

# A BELATED LETTER TO OUR FIRST THREE YEARS

Dear 2017 to 2020,

Perhaps it is convenient to define Emergency Stairs simply as an experimental theatre group that does not pander to mainstream taste, but Emergency Stairs was set up with a larger dream in mind.

Emergency Stairs' mission was in part, a response to the state of our arts scene in Singapore. Based on our observations as theatre practitioners for the past two decades, the theatre scene in Singapore has gradually fallen into a fixed and stagnant cycle, on a loop-stagnant creation, stagnant evaluation, stagnant audience and stagnant funding models.

Creativity and innovation have become trade-offs for stability, charted growth and meeting key performance indicators (KPIs). Instead of focusing on creation and creativity, the focus of the scene has shifted to that of managing funding

requirements under the slogan of accountability. For a long time, the development model of established arts groups in Singapore has been relatively linear: setting up arts groups, applying for government funding, producing programmes that meet the contractual KPIs, and then applying for the next cycle of funding.... This stable and stagnant model might give art groups a safe haven to create but the trade-off is that we lose our autonomy, flexibility, openness and the courage to critique.

Especially for a small experimental outfit like Emergency Stairs, entering the Major Company Scheme would necessitate diverting our focus and limited resources away from art-making into developing organisation capacity and meeting largely quantitative key performance indicators. Similar to us, most arts companies in Singapore are relatively small and they are heavily reliant on state funding to sustain their operations to meet their artistic missions. And we become protective of the framework we have helped to perpetuate.

So where does Emergency Stairs fit in the grand scheme of things?

We believe that artistic creation should always dialogue with, negotiate with and challenge the

existing cultural forms, cultural systems and cultural environment. We also believe that we should always dialogue with and learn from other forms, systems and environments, in order to continuously evolve in our thinking and in our practice. Only with that would we be able to develop alternative models and achieve the development of arts in tandem with the larger environment — one that is fluid, revolutionary, relevant and critical to our times and ethos.

In 2017, Emergency Stairs was incorporated as a Company Limited by Guarantee and funded under the National Arts Council Seed Grant scheme. By the end of the fixed three-year grant cycle in 2020, Emergency Stairs made the decision not to pursue the Major Company Scheme.

In the three years under Seed Grant funding, we have achieved much — we have built networks with 70 cultural and arts institutions in 39 cities, created a small but outstanding body of works in Singapore and with our partners in other cities, set up platforms such as Southernmost, Emergency Shelter and One Table Many Chairs to encourage exchange and incubation. And we have established ourselves as a nimble outfit with a knack for creating alternative content.

From the onset, we have never seen ourselves as a service provider of creative programmes since there is no lack of that in Singapore. In our opinion, artistic creation is more than putting up a show, it is also the enrichment of the cultural landscape of a city, and should rightfully be concerned with the cultural workforce, the cultural policy and the larger cultural environment of a city, which we are part of.

So how do we go from here?

In the interlude between Seed Grant and a funding limbo, we sat down and we revisited our mission and our vision. How can we challenge existing institutional frameworks if we are so eager to join them and be them? In the end, we decide to forgo the security of a regular funding scheme and instead seek an alternative model, one closer to what Emergency Stairs stands for, so that we can be more directive in driving our artistic mission. We believe that by venturing on a new path, we can demonstrate an alternative mode of arts institution in Singapore.

Emergency Stairs will continue the journey to nowhere but our dream.

Liu Xiaoyi

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