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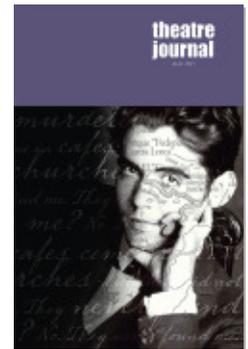
Glocalqueering in New Asia: The Politics of Performing Gay in Singapore

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Glocalqueering in New Asia: The Politics of Performing Gay in Singapore

Eng-Beng Lim

The global propagation of Western gay culture is generally perceived as a progressive development that is liberating sexual minorities in third world countries. Called “global queering” by some theorists, this neoliberal model of free market transmission, by which an emancipatory and often glamorized Western gay culture is transforming the rest of the world, presumes a primarily North American and secondarily European standard constituting what we think of as “‘modern’ homosexuality.”¹ In every modern capitalist society, then, global queer boys are perceived to come out with a universal gay identity that both distinguishes and sets them free within a transnational Gay Pride world.

While such a performative trope is gaining prominence, one has to ask whether such identitarian paradigms of global queering are applicable—or even should be applied—to global cities like Singapore, where the quotidian reality as well as theatrical representations of gay men continue to be policed in both overt and subtle ways by the state. Even as Singapore stages its embrace of queer capital by sanctioning the proliferation of explicitly gay-themed theatres and pink-dollar commerce—a development unprecedented in this city-state—the extent to which this queer visibility

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¹Dennis Altman, “On Global Queering,” *Australian Humanities Review* July (1996), <http://www.lib.latrobe.edu.au/AHR/archive/Issue-July-1996/altman.html> (accessed 13 October 2003). Altman has also elaborated on this standpoint in “Rupture or Continuity? The Internationalisation of Gay Identities,” *Social Text* 14, no. 3 (1996): 77–94; “Global Gaze/Global Gays,” *GLQ: A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies* 3 (1997): 417–36; and “The Emergence of Gay Identities in Southeast Asia,” in *Different Rainbows*, ed. Peter Drucker, 137–56 (London: Gay Men’s Press, 2000).

is to be celebrated as a frame of a liberating spectacle via global queering requires further interrogation. But how is this new public visibility of Singapore's gay males as "Asian boys" to be read? Are they truly the product of unique cultural influences, or merely subjects of a selective global gaze, configured by anecdotal and ethnographic observations about free market transmissions of Western queer cultures?

Contesting the dominant tendency to use singular binaries or reductive trajectories (e.g., West to East, first world to third world) to map out global queer lives in the so-called non-Western world, this essay considers the complex flows of queer realities as they are inflected, as in the case of Singapore, by multiculturalism, state policies, transnational capital, and regional, inter-Asian diasporic circuits and exchanges. Following new directions pointed to by scholars working in the burgeoning fields of queer diasporas and globalization, I use a groundbreaking gay male theatrical production in Singapore, *Asian Boys Vol. 1* (2000), as an exemplary site to understand this global and inter-Asian queer imaginary.² I consider this English-language play as it is cathected in Singapore's transnational economic matrix, performing a global city's highly mediated queering within "New Asia."³ From this point of view, *Asian Boys* belongs to a lineage of Singaporean theatrical productions that create, as cultural theorist C. J. W.-L. Wee suggests, "limited cosmopolitan [and sexualized] versions of regional Asia that are connected to but simultaneously contend with the global West."⁴

² See, for instance, Anne-Marie Fortier, "Queer Diaspora," in *Handbook of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, ed. D. Richardson and S. Seidman, 183–97 (London: Sage, 2002); Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue, *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003); Gayatri Gopinath, *Impossible Desires: Queer Diasporas and South Asian Public Cultures* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005); David Eng, *Racial Castration: Managing Masculinity in Asian America* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2001); Elisa Glick, Linda Garber, Sharon Patricia Holland, Daniel Balderston, and José Quiroga, "New Directions in Multiethnic, Racial and Global Queer Studies," in *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 10 (2003): 123–37; Jasbir Puar, "Transnational Sexualities: South Asian (Trans)national(alism)s and Queer Diasporas," in *Q&A: Queer in Asian America*, ed. D. Eng and A. Y. Homs, 405–24 (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998); Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan, *Queer Globalizations: Citizenship and the Afterlife of Colonialism* (New York: New York University Press, 2002); John Hawley, ed., *Post-Colonial, Queer: Theoretical Intersections* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2001); and Cindy Patton and Benigno Sanchez-Eppler, eds., *Queer Diasporas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

³ As a neoliberal rhetoric, "New Asia" was a geopolitical imperative aimed at fostering regional links, technological growth, and the restructuring of (especially East and Southeast) Asian economies hit by the financial crises of the late 1990s. See, for instance, "East Asia Economic Summit Ends with Call for Building New Asia," *News Agency*, 16 October 1999, <http://www.xinhuanet.com/english/index.htm> (accessed 10 March 2001). Singapore in particular has actively embraced the cultural dimensions of this New Asian imaginary in the past decade as a way to instantiate the city's cosmopolitanism and touristic appeal. This form of cosmopolitan tourism is deftly integrated or suffused in recent performance projects and productions by Singaporean director Ong Keng Sen, notably his pan-Asian Shakespearean productions and the Flying Circus Project. For just two of the many interesting debates about Ong's work, see Yong Li Lan, "Ong Keng Sen's Desdemona, Ugliness, and the Intercultural Performative," *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004): 251–73; and Helena Grehan, "Questioning the Relationship between Consumption and Exchange: TheatreWorks' Flying Circus Project, December 2000," *positions: east asian cultures critique* 12 (2004): 565–86.

⁴ C. J. W.-L. Wee, "Staging the Asian Modern: Cultural Fragments, the Singaporean Eunuch, and the Asian Lear," *Critical Inquiry* 30 (Summer 2004): 771–99. For a postcolonial history of Singapore's development from the perspective of a theatre historian and critic, see Jacqueline Lo, *Staging Nation: English Language Theatre in Malaysia and Singapore* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2004), especially chapters 1 and 2—see my review in this issue of *Theatre Journal*; and William Peterson, *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001).

Glocalqueering in New Asia

Distinguished from other postcolonial states in its determined efforts to emulate industrial advancements of the West while retaining Asian values, Singapore exemplifies a capitalist—some say “philistine”—modernity.⁵ English is the first of the republic’s four official languages, which include Malay, Chinese (Mandarin), and Tamil. In this prosperous country, luxury automobiles, Hollywood movies, Japanese retail stores, and a potpourri of multicultural and international arts festivals mark a distinctly postmodern, global, and cosmopolitan urban experience of consumption. The government’s official rhetoric and policies, anchored in a economic rationality, have come to embody the national culture.⁶ The nation’s statesmen often point to and reiterate the 5 Cs—cash, credit card, car, condominium, and country club—as the organizing coordinates for personal fulfillment in Singapore,⁷ whose globalism is eminent among Asian countries. According to various much-cited reports, including the 2005 A. T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Magazine Globalization Index and its companion Cultural Globalization Index (2004), Singapore is “the world’s most globalized nation.”⁸

⁵ C. J. W.-L. Wee, “Creating High Culture in the Globalized ‘Cultural Desert’ of Singapore,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 47, no. 4 (2003), http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/the_drama_review/v047/47.4wee.pdf (accessed 10 December 2003). Singapore became fully independent from the British Empire in 1965, following a brief union with Malaysia for two years (1963–1965). Through rapid economic development, it has accrued one of the highest per capita GDPs in the world, “equal to that of the Big 4 West European countries” (US\$27,900, 2004 estimate). See US Central Intelligence Agency, *CIA The World Fact Book*, <http://www.cia.gov/cia/publications/factbook/geos/sn.html> (accessed 10 May 2005). Economists, however, point out that while Singapore has a “First World per capita income,” its wage share is substantially lower than many OECD countries, and closer to Newly Industrializing Economies (NIEs) and third world countries. Soon Teck Wong and Ong Lai Heng, “First World Per Capita Income, But Third World Income Structure? Wage Share and Productivity Improvement in Singapore,” *Statistics/Singapore*, Singapore Department of Statistics, <http://www.singstat.gov.sg/ssn/feat/3Q2001/wage.pdf> (accessed 14 June 2005).

⁶ For a discussion of Singapore’s pragmatic economic ideology and its relation to meritocracy, multiracialism, Asian values, and communitarianism, see Chua Beng Huat, *Communitarian Ideology and Democracy in Singapore* (London: Routledge, 1995); and Diane K. Mauzy and R. S. Milne, *Singapore Politics Under the People’s Action Party* (London: Routledge, 2002), especially chapters 5 and 6.

⁷ Such a performative, materialistic rhetoric has engendered the image of the ugly and ungracious Singaporean. In 2002, Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong proposed the creation of a Remaking Singapore Committee (RSC) to steer the aspirations and goals of the post-independence generation beyond the 5 Cs. As crucial as a matter of national security, the manifesto states that the RSC “will focus on the political, social and cultural aspects of our survival as a nation.” Ironically, the RSC is structured as an offshoot of the earlier established Economic Review Committee to help consolidate the larger and main goal of revitalizing the city-state’s long-term economic fundamentals. For the full report, see “Remaking Singapore,” <http://www.remakingsingapore.gov.sg> (accessed 11 May 2005).

⁸ The A. T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Magazine Globalization Index is reportedly “the first comprehensive empirical measure of globalization and its impact.” Singapore is the only Asian country within the top ten, heading the ranking that continues with Ireland, Switzerland, the United States, the Netherlands, Canada, Denmark, Sweden, Austria, and Finland. The other Asian nations that appear on the list are: Malaysia, ranked number 18, Japan (28), South Korea (30), Philippines (32), Taiwan (36), Thailand (46), Pakistan (50), and China (54). Notably, the report says that Singapore’s rise to the top from its runner-up placing the year before was “solidified” in part by its bilateral free trade agreement with the United States in May 2003, “the first such agreement the United States had signed with an Asian nation” (54). It also notes rather cryptically that as an “exception to the rule”—the rule being that “there is a strong positive relationship between globalization and political freedom”—Singapore has “tight government control over the media and limited individual liberties” even though it is the world’s most globalized country with one of the freest, most open, and most modern economies in the

Asian Boys Vol. 1 tells the story of a “goddess sent to earth to save Asian boys from extinction.”⁹ The play is adapted from August Strindberg’s *A Dream Play* by Alfian bin Sa’at, a local Malay playwright/poet. It turns the protagonist of Strindberg’s play, Indra’s daughter, into Agnes, a celestial and multicultural fag hag who makes a very queer journey across the homoerotic time-space of Singapore during two centuries, accompanied by a coterie of local gay males thinly veiled as Asian boys. This groundbreaking play is emblematic of a “glocalqueering” technology that communicates and cross-codes a glocal and diasporic Asian homoerotics in this global city-state.¹⁰ By theorizing glocalqueering, I propose to enact an epistemic shift from the interpretive paradigm of global queering, which has focused narrowly on how so-called local queer subjects are adopting Western-style gay, lesbian, and transgender identity for their own agencies. The coordinates of such a global/local, West/East binary tend to reinscribe a problematic ontological premise for international queer subjects by making the assumption that a queer, sexual Being exists on stable, identitarian grounds across time and space cohesively structured. The stability of this identitarian base is consolidated by the prominence and permeability of Western queer culture and identity. This means that the politics of queer representation and encounter in trans/national contexts are often obscured by the prominence of Western modalities of queerness. Consequently, queer cross-cultural exchanges are invariably reduced to a quandary around ahistorical identity claims and focused on the iconicity of the white gay male. There is thus a sense of epistemic narcissism in which global queering is all about or only happening in relation to white men or the Western gay male gaze. For instance, classic liberal questions using this approach include: “how gay identities will change as ‘Asians’ recuperate Western images and bend them to their own purposes”;¹¹ and the generalized, perennial curiosity, are Chinese, Indian, and Malay gay men (closeted) like American gay men?

world (59). For the full report and ranking see “Measuring Globalization: A. T. Kearney/Foreign Policy Globalization Index 2005,” http://www.atkearney.com/shared_res/pdf/2005G-index.pdf (accessed 10 May 2005). For the 2004 report on cultural globalization, see Randolph Kluver and Wayne Fu, “The Cultural Globalization Index” in *Foreign Policy*, http://www.foreignpolicy.com/story/cms.php?story_id=2494 (accessed 12 May 2005).

⁹ Showcase, press release, 25 November – 2 December 2002.

¹⁰ The term “glocal” (global + local) is said to be popularized by sociologist Roland Robertson, who notes that the term “glocalization” was coined by Japanese economists who published in the *Harvard Business Review* in the late 1980s. Rendered in Japanese as *dochakuka*, it refers to “the simultaneity—and co-presence—of both universalizing and particularizing tendencies.” Roland Robertson, “Comments on the ‘Global Triad’ and ‘Glocalization,’” in *Globalization and Indigeneous Culture*, ed. Inoue Nobutaka, Institute for Japanese Culture and Classics, Kokugakuin University, 1997, <http://www2.kokugakuin.ac.jp/ijcc/wp/global/15robertson.html> (accessed 19 May 2005). See also, Roland Robertson, “Glocalization: Time-Space and Homogeneity-Heterogeneity,” in *Global Modernities*, ed. Mike Featherstone, Scott Lash, and Roland Robertson, 25–44 (London: Sage, 1995); William H. Thornton, “Mapping the ‘Glocal’ Village: the political limits of ‘glocalization,’” *Continuum* 14 (April 2000): 79–89; and Frederic Jameson and Masao Miyoshi, eds., *The Culture of Glocalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1998). The term is now widely circulated in the field of cultural studies, particularly around “global/local linkage, disjuncture and fracture at the neo-capitalist border: the counterlogic of *both/and*” intersections of culture. Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake, eds., *Global/Local: Cultural Production and the Transnational Imaginary* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996), 5.

¹¹ Altman, “Global Queering,” 102. For a critique of the ways in which the Western epistemic template is used as the basis for other legibilities, see Slavoj Žižek, “A leftist plea for ‘eurocentrism,’” *Critical Inquiry* 24 (Summer 1998): 988–1009.

A glocalqueering understanding works within the milieu of queer globalizations and diasporas while attending to the ways in which non-Western homoerotics are racialized by (auto)exotic and (neo)colonial epistemologies, ethnographies, histories, and different genres of queer performance.¹² While engaging in the logics, histories, and contradictions of pragmatic local practices that exploit the currency of queer globalism in myriad ways, it asks how we know what we think we know about the global transmission and formation of queerness in the face of national heterosexism, intercultural modernities, neoliberal regimes, and other critical contexts. In one way, it extends J. K. Gibson-Graham's observation that "[b]y querying globalization and queering the body of capitalism we may open up the space for many alternative scripts and invite a variety of actors to participate in the realization of different outcomes."¹³

The theatricalized queer boys in *Asian Boys Vol. 1*, along with the Mardi Gras party boys on the streets of Singapore, emerge as guides to its Asian and glocalqueer world.¹⁴ The boys embroil the politics of performing gay in the economic exigencies, political history, and diasporic cultural realities of this global city-state. This glocalqueering matrix reveals complex circuits of mobility that follow neither a model of bilateral cultural transmission (West to East and vice versa) nor a contextual study of national productions that attempts to locate a quintessential Singaporean queerness. Rather, a glocalqueer optic configures an inter-Asian diasporic framework that produces new models of cross-cultural understanding about queer sexuality aligned with recent studies that imagine alternative ways of conceptualizing traditions, affiliations, kinship, genealogies, and citizenship.¹⁵ Using such a critical lens, we will consider the theatricality of *Asian Boys* as alternately disruptive, self-representative, and (un)critical acts by glocalqueer male subjects attempting to find varied expressions of subcultural meaning in the face of sexual discrimination in a supposedly queer-friendly global world.

In using the term "queering" in this global and trans/national context, I refer to the theatre of Singapore's dramatic if also dubious transformation from a father-state to Asia's new gay capital at the outset of the new millennium.¹⁶ The act or performance

¹² In the US academy, queer scholars of color are already intervening in this discourse with sensitivity to cultural difference as they formulate ways of making coalitional queer affiliations across the world. Arnaldo Cruz-Malavé and Martin Manalansan make an alternate case for "queer globalizations" with an explicit call to deflect from the "colonizing gaze" of the "white scholar," and to unfix the legacy and grammar of "gay" as a structuring term for global interaction and coalition (*Queer Globalizations*, 4). For an exemplary nuanced study, see also Martin Manalansan's wonderful book, *Global Divas: Filipino Gay Men in the Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003).

¹³ J. K. Gibson-Graham, "Querying Globalization" in *Post-colonial Queer: Theoretical Intersections*, ed. John C. Hawley (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 263.

¹⁴ The public visibility of queer action at rainbow-flagged clubs and bars, as reported in the press, is a new phenomenon in Singapore. For a more focused discussion of Mardi Gras boys, see my forthcoming article, "The Mardi Gras Boys of Singapore's English-language Theatre," *Asian Theatre Journal* 22, no. 2 (Fall 2005).

¹⁵ See, for instance, Elizabeth Povinelli, "Notes on Gridlock: Genealogy, Intimacy, Sexuality," *Public Culture* 14 (Winter 2002): 215–38; Jigna Desai, "Homo on the Range: Mobile and Global Sexualities," *Social Text* 73, 20, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 65–89; and David Eng, "Transnational Adoption and Queer Diasporas," *Social Text* 76, 21, no. 3 (Fall 2003): 1–37.

¹⁶ See Lim, "The Mardi Gras Boys."

of queering signifies a number of referents. In sociolinguistic queer theory, for example, queering may be said to be a performative act pronouncing or recuperating the visibility of queer lives. Singapore's queering encompasses the rise of the nation's gay and lesbian theatre; the rapid development of queer social infrastructure like gay bars, real estate, and bathhouses; the consequent media visibility of gay men and lesbians in the public eye; and transnational events such as the Nation Party, which has gained the reputation of being Asia's Mardi Gras.¹⁷ This process is further bolstered by the state's embrace of queer capital as a form of creative technology, the open employment of gay individuals in government agencies, and the profitability of pink-dollar industries in the form of gay and lesbian tourism, entrepreneurship, and consumerism.

Though the term "gay" is a more or less defined and politicized sexual identity in the West, its usage in multilingual Singapore is less certain; hence a short but crucial note on sexual terminology is warranted at this point. I use the term in its common local usage among English speakers as a polysemic, subcultural sign for homoerotic/sexual practices of and between men. "Gay" and "homosexual" have been used interchangeably by the state in medical, criminal, and sexual classification of men in this grouping. In contrast, I use the term "queer" to problematize any normalizing conception of sexual identity and to indicate Singapore's turn to queer capital to further its artistic ambitions as the regional cultural hub. Notably, one or all of the three abovementioned English terms—though not the colloquial and/or pidginized terms in Chinese, Malay, Tamil, and their respective dialects—may be used to describe the sexual identity and/or practice of the nonheteronormative Singaporean male, depending on the context, class, ethnicity, personal preference, and understanding of these usages. Generally speaking, "gay" rather than "queer" is more commonly used in the local parlance for personal sexual identification or as a sign of male homosexuality. However, due to Singapore's complex linguistic situation and the inconsistency in usage, there is really no one definitive way to use each of these subcultural terms. What bears noting is that the terminology for homoerotics in the nation's English-

¹⁷ Organized by Fridae.com, Asia's largest gay and lesbian Web site, the transnational Nation Party, which began on 8 August 2001, attracts a steadily increasing number of queer tourists (1,800 in 2001 to 8,000 in 2004) from Australia, Hong Kong, Japan, Malaysia, Taiwan, Thailand, Europe, and North America to Singapore. Party-goers revel in various ticketed parties held in conjunction with Singapore's National Day and spread over three days within the confines of event venues such as the Musical Fountain in Sentosa; the swimming pool, Big Splash (for "poolside recovery"); and some of the hippest bars and clubs in the city. This annual event, touted as the largest gay and lesbian party in Asia, is said to generate millions of tourist revenue for Singapore, and enjoys wide coverage by press around the world. See Karl Malakunas, "Singapore to host Asia's biggest gay party . . . and rake in the pink dollar," *Agence France Presse*, 6 August 2004. Interestingly, the moniker "Asia's Mardi Gras" for the Nation Party is a source of contention. The CEO of Fridae.com, Stuart Koe, has maintained that the Nation Party is not a "GLBT" event, "gay party," or "gay parade." Instead, the event "not only welcomes gays and lesbians, but everyone who wants to celebrate National Day with the rest of Singapore." Stuart Koe, "Nation.03 is for every S'porean," *New Paper*, 31 July 2003, <http://www.yawningbread.org> (accessed 17 June 2005). Koe's remark was in part a strategic response to ensure that the "pinkness" of the event did not alienate bureaucrats and jeopardize its chances of getting the requisite license from the police. It was also calculated to foreground the ways in which the Nation event was not "just a dance party" but, to use the state's language, "a major celebration of social diversity and acceptance." See Calvin Low, "No Mardi Gras, says PM," *New Paper*, 6 July 2003, http://www.yawningbread.org/apdx_2003/imp-096.htm (accessed 17 June 2005).

language theatre is complicated by postcolonial history, multilingualism, differentials in sociocultural positioning, and the varieties of English used, as well as the influence of taxonomies about alternative sexualities, particularly the rise of queer theoretical models from the West.¹⁸

“Asian boys” represent one of several types of “queer boys” circulating in the global gay market. In the Western context, queer boys are a generic sign for white, urban, gay, male youth culture, while the subcultural category of Asian boy references the racialized fetishes of an older white male for the diminutive and effeminized Asian male. The emergence of Asian boys in Singapore and their theatricalization in local plays like *Asian Boys* both reiterate and transform the Asian houseboy trope. For instance, the play’s critique points to the Singaporean state as a substitute for the white male in the classic colonial/nativized boy coupling: Are global Asian queer boys the state’s unspeakable fetish as it turns to queer capital to sex up its insipid image as a draconian father-state? On some level, the Asian boy is already imbricated in the state’s use of Asia as cultural capital for touristic, economic, and political ends.¹⁹ The Singapore Tourism Board (STB), for instance, has been quick to exploit Asia in its autoexoticizing construction of this “Lion City” as “New Asia.”²⁰ In an interesting turn, the queer dimensions of this imaginary are brought out by critics who argue that

¹⁸ On the issue of multilingualism, note that English has been the official language of instruction in Singaporean schools since 1987; the native tongues of Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil are taught as second languages. Nearly everyone in Singapore speaks more than one language. Most children from Chinese households, for instance, typically acquire a dialect (Hokkien, Teochew, Cantonese, Hainanese) that is freely mixed with Mandarin. Each of these languages has its own particular lexicon for queerness, and all cross-code with several varieties of Malay to produce Singlish. Finally, at a number of secondary and junior colleges (the equivalent of middle and high school in the US), French, German, and Japanese are also taught as third languages. For those interested in the linguistic issue, see J. A. Foley, T. Kandiah, Bao Zhiming, A. F. Gupta, L. Alsagoff, Ho Chee Lick, L. Wee, I. S. Talib, and W. Bokhorst-Heng, *English in New Cultural Contexts: Reflections from Singapore* (Singapore: Singapore Institute of Management/Oxford University Press, 1998).

¹⁹ Rustom Bharucha has made the argument that Singapore “needs Asia . . . to enhance its cultural credibility and state-managed multiculturalism.” Identifying it as “a metropolis that has thrived on eliminating local cultures and communities in the interests of real estate,” Bharucha sees Singapore as exemplifying “these very Asian countries where the capitalist foundations of the West have been so thoroughly assimilated that Asia should be flaunted as cultural capital” (5). See Rustom Bharucha, “Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare: Dissenting Notes on New Asian Interculturality, Postcoloniality, and Recolonization,” *Theatre Journal* 56 (2004): 1–28.

²⁰ According to Connie Poh, Brand Development Manager of the Singapore Tourism Board, “New Asia – Singapore’ is the tourism brand that Singapore Tourism Board launched in 1996. It aims at positioning Singapore as a unique city-state at the heart of Asia, by expounding on the curious blend of Occidental and Oriental influences, of things old and new that have made Singapore unlike any other in the world. It also spoke of Singapore as being a vibrant, dynamic Asian country celebrating the best of her diverse cultures and traditions, and preserving and nurturing her Asian heritage, even as the country embraced the economic marvels of high technology.” Connie Poh, e-mail message to author, 31 March 2003. See also National Arts Council brochure, *New Asia on Stage: Performing Arts Singapore* (Singapore: National Arts Council, 2000), which proclaims that “Singapore is New Asia, a thriving Asian city with a busy arts scene influenced by the traditional Asian heritage of its multicultural population and the contemporary beat of a young cosmopolitan city.” For a discussion on the relation between Singapore’s art, cultural industries, and New Asia, see Lee Weng Choy, “Authenticity, Reflexivity, and Spectacle; or The Rise of New Asia Is Not the End of the World,” *positions: east asia cultures critique* 12 (2004): 643–66.

“New Asia has also been constructed in part by the idea of a ‘queer Asia.’”²¹ Based on a queer and exotic interculturalism, Singapore’s claim as the nexus of New Asia—the “heart of Asia” fusing “Occidental and Oriental influences”²²—is inscribed on the bodies of its transcultural Asian boys. Importantly, however, the focus on global Asian queer boys does not mean in any way that queerness in Singapore, inflected by differentials in class, race, and gender, is reducible to this trope or only intelligible through the performativity of the white daddy/Asian boy binary. Rather it is to consider, through these different critical trajectories, multiple meanings generated and forestalled by the glocalqueer production of *Asian Boys*.

Enabling and yet complicit in neoliberal and nationalist agendas, Singapore’s global Asian queer boys and their troubled visibility foreground the difficulties in understanding the contingencies of, or what counts as politically efficacious, queer representation in a multicultural, multiracial metropolis. Where do local gay male bodies fit within the state’s nationalistic mantra, “One People, One Nation, One Singapore,” in the geopolitical imaginary of New Asia, and in other such official cultural blueprints as “London of New Asia,”²³ “Renaissance City,”²⁴ “Switzerland of the East,”²⁵ and “Global City for the Arts”?²⁶ How are their representations, voices, and performances to be read and understood in an age of glocalqueering?

Asian Boys Vol. 1

Asian Boys stages both Singapore’s handling of queer capital as well as its posture as a traditional Asian state. Told in nine episodes, the piece foregrounds the queer underside of historic landscapes by turns fictional, fantastic, and distinctly Singaporean. As a fictional goddess, Agnes is supposedly an Asian queer construct in an international lineage of gay icons, divas, and fabulous beings. She is accompanied by a coterie of multicultural Asian boys (three Chinese, one Malay, one Caucasian), who adopt

²¹ Olivia Khoo, “Sexing the City: Malaysia’s New ‘Cyberlaws’ and Cyberjaya’s Queer Success,” in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 222.

²² Poh, e-mail.

²³ George Yeo, Minister for Trade and Industry, is perhaps most prominent among Singapore’s policy makers and officials who use this phrase to articulate the country’s aspirations to be a vibrant, cosmopolitan city that will rank among the top in Asia. See, for instance, “Speech by George Yeo, Minister for Trade and Industry, to the US Chamber in Washington DC, 28 April 2003,” http://www.mti.gov.sg/public/FTA/frm_FTA_Default.asp?sid=36&cit=1608 (accessed 17 July 2005). See also, Karl Ho, “‘London of Asia’ here? First scrap rules on nightspots,” *Straits Times*, 25 March 2003, <http://straitstimes.asia1.com.sg/singapore/story/0,4386,179174-1048629540,00.html> (accessed 26 March 2003).

²⁴ Singapore Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA), *Renaissance City Report*, 9 February 2000, <http://www.mita.gov.sg/renaissance/ES.htm> (accessed 10 December 2003).

²⁵ “Singapore has long been ‘Switzerland of the East,’” *Business Times*, 18 September 1999, 3.

²⁶ In the Executive Summary of the *Renaissance City Report*, Singapore wants to become a “global arts city” as part of a “nation-building” imperative, <http://www.mita.gov.sg/renaissance/ES.htm> (accessed 10 December 2003). This artistic aspiration has been covered by the international press. See, for instance, wired reports by Salil Tripathi, “Artistic ambitions don’t play well in uptight Singapore,” *Australian Financial Review*, 14 December 2002; and Zeida Cawthorne, “Lion City stalking global arts title,” *Sunday Morning Post*, 14 June 1998, <http://www.singapore-window.org/80614sc.htm> (accessed 10 December 2003).

different gender and ethnic identities while inhabiting various spatial and temporal zones in Singapore's history.

Each of the nine episodes presents a gay site which Agnes and her chaperone, Boy, visit as detached observers, conspirators, disguised characters, critical commentators, intervening higher forces, or heterosexual fundamentalists working for the Singaporean Government. The historical backdrop of their queer journey runs the gamut from Chinese migration to Nanyang (Singapore) in the nineteenth century, to Japanese occupation during the Second World War, the detention of several local presumed Marxists under the Internal Security Act in 1987, the vibrant transvestite cultural scene that was part of the city-state's past, and contemporary gay life in the city and in cyberspace.

Tracking this unpredictable itinerary, the audience follows Agnes's haphazard journey to discover a myriad of gay lives, all tentatively defined in colonial, global, and virtual Singapore. Agnes meets only homosexuals, queer beings, and gay men on the island; this guided tour is described in the program notes as a "happy ride through glorious holes to experience [Singapore's] style, phallic monsters, stardust, and macho goddesses."²⁷ While such a proclamation appears to be a fantastic conception set in an indefinable queer zone, Sa'at is evidently pitting these Asian boys in their varied manifestations against the city-state's national history, ambiguous cultural policies, and postcolonial sexual mores.

Staged in the blackbox of The Necessary Stage (TNS) in the symbolic heartland of Singapore, a housing estate known as Marine Parade, this production speaks to the issues raised about the contemporary city-state's glocalqueering. TNS is a not-for-profit professional theatre company known for its eclectic programs and social consciousness.²⁸ One of six major arts companies recognized by the National Arts Council, TNS receives funding and support from the state as well as private corporations, and operates out of a fairly new performance and office facility at the Marine Parade Community Club.²⁹ TNS was formed in 1987 under the long-standing partnership of artistic director Alvin Tan, who is of Peranakan Chinese descent, and Haresh Sharma, the company's Indian resident playwright.³⁰ Apart from its local commitment to new works and new artists, the company is also global in its outlook.³¹

²⁷ "Filth for the Eyes, Food for the Soul," *Asian Boys Vol. 1*, program notes, 2.

²⁸ TNS produces a varied program that promotes an ongoing social commitment, not only through its main season, but also by sponsoring annual community theatre festivals for young people aged thirteen to twenty-five, educational theatre programs in schools, and various community forums and platforms.

²⁹ Community clubs are found in every constituency or residential precinct and serve as neighborhood centers for social and cultural activities. Singapore's Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong, representing the dominant People's Action Party, happens to be one of Marine Parade's democratically elected officials.

³⁰ Both Tan and Sharma are Singaporean citizens, have professional theatre degrees in their corresponding fields from the University of Birmingham in England, and are more proficient in English than in their mother tongues. Tan was also mentored by Richard Schechner at New York University in 1997 for three months on a Fulbright scholarship.

³¹ The Necessary Stage, <http://www.necessary.org/About/about.htm> (accessed 20 May 2004). TNC productions have toured Cairo, Glasgow, Berlin, London, Melbourne, Taipei, New Delhi, Macau, and Pusan.

The production credited Roland Barthes's *Fragments: A Lovers Discourse* and Strindberg's *A Dream Play* as two sources of inspiration for its many-layered intercultural queer encounters. Gay practices are signified in the play in ways that are reflective of the state's carefully choreographed queering and oblique cultural politics. Fostering a dialogue about history and queer politics in Singapore, *Asian Boys Vol. 1* stages a unique inter-Asian construction of global queerness by drawing on Indian myths, Chinese soap operas, Japanese popular culture, Malay folklore, and Singaporean urban legends, as well as Western gay male iconography. While the play's multiculturalism is constitutive of Singapore's state-sanctioned, cosmopolitan culture, its form of gay critique and representation has to be viewed and understood in light of the country's Censorship Review Committee (CRC) reports in 1992 and 2003.

Both CRC reports state that homosexuality onstage may be explored but cannot be promoted.³² There is, however, a crucial but ambiguous caveat in the 2003 report. Although "deviant sexual practices" that undermine the "core moral values of society" are disallowed in performance, the 2003 committee recommends taking a "more flexible and contextual approach when dealing with homosexual themes and scenes in content."³³ Some of the key factors influencing this change in policy are "globalization" and "attracting talent." In this regard, the CRC committee cites the Economic Review Committee (ERC) Report 2003 as having identified talent as the key driver in the New Economy: "To attract talent, there are calls for an environment with less restrictive censorship guidelines and more diverse choices."³⁴

Notwithstanding the issue of global talent, the CRC report notes that the Media Development Authority of Singapore (MDA) continues to take a "cautious approach towards homosexual content" even as it gives theatre "greater leeway" in dealing with "homosexual issues." The concession given to theatre is due to its perceived status as an elite form of "arts entertainment." By definition, Singapore's authorities will accept homosexual portrayals as long as they are "non-exploitative" and "non-promotional."³⁵ In the matter of regulating "homosexual content" in performance, seven committees and ministries are potentially involved in the process of determining or influencing the standards of what is appropriate.³⁶ Hence, a certain level of bureaucratic ambiguity haunts the boundaries marking a proper portrayal rather than the "promotion" or "exploitation" of homosexuality onstage.³⁷ As TNS Artistic Director Tan remarks, "The report says that a work can explore but not promote homosexuality. Works that cover homosexuality must then always take the apologetic position. Art is about how a story is told and not having to be preoccupied with how content is managed."³⁸

³² Singapore Media Development Authority, *Report of Censorship Review Committee (CRC)* (Singapore: Ministry of Information, Communications and the Arts, 2003), 51.

³³ *Ibid.*, 15.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 21.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 51.

³⁶ The committees and ministries include the following: Censorship Review Committee (CRC); Media Development Authority (MDA); Economic Review Committee (ERC); Remaking Singapore Committee (RSC); Ministry of Information and the Arts (MITA); National Arts Council (NAC); and the Public Entertainment Licensing Unit (PELU).

³⁷ *Report of CRC*, 51.

³⁸ Alvin Tan, quoted in Sonia Kolesnikov-Jessop, "Singapore loosens censorship," *United Press International* (UPI), 4 September 2003.

With guidelines about the staging of homosexuality written, relaxed, and written off, Singapore has become the Asian country where "it's in to be out."³⁹ The influx of queer capital not only helps transform the gay landscapes of Singapore, but also facilitates the dramatic rise of English-language theatres saturated with queer themes. Testing the limits of gay representation in performance, *Asian Boys* actively negotiates the republic's changing and pragmatic governance as it pertains to sexual and cultural practices in a global frame. Singapore's much-desired "diversity quotient"⁴⁰ can only be enhanced if its own sexual minorities are no longer subjected to the kind of persecutory surveillance and crackdown that had earned the country such ignominious descriptions as "oppressive" and "authoritarian."⁴¹ Given this context, Singapore's theatricalized Asian boys are participating in the country's sexy makeover and cultural liberalization as they carefully stake out their own places in its official discourses.

Asian Boys is an original English-language play that exemplifies not only the company's mission statement and transnational influences but also Singapore's multicultural and middle-class sensibility. Both the playwright Sa'at and the director of the production, Jeff Chen, are young and exciting new voices in the local theatre scene. The play's queer representations are socially motivated commentaries producing an audience as subcultural as it is thoroughly bourgeois.⁴² Playing to nearly sold-out audiences and much media fanfare, *Asian Boys Vol. 1* attracted a mostly young, male audience from professional backgrounds, universities, and the military.⁴³ Using explicit images of men in bondage and S & M gear, drag, g-strings, and sailor costumes to advertise the production, the R(A)-rated show highlighted its "salacious elements" to signal that TNC was not "selling children's theatre," and also to beckon the presence of "alternative lifestyles."⁴⁴ While professing to balance between the conservative status quo and the marginalized, the production clearly appealed to a queer male audience with its laugh-a-minute anal jokes, queer gags, and overt displays of camp homoeroticism.

At the start of the play, Agnes, wearing a tacky bridal gown, white feather boa, and tennis shoes, makes a symbolic descent to earth via a fixed, elevated platform set against a sky-blue cyclorama painted with white clouds (fig. 1). As she glides down the ramp used for transitions between scenes, Agnes is accompanied by five voguish

³⁹ David Clive Price, "Singapore: It's In to be Out," *Time Asia*, 18 August 2003, <http://www.time.com/time/asia/magazine/article/0,13673,501030818-474512,00.html> (accessed 5 June 2005).

⁴⁰ See Goh Chok Tong, "Speech by Prime Minister Goh Chok Tong at Remaking Singapore Report Presentation and Appreciation Lunch on Saturday, 12 July 2003," http://app.mfa.gov.sg/pr/read_content.asp?View,3283 (accessed 14 June 2005).

⁴¹ See Baden Offord, "Singapore," in *Encyclopedia of Homosexuality: Gay History and Culture*, ed. George Haggerty (New York: Garland Press, 2000), 821.

⁴² Chen, a film graduate from Boston University, also received his MA in English from the National University of Singapore and attended a seminar on feminism with Sue-Ellen Case, who was in residence as a Visiting Fulbright Professor while Chen was pursuing his degree in 1999.

⁴³ All Singaporean males are enlisted for military service when they turn eighteen years old.

⁴⁴ The R(A) or Restricted (Artistic) ordinance is a state-imposed regulation that ensures that theatrical and filmic productions with contentious, presumably adult themes in sexuality (in other words, homosexuality), violence, nudity, and other such suggestive scenes are only available to audiences above eighteen for theatre and twenty-one for film. See "New play set to ruffle feathers," *ProjectEyeball*, 11 October 2000, 2.



Figure 1. Agnes (Nora Samosir) is escorted down to earth by The Boys in *Asian Boys Vol. 1*. Photo courtesy The Necessary Stage Ltd.

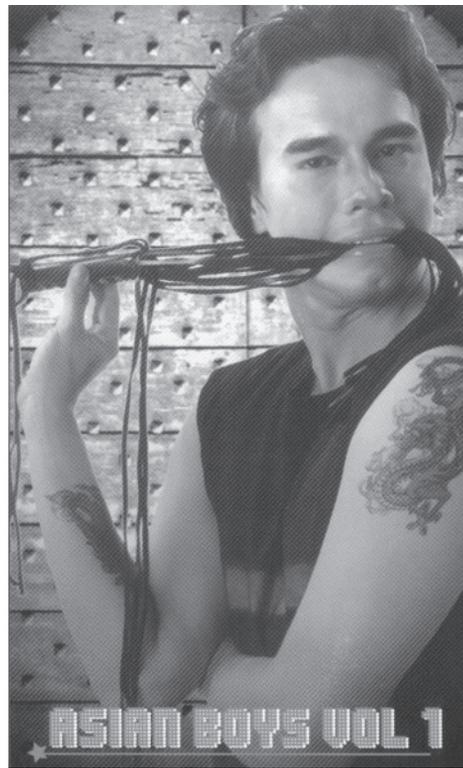
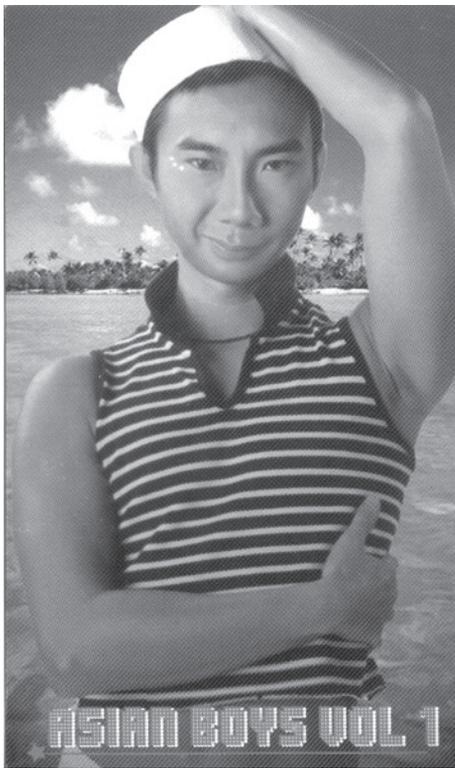
Asian boys prancing around her like divine consorts. They are dressed immaculately in neatly pressed white shirts and pants. The *mise-en-scène* of the production remains basically unchanged throughout the show as the actors rely almost exclusively on gestures, costumes, and performative utterances to evoke new locations. For instance, to mark a scene change, the narrator Boy chaperones Agnes to the next historical site by whipping out an IKEA rug from his slingbag.

Agnes and Boy can be seen as omniscient and global forces incarnated as translocal bodies in Singapore. As a sanctified authority figure who manifests herself in different forms throughout the play, Agnes is easily read as the transmogrification of the state. And like the Singaporean state, she is scrutinizing, gazing, interrupting, and participating in queer cultures with amusement and judgment. In contrast, Boy is the gay native informant who guides her to understand and accept different versions of homoerotic longings, affiliations, and practices while wielding the power of subcultural knowledge. The state is exposed and queered in its manifold surveillance, immersion, and fascination with gay practices through Agnes's unstable identity, contingent behavior, and trashy ways. As Agnes and Boy survey the sites of queer possibilities, the viewer is taken on a rainbow ride that revises the epistemologies of truth about Singapore's normative history. The hidden queerness of historic landscapes—by turns fictional, fantastic, and distinctly Singaporean—is thus uncovered by Agnes and her boys in their acts reprising gay abjection and gay hope.

The boys in the play are scripted as Singapore's queer citizenry, with their own version of national and social histories. They are cast variously as modern gay men, goddess consorts, migrant coolie workers, Internet chatroom addicts, soap opera

leads, authority figures, and drag queens in g-strings and negligees. In one of the more overtly political scenes, the boys appear to walk out of their roles to take those of the actual director, playwright, and actor of *Asian Boys* as they are questioned by a puritanical government interrogator. The nonlinear structure of the play enables the characters to randomly enact stories lifted from the unwritten queer pages of Singapore's official cultural and political history. By imbricating gay labor in the construction of national history, the august heteronormative narratives of the father-state are homoeroticized with a purposefully queer slant to show that homoerotic attachments existed back then as well as now. The queer twists and representations in *Asian Boys* are therefore politicized by having gay men stand for all those who are economically and politically sabotaged.

The play's publicity shots (figs. 2–3) transpose Frenchmen Pierre et Gilles's highly stylized and homoerotic fantasy photo-art into Singaporean versions of a sailor boy, S & M bondage boy, mermaid, and diva goddess.⁴⁵ As the first local play to use such a



Figures 2–3. Sailor Boy and S & M Bondage Boy from the publicity photos for *Asian Boys Vol. 1*. Photos courtesy The Necessary Stage Ltd.

⁴⁵ A critic from *salon.com* calls Pierre et Gilles's photo-art "an unabashed mix of commercial and high art, glamour, poetry and homoeroticism." Glen Helfand, "Pierre et Gilles," *salon.com*, 1 March 2001, http://dir.salon.com/sex/feature/2001/03/01/pierre_gilles/index.html (accessed 9 December 2003). For more images, see Bernard Marcadé, *Pierre et Gilles: The Complete Works, 1976–1996* (New York: Taschen, 1997). Evidently, the publicity shots of *Asian Boys* incorporated this aesthetic by fusing elements of sadomasochistic and toy images with a sensibility of glossy high fashion.

fabulous queer aesthetic, *Asian Boys* locates Singapore through thinly disguised metaphors, multiple sexual fantasies, and as its program proclaims, intercultural “wet dreams.”⁴⁶ In the production itself, Asian narratives and popular cultures substitute for the stylized constructions of the photo shoot as both resources and inspirations for performing gay. There are hardly any props onstage; the actors mostly use dialogue, innuendo, gesture, and to some extent, costumes and songs. Mixing Asian religious icons, pop idols, and historical figures such as Brahma, Chage and Aska, Meena Kumari, *samsui* women, and Chinese rickshawmen, the play constructs much of its own erratic montage of queer personages and references that have little or no Western bearing. Indexing this inter-Asian construction, much of the stage language is a local patois that cross-codes the country’s four national languages and their respective ethnic dialects. As different accents interlace the dialogue, phrases in Japanese, Malay, Hokkien, and even a ridiculous polyglot are also used to serve the dramatic exigencies in various scenes.

The audience is introduced to Agnes as the daughter of the supreme god Indra by way of Strindberg’s orientalist conception. Clearly, however, Agnes is reimagined from Strindberg’s play as a modern day fag hag with a visible “bad perm” and a poorly defined mission to “help gay people.”⁴⁷ This bungling supposedly Indian goddess is hilariously performed by well-known local actress Nora Samosir, who adds to the role with a few more cross-cultural layers. Samosir is a Batak Indonesian Singaporean who graduated from a Canadian university and subsequently trained in voice studies at London’s Central School of Speech and Drama. Code-switching effortlessly in her multiple roles, Samosir’s Singaporeanized BBC-style enunciation, *pasar Melayu* (a creolized form of Malay), and Singlish foreground a mishmash of linguistic worlds and an inter-Asian flux of cultural signs.

Right from the play’s beginning, the cultural reality of Agnes and the Asian boys is unstable. As the goddess slips from one time zone to another, her costumes change from the tacky bridal gown to a Malay sarong to the generic uniform of an official. The politics of transcultural queerness are thus encoded in the very being of Agnes. Her lofty mission to “save mankind from extinction” determines to some extent the visibility of Asian boys and their “originary” tales. Facetiously, the universal referent of “mankind” points to gay men in Singapore, while “extinction” camps up the grave predicament of their cultural annihilation. The parallel construction of Agnes as the state adds yet another layer to this regulatory Divine Order. Agnes’s clueless campiness points to the state’s spectacular lack of knowledge about gay lives on the one hand and its own queering on the other. With parodic effect, the goddess appears on earth as an overaged beauty pageant contestant who mouths such grand campy clichés as, “I want to save the world and make it a better place.” Her father Indra, who speaks with a heavy Singaporean accent, presents her in US cultural terms: “5 feet, 5 inches, and 110 pounds . . . has degrees in cultural anthropology, gender studies, and comparative literature.” Following Singapore’s embrace of American industries, the goddess’s vital statistics are presented in the English system of measurement used almost exclusively by North Americans. It is also implied she has had an American

⁴⁶ Program notes, 2.

⁴⁷ Alfian bin Sa’at, “Asian Boys Vol. 1.” All quotes from *Asian Boys* are from an unpublished version of the playtext supplied by the playwright.

education, since her academic degrees are typical at US research institutions but unavailable at Singaporean universities. These allusions to US cultural and intellectual traditions are looked upon as a kind of divine standard, even as they are inscribed on the somewhat ineffectual goddess herself. Yet unlike an absolute benchmark, the Americanized meanings mapped onto Agnes's body perform a contested relationship operating on many different levels.

Agnes is both out of this world and intrinsically part of it, a predicament charged with the global condition of interculturalism. This is enacted in the hilariously campy segment in which she answers the question of how she might "save the world" if she were crowned Miss Universe. Despite speaking English fluently, Agnes requests an interpreter because it is "Lagi Glam" ("very glamorous" in Malay and Singlish). A mishmash of influences, the pidginized speech she spouts and the coterie of world fag icons or "false goddesses" that she ultimately wants to replace as the one to be worshipped (Barbara Streisand, Greta Garbo, Bette Davis, Madonna, Gloria Gaynor, Diana Ross, Ge Lan, Meena Kumari, and Anita Sarawak) point to the intersection of diverse linguistic and queer cultures that positions her uniquely as the new Miss Universe.⁴⁸

In the overlapping worlds of queerness and Singapore then, intra- and intercultural influences always already collide and congeal in remarkable ways. The Indian derivation of Agnes, particularly the *Natyasastra* legend that implicitly frames the entire dramatic journey, is itself an intercultural product that points to the consortium of Asian influences in the play.⁴⁹ In this appropriated Indian myth, the disturbances on "Brahma's perfect creations" on Earth are mapped onto Singapore, the cartographic "little red spot on the face of the Earth."⁵⁰ Brahma is the Hindu god of creation recognized for his invention of drama. Within this composite world, Agnes would come to know Singapore as composed of exclusively gay performative spaces spanning two centuries. Queer Singapore is thus created in this postmodern constellation of mythic worlds at once fictional, local, and universal. Since the Hindu mythological reference in the play is an inter-Asian marker of globality, Singaporean gay men are scripted into a larger history and recuperated from their national cultural banishment and discursive absence.

Crucially, Brahma is mentioned to gesture at the origin narrative of the *Natyasastra*. Both the *Natyasastra* and *Asian Boys* frame drama as a mythic site of redemption, inclusiveness, and possibility. In the original narrative of this myth, Indra is said to have commissioned Brahma to create drama as a form of diversion that would help rectify the immoderate sensual pleasure of humans. Drama (*natya*) would become the sacred text known as the fifth Veda. It is said that Brahma staged the first dramatic show with Bharata and his sons, members of the priestly caste, and specially trained

⁴⁸ Ge Lan from China, Meena Kumari from India, and Anita Sarawak from Malaysia are Asian stars affectionately recuperated alongside their Hollywood counterparts as international queer icons for their comparable cinematic excess, tragedy queen personas, and outlandish styles.

⁴⁹ Written between 500 BCE and 300 AD by Bharata, the *Natyasastra* is an ancient Indian treatise on dramaturgy and histrionics that covers all aspects of theatre and many other art forms. See Bharata Muni, *Natyasastra of Bharatamuni* (Baroda: Oriental Institute, 1980).

⁵⁰ Sa'at, "Asian Boys."

actors. Following disturbances by demons at the inaugural show, the performance space was to be ritually cleansed and sanctified thereafter. Significantly, the conflict was resolved by a principle of global inclusiveness and the greater good of mankind was thereby redeemed. Everyone, including demons, would now be welcome at performances. This tale of origin and new possibilities is related in most accounts of Sanskrit drama and it marks a site of invention, negotiation, and change.⁵¹

While the ritual and religious significance of this account from the *Natyasastra* is eviscerated in *Asian Boys*, Sa'at appropriates the dramatic frame of an originary Hindu mythological site, twice removed by way of Strindberg, for a deliberately queer purpose. *Asian Boys* retains the inventive possibilities of its Hindu progenitor but substitutes the invention of gay myths in Singapore for the Sanskrit story of dramatic origin. In a campy political maneuver, these gay myths and stories willfully revise Singaporean history and create a political in(ter)vention of male and homoerotic significance. This framing device around multiple queer origins in Singapore takes its cue from Sanskrit literature rather than from dominant Western sources, such as same-sex practices of ancient Greece or the 1969 Stonewall Rebellion in New York City. Such a move not only reclaims the Asian cultural myth of Indian mysticism from Strindberg's conception, but also breaks the myth of the Western origin of gay practices. The principle of global inclusiveness in the Sanskrit story is also an important consideration for the validation of the boys. In this regard, the fictitiously mythic framing of *Asian Boys*, including "all," intimates a gay beginning of Singaporean queer history veiled to avert charges of promoting homosexuality in the country. This implicit queering of the Indian myth itself is an interesting lateral move as its dominant characters—gods (Indra, Brahma), priestly actors (Bharata and his sons), and audience—are all presumably male. Crucially, the disruptive act in this vignette is also a space-clearing gesture for an Indian myth to emerge in New Asia.⁵²

Such an alternate myth of queer origin imbues *Asian Boys* with a diasporic genealogy by means of a South Asian dramatic narrative. By uncovering this perverse diasporic history, *Asian Boys* produces a glocalqueering circuit exceeding the formations of the Singaporean state, whose rhetoric of multiplicities (multiculturalism, multiracialism, multilingualism) is seen in this regard as being inadequate to or unrepresentative of alternate genealogies that fall outside of the national rubric. This queer critique of the state is made manifest in the symbolism of the white costumes worn by the boys and in the spatial displacement of Singapore as the "little red spot" where uniformity is the rule of the day. The costumes are a politicized referent to members of Singapore's ruling political party, the People's Action Party (PAP), who also wear immaculately pressed white shirts and trousers at official events. Each year, the sea of PAP cadres in white sitting at the elite spectator podium to view the National Day Parade is a formidable display of the party's political success and

⁵¹ For a comprehensive account of this tale, see James R. Brandon's Indian theatre chapter in *The Cambridge Guide to Asian Theatre* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 65–66.

⁵² Indians are a minority in Singapore. As a result, Indian and other South Asian myths and cultures are often less considered and less privileged in mainstream media. For an interesting discussion of India's omission from New Asia and Singapore's location in "New Asian intercultural structures," see Bharucha's "Foreign Asia/Foreign Shakespeare."

power.⁵³ The uniformity of PAP's austere white attire points to the party's no-nonsense policies and readily brings to mind its homogenizing and heteronormative authority. Adopting the white look for a clone effect of a different kind—a queer but nationless Asian community—the boys substitute for the politicians as groupie-like fans who vogue around Agnes.

Queering the soberness and uniformity of PAP's bland policies, the boys affect a seriously campy behavior to critique the rigid heterosexism of the government. The audience may see this in the context of Singaporean artists who have tried, mainly in vain, to challenge the political rhetoric of officials who uphold and enforce state discipline in regulating the process of creating art in the country. For instance, in response to the late theatre doyen Kuo Pao Kun's commentary in the local press that state domination is a "crucial impeding factor" in the development of the arts in Singapore, Koh Peck Hoon, the Deputy Director of the National Arts Council, replied that the "arts cannot be a sphere unto itself and artists should not arrogate unto themselves the position of sole decision-makers and agenda-setters in the arts."⁵⁴ While the boys in white are not a direct attack on the PAP government or its bureaucratic ideology, the uncanny resemblance of their outfit to that of PAP members, and the explicit sexualization of the male bodies in the subsequent scenes, point to the particular location/localization of queer sexual politics in the play. As staging directions are highly fluid and easily slip outside the purview of censors, these coded markers queering the state help to enact an oblique political critique. The political valence of such an assessment in the Singaporean context, however, remains highly contentious since it is the state's investment in global capitalism that enables this very fraught encounter. Hence, while the apparent failure of the state to recognize this queer critique appears to enable the performance of queerness, it also performs, in effect, the state's propensity to simultaneously accommodate and disavow queerness.

While negotiating the line between a queer critique that is no more than a celebratory gesture and one that is grounded in social content, *Asian Boys* points to the various modalities of queerness in Singapore that had until recently been all but invisible. In this regard, Agnes and her boys are like social actors working their way through Singapore's histories, and they urge for more queer work to be done around the problematics of a glocalqueer visibility. They do so without a fixed identity, and their action pays no attention to chronological order, factual verisimilitude, or narrative logic as each episode is staged in rapidly changing locales and anachronistic

⁵³ National Day Parade is a spectacular event in Singapore featuring thousands of participants from schools, civil ministries, military units, corporations, and grassroots organizations. The parade enjoys a live broadcast on virtually all available television channels. For television viewers in particular, it has become a yearly ritual during the start of the parade to see parliamentary and elected officials take their seats by rank at the podium. As the camera focuses on the podium, viewers watch endless streams of People's Action Party (PAP) officials in their signature white uniform walking in order to their seats. The plethora of white uniformed officials serves as a timely reminder of the party's dominance in local politics. Having led the country from rags to riches since its independence from the British in 1965, PAP officials are highly respected by their constituents for building the nation into a global city-state. In the last election on 3 November 2001, the Singapore Government, controlled by the PAP, was returned to office, losing only two out of eighty-four seats to opposition parties. PAP's margin of victory (75.3 percent) was also its largest since 1980.

⁵⁴ "State, artists work together to develop arts," *Straits Times*, 9 December 1999, Forum: 42.

time zones. For instance, Agnes's lead chaperone, Boy, performs spells of transport while brandishing a dildo for navigation. He leans on Agnes, the "Dildo Divinity," and the duo sings "A Whole New World" from Disney's *Aladdin* as a kind of running gag every time they transport themselves on their IKEA carpet to the next queer scene. But the couple does not in fact move at all, stationed as they are on the carpet while the actors for the next scene take their positions onstage. No one is ever certain where this "Whole New World" is or what its decontextualized "fantastic point of view" may be on the bare stage.⁵⁵ The elision or obscurity of these queer beings is foregrounded when Boy talks about how he has no history or definable identity, generating only more questions about his unknown origin:

AGNES: Who are you?

BOY: I am a boy. . . . I have no name. You can just call me Boy.

Similarly, none of the other boys has a distinguishing identity or is sustained by any of his gay deeds. The funny and celebratory Disney tune is thus burdened with a graver undertone: the queer longing for "A Whole New World" is perhaps no more than an animated imagination at this point, a perennial elsewhere. In 2000 when the play was produced, the public visibility of gay men was still a matter of careful negotiation with the police; the small but burgeoning subcultural scene of clubs and saunas is still at best an open secret in the country.

The queer use of Disney's soundtrack points to another cultural resource in this gay world linked to the metropolitan West. The boys in the production are sometimes dressed in the Western subcultural style of a sailor boy and display a savvy knowledge about kitschy consumer products like Disney's songs. Yet their relation with Western gay male practices is often a troubled one. For instance, Lost Boy makes the following observation to Agnes about what he has to do to be "gay" following his first outing at a gay pub in Tanjong Pagar:

That I must get a tan. That I should start working out. That I will become a gym-rat disco-bunny with a snake in my pants. No more ugly duckling with chicken legs and pigeon chest. That my one desire is to walk here one day with a tight pink T-shirt with the word "Gorgeous" on it in glitter.

One could argue that the body aesthetic and fashion codes Lost Boy learned that evening are the bread and butter of those who identify as exemplary gay citizens of West Hollywood, Chelsea, and Soho. In any US gift shop with a gay theme, muscle t-shirts emblazoned with "Princess," "Divine," and indeed "Gorgeous" are staple items next to tank-tops, disco CDs, and cargo pants. Besides, images of hypererotized men with buffed bodies and snakes in their pants have become part of Western gay male iconography through the work of such artists as Tom of Finland, physique magazines of the 1950s and early 1960s, and advertisements in just about any gay magazine, Web site, or billboard.⁵⁶ The aesthetic to which Lost Boy alludes is a

⁵⁵ Lyrics of the song "A Whole New World" as used in the production. Alan Menken (music), Howard Ashman (arrangement), and Tim Rice (lyrics), "A Whole New World," *Walt Disney Pictures presents Aladdin original motion picture soundtrack* (Burbank: Walt Disney Records, 1992).

⁵⁶ Notably, the visibility of these artistic and commercial signifiers of gay sexuality is based on the fantasy, embodiment, and eroticization of certain types within the gay community. On gay.com for instance, "Asian" is a type that one can choose to encounter from over fifty sub-subcultural selections.

commercialized lifestyle, the commodity fetishism purveyed by white middle-class gay men. In dominant images of Western gay representation, the well-chiseled white male often takes center stage as the model of masculinity.

Significantly, visual representations of gayness in these media are often concomitant with an erasure of individual identity, suggesting that a type forms part of a collective identity. Like the gay icons typified in the West, all the boys at the contemporary Singaporean Tanjong Pagar pub in the play are identified as types rather than individuals with names. Apart from Lost Boy, Agnes and Boy also encounter Bi Boy, Muscle Boy, Social Boy, and Old Boy. Notably, all these boys are somewhat dysfunctional and meant to signify the larger issues of the Singaporean male confronting his sexual identity and also participating in random homoerotic encounters. Yet rather than quoting an archetypal Western gay culture based on looks, product endorsement, and a celebrated sense of community, these subcultural types in Singapore are symbolic of the anonymity and secrecy of men seeking other men in the city-state circa 2000. While highlighting the troubled visibility of gay men in Singapore, they also raise the specter of the restrictive categories of Western gay life. As Asian Boys, these characters appear to claim the subject position collectively and wield control of their queer representation. Yet as icons of new Asian Boys, these Singapore queer boys also signify a contentiously configured sexual community within a geopolitical economy that is at once modern, Asiacentric, and accessible only via the privileges of a New World Order (fig. 4).

The Chinese and Japanese components in the construction of these theatricalized queer boys are revealed in an episode that deftly combines a critique of the state with the queering of Asian popular culture. Local Chinese television melodrama is used to turn Japanese Imperial forces into a metaphor for state oppression and police surveillance in Singapore. In this segment, two brutal World War II-era Japanese military officers, Lieutenant Tarepanda and Sergeant Sanrio, become surrogates for the Singaporean authorities who had zealously hunted homosexuals in the 1990s, humiliating those entrapped by their undercover operations.

There is a concomitant queering of authority here, as Lt. Tarepanda and Sgt. Sanrio are facetiously named after the contemporary Japanese merchandising empires of a panda bear, Tarepanda, and a corporation, Sanrio Company, Ltd., best known for the Hello Kitty line of products. In this way, the tough military identity of the Japanese soldiers is queerly and anachronistically conflated with cute Japanese pop-cultural products that flood the present-day market. Mimicking the unique grammar of short English phrases emblazoned on these pretty Japanese commodities, the officers' mouth expressions like "This morning is precious time. You my friend forever. Happy melody." By layering the consuming public's contemporary fascination with these products on the construction of WWII Japanese soldiers, and by inscribing the officers with bizarre qualities exemplified by the sergeant's cutesy excess, such a representation produces a displacement that deforms power. It also directly queers the aesthetic of cute Japanese products and engages an open secret of Singaporean gay men who

Others include "Military," "Suit & Tie," "Muscle," "Hairy Chest," "Cowboy," "College," "Bears," "Jews," "Muslims," "Hispanic/Latino/Mexican," and "Native Americans." Noticeably absent is a chat room of "Whites" or "WASPs."

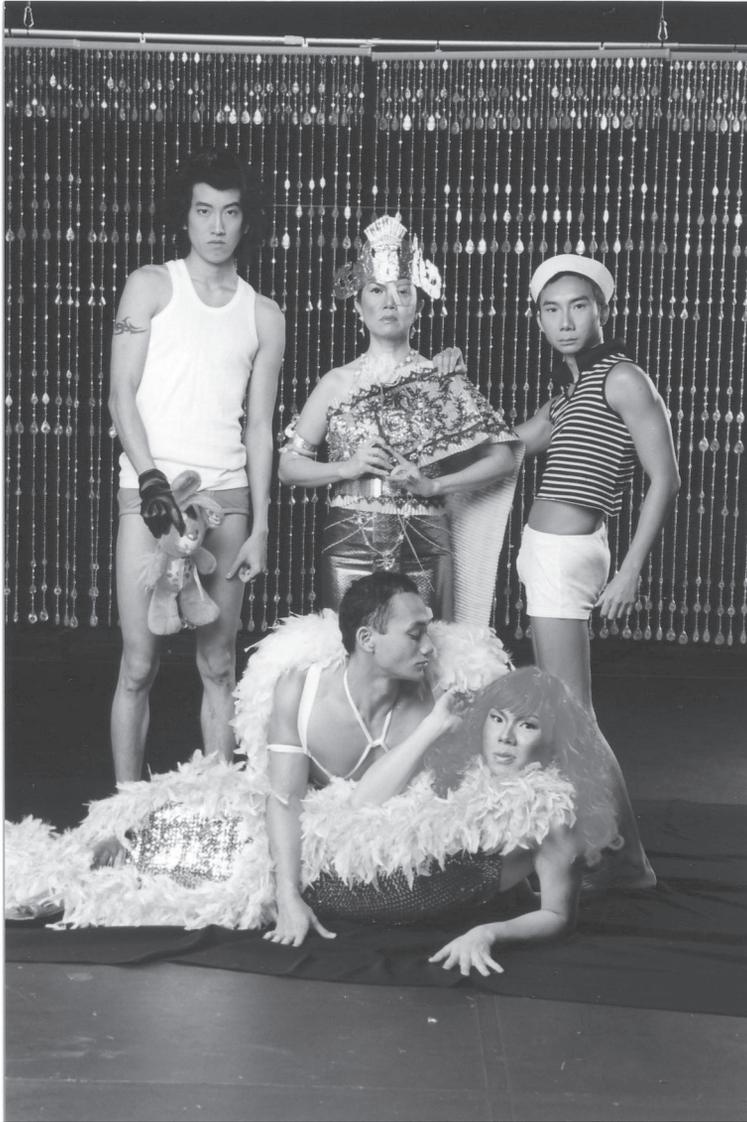


Figure 4. The cast of *Asian Boys Vol. 1*. Photo courtesy The Necessary Stage Ltd.

grew up toting Happy Melody water bottles, My Friend Forever knapsacks, Hello Kitty pencil cases, and various Precious Time curios. Lt. Tarepanda and Sgt. Sanrio are also theatricalized references to the Singaporean police officers who pose as gay men in the antigay operations. The critique of the Singapore police entrapment of homosexuals is made explicit as they converse about the “12 men” in “Tanjong Rhu” whom they have captured:

LT. TAREPANDA: We will publish their names and faces in the papers! Then we will shave off all their pubic hair and make them bow to the sun. And then we will cane them. Perverts!

The men in question directly reference an actual antigay operation in 1993 Singapore, in which police planted their own boys—known as “pretty police”—around the known cruising areas of Tanjong Rhu.⁵⁷ In this infamous sting, twelve men were persecuted for touching or pursuing sexual offers with undercover officers. Adding to their criminal charges, the men also had their names, ages, occupations, and the graphic nature of their encounters published in two Chinese newspapers and one English tabloid-style daily. The offenders all received three strokes of the cane and between two to six months in jail. Such a sensationalistic police entrapment exercise was not new. In March 1992, another similarly well-publicized incident occurred with eight arrests. Four of those arrested had their pictures published in the newspaper and one of them later committed suicide. Following the widely publicized police entrapment operation in 1993, local performance artist Josef Ng created a nuanced protest performance for which he was also very publicly arrested on grounds of indecency.⁵⁸ The criminalization was largely caused by officials and journalists who had not seen the performance and sensationalized an inconspicuous segment of Ng’s piece, during which he snipped off his pubic hair with his back to the audience. There is no doubt that Lt. Tarepanda’s call to “shave off all their pubic hair” is a direct reference to this infamous incident. It appears that by decontextualizing these events of queer injustice as instances of Japanese brutality, *The Necessary Stage* was able to pass the censors of the country’s National Arts Council (NAC) who regulate content presented onstage.

Conclusion: Asian Boys in Global/Local Context

In negotiating the immediacies of queer men’s complex cultural predicament in this global city-state, *Asian Boys* subtly negotiates state ideology and prohibitions using a glocalqueering mode of production that exceeds such classic dualistic frames as East versus West. The diasporic and inter-Asian dimensions of the production are demonstrated by the boys’ embodiment of and/or references to Indian gods, Japanese pop icons, Chinese rickshawmen, samsui women, and Malay online chat addicts. The construction of queer Agnes and her portrayal by the Singaporean actress also point to yet another conglomeration of Asian influences drawn from Indian, Singaporean, Anglo-Canadian, Batak, and Malay cultural resources and experience that variously instantiate, undercut, and exceed binary structures and relationships. Neither a monolithic Eastern nor a Western framework can account for her queer construction. Significantly, Singapore’s governmental policies appear prominently alongside free-market forces to carve out spaces for a particular kind of queer performance linked to the country’s global economy and cultural policies. Local artists, activists, and gay boys on the street are all actively involved in negotiating their queer representations around their conceptions as Asians and citizen-subjects of Singapore’s political and cultural institutions.

⁵⁷ William Peterson, *Theater and the Politics of Culture in Contemporary Singapore* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 2001), 153.

⁵⁸ Ng’s performance was part of an arts festival co-organized by The Artists’ Village and 5th Passage. His performance in 1994 titled “Brother Cane” was condemned by the National Arts Council after it became a focal point of controversy following the sensationalized coverage by the *New Paper*. Ng was charged with obscenity and banned from performing in Singapore indefinitely. For discussion on this event, see Sanjay Krishnan, Lee Weng Choy, Sharaad Kuttan, Leon Perera, Jimmy Yap, eds., *Looking at Culture* (Singapore: Artres Design and Communications, 1996).

As part of a transnational colonial legacy, “Asian boys” is of course a contested term in itself, and embroiled in orientalist models of queer representation. In its global transmogrification, Asian queer boys are figures caught on the cusp of epistemic and political possibilities and impossibilities while embodying Singapore’s economic and cultural globalization. This raises many questions about the effectivity of this kind of queer representation in the hyperconsumerized, political context of Singapore. Is the Asian boy an icon of resistance? Or is he no more than a racialized sexual figure dressed up and accessorized with the hip, sexy appeal of queer capital? Is *Asian Boys* then a neoliberal production that purports to stage the predicament of queerness in Singapore’s postcolonial and postmodern present, but which reduces the nonparticipating male citizen in the country’s heteronormative projects of national production—including marriage and raising kids—to no more than a boy with dreamy escapades?

In pointing to the ways that *Asian Boys* relies on Asia’s media, cultural traditions, and commodities (Japanese colonial history, Sanskrit literature, Chinese melodrama, Singapore gay bars, and Malay stars) to construct Singapore’s queer realities, I am not proposing an Asiacentric model of queerness devoid of Western references. Rather, the glocalqueering model of analysis I have employed in this essay shows the different circuits, affiliations, and practices that constitute Singapore’s diasporized version of a queer Asian maleness. Besides, unlike Euro-American models that emphasize the affirmation of a sexual identity, one in which gay social theorists like Dennis Altman rewrites for the world as a “universal gay identity,” Singapore’s queering manifests more prominently as a set of pragmatic homoerotic practices with many inter-Asian and diasporic resonances. In this regard, the terms of global queering dominated by the global English language, the Euro-American gay lens, and capitalism have to be reassessed not only as a global/local issue but also one that challenges their paradigmatic dominance. The issue is thus not how well non-Westerners adapt these superoriginary gay identities and practices in making their own queer world. Such a politics of representation tends to reinscribe classic binaries in broad strokes of difference that are ultimately cast in a narrative of sameness.⁵⁹ *Asian Boys* shows that performing gay in this global city has many inter-Asian dimensions that are not accommodated by Euro-American models. Greater critical analysis should also guard against the dominance of interpreting Asian queer boys in the country’s English-language theatre as merely replications of Western gay culture or one in which local homoeroticia is to be affirmed as national difference.

⁵⁹ As I have argued, global queering theorists often choose to look at evidence that gay cultures are alike in many different ways. Others speak about international homoerotic traditions or signs in Western terms or frame of understanding: coming out, gay, Pride Parade, etc. Even in their nuanced critique of “global queerness,” Chris Berry and Fran Martin contend that “the moment of cultural globalization is characterized precisely by challenges to the authority of the West from forces of cultural difference unleashed by decolonizations and the ensuing complex global economic and cultural shifts.” Without denying the historic, colonial legacies of the West, such a formulation continues to perpetuate the premise in which “the West” (which West, whose West?) is always already dominant and the sole colonizing or influential force in the gay world. Such an approach tends to neglect other complex forces at play within geopolitical regions and also the nation-state. See Berry and Martin, “Syncretism and Synchronicity: Queer ‘n’ Asian Cyberspace in 1990s Taiwan and Korea,” in *Mobile Cultures: New Media in Queer Asia*, ed. Chris Berry, Fran Martin, and Audrey Yue (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 88.

A glocalqueering analysis seeks neither to disaggregate Asia or Singapore (the East of the East/West configuration) into its regional cultural and linguistic constituents—or a sort of auto-orientalist anthropological account of heterogeneity—nor to merely refute the universal gay identity routinely foregrounded by those who herald commonalities over difference in the global gay world. Rather, it is to fundamentally reassess how we look at emergent global queer cultures and performance. Why, for instance, are ubiquitous images of protein shake-drinking gay boys decked out in designer tank-tops and feather boas necessarily proof that Western queer cultures are the signs of progress and modernity in globalizing cities around the world? Such presumptions elide histories and, in the case of Singapore, the intracultural and class differences of its queer and homoerotic practices. They reduce sensitivity to acts considered political or interventionary in the queer contexts of Singapore. Interpreting the global signs embodied by Singapore's queer boys on- and offstage reveals histories and practices embedded in glocalqueering circuits that demand closer readings to unravel their national, diasporic, and postcolonial ramifications.