



# How to Warm Up an Asian Crowd: Let Me Count the Ways

By Anne Chua

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## **Introduction**

I have thought of writing down some of my ideas for warming up audiences for a long time, but I never seem to get around to doing it. Perhaps in the midst of doing other projects for Playback Theatre, I kept procrastinating this task. So when I finally got down to writing this essay, I know this is something that I need to do for myself. The purpose of this essay is to explore on some of my ideas gathered over the last three years of doing playback theatre in Singapore and the ideas and insights learnt over this period of time in connecting with the multi-racial Singaporean audience and their reactions to playback theatre.

## **History of Playback in Singapore**

Playback Theatre in Singapore first started after a 3-day workshop conducted by Beverly Hosking, a New Zealand Playback Practitioner in February 2002. The workshop was conducted for social workers, teachers and psychologists to do real life stories about intergenerational bonding. Later, a few people from that first workshop decided to gather together to do more playback theatre and Tapestry was formed in April 2002. The group met up to have regular weekly practices in 2002. From a humble group of 4 members, it grew to a total of 10 members by mid-2004. By January 2005, the original group was divided into two groups: namely Tapestry and Yellow Cube. Presently, there are 5 members and 2 probationers in Tapestry.

Currently, it is being housed at the Training Room above the Queenstown Hawker Centre as sponsored by Church of Our Saviour. Tapestry has had several workshop performances at various settings such as primary, secondary schools, community centers, family service centers, a family theme resort and even in a hotel. Themes such as intergenerational bonding, family and school issues (eg. bullying, building self-esteem, resilience), family-bonding through storytelling and marriage life were explored with different sectors of our population. To date, more than 700 people ranging from young children to the senior citizens benefited from watching or participating in playback theatre in Singapore.

## **The Audience in Singapore**

In the history of Singapore, there are many ethnic groups that have migrated and settled here. From Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, Singapore's cultural composition is described as thus:

*Singapore is a small and relatively modern amalgam of an indigenous Malay population with a third generation Chinese majority, as well as Indian and Arab immigrants with some intermarriages. There also exist Eurasian and Peranakan*

*(known also as 'Straits Chinese') communities. Singapore has also achieved a significant degree of cultural diffusion with its unique combination of these ethnic groups.*

With such a combination of various Asian cultures, the Singaporean audience would comprise of a variety of Asian influences. In a Playback performance in Singapore, the audience could be made up of local residents in a housing estate, school students from a junior college, a group of young married couples attending a workshop, or simply a group of people who came because they were invited by their close friends who do playback theatre.

Tsen Tze (1999) in his article about the current developments of the performing arts scene in Singapore, he observed that there is a growing interest among Singaporeans going for performances since the 1970s. In the 70s, Singaporeans could only look forward to one production per month, while in the 80s, the theatre scene began to develop more plays that looked into the issues of life in Singapore. Later, in the 90s, there was an influx of international musicals and issue-focussed plays that bombarded the Singapore arts scene. Tsen Tze (1999) maintained that “the Singaporean audience has learnt to appreciate the theatre... selective in what they want to see...”

Pearl Forss (2006) from Channel News Asia noted that there was an increase in audience turning out for this year's local Arts Festival in June and this was encouraging as this number was even greater than the turnout for international theatre productions. Haresh Sharma (quoted in Forss, 2006) explained that while there was an increase in attendance for local arts or theatre, the audience tended to go for commercially entertaining productions as opposed to experimental or exploratory plays.

To date, there are about 350 people who watched a proper playback performance. Playback in Singapore continues to attract and entice the type of audience who have experienced the commercial fare that have been around since the 70s. Thus, as a conductor, I would encounter the “laidback” kind of audience who are keen to know more about playback theatre but are reluctant to participate actively in sharing their stories as they are not used to interactive theatre productions.

Most of the time, I have encountered friends who came to our performances with the mentality of sitting on the backbenches. Once, a friend told me before the show, to not pick him as a teller even though he might be smiling at me. He was most happy to sit behind the rest of the audience and watch the action. Others have told me that they feel that their stories are not interesting enough to be shared in front of everyone. They believed that descriptive and adventurous stories are perfect for sharing. Many times I found myself telling the audience at the start of a performance that I am excited to hear an ordinary story, a story about the everyday lives of Singaporeans. My belief is that no story is too insignificant to be told. Yet, it is still difficult to break this mindset in Singaporeans who are very conscious of what is being shared and what is to be shared. The self-censorship in them probably comes from being in the bigger culture of a country where self-censorship is part and parcel of keeping the harmony of a multi-racial society.

## **Audience Reaction and Participation**

In an online article by the Total Communicator, it discussed the issue of talking to an international audience. The author spoke about how certain presentations that work with the American audience might not necessarily work with audiences of other nationalities. According to this article, people from different cultures behave differently at a presentation. American and Canadian people would prefer to have a faster-paced presentation that is based on a main point while Europeans prefer having lots of information and evidence supporting the point of discussion. Asians on the other hand, would prefer a step-by-step approach of building up towards a point. When faced with asking and answering questions, an Asian crowd would likely to remain silent or ask a few polite questions. According to the article, Europeans and Asians generally need more time to reflect and ponder over information that is presented to them. Likewise in traditional theatre, the audience tends to assume a reactive role by responding to the performance in a passive manner. They tend to have the mentality of “entertain me, make me laugh, let me have a meaningful experience!” The Playback audience on the other hand, is used to an interactive approach where they are able to participate by sharing their stories to the conductor to enable the actors on stage to perform for them.

In the theory of active audience model as proposed by McQuail (1972), reality is socially constructed. This theory states that the person receiving the media does not have the monopoly on the meaning of what was presented. Usually, there are 4 reasons which people use media for their own purposes and achieving their satisfaction. This can be applied similarly to how the audience uses playback theatre. One of the ways that audience could use playback for is diversion where playback is perceived as a form of entertainment or relaxation. In the way, it fits the traditional type of audience that was mentioned in the earlier part of this essay. Another use is for personal relationships where the audience gain insights and knowledge about interpersonal relationships. Here, the audience is learning about the dynamics of all the relationships in the told story and thereby the teller gains some connections to his or her own emerging story themes. The third form of usage is for personal identity when the audience can identify themselves as one of the characters in a playback story and thereby gaining a deeper insight into their own personal psyche. Very often, the audience is learning to relate to others as fellow human beings in a bigger community of human behaviours. The last usage is surveillance where the audience could see playback as a form of theatre that informs about a particular phenomena that is happening around the community.

Looking at the suggestions given by McQuail, I am persuaded to think that the Asian crowd in Singapore is very much divided in their uses for playback theatre. Based on what I gathered from the feedback taken from Tapestry’s performances, we had at least 40 people in the audience in each performance. Most of them were family members and friends of Tapestry members. There were more audience members who fall between the age group of 20s and 30s. We found that there was about 80 percent of audience turnover rate for each performance in the past 3 years. We tended to have more new audience members for each performance as those people who have playback theatre for the first time, who felt that they have satisfied their curiosity of knowing about playback theatre and did not see the need to watch it again. Most of the 80 percent felt that playback theatre was an engaging and entertaining form of theatre, different from the traditional forms of theatre that they were used to. The rest of the 20 percent are repeat audience members who feel that they have benefited from watching playback theatre and they felt enriched by the enactments. Much of their motivation to come back was due to the fact they see playback theatre as a platform for developing personal insights into interpersonal

relationships. They are those who have become a part of the supporters of Tapestry and they see themselves as contributors of stories whenever they come for the performances.

### **Work done in the past 3 years**

I became a conductor of Tapestry by default as I was one of the founding members in this troupe. Although I share the role of conducting with Agnes, my Co-director in Tapestry, the planning for each performance was my responsibility, due to my vested interest in keeping to the theme of each show. Much of my learning came from my trial and error experiences in planning for these quarterly performances. I must admit that it has been an uphill task for me since I was inexperienced both in conducting and planning for performances. For each performance, I would give the theme to my members at least 2 months ahead of time. We would brainstorm on the possible issues and sub-themes that could expand the current theme. I would then take the audience through an experiential process for the intended theme. Let me elaborate by giving a few examples\* of the preparation of warming up the audiences before and during performances.

When Tapestry started to perform in 2003, we invited many friends of ours to come and watch the performances. Thus, we thought that this would be an easy task since they were our friends and were sympathetic to our inexperience in performing for a closed-door performance. Many times, the Playback team would be greeted with an uncomfortable silence or obliging smiles from the audience the moment the opening question had been launched by the conductor. As a new conductor, I soon began to realise the need to prepare my audience members for the new and unique experience of Playback Theatre.

For our next few performances, we started to warm up the audience members by doing some ice-breaking activities. For example, to get people to tell their feeling about how their day had been, we would do a passing musical drum game where a Chinese musical hand-drum would be passed among the audience while lively music would be played. When the music stopped, the hand-drum would be in the hands of a surprised audience member who would be obliged to tell a feeling of his or hers. There were times when we just got the whole audience to sing along with a familiar action song like “The Community Song”. Such action songs tended to get the audience to do silly actions and move around to interact with one another. In these activities, I found out that as long as Singaporeans are involved in a fun game or a silly activity that allows them to feel comfortable as people who share common experiences in the past, they would be likely to feel the warmth and acceptance of the current community. Then it would be easier for me as a conductor to get their responses and feelings in the beginning of the show.

As a troupe, Tapestry members would often spend time to greet all the audience members who arrived early as we wanted them to feel welcome in a new environment. As a conductor, I would also try to get to know ahead of time the different groups of people who might be coming from my members who invited their friends and family members. On the evening of the performance, I would try to chat up some of the audience members who are there early and find out about their interests and theatre experiences. It helped me immensely as a budding conductor to know the demography of the audience I would be conducting.

*\* Refer to Appendix A on page 8 for other ideas about initial warming up of the audience*

To warm up the audience to share their stories of “Childhood Days”, we strategically placed many olden days childhood game materials all around the venue of our performance. It got the audience members to play with each other using these materials while waiting for the show to start. In doing so, the audience would have time to feel the reminiscence of their childhood experiences and time to laugh and be relaxed in the friendly atmosphere. I found that in using visuals to trigger memories, audience members are likely to share readily as opposed to asking them to recall by verbally describing certain childhood situations through the conductor’s suggestions. I found that it is equally important for the Asian audience to go home with a souvenir or memento of the show to evoke certain warm feelings and conjure a sense of completion for the whole experience of the playback performance.

In our show “Love in Any Language”, we gave out little satchets of 5 to 6 types of raw seeds together with a little poem that explained the meaning of the different levels of love relationships (eg. Soya beans mean family love as most of us would experience our moms buying a packet of soya bean milk for our breakfast drink in our childhood days). According to Tapestry members’ post-show comments, these little satchets enabled the audience members continued to talk about the stories that were told even after the show was over. It got the community to be more aware of the feelings and relationships that were shared through a simple token of appreciation. What a wonderful revelation for me as a conductor who was learning to give my audience members a sense of anticipation for the next show.

For the latest show “Who Am I?”, the emphasis was about self identity and self awareness. A special bookmark was designed by one of Tapestry members was given to the audience members before the show commenced. The audience members were asked to fill in their responses to incomplete statements like “I am (an adjective that describes you), I love to (an activity that you enjoy) or I hope for (a dream or aspiration for the future)” From the verbal feedback given by the audience, the conductor was able to elicit some feelings about how the audience feel about their own self identity. They felt that the bookmark was a beautiful visual representation of the many layers of attributes and desires that make up the unique individual. It was noticed that even during the tea-break after the performance, the audience members were engaged in sharing about the bookmark and what these statements meant for them.

### **Role of the Conductor**

The more I conduct in an Asian context, the more I am convinced that the Asian crowd requires a process of warming up in a slow but gradual way. This means that the process could begin from the moment they get the e-flyer that invites them to the show to the moment they hear the first words of the conductor inviting the first feeling or story. This process involves stimulating their interest in the theme of the performance and generating a natural curiosity of the audience to want to see what the actors would do with a certain feeling or story. Many a time, it is easy to rush through the process by the usual approach of not highlighting much about the given theme except for the given programme outline and the audience would only know what to expect once the conductor began to speak. This might result in the audience members to form certain expectations that might be unattainable or unrealistic.

In an Asian community like Singapore, the audience would rather not to be called to express their views in public. The idea of being called is likened to the experience of being called upon in class to answer the teacher’s questions. Being put on the spot is not

an experience relished by most Singaporeans. Perhaps this fear of answering is also coupled by the possibility of “losing one’s face” (ie. a singlish expression for “become very embarrassed, lose dignity”) in the event that the answer is not politically correct in the presence of those who are sitting in the audience. Thus the conductor has an important role of creating a safe environment for the audience to feel comfortable to share.

Harris (2004) wrote about how “audience members... respond positively to a conductor who approaches them as beings of value...”. This rings true in my experiences in conducting Singaporeans as they would be warmed up to share when they sense that the conductor is physically and emotionally present to their feelings. One of my audience members once shared with me that she felt comfortable in sharing her story because Agnes, another Tapestry conductor was able to accept and present her present state of confusion without having to apologise or make up to the others in the audience who might be feeling uncomfortable for her to share that difficult family story. Such is the presence of a conductor who shows empathy for the teller who is warmed up to tell.

Sometimes I get tellers who are warmed up to the idea of telling but they are only interested in telling facts in their story. A story about being late for work would be about the alarm clock that did not work and the journey of trying to get to work but getting caught in the traffic jam. The conductor would get the whole description of the incident based on the situational facts and nothing about how the person felt about the whole incident. With times like this, I found myself observing the body language of the teller and checking in with the teller through paraphrasing so as to find the real essence of the story told. Thus from an Asian perspective, getting the tellers warmed up to telling is just half of the job done. Truly, the work of the conductor has only just begun.

Burgess (cited in Sittenfeld, 1999) wrote about the need to notice the three “learning lines” of the audience, this is referring to the physical, mental and emotional ways that people prefer to receive information. “Physicals” tend to prefer getting out of their seats and doing a hands-on activity while the “mentals” need to have a good argument supported by plenty of facts. The “emotionals” are people who would be good at free-association and most receptive to the mode of story-telling. What this means to the Playback conductor working for an Asian crowd is the need to be sensitive to the different learning lines that might be in the audience. However, I believe that in every audience group, there would be a combination of the above-mentioned learning lines. Thus, I truly believe that for an Asian crowd, it is really worthwhile to include a multi-sensory approach as they would appreciate an experience that is both holistic and stimulating.

## **Conclusion**

In short, I have attempted to outline the profile of the Asian crowd in Singapore. I shared more about the importance of pre-performance preparation work and engaging in fun hands-on activities for warming up an Asian audience in Tapestry’s performances. I also discussed about other possible approaches that a conductor could take when faced with a multi-racial community like Singapore.

I am thankful for all the late-night experiences of planning for each of Tapestry’s performances and to have this opportunity to write about these ideas and insights about conducting the Asian audience in Singapore. While I am aware that my essay has been

completed, I believe its completion marks the beginning of a life-long research of finding more new and engaging ways to warm up different Asian audiences in my role as a conductor and trainer in Playback Theatre.

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## Appendix A

### Simple ways to warm up the crowd

Lastly, these are some other possible activities adapted from the Improv Encyclopaedia\* that may be useful for the beginning of a Playback performance. This will help to break the initial awkwardness among strangers and allow the conductor to work up the crowd a little. However the decision to use a particular warm up activity is dependent on the theme that is used for the performance as well.

1. *Do a body wave (audience moving up and down to make fluent waves with their hands above their head).*
2. *Have the pianist/keyboard man (playback musician) make all kinds of sounds and have the audience imitate them.*
3. *Ask the audience to stand up and do some physical warm-up. Have them shake their arms and legs.*
4. *Have the audience introduce themselves to strangers and tell a story to a stranger.*
5. *Divide the audience in 3 or 4 groups, and give each group a sound. Rehearse the sound with each group. Then use these sounds as percussion sounds and try to get the audience to make these sounds like they were part of an orchestra or acapella group.*
6. *Give the men and the women a different sound and play with that. Tell them they are members of a wild tribe, the women go 'Ugh' when you raise your left hand and the man go 'Hagawaga' when you raise your right hand.*

\* Adapted from Improv Encyclopaedia. <http://www.humanpingpongball.com>