

# Back to teach theatre

Ong Keng Seng will also direct five works for TheatreWork's 25th anniversary next year

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**G**lobe-trotting theatre director Ong Keng Sen will be settling down in Singapore – at least for a while.

The 46-year-old, who often stages experimental theatre pieces in Europe, is teaching a course at the National University of Singapore's Theatre Studies programme from next month.

The artistic director of TheatreWorks will also be directing five works for the company's 25th anniversary next year.

Ong, who started the theatre programme at the university with Dr K.K. Seet in 1992, taught there until 1997. He stopped because of a heavy international touring schedule of his iconic work, *Lear*.

"It was completely unheard of to have a theatre studies programme at that time in Singapore. Now, I think I can offer quite a lot with the experience I have

accumulated in the last decade," says the director, who is an adjunct associate professor.

The course, titled *Memory, History And Performance*, will delve into theatre work which has been done in Singapore and in South-east Asia. Ong is also involved in a research project on major Asian directors.

He says: "In terms of access, there is an imbalance between Asian and European artists. I feel like there is a loss of reflection and referencing done with the works coming from Asia."

The 2003 Cultural Medallion recipient has been busy with work overseas for most of the past decade or so, working on such varied projects as heading a German arts festival in Berlin in 2002 and 2003 as well as creating an arts lab in Sweden for the Goteborg Dance & Theatre Festival 2008.

Appointed the Leverhulme Artist in Residence at the Edinburgh University this year, he also scored a coup when his production *Diaspora* was presented in the main programme at the prestigious Edinburgh International Festival in August.

Preparations to celebrate TheatreWorks' milestone anniversary will offer a chance for the director, who travelled for 10 months this year, to re-connect with the Singapore arts scene.



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**Ong Keng Sen (left)**

As part of its 25th anniversary celebrations, the arts company will be staging six iconic works, of which five will be directed by Ong.

Whizzing in and out of Singapore has also allowed him to notice the changes in the local arts landscape. He observes that the arts scene's emphasis has shifted to commercial viability.

"I do feel like the scene has become very strongly about commercial productions. It is good on one level, that it is the first step that needs to be done so the industry can support itself. But there is also a loss of reflection of what we are doing and how theatre artists are relevant to Singapore," he says.

He adds: "I feel like we have become so oblivious to history, that we go on about new directions without enough reflection or relevance to the past."

The jetsetter also hopes to emphasise the island's ties to current affairs and world events.

"Some difficulty I have with the scene in Singapore is that it is still very provincial. It does not really look at the rest of the world or engage with the issues that other places are dealing with," he says.

"Our theatre artists are not doing that. We are not looking at the social and political perspectives of the region, for fear that it won't sell tickets. This, for me, is one of the developing problems of Singapore theatre."

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