

Sleepless in Singapore

Ong Keng Sen brings Asia's contradictions to London. **Ken Smith** talks to him

In many ways, the theatre director Ong Keng Sen feels uneasy representing his native Singapore. Few of his productions appear at home now, he admits, and when they do they seldom star Singaporean performers. He realises that the famously restrictive city state prefers productions that focus on surface beauty rather than societal controversies and contradictions, but as an artist he just cannot help himself.

"Europe and America look at Asia like a Chinese box, where everything fits together smoothly," says the 41-year-old director. "When you live here, however, you realise that one layer doesn't always fit in the next. I have to represent the world I live in, with all the jagged edges."

This is why his multifaceted show *Insomnia*, a contextual look at Singapore and south-east Asia, focuses heavily on young artists working in alternative (and less censored) media such as internet and digital arts – and delves into such controversies as the "pink dollar", a look at Singapore's "pragmatic capitalism" in recognising the spending power of gay culture despite its illegal status.

Ong may be apprehensive about flying the national flag where art is concerned, but his highly personalised, pan-Asian, multidisciplinary works have put Singapore on the international map. So strongly has he codified a distinctively Singaporean stage aesthetic that even local productions with no connection to Ong or his company TheatreWorks are often summed up during interval chatter as "good Keng Sen" or "bad Keng Sen".

Ong was the youngest of six children born to Chinese immigrants and found himself constantly walking a line between his Chinese-speaking parents and his English-language education. Even as he discovered the theatre through his primary school drama club and local British expatriate productions, his most visceral experiences came from Chinese street opera.

"What attracted me to theatre was the ability to tell my own narrative," he says. "What I first started looking at was my own alienation from my parent culture, and the idea of negotiating the east and west in my own life."

Ong studied law at the National University of Singapore, but there he also kept up his work with the stage, and near his graduation discovered TheatreWorks, a troupe founded by lawyers who had returned from London set on creating a distinctly Singaporean theatre.

At their invitation, Ong directed the "Singlish nostalgia musical" *Beauty World*, combining Chinese opera and pop music. He was soon artistic director.

Two factors shaped Ong's contribution to Singapore's late-1980s postcolonial theatre movement. The first was the knowledge that his father's family had been scattered throughout south-east Asia. The second was formal theatre studies at New York University, where he first encountered the works of experimenters such as Robert Wilson, Meredith Monk and Philip Glass.

"What really impressed me about those artists was how much they borrowed from Asia and yet found their individual stamp," says Ong.

The director's view of art as cultural exploration hit new heights with *Lear*, his 1997 post-modern deconstruction of Shakespeare commissioned by The Japan Foundation and developed by Ong's Flying Circus Project, the theatrical "research and development laboratory" he founded as an exchange programme for Asian performers of different traditions. Through a mixture of Peking Opera, Noh Theatre, Thai court dancing and a handful of Asian musical styles, *Lear* juxtaposed performers each working in their native language and stage technique.

Since that production, Ong has been particularly aggressive in transcending borders. "Is this Singaporean art?" he asks. "I think it reflects Singapore's

hybridity, and I don't think I could do it if I had been born anywhere else."

For some viewers, however, Ong's approach smacks of emotional detachment and self-conscious manipulation. At Berlin's House of World Culture, where he was first invited to curate a festival in 2002, audiences asked him directly: "You're involved in cultural exchange, but is it art?"

"They felt that art was something in a different realm that had nothing to do with life," he says. "They agreed that the performers were wonderful, but argued that they were 'ethnic' artists, as if you couldn't be contemporary if you were ethnic. In Europe, people rarely examine their own context or ethnicity, and if you do it's supposed to be seen as embarrassing, unlike New York, where it's a strength."

Still, Ong admits that his experiences in Berlin have made him speak more as an individual artist than a cultural negotiator. At times, he says, he even sides with his critics. "Sometimes I cringe when I see things I've done before," he laughs. "But then there are times like *Lear* where some images still take my breath away. As a creator, you have these moments when you think, I could never do that any more."

Ong's new directions are visible in *The Global Soul the Buddha Project*, a production loosely inspired by Buddhist writings and the essays of the travel writer Pico Iyer, which premiered at the 2003 Singapore Arts Festival.

"I still believe art must be seen in its cultural context, but I'm no longer at the confrontational stage," says Ong, "Singapore has always been multicultural, and has all the signs of being a 'global soul'. But I'm confident that the feelings in this show permeate our own foundation so deeply that I don't even have to explain anything."

'Insomnia' is at London's Institute of Contemporary Arts from February 25 to March 12. Tel 020 7930 3647