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## EPISODE 1: "Right Time, Right People" feat. Arun Mahizhnan (Part One)

[00:00:00]  
[Theme Music]

### INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT-SETTING FOR THE 1980S SINGAPORE THEATRE ART WORLD

[00:00:08]  
**Serene:** Welcome to Backlogues – an arts management podcast series, where we delve into the histories and evolving practice of arts management in Singapore. The world of arts management is a vast and wide ranging one, and this podcast series is a humble attempt at beginning to map this world and chart its growth. This pilot series focuses on the management of the theatre and literary art worlds, a process that brings texts to the stage or page. It also focuses on the time period of the 1980s to 1995, an exciting time for the local arts ecosystem because of the crucial work of the arts managers in the increasing professionalisation of the arts and cultural industries. Head to our website at [backlogues.sg](http://backlogues.sg), that's B-A-C-K-L-O-G-U-E-S dot S-G for more information and resources.

[00:01:03]  
**Serene:** The 1980s was in many ways, a very pivotal time for the growth of the arts. This was a time where there was more support for the arts from public and private entities, enabling arts companies and arts events to reach out to a wider and more diverse audience. The infrastructure of the arts was developing with the release of Singapore's first official and publicly-available cultural policy in 1989, which would result in a push towards: (i) number one, professionalisation of the arts manager as a proper full-time profession, as well as (ii) number two, the establishment of a variety of monetary and resource support schemes for the arts. And finally the formation of the National Arts Council or NAC in 1991. Now, a particularly exciting part of this vibrant time was the Singapore Arts Festival, which had started in 1975, but only in the 1980s did it reach greater audiences because of increased state and private support.

### INTRODUCTION TO ARUN MAHIZHMAN

[00:02:03]  
**Serene:** One spirited arts manager was integral to the growth of the arts festival, as well as the setting up of the NAC. And we have the fortune of speaking with him today. Mr. Arun Mahizhnan. Welcome to Backlogues.

[00:02:16]  
**Arun:** Thank you very much for having me on this show.

[00:02:19]  
**Serene:** We are very delighted to have you and I am just going to give a little bit more context before I ask you some questions and just find out a little bit more about how you began, and certainly your illustrious career as well.

Arun was a member of the festival steering committee from 1980 to 1990. And at the time of the appointment, he was Public Affairs Advisor at Mobil Oil Singapore, and is credited as being instrumental in mobile's decision to sponsor the 1982 Singapore arts festival with S\$500,000, and that was certainly a really huge amount. He advocated for the need of a festival artistic director, as well as a professionally-organised secretariat, roles that call for the unique and multifaceted skills of an arts manager. This was then a pivotal move and also a landmark event in the professionalisation of arts management in Singapore. Arun was also a key figure in the development of Singapore's cultural policy in the late eighties. Now, for the 1991 establishment of the National Arts Council, he chaired the Subcommittee that drew up the blueprint for the NAC. The Subcommittee was part of the Advisory council on Arts and Culture.

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**Serene:** So Arun, we're very interested in how this love affair with arts began. If I can just ask you a little bit about your early days. I know you were born in India and you moved to Singapore at a young age for secondary school. Now, did you study the arts at all to become an arts manager?

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**Arun:** You used the phrase – love affair. Like love, you don't have to study it to fall in love. I never studied arts management in any formal way. What I know about arts management is by doing and learning. But I would say that my university education in Tamil literature has a lot to do with my fundamental philosophies on arts, culture, which I suppose in a way also led me to look at arts management in a certain way.

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**Serene:** That's true. Yes. You had a tradition of involvement in the literary arts from a young age. And I think when we look at families that have that, I think a lot of the times the parents love arts and the children also follow up and continue in the arts as well.

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**Arun:** That's certainly the case in my family. My entire family had an active interest in the literary arts, of course, Tamil literary arts. My mother could not speak English, but though she was not educated in the formal sense, she was widely read. So it was my father, my two brothers and sister.

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**Serene:** And, your long and substantial involvement in the arts speaks to not just the love that you talked about but also in the policy of it. You are currently a special research advisor at The Institute of Policy Studies as well.

## THE BEGINNINGS OF THE SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL AND ARUN'S INVOLVEMENT IN 1979

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**Serene:** What kind of a landscape was there to go to, that was supporting the arts, when you began your work with the Arts Festival?

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**Arun:** Okay, if we start with the Arts festival, my intense involvement began in 1979 when I joined Mobil Oil Corporation.

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**Arun:** And I would say the prevalent sense of Singapore was [as] a cultural desert. And in fact, we use that phrase in some of our promotional material, when we put out advertisements for the arts festival, "Who says Singapore is a cultural desert?"

In fact, it is not, and here it is, as the oasis of arts. And I would say both by design and by chance, the arts in Singapore had not been developed anywhere to the extent, in my humble opinion, it could have been. Partly because there was an obsessive concern about economic development. And there is a lot of justification for that obsession because as you all know, [in] 1965, we were cast out of Malaysia and there was a literally, and this is not just a figurative thing about Singapore, whether it will sink or swim. So this kind of existential question on economic development, guided and governed a lot of government policies, efforts. And even the initiatives of the private sector at that time, it was more focused on economic development. So arts took not just a backseat, but far away... not even in the car, I would say. But I must also point out that Mr. Rajaratnam, our Culture Minister in that era, was one of the most articulate advocates of the role of the arts. And he was the man who conceived of Singapore as a global city.

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**Arun:** The antecedents of the Arts Festival were there in some of the big mega festivals I would say the Southeast Asia Cultural Festival. And even before that, there was an arts festival, with the name arts festival. While the arts festival was not unique or the first time ever, I would say the sense of the role of arts became more palpable since the eighties because both the government and companies like Mobil got involved in it in a very conscientious, as well as an, a consistent concerted way. That was not the case until that period. And also the notion that arts is only for those who have a full stomach or...

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**Serene:** a luxury...

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**Arun:** which is, I think, rather unfortunate. It was not a luxury, but that's the way it was articulated by some of our leaders which is very unfortunate. As we all know, great art has been produced by poverty-stricken people around the world. And I think for some of the people who wanted to help, they were probably waiting for some signal.

## THE START AND SIGNIFICANCE OF MOBIL OIL'S SPONSORSHIP FOR THE SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL

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**Arun:** I think Mobil's participation had a signalling effect on many other corporates. Of course, most of them were multinational corporations because this is part of their tradition, but there were also Singapore companies. If I can cite the example of UOB and the Painting of the Year competition, that's a Singapore company, which paid a lot of money and put in a lot of effort to create this competition which has paid off very handsomely for the arts lovers, as well as for the company.

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**Serene:** I like to put some dates into the section just so that our listeners can also follow our timeline a little bit. You mentioned the year 1979. So actually for nine years, since 1970, you were a senior producer with the central productions unit of the Radio Television Singapore, RTS right?

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**Arun:** Yes. That's a name that most people would not recognise today.

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**Serene:** Besides a current affairs programme, this unit actually also produce arts-related programs and documentaries, so I can see why you were working there. And then in 1979, you moved over to Mobil. That's the company you talked about as public affairs manager and you are credited as being instrumental...

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**Arun:** Yes, I started off as public affairs advisor and then I got promoted as public affairs manager, a little later...

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**Serene:** Ah, okay. So public affairs advisor at first and then public affairs manager. And you're credited as being instrumental in Mobil's decision to sponsor the 1982 Singapore Arts Festival. Yeah.

[00:10:05]

Music Transition

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**Serene:** Okay. So it seems like a good time to move into sort of the evolution of the Singapore Arts festival, The nations' flagship arts festival now known as the Singapore International Festival of the Arts is a well love staple of our city's cultural calendar. And it draws diverse attendance with audiences from all walks of life, be they young, old, local international, regular arts-goers, or even people who are new to the arts.

But when did this all begin? You mentioned earlier on about some antecedents. So I am going to give some context to that as well, and to understand what forces have shaped its growth over the decades and how that has in turn shaped the local art scene. How does the festivals' history tie in with the growth of arts management in the 1980s?

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**Serene:** Now the earliest record of a national arts festival that we know of was 1959 just before Singapore's self-governance. And that was just an one-off event. And it wasn't until 1975 that we began to hear of this word SIFA, Singapore International Festival of the Arts.

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**Serene:** [In] 1963, there was the Southeast Asia Cultural Festival. It ran for about a week. It was to celebrate the official opening of the National Theatre even though at that point in time, it was only partially completed. You remember that and the National Theatre?

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**Arun:** Yes, absolutely. I mean, it was one of the most exciting art events I had ever seen in my life till then. But I have to say even now after so many decades, that was a mega festival and had such an impact on so many of us because that was Southeast Asia - this was our backyard. We always look to the west as if that's where the best is, but we were exposed for the first time, as a country, how our neighbours have developed the art and what their arts are and what their culture is. Yeah, I was so excited and I am so glad I had the opportunity to attend some of the events myself.

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**Serene:** How old were you at that time?

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**Arun:** I was born in 1945. So this must be about, what year?

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**Serene:** before you were, in 20... 18!

[00:12:28] **Arun:** Yah, Yah.

[00:12:29] **Serene:** Phew, saved by my maths. I read that the ticket prices range from \$1 to \$5

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**Arun:** Pricey sum for me at the time, to me.

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**Serene:** Okay, Okay. And there were, what... some 1500 artists from 12 neighbouring countries. And this was a milestone in the history of Southeast Asia because it marked the first time that so many countries in the region had come together to participate in a single cultural event. Any idea what the significance was, holding this in Singapore?

## SIGNIFICANCE OF THE 1963 SOUTH EAST ASIA CULTURAL FESTIVAL

[00:13:03]

**Arun:** My sense is this, as you know, I was a young school boy, but I think it was primarily motivated by the political idea, of an ASEAN group of countries. While the arts was the, probably the excuse, the real motive was to bring us young countries together. As you know, this was an extremely tumultuous period in geopolitical history. There were grave fears about what would happen to the smaller countries in Southeast Asia, in the bipolar world, the communists and the democratic geopolitical cold war. So I would say that while it was a fantastic art event, it had a political background and primary motivation because unfortunately, such a festival was not continued on a periodic basis after that, which is a great shame.

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**Serene:** Sure. So I suppose this wasn't really art for art's sake, so to speak. Yeah, that was 1963. So I think now that we look back, we can see that, well, that was just like two years

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before Independence. The planning for this festival started in 1961 by a Festival Committee chaired by Lee Khoo Choy, who was then Permanent Secretary of the Ministry of Culture. It embraced diversity as a key determinant of national identity, and there was also an exhibition held from seventh to 15<sup>th</sup> August to showcase paintings, photographs, sculptures, musical instruments as well. All of this was held at the Victoria Memorial hall and the Singapore Polytechnic at that point in time. So the seedlings really for the arts festival, as we now know it would have been something like 1975. Am I correct, Arun?

[00:14:53]

**Arun:** Yes, that is my recollection too. Though I was not in Mobil then, as far as I know John Lim was directly involved in this. He was then the Public Affairs Manager. So I certainly trace Mobil's involvement in the Arts Festival to that point.

## PLANTING SEEDS TO START THE SINGAPORE ARTS FESTIVAL AND MOBIL'S SPONSORSHIP

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**Serene:** Yeah. Interestingly, how this festival began in 1975, was that a group of music enthusiasts and music education inspectors of public schools who were working with the Young Musicians Society (YMS), which was one of MOE's extra-curricular arms... they approached Mobil Oil to sponsor a concert in 1975. And you are absolutely right, Mr. John Lim, who was the Public Relations Manager, welcomed the idea and counter-proposed an arts festival to enhance the local cultural scene. And I guess it was just an opportunity to be seized. The members of YMS drew up a masterplan for the arts festival with programmes and budgets for Mobil Oil and one of Mobil Oil's executives... that's you! Arun... subsequently became a member of the festival's steering committee.

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**Arun:** I was fortunate enough to be there... much later. Yes.

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**Serene:** Tell us what the vibe the atmosphere was like at the point in time where you had a chance in a way to start up a festival for arts' sake?

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**Arun:** Yeah. Between John Lim and myself, there was Peter Wilkinson who succeeded John Lim. The thing about Mobil Corporation, not just Mobile Oil Singapore, but Mobil Corporation... it had long been a patron of the arts and culture. And it had a tradition of actually publishing coffee table quality books on arts and culture of some of the countries in which they operate, which is why as you well know in the corporate world, every cent counts. Many people may think that – especially in the 1980s – the oil business was the biggest business in the world. And the seven sisters, as the most important seven oil companies were called, ruled the world in a figurative sense. The money was not the issue, but the cause is, and Mobil already had this at its core and the headquarters was very much in support arts activities. Whereas in some of the corporations, including, I would say, even in Mobil, some directors actually asked me how many litres of petrol can you sell through the arts festival? Yeah...

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**Serene:** I can imagine. It has to be quantified.

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**Arun:** So I told them, it's a stock answer. The festival is not to sell the petrol as such, but it just to sell Mobil corporation – Mobil Oil Singapore – that it is a company that it functions as a corporate citizen in a responsible way.

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**Arun:** And there was hardly any corporation in Singapore in the 1980s, who had taken up arts as their primary thing. I mean, if you look at our biggest competitor – Shell – which is huge, but they had already established themselves. For example, Shell Traffic, that was their brand and they did a lot of stuff in promoting understanding of science environment and so on. No big player was in the arts field. I think that this was because, as we discussed earlier, the notion of arts as an integral and as a very important part of our life as a global city or as a nation was not well-established at that time. And as I mentioned, also, Mr. Rajaratnam did promote the idea of a global city, but the arts as an integral part of it came much later.

So to some extent, when I got into Mobil, I saw that the government was turning to arts development as an important phase in our nation-building. The fact that other corporations didn't pay attention gave Mobil the feeling that this is a greenfield in which we can plant our flag.

And that's what I think John Lim did actually that the it's a pioneering effort. In fact, Mobil has all been called a pioneer in the arts in the Singapore scene, you know. But this is a role it has played in elsewhere around the world. So it was very easy for me to promote this idea, to make it bigger... better, because my headquarters was totally in sync with me and my then chairman whom I should mention Dorsey Dunn was also instrumental. Whenever people give me credit, actually the credit should go to Dorsey down and they had quarters because they were fully behind these proposals.

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**Arun:** If not for their support, their blessing, nothing would have happened. But I also have to say that Mr. Lee Wai Kok, who was then Director of Culture and under whose jurisdiction the arts festival came, took to me in a very kind sort of way though I would have sounded like a Maverick at that time. And, Michael Lok who was his deputy at the time... these people were willing to listen to our ideas. So I would say my entry into the arts festival through the auspices of Mobil was very fortuitous. It was the right time with the right people. And it was a propitious moment if I may say so.

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**Serene:** It sounds like the stars had been lined up yeah? You're in the right constellation, because you are an arts lover. You're put into this situation where you can see the opportunity. Mobil had been in the game of supporting the arts anyway and believed in it. You positioned yourselves as a citizen of this location and of the world as well. I think this is in a way kind of the perfect arts sponsor, so to speak.

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**Arun:** Yeah. We also had another character in the cast, which is Gary Steen. When I went over to New York for my developmental assignment, he was brought from New York to hold

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the fort. And he was the public affairs manager in between 82 and 83. And he was of the same ilk. And he was totally committed to this. So even when I left for New York in 1982 June or something, he was very much in support of the arts and he played a critical role in the Steering Committee as well.

## STEERING THE ARTS FESTIVAL – MORE THAN JUST CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP

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**Arun:** One of the things that is probably useful thing for a lot of people to remember is... the notion of a corporate involvement is usually financial. Corporations donate a certain amount of money in support of the event or the cause. In Mobil, what we did was – originally we were just signing the checks and we were in the finance committee. But later on, Gary Steen and then myself, we got involved in the Steering Committee of the Arts Festival. And I actually became the chairman of the marketing committee, which is not expected of a sponsor.

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**Serene:** Wow.

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**Arun:** We took a really hands-on approach to corporate sponsorship, which is not usually the case. We became, I became a very active member of the entire steering committee, the organizing process, and [we were] not just content with signing the checks for the festival.

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**Serene:** yeah, but you signed the checks. Mobil signed the checks for three additions, right?

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**Arun:** That's right. The first three additions were solely sponsored by Mobil. But errr... during my time, I really felt that if the festival were to grow and that was certainly Mobil's intention that it must grow... it needed a much bigger pocket than Mobil's.

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**Serene:** Yes, we'll go into that in a short while. There is a quote here from you in the Straits Times in 1986, it says, "as far as Mobil's support is concerned, we have a very soft spot for the festival. And we would like to provide as much support as we can afford, both financially and through our staff's involvement in organizing the festival." I find this a very interesting quote, because usually when we talk about budgets and sponsorship, they're hard numbers. There's a very capitalist slant to it - what we give, what we want to get back and things like that. Any comments about that? These other players that you've mentioned... like it feels like all the people you were working with, all had a very soft spot for the arts.

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**Arun:** Yeah. The staff involvement is again a Mobil practice in the headquarters. And in many other countries, they actually loan very senior executives to charitable institutions. Sometimes on a full-time basis for two to three years, they are seconded to these organisations and bring in their expertise. So it could be financial, it could be non-financial.



And in that sense, my involvement and Gary Steen's involvement in the steering committee, marketing committee, or so on... is in addition to the funding, the actual cash that we offered. We were giving our valuable time, which is also paid for by Mobil. So when you add it all up, it is much more than the dollar amount that you see in the sponsorship. But I must say that the Ministry of Culture then was welcoming of our involvement.

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**Arun:** And of course the chairman of the steering committee was Robert Lau, a legendary figure in the arts development. And as you know, he was the first Chairman of what we call today, the Esplanade. So we had a number of corporate people who had an active role in shaping the festival. And this, I think is a modus operandi that many other corporates should take into consideration because the civil service has a certain depth and a certain breadth without question. But they can be helped in other dimensions by the corporate executives who become part of the process. Just like artists themselves, when they're in the steering committee, it takes on a very different... the whole game changes. If we only have civil servants sitting in a steering committee or even civil servants and corporate sitting in the steering committee, it is good, but not good enough.

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**Serene:** Hmm, I think you are definitely making a case for diversity in the management of festivals and in the arts in general.

The three editions that were fully sponsored by Mobil alone were:

- the Singapore Festival of the Arts in 1977. It ran for seven days. The venue was Victoria Theatre and the cost was fully borne by the sole sponsor Mobil Oil. There were 1,300 participants and 77 groups performed in seven nights of sold-out shows and an open competition was core, with 75 entries received and judged.
- The second edition was the 1978 Arts Festival. So just one year later. It also ran for seven days. The venue was Victoria Theatre. The cost was \$150,000. It involved more than 2000 participants and a hundred groups. And on opening night it was announced that the Singapore Cultural Foundation would be set up to fund arts development in Singapore. Definitely a very exciting announcement. I can imagine during that time, it was organized by the Ministry of Culture together with MOE and Radio Television Singapore. The performances were by established groups, such as the National dance company, Ping Hsieh Peking Opera Troupe, Singapore Ballet Academy, Singapore Indian Fine Arts Society. And the competition element continued to provide local groups with an opportunity to be involved. The visual arts thread was also introduced and it featured artists from member countries of ASEAN.
- Then there was a skip. There was a rest of one year where there was no festival. And that brought us in 1980. This is the third edition that was fully sponsored by Mobil.

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**Arun:** Perhaps I should explain why there was a gap. Originally the Festival was conceived as an annual festival. But when I got involved and looked at the scope of an international festival, we felt that it is unsustainable for the Ministry and Mobile to mount the efforts and provide the funding on an annual basis. So it was proposed that we switched to a biannual cycle. And that's why the subsequent few festivals were definitely on a biannual basis because we needed to take more time to organize a proper festival. I use a word proper

advisedly in the sense that if you really want a professional international festival, you need a lot more lead time. And to make something an annual festival, you have to plan at least two or three years ahead. And we just didn't have the bandwidth at that time. So that was the reason why we decided there will be no festival in...

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**Serene:** 1979. That's right. Yeah. So in 1980, the festival came back and that was really, I would say the formal start of your involvement, Arun right?

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**Arun:** Yeah.

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**Serene:** This was the final year with a competitive feature. There was strong artistic direction. The programmes were curated to ensure a diverse range of events to suit people of different ages and tastes. And this was in line with the government's view of the arts as a tool for nation-building as well, and, also cultural development. There were dedicated programmes for theatre and visual arts introduced. There was participation from international artists, such as Australia, Austria, Japan, Korea, Sweden, and the USA. So, giving expression to what you were saying, earlier on why earlier on, there was a gap year to prepare for that as well. This was also the time where the Singapore Festival of the Arts was started as a professional organisation?

## INTRODUCING THE CONCEPT OF A FESTIVAL ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND THE PROFESSIONALISATION OF FESTIVAL MANAGEMENT

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**Arun:** Okay. When I say professional, I mean not as a registered professional organisation. But I would say the word professional applies particularly to the Artistic Director. Until then, the festivals were organized primarily by the civil servants, the Ministry of Culture senior staff. Mr. Lee Wai Kok was then the Director of Culture. The modus operandi was, because of the support that the embassies in Singapore could give, they tended to look to the foreign embassies in Singapore to provide an art group... a performing group to come and perform at the festival. But, my conception and some others said that time I in the steering committee felt that we really need a professional artistic director.

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**Serene:** Hmm... someone to give that input and direction...

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**Arun:** That's right. And that is the professional part of it... that we felt that somebody with a vast experience in organising arts festivals should lead the charge. And that is when we brought in Antony Steel, who had already acquired a very high reputation as the festival director of the Adelaide Arts Festival, which actually was a model that we tried to emulate. Because the biggest one at that time was the Edinburgh Festival. But that was just too big. So we looked to the Adelaide Arts Festival and we noticed that Mr. Anthony Steel had done a marvellous job. So I approached him and then invited him for an audition with Mr Lee Wai Kok.

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**Serene:** Yes. That's the professionalisation of festival management. This began with your 1982 suggestion of the appointment of the Artistic Director. And from such decisions made in 1982, we can see how there were more and more. Basically we followed this thread and always had an artistic director down the line in the years of the Singapore Arts Festival.

I have a quote here, and this is a quote by Mr Liew Chin Choy, who was himself an Artistic Director. At the point in time, he was working at the National Arts Council. He said, "from the very beginning, the festival was very much a civil service driven project operating under the stifling civil service rules and procedures of the instruction manuals. Bureaucrats like me, meaning Mr. Liew, on posting to the Ministry of Culture were assigned the task of organizing the festival as part of their civil service duties. And many of us took on the pioneering task of organizing a whole plethora of cultural activities without an arts background or formal training in arts management. And this quote was taken from a 2007 article. Yeah...

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**Arun:** Yeah, Chin Choy was a comrade in arms because Lee Wai Kok, Michael Loke and Chin Choy... these were people who played a very important role. And I had the pleasure of working with all of them. But as he himself has confessed, there was a certain lack of familiarity with what really, again to use the word professional arts festival should be. And that's why Antony Steel.... at first, I have to say this... there was a reluctance, how do we get a foreigner to come here and understand? Because we had both, international as well as Singapore arts, in our hearts. It was not just a platform for showcasing international arts. It is also a platform for Singapore arts. So there were some concerns, some kind of questions about the ability of a foreign artistic director to address this dual purpose. But I was personally convinced that to bring in the Singapore element, we had enough people in the steering committee. For example, Professor Bernard Tan was there. So I wasn't particularly worried about that. And like I said, my kind of successor and predecessor, Gary Steen the American who took over the public affairs portfolio, was also very much in support of this. Which is why we recommended to the government, at least consider him. So we had a very long lunch with Anthony Steel. And I think Anthony Steel impressed the group so much, especially the director himself, Lee Wai Kok. He later changed his mind and said, okay, let's bring him back again and have a formal, contractual agreement. And that's how it all started. Reluctance at first, but a very thorough, rigorous discussion and a change of heart.

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[Music Transition]

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**Serene:** In 1982, Anthony Steel was appointed as the festival consultant. And this was the beginnings of that professionalization. The dates of this festival were 10 - 20 November 1982. I'd like you to just take note of this cost here - It was S\$1.7 million. There was a growth of new corporate sponsors, such as the Singapore Airlines, Singapore Tourist Promotion Board, now of course called the Singapore Tourism Board. They became major sponsors. The objectives here were to programme a good cultural mix of products to ensure that audiences had an opportunity to see the world arts. There was also the introduction of a festival film week to broaden the appeal to film lovers. There was also the start of staging the festival in multiple theatre venues to make it accessible for audiences. So for example, in this year in 1982, there were eight venues used. And they included Victoria Theatre, The

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World Trade Centre Auditorium – which is not in use now, The Drama Centre, The DBS Auditorium, the Singapore Conference Hall. These were the venues that were mentioned. There was invitation of renowned international practitioners to work with Singaporeans and inject professionalism. So that was the beginning of collaboration. There was also encouragement of collaborative projects by ethnic theatre and arts companies here in Singapore. All this helped to bridge partnerships and relationships, especially amongst rival arts groups, shall we say. Some of these landmark shows are the "Little White Sailing Boat" by 13 Chinese groups. There was also "Puncak" involving four Malay groups and "Kalaa Sandhya" comprising four Indian groups. So in that year alone, 1982, a very big one.

1983. The formation of the Festival's Secretariat happened that was formed under the ministry of culture, which would later sit under the cultural affairs division of the ministry of community development. Wow Arun, you went through all this! So many iterations of the ministries and the formation of various things. So, I'm going to pick your brain in a short while, okay? I'm going to go back to something we talked about in a short while.

Let me just give some context the last year that Anthony was hired for the Singapore Arts Festival. That was 1984 and the dates of the festival were 8 - 24 June. Wow. Very, very long run. It coincided with the 25th anniversary of Singapore's nation-building. The cost was S\$1.8 million. So about the same as 1980. Yeah, sponsorship of S\$1.46 million by 68 sponsors. So this is a lot more. 94% attendance. It reached out to 88,000 people. Okay, people are keeping track with statistics here. There was an introduction of a computerised ticketing system, the brain child of Robert Lau, who was then-chairman of the festival programming committee. Unfortunately, after preparing for months to get the computers ready for selling tickets. Sadly, they failed on the first day of public sales and the traditional method of buying tickets in-person had to be resumed. Nice anecdote there. The person is still the good fallback. There was also an introduction of a Festival Fringe. This fringe featured 12 groups in 34 performances at 13 venues, including housing estates. There was a mix of community and amateur group performances, open rehearsals and workshops. These workshops were by companies performing at the festival. Of course, it was important in terms of encouraging original and experimental new works by Singapore artists and for the community outreach.

What was the scene like, then? Why was this important, Arun?

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**Arun:** The tendency of international programming - it focuses on big theatres with very modern and very extensive facilities... technical facilities. That's why you now have the Esplanade at Theatres on the Bay with state of the art facilities. But we felt the arts festival was always conceived of elite activity; is only for select people. And those people had to be already pre-ordained to appreciate the art. This sort of notions were widespread. And so we decided that while we want to bring people to the festival, the festival must now go to the people. And that was the reason why we deliberately chose to stage these events in the housing estate, which is the heart of Singapore, right? So the festival was now going to the people and performing in open air, performing in sort of pop-up stages.

These were things that are actually not new to us. We had done the Wayang for nearly a century that way. That's right. Street theatre was already part of our culture. So we decided to expand the Fringe Festival: (i) one is to go to the people; (ii) second, to have a different kind of programme mix, because what you do within a proscenium theatre is vastly different

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from what you can perform in open air, and (iii) thirdly, we also wanted to give opportunities for local performers because in the whole festival, given the limitations of time and the cost of tickets, not a lot of people would be able to afford that. So we felt for the Fringe Festival, most of them were not ticketed. It's free performances, and we felt the Singapore performers would have an opportunity too. And also it was a platform for experimental work. You don't have to worry about the risks so much when you're doing it in the Fringe Festival. Actually fringe in many other international festivals are also experimental, right?

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**Serene:** Like Edinburgh...

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**Arun:** Yes, Yah. We took inspiration from other Fringe Festivals. And in this context, I must mention one person in particular - Jessieca Leo. At that time, she was a science graduate and there was a concern - well, what would a science graduate do with a festival in the ministry? So I hired her as a Mobil staff then loaned her to the festival.

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**Serene:** Secondment.

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**Arun:** Yes. We said, "okay, don't worry about qualifications and all that. I think she has the right heart." So we loaned her to the ministry and she was actually the livewire, the prime driving force behind the Fringe Festival. But her performance was so good that Mr. Lee Wai Kok actually hired her full-time into the ministry establishment, as they call it, the staff.

I think it just shows two things: (i) The fringe festival was a right idea at the right time, and (ii) secondly, when you hire people, you cannot go by paper qualifications, which is an obsession in the civil service. I think what the private sector does is, it focuses more on the capacity and the capabilities as of now, not what you did in your university days. And what rank did you get? What grade did you get? Those are okay. I mean, they are an indicator, but people like me and others in the private sector were, what did you do yesterday? And Jessica was able to convince me and later on the steering committee, that she has got what it takes to run this festival.

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**Serene:** I want to say a little bit about the programming for this 1984 festival as well, because you mentioned experimentation. And I think there's some wonderful examples here. For example, there was an introduction of a song to promote the festival. I think it was called "Finer Side of Life" written by Mary Tan and was performed by the NUS Choir at the festival opening. There was a continuation of international and local collaborations, of course. So one of the productions, seminal productions, that we read about in [the] history of local theatre is *Bumboat!* which is an English-language musical directed by American Tzi Ma and Singaporean Lim Siau Chong. This presented vignettes of contemporary Singaporean life in a series of stories written by a group of writers including Michael Chiang of *Private Parts* fame; Catherine Lim one of our illustrious novelists; Jacintha Abisheganaden. Dick Lee was composer and musical director. There was also continuation of encouraging collaboration amongst local groups in a single production. And that production was a Chinese one. It is the *Oolah World*

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directed by the late Kuo Pao Kun, doyen of Singapore theatre, Han Lao Da and Hua Liang. And there was an introduction of a Peranakan play *Pileh Menantu*, which drew record audiences. So 1984, sounds like a year of a lot of groundbreaking performances.

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**Arun:** Absolutely! Because 1982 had already been partially planned. So Anthony Steel had to make do with what was given him. [19]84 is entirely his way. That's why I considered that festival truly outstanding; in many ways it was pioneering. Like what you mentioned just now, collaboration between foreign production houses or companies and local Singaporean ones.

And also within Singapore, we decided instead of giving one theatre group its own place in the festival, why don't we get a number of Singapore groups to perform together in one? In fact, in the case of the Indian dance performance, Anthony and I met with one of the greatest dancers in the world an Indian lady, we brought her here and she choreographed the Indian dance by an open audition where all the Indian dance could send their students or members and just be selected by her. So this was an example of collaboration that is highly fruitful. And the learning thing in that, what we can learn from the masters was part of the game plan that by collaborating with a very well-established foreign group or a person, we could learn in the process itself. So I... I.. that was all Anthony's work. It was absolutely brilliant.

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**Serene:** Yes, and well supported by the administration and all the marketing and everything as well. Could I go back a little bit to the purse, the solo purse of Mobil, that you had mentioned earlier? I know you had mentioned that Mobil felt that no, you did not want to hold onto the sort of rights in a way to be called the sole sponsor. Can you maybe say a little bit about which other sponsors came in and how that elevated the festival?

## THE GROWTH OF CORPORATE SPONSORSHIP FOR THE ARTS FESTIVAL

[00:46:01]

**Arun:** I think the tendency among corporates is to monopolise sponsorship. That's normal because it's part of your brand, just like the, uh, you know, uh, painting of the UOB Show. And this is normal. There's nothing unusual or unethical about that. But in our case, when we saw the potential of the arts festival, that it can grow much, much bigger and also much better, our management was persuaded to accept that we don't have to be this whole sponsor. First, we can't afford it. If we really want to go big, can we put in a few million dollars, like \$5 million to begin with? That's too much for even the world's third largest company at the time for Mobil. So we proposed to the management that we become one of the sponsors. and by the tradition of starting it, we would probably the main sponsor, but we should be prepared for the eventuality that we would be just one of the sponsors. To the great credit of my management, they accepted this – that we don't have to hog it; we don't have to keep it a Mobil product. And then, because I was also the chairman of the marketing committee, I went around together with others in the Ministry to promote the festival. And I think I had a very special, uh, cache because I am the Mobil person who is actually seeing to the other corporate leaders – “hey, this has benefited us; this is not what the ministry is telling you. I am telling you from personal experience that for Mobil we benefited from this. So it's like...

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**Serene:** a fellow corporate telling them that.

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**Arun:** That's right. Secondly, I also made it very clear to them that Mobil has no intention of monopolising the festival and we don't even have to have a say who else has coming. I am here to advocate the festival and to say that you would be most welcome, even though you are a rival in some sense... in a business sense, that we are most happy for others to come in and be a partner in the sponsorship. So we went around canvassing for funding, but as you would have noticed that the first two are... well.. Singapore Airlines is a kind of government company. It is a GLC. And certainly, the Singapore Tourism Promotion Board is a government institution. But over time, others came in. I think this was after they had seen: (i) one, the benefits and (ii) second, the welcoming mood within the festival steering committee - this is not favouring Mobil all the time. Even though I continued to serve in the festival for many years, even after I left Mobil... eventually I became chairman of the festival at one point, but I think it was important for Mobil to signal this willingness to bring in others. And I'm very glad that my management took that enlightened view of sponsorship rather than monopolising it.

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[Music Transition]

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**Serene:** Hmm, Arun, you were talking about how you wanted to share the sponsorship load and the privilege as well with other corporates. And 1986 – that edition of the Singapore Festival of the Arts would prove to be the festival where that actually came to pass. The dates of the festival were 6 - 22 June. The cost was S\$2.3 million and the sponsorship of S\$1.9 million actually came from 85 sponsors. The eight major sponsors were Singapore Turf Club putting in S\$600,000.00 followed by Singapore Tourism Promotion Board at S\$500,000.00 And then you had Mobil Oil Singapore [with] S\$200,000.00. And then you have the Cultural Foundation [with] 150K, and Singapore Pools [with] 10K. That was also the addition of non-cash contributors, such as Western Samford and Western Plaza. They offered free accommodation to troops that were coming to Singapore and artists. Singapore airlines for discounted airfares and Total Information System, which developed the computerised ticketing system. For the first time, credit card companies, such as the American Express, waived commission charges for payment of tickets booked with the use of credit cards.

And in fact, there's this quote that I read here "every ticket that you bought in that year to the festival of the arts was subsidised to the tune of S\$21 on average." That's really big a subsidy.

There was the appointment of Robert Liew as the Artistic Director that year. There was also the introduction of the Writer's Week, which remained until 1990 and would subsequently spin off to become the Singapore Writers Festival in 1991. The interesting thing here, is that the Festival Fringe, which Arun was talking about, had an allocated budget. And this budget was \$15,000.00 and included *No Parking on Odd Days*, and it was staged by Practice Performing Arts School.

Then we cut to 1988, which was the 10th anniversary of the Festival. This was an interesting festival as well. The cost was S\$3.7 million. It lasted five weeks. There were 42 international and local productions. What was important here to note is that there was a festival commission of Beauty World, which was premiered by Theatreworks at World Trade Centre Auditorium. And of course in backlogs, we will have a chance to speak to an arts manager who was active at the time with Lucilla Teoh

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In 1990 – that was when I was 16 years old, Arun! I was looking at the Festival of the Arts as well, and at that point in time, very much as an audience member. There was the appointment of Tisa. Tisa Ho-Ng as she is now known. And she was the Artistic Coordinator. I got to know Tisa later on because she was a board member of The Necessary Stage (TNS). And I had acted with The Necessary Stage as well.

That was a very interesting year - S\$4 million... more than S\$4 million was raised to fund the festival. To promote of the Festival of the Arts programme, the cultural division of the Ministry of Community Development, established a marketing department dedicated to generating corporate support. For the first eight months of 1989, the marketing manager, Nellie Har called upon an average of two companies a day. So I think what you mentioned earlier on about Mobil asking the corporates to come forward, it was really starting to bear fruit in 1990.

This year was also interesting. There was a festival commission of *Lao Jiu* by the and allowed to continue to be part of the canon of Singapore work. There was the introduction of a music forum series supported by Performing Rights Society to showcasing Singaporean works. And of course it also included the restaging of *Lanterns Never Go out* by TNS at the Drama Centre. Uh, we will be speaking to two arts managers who are very active at TNS at that point in time as well – Goh Su-Lin and Clarisse Ng in Backlogues.

Arun, you were also a key figure in the development of Singapore's cultural policy in the late eighties. And then for the 1991 establishment of the National Arts Council (NAC), you chaired the subcommittee that drew the blueprint for NAC. And this subcommittee was part of the Advisory Council on Arts and Culture. Now, if we move beyond this period in the year 2004, you came back actually to chair this festival. Were you excited?

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**Arun:** Err... no... I would say I did it under duress, but because I really thought I was way past my prime and that there were many...err... better people than myself, but Lee Suan Hiang and Goh Ching Lee who were then heading up the arts council persuaded me that sometimes a few gray hairs and some experience would help. Because the rule of the Chairman then was not so much to initiate things because we had already... a very well established modus operandi for the festival by that time. This was more to bring in, perhaps more people to negotiate a few things. I didn't play a very... I won't say I played a tremendous role, uh, as a chairman. But I finally agreed to be the chair and because I always loved the festival in a way, I always feel a sense of ownership that I put in a few bricks in the foundation. And so I thought, okay, if they really felt I could be of some service, I would be happy to do that.

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**Serene:** I think what you have just highlighted is that in Singapore, there are so many people who have seen the beginnings of the arts have done something... put a brick... a few bricks in the foundation, as you mentioned. Much of it is not documented. And in some sense, the pace of development of everything in Singapore, including the arts, has been so fast. That in a way we need to look back a little bit to see where we've begun, because sometimes some things come in full circle. For example, now there are actually a lot of arts groups, local arts groups, and I think funding is still a problem. Where do they look for funding? For example, how do they get themselves into festivals? Is there going to be an arts manager who is looking out for them and saying, hey, why don't you collaborate together and perform in this Fringe or in that Program? So I think this continuity speaks a lot about the collective wisdom that comes with remembering colleagues who have actually put in a lot of time and effort into the building blocks of, uh, the Singapore art scene.

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[Music Transition]

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**Serene:** This concludes Part One of our discussion with Arun Mahizhnan. We discussed the evolution of the Singapore arts festival and the role of corporate sponsorship not just in terms of financial support, but also operational support that extends to the organisational management and direction of the festival. The idea of the People's Festival came up as well: a festival that reaches out to people in the heartlands. We also discussed the festival's support of local theatre productions which aided the development of a credible homegrown arts ecosystem. Another aspect of the festival is its multi-disciplinary scope: including different art forms from theatre, to film, to music, to visual art. We also learned about the professionalisation of festival organisations through the appointment of an artistic director.

In Part Two, we'll learn about Arun's adventures in cultural policy, as well as his friendships with artists. Stay tuned!