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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, that's B A C K L O G U E S dot S G for more information and resources.

In this episode, we're focusing on the early founding years and the development of local theatre companies and the corresponding growth of theatre managers from, of course, the period of 1980 to 1995. The mid-1980s saw the proliferation of local theatre companies, such as ACT3, that was in 1984, Theatreworks, 1985, now, of course, known by its new name T:>works, HI! theatre, that was in 1986, Asian Theatre Research Circus, or ATRC in 1987, of course, most fondly remembering the late William Teo and Teater Ekamatra, that was in 1988.

Now, it is within this very small, but flourishing environment of theatre companies starting in this time period that we trace the origins of what would become The Necessary Stage or TNS. The genesis was defined by a bold and useful spirit. There were about 20 NUS undergraduates, plucky group, who referred to themselves mysteriously, but emphatically by the symbol of the exclamation point. They won an award for outstanding production at the NUS Drama Festival in 1986 and little did they know that, over 30 years later, they would be renowned as one of Singapore's most prominent theatre companies. Back then, who were the members at that point in time? The exclamation mark or the exclamation point.

Let me just read off some interesting names. Alvin Tan, of course, the president. There was the PR officer, Haresh Sharma, and the artistic committee. You had Ivan Heng. Yes, Ivan Heng, Elvira Holmberg, Lau Siew Mei, Neo Swee Lin, Josephine Peter and Ovidia Yu. Some very, very well-known names and they are actually also, now, associated with other companies, but this is because it's 30 years later, right? The Necessary Stage, known especially for their methodology of device work now, as well as their focus on education, collaboration, community, and socially conscious work began in the 1980s.

So, there's a lot to talk about. How do arts managers grapple with the goals of art-making and the demands of stakeholders? How do they fulfil the needs of the audience while discussing important issues of the day in society?

We're going to hear from two of our guests today. Their first-hand experiences of facing such challenges and the joy, first and foremost, of making work that strives to make a difference. Two arts managers who are both early alumni of TNS and who continue to contribute to the arts in various ways through their careers. Clarisse Ng.

[00:03:35]

Clarisse: Hi.

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Serene: Clarisse was working with The Necessary Stage from 1987 and then from 1992 to 1999, where she was their first full-time production technical manager. So, she shares with us about their early days. We'll come to her and ask her to fill in some of those years. And our second guest, Goh Su Lin.

[00:03:53]

Su Lin: Hello.

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Serene: Hi – ooh – Su Lin, haven't spoken to you for a long, long time, Su Lin, because you've been very busy at ITI. But Su Lin actually began volunteering with TNS in their early days. And she joined them a little later than Clarisse, as their full-time general manager in 1994. Yeah. So together we'll explore what the role of the arts manager of TNS looks like at different points in its evolution. So, Clarisse, can I start with you first? What was your title back then when you first joined TNS?

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Clarisse: I think it depends on what you mean by join. I was a volunteer back in the day where we were all still undergraduates. And I did, I did various things, I crewed, I stage managed, I did some lighting design, I think. And then it was only three years after we graduated that TNS was in a position to hire and Alvin asked me whether I would go full-time with them, then it became the very first production slash technical manager. Yep. And that's the role I held for seven years till I left in 1999? Yeah.

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Serene: Okay. That was the time, if I could just put things in context, Alvin was still a teacher. Am I correct? He was a full-time teacher in a secondary school.

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Clarisse: Yes, that's correct. And I was working in a bookstore at that point in time for three years after graduation. And I was, I was still sort of part-timing here, part-timing and doing stuff at The Substation, blah, blah. And then he said, do you want to go full-time with us? We've got the money. So I said: Great, let's just do it.

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Serene: Okay, well, I think you might have been one of the earliest arts freelancers, by your description.

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Clarisse: Well, I... I'm not sure. But yeah, okay. I mean, as a freelancer, I actually... I actually got paid I remember: The Substation... I did work with NAC as well. Back then I don't think it was NAC right, it was the Ministry of Culture, if I'm not wrong. And all that, before I joined TNS. With TNS, I think everything was still on a volunteer basis. Yeah.

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Serene: Okay, great. So, Su Lin, you joined as full-time GM in 1994, the first general manager. Yeah. Do you remember what the state of the company was like when you first joined?

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Su Lin: I was a big fan of TNS. I watched a lot of their plays and from 1987, I volunteered with them, but less often than Clarisse did then. I was a lawyer for a while. And when I got tired of that, coincidentally, Alvin and Haresh came to talk to me and said they wanted to have a company manager and would I try it out? So in 1994, I became the administration manager. I resisted the title "General Manager" for a while because I really did not know what I was doing. They were doing quite well. They had been very fiscally responsible by underpaying themselves. So, they were not in the red or anything like that. They had the key staff or certain areas of responsibility, but of course they were underpaid, but then they were also taking on extra responsibilities, because you needed a large team to put out four shows a year. And that's what they were doing as well as their work for schools etc. So, they were just a group of very dedicated, committed people. Underpaid. And doing everything they could to keep the work going.

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Serene: So what, do... do you remember what were the eventual pull factors that made you join TNS and leave your legal career?

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Su Lin: Okay. So, I started off as a very enthusiastic young lawyer, but I think after the first two years, the shine wore off a bit. When you got tired of always being in litigation, seeing clients who are only in trouble, that's why they come to you. I guess also at that time it was either I leave, or I go for junior partner and be responsible for bringing in clients. So, I was juggling all that and thinking, no, I do want to leave the law. But I wasn't sure what I wanted to do. It was really my luck that Alvin and Haresh came to see me and said they wanted to further professionalise The Necessary Stage. And they asked me to join as manager. I had no managerial experience, but they knew I had organised stuff before in school and I volunteered with TNS. So they knew I could, I suppose, manage some things. So, I agreed to try. And then I've been an arts manager ever since.

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Serene: It's interesting that right from the start, TNS recognised the importance of having a strong arts management component. When they registered it as a society in 1987, 2 components were set up: an admin EXCO and an artistic committee.

And I quote: "the admin EXCO oversees productions throughout the year, takes the role of producer, provides TNS with a capacity to meet up with the anticipated increase in paperwork and to put forth an organised and neat front when meeting with corporates and people outside the group. The admin EXCO will relieve the artistic committee of paperwork and other administrative demands so that they can concentrate on the artistic quality, direction and vision of TNS."

It's interesting that when TNS began, they actually had a bit of a structure already, right? As I shared about having the admin, as well as the artistic committee. In terms of doing that, could you share with us a little bit about the role and work of the arts manager at TNS?

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Su Lin: I came in pretty late in '94. There was already a marketing person and an admin executive. And, of course, the production manager. So, it was, of course, that wasn't enough to get all the work done. So, everyone did a lot of stuff that was not under their names. Right. And everyone attended a lot of rehearsals because everyone was so interested in what the work was, how the work was developing, but they essentially had these clear, sort-of focuses of responsibility identified. And Haresh and Heng Leun. Sorry. When I came in, Heng Leun was Business Development Manager. So he had taken over the financial management and I think, some of the fundraising. But Haresh, being such a natural at it, he was actually a key figure in the fundraising.

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Serene: It's interesting how, despite having a clear set up at the start, where arts administration and art-making were intended to be more separate, the role of the arts manager at TNS was actually more fluid. In fact, another intriguing point about TNS is that many of today's luminaries of the theatre and entertainment world are alumni of TNS in one way or the other. And many of them where the cast or crew actually took on the roles and responsibilities that we would associate with arts managers today

Due to their lean size, everyone at TNS often wore multiple hats, taking on multiple roles. We got lists of whether they were considered artistic or managerial. No type of role was higher or lower than the other such was the collaborative and non-hierarchical structure of their practice. In fact, in 1991, the resident playwright, Haresh Shama, was actually listed as the first and only full-time staff. A full-time arts manager and PR manager. That was in 1991, where he was the first full-time staff earning something like \$1,400 a month to do everything. Could you share more with us about the different people who have worked at TNS and the different roles they took on? I think it will be only fair to put some names to it. The name of Kok Heng Leun, right? So, Kok Heng Leun was at TNS. He, his first role was...

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Su Lin: Well, it was before my time. When I was hired, he was business development manager. But as soon [00:11:00] as I got in, he had a couple of handover meetings with me and then he was off directing a play.

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Serene: And that's why he is credited in a lot of the early brochures as resident director.

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Su Lin: I think the following year we gave him the title of resident director and he was very clear. He was no longer doing any admin work.

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Serene: Because he had handed over to you, and Julius Foo. Julius Foo from the time that I knew him, Julius was always the actor, the consummate senior physical actor, but he also was the admin manager at one point.

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Su Lin: He managed the Theatre for Youth Ensemble from 1993. Yes. And then when we, he was, but he was always a part-time actor with TNS. Right. And then later on in the later nineties when TNS had the funds for a full-time ensemble of actors, Julius was one of them. In between - I can't remember - did he do admin stuff?

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Clarisse: I'm very sure he did. I think he did the admin stuff for the Theatre for Youth branch. He did ad-hoc admin things as well for various things. He also did production work, right? Because for the Theatre for Youth branch, at least when we went out for shows, they wouldn't normally need me, you know, so most of the logistics was done by him. So you did what you had to do la. We didn't hire a separate stage manager to tour with the shows. The actors did everything themselves. Led, usually by Julius, if he was on show.

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Serene: Yeah. Yeah. I can remember some of those days. I did some of these shows before, but not that early, a bit later on. And you would be very lucky if you had one stage manager with you, who would also operate the sound and basically liaise with the school.

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Clarisse: Yeah, there was Julius. Actually, a lot of the liaison work was actually Julius! And he was also our resident driver.

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Serene: Did you all have a van at that point?

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Clarisse: No, we didn't, we used his car and he had a roof rack and we, this was for *Legend of Bukit Merah*, right? So, when we toured, we had a little Chinese drum, we had a stool, we had sarongs. We had various things which were all packed into boxes and we put straps and we had these two bamboo poles, the gala's that, that he had typed together to make two [00:13:00] tripods, that we will hang our backdrop on, on another pole. And all this was strapped to his roof rack. I don't know why we were never stopped by the police, but yeah, that's how we transport everything, everything to the roof of the car. Yeah.

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Serene: I guess the routes were also probably not as busy at that point in time. Another name, another early name Freddy... Freddy Low. What was his position?

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Su Lin: Freddy was a marketing executive. He had a lot of great marketing ideas. I do want to shout this out. He came up with the triangle project where TNS found sponsors for tickets, for people who are less privileged. And we even see that scheme being used today by The Esplanade, under another name, of course, but this came from Freddy Low. So, his title was marketing executive, but he was also in charge of PR. He was doing ticket sales. He would do front of house, most of the times

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Clarisse: And part-time actor, the occasional acting job.

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Su Lin: Occasionally acting and also backstage, if he was needed, he would do whatever was needed.

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Serene: Yeah, I actually worked with Freddy in my first job. I interviewed him. He was, of course, he had joined SSO after that. And also, my first play that I acted with TNS. He was in the lead role. He played "A" in *Invisibility*. It was a Chinese play.

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Su Lin: Ooh, *Invisibility* was your first play.

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Serene: Yes, but this was late 1990s. Yes, yes. Yes. 96 or 97. I can't remember, thereabouts. Now in 1986, at the time of their founding, they stated that, and I quote, "local playwrights have the opportunity to see their plays produced. Now, this is one concrete step in helping local drama mature. And we see this as the Necessary Stage at this point."

So, the founding of the Necessary Stage stemmed from a desire to support the development of local drama, featuring local characters, local language, and local issues. They are also known for their work with communities. So the practice of community arts may seem like a very modern year 2000s sort of concept, but TNS was already practising it in the early nineties. In 1994, they launched their community service branch, where they were the resident theatre company of the Tampines regional library and their rehearsal and office space were then, at One-Two-Six Cairnhill Arts Centre.

But of course, having a residency in a community space actually gave them the opportunity to make work for communities in the heartlands. In 1992, they also developed a Theatre For Youth branch, recognising the importance of theatre in schools. Theatre For Youths, with the support of the NAC, they were actually one of the first organisations to have a program dedicated to the importance of arts in education.

But TNS was also very versatile, taking on commissions from unlikely companies, such as Apple computers, Shell, and the British American Tobacco company, BAT. Let's just dial back a little bit and talk about how the programs were structured within TNS. Was there the concept of the main season at that point in time and then the Theatre For Youth brunch? Is that how it was structured?

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Su Lin: Yes, I think it was very clear that there was a main season. That was where the main artistic expression went, but because Alvin always had a very strong interest in education, there was always an active sort of Theatre For Youth branch, even though it wasn't called that until 1995. There was always very active work for schools.

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Serene: And, and this was Alvin's brain.

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Su Lin, Clarisse: Mostly.

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Serene: Mostly, okay. It was mostly his brainchild. Yeah. I say this of course, because I think we see similar models that have evolved with many theatre companies over the years, where they always have some sort of a main season and then they have a tiered structure where they have, they may have some teens, teen programs, young adult actor acting programs, and they have some for the very, very young as well.

Yeah. I think, I'd like to talk a little bit about some of the early support that you had. You mentioned a British Council, for example. And coming out of NUS, I think there were also some of these, ESSO lunchtime concerts, opportunities to perform at the Shell Theatre. I can see you nodding here. Are these memories coming back? How instrumental were these corporates in developing your role as an arts manager and developing the company?

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Clarisse: I think, let me focus on Shell Theatre and I think it's called the Shell Lunchtime Programme. Because the ESSO one was on campus. I mean, we were on campus, so not that it wasn't important, but I think specifically to TNS, the Shell Lunchtime Series gave us an opportunity to stage a number of small productions. But nevertheless, it meant that people could try out ideas and so on. And it was a very generous kind of support if you asked me. Not so much the money, but the fact that they were kind enough to give us the space and it, and in those days I think that the theatre probably had some kind of facilities technician, but no theatre technician. It was a small space, but they had stage lighting or sound system and so on

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Serene: And this was in Shenton Way right? To give context.

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Clarisse: Correct. Raffles Place, actually to be specific. You come out and then, you know, it's just there. And, and, and we, we had the run of the place. That's how kind they were and how generous they were. So, I would, we were moving a couple of days earlier, and again, we would do, I would do the lighting for it, and then we could just rehearse.

And it was nice because they trusted us. So, nobody came in like, oh, what are you doing? You know? And, and I think that kind of support you don't quite see these days. I think every, I don't, I don't even know where the corporates have venues like these, or if they do, whether they would hand it over to a group too to actually, yeah. Just do their own thing. So, I can't remember how many plays we staged there, but quite a number, including Haresh's place, I think.

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Su Lin: Yes. I, I have to say the other thing that was good for TNS, there was that, lunchtime audience coming from Shell and also surrounding offices were quite discerning actually. And it was, it was really good to see their responses to whatever was happening on stage,

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Clarisse: Yeah. Actually, I think the programme itself, I mean, of course, we weren't the only people that performed there. The program has, I think, had an impact in the area because I think they had pretty good programming going on. And it was a regular thing for the Raffles Place crowd.

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Serene: So during lunchtime, I think people had something to look forward to if they wanted to just consume the arts. I remember having a chance to perform once, a singing program, I think at the Shell Theatre as well. And my mother who worked in Shenton Way at that point in time, could come to watch and find out what her daughter is up to.

Yeah. Besides the Shell Theatre and the campus events, I think TNS also worked very much in the community, right? The Tampines regional library was a space that you worked in a lot. Can you tell us what you remember, how this came to be?

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Su Lin: Yeah, I think towards the end of 1994, TNS had always had interest in working with community, right? Developing plays with different, uh, groups from the community, etc. But there was this idea of taking the arts out to the heartlands. I'm not sure why, and we were ready to test it out. So we wanted to not just come, drop in with a show and then disappear. Alvin and Haresh always thought, thought deeper than that. And I think Heng Leun as well, was very interested in this community venture. So, we went to the Tampines regional library people, I don't know why, and propose that we do a series of programs for about a year and they agreed. And I remember we had some funding from arts fund, as well as our regular theatre grant. And we put it, we put it towards, I mean, arts fund supported this particular community venture. And we put up a series of plays. We developed a new play *Rosnah*. We maybe repeat at one place, we did a few workshops for the community coming back device.

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Clarisse: We devised one play with the community. Cause I remember,

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Serene: I think it was called, there was a tree... *There is a Tree*.

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Clarisse: What I remember from it was that one of the residents who acted and there was this elderly gentleman, who was very active for his age. I think he was probably eighty years old at that time or close to eighty. And he was one of the residents who actually worked with us on that play. Wonderful.

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Serene: So, auditions were held in the communities. So that's very active, meaningful engagement, right? With the community. Then when you say it's an elderly gentleman, also, I think that's wonderful because it crosses all the generations, the young people who are coming out, interested from the university, as well as the older generation as well. TNS was the resident theatre company for the Tampines regional library, and by 1997, they had performed to more than 24,000 people in the HDB neighbourhood and in the library. I think I, myself watched a play that TNS put up and that was at the MRT station, if I remember correctly.

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Clarisse: That's right. Well, we did a tour. I remember we performed at the bus interchange, MRT station. Was it with Julius and Jean, by any chance?

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Serene: It wasn't.... it was with Geraldine and Rajesh and Hossan. I remember a purple umbrella of sorts. Yeah.

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Clarisse: We did a community tour, but we'd also tour. Actually, we've been touring community venues for, well, even without Theatre for Youth actually. In fact, that was the primary space, performance space for the youth ensemble. So they would write their own plays and we will put them together. And then we would tour different libraries.

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Su Lin: Because if you were not charging for tickets, they would let you have the space for free, and then you could get just new audience in.

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Clarisse: So, Julius and myself, basically, we would take our kids out. Of course, in those days, things were a little bit more lax, we hired a lorry, and then we would drive it. And then the kids would sit at the back, accompanied with all the props, something that would probably be frowned on today. Yeah. But that's how we brought the shows around. So, we did.

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Serene: And in terms of setting it all up, the role of the arts manager, would you say is in negotiating for these, this, these things, like, we're not going to charge?

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Su Lin: Negotiating for the space, making the bookings, making sure the right people are there to receive them when they appear.

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Serene: Yeah. How about crowd management and front-of-house? Because this was in the

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Su Lin: Making friends with the librarians in the space and letting them make the announcements at the right time. Right. Yes. And managing your own front of house. Um, yeah...

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Serene: But in the open spaces, like the MRT stations and the bus interchanges, those

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Clarisse: Yeah. So... so, I mean, we... we had, we had volunteers. Uh, again, I... if I remember correctly, most of our crew were still volunteers at that point in time. So, they would come in, I would roster them, they would come in and there'll be crowd control people to stand and make sure that they don't walk through our, but, but again, it's community theatre.

So, you do expect people to like, ignore your ushers. Right. And then just walk through your performance space. Right. So, the pieces were devised with that in mind. Now you can't stop. Even though when I go for community performances at the heartlands and all that, you see people walk right through the dance piece ah.

I mean, it still happens, but a lot of the crew were just volunteers who were interested. Yeah. And they came, I think some of our youth ensemble people from those days as well were volunteering in other capacities for other shows as well.

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Su Lin: Yeah. Interesting alumni as well.

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Serene: Yeah. Tell us a bit, some of the alumni, I think the current general manager of TNS, Melissa Lim, was an alumni?

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Clarisse: Yes, Melissa Lim was an alumni. If I just run through the names. Ko Siew Huey who went on to found ArtsWok with Ngiam Su-Lin. Alfian Sa'at, of course, and Musa Fazal. Charmaine Tan, who's active in the arts for the elderly is it? I think yeah. The IC. Yeah. So quite a number of, did I leave out anyone? Yeah.

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Su Lin: Not from the ensemble, but other volunteers, uh, Rydwan Anwar, now at The Esplanade.

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Serene: Okay.

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Serene: And now we'd like to talk a little bit about spaces of rehearsal and presentation. An interesting aspect of the growth of TNS is the type of spaces for rehearsal and presentation that they've occupied in their 34-year history. TNS started out ideating and rehearsing from passageways of NUS, as well as the bedroom of artistic director, Alvin Tan. After registering themselves as a company, they took advantage of the arts housing scheme that was launched in 1985.

So, a lot happening in the eighties, as you can see. And because this was launched in 1985, it actually granted them a proper and more stable office at the Telok Ayer Performing Arts Centre. That was in 1990. You don't see the Telok Ayer Performing Arts Center now because it's been pulled down to make way for a big office block.

And then, of course, in the history of TNS: from TAPAC (Telok Ayer Performing Arts Center), they actually moved on to reside in One-Two-Six Cairnhill Arts Centre and then Marine Parade Community Centre. And then the next chapter will be in Paya Lebar. So, when it comes to presentation venues, the mid-1980s was a time where large drama spaces, such as The Esplanade did not exist. And The National Theatre at River Valley had also been demolished by that time. So TNS started out performing in the lecture theatres of NUS, and by 1991, they were able to regularly present work at the Drama Centre under the Ministry of Culture's Semi-Residential Status in Theatre Scheme. Very long acronym here, I'm going to say it out: S S R I T S. [The] Ministry of Culture's Semi-Residential Status in Theatre Scheme. And from there, they moved on to present at larger and more professional venues, such as the DBS Auditorium and the World Trade Centre Auditorium. Interestingly, the DBS Auditorium and the World Trade Centre Auditorium are also not in existence anymore.

So, this is a real gem in Singapore theatre history. If we pop back to the idea of the spaces that you use as well, the old Drama Centre, the old Drama Centre, which we had to say goodbye to... I really liked that space as well. That's actually where the current car park of the National Museum is, right?

That, that was a space that you used a lot. You want to share a little bit about some of the projects that were done there and what memories they bring back?

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Clarisse: Wow, I think all the iconic ones were done at the Drama Centre. I mean, the ones that most people associate TNS with. From *Off Centre* to *Pillars* to *Galileo*, all done there.

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Serene: I was in *Galileo*.

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Clarisse: I know.

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Serene: Suddenly remembered. Yes, I used that too.

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Clarisse: Drama Centre and Fort Canning, as well as The Substation, were the two main spaces that we did our work. It was home to us because we did, I think in those days, the requirement was four shows a year, right? So it was either or, so I think four shows at the drama centre, can't be that, it was either or, yeah. And I think we'll need the Victoria Theatre once in those years, 1997?

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Su Lin: So up to 1995, the Substation in Drama Centre after 95, I think more Drama Centre maybe.

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Serene: Mm...okay. I like to just ask some questions for context so that our listeners also can understand what the situation was like then. One: was the requirement was four a year? Can you give us more clarity on that? Four shows a year for a particular grant?

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Su Lin: Four shows a year for the theatre grant, which is the equivalent of the major grant now. Yeah, it actually started from the residential scheme, where you had space at the local theatres, like at the Drama Centre. You were supposed to do four regional shows a year.

And then that, that carried over into the theatre grant. And it was only a few years later, I think, late nineties that the arts council took in the feedback from groups that there was too much, especially if you're just on original shows and that we should focus more on deepening the quality and maybe extending production runs and not just new shows, new shows, new shows all the time.

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Serene: My second question is actually with regard to managing the arts, the finances, the audience, I suppose, and also producing that show. Clarisse has mentioned that you only did Victoria Theatre once. So clearly the big difference between Victoria Theatre and the Drama Centre then, and the Substation was size. Yeah. Can you shed a bit of light on what, what are some of the things that arts managers worry about when you have to deal with a big venue versus a smaller one?

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Su Lin: Break even? But of course, if you're a non-profit theatre company, it's because you usually don't break even anyway, but you still want a decent amount of sales. Right? So... so when it comes to size, I think that's the first thing that you worry about. Secondly, production budgets will go up as well. So you're already investing more. And then...

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Clarisse: Also, the nature of the work, whether the work it's a.... I mean, Victoria Theatre used to put it very bluntly, you need to be more epic right, because it is a big venue, audiences are far away. The work that you want to stage there will clearly have to be on a bigger scale. So it really depends on the kind of work that you're doing. I think as... as a general rule there, and I think this is probably still true for TNS today, that the work is on a smaller scale. I think intimacy is important. That's why I think those two venues were really great for us because Drama Centre, even though he had, it was, it was two levels, right? It's still small, very intimate. And I, I really think we lack that space actually, even today. Of course, now we're all looking at the Waterfront Theatre that's coming from the Esplanade. I'm not going to not, I suspect not quite the same. I think still bigger. We really need a space that's really small like that.

Maybe, maybe Wild Rice's space. Yeah. Yeah. Maybe Wild Rice comes closest, then of course The Substation. But of course, now, we do have black boxes, so the theatre studio at Esplanade does a good job for that, but Theatreworks had a black box, which was also very nice, but it was exclusive to Theatreworks. So for TNS, Substation was the obvious choice.

[00:30:16]

Serene: Theatreworks' Black box is the one that was on Fort Canning Hiill, correct? Yeah. Well, what are some of the memories that you had in your earliest days? Challenges or otherwise?

[00:30:26]

Clarisse: I think of course having been there when the company first started, and we were still at Alvin's house. Alvin's bedroom was our office right and his backyard, in those days, we didn't return the set to somebody. If you had a box set with the walls and everything, we brought them back with us. The idea was to repurpose them, of course. And everything was stored in Alvin's. You know, again, his parents are remarkable people. The fact that they allowed us to store eight by four flats in his backyard was like crazy. But they, they put up with it, rehearsals in the house. Yeah. So it was nice to move to TAPAC and we finally could move everything out. But I think our TAPAC room was on the second floor or the third floor. And we had to carry everything up and then we invested in floorboards, but everything had to be done by hand. So I think a lot of things in those days were very manual and most people work full time. So if I needed him to do anything in the day time, it would just be me. So, if I had to prep for rehearsals in the TAPAC hall, which was basically the canteen, right, and I had to rig up lights, I would just go up on a ladder.

Nobody thought about safety in those days and just climb on my own. If I had fallen, no one who've known, even Othman I think his name was the caretaker. I don't think he was awake in the afternoons. And I probably would have dealt with his family. He did, he did with the chickens. And also, I mean, there was a very common in those days because it really was the old school compounds.

It was the same idea. So we just wreck everything, use household, dimmers, cable, everything up, it just, just, it's just like that. And you just did what you needed to do. So, in a way, that's nice. Of course, everything is much more professional these days, right? So sometimes the old school we are doing things is still,

[00:32:07]

Serene: yeah, there's a bit of a romantic notion as well,

[00:32:10]

Su Lin: Only because you didn't get injured.

[00:32:12]

Serene: That's true. Well, actually that's interesting. I mean, was there any concept arts managers would look out for actors? At least I can see that for now. And they'll tell me that we are covered under a production insurance. Was there something of that concept?

[00:32:26]

Su Lin: Actually our first concern back then was to get everyone better paid if possible. That was the first concern because no one could make their living from theatre. So, you mentioned, when I was hired by TNS, I was hired out of a law firm and I found out what the pay scales were and how she was still paying themselves, I think not even \$2,000, not even \$2,000 a month. So, I was just horrified and they were, I, the company was in good shape because they were so fiscally responsible. But why? Because artists were sacrificing themselves. Yeah. So, our first concern was to...um... not just raise their pay levels, but also for the freelancers who are living hand to mouth, it was really hand to mouth.

[00:33:06]

Clarisse: I think the last people to get paid for anything were crew la. I still remember.

[00:33:11]

Su Lin: So we tried to change that a bit, as I learned more about cash flow and I managed to make TNS' cash flow better. I tried to pay the little guys first because it was really, no one could make a living in. It was so hard on them. So even before we thought about buying insurance, that was where we were trying to move, trying to make things better.

[00:33:38]

Serene: Okay. I have here a list of a lot of eighties shows done by TNS. 1986, *God*, but that was not done under TNS, it was an exclamation point, exclamation mark. An adaptation of Woody Allen's *God* for National University of Singapore Students Union, (NUSSU) Festival. Then *God* was done a few more times... Restagings. There was *Diversion*, 1986, part of NUS humanities. They were sponsored by ESSO.

[00:34:12]

Clarisse: I think I've watched that one. Yeah, but I didn't, I wasn't involved yet.

[00:34:16]

Serene: Okay. *The Smoking Car*, 1986, also sponsored by ESSO, part of the NUS Humanities Day. Also 1986... *Hollywood Heroes*, part of the Alpha Club's annual Dinner and Dance. Wow. Okay. So, I am seeing how this goes, is a sort of very student effort doing, taking advantage of any opportunity you can get. Yeah. And then I'm going to fast forward a little bit to 1987, the *Waiting Room* and *Dead on Cue*. Clarisse, this was your debut as stage manager!

[00:34:49]

Clarisse: I... I wish I could say I remember it but I don't. Obviously, I remember working on the show, but I, I think back then, I wasn't sure what a stage manager did beyond getting the props and making sure, I think my idea back then of being a stage manager was getting things together, as in from, and making sure that the props were, so it was very props oriented. You make sure that the props are set correctly and so on because I think each department ran independently, right? So, I think the lighting designer, if there even was a lighting designer. So that was probably my first show, I think.

[00:35:20]

Serene: Yeah, it was. Cause the research says so.

[00:35:21]

Su Lin: I was a bump-out crew!

[00:35:25]

Clarisse: And whatever I knew about stage management was like watching other people. And of course, nobody was trained right, not in the cycles that we moved in. So, if you ask me the blind, leading the blind, but in a good way, I suppose in hindsight.

[00:35:39]

Serene: But it's interesting because I'm looking at the other names that I can see right here in front of me, the set designer was Ivan Heng. The playwright was Ovidia Yu. The director is Elvira Holmberg. At that point in time, she was a student. Is it? Or was she teaching already?

[00:35:55]

Clarisse: I think she graduated before me, so probably teaching already.

[00:35:58]

Serene: And I think it's very interesting looking at this piece of history, because you say blind leading the blind, but also things were very organic at that point in time. And there was space in a way to make mistakes and learn on the job.

[00:36:09]

Clarisse: I think within question because, remember, not a lot of people were trained, right? So you didn't feel so like, oh, okay, I don't know what I'm doing. Of course, we all didn't know to some extent we just did what obviously needed to be done, you know? And then of course, when we look at it now and say, oh dear, what were we doing back then?

Right. But we just... everybody just... I think the only... I can't think of a single person because Ivan trained as a lawyer, right? Nobody would be trained as a theatre practitioner. The closest was someone like Haresh doing Theatre Studies, right? Oh no, he did....

[00:36:42]

Serene: He studied Literature!

[00:36:43]

Su Lin: Theatre Studies didn't exist yet.

[00:36:45]

Clarisse: He did, he did! What's the course? I can't remember the module now, but it was the closest thing to the theatre thing.

[00:36:53]

Su Lin: So, it turns out law was the closest to the theatre.

[00:36:55]

Serene: I think so. I do think so. If you think of the names associated with it, right?

[00:36:58]

Clarisse: Or if you think of how many lawyers there are.

[00:36:55]

Serene: Right, your Ong Keng Sen, Neo Swee Lin, Ivan Heng, a lot of them, yeah. Anything that you remember, any particular show that you remember from those eighties years?

[00:37:09]

Su Lin: Eighties, early nineties. *Still Building*, I suppose. That really stood out. I really enjoyed *This Chord and Other*, which a lot of people don't remember now.

[00:37:16]

Clarisse: Drama Centre...

[00:37:17]

Su Lin: It's a bit, yeah, it might get a bit dated to restage it. Yeah. But well, I liked it.

[00:37:22]

Serene: I remember it was a comedy on friendship and then also a lot about racial prejudice. Three-hander. Am I correct? Three-hander?

[00:37:33]

Su Lin: The boys, each played, the other ones' fathers.

[00:37:37]

Clarisse: And I think there was a song right?

[00:37:38]

Su Lin: I can't remember the song though.

[00:37:40]

Serene: I'm going to fast forward again to 1990. And that was the performance of *Those Who Can't Teach*. And that was performed at the opening of the Substation. As we know, Substation, the building has been returned to NAC and all that. Your thoughts? Thinking back.

[00:37:55]

Clarisse: Those were exciting years, right? The Substation had just opened and it was a first sort-of multi-disciplinary space. And I wasn't just doing TNS work. I was, I was, I was working in the bookstore, but I was also freelancing on the site. So, I did a couple of things with The Substation. And I think at that point in time, I didn't necessarily see myself as an arts manager or production manager, even, I think at that point of time, I might have been more interested in lighting actually. Yeah. But of course, when the job offer came to be production manager, I'm like, well, it's a job, you know, we'll find you work in theatre full-time right. Why not? And I didn't think I was good at lighting anyway.

[00:38:37]

Serene: But you got to do... you got to try many different things.

[00:38:39]

Clarisse: I did, I did and after I went full time with TNS, I did get to light anyway, but I think given the work that I needed to do as production manager, there wasn't a lot of time. And it wasn't the best thing to do, you know, double hat, because, as production manager, I shouldn't be looking at one aspect only, right? So I... I found it difficult to light MVPM. So, I dropped the lighting.

[00:39:00]

Serene: One of the things that I remember about the Substation, even though generally I, I work in the capacity only as an actor, is that to cross backstage, if there's a very, very big cross, we would have to go outside, go around the café, Fat Frog, and come back into the garden.

[00:39:16]

Clarisse: Into the garden and into the backstage and then come back around again.

[00:39:18]

Serene: Correct. Or the other creepier way is to go in the basement and then climb up the ladder and then emerge from like a trap door.

[Music Transition]

[00:39:35]

Serene: One of the major defining traits that makes up the very DNA of The Necessary Stage is their devising methodology. Here is a quote by Haresh Sharma in the book, "Reading the Room: A Playwright's Devising Journey," which was published in 2021: "I started writing plays by accident. When I started writing, I had no theatre or playwriting training. An important ethos of TNS back then, which has lasted until today, was the focus on research and process because none of us were trained in theatre. There wasn't a theatre studies program at the university back then. We decided to work together and be a collective resource for each project. For instance, we would share stories about our backgrounds, our different cultural sensibilities and so on. We would also create a lot of improvisations, what we call devising. So a common phrase, back in the day, would be "Let's devise a play!" A phrase, which was usually met with cheers, more so than jeers. This was because devising meant everyone had a say, everyone could contribute in some form or other, through improvisations or research or feedback. There was structure and hierarchy minus the authority." Unquote.

So, as we have mentioned before, we can see the importance of people coming up, once again. The importance of the fluidity of professional roles, all of these play a key part in the devising process, that is unique to TNS. Haresh's first devised play was *Lanterns, Never Go Out*. It was written in 1989, first staged as a lunchtime play, and then eventually presented at the Singapore Arts Festival 1990, as mentioned in Episode Two with Tisa-Ho Ng. Do you remember anything about *Lanterns, Never Go Out*?

[00:41:21]

Clarisse: I really enjoyed it and I think it was a very touching story. And it resonated with many of us, you know, the idea that, you have your set of dreams, and then, but you know, it doesn't match society. And I think that was a theme that was very popular in those days.

[00:41:34]

Su Lin: I was not really involved in that, but I do remember the romantic story of them being discovered by a Tisa-Ho Ng for the Singapore Arts Festival. She spotted them. She saw the first production and she... she asked them to be in the Singapore Arts Festival.

[00:41:47]

Serene: The tickets were sold out! How did that make you feel as arts managers?

[00:41:51]

Clarisse: Was that before your time, Su Lin?

[00:41:52]

Su Lin: That was before my time.

[00:41:54]

Clarisse: I think it was very exciting. It's always nice to feel that the show was. And I, I do think TNS in terms of its... its audience appeal, it was definitely building. You know, so, so it was good to get that kind of validation, right? Again, I think it really is about that particular context, because everyone was very excited about local work. You know, Pao Kun's plays were very hugely popular at that point in time, because we were all like, oh my god, we're seeing multi-racial multi-lingual, multicultural work on stage. It was such a nice sort of contrast to the kind of very anglophile work that had been done previously.

[00:42:29]

Su Lin: About recognising your own self on stage, I guess.

[00:42:33]

Clarisse: Yeah, the local context.

[00:42:34]

Serene: Okay. So, we're going to move on to 1992. That was the year that TNS was registered as a professional theatre company. The National Arts Council was established in 1991, and very swiftly, grants were to follow.

The first one was the Travel Grant in 1992, which went on to help TNS, to bring *Still Building* to Cairo. There was also a grant to start the Theatre in Education branch in 1992. And that was very useful for the Theatre For Youth Ensemble. In 1993, there was the Seed Grant and it's interesting to note that TNS was the first to receive the Seed Grant.

And that same year, the Theatre Grant Scheme was started. And that is interestingly today's major company grant. Why this is significant is because it actually paved the way to the development of their three branches in 1995. And these were the Community Service for Theatre branch, the Theatre For Youth, as well as their annual main seasons.

So the company was obviously morphing... moving in a particular direction as you were getting organised and things like that. I think things started to change.

For example, the housing, you moved to One-Two-Six Cairnhill Art Centre, and this is a quote: "For The Necessary Stage, for instance, moving into the new premises means moving out of the bedroom of its president Alvin Tan, which has served as the company's headquarters for five years. And the offer from NAC could not be more timely, for the group has just turned professional. And Alvin says "It is a relief, really, because my bedroom is quite claustrophobic!"

This was taken from the Straits Times in 1992.

And in 1992, very, very quickly in that same year, the company presented *Still Building* at the Cairo International Festival of Experimental Theatre.

Again, I'm going to highlight the show run. The dates were 1st to the 10th of September. So a significantly longer run, five performances though. This was a restaging of *Still Building*. What Su Lin mentioned earlier on as something that was very iconic. Yeah. First presented for "Theatre on the Hill" in 1991. This was a theatre and arts carnival organised by then Theatreworks on Fort Canning Hill.

It was supported by the NAC travel grant of \$7,000 and it covered airfares for seven participants. This was a subsidy, this was after a subsidy by Singapore Airlines. There was also free accommodation and transport. I think this must be a very exciting time, right? When you're thinking of, really quite substantial sponsorship. Both from the government, as well as from corporates. You want to tell us a little bit about what you remember, Clarisse?

[00:45:09]

Clarisse: Actually, I don't, because I didn't get to go on that trip.

[00:45:14]

Serene: Because, seven performers... so they had to leave someone behind, right?

[00:45:15]

Clarisse: Yeah, production managers usually get left behind. It was very exciting for the company to bring a show abroad. And it was a show that was really significant for the company as well, in terms of the devising process, in terms of the kind of methodology, the presentation stylo. Very TNS. So, I think that, that was what was really important about that particular show.

[Music Transition]

[00:45:44]

Serene: And that year seemed like a very busy year because you all also started a Theatre For Youth branch. Just to give a couple of figures here, the company received a S\$16,200 grant from NAC to start TIE, yeah? And NAC saw that TIE was a way of building up to a future audience base for Singapore. You started with a launch of *Legend of Bukit Merah*, that was a theatre and education programme.

The aim really was in theatre work, with, and for the young people and with different communities in Singapore, the work included presenting short plays during school assemblies, interactive theatre and education programs, workshops, and process-based drama programs that focus on personal development. I think this is worth highlighting because actually NAC would then start the NAC AEP programmes a year later. You remember this moment? It feels like theatre at that point in time, the growth was really galvanised because there was the whole education lens, that we were all looking through.

[00:46:44]

Clarisse: Yeah, I think, of course, it's multi-pronged, right. I think creating work or presenting work in schools, working with schools, is also, to be frank, it's also a revenue source, it's income source. And it's important because I think sometimes you do Main Season shows, you may not break even. But it's also important to note that, I think for Alvin and Haresh, working with students and young people is really important as part of the DNA of what TNS' work is about.

This was very exciting because I think when we created *Legend of Bukit Merah*, for example, that form had not been done, as far as we know, in schools. So, I think, I think different practitioners have been doing workshops and so on. And I think the notion of an assembly play is not new, but...

but the idea of going in and, and in some ways it was a real privilege, right, that they would give us a group of students for an afternoon. For us to work with, for three hours with them. And so, you present a little short play with a dilemma in it and then you get the students all in their roles. So as you know, the story of the *Legend of Bukit Merah*, the students are the villagers or the fisherman and we gave them all sarongs to wear. Things we can't do now with safe management. But anyway, so, everyone was in role and each group had a facilitator, who acted in role with them. And then you present them a situation. Who do we save? We call them up to, in the play, you know, despite the fact that he had saved the whole village and so on. So that kind of investment, just think about how many people. I think it was five people per show, five facilitators and they're working for three hours with the students, was actually an expensive thing to do. If you think about manpower resources and all that. But it was very, very rewarding. I think there was, I think for me, very significant about the kind of work that Theatre for Youth branch was doing.

[00:48:29]

Serene: And I think also very holistic because I'm reading here that the drama workshops don't, didn't just focus on acting, but also on directing, playwriting, production and stage management.

[00:48:40]

Clarisse: Yeah. Okay. So, we ran a series of workshops. I can't say many schools were interested in the production workshops. I guess the other ones were always more exciting, but we did do a couple of workshops. There were schools, and I'm trying to remember, was it a 12 hour? I think it was quite a number, like four sessions of three hours kind of thing. Where I would take them from working with a script, you know, and then looking at what kind of props were needed, and then we would simulate it basically, you know, and then running in class. Looking back, actually, that was the genesis of the workshops that I ran quite recently because I was also involved in M1 Peer Pleasure, right, the theatre festival, the youth theatre festival. We have a group, we have a program called the Ninja Programme, where we brought in, you know, students would sign up or young people would sign up for these, and I did something similar with them. To introduce them to the various aspects of production itself, and then stage management, production management, and then they would crew on the festival. So that, and when, I mean, so you can see that journey, the development. And the festival provided them opportunities for them to work on the show. So that was the one thing we didn't manage to do for the production workshops back then, right. They would do, quite dry in a way, like drama club, right, then you do, then what do you do with the skills you learn isn't it? Right. But for M1 Peer Pleasure, we actually managed to put them on show.

[00:49:54]

Serene: Wonderful. And you actually reached, at its height, I think about 800,000 students actually had seen some of the shows and this, this actually paved the way to drama programs, piloted drama programs for school curriculum, and then TNS continued to work with numerous non-governmental organisations and voluntary welfare organisations as well.

So, this proved to be something that had a maximum reach, I think. In 1992, another big program came about, and this was the Creative Arts Programme by MOE. It was established on the 12th of March 1990, by the Ministry of Education's Gifted Education Unit, in collaboration with NUS, the department of English Language and Literature.

This is an annual creative writing program for secondary and junior college students. So you mentioned Alfian Sa'at earlier on, the playwright that we know, he's with Wild Rice now, Alfian Sa'at took part in the Creative Arts Programme twice in 1992 and 1994, where he was under the mentorship of Haresh Sharma. So Alfian, actually, really had his roots in TNS and one of his plays, *Black Board, White Walls*, written in 1997 was subsequently staged by TNS. In 1993, the NAC AEP programme that was launched in 1993, as I said, there was an annual Tote Board Grant to cover subsidies for student theatre tickets by 50%. Was this helpful for bringing students audience to TNS shows?

[00:51:22]

Su Lin: I think it was, if I remember how it was explained to me, cause I joined one and a half years later right. It's certainly helped bring students to schools, but I think there was also the unexpected consequence of the AEP programme that it actually drew a lot of other operators to offer "arts programmes" for schools. So that you had a lot of poorer players just setting up businesses to offer programs to schools because of this kind of subsidy. So, you had genuine players like TNS and all the other arts companies you've named earlier. After a couple of years, we were outnumbered by the other players. Yes. So, it worked well for the beginning, then you had all these unintended consequences come in.

[00:52:04]

Clarisse: Yeah, because you know, now the landscape is populated by many of what we call vendors from a school's point-of-view right. And these are not necessarily companies that, they might be training companies if you put it that way, but not necessarily arts companies at heart. But now, lots of people offer arts programs for schools.

[00:52:21]

Su Lin: Which is why now you have this vetting process in place by the National Arts Council, because of what happened then.

[00:52:27]

Serene: Wow. Okay. This is definitely something that's interesting. Were there discussions amongst the managers of the more genuine companies, if I can quote you?

[00:52:36]

Su Lin: I don't think we needed discussions. I think we all individually feedbacked to our National Arts Council officers, who we were very directly in touch with.

[00:52:48]

Serene: Okay. Okay. Yeah. Early on, we had mentioned that Julius took on, Julius Foo that is, took on an admin role as well. He was the admin manager for the Theatre For Youth ensemble. And Clarisse, you did the production coaching for this ensemble. Yeah. They were the first young professional theatre company to receive the NAC seed money grant of \$50,000. That was in 1993. And this is a one-off grant to help young arts groups with a track record to establish themselves. Could I just ask a question, this Theatre for Youth ensemble, TNS doesn't have any more right?

[00:53:23]

Clarisse: No, it's just for three years I think.

[00:53:24]

Serene: It's just for three years. Yeah. Just wondering these, these initiatives, they come and go. What are some of the challenges that you saw with these ensembles? Because I think TNS also had a full-time theatre ensemble before, right?

[00:53:40]

Clarisse: I think the two are quite different in terms of function if I put it that way. I think our full-time actors ensemble was really to work on the Main Season plays. And I think it's always a dream for every company to have, look at what Nine Years Theatre has done with their ensemble, which I understand they're not able to continue with anyway. But I think that it was a very expensive venture.

[00:54:02]

Su Lin: So the full-time actors ensemble, when they started it, I agreed with Alvin and Hareesh. You try it for a couple of years and then make a decision after that whether you want to try to continue it, because it will use up a significant portion of your reserves. That's how expensive it was, but they wanted to take the artistic gamble and try it out. And then at the end of the two years, he decided not to spend that kind of money anymore and to do it slightly differently. But for the

Theatre For Youth Ensemble in 1993, there were so many enthusiastic young people wanting to get involved in theatre. They were trying to volunteer with us or just asking for roles and stuff. So for these young people from ages of 14...

[00:54:41]

Clarisse: 14 to 18 I think. Maybe yeah.

[00:54:44]

Su Lin: Yeah. 14 to 18ish. TNS started this thing. And this is before I joined them, but they were so generous with their time right. They had the kids come in every weekend almost.

[00:54:52]

Clarisse: Oh, I remember now. Yeah, but there were a lot of sessions because, you know, they came in for workshops, right, we ran workshops with them [00:55:00] and then they decided what they wanted to specialise in. So we had playwrights, directors, we had the production people.

[00:55:08]

Su Lin: And also, the early set of workshops, don't get this wrong, it was workshops offered by Alvin, by Hareesh, you know. So by all the main core members of TNS, really, and Clarisse of course, doing the production and stage management. Then of course the interesting part is the second half of the year where they each write their own pieces, you know, teenagers writing short pieces.

[00:55:26]

Clarisse: Short angsty pieces, I must say.

[00:55:28]

Su Lin: Then Clarisse and the people who had chosen to specialise in production stage management would help to create these pieces and you know, put them on stage. And that's when we toured the libraries with them.

[00:55:40]

Clarisse: Actually no, the CCs. And the libraries. I think both we did.

[00:55:45]

Su Lin: Libraries and CCs. I remembered the libraries more. Anyway, so it lasted for three years. And why it didn't continue is really because I think people felt tired and we ran out of steam. You know, it's kind of burnout because this is on top of all the other parts of their full-time job.

[00:55:58]

Clarisse: Not to mention that when you work with young people, you always have a pastoral care slash mentorship role. So you don't just, they're not just here to get the skills. Very often, you also need to take an interest and care for them. And that's very tiring because these are teenagers, right, and they have their problems as well. So inevitably they, all the chickens come home to roost. And then, you know, you have to spend time with them with these things as well. And it's very costly in a sense. Yeah. So it is tiring.

[00:56:27]

Serene: It does help to explain why there was also a proliferation of local writing because there was all this investment. There's all that mentorship that went into it. Yeah.

[00:56:45]

Serene: Going into being an arts manager, I mean, both of you did not study arts management formally anyway, going into it. So when we talk about this term "arts manager" now, this is being offered as a course in many institutions, right? Arts management and things like that. What comes

to your mind? What do you think when students come to you or you hear people say I'm studying arts management?

[00:57:09]

Su Lin: Oh, well, I think the whole skill set comes to mind. Administrative skills, organisational skills, leading people, coaching, uh, people with you, team building, financial management. And then if you're in an organisation, setting up the institution, maybe working with a board of directors, different levels of volunteers, volunteer management, everything.

[00:57:31]

Serene: Okay. How about you, Clarisse?

[00:57:33]

Clarisse: Well, everything she said. But as a production manager, I cannot resist the notion that a production manager is an arts manager, only because in my head, it's because we worked so much with production people and, uh, on a technical side of things that I see us as a separate category. I know in courses that are taught in school these days, you probably do both sets. And I think in Republic Poly, I think, you can choose one or the other if I'm not wrong. Yeah. But I usually, usually when people say arts manager, I don't think of myself as [00:58:00] an arts manager. I think of myself as a production person.

[00:58:02]

Su Lin: Yeah. I guess the big distinguisher is the financial responsibilities at a slightly different level, organisation-based rather than production-based. And of course there's the marketing and fundraising.

[00:58:14]

Serene: Mm. What do you feel are some of the necessary disciplines to study to become an arts manager of today?

[00:58:22]

Clarisse: Wow. As an untrained production manager, I must say it still gives me imposter syndrome. The fact that I didn't train for it. And that I have no formal technical background. I, I think if you asked me whether production managers need to be trained that way, I would say no.. But in terms of the skillset, yes, I mean, not so different from the admin side of things, right? The planning, the organisational skills, the people skills preferably, and then the technical know-how. Enough to know how to do some good planning, I think that's basically it. And a lot of things you learn from experience. Yeah. I'm not so sure that if you study a [00:59:00] course and then you go out into the field, that it would match the whatever theory that you have studied anyway. But a lot of learning happens on the job. Yeah. There's no two way about that.

[00:59:09]

Su Lin: Yeah. I think I do admire the early TNS guys, the group, because they did every workshop that there was to do. If The British Council ran a workshop on lighting, they would attend. If, you know, there was a talk on growing audiences for the arts, they would attend. I mean, we were pretty hungry because, you know, there were no courses available. So we did all that.

[00:59:27]

Clarisse: None of us were, in a sense, trained. I mean, the only people who were trained if you put it that way was the fact that Alvin and Haresh eventually went and did their masters right. Other than that, everyone else has got stuff from books, magazines. You just, you just learned where you go and there was no Google in those days.

[00:59:42]

Serene: Um, so networking was very important, right? Building people skills, getting to know other, see who could throw in some favours, who was willing to give up some time as well. And Su Lin,

what you're talking about, I think paying people or making sure that they could, they could actually support themselves, was the responsible thing [01:00:00] to do as well.

[Music Transition]

[01:00:10]

Serene: In this episode, we also want to take a look at the challenges of the arts manager during some of the controversies in Singapore theatre history. TNS has also faced brushes with controversy. For example, the prescription of the participatory form, known as forum theatre, that happened in the early part of 1990s. TNS found itself embroiled in, um, I would say nightmarish Marxist scandal, after it was reported that Alvin Tan and Haresh Sharma had attended workshops on forum theatre and drama therapy in New York conducted by Augusto Boal, a Brazilian Marxist. Theatre practitioner as well. The implication was that the group was using theatre as a political tool and it narrowly avoided closing down. And history has it that forum theatre wouldn't be allowed funding until the year 2000 or slightly beyond. The challenge of censorship was also an issue when government funding was revoked for the 1993 play *Off Centre*, which dealt with the grave issue of mental illness. Funding was revoked by the Ministry of Health due to the play's realistic depiction of mental illness and the depiction of full frontal nudity. So, we would be interested to find out how the company coped in some of these years. What were some of the discussions amongst the arts managers during those times?

[01:01:20]

Su Lin: I think, funnily enough, the incident that TNS went through, with the forum theatre, helped also remove some of my belief in the legal system and made it more... It brought about my leaving sooner. Basically, the Straits Times ran an article that called Alvin and Haresh Marxists, that they were doing Marxist work. That was the implication. So that really upset me because we all know the history of internal security detentions in Singapore. I think I don't need to go into that. So we're using the word, Marxist, is really a pointer to that, and I knew that the legal system, you had no recourse under the internal security, detention rules and regulations and laws. So that was disillusioning for me.

[01:02:00]

Serene: Mm. What was the feeling like that you felt that you wanted to help them to clear the air to clear the reputation?

[01:02:08]

Su Lin: Well, actually their reputation wasn't too badly off because I think Professor Tommy Koh, to his credit, came up to their defence almost immediately after the article came out. And members of the public wrote in as well, interestingly enough, out of their own volition.

And actually, I happen to know one of them, and he's not even a regular theatre goer, but he had seen only one of their plays, and he wrote in. Anyway, I think it's not so much that I wanted to help them, but I, it just disillusioned me from the law a bit more. And so then I was ready. I was ripe when they approached me to take the role on.

And yeah, it does seem a bit silly to come into a company which just had this controversy. It might be losing sponsors and had lost school bookings etc. Right. But I guess I like the challenge. So, I tried.

[01:02:52]

Serene: There you go. An arts manager who likes a challenge. I think you'll find more than less. I just want to illuminate the situation at that time, a little bit. Looking at some of the records, ticket prices at a point in time, let's see, in 1988, they cost about \$5. But they rose as high as about \$20 by 1992. And you joined in 1994, there was a Straits Times article as well, in 1992 that stated that TNS shows still did very well because they were accessible to the audiences. And perhaps this is, this speaks to the fact that there were members of the public that were really staunch supporters. They, they really formed a very, a strong audience base for TNS and they knew their work and

believed in, in kind of the voices that they were trying to represent in society. Professor Tommy Koh, of course, back then was the chairman of the National Arts Council. So that, that was clearly very influential. But of course, in terms of timing, this came after that Marxist conspiracy or controversy that you had just spoken about. Was it difficult to sell tickets after that?

[01:03:57]

Su Lin: I think. Okay. So I have been reminded that the school bookings definitely took a hit because after the article came out, oh, rather the journalist behind that article already approached schools to ask them leading questions about what they thought about having Marxist-trained artists do programs in their school. So there were a lot of cancellations that year of schools, programs that, you know, normally brought in money and also had sponsorship behind them. Luckily, or because of the good relationships TNS had built up and maintained, the sponsors stayed with TNS. So that was great. The school bookings took a while to climb back. We focused some effort on marketing to the school for the next two years. You know, sending out the information, lots of followup calls. It was really hard work because you know, no one was online. Teachers didn't have their own emails. You basically call the staff room and try to catch someone, really hard sales work. Community works, strangely enough. We reached an agreement to go to Tampines regional library at the end of that same year, in 1994, and we started work in 1995. So I think the article maybe didn't carry as much weight as it might have, thankfully.

[01:05:01]

Serene: Any lessons to be learned here about how the arts manager wants to manage press relationships from this episode?

[01:05:10]

Clarisse: That one's tricky I think. I think initially when, when it had, okay, so we actually had insider info that this article was going to come out right. And we know that there was a debate in the editorial room that very evening.

And we, we had, we, we knew what was happening and we, of course we were scared right. Who wouldn't be? Article comes out and then we were like, you know, is LSD going to come knocking right. And something that we had to, we had to, I remember that evening, we all stayed late, myself, Alvin, Haresh, we were talking about, okay, so what happens if the article comes out tomorrow and then we get called in and then what, should we tell our parents first? You know, they kind of thing. But the thing was that I think, uh, the journalists did ask Alvin and Haresh for a statement. But I think it was difficult because do you give a statement and if, and what if the statement is misconstrued? So, I don't know if we had a more savvy, like, did we need someone to advise us on how to handle this kind of press queries?

[01:06:09]

Su Lin: There was no PR specialist, no media trained person in the staff. Yeah.

[01:06:14]

Clarisse: Yeah. Unlike now, I mean, no, at least we have the recourse of, of rebuttal, if nothing else, at least through social media, right. In those days, it was just the Straits Times. And it was all by insinuation, the article. And we didn't know how to handle it. If you try to give an answer, would it be twisted in some manner?

[01:06:31]

Serene: Sure, there was, of course, another issue involving censorship with *Off Centre* and that was in 1993, where government funding was revoked. I know, Su Lin, this was a little before you joined full-time. TNS had wanted to produce the play, but they lost \$30,000 worth of sponsorship from the Ministry of Health. And this play was interesting. It dealt with the grave issue of mental illness. And, of course, *Off Centre* is now really part of the Singapore Canon. It's studied in schools and things like that.

Basically, the sponsorship was revoked due to the company's refusal to make "technical changes" requested. And some of these changes included, changing the mental illness from schizophrenia to common depression. I think NAC also disapproved of full-frontal nudity that was going to be seen at the end of the play and recommended that this be cut off. Now we read that the company actually initially self-imposed a NRA rating for this full frontal nudity. Remember this episode quite vividly? How did you... I know, Su Lin and this was before you joined... how did you recall how the company reacted to this and how they managed?

[01:07:38]

Su Lin: I wasn't in TNS, but I remember it well, because I was a volunteer and they approached me to ask a legal question. TNS, they asked me about whether they could go on with the play after the commissioning body or agency had revoked their commission.

Could they do that? Or could they be sued by the Ministry of Health? You know, because the play had been funded, sort of commissioned, by them in a sense. That's how they asked me the question. I didn't know it was a tender, but I said, if it's, you know, whatever it is, if they are paying you to do the play, but they didn't put a clause in the contract to say they owned the rights, the copyright is with you, you can go ahead. I heard a little bit of the background when they asked me that question, which was that they had spent so long working on the play, devising it. So cast, playwright, director, doing the research, interviewing people with mental illness, interviewing caregivers, medical personnel, they were very invested in the play. They didn't want to stop. They wanted to go ahead with it, even if it meant they were paid even less than usual because of the funding being pulled. Yeah. So luckily, I was able to tell them that they had the copyright, the owned the rights because they were the creators and they could go ahead.

[01:08:41]

Serene: And *Off Centre* went on to do very well. I think it was, the audiences really enjoyed it and felt it was relevant. I think it's still being used as a text in schools. I mean, as, artsmanagers, you know, working back then with the controversy. Now looking at it, what are your feelings?

[01:08:59]

Clarisse: I think... I think that the important thing to note is that even back then, I think the company didn't want to back down from it because I think the objection that MOH had, which was that the play portrayed mental illness in an unnecessarily negative light, was a criticism we could not agree with. I think a lot of work had been done, as Su Lin said, into the research, it was a very personal piece for the team that was working on it. I think several people had, our friends and family who were struggling with mental illness and that journey in Singapore, especially, you know, it's not easy.

I think, I think that's why the place still resonates because many of the issues surrounding the way our mental health patients are treated, the way that system, the entire system in Singapore works is still relevant. And it's still true today. So it was a criticism that was unfair in a way.

And I don't think anyone wanted to back down to say, yes, we agree with you, you know? And so, the idea that we had to give up money, okay, I'll give up money, then we will push on as she presented. And I think that paid off because I think audiences agreed with us that the play was moving, touching, powerful. And it's certainly, for me, one of the highlights of my TNS career in that sense because I really, it was a really important production for me as well.

[01:10:10]

Serene: Was that a watershed moment? Self-imposed RA rating?

[01:10:15]

Clarisse: I think the whole rating thing was just coming into it... if I remember correctly... and... the idea was, was that the company thought that the full frontal nudity was really important, the climax of the play, and I think we had taken into consideration the need to be sensitive where the

audience was concerned. I think the character, the protagonist in that sense, at a critical moment, just before committing suicide, that he would strip down to nothing was important. But we had planned strobe lighting and so on to not disguise, but to make it more indirect, right. This full-frontal nudity thing. And even suggested the rating for it. But clearly NAC felt that perhaps the rating to allow the full-frontal nudity would not be a good thing but we had taken care of it. And I don't think we had any complaints from any of the audience that it was a problem. Because I think it was really a very powerful one that was built up to that point, I think people were shell shocked, not from the nudity at any point, I don't think. And really, I think we did it in such a way where it wasn't in your face.

[01:11:19]

Serene: Yeah, if I remember catching one of the runs, actually there was silence when people saw. It was almost like they could not believe that it was happening and managed to watch the original cast as well. So that's interesting.

[01:11:39]

Serene: Um, I guess I have one more question and that relates to what Su Lin was saying, devising the work. You had said that also, Clarisse, that the cast had very personal experience devising the work. What kind of control do you feel arts managers need to have, or when you're working with a group that devises everything? Cause you almost never know what's coming your way.

[01:12:00]

Clarisse: It's not that when you devise that there is no structure at all. I think that's important to note. I think devising, of course, I think for marketing people, it might be scarier because you don't know what the play is going to be, but I think it's very important in a process where the devising is concerned that the production team is in very close touch with the production. Right. So you'll know where it's going. Although you don't know exactly where it's going to land, it's not, I mean, of course the two ways, right? One is that you devise, devise, devise, you finish devising, then the production, the design team comes and says okay. But that has its pros and cons, right? Cause you, you then treated it, from the production team's point-of-view, you treated them as a scripted play, and then you work from there, right? But the merit, of course, of doing the other way, which is that the team journeys with you all the way and that you can try things out. And I think that is actually part of, if I'm not wrong, TNS' methodology, even now, right?

That the designers come in early and even from phase one development, they're there to, to support, to create, to improvise and to work with. I think in those days, we, because our timelines were really long. I don't think the designers came in early, but still, I think the fact that the production team was in touch with the production early enough, you, you can anticipate where things are going. And I think in terms of staging, I don't think Alvin and Haresh were ever extravagant. I think their aesthetic and style had never been one that is, you know, like tremendously costly. I can see about now, but back then, I think we were always very careful with money.

So yeah. So... and we... and then... the aesthetic, like I said, it was very minimalist anyways. So it wasn't a big problem. In fact, I think some of the shows where we might have busted a budget were not shows that Alvin and Haresh themselves were directing.

[01:13:47]

Su Lin: But the trouble with devised work is, of course, for the marketing and admin team, especially in those days where you have to get your publicity out early, because it has to be printed physically and distributed physically. So, you can only go with stuff like these artists are involved. This is the theme we're looking at. This is the question we asked ourselves, and then you hope it doesn't go too far away from that. So, you learn creative writing, to be very creative because every show is like that, you can't keep saying that right.

And then once in a while you hit a bad patch where you, and I just remember there was one festival, we told Ching Lee the title was something to do with superheroes, I can't remember.

[01:14:23]

Clarisse: Superfriends? *Superfriends at the Hall of Justice!* But it was that in the end, no?

[01:14:25]

Su Lin: It seemed to imply a certain kind of content, but the content came up rather different. And I think she was quite unhappy with us.

[01:14:34]

Serene: I seem to remember that it was at Victoria Theatre. This is the one you were talking about, is it? Drama Centre, is it? Okay.

[01:14:50]

Serene: So now that we say that, Clarisse, you said that, oh, you don't know about now, what Alvin and Haresh's style is like and things like that.

[01:14:58]

Clarisse: Super minimalist for the shows I've watched.

[Music Transition]

[01:15:01]

Serene: So as arts managers until today, how do you cope with the evolving needs of the artists and the designers? Because you're in the business of managing it all right.

[01:15:15]

Clarisse: Well, I mean I took a 15-year hiatus in between, right?

[01:15:20]

Serene: To teach. Those who can't, teach.

[01:15:23]

Clarisse: I think what I did then has shaped my tastes in terms of the work I do. So coming back here now, of course, many things have become much more professional. And I quite liked that I have to be honest as much as I miss some of the gung-ho-boh-cheng-hoo kind of a thing that we used to do in the past. It's nice to come back and we have very well-trained professionals, very expert. I mean, I do feel that I'm a little out of my depth, to be honest, and so the whole imposter syndrome, because many more people these days are trained. Right. But I think processes have also changed in that there are different designers with different working styles and then knowing who to work with for different productions is also important.

Yeah. And of course, one of the biggest sort of changes I see have to do with safety, for example, and care and concern for practitioners, which I think is still evolving, but still important. I think, I think in those days, when we were deceiving in those days, it's not that we did not consider, I'm sure we did. And I think Alvin and Harish have always been very careful working with people, but I think the articulation of those concerns wasn't there and today they are. Now we talk about safe spaces. We talk about permission, we talk about consent in, in rehearsal rooms. Right. And then in the devising process, what is ethical, right. I think it's not widespread, but I see more of these conversations happening, which I think is something I appreciate.

[01:16:45]

Su Lin: Yeah. I think you're right that it's better articulated now, but I think Alvin and Haresh were always ethical, we so often had counsellors in the rehearsal room. For that reason.

[01:16:54]

Clarisse: Yeah. But I think, I think that's, that's something which I see more often in a general sense now, which I think is important. Not because something just because, Alvin and Haresh were more in tune with the need to do that, you know, are preceded by this kind of industry standard that we should expect actually. Yeah.

[01:17:09]

Serene: Anything to add, Su Lin, for yourself. Coping with the change and all?

[01:17:12]

Su Lin: Well, I think arts management remains at the root the same, but I've matured a little bit as a manager. Cause I started off coming in as a lawyer, right? And that's an independent professional. So you have to learn how to manage a team. And then after that, you've to learn to be more interested in processes and making sure that people can follow processes as the organisation grows more complex, right. Apart from all the ongoing firefighting or fundraising and what have you.

[01:17:39]

Clarisse: Actually, yes. Actually, in that sense, the landscape is much more diverse now. So a lot of the things that we struggled with in the early days in TNS is still true today, but for the emerging groups, right? So I work in groups where designers are interested, but they may not be trained theatre designers. And now of course, expectations are much higher. Yet you go into a venue like Esplanade, for example, there's paperwork to be expected and so on, which sometimes their designers may not be familiar with doing things according to so-called industry standards or industry, you know? So, there is that challenge. A lot of the work I do with small companies is exactly that.

[01:18:18]

Su Lin: Yeah. And has always the, the artists have to be their own managers first and write their own grant applications and stuff. Absolutely. Still going on right.

[01:18:24]

Clarisse: Absolutely. Yeah. I work with, I work with veteran artists, actually, people like Zelda and Effendy, right? And, but, but they, they, if in the best of all possible worlds, they would have their own producers, but they don't. Right. So that's always a challenge that you don't, that you produce your own work. That's tough. Actually, it's tougher today I feel.

[01:18:42]

Serene: Because I think there's certain infrastructures that are in place. So, if you are, it's like not learning to learn, to work the computer, for example, you would be left behind a little bit. And I suppose at a time where COVID-19 is still raging going on longer and longer, there are also new things that I expect?

[01:18:59]

Clarisse: Also, there's more competition, right? So I'm just going to, I'm just going to put a word out there for artists who've been around on the scene for a while. You know, I think, I think people are always excited to support young people, right? But you have veteran artists who want to produce and direct or not produce, they want to create their own work. They don't want to produce, but they want to create their own work. But then who picks up on this because every company has its own individual team or its own individual focus, right? But then we do have actually a lot of artists who are, are older, definitely should still be on the scene, but who produces their work?

[01:19:33]

Serene: Fair question.

[01:19:34]

Su Lin: Interestingly, there is a good crop of young producers, I think, but still too few of them.

[01:19:40]

Clarisse: Yeah. And also, I think it is tough because for young producers they will be still getting used to networking and then also finding the right fit.

[01:19:47]

Su Lin: And always the financial question, right? Can I raise enough money for the show and then how do I pay myself?

[01:19:52]

Clarisse: Correct.

[01:19:55]

Serene: All right. Thank you very much for sharing your experiences, your memories, your stories with us here on Backlogues today. This has been Serene and with me, was Clarisse as well as Goh Su Lin. Thank you and see you next time. You've just come to the end of another episode of backlogues and arts management podcast series. If you'd like to learn more about any of the key events, people and institutions mentioned in this particular episode, head over to our website at backlogues.sg. That's B A C K L O G U E S dot S G to find further information pertaining to each episodes content. You may find them under shownotes on the respective pages for each episode.

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