Edith Cowan University

Copyright Warning

You may print or download ONE copy of this document for the purpose of your own research or study.

The University does not authorize you to copy, communicate or otherwise make available electronically to any other person any copyright material contained on this site.

You are reminded of the following:

• Copyright owners are entitled to take legal action against persons who infringe their copyright.
• A reproduction of material that is protected by copyright may be a copyright infringement.
• A court may impose penalties and award damages in relation to offences and infringements relating to copyright material. Higher penalties may apply, and higher damages may be awarded, for offences and infringements involving the conversion of material into digital or electronic form.
Cries from Within:  
The Struggles & Triumphs of Creating a Singaporean Voice in Musical Theatre

This thesis is presented for the degree of 
Doctor of Philosophy

Caleb Goh

Edith Cowan University 
Faculty of Education and Arts 
Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts
2015
ABSTRACT

This research explores the plausibility of replicating a Broadway-type musical theatre industry in Asia. What would it take to establish a similar standard of musical theatre in an Asian country? With the problem being a lack of Asian representation in the genre, my aim has unashamedly been to see whether it was possible to increase the visibility of Asian musical theatre in form and content, with greater representation for makers and audience. By exploring the viability of creating a strong musical theatre platform in Asia, this research aimed to empower student/emerging Asian performers in believing that the dominant paradigm of musical theatre in the West could find a parallel or counterpart elsewhere.

Upon brief exploration of various Asian countries, Singapore was chosen as the country in which to conduct the research and experimentation. Through interviews, focus groups, workshops, directorial and choreographic experiences with students at the only undergraduate musical theatre honours degree programme in the country, and immersion in the professional industry, I sought to shed light on the viability of an Asian Broadway-type musical hub in Singapore. I found a bourgeoning theatre industry, high production standards and sustainable growth for industry and audiences. Performers also showed interest and potential to develop their musical theatre skill-set, and educational programmes had the appropriate tools and curricula to guide performers, to hone those skills, and to help them achieve competitive and superlative standards of performance.

I have found through the course of the research that in the city-state of Singapore, musical theatre has generated much interest. If my recommendations are executed, I argue there will be the potential for not only an increase in visibility, but also quality, which will inevitably lead to greater performing opportunities for Asian performers. I argue for small changes in the musical theatre curriculum and arming musical theatre educators with greater skills in order to extend musical theatre workshop offerings nationwide. This will enable skill acquisition and the nurturing of talent, allowing for a greater advancement in the art form, priming individuals for success and eventual contribution to the quality and prominence of the growing industry.

This advocacy has the potential to sustainably and effectively promote musical theatre in the city-state and stimulate the education of audience and potential makers, and the nurturing of the next generation of performers and theatre enthusiasts. In addition, it will enable new Singaporean works to be developed, for eventual regional and subsequent international impact.
The declaration page
is not included in this version of the thesis
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The journey to completion of a doctoral degree can be a lonely and arduous journey fraught with uncertainty, moments of self-doubt, and fatigue. Thankfully, many individuals made the road less travelled filled with little triumphs, moments of clarity, and much joy, hope and inspiration.

First, I would like to thank God for all good things. I know that faith is a personal thing. For me, it was God who led me to Australia, where I stumbled upon the Doctor of Philosophy degree programme in the Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts. He has continued to guide me through the entire process and has given me strength and hope each step of the way, even when I had none.

They say your work is only as good as the eyes, hands and minds that invest, guide and nurture along the way. My amazing supervisors patiently and lovingly journeyed with me through the research jungle and helped me make sense of my own work. Maggi Phillips, thank you for believing in me and for being a wonderful sounding board for my crazy ideas. Your wisdom and creativity motivated me to greater heights. You are sorely missed and I will constantly cherish the time spent basking in your brilliance, humour and humanity. Lyndall Adams, you are my rock! Thank you for pushing me beyond what I thought I could handle, and then pushing me even further to achieve my goals. It is because of your precision, care, love and attention to detail that I managed to accomplish all that I did within the timeframe on which I insanely insisted. I will treasure our friendship and your guidance always. Renée Newman, thank you for coming to the rescue and striving to make my research look and feel like the best that it could possibly be. Your positive spirit and strength during this time of need is greatly appreciated and I am grateful for your expertise, excellent input and critical eye.

I would like to extend a huge thank you to all the theatre practitioners that I interviewed for this thesis. Takayo Fischer, Ann Harada, Ivan Heng, Alvin Ing, Jose Llana, Paolo Montalban, Amanda Morris, Nell Ng, Tracie Pang, Venka Purushothaman, Hansel Tan, Tay Tong and Christine Toy Johnson, your invaluable insights into the world of musical theatre, both in America and in Singapore, have provided me with much needed information to shape the course of my research. Your anecdotes about life in the industry still put a smile on my face.
The immersive practices used in this thesis would not have been possible without the help of individuals who trusted me to shape curriculum, conduct workshops, direct and choreograph productions, and work closely with students and musical theatre enthusiasts at various institutions. The research done and data collected at School of the Arts, Singapore, National University of Singapore, Lasalle College of the Arts, and Pangdemonium Theatre have been invaluable and much appreciation goes out particularly to Sean Tobin, Tony Knight, Greg Peterson, and Adrian and Tracie Pang for making it happen.

A big thank you goes out to all the students and participants in the various workshops, showcases and musical productions mounted. Your passion and hunger to learn, and dedication to the different projects encouraged and motivated me. Thank you for your patience and for devoting your time, effort and talent to the experience.

As a technology neophyte, this thesis could not have been designed so beautifully without the help of two dear friends with much needed expertise. Michelle Tan, thank you for the lovely video splicing and labelling techniques and for being a wonderful sounding board for all my ambitious and wacky ideas. You came to the rescue on many occasions and managed to allay my worries, calmly solving many issues with the expert flick of your hand and with confident and utter technological precision. Your keen eye, patience and genuine friendship played such a vital part in getting me through this undertaking. Bjorn Yeo, thank you for going out of your way to make sure that my research was laid out in such a professional and stunning manner. You made my work look so good!

Friends and loved ones are the cornerstone of any successful venture. They provide reprieve from the monotony of research, when all creative juices have run dry. They allow for moments of levity, and chances to recharge, in preparation for more hard-hitting studying and writing. If not for their support during the past few years, I might not have made it through this demanding process with my sanity intact. In particular, Paerin Choa, Daphne Quah-Duncan and Mark and Ed Waite, thank you for the coffee runs, the theatre talks, the unapologetically long texts, the potlucks, buffet binges, much needed vacations and moments of unbridled laughter. Of course, much love to Dickson Su for tolerating the research diatribes, the moments of unfounded futility and the irrational outbursts brought on by fatigue.
My deepest thanks go to my family for putting up with my endless rants, constant frustration and incomprehensible spiels on musical theatre. In particular, my most heartfelt gratitude goes to my father. Thank you for the endless late night chats, the constant debates, the inspirational pep talks and the open avenue to vent. As an esteemed researcher himself, my father knows the ins and outs of the world of academia. He understands its requirements and the journey that needed to be taken in order for my research to come to fruition. Not once did he give up on me, even when I did not believe in myself to carry this to the finish line. His wisdom and expertise were invaluable, and his unconditional love for me cannot be compared. I am immensely grateful and much in debt.

Thank you to everyone I have mentioned here, as well as to those that I might have missed. Your help and support has been immeasurable and I am blessed to have you in my life. Thank you.

Professional editor, Elite Editing, provided copyediting and proofreading services, according to the guidelines laid out in the university-endorsed national policy guidelines, ‘The editing of research theses by professional editors’ (available at http://iped-editors.org/About_editing/Editing_theses/FAQ_students.aspx)