over time.

One other challenge is that as an artist or producer, I like to create works as well. It is not easy to create works with the children at LGPO because our premise for getting together is play through creative expression, not to make artworks. There are things that we want as artists that the community doesn't want. And we have to respond to that and respect that.

What do you think is the role of the artist when engaging in play with communities?

Artists create shared experiences for the community through creative expressions. Through these experiences that elicit imaginations, emotions, memories... different members of the community including stakeholders are brought together to better understand one another as human beings. So artists play a crucial role as peace-makers, connectors and negotiators.



Performance of participatory giant puppet show, *The Rubbish Prince* in Boon Lay (April 2019). The LGPO children community helped in door-to-door neighbourhood publicity and setting up of the show. Image courtesy of 3Pumpkins.

PUPPETEER AND DIRECTOR

TAN BENG TIAN

Tan Beng Tian co-founded [The Finger Players](#) in 1996. A veteran in the performing arts scene, she has a vast amount of experience in acting, puppetry and directing. Besides the company's productions, she has taken part in many important Singaporean works by other companies such as Drama Box, Esplanade, The Theatre Practice, TheatreWorks and W!ld Rice Ltd. She is also a recipient of Japanese Chamber of Commerce & Industry (JCCI) Singapore Foundation Culture Award 2005 for her excellent work in promoting puppetry in Singapore.

Beng Tian is a proud member of Singapore Drama Educators Association (SDEA), as well as Access Arts Hub, which aims to make arts more accessible for persons with disabilities in Singapore. She is involved in multiple community-based projects, including a collaboration with Drama Box and ArtsWok Collaborative in "The Wind Came Home", a puppetry performance in *Both Sides, Now* – a community engagement project on end-of-life related issues. Apart from that, she has also worked with seniors through programmes at Hua Mei Elder Person-centered Integrated Comprehensive Care.



“You must really play hard, but also play with responsibility”



Scene from a rehearsal of NIML? Image courtesy of Alvan Yap.

Can you talk about your recent work with the community?

I am currently exploring accessibility in the arts, and right now, I am rehearsing [Not in my Lifetime? \(NIML?\)](#)¹⁴, a work that is fully accessible to all communities – the hard of hearing and the deaf, the blind and the low vision, and also people on the autism spectrum. But as a disclaimer, though the

production is fronted by The Finger Players (TFP), TFP is a platform for various artists to do their work on, so whatever I do isn't representative of TFP's overall direction as there are so many artists in TFP.

That's a helpful clarification. So for yourself, how does play come into your way of working?

To me, play is important. Even now, rehearsing this show, I keep reminding the actors 'you must really play hard, but also play with responsibility'. Firstly, when you play, you really enjoy yourself, and that is the most sincere reaction you provide. And once it's sincere, the audience will get it. So if you're having a good time onstage, the audience will also have a good time at their seats. But playing irresponsibly is if you have a good time onstage by yourself only, and you leave out the audience. So at the end of the day, it's about the balancing – how to balance it well.

For example, I did a lot of improvisation with the ensemble for the piece, and there was one very cute moment that we all laughed at. In the actual show, the sighted audience will probably laugh as well, because it's such a cute image. But if a non-seeing person is watching, he/she can't see, so we

¹⁴ *Not In My Lifetime?* is an inclusive theatre experience with puppetry that explores the special education system in Singapore and people in it. The play is based on the experiences of playwright Alvan Yap.



Left: Pre-show touch tour of NIML?
 Right: Scene from a rehearsal of NIML?
 Both images courtesy of Alvan Yap.

need to let them know what they are missing out. So, we tried various methods to audio describe the movements effectively, but nothing worked and therefore I said, 'I'm sorry, shall we axe this?' It's fun, and visually it's also very nice, but it may not work if we want to include the blind community. So we decided not to do it. Sometimes we want to play and maybe we have something that's very fun, but if it's not suitable for another community, then we shouldn't play. Instead, maybe we should change to another game that everyone can play, and that's how we are rehearsing this show.

In this production, we are also playing with how audio description (AD) is done. Conventionally, there would be an audio describer in a bio box, something like the commentator box in sports stadiums. But in the Black Box where NIML? is being staged, there's no space to put the audio describer, and so I told him 'I have to put you onstage. And you're going to do audio describing onstage'. From there, we tried having him as a performer, and then from trying different ways, we realized it worked if his character is an old man reminiscing about the past. So the man is the narrator throughout the show, like an audio describer in a way, except he's describing in a storytelling format, instead of just being very factual in the conventional way of AD. However, as a character, I think he has the passport to be able to say things however he wants. So that is my tryout in using AD in a different way. I don't know whether by doing so can people fault me or blame me to say I have misinterpreted or misused the term "audio description". I'll only know whether this new way works or not once it's really out, and once I get the audience's feedback.¹⁵

How are you leading your team in this way of working?

I am the director, but this is not a conventional way of production. So I keep telling this to everyone in the marketing team and the production team - I say, let's not always refer to 'eh usually, The Finger Players does this...'. There is no 'usually'. Because this is the first time, for instance, where we have a sound designer who is a wheelchair user. So I wouldn't say that because I am the director, I dictate everything. In fact, the team has given me a lot of perspective. The production team and the cast will sometimes question if doing something will work for a certain community, which makes me realise that there's a blindspot I didn't see. So I have them to thank because they help me – they are my third, fourth, fifth, sixth eyes – and they actually help me see a lot of loopholes, and help me to mend all these holes. So this to me is a full collaboration. Whoever has things or issues can just throw it out and share, and then we will all have to question what we think about it. And honestly, sometimes I don't have the answer. So the way I so-called direct this show is really very open, and I wouldn't term or deem myself as the director, more of just maybe the coordinator or facilitator.

¹⁵ Three weeks after this interview was conducted, a decision was made for a more conventional use of audio description after after a trial and feedback session with the non-seeing community - having the audio describer play a character and narrate meant that certain crucial details such as actions and facial expressions could not be fully conveyed, which affected the non-seeing audiences' experience of the story. Based on their feedback, Beng Tian decided to use the conventional way of placing the audio describer outside of the piece, and found another solution to the lack of a separate space for the audio describer.

REVIEWING THE 'PLAY KIT': SO WHAT DO WE HAVE?



Broadly speaking, it can be seen that these three arts practitioners all have slightly different articulations of what play is. However, there are a few recurring insights that are worth highlighting for anyone thinking about adopting a more playful approach to working with communities and leading.

INTENTIONALITY BEHIND PLAY

All the practitioners are intentional about needing to play alongside the community they are working with. The structures and the spaces of play in their work emerge from a thought-out process and approach that is ultimately guided by core principles about autonomy and negotiation. As a result of their belief in the criticality of play, the element of play is planned for and integrated within their engagement from the very beginning, instead of seeing it as an 'add-on'. Their approach is also practised with regularity while remaining highly dynamic – the practitioners adapt constantly, adjusting and shaping their ongoing approach along the way.

Beng Tian: "Sometimes we want to play and maybe we have something that's very fun, but if it's not suitable for another community, then we shouldn't play. Instead, maybe we should change to another game that everyone can play."

Shiyun: "Play is very much about the process; during the process, we discover things – about ourselves, about the participants, and we can then co-create the objective."

ROLES PLAYED WHEN FACILITATING PLAY-BASED PROCESSES WITH COMMUNITIES

All of the practitioners occupy leadership positions in their respective areas - Hui Ling is an artistic director, Shiyun is a lead artist and arts producer,

and Beng Tian is a director. Yet this leadership is not conventional. It is devolved, shared and highly collaborative. The nuanced understanding of leadership is seen in their awareness of the various roles they play when leading and facilitating play-based processes with communities.

Hui Ling: "Artists are vessels or conduits where differences and similarities are contained/travel through, and we can play an objective role in mediating, inspiring, and provoking boundaries within the communities, while maintaining a very keen and open ear."

Shiyun: "Artists create shared experiences for the community through creative expressions. Through these experiences that elicit imaginations, emotions, memories... different members of the community including stakeholders are brought together to better understand one another as human beings. So artists play a crucial role as peace-makers, connectors and negotiators."

UNDERSTANDING TIME AND SPACE

All three practitioners recognised that working with communities has to go beyond speed, efficiency and conventional ways of thinking about productivity. Play cannot be hastened. Time is needed to build trust, to get to know communities and to experiment. Space is also needed to offer a conducive context in which play can happen. In fact, play can take place anywhere, as long as one understands the environment one is working in and its relationship to the community. There are no short-cuts to playing as a way to develop relationships with the community – time is needed to plan, reflect, facilitate and evaluate. One also needs time on an ongoing basis to get better at playing or facilitating play, as well as to clarify and deepen one's own approach.

Hui Ling: "Many times, a bigger struggle is time – time for life and the work to develop, and for the community to recognise the importance of their stories."

Shiyun: "It's about playing and being attentive to the process whereby emotions and thoughts are expressed naturally. But I think it's very important to take time to build the relationship in a community. The trust is very important. If you don't have trust, you cannot play."

NEGOTIATING CO-CREATION AND COLLABORATING WITH THE COMMUNITY

All three practitioners value collaboration and have deep respect for the voices and desires of the community. Indeed, they hold true to this even if what the community wants is not in line with their initial hopes for the work, which is key to further building trust in the relationship, as well as extending what play initially encourages – people's ownership in the larger project.

Hui Ling: "Sometimes some of the things we think would work really well artistically may not be agreeable with the community members at that point in time. So we may lose an opportunity to feature that particular aspect but yet, we need to respect the community's concerns."



Production photo from *IgnorLAND of its Time*; featuring community performers. Image by Zinkie Aw for Drama Box.

Shiyun: "It is not easy to create works with the children at LGPO because our premise for getting together is play through creative expression, not to make art work. There are things that we want as artists, but the community don't want that. And we have to respond to that and respect that."

EMBRACING THE SENSE OF NOT KNOWING AND ACCEPTING POSSIBLE FAILURES AS PART OF THE PROCESS

The practitioners often embarked on processes without knowing what the outcomes would necessarily be, echoing how play works through experimentation and spontaneity to stimulate creativity. As someone leading or facilitating work with communities, one does not always have to have all the answers. In fact, by relaxing and going with the flow, as well as taking in what others contribute (be it questions or responses), what eventually emerges will probably be better because more potential blind spots would have been addressed.

Hui Ling: "It's... about letting go and being comfortable with not knowing what the end is going to be."

Beng Tian: "I don't know whether... people [can] fault me or blame me... I'll only know whether this new way works or not once it's really out, and once I get the audience's feedback."

INNOVATE STRATEGIES TO BETTER SUPPORT THE PROCESS-DRIVEN APPROACH THAT IS NECESSARY FOR PLAY

Playful approaches may embrace the spontaneous, but they are not organised spontaneously. Be it seeking to actively communicate about the process with external parties and the public, or emerging alternative modes of evaluating

'success', the three practitioners make conscious effort to ensure that they are able to connect with the wider ecosystem of stakeholders. Ensuring that these external structures are taken care of in turn helps to create conditions that are most conducive for the community and the artists to play alongside each other.

Hui Ling: "It also became important to me that we highlight the process itself in our work, to make the invisible process of building a relationship and workshopping with the community visible to the public, because the process is as important as the work."

Shiyun: "The work is very much about free play and participants don't always attend every session, so assessment of the work becomes rather difficult. This is why we usually define our performance indicators quantitatively or according to tangible short-term goals, which can be measured easily."

CONCLUSION: HOW WILL YOU PLAY?

Playing is an approach, not a separate activity from work. Many leaders require the competencies, skills and values that can be acquired through the mode of play – the spirit of risk-taking and experimentation. Whether you are a community worker, policy maker or artist, all are leaders in their own capacities, existing within dynamic environments, which require the flexibility inherent in playful approaches.

It takes tremendous effort to engage in community development or to work with any community. Deep and meaningful work in the community often requires attentiveness to the community's desires, efforts to create and maintain safe spaces for expression, and also thoughtful leadership. In the three examples, it can be seen that play is not just for children, but is in fact a necessary practice that enables the practitioners to lead and work with the community. Yet, play in such contexts is not always easy, as it requires people to be intentional about structuring sufficient time and space to allow for relationships to build and possibilities to unfold. It also means embracing different roles while leading, being comfortable with the unknown and meticulously establishing with other stakeholders support systems for true play to happen.

For many artists and creatives, playful approaches are intuitively incorporated in their work and processes. Hence, they are generally more open to experimentation, able to think on their feet and adapt, and generous in collaborating with others. Arts practitioners with a social practice are no different – even as they understand the complexities involved in working with communities, they are also able to imagine new possibilities, as well as adapt and create new approaches to community engagement. Through their experience and practice, the arts practitioners in this case study have offered valuable insights on ways to bring play into their work with the community. Still, as can be seen, each of them has their own unique take on play. **How then, might your play kit look like?**

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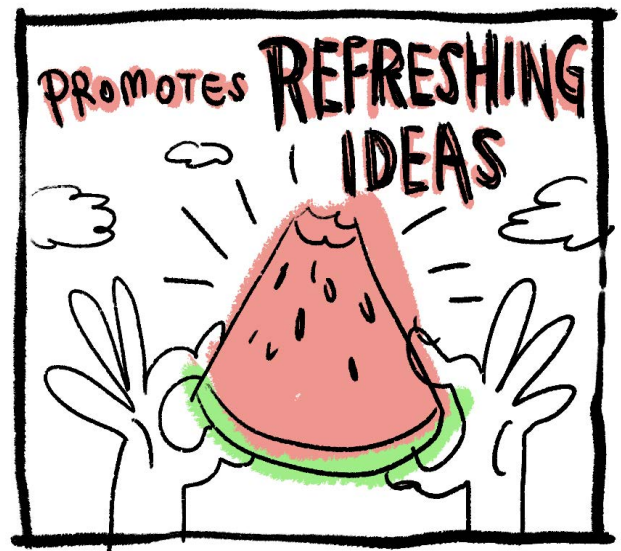
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ANNEX A: WHY PICK UP THE ‘PLAY KIT’?

There are clear benefits to play for collectives as well as individuals, as described in this case study. Below is a summary of the five key benefits of play that are particularly relevant for community building and development work:

Play helps to trigger ‘the collective self’ and facilitate a communal identity, which can “help individuals build bridges across differences and allow for individuals from different backgrounds and diverse characteristics to join in and interact in a playful mode”.¹ As a result, play can be quite valuable for leaders and community development workers seeking to enable team and/or community members to feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and perspectives that may be different from the rest. It also allows for members from different sub-groups who may not relate well to experience each other differently.



Play also benefits collectives because “the mutual attraction, synchrony, merger, selflessness, and unserious-seriousness of play” results in people being willing to adjust to others. In other words, playing as a group facilitates members’ willingness and investment in contributing their individual knowledge and expertise to the larger picture, which can facilitate the refining of processes and results in the work.²

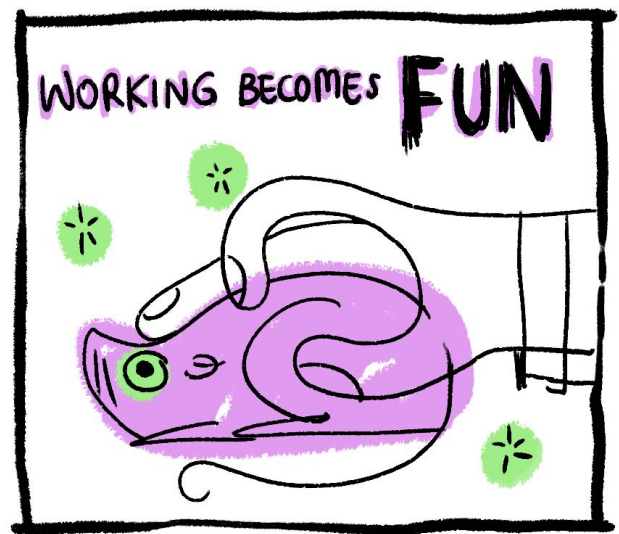
¹ Kark, *Games Managers Play*, 519.

² Lloyd E. Sandelands, *The Play of Change*. (*Journal of Organizational Change Management*, 23, 2010): 71-86.



Play lends itself to experimentation and spontaneity, enabling people to pursue intriguing ideas or thoughts as opposed to necessarily following one fixed route or the 'most efficient' route. As a result, play serves to stimulate creativity,³ which was highlighted as the most important leadership quality in a 2012 IBM study.⁴ In a similar vein, commentators have highlighted the importance of creativity to Singapore's growth, but also its apparent lack in Singapore and thus the necessity of cultivating creativity.⁵

There are also benefits to play for the individual that relate back to organisational processes as well as being part of communities, and larger society. For instance, play can contribute towards learning and skill development, which addresses the common refrain in Singapore about needing to upskill and engage in continuous professional development. Skills such as communication, collaboration, negotiation and so on are also required living in a multi-cultural society and developing resilient communities. Specifically, if learning can be framed as a game and set up as a kind of play, it is more likely that learning will be perceived as fun as well as "cherished and prolonged";⁶ as opposed to being burdensome. In turn, a deeper engagement helps to facilitate skill development in the long-term.

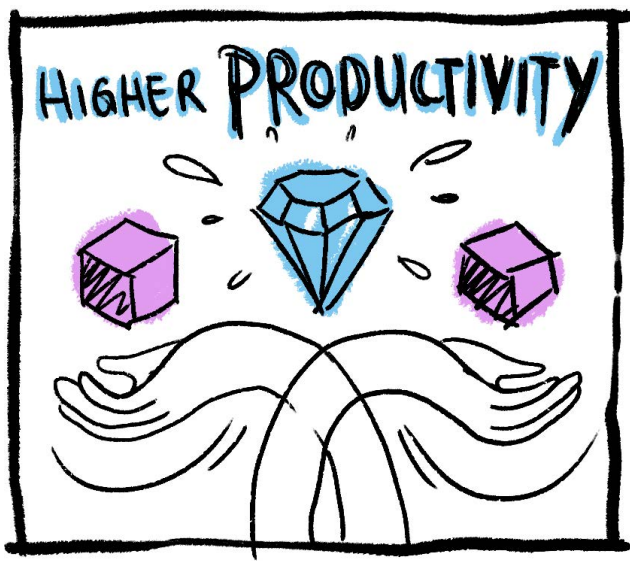


³ Michael John Apter, *Psychological Benefits of Play*. Rodney P. Carlisle (Ed.), *Encyclopedia of Play in Today's Society*. (SAGE Publications Inc, Thousand Oaks, 2009): 579. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412971935.n327>

⁴ For analysis regarding the trend of creative leadership, see Mark Vernooij and Robert Wolf, "The Need for Creative Leadership," <https://www.thnk.org/insights/the-need-for-creative-leadership>, (April 16, 2014).

⁵ Wong Chen Cheng, *Forum*, "Creativity the key to nation's future growth," <https://www.straitstimes.com/forum/letters-in-print/creativity-the-key-to-nations-future-growth>, (Feb 26, 2018); Kevin Fitzgerald, "Commentary: Are Singapore businesses just not creative enough?" <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/singapore-businesses-singaporeans-just-not-creative-enough-10555560>, (Aug 1, 2018).

⁶ Apter, *Psychological Benefits of Play*, 579.



Play can also help to relieve stress, which has been shown to be an ongoing issue for more than half of Singapore's workforce.⁷ Essentially, physiological studies in stress research have discovered that muscle tension throughout the body increases quickly when doing something while stressed, as compared to while being in a playful state of mind; another discovery has been that "a playful interlude reset[s] the base level of tension".⁸ As such, regular intervals to play can aid psychological health and work productivity,⁹ which is important to note for both leaders as well as for those engaged in working with communities, where burnout is not uncommon.

⁷ Siow Li Sen, "S'pore workplace stress on the rise: survey," <https://www.businesstimes.com.sg/government-economy/spore-workplace-stress-on-the-rise-survey>, (Aug 27, 2016); Carys Chan and Paula Brough, "Commentary: Despite flexible work arrangements, work stress has worsened," <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/commentary/higher-stress-from-work-despite-flexible-working-arrangements-10515224>, (Jul 18, 2018).

⁸ Apter, *Psychological Benefits of Play*, 579.

⁹ *Ibid.*

ABOUT CHONG GUA KHEE



Chong Gua Khee / 张月崎 is a Singaporean independent theatre practitioner who primarily takes on the roles of creator and/or director, as well as facilitator and dramaturg.

Her interest is in the potentiality of connections that emerge through and from conversation, and Gua Khee's research delves into the idea of Conversation — both spoken/textual — as well as the unspoken, often sidelined, conversations between and amongst bodies and space, across time.

Gua Khee graduated from the University of British Columbia, Canada, with a Psychology (Honours) and Theatre (Major) degree. While in Canada, she trained in Theatre for Living with David Diamond, as well as created *Changing the Lens: A UBC Forum Theatre Project*. Her recent credits include the musical *Island Song* (director), participatory performance *LAST DANCE* by Drama Box and ArtsWok Collaborative (creative team), theatre piece *Tortoise Tales* under Silver Arts Festival 2018 (co-playwright and director), participatory theatre *The Lesson: School Tour* by Drama Box (co-facilitator), and the performance *HOT POT TALK: Theatre & the Arts* (producer and director). She has been an Associate Member of Dance Nucleus since 2018, and was recently one of two Artists-In-Residence under its *ELEMENT #3 (Solo) Dramaturgies*.

You can find more information about her works and other pieces of her writing at www.guakhee.com

ABOUT ARTSWOK COLLABORATIVE



The work of ArtsWok Collaborative focuses on arts connecting communities by harnessing the power of the arts to create dialogue, invite social participation and build bridges across difference.

ArtsWok Collaborative works with multidisciplinary teams to design and implement innovative community-based arts programmes such as *BOTH SIDES, NOW*, an immersive arts experience that invites conversations about end-of-life issues, as well as *IPS Prism*, a civic-engagement piece which looked at governance in Singapore. In 2015, it launched the inaugural annual youth theatre festival *M1 Peer Pleasure*, a platform for creative and open exchanges with young people through drama and dialogue. It developed and continues to facilitate *The Greenhouse Series*, a field-building initiative that catalyses learning through a community of practice and action-learning lab. It also conducts and shares research that builds legitimacy for the field of arts-based community development. Our bi-annual e-newsletter as well as case studies can be found on our website.

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