

A Chinese-speaking Children's Theatre for the Nation: Arts Theatre of Singapore in 2017

YU Weijie

The longest standing home-grown Chinese-speaking company, Arts Theatre of Singapore (ATS) has undergone another year of its fundamentally sustainable development in the areas of organizational restructuring, infrastructure betterment, artistic development, and global outreach in 2017, moving towards a quality mandarin children's theatre of the nation.

With its unique and fruitful achievements reaped over from the past 60 years, ATS, the leading Chinese-speaking children's theatre of the nation, has further advanced, since after the celebration of its 60-year anniversary in 2015, effectively towards another new phase of development under the direction and management of its board and the former Chairman (till 2017) who is also the current CEO Koh Chong Chiah (2017 -).

Continual Infrastructure Betterment: The Home of ATS

Following its withdrawal from the limited space (600 s.f.) allocated at Aliwal Arts Centre and move into UBI Industry Buildings in 2014, ATS has, since then, stood firmly on its own feet with a sound professional space for its solid sustainable business and artistic development: 1 x office / rehearsal / sound studio complex with over 2,000 s.f. in BLK 67, UBI Road 1 (sponsored individually by Koh Chong Chiah), and another 1 x workshop / storeroom of HDB-rented complex for costume, sets and props, etc. in XXX (address) in the vicinity. The space and equipment at both complexes, which have been under constant annual renovation and upgrading, has provided a secured working environment for the company's sustainable work in 2017.

Nomination for the Inaugural Chinese Culture Contribution Award

In Feb 2017, ATS was nominated for the inaugural Chinese Culture Contribution Award (institutional) launched by the Singapore Chinese Cultural Centre. The event, which has involved ATS's company staff, board members and many long-year-supporters' valuable contributions, proved to be a significantly effective self-examining and reflective process, re-affirming ATS's unusual and rich history as the longest-standing mandarin-drama company in Singapore, and firmly positioning ATS's visions and mission to develop quality stage works for the local Chinese-speaking audience along with the nation's move towards a cohesive society.

24 Staged Productions with Total 59 Performances Reaching Out to 19,773 Audience

With this re-affirmed mission and vision, ATS has produced 24 staged productions with total 59 shows reaching out to 19,773 audience throughout the year of 2017, performing at schools (both the established supporters and newly developed partners) as well as SOTA Theatre locally, and touring to Nanning attending the 5th China – ASEAN Theatre Festival internationally. Among these works were three new productions of LAUGHING ALL THE WAYS: LION CITY STORIES, MONKEY KING IN THE HEVENLY PALACE as well as THE LITTLE WHIE RABBIT.

THE LITTLE WHITE RABBIT, a re-staged production in a re-written version with a new direction based on its original Russian script, has injected in this 1950's classical world children theatre repertoire with a contemporary approach. The explored and displayed artistic beauty both visually and aurally on the Chinese-speaking stage has made it an unusual and effective theatrical feast aesthetically for the little

local audience, most of whom have for the first time in their lives been convinced and treated with the quality and beautiful stage images in a Chinese-speaking show.

Representing Singapore: ATS Participated the 5th China-ASIEN Theatre Festival in Nanning

In Sept 2017, ATS was invited to participate the 5th China-ASIEN (Nanning) Theatre Week held in Nanning, the capital city of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China. The festival was organized by the Municipality of Nanning People's Government and the Department of Culture of Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region. The participating ASIEN theatre troupes together with another 10 Chinese professional companies staged a total of 47 quality productions in conjunction with the official opening of the 13th China-ASIEN Expo held that week.

ATS Joined the China-ASIEN Theatre Cooperation & Exchange League at the Submit Forum of China-ASIEN Theatre Delegations.

The directors of the 10 representative ASIEN theatre groups and that of another 30 theatre companies from China participated the Submit Forum. Mr. Koh Chong Chiah, the CEO of ATS signed the MOU of China-ASIEN Theatre Cooperation and Exchange League. Following the MOU signed, the representative theatre companies from ASIEN counties will form the working group with Nanning Ethnic Culture Research Institute and Nanning Theatre Company to jointly explore, plan and communicate on the future theatre & culture exchange programmes between China and ASIEN countries backgrounded by the global scheme of Road-and Belt Project.

THE LITTLE TADPOLE LOOKING FOR MAMA: Award of Excellent Production and the Award of Excellent Actor

ATS staged the mandarin-speaking children-play THE LITTLE TADPOLE LOOKING FOR MAMA at Nanning Women and Children Culture Centre during the festival. The story, written by Ai Guangjie, the artistic director of ATS, with the background of River Safari Singapore, tells about the interesting adventure of the little tadpole looking for mama and how he is helped and taken care by the other little animals in the journey. The denouement of the play reveals towards the end that the frog, the little tadpole's mama, has in fact been caught in capture by human-beings, a painful issue happening nowadays as a surprising dramaturgical scheme to this children's tale has thus created its huge dramatic suspension throughout, which was significantly meaningful to both the little and adult audience, making this children-theatre immediately connected and related to the contemporary world of today. The play has won the Award of Excellent Production, and the two actors, Gu Zhiqi and Ren Xin who respectively played the title role and the tortoise won the Award of Excellent Actor.

Constructing China-ASIEN Theatre Joint Platform with Road-and-Belt Scheme: Award of Excellent Paper to ATS Theatre Consultation Panel Member

The theme of the International Academic Symposium held at the Theatre Week focused on constructing a joint China-ASIEN theatre new developmental phase. Theatre scholars from the 10 ASIEN countries as well as those from the universities and research institutions of China have had an intensive discussion on the topic. The ATS Theatre Consultation Panel member Dr YU Weijie's paper on ATS' capability and function as the strategic bridge-tower in building a shared stage and repertoire pool of China-ASIEN mandarin-speaking drama performance in SEA region was received with Award of Excellent Academic Paper.

Distinctively with Professionally-trained performers, ATS Is the Biggest Local Theatre Employer for the Home-trained Mandarin Drama Graduates

ATS has been providing regular employment opportunities to the mandarin drama graduates professionally trained from the local arts institution since the beginning of the century. The present artistic director as well as the members of the production cast and creative team involved in its total 59 performances in 2017 were mostly the graduates from Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts (NAFA). With this record, ATS has in recent years employed, both full-time and project-based, almost 100 personnel/projects per year, becoming the biggest local theatre employer for the home-trained mandarin drama graduates.

Structural Re-organization: Preparation to Meet New Challenges

ATS has undergone a fundamental structure re-organizational process in 2017: the registration of ATS, changing from its then existing NPO status, with a new status of Charity Organization was successfully approved in Oct. With Dr Lee Chuan Guan as the new chairman, the ATS Board consists of total 11 members. ATS has recruited/re-appointed its 6 x full-time staff with Koh Chong Chiah as CEO, Ai Jiaqi, the artistic director, Richard Tan, the general manager, as well as production and acting personnel of Qu Xiangzi, Ye Bing and Yao Jiawei.

In response to the government initiative of the celebration of the 200-Year of Singapore in 2019, ATS has started its preparation with series of significant projects towards the years of 2018 – 2019, aiming to showcase and demonstrate the fruition of the establishment and development of Chinese-speaking theatre achieved by this longest-standing local mandarin-drama company as part of the long historical process of multiculturalism Singapore.