

Speaker 3: Thirunalan Sasitharan

I was surprised to learn, but not entirely so, that Mr Baey had to seek permission from the Minister for Culture, Community and Youth to speak here. I, on the other hand, was directed to speak here by my “two bosses”, Tan Tarn How and Arun Mahizhnan.

I think being a civil servant and a bureaucrat in the civil service means that you have to respect a certain chain of command. There is no escaping the chain of command and the circuit of authority, which you have to be beholden to. And I respect that. In fact, I think the best civil servants are the ones who are able to work within that ambit of authority.

But the question that I want to pose today is, “If you are a cultural leader, what is your responsibility to the arts? Who speaks for the arts? Who speaks for the artist?” We know that as civil servants and bureaucrats, you are working for the state and the people. But who works to support the artist? This is an area that we need to think about very deeply.

“When I hear the word ‘culture’, I reach for my revolver.” This remark is often attributed to Air Marshal Hermann Göring, Chief of the Luftwaffe in Nazi Germany. Actually, this is not true; he did not say this. It was in fact a line from a play called *Schlageter* by a Nazi party member, Hanns Johst, in which a character says, *“When I hear the word ‘culture’, I release the catch on my Browning.”*

It is amazing to note that so many regimes, totalitarian and dictatorships place such a significant importance on culture. The Stalinists, the Nazis, Mussolini, the Maoists — they were all keen to control culture. Why? Because ultimately, the artist seeks to speak truth. Ultimately, the artist seeks to reflect what he sees is the reality on the ground to his people.

It is as Polonius said, *“To thine own self be true, and thou canst be false to no man.”* *“Live in truth”*, said Vaclav Havel. *“Let the lie come into the world but not through me”*, said Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn.

The artist rightly or wrongly, politically or apolitically, courteously or discourteously, is concerned about reflecting the truth — the truth as they are given the light to see it. They choose to reflect this because they see this as their calling

within the society that they represent. So, for the artist, the word “culture” is deeply infused with the “self”. There is no separation and no objectification. The way in which they make art and create art is tied up with a sense of who they are, where they are, how they may speak to fellow citizens, and ultimately their address is to all human beings.

“Culture”, for the bureaucrat and the civil servant, must be a different thing. Like the economy, health, housing, or transportation, it is something that happens to other people. All the training the best and brightest get in order to become good bureaucrats serve for them to objectify “culture”, distance it, and separate it from the bureaucrat “self”, so that they may attend properly and impartially to the business of managing and governing it. And this is as it should be! As we know, if you are a doctor treating a patient, the last thing you want is to be emotionally connected to the patient. There is professional distancing. There is a separation.

But the artist cannot work that way. For the artist, there is no separation. Sure, the distancing is part of a process of craft, technique, learning, experience, seeing, and watching. But ultimately, the artist is completely conjoined to the work that he or she is prepared to put out to society. You cannot meaningfully separate cultural concerns from the artist’s “self”; it absurd to even try.

So, there is an integral and irresolvable tension between that community of people whom we call “artists”, and the people who run the systems and manage bureaucracies. The chasm is virtually unbridgeable. This is something we need to accept. And for the last 40 years of my life, I have been working to bridge this chasm.

By any statistical, anecdotal, or survey evidence, it is overwhelmingly true that development of arts and culture in Singapore has been phenomenally successful! Numbers may not lie, but they do not always tell the entire truth either. My point is that the material progress made in Singapore, since the time when the arts were a dispensable luxury; when the arts were an icing on the cake, to the present when they appear to be at the very centre of life in Singapore, the material progress is a mask which fundamentally hides deep problems and shortcomings.

The problem with structuring a system as efficiently and effectively as it has been done in Singapore is that there is inevitably the distancing that I talked about. The leaders cannot understand the instincts, impulses and needs of the artists and arts communities on the ground. Often, cultural leaders are found wanting and

floundering. Often, they do not recognise the significance of a work, a way of working, a practice, or an audience that needs to be addressed.

There is some truth to the argument that Singapore is probably the best-resourced city for the arts in the world. The question we need to ask then is, “What have we made that is a commensurate return on our investment?” For these resources that have been put into the arts, I would say that we have seen poor returns.

The instrumental and top-down conceptualisation of artistic and cultural programming — whether it is in terms of discreet racial, nationalistic, genre, or sectorial models like CMIO festivals for Chinese New Year, Hari Raya, Deepavali; even festivals like the Singapore International Arts Festival, Singapore International Film Festival, Singapore Film Festival, Singapore Biennale — tend to create silos. They tend to create efficient channels for a particular kind of work to be made in a particular way, without sufficient natural movement and understanding. They tend to separate creative processes, and disconnect the impulses and instincts of artists. So, to some extent, cultural leadership has evolved, unsurprisingly, to become yet another layer of officialdom, which serves only to please their own masters — political masters, bureaucratic masters, or worse, moneyed patrons.

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It is generally out of step and out of place in the chaos that is the crucible of creativity. Singapore was one of the first countries that explicitly stated in the 1990s that it was going to embrace contemporary art. Liu Thai Ker, who was then chairman of the National Arts Council, made this statement. But what is it to embrace contemporary art? Contemporary art is a very different animal from modernist, classic or classical art. Contemporary art has a certain studied distance from history, and a certain autonomy from supposed artistic standards that are

imposed on the work and genres of non-contemporary work. It is about the present and the “now”. It denies these standards. It denies a connection to a tradition. It came after post-modernism.

But in order to be able to manage the field contemporary art, we need to have bureaucrats and cultural leaders who are prepared to engage the contemporary artists on his or her own terms. There has to be a broadening of the idea of what it means to be “creative” and “innovative”, and what it means to be able to do something which is new. I am not merely making the suggestion that the “new” has to be shocking or outrageous. But the “new” has to be different from what is available now. Unless our cultural leaders are open enough to embrace difference, trusting enough to enable diversities in expression, and prepared to risk the possibility of failure, there will be no progress in art. And this is a complex thing! It comes from years of experience, from a particular kind of taste, and from an openness of mind and heart. At the same time, it comes from an understanding of the rigour, technique, and craft of making things in art, whether it is music, theatre or painting.

This is why I was appalled to learn that the majority of students who are going to graduate from the School of the Arts Singapore will not be artists. It does not make sense to me. If you were running a medical school or a college for carpenters, would you think that your students who go through the system should not become doctors or carpenters? Of course you would not! But somehow, when it comes to the arts, we are prepared to allow a kind of fuzzy logic to take over — “It is okay as long as they are sympathetic, exposed to, and are likely to support the arts in the future.” No, it is not enough; it is not sufficient. We only put up with it because it is the arts. We would never put up with a similar cast of mind if it were any other area of significance to the country.

So, I get the feeling that bureaucrats and the people who are running the arts in Singapore, do not get the arts! They do not get what it is to make art, to want to make art, create art, put out art, and want to tell the truth. And it is something that we cannot change — it is a cast of mind, it is a habit of the heart.

Cultural leadership also has to stop pretending that the arts are not political. Of course the arts are political! The arts are not politics — yes, artists are not interested in politics — but any artist who tells you that he or she is not political does not understand what he or she is doing. It is significantly political and it has to be political if it has meaning, moves, transforms, informs and connects. Unless we are

prepared to accept this, we are not going to make any changes and there is going to be no improvement.

Seventeen years ago, when the Intercultural Theatre Institute was launched, Liu Thai Ker, whom I count as a man who was, and is, probably the clearest leader in culture and the arts, had this to say, “*The life of a cultural worker is nothing less than a long march.*” According to a *Straits Times* editorial piece on March 3, 2000, I quote:

He made this observation in the course of a tribute to two exemplary Singaporean artists, the dramatist Mr Kuo Pao Kun and the dancer-choreographer Ms Goh Lay Kuan. Calling them “cultural warriors”, he recalled their pioneering beginnings in 1965, when they formed the Practice Performing Arts School (PPAS)...

Less than a decade after the Marxist conspiracy, the term “long march” was significant. It was significant because he understood that there is a commitment that artists need to have. And artists still have that commitment. Anyone who is doing significant work still has that commitment. And I go on to quote from this editorial:

... art does not reside in buildings and institutions ... but in individuals ... if they matter at all, [they] matter because of because of them.

This is the significant thing that I think we have lost. In focusing so much on systems, outcomes and structures, we have lost touch with the individuals who make the art. Their concerns and their needs — not just material needs; their needs that go beyond the material, which speak to the spirit, the conscience, and which speak to their need to speak. Unless and until cultural leadership can embrace artistic practice and artists as they are, we will always remain good, but not quite good enough.