

Expressing cultural heritage through contemporary dance: Case studies of four choreographers in Singapore

Dr Caren Carino

PhD, MFA, BEd

Singapore's ethnic landscape

Singapore's **resident population stood at 3.90 million as at end-June 2015**. This comprised 3.38 million Singapore citizens and 0.53 million permanent residents.

There were 1.63 million non-residents, resulting in a **total population of 5.54 million**.

- ❁ Chinese – 2,900,007 (74.3%)
- ❁ Malay – 520,923 (13.3%)
- ❁ Indian – 354,952 (9.1%)
- ❁ Others – 126,808 (3.2%)

Singapore's Cultural development

'Given that Singapore itself has chosen an open economic system and an open communication system as the path to the future, and given the current world trends, chances are that state dominance will wane, civil society will rise and information technologies will be liberating.

Based on these projections, two positive cultural development scenarios are probable:

- i) a syncretic model in which the end-state will be a unique Singapore culture, developed from the syncretic selection of what is best from many different cultures;
- ii) **a multicultural model in which the existing indigenous cultures are strengthened and promoted to exist separately but in symbiotic relationship with each other.'**

Today, Singapore is becoming an increasingly multi-cultural and multi-ethnic society through:

- ❁ diversification
- ❁ differentiation
- ❁ assimilation
- ❁ awakening



The changing role of dance in Singapore

- ❁ During Singapore's initial colonization by the British (1819- 1945) dance provide **a sense of community** for the different immigrant populations – the Chinese, Malays and Indians,
- ❁ After World War II (1942-1945) during which time the Japanese occupied Singapore, when the British returned to rule, dance was linked to **national identity**.
- ❁ Through the progress of Singapore's economic development which began in the 1960's and continuing into the mid 1970's, the Singaporean identity was still very much thought of in terms of the three major ethnic groups and dance primarily served a **function**.
- ❁ By the end of the 20th century dance was finally acknowledged as an **artistic expression** as the government focused its intentions of becoming a world-class.

Contemporary dance in Singapore

- ❁ The eventual location of contemporary dance in Singapore sets an exciting but thorny ground for artistic creation due to the dilemmas and complexities that surround it because of its **association with Western knowledge and aspirations.**
- ❁ Through global-local tensions, contemporary dance has taken different forms in Singapore over time because of its **preoccupation with asserting local difference.**

Singapore's evolving cultural landscape is represented by Singapore contemporary Asian choreographers and their dance creations

Four Singaporean choreographers are featured in this presentation



Raka Maitra



Cai Shiji



Osman Abdul Hamid



Shahrin Johry

Raka Maitra

Artistic Director, Choreographer and Dancer
CHOWK

🌸 Age: 44

🌸 Race: Indian

🌸 Culture: Indian (Kolkata)

🌸 Citizenship: Singaporean

🌸 Dance training: Odissi



'People – Chowk. <http://www.chowk.sg/people>
Burridge, Stephanie. Articles and Interviews/Conversations with Raka Maitra. The Substation. Written
June 2010. <http://www.substation.org/conversations-with-raka-maitra/>



Through Raka Maitra's choreography CHOWK has consistently produced performance works that **rise out of literary inspirations and manifest as dance theatre.**



Raka's contemporary explorations centred on Odissi represents her East Indian cultural heritage.

'My training is classical Indian dance [Odissi] but when I am doing a choreography. I just think of it as dance. Sometimes I use classical movement. It depends on the topic. If I feel a classical structure is needed. I use a classical structure and if it has to be abstract and it needs improvisation then I'll use that...'

'Contemporary is when you take whatever is in your body to say something which is relevant today and you break the structure of the classical.'



'From Another Land' (2015)
Choreographed by Raka Maitra
Performed by CHOWK
(3:35 -6.21)



Cai Shiji

Creative Director and Choreographer
Dance Ensemble Singapore

- ✿ Age: 34
- ✿ Race: Chinese
- ✿ Culture: Chinese
- ✿ Citizenship: Singaporean
- ✿ Dance training: Chinese dance and Contemporary Dance





'Traditions are never old and irrelevant. While we need to understand and appreciate the importance of our Chinese heritage, we also have to acknowledge our **shared heritage of the Nanyang**, which embraces a fusion of different cultures in the heart of Southeast Asia.'



Yan Choong Lian,
Founder/Artistic Director

Dance Ensemble Singapore Arts Company (DES Arts) is recognized to be the anchor of Singapore's **Contemporary Chinese Dance**; while maintaining a strong foundation of traditional Chinese Dance philosophy under the guidance of Mdm Yan Choong Lian (Founder).'





Shiji utilises contemporary dance as a vehicle to express her cultural heritage as a Chinese born and raised in Singapore.

- ❁ 'I do not want to re-create China's Chinese dance on stage because I feel strongly that it is not representative of my culture as a Singaporean. Though our ancestors are from China, we do not embrace the same culture as China.'
- ❁ '...there is a need to find my own voice , in my creative space and through dance it is perhaps the best way to relink to my culture as a Chinese Singaporean.'

'Unrest. Insight' (2014)
Choreographed by Cai Shiji
Performed by Dance Ensemble Singapore Arts
(18.40 – 21.04)



Osman Abdul Hamid

Artistic Director and Choreographer
Era Dance Theatre

- ✿ Age: 53
- ✿ Race: Indian & Indonesian (Buginese)
- ✿ Culture: Malay
- ✿ Citizenship: Singaporean
- ✿ Dance training: Malay dance



Segment Three: Fingerlings-Smolt (Freshwater)'
in Returning (2015) by Osman Abdul Hamid



Era Dance Theatre Ltd

For many years, EDT stretched the boundaries of the Malay dance scene in Singapore, bringing a unique quality of Malay dance under the creative direction of Osman Abdul Hamid.

The company's repertoire includes traditional, **contemporary and new creative Malay dance....'**



The Mirror Within (2014) by Era Dance Theatre



Osman has claimed Malay culture which is often represented through contemporary exploration without intending to dilute Malay tradition

Contemporary dance is a creative approach to traditional Malay dance

Malay cultural values are embedded in the form

Process of exploration/experimentation/improvisation with the basic foundation of traditional Malay dance and Silat training



'Arus Masa' (2013) by Osman Abdul Hamid



Arus Masa (Tides of Time)
Choreographed by Osman Abdul Hamid
Performed by Dance Programme, Nanyang Academy of Fine Arts
13.47 – 14.39



Shahrin Johry

Assistant Choreographer and Principal Dancer
Maya Dance Theatre

- ❁ Age: 33 years old
- ❁ Race: Indonesian (Boyanesese)
- ❁ Culture: Indonesian
- ❁ Citizenship: Singaporean



MAYA DANCE THEATRE LTD

‘Maya Dance Theatre has built a distinctive identity over the years with its **cross-cultural collaborations** and **integration of Asian traditional dance forms with contemporary dance**’

‘Our dance vocabulary draws inspiration from Asian traditions and aesthetics.’



Kavitha Krishnan,
Creative Director/
Choreographer





KA' (work in process) by Shahrin Johry

Photo: Tan Ngiap Heng

Sometimes Shahrin's choreographic process is a cultural awakening.

Through dancing with other Indonesian artists and through movement improvisation he has discovered that his Indonesian culture has been embodied all along.

Breath, sustain, energy...

'Angst Angel' (Rama and Sita Duet)
Choreographed by Sharin Johry and Danang Pamungkas
Performed by Sharin Johry and Sheriden Newman
.00 – 3.05





‘We have to adapt, we have to evolve, we have to absorb ideas, experiences, talent from many parts of the world but at the same time, there is some essence and spirit of Singapore which is valuable and you don’t want to wake up tomorrow and find that’s gone. As long as our own population is stable, I think we can manage that.’

Singapore Prime Minister Lee Hsien Loong. ‘Growth in region, skills key to economics future’. *Straits Times*. 20 Sept 2015.