

"Chinatown Crossings": A Trail of Echoes

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(890 words, 5 minute read)

Along the bustling roads of Chinatown and the throngs of long-time residents, local visitors and tourists, there's an invisible, theatrical time machine that comes to life a few evenings a week, running until mid-August. *Chinatown Crossings*, Drama Box's latest promenade theatrical performance, pays tribute to the neighbourhood that the company calls home. Directed by Koh Hui Ling and written by Jean Tay, *Crossings* reimagines real-life stories from people in the community, collected by the team over the past one and a half years. It traces the evolution of the neighbourhood since the 1960s, when it was known as Kreta Ayer, through to the 1980s, when it was beginning to be renamed and repackaged for tourist appeal. Today, the ubiquitous presence of construction barricades and safety cones along every other street in the neighbourhood reminds one of

the constantly amorphous nature of Singapore's cityscape.

The tour begins at the entrance of Chinatown Heritage Centre on Pagoda Street and roves through the vicinity, stopping at various sites of note, such as Sri Mariamman Temple, Sago Lane, Chinatown Complex and Cundhi Gong Temple, finally ending at Keong Saik Road. Audience members are each given an MP3 player and headphone set. It plays an audio track that interweaves the performers' real-time dialogue and the natural sounds of the surrounds – the whirr of vehicles passing by, the chatter of pedestrians – together with dreamlike soundscapes as well as recordings of news stories through the years. The soundscape, designed by Ctrl Fre@k – who had also worked on Drama Box's [IgnorLAND](#) series of promenade performances – enveloped me in a liminal, imaginary space in between past and present, a kind of double reality.



Image courtesy of Drama Box

Crossings goes beyond a factual exposition detailing the historical evolution of the different parts of the neighbourhood, and layers the journey with a moving story about deep bonds that cross class and culture. It revolves around the friendship between an Indian man, Kunalan (Pavan J Singh), and Ting Ting (Sabrina Sng), the daughter of his Chinese landlord, as well as Ting Ting's relationship with her Cantonese *ma jie* (domestic helper) Fong Cheh, played by Jodi Chan. One of the earliest scenes depicting Kunalan's and Ting Ting's childhood exemplifies the relationship between the three of them. As part of the traditional Hindu ritual for mourning, little Kunalan (Aadi) offers to the birds a plate of food offerings. Fong Cheh, not understanding the practice, is appalled, but after an explanation from Ting Ting (Lu Jiayi), she apologises to, and comforts Kunalan. The adult Kunalan reflects on how Fong Cheh would become a maternal figure to him. Later on, in a narrow alleyway outside, young Kunalan and Ting Ting play with shadow puppetry, telling stories of myths and folklore from their respective cultures, like *The Cowherd and the Weaving Maiden*, and legends about Krishna.

These close, near familial intercultural relationships are a crucial element of the performance, highlighting the prevalence of ethnic diversity and intermingling within the community of Kreta Ayer. For the same reason, I also felt it significant for an Indian to be the protagonist, the face, of this story about a neighbourhood that could easily and understandably be mistaken as a Chinese-dominated enclave.



Image courtesy of Drama Box

Tay's poetic and affective storytelling lends the tour its soul and heart. *Crossings* maps the growth and change of Kun's and Ting Ting's friendship alongside the landscape of a city, through a narrative that is not chronological nor linear, slipping seamlessly between different eras and perspectives, between what is and what used to be. The audience is, at any given point, led by either present-day Kunalan or 1980's Ting Ting – never the two together. When they speak of each other – rarely in the present tense – it is as if they are ghosts to each other, even though they both recount the same shared memories of Smith Street, of eating ice kacang together at the hawker area that is now Chinatown Complex, and visiting the animal shops along Smith Street.

Kunalan's monologues are marked by retrospection and mourning the gradual loss of the neighbourhood he used to know, while Ting Ting is full of excitement at the possibility of leaving Singapore to

pursue her studies in avian veterinary overseas. A recurrent motif of birds runs through the piece, symbolising departure, freedom, and constant movement. It may not be a coincidence that the performance passes by a restaurant named *Birders* on Keong Saik Road. That subtle but striking detail feeds into part of the magic of promenade theatre, where ordinary aspects of the neighbourhood architecture and environment take on a poetic significance in connection with the performance. *Crossings*' wistfulness is grounded by interludes of audience interactivity, like when Ting Ting treats us to something sweet from long-time residents of Chinatown – plus, we also get to leave with a little something of our own creation as a souvenir.



Image courtesy of Drama Box

We've been treated to a range of heritage walking tours and promenade performances in Singapore this year, from [ArtWalk Little India](#) in January, to [OH! Open House](#) in March and The Theatre Practice's [Four Horse Road](#) in April. *Chinatown Crossings* stands out as a kind of amalgamation of these forms, melding thorough first-hand research into a community with a well-crafted narrative, nuanced characters, an intriguing hybrid of theatre and tourism

(*Crossings* is even listed on [TripAdvisor](#) as a tourist activity), resulting in an innovative and immersive educational experience of Singapore's spaces and histories.

[Chinatown Crossings](#) by Drama Box runs until 18 August 2018. It is sold out, but registration of interest has opened for a second season. Find out more [here](#).

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