

THE FIKA PROJECT

NARRATIVES
BY
CULTURAL
CHANGE
MAKERS

Interviews by Sven Rånlund

**Edited by Karin Dalborg
& Mikael Löfgren**

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Editors' foreword

This book is part of *The Fika Project* which is supported by the EU Erasmus+ education and training programme and Region Västra Götaland in Sweden. Its aim is to design a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) concept for cultural leadership development capable of meeting the demands of our complex and changing times. The project was initiated by Nätverkstan Kultur and its partners Trans Europe Halles, ENCATC and Olivearte. As the starting point for the work, the project group undertook an analysis of the needs of the cultural sector and a survey of existing cultural leadership training. Together with *Perspectives on Cultural Leadership*, which is being published alongside it, this book forms the analytical and empirical basis of the CPD programme for cultural leaders in an international context that is *The Fika Project's* ultimate objective.

As part of the project we commissioned arts journalist Sven Rånlund to interview ten experienced cultural change makers from various parts of the world. They are active in different countries, in different types of organisations and with different art forms and types of culture. We present here their stories about life and work, education and training, professional experiences, success and setbacks, dilemmas and solutions. As the reader will see, the stories are very different, partly due to external factors but also because of the individual qualities and beliefs of the interviewees. Despite the differences, however, they have much in common both in terms of the challenges they face and their ways of dealing with them. We hope that, rather than presenting role models to emulate, these stories will serve as inspiring examples for the readers to test against their own experience.

The project group would like to extend its thanks to all the cultural leaders interviewed for being so accommodating and to author Sven Rånlund for his perceptive input, and we wish you an enjoyable read.

Bohus-Björkö, spring 2016

Karin Dalborg and Mikael Löfgren

Author's foreword

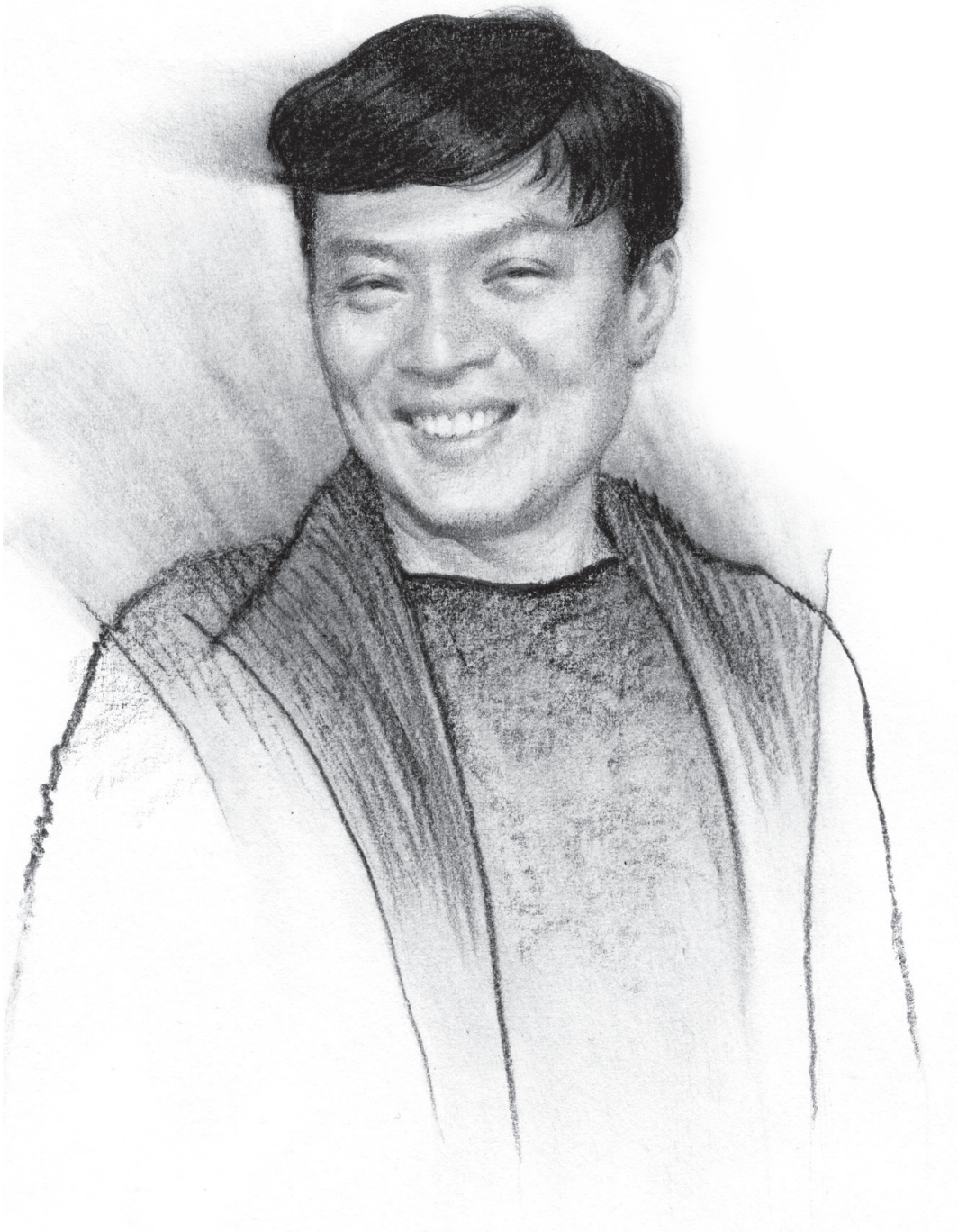
Ten people in leadership positions in arts and cultural organisations in various parts of the world were interviewed for this book. The interviews took place via Skype and were long, often wide-ranging, conversations about professional life and life in general. We slowly reviewed the years, bringing specific memories of work, encounters and experiences to the surface. As the interrogator, I tried to identify the moments in the course of people's lives that showed the first hint of a future leadership career.

For interviewees, the sessions evolved into an occasion for in-depth reflection on their professional lives. In order to translate *their* stories into *these* stories, the interviews have been written in the first person, not just to bring the reader closer to the interviewees but also to ensure that their own voices are heard more clearly. It is one thing to talk about the successes of one's organisation in a strictly professional capacity, but it is something else entirely to find words to describe crises, hard-won experiences and unexpected leaps. I hope that the reader will be able to sense the interviewees' own presence in the words that follow.

So what is it that connects these international cultural leaders? Although there are many differences between them, they do have one thing in common: they understand the conditions under which art is created and artists operate. The ability to lead and develop your own organisation, irrespective of its size, depends on an understanding of artistic creativity. Several leaders talk about how they exploit their creativity in their day-to-day work, as if their leadership role provided scope for a type of art all of its own.

Sven Rånlund

Ong Keng Sen, Singapore International Festival of Arts and Theatre Works, Singapore.



“We are all in some way involved in a kind of ‘world creating process’...”

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I run an independent theatre company in Singapore called Theatre Works, which is my base. I’m also Director of Singapore International Festival of Arts (SIFA), commissioned by the Arts Council. I have also founded Arts Network Asia, a collaborative group of artists and cultural workers from Asia. As I operate at many levels, I focus on quite a few different cultural areas.

For me, art is about an encounter with the ‘self’. It’s easy to think that making art is about other people and their conflicts, tragedies or issues. When I first began making art in school and all the way up to university, it was always about some fantasy of someone far away. That is the starting premise of most art – you imagine something outside of you and write stories about this other world. But around the time that I started Theatre Works, I realised that I wanted to search for the ‘self’, because this is, in a way, our blind spot. Our bodies are built in such a way that we always look at people and places from inside. So, for me, the idea of the ‘self’ is connected to how, in the theatre and the arts in general, we can turn the mirror on ourselves so that we are no longer in that blind spot.

After studying law in Singapore I went to the US to do post-graduate work in performance studies. I was already a professional director, but I felt that I needed to engage in a wider socio-political field. I decided not to go for a typical course aimed at perfecting one’s craft but looked instead for a more extensive interface with global politics.

In 1988, I was invited to run and reform Theatre Works in whatever way I thought best. After 27 years I am still in post, but the company has evolved and has been radically transformed. For me, the key to running a small or medium-sized organisation is not to be afraid of evolving. In fact, transformation is really the only way forward for this kind of cultural enterprise.

Theatre Works began as a repertory theatre with a subscription base. Today, we are a platform for various creative interventions. We have no fixed repertoire; we don't even produce a season anymore. We can go a whole year without making any theatre. Instead, we offer residencies, talks and dialogues. That is where the need is, rather than yet another play. So the evolution of Theatre Works with me at the helm has really been about sensing what is needed and being ready to change. It's true to say that evolving has been our only option to ensure continued relevance.

I can identify some distinct stages in the changes that Theatre Works has undergone. The first stage involved delving into cultural histories and ethnicities to reclaim our roots from what was at the time a globalised, western perspective. What we see nowadays, of course, is a much more diverse globalisation that incorporates different histories. During that stage we reached out to our own roots as English-Chinese speaking individuals, in the realisation that there were alternative, repressed histories. The second stage was to move away from being centred on our own ethnicity and to begin a journey to search for affinities. This was about searching for a shared space that was not based on roots. Doing this was an important reclamation of mental space, because this space had been lost.

In fact, we were globalised people long before we realised it. Vikings and Arabs, for instance, were travelling all over the world long before we began to think about colonialism, which is the starting point for a lot of post-colonial or post-post-colonial conversations today. So reclaiming the mental space that was lost through modernisation, as Theatre Works has done, has been a sort of process of renovation. It's like renovating an old building



and uncovering lots of different layers. As Asian performance artists and researchers, we often begin by searching for our roots, but for me it is much more important to search for affinities. In non-Western countries, the search for roots was, for a long time, a search for identity, which has obscured a lot of other attitudes and philosophies that have now been lost.

Through our search for affinities we have become aware of a deeper, unifying element across different cultures and identities. We are all in some way involved in a kind of ‘world-creating process’. We are creating worlds that we can believe in and function in, and also contribute to. Personally, this is the basis of a lot of my current philosophies – a desire to create worlds that are ethical as well as integrated.

What prompted me to reflect upon art in this way was my arrival in New York. Suddenly, I discovered that composers like Philip Glass and Meredith Monk, who were clearly not Indonesians or Tibetans, were writing music that had strong affinities with the gamelan and Buddhist meditation. So how then do we begin to develop an understanding beyond our roots? One key belief is that roots do not limit creative individuals and art in itself. It is in fact possible to write gamelan music that demonstrates a

strong affinity with the art form without being Indonesian. You don't need that essential belonging to take on another voice. It was an important moment for me when things started to break down: when it was no longer East versus West, South versus North. It's not just about roots, identity or affinity. When you don't have to belong anywhere, you can rewrite the structure of the whole world.

The question of passports is still a crucial one. But things change when we question the role of the passport as an essential form of identity and begin to suggest that it is merely a bit like your credit card. For me, the moments of finding these affinities are important breakthroughs into spaces that can allow for conversations wider than just "Where do you come from?" and the stereotypes that follow from that.

I truly believe there is a need today to reflect on the world before borders were introduced. I'm interested in going back to what was global even before colonialism, when people moved through borderless spaces.

"For me, the key to running a small or medium-sized organisation is not to be afraid of evolving."

In Singapore, we have something called the Media Development Authority. This has official powers of censorship and regulation that enable society to exist in harmony. The Authority's activity is based on the actions of the British who began introducing legislation for the control of public assembly when they arrived in Singapore in 1819. But if you look at what existed before the British came and started exercising control over the indigenous population, you will find that people had various methods of negotiating, debating and engaging in dialogue. I think that if we are to deconstruct the systems of hegemony and power that we have today, we need to go back to before the systems were put in place.

For those of us working in the cultural sphere, these issues seem to be very much linked to the fact that the people and political parties in power will never want to give up their authority. Their power has a legal basis, since the legislation was enacted in accordance with the law at the time of independence. What I can do as an artist is to think about putting other things on the table: alternative philosophies, alternative viewpoints about how the world might be constructed. As the director of a small or a medium-sized enterprise, I should not limit myself to thinking about what is possible. Instead, I need to focus on what is impossible within the existing framework. If I don't, we are sure to remain a small or medium-sized organisation.

It is important to ask yourself how you can move forward. What are the alternatives to disillusion and resistance? There is always the option for an organisation to submit to becoming bigger and better in line with a specific formula for success. But for me, the crucial thing is actually to be on the border – to cultivate border thinking. Border thinking comes from South American political resistance. I interpret it to mean that it is about finding a way to manoeuvre yourself through these hegemonies and trying to remain true to your needs.

When you start to engage with the impossible, you are starting in a way to work towards the dream of an alternative. So how do we feed these dreams for change? For me, it is about finding previously vague spaces with some kind of potentiality. When trying to grow a dream you have to look for more informal realities, things that many people may dismiss as being unclear and not factual. This lack of definition can allow dreams to be realised. It is crucial to inspire others to think about different kinds of vagueness, almost to breathe life and energy into what is impossible – not to clutch at straws but to define ways of thinking that will provide not only solace but also belief and forward momentum.

Theatre Works started as a collective, but it hasn't operated as such during my time there. I strongly believe that collectives require like-minded people. That is where a lot of organisations

fall down, unfortunately. There are lots of examples, for instance in the UK, where the vision of the collective had eroded but the structure remained, and then the whole venture collapsed; or where the organisation was led by one visionary and then turned into something else.

I think it important to hold on to what the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze called ‘lines of flight’. Who is able to chart these lines of flight? At Theatre Works I was the person who charted the pathways. But it wouldn’t have been possible without someone to make it actually happen. It can be anybody: an executive, a director, an accountant, a deputy – somebody who manifests these lines of flight. There has to be a give and take between ideas and execution. You can work alone, of course, but you need at least one other person who can challenge inspiration by putting it into action; this leads to dynamism.

It is not easy to find partners to co-create a vision with. At Theatre Works, I work with a managing director, who is also alongside me at SIFA when we put together the festival. We met when I was 12 years old, so we have a shared history. But how do you find someone you click with? I saw a production by the legendary theatre director Peter Brook recently and it’s the same for him – he needs to find people he clicks with or he won’t be able to continue to propagate his ideas.

Part of finding people with the same beliefs and philosophies includes understanding that these people will not necessarily always work with you. Not because you are still active in that enterprise, but because they might have to move on to some other uncharted territory where they can start to make a difference. It is important to see this as extending the gene pool, so to speak, so that initiative can flow into other spaces. I imagine that I have been a factor in persuading many different individuals over the years to take up careers in other countries where they can make a difference, combined of course with their own search for personal happiness, desire for different spaces, etc. As a mentor, I may have been an important but very small part of their lives.

I see it very positively as people leaving for new homes else-

where rather than just staying with one organisation. If you are a good organisation they shouldn't stay, because it will be clear that the enterprise is safely established on its own course and that they should move on. By 'safe', in the context of Theatre Works, I mean that it is already experimental, and has people who believe in experimentalism, evolution and transformation as a paradigm. Our space is safe because it is already super-evolutionary and super-transformative.

"As director I need to focus on what is impossible within the existing framework."

In 2013 I was appointed Director of SIFA, Singapore International Arts Festival. For many years the festival was simply called Singapore Arts Festival. More important than the inclusion of the word 'International' was the fact that it had previously been curated and managed by the Arts Council – in other words, by bureaucrats. The nerve centre of the festival had been inside government and with, as I see it, a lot of self-censorship. So becoming SIFA was also a political move, because with 'international' in the name we would have to move beyond local jealousies and petty conflicts and take on board a wider, international perspective.

The Arts Council gave me the job – and they must be regretting it now. The whole situation is currently coming to a head, with a big discussion underway about how the Arts Council uses funding as a means of censorship. My appointment as Festival Director reflected their need to expand their vision and to be seen as open and objective. This came after some pressure from the cultural sector to keep the festival going but as an independent entity separate from the state. The idea was to encourage multiplicity rather than continue with the monolithic approach. The intervention from the sector carried such weight that the Arts Council probably thought it wise to acknowledge it and to

commission the festival from an independent agency on the arm's length principle. They must have understood the importance of co-operating, so I have no doubt that it was a political move to have me as Festival Director.

I started by attempting to recalibrate the festival. I wanted it to engage with the audience qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Bringing qualitative engagement to the table meant not only introducing quality work but also asking ourselves about the nature of public engagement: Is it public engagement when 400,000 people watch fireworks?

The arts are at the heart of our discussions. SIFA is not a festival per se, nor a cultural festival, but an arts festival. We therefore have to allow for the inclusion of extreme individual trajectories and not just consider works in which artists are objectified to create knowledge or enhance diversity.

The position of a major, national festival such as SIFA is linked to the political landscape. Just because the funding comes from the party does not mean that the Arts Council should automatically follow the party line. The Arts Council should have its own way of thinking about social harmony and not just say that it can't fund any project that is detrimental to social harmony. We can agree that social harmony is something we have to deal with in Singapore, but that doesn't mean the authorities have to apply the standards of the political party in power when it considers the issue. They have to make judgements about what they want to fund, but such judgements should not necessarily be aligned with government thinking.

The Arts Council should not immediately adopt the government's position. You often encounter the statement, "We can't fund something that is critical of the Ministry of Health, because that department and the Ministry of Arts are all part of the same government." This for me is a very problematic way of thinking. There is less risk-taking, because a lot of institutions don't dare to deviate from the government line, as they may claim that the work the institutions plan to present would affect social harmony.

I think there is a lot of self-censorship going on in cultural in-

stitutions in Singapore at the moment. An example: A theatre decides it can't put on a play by Luigi Pirandello because it is surrealistic and there is no audience for it, so they are self-censoring. Censorship works at both a financial and an artistic level, though, since the play could also be seen as promoting alternative lifestyles in the form of gay marriage, which will be problematic for the government.

The four-year post that I have been appointed to is therefore quite an interesting one. It's my view that I have been given the role in my capacity as an independent artist. My immediate idea is to develop an ecosystem for the arts. SIFA plays a vital role in this ecosystem. While in this post I should not simply follow the government or Arts Council line. The fact that they invited an independent artist to take on this role is therefore justifies my standpoint: if they are not happy with it, they shouldn't have appointed an independent artist who first and foremost has a duty to society. Strategy, in short, is very important at the moment.

In SIFA's first year, we didn't have to apply for a permit for any of the shows in the festival. But this year we did have to apply, and that meant censorship. We now need a permit for every show, every talk and every film. As soon as this became apparent, I started to challenge it on every possible occasion. If I had been told at the beginning that I was going to have to run a festival with censorship, I would have said no.

The festival has to submit scripts and videos to the authorities. They look at them and suggest amendments. For example, we had programmed a theatre production from Hungary. The response went like this: "The nudity on stage is okay, but the blowjob is problematic. Could you ask the character who interrupts the blowjob to enter a bit earlier so that it doesn't actually happen? Permits will then be approved with edits." This means that if we don't follow their suggestions, we won't get permits to put the play on stage; it will basically be illegal. The reason things became very difficult for the festival was that we only got the permits two days before the date of the performance. It was very stressful having to sell tickets not knowing if there would actually be a show.

I have a feeling that SIFA is going to become more aligned in the future. Perhaps that is the festival's destiny, but I think that what we have done is to try to give it a different perspective. The festival is big enough to have an influence on audiences' ideas on things such as quality of life, enlightened democracies and the public role of the arts. A small, private company cannot talk about the public role of the arts and be taken seriously. That is why I think I present a danger to them.

This is what border thinking is all about. You enter a space that opens up – but that particular space is about to close, so you have to move on to another empty space. I think that if you keep fighting and confronting people on the same spot, you will have less chance of achieving a transformation. Being a border thinker means you have to know when to leave a space and find new spaces.

There are moments in time – magical Camelot moments – when you may be fortunate enough to be part of some milieu where you can influence or change ways of thinking. But these spaces very often get quickly absorbed into the mainstream and you have to keep moving to other spaces. This is why artists can be seen as flies in the ointment, because we are nomadic and constantly looking out for new spaces. My feeling about my four years in a Camelot idyll is that it then dies and you have to find new spaces.

So far, I've learned a lot from leading SIFA. I've suddenly realised that in the wider, socially-engineered Singapore, the independent arts are really just a playpen for noisy children so that the adults can get on with their work. I can see no opportunity for an independent artist to play an international role. You can get political commitment from your audiences and your communities that you feel in tune with, but it will be almost impossible to reach out to other communities.

In this context, there is a lot at stake for a lot of players. There is also much fear of being mentally and spiritually corrupted. But having grown up like this, I can also see Singapore's advantages.

I like to live in a place that is clean, not strewn with rubbish. That is why Singapore works. The spiritual and emotional aspects of the place are not important because the physical aspects work. Everyone is happy with that and no-one cares about the censorship of free expression. That's why many people say that Singapore is the future of the world and more and more cities are becoming like Singapore. People actually believe that Singapore is a perfect model. But at what cost?

Although I am the director of a company and of a national festival, I don't think of what I do as being a leader; it's just me being true to myself. Leadership is something that happens along the way, and people might want to join you, but I believe in role models and mentors, not in leaders or followers.

I think this comes from my status as an artist. I'm not a cultural manager in the way I think about censorship. My perspective comes from the work that I make as an artist. In a way it's very intrinsic to me. I don't see it as artistic leadership. It is, for want of a better phrase, leadership by a particular artist.