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Drawing from Grotowski and beyond: Kuo Pao Kun's discourse on audiences in Singapore in the 1980s[1]

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ABSTRACT

Much has been researched on Kuo Pao Kun's multilingualism and multiculturalism. However, as one of one of the most important Asian dramatists, the analysis of Kuo's discourse on audiences remains largely unexplored. There is a pressing need to understand the ways which theatre practitioners imagine audiences as it points to issues of subjectivity, audience participation and social engagement, especially in a neoliberal society like Singapore where people are often positioned as docile economic subjects. Among the many Asian and Western dramatists Kuo drew inspiration from, Jerzy Grotowski was pivotal. This essay seeks to address this gap by examining how the latter's ideas was crucial to understanding how Kuo envisioned theatre and audiences alongside his artistic practice.

KEYWORDS
Audiences and theatre; subjectivity; Jerzy Grotowski; cultural activism.

The late Singaporean theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun (1939-2002) is well known for actively pursuing multiculturalism, humanism and cultural activism throughout his entire life. This paper focuses on his discourse on audiences from his essays, speeches and published interviews through engaging with the following questions. How did Kuo see audiences? What social functions did he ascribe to theatre that he envisaged would serve audiences? What were his presuppositions of audiences? How did he understand the relationship between the artist and audiences? In view of Kuo's highly regarded status as the "father of

[1] I am grateful to C.J.W.-L. Wee and Sangeeta Bhardwaj for their insightful comments. All errors, of course, are mine.

Singapore theatre," these questions are crucial, given his moral and authoritative stance among visual and theatrical artists, stemming from a record of activism and artistic achievements (Wee 2004, 774).

The essay does not claim to be an exhaustive ethnographic study of audiences, but rather, is an attempt to analyse Kuo's statements related to audiences. In other words, this paper approaches audiences as a discursive category, following the argument that it is a "situated 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 stemming from when and how Kuo was representing audiences, and their relationships with artists. To better understand the idea of audiences in his discourse, it may be useful to consider the various roles that he played. Other than a playwright-director, Kuo was also a public intellectual, arts reviewer, educator and curator; he also served on the consultative panels of government ministries.[2] All these different appointments and experiences are not only closely related to his vision and practice of art that makes it impossible to discuss his discourse on audiences within a single, fixed role such as a director or a playwright. Nor is it plausible to focus solely on the texts in which the term "audience(s)" appears, for it is a social category that needs to be considered in the light of the artist's relation to society and the state. This relation requires an inclusive approach to archival matter that may carry implications of Kuo's understanding of audiences, such as the functions he attributed to theatre. As the indisputably most important dramatist in Singapore theatre since the nation's independence (Sasitharan 2000, 10), Kuo's leading 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,

[2] Kuo served on several panels under the National Arts Council (NAC) of Singapore. Like other ministries and statutory boards, the NAC has the practice of inviting artists and other professionals to serve on consultative panels for advice on matters such as censorship, arts education and funding.

377). Given the strong social engagement in both his artistic practice and intellectual discourse, it is all the more important for us to make sense of his discussions of audiences for mainly three reasons. Firstly, no study has been carried out on this specific topic; secondly, insofar as Kuo was highly engaged in the critique of state policies and the status quo, examining his discourse on audience does not merely imply a better understanding of Singapore theatre but also of state policies. Noting Kuo's highly revered status in different fields, one might even argue that a study of his ideas would be a useful way to approach Singapore Studies. Thirdly, at the heart of Raymond Williams's famous statement, "there are in fact no masses, but only ways of seeing people as masses" (1958, 289), point to the socio-political stakes extant in how audiences, as representations of people, are represented. Underlying Williams's statement is the desire to produce a radically more democratic concept of culture, which challenges hierarchic classifications of people (Winter 2010, 46). In the Singapore socio-political context, examining representations of people in itself is highly charged in the ways through which state discourse often positions people as the nation's "only resource" (Mahizhnan 1999, 13; Lee 2015), and in how the social body, following Foucault (1979), is subjected to "the repertoire of governmental techniques" of social campaigns, policies and 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), and Grotowski's ideas on theatre and audiences served useful in this regard.

The scope of this study lies principally in the 1980s after Kuo's release from his detention under the Internal Security Act in 1980. That decade is often seen as a turning point for his theatre practice, not only in terms of how he himself retrospectively perceived it, but also how it was understood by scholars. Kuo 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."[3] 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).[4] 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 indeed true that Kuo's plays in the 1980s moved away from a direct confrontation with politics and social campaigns,[5] this change did not mean that politics do not matter to Kuo anymore (Quah 2010, 148; Wee 2012), and his work, as before the detention, "still did not subscribe to any notion that art functioned as the cultural-artistic manifestation of an individual ego" (Wee 2012, xv); that is, there is a continuity that can be traced in Kuo's from before and after his detention. An enquiry into his discourse on audiences in the 1980s will demonstrate that his ideas are closely linked to his activist-driven and politically-engaged theatre practice in the 1960s and 1970s.

This paper consists of four sections. In the first section, I suggest that it is necessary to see how Kuo thought in the 1960s and the 1970s of the director's vital role in forming community and contributing towards nation-building to gain a longer perspective of his artistic work. This will be followed by sections on *live presence*, *communality* and

[3] Kuo mentioned this at a forum for playwrights in 1997. See Kuo (1997, 70).
[4] 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).
[5] See Paul Rae's "The Feeling of Being Watched," in this issue.

intellectualism. The importance of live presence is not just a key trait of theatre which Kuo saw as distinctive of other mediums, such as television and film, but is also closely related to the features of transience of theatre performance and spontaneity of audiences, and the relationship between the latter and performers. I argue that Kuo's ideas of communality and intellectualism in the 1980s, both which are made possible by the condition of live presence, are in fact a refashioning of his activism in the 1960s and 1970s. This is where I will intercede in the scholarship related to Kuo's artistic practice through examining how he enriched his discourse on audiences by drawing upon Jerzy Grotowski. During his detention without trial in 1976 for four years and seven months,[6] 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). [7] Even though there has been brief discussion of Grotowski's influence on Kuo's directing and training methods (Jit 1990, 23-24; Wee and Lee 2003; Oon 2010; Wee 2012, xix), there has not been any in-depth study of how he drew from the former for his ideas on audiences. The Polish master is one of the key figures in Kuo's rich tapestry of theatre methods and traditions from both Asia and the West, and while both dramatists were devoted to the creation of theatre which defied conventions of their respective contexts, they differed in emphasis and approach. Whereas Grotowski was primarily concerned with stripping theatre bare of its props by focusing on the corporeality of the practitioner, concomitant to the creating of "not-for-a-public ritual performances whose sources are almost totally "traditional"—that is, non-Western—cultures" (Schechner 1993, 246), Kuo was relatively more interested in positioning theatre as cultural reflection and intellectual engagement, drawing upon diverse Asian and Western theatre traditions. Underlying the latter's discourse was a strong humanism rooted in its

[6] Kuo was detained for his alleged involvement in political subversion against the state. For an account of his experience in a personal interview; see Klein (2001).

[7] 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.

reflections and critique of the Singapore state's political pragmatism and paternalism in a rapidly evolving capitalist-consumerist society, especially in the 1980s.

Last but not least, this paper will illustrate how these Kuo's concepts of communality and intellectualism are inextricably intertwined within his artistic practice. Before the 1980s, Singapore theatre has been segregated according to language, namely, Chinese, English, Malay and Tamil. As a legacy of the colonial government's "separate-and-rule" policy, this division extends to all segments of society and culminated in what sociologist Kwok Kian Woon described as "compartmentalization." (Quah 2002, 378). Kuo's discourse on audiences is not only closely related to his interventions of the official top-down and non-integrationist multiculturalism, but also challenges the subject positions delegated by the state to Singaporeans in social engineering and arts policy for the formation of a supposed unity.

1960s and 1970s: theatre as direct political critique

What was 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 student politics of the 1950s, the plays he subsequently wrote and directed were politically engaged. Quah Sy Ren makes the crucial observation that Kuo during the 1960s and 1970s was inspired by the social idealism and activism in the newly established People's Republic of China and the anti-colonial struggle in many Third World countries (Quah 2010, 148). His cultural practice during this period was concerned with forging a sense of community and bonding with the displaced underclass, given their marginalisation resulting from the government's implementation of its post-independence economic agenda.[8] The works that he produced

[8] It is believed that such an undertaking led to his arrest during a nationwide crackdown on political dissidents in 1976 (Quah 2010, 159).

were concerned with the struggles faced by the working class in Singapore.[9] In 1965 — the same year that Singapore became independent — Kuo and his wife Goh Lay Kuan established the Singapore/Practice(?) Performing Arts School (S/P[?]PAS). Through staging multicultural performances early back then, they were already engaged in the practice of crossing ethnic and language boundaries (Quah 2002, 380-382). In 1971, the couple went into the "Go into Life" campaign in 1971, attempting to forge a relationship with the people who were the subjects represented in their plays. Reminiscent of China's "Down to the Countryside Movement,"[10] PPAS students would spend time experiencing the life of the people from the lower classes in Singapore and Malaysia, which included workers, peasants, fishermen and clerical staff.[11] These people formed the audiences which Kuo's plays were reaching out to. Artistic creation for PPAS also meant obtaining audience responses from the working class who attended the School's plays; this was undertaken in the spirit of "respecting those who labour," even if it meant having to work through and accepting the opinions of workers who made suggestions that did not understand the practical issues in stagecraft.[12] I will expand upon this in my section on communality.

During this period, Kuo created a theatre that offered an alternative approach towards national identity formation, and his theatre urged audiences to be proactive in the building of an ideal home and nation, taking into account Singapore's particularities (Quah 2010, 148). Fundamental to Kuo's understanding of the "Theatre that activates" is the notion

[9] 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.
[10] Spanning 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 bourgeois thinking and behaviour could be purged. This was known as the "Down to the Countryside Movement," and the youths who were thus exiled became known as *zhiqing* (educated youths).
[11] Cf. Kuo's interview with Jacqueline Lo (2002) for his account on the "Go into Life" campaign. Kuo and his wife also recounted their experience in the campaign during an interview with Quah and Tan (2011) in 2002. See also (Jit 1990, 16).
[12] Kuo cited the example of the sunflower dance to which a worker implied that it was illogical for the audience 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." (qtd. in Quah and Tan 2011, 210).

of communality, that theatre is a medium for community building. His theatrical representation of a nation-state with its suppressed underclass struggling with quotidian and daily challenges portrayed an image of Singapore contrary to the ideology espoused by the ruling People's Action Party (PAP). 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. Chua Beng-Huat describes this as the 'ideology of survival' which served as the basic concept for the rationalisation of state policies that extend beyond economics to other spheres of social life (1995, 4), including its policy of multiculturalism, and culture became considered secondary to economic development (Kong 2000; Bereson 2003).[13] This official ideology was epitomised by a form of theatre Kuo described as the "Theatre that governs" (Kuo 1996a) and according to Kuo, this is a "first rate political Theatre" driven by the "singular purpose of developing a highly focused national sentiment and awareness," "sense of nationhood, of togetherness" (Kuo 1996a, 169). This idea of unity 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 diverse peoples into disparate racial or ethnic groups. [14] In contrast, Kuo's notion of communality could be understood as cultural resistance, dedicated to the breaking of barriers between different groups and classes, and it was the live presence of theatre that made this possible.

[13] Following the 1985 economic recession, the state made recommendations to consider the role of the "cultural and entertainment services," which included the performing arts, in recognition of the fact that they were economic activities in their own right and would enhance Singapore as a tourist destination and help people to be more productive (Kong 2000, 413).

[14] The official multiculturalism in Singapore is underpinned by a non-assimilative and non-integrationist CMIO (Chinese, Malay, Indian and Others) racial framework that positions each group as distinct and disparate for governance (Siddique 1989, 575). Through promoting idea of "open culture," Kuo offered a radical way of reimagining the multicultural, 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). Specifically, Kuo's open culture meant celebrating the intermingling of cultures – both past and present, local and global – beyond the constraints of racial and linguistic origins in artistic practice and policy (Devan 2000; Leng 2015).

Live presence: precondition for communality and intellectualism

In the seminal book, *Towards a Poor Theatre,* Grotowski raised a fundamental question about theatre: "What is the theatre? What is unique about it? What can it do that film and television cannot?" (Grotowski 1968, 18-19). Across several essays and interviews throughout the 1980s to the 2000s, the answer in Kuo's various responses to this question was the notion of theatre's live nature, in which he saw as key to the relevance of theatre in contemporary society. In his long foreword to the programme of his 1982 Mandarin-language staging of the South African anti-apartheid play, *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* (1972), Kuo stated it was the spontaneity of theatre that distinguished it from television and film.[15] Thus the suggestion that even though the images of these two mediums 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 1982, 25).

During a forum on Singapore Chinese theatre in 1982, Kuo offered a more detailed explanation of what this "live" characteristic entailed: "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 performed in front of audiences" (qtd. in Chen and Zeng 1982).[16] In other words, central to the spontaneity of theatre is its transience and the presence of audiences, which Kuo mentioned in another interview, most likely conducted between the late 1980s and the early 1990s: "A thousand

[15] 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 S/PPAS(?) – at the Victoria Theatre in Singapore on 21-24 February 1982.

[16] 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 significance of theatre and his perceptions of audiences. This is an important source for my argument. All translation in English from the interview are mine.

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" (qtd. in Chia 2011, 43).[17]

We may ask: what is so notable about contemporary Singapore life that makes the live nature of theatre so important for Kuo? 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. Underlying the ruling party's political pragmatism was an "instrumental rationality" that saw citizens as the small city-state's "only exploitable resource" – they were "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. Under such circumstances, he asserted that television and film, whilst offering the convenience of seeing performance at home, created a sense of "isolation" that denied people the opportunity for interaction, and that it was being a member of an audience in a theatre that could eliminate this isolation (Chen and Zeng 1982).

Kuo drew inspiration from Grotowski in the manner in which he framed his understanding of audiences from the 1980s onwards. He drew upon Grotowski in his delineation of the relationship between audiences and actors as "nothing more than a confrontation between a naked actor and a single spectator" (Kuo 1994, 60), and that confrontation is all that is "necessary in theatre to take place" (qtd. in Chia 2011, 43). This articulation is closely aligned with Grotowski's definition of theatre as "what takes place between spectator and actor" (Grotowski 1968, 32). Kuo also described this confrontation as made up of "people's sensitivities touching each other" (qtd. in Chia 2011, 43). Grotowski, in

[17] 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 Singapore public train system was launched in 1987 and hence the interview was most likely conducted sometime in the late 1980s or later.

comparison, claimed that theatre "cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (Grotowski 1968, 19), and is "an act engendered by human reactions and impulses, by contacts between people" (Ibid, 58). While what we have here is an ephemeral "communion," as people only become constituted as an audience when they enter the performance venue and come into "confrontation" with performers, after which they disperse and go about their lives, it is – paradoxically – still the live presence in theatre that gives rise to the possibility of building communality and inspiring intellectualism in theatre.

Communality: humanising the alienated individual

According to Kuo, interaction is not only what defines the existence of theatre but significantly is also what fosters the "intimate" relations between people,

> because when the play is being performed, not only 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 (qtd. in Chen and Zeng 1982; my translation).

In other words, Kuo's thinking on the importance of the theatre experience for audiences in Singapore was more than just about providing another entertainment option for people. It was not only related to its supposed humanising effects to alleviate the problems of alienation and disenfranchisement stemming from urbanisation (Chia 2011, 43; Kuo 1996b, 182), but also associated with the function of theatre as critique and reflection.[18]

Kuo's strong insistence on the importance of theatre in contemporary society was not related to the idea of "art for art's sake," but rather, one that saw arts to be a valuable social institution in a society in which "pragmatic" and hyper-petit-bourgeois values were valorised by the state (Wee 2012, xi, xii). Grotowski's focus on the spirituality of theatre

[18] At a playwright forum, Kuo discussed the functions of theatre to critique and reflect. See Kuo (1997, 70-71). I will return to this in the next section.

audiences was for Kuo, then, a way of humanising the individual in a neoliberal-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 absolutely unnecessary (Grotowski 1968, 20). While Kuo brought his plays to the people in "non-theatre" places like schools, community centres and shopping complexes in the 1980s (Ngui 1986) — a practice linked to his agit-prop theatre in the past — he did not eschew staging performances in more conventional venues, such as the proscenium-arch theatre or the black box.[19] Additionally, unlike Grotowski, who was against catering for audiences wanting 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, his theatre company, then known as Theatre Practice Ensemble, had even written to companies and unions to suggest "theatre parties," where employees could meet and socialise at plays instead of the usual barbecues and picnics (Ngui 1986). These efforts may be read as attempts to increase audience outreach in a capitalist-consumerist society in the 1980s, when film and television had become increasingly ubiquitous and popular. Kuo observed how 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, and 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

[19] A check on the staging information of many of Kuo's plays in the 1980s would show that they were mostly performed in such venues; see Kuo (2005).

about, but rather, the interaction between artists and audiences, which he saw as crucial in theatre practice.

Reviewing the open-air production of *Medea* staged by the late William Teo, founder and artistic director of Asia in Theatre Research Centre in 1988, Kuo spoke warmly of how audiences 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).

Kuo's statements not only carry a tinge of nostalgia that alluded to a relationship between theatre practitioners and audiences that was more intimate in the past, and now supposedly eroded by economic development. In fact, he laments that theatre had "transformed from an organic, community event into an alienated consumer item," and the relationship had become "a blatantly consumeristic bond":

> Stripped naked, it looks something like this: Advertisements canvass patronage; 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).[20]

Elsewhere, he spoke on his idea that the theatre is a vital platform where people could establish meaningful relations:

> 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 (qtd. in Chen and Zeng 1982; my translation).

[20] Kuo's critique of theatre as a consumer experience is best expressed in his concept, "Theatre that consumes." Using examples of highly commercial Western musicals such as *Cats* and *Les Miserables*, which, in the 1990s, despite their high ticket prices, were successful in drawing local and regional audiences "to the world Theatre market [in Singapore] 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).

In other words, it was through close interaction with audiences – building communality - that would enhance the significance of the work of theatre artists subject to the competition of television and film, and even challenge the idea of theatre as a consumer product. And this stress on communality, as I have noted earlier, harked back to the political engagement of his previous "Theatre that activates" undertaken in the 1960s and 1970s. An appreciation of the outreach and significance of theatre during this period allows us to make better sense of Kuo's discourse on audiences later in the 1980s when Singapore became increasingly integrated in global capitalism. During the 1970s, audience numbers for Chinese theatre reached tens of thousands for each production. For example, , Singapore Children's Playhouse had put up plays at the National Theatre to an audience about 3,400 people, [21] rerunning their production at least ten times, reaching more than 35,000 audiences in total.[22] The Rediffusion Youth Theatre Group also had a production that achieved an attendance rate of more than 20,000 in 1974 (Chen and Zeng 1982).[23]

According to Kuo, peddling tickets on the streets and in government public-housing estates was one of the key outreach strategies that accounted for high audience turnouts in Singapore during the 1970s (Chen and Zeng 1982). In a way, this meant bringing theatre to the people in a literal sense of the word. Additionally, audience engagement was taken to the level of collective creation, suggesting that his emphasis on cultivating fraternity was a serious undertaking in his practice. As earlier observed, audiences were allowed to respond to Kuo's theatre productions in that period: "Workers from the various professions were often invited to advise us throughout the creative process; they and selected outsiders were

[21] Singapore Children's Playhouse was a prolific Chinese theatre group established in 1965 which attracted huge audience turnouts until it disbanded in 1980.
[22] Kuo was discussing the social impact of Chinese theatre at a forum. See Kuo (2001, 96).
[23] Rediffusion was a British radio broadcasting service formed in 1928 and had operations in its colonies, including Singapore, Hong Kong and Malaysia. The Singapore station was the pioneer of the nation's only subscription radio service and comprised of a Mandarin youth theatre group until it terminated service in 2012.

also invited to critique our final work during and after the public performances" (Kuo 1994, 60).[24] It was only after multiple revisions and feedback sessions that the plays were finally staged (Chen and Zeng 1982).[25] In other words, the "worker friend (工友 *gongyou*)" was not only part of Kuo's audience, but also a source of inspiration and his foremost critic (Oon 2010). Such an approach virtually positioned audience members as artistic co-creators. Kuo's understanding of Grotowski in this regard thus also positioned the latter as the trailblazer who transformed Bertolt Brecht's statement that "true art becomes impoverished with the masses and grows rich with the masses" into practice (Kuo 1982, 26).[26]

Through the process of co-creation, audiences transcend beyond their provisional roles as transient, passive consumers who leave the theatre at the end of performances with no further contact with the artist. Especially worth noting is how this practice, through integrating communality and collective creation, embodies the non-elitist ideal that sees 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 discussed the ability of theatre to provoke intellectual exchange, he again referred to the Grotowskian idea of film and television as contrasting mediums. He asserted that the latter saw theatre audiences as a category whose spirituality and reflexivity should be addressed and 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 spiritual voices of humans. This kind of

[24] See also Kuo (1997, 68-69).
[25] For a documentation of the creative process, see Quah (2005, xviii-xix).
[26] The quote comes from Brecht's essay, "Two Essay Fragments on Non-professional Acting," in which he was addressed the significance of amateur groups (Brecht 1964, 149).

> theatre is different from the types of film and television that do not require us to exercise our *mental faculties* (Kuo 1982, 26, italics mine).

In addition, Kuo asserted that although similar to dance and music, theatre was affective and invited emotional exchange, its ability to provoke intellectual dialogue was something that these two art forms lacked (Chia 2011, 43). While Kuo was in danger of making elitist assumptions of theatre and television audiences, the issue of how he understood popular culture would have to be taken up in a separate paper. What is crucial here, is how Kuo placed confidence in the intellectual capacities of theatre audiences, and this position could be traced to as early as 1966 when he became the first theatre practitioner to introduce Brecht to Singaporean audiences with the play, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (Lo 2002, 394-395; Quah 2002, 380).

Recounting his experience of staging the work during an interview in 2002 (Quah and Tan 2011), Kuo demonstrated his creative boldness to venture into what might be seen as objectionable at a time when Stanislavskian realism was the dominant mode of representation in Singapore theatre. As the lighting designer for the Old Tote Theatre Company's earlier performance of the same work, Kuo was well aware of the consequences following the destruction of the fourth wall of the stage (Jit 1990, 14).[27] Indeed, his use of symbolic spaces on stage and the exposure of scene transformation by crewmembers drew the vehement ire of Stanislavskian followers (Jit 1990, 15; qtd in Quah and Tan 2011, 227). Kuo was chastised for staging Brecht who had already been denounced as a bourgeois dramatist in China and the Singapore Chinese theatre scene in the 1960s. For radical critics, especially offensive was the inappropriate representation of peasants who were portrayed as "unheroic figures" (qtd. in Quah and Tan 2011, 227; Jit 1990, 15; qtd. in Lo 2002, 395). In an interview, Kuo revealed how he responded to the vitriol feeding off the political beliefs of

[27] The Old Tote, operating from 1963 to 1978, started as the standing theatre company of Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Art (NIDA) and was the precursor to the Sydney Theatre Company.

the Cultural Revolution in China: "In a fit of anger, we restaged the play and left it to the audience to judge" (qtd. in Quah and Tan 2011, 227).[28] Not only was the play reproduced without amendments, but was also "filled to capacity again" (qtd. in Lo 2002, 395). As such, Kuo's endeavour was bold and enterprising; it was driven by the assumption that audiences were open-minded and capable of appreciating works that were seemingly difficult.[29]

More importantly, it was also a strong rebuttal against the politically-driven attack of detractors who dismissed the play simply because they saw it as "formalistic theatre" (qtd. in Lo 2002, 395). According to Kuo, his rendition of Brecht's work was very close to realistic acting, and he was "unaware of the aesthetic difference between Stanislavski and Brecht" (Jit 1990, 15). Whereas the 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 audience. Notably, Kuo did not totally eschew the methods of the former as his training at the National Institute of Dramatic Arts, Sydney, rooted in conventional Western drama techniques, which reinforced his historically anchored conviction in Stanislavskian naturalistic theatre (Jit 1990, 14-15). While he embraced the received values of naturalistic drama of Chinese theatre during the 1960s (Jit 1990, 15), the fact that he experimented with Brecht and unapologetically restaged the *Caucasian Chalk Circle* demonstrated an intellectualism that entailed challenging theatre convention and commonly held beliefs, distinguishing Kuo from his peers in Chinese theatre.[30]

[28] Goh Lay Kuan revealed that the staging of Brecht in 1966 led to the accusation of Kuo as the chief culprit for destroying everything in Singapore Chinese theatre (qtd. In Quah and Tan 2011, 227). See Jit (1990, 14-15) for a more detailed account of Kuo's staging of Brecht's play.

[29] Kuo (1982) also introduced the ideas of Brecht in his foreword to his staging of *Sizwe Banzi is Dead* in 1982. He also addressed the impact of Brecht on Singapore theatre in a paper. See Kuo (1989a).

[30] Quah states that Kuo's direction of plays from diverse countries in the 1980s, spanning from the United States, South Africa, Malaysia, Switzerland to Hong Kong, showed his openness to "the construction of a pluralistic theatre" (2002, 380-381).

Interestingly, despite Kuo's apparent emphasis on intellectualism, his was not against the idea of theatre as entertainment. In contrast, Grotowski asserted that there were "certain types of film to cabaret and music-hall" (1968, 40) to serve this purpose. He also believed that theatre should instead 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 was receptive towards the idea that it was possible to fulfil, simultaneously, the audience's needs for both entertainment and critical thinking:

> For a performance to attract audiences, the foremost is its entertainment value. However, the cultural 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 1989b).

During the 1980s, when audiences of Chinese theatre in Singapore were dwindling, Kuo led his theatre group to perform *xiangsheng* (Chinese crosstalk), comedy and songs in 15 community centres (Ngui 1986), which could be understood as his answer to fulfilling such expectations and reaching out to diverse audiences.[31] Likewise was the use of humour in the plays he wrote in the 1980s (Jit 1990, 21; 2000, 96). As it is beyond the scope of this paper to discuss the affect of the comic in his works, I would continue to focus on the implications of how Kuo imagined his subjectivities of his audience and the subjects represented in his theatre through successfully integrating his ideas of communality and intellectualism with multiculturalism. Against the attempts of the Singapore state to frequently represent and construct its people as "economic digits," [32] Kuo's 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

[31] Chinese crosstalk is a form of traditional comedy performance which usually involves two actors.
[32] The late Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew was known for referring to Singaporeans as 'digits' on many occasions, especially during the 1960s and early 1970s when he needed to stress the economic vulnerability of Singapore. See Lee (1966a, 1966b, 1967, 1971, 1983).

more pronounced.[33] Kuo stressed that theatre would serve the purpose of identity search: "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, dramatic arts, particularly theatre, will be especially important" (qtd. in Chen and Zeng 1982).

Having just been released from prison in 1980, the "new" not only meant a reflection of Kuo's own artistic journey and a move away from the direct confrontation with politics in theatre, but also an engagement with the state's discourse of nationalism and developmentalism, and its version of political pragmatism and multiculturalism. His plays since the 1980s were informed by the idea of theatre as social critique (Oon 2010; Jit 1990, 24). Key to his artistic practice was the presupposition that audiences were capable of appreciating symbols and images, instead of just relating 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)[34] and *Mama Looking for Her Cat* (1988), protagonists were depicted as subjects who reflected upon and undertook 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 different languages that underpinned the uniqueness of the play, but this was also the premise for universal dialogue between Singapore and world audiences (Quah

[33] A classic example of a play that focussed on the representation of the Singapore identity is Stella Kon's well-known monologue, *Emily of Emerald Hill* (1985) which features a Peranakan woman's struggling to live up to her multiple familial and social roles in a conservative family. The Malaysian dramatist Krishen Jit describes the work as the arrival of the much sought-after "Singapore play" for English-language audiences (1990, 21).
[34] For synopses and discussion of these three plays, refer to Paul Rae in this issue.

2005, xxiv). More interestingly, it was not just Grotowski's ideas on audiences that he drew from. The former's acting exercises and methods of the latter were employed alongside language games in his direction of *Mama Looking for Her Cat*, featuring a Hokkien-speaking mother who becomes estranged from her bilingual-speaking (English and Mandarin) children. The former seeks solace by keeping a cat and when she goes in search of her pet when it goes missing, she forms a friendship with a Tamil-speaking stranger. The play inspired a reflection of the communication systems and missystems in Singapore society (Jit 1990, 24) through obscuring the barriers of the streams by conceiving dialogue in the diverse languages of Singapore (Ibid, 10). The key to considering language in Kuo's theatre practice is "how the performance in different languages would be received by a linguistically and culturally diversified audience" (2002, 382). In *Mama*, Kuo made the radical move of getting culturally diverse actors to perform in the languages of Mandarin, English, Tamil, Hokkien, Cantonese and Teochew. Not only were the languages of the mother and the Tamil person 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 amalgamation of multiple languages on stage, through reinventing the multilingual quotidian on stage, was arguably a form of defamiliarisation, which artfully integrated the aspects of communality and intellectualism: it was not just about getting people of diverse language and ethnic backgrounds to congregate in a theatre, but also a matter of inspiring them to question the taken-for-granted racial and language boundaries of the official multicultural policy. In contrast with state communitarianism which positions the individual as a docile subject inscribed by the interests of society and the state, Kuo imagined theatre audiences as intellectual and creative subjects.

Conclusion

Through examining the archival materials of Kuo's speeches, essays, reviews and interviews in the 1980s, I have demonstrated how communality and intellectualism form the cornerstones of his ideas on audiences. Communality, premised on the condition of "live presence," is a refashioning of his activism in the 1960s and 1970s. What was hitherto a politically charged theatre practice had evolved into an articulation for communality and fraternity — this differentiated him from Grotowski who placed much emphasis on the spiritual, actor-centred and minimalist aspects of theatre. To facilitate audience engagement in a fast-changing society, seeking and interpreting the ideas of dramatists who envisioned the relationship between audiences and actors in a way that were relevant to modern Singapore in the 1980s was crucial. It was Grotowski whom he drew inspiration from, an understanding of theatre relevant to the Singapore context when the practice of agitprop theatre had become unviable. This is represented as a desire to cultivate fraternity with audiences, and as the idea that theatre could enable them to counter the problem of urban alienation in an increasingly developed society even when television and film had become the main means of communication and entertainment in the 1980s. In other words, communality and intellectualism are both closely related and point towards the idea that art is "useful," which is defined by Kuo's humanism that criticised the excesses of capitalism and political pragmatism. He was motivated by the ideal of building mutually enriching and potentially long-lasting relationships between audiences and the artist, and saw audiences as intellectual and creative subjects. But what is also interesting about this understanding of audiences is that it is, paradoxically, the very transient nature of their subjectivity that promises the possibility of cultivating communality and intellectualism.

Even when the internet had become increasingly ubiquitous and enabled live digital communication 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" (qtd. 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,' 'an experience in reflecting and feeling for life': "It is about people looking at people, thinking about people, and feeling about people. It is witnessing the enactment of life" (Ibid, 123).

Notably, Grotowski was again one of the sources of inspiration when Kuo established the Theatre Training and Research Programme (TTRP) in 2000, a performance training course that drew from five sources, namely Chinese traditional opera, *Bharatanatyam* from India, Japanese *Noh* theatre, Indonesian *Wayang Wong* and Western theatre ranging from Greek, Shakespearean, Russian to American canons.[35] Citing Grotowski, the founder of "early enlightenment" from "the ancient cultures of the East" and whose ideas of theatre practice "touch[ed] people through a process of pure energy transmission", Kuo asserted that drawing inspiration from Asian theatre was the next step to reach out to audiences. Again, this demonstrates that while the ideas of Grotowski may have continued to help inform his practice, the diversity of resources he drew from not only proved him to be a pluralist, but also his persistence in the belief of audiences as receptive to innovation and experimentation.

Last but not least, the broader significance of this essay points to the exigency of understanding the ways which theatre practitioners imagine audiences, for it raises issues of subjectivity, audience participation 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. But that is for another paper, of course.

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[35] See Kuo (2000) for a more detailed explanation of the rationale of the training methodology undertaken in TTRP.

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