

Dear Friends,

On Monday, 4 September 2017, National Youth Council (NYC) presented a public engagement programme. It came to our attention that the engagement programme, *For Your Consideration*, was structured similar to *The Lesson*, which was presented by Drama Box recently. National Youth Council had not approached Drama Box for consultation or inform us of their intent to emulate the structure prior to the engagement. It was only after the programme has been completed that we were told. Mr David Chua, CEO of National Youth Council, wrote an apology note to us via facebook 6 September 2017 (Annex A), which we have responded to on 7 September 2017 (Annex B).

Subsequently, we met with NYC on 8 and 19 September 2017 to have more in-depth conversations about the issue. In this letter, we present to you a summary of the meetings with NYC, as well as our further reflections on the matter.

### **Drama Box-NYC Meeting Summary**

#### Attendees on 8 September 2017

- 1) Koh Hui Ling (Associate Artistic Director, Drama Box)
- 2) Tay Jia Ying (Company Manager, Drama Box)
- 3) David Chua (CEO, NYC)
- 4) Tay Choon Hong (Deputy CEO, NYC)
- 5) Christopher Pragasam (Director of Youth Engagement, NYC)
- 6) Louis Soo (Deputy Director of Youth Engagement, NYC)

**Note:** Li Xie (Creator of *The Lesson*) was not available for the meeting, and had given her inputs to Hui Ling and Jia Ying to be shared with NYC

#### Attendees on 19 September 2017

- 1) Kok Heng Leun (Artistic Director, Drama Box)
- 2) David Chua (CEO, NYC)
- 3) Tay Choon Hong (Deputy CEO, NYC)
- 4) Christopher Pragasam (Director of Youth Engagement, NYC)

During the meetings, NYC agreed with us that it was wrong for their officers to have adapted *The Lesson* without consulting or acknowledging us. We clarified that we are not precious about *The Lesson*, in that we are open to sharing the work. However, the way this incident unfolded highlighted the lack of understanding for artists, our creative processes and work from the NYC officers, hence, we reiterated the following points during the meeting:

- 1) Behind every work we create is a rigorous creative process. Each work is created purposefully, with clear intentions, working philosophies and methodologies. The process takes time, multiple trials, evaluations and rework, before it is ready to be presented to the audience, which then goes through more evaluations and rework. The final form is not something that one can simply “copy and paste” and expect it to work as well. A clear example can be seen in the case of *For Your Consideration* as the form clearly does not serve the purpose of the event, hence causing much confusion amongst the attendees on the event’s objectives.
- 2) There are differences between a skilled arts practitioner and an organiser. The organiser, without the right skillsets and experience cannot assume the ability to create an art work independent of the arts practitioner. The arts practitioner, without subject matter knowledge will not be able to create a compelling art work that achieves its objectives. In the scenario where an organiser works with an arts practitioner to create a work, they could share the work of a third, and necessary role, which is that of a curator. Both parties hold different expertise and knowledge, and will be able to lend different important lenses to the issue at hand.

NYC acknowledged the time, effort and expertise that goes into creating an art work. They apologised and took responsibility for the mistake that they had made with *For Your Consideration*, how it did not deliver as an engagement programme, as well as how they have hurt the artists and communities in the process. They will not be repeating the current version of *For Your Consideration* at other events.

NYC also clarified that they did not want their officers to become “arts practitioners”, but hope that their officers will be able to work with artists to curate and create projects together in future. They acknowledged that many artists are able to create programmes that truly engage the participants. They were keen to have dialogues or have artists conduct workshops for their officers to help them learn what it means to engage, collaborate and co-curate programmes, as well as the understand philosophies behind our engagement methodologies.

### **Our Further Reflection**

In recent years, many agencies (especially government agencies) have seen art as an instrument to reach out or to present certain messages in an ‘interesting, palatable’ way to the public. One example would be how popular Forum Theatre have become with schools and government agencies over the years.

Drama Box has received many requests from government agencies to create Forum Theatre plays to help them deliver certain messages. They are usually drawn to Forum Theatre because of its interactivity, which they think can help them bring across ideas and messages interestingly without making the public feel force-fed. Such a narrow view of what interactive theatre or socially engaged art displays their misunderstanding and misappropriation of such works.

Socially engaged arts, which not only focuses on building relationships in the art making process, also provides a critical lens for audiences to examine the issue or topic presented. Its purpose is to open up discussions, not to drum certain messages across. It is a democratic way of working, hoping to create a kind of social and cultural relationship, where people can be critical, learn to co-operate if their values coalesce, or learn to co-exist and be empathetic if their values differ. Such art practices aim for inter-cultural or inter-sectorial dialogues. These interactive approaches were not meant to make it ‘fun and interesting’, but as a ‘call’ strategy, inviting the audience to ‘respond’ so that dialogues can happen, on top of learning and discovery.

It is imperative that if government agencies want to use socially engaged art to approach issues, they must know that the outcome is not about messaging an idea but to open dialogues and hope to build capacity, such as people’s capability to deal with conflicts, and their critical thinking skills to process information.

This incident also revealed how little people understand the process of art making. Besides this incident, there have been many stories of how artists are told that they are charging too much for a commission, or that they are asked to produce a new work with very short notice. There are also many instances when artists are told to simplify their work to make it accessible.

Artists, as with other professionals, practise for years to attain skills. They study and research diligently to hone their craft, constantly seeking to find unique forms that express their unique visions. It takes a lot of time, discipline and hard work. The work does not come about with mere inspirations. What may seem beguilingly simple, is actually layered with complexities. What may seem difficult can at the same time be exalting. A piece of good art is both visceral and intellectual, material and spiritual.

When artists are asked to do work for free or accept lower fees, it only shows how their work is being undervalued. It also reflects that the person who suggested it, is not appreciative of the value of art. So the question is, how much arts education do we need in order for people to understand and value of art and artists?

This incident, and many other instances of disrespecting artists and their works, have involved government agencies, where they engage independent artists and arts groups in many different ways, through commissions, contractual engagement.

What is ironic, is that NYC is under Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (MCCY), whose agenda includes advocating for the arts and artists. We seek for the National Arts Council and MCCY

to play an active role in advocating the true value of art and art-making to other government agencies, including those agencies within the MCCY family.

We also ask other relevant ministries to look into educating the Singapore public about the importance of protecting the intellectual properties of every creative individuals and groups in Singapore.

Lastly, we would like to thank everyone who have stood with us when the incident happened, for all your support, love and concern. We also appreciate Mr David Chua from NYC for reaching out to us promptly to rectify the mistake, and engage in earnest conversations with us on the issue. We hope that this can be seen as a way forward for future dialogues to happen, and with more time and positive actions that trust can be rebuilt.

Sincerely,

Kok Heng Leun  
Artistic Director  
Drama Box Ltd

**Annex A: Apology Note from Mr David Yeo, CEO, National Youth Council to Drama Box**

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/david.chua.9083/posts/10155434580096013>

Date: 6 September 2017

Hi Li Xie, Heng Leun, Hui Ling and friends.

My name is David and I am the CEO of the National Youth Council. The issue was just brought to my attention and I would like to apologise for the disrespect our team has shown for your work (The Lesson) in adapting it for our youth engagement. We respect the Drama Box and its partners for the fine work you are doing in the Arts and social impact space, and have much to learn from the Arts community in using these modalities for deep authentic engagement with young Singaporeans on complex issues. I have already spoken with my team, but felt it was important for me to first take responsibility for my team's actions and the hurt you must feel. In the excitement to find new ways to connect with our youth, we were too hasty in putting into action what we had learnt and did not consult with Drama Box and its partners. This was not right - please accept our apology.

I am looking into the matter personally and would also appreciate an opportunity to talk it through with the Drama Box team and you. My own desire is that NYC can collaborate with various Arts groups to co-curate and co-deliver programs that can positively impact our young people.

Yours sincerely,  
David Chua

Li Xie Koh Hui Ling Kok Heng Leun Jean Ng Jalyn Shese 韩 Han Xuemei Jia Ying Tay

**Annex B: Response from Mr Kok Heng Leun, Artistic Director, Drama Box to note from Mr David Yeo, CEO, National Youth Council**

Source: <https://www.facebook.com/kok.leun/posts/10155648553917856>

Date: 7 September 2017

On Monday, National Youth Council presented a public engagement programme. It came to our attention that the engagement programme was structured similar to THE LESSON, which was presented by Drama Box recently. National Youth Council had not approached Drama Box for consultation or inform us of their intent to emulate the structure prior to the engagement. It was only after the programme has been completed that we were told. CEO of National Youth Council, Mr David Chua wrote an apology note to us which I have shared below. The following is my response to him about this matter:

Hi David,

Thank you for the post. While I appreciate your apology note on this matter, I am disappointed that the note reflects greatly the lack of understanding of the issues at hand.

First, let me articulate my thought on the sharing of our work. Drama Box always welcomes sharing of ideas and practices. THE LESSON is one such important work that Drama Box is always willing to share. We are not precious about authorship or ownership, but we value the intent and critical process that defines the work.

In response to your note, I do not understand what you mean when you say that your team was "too hasty in putting into action what we had learnt and did not consult with Drama Box and its partners".

Drama Box was not even informed by NYC about using the structure of THE LESSON for engagement, much less 'consult'. And what was it that you have 'learnt'? From who, where and when? I understand that some people from NYC attended THE LESSON and were excited by it. If it is about having watched The LESSON and hence 'learnt' the engagement approach, then it is deeply troubling. How could an agency that is committed to engagement (with youths) have such frivolous attitude towards understanding and learning of engagement processes? While one can get excited by the form and appreciate the value of the engagement, it is either arrogant or ignorant to believe that one can emulate the same idea without appreciating the critical approach THE LESSON embodies. The LESSON is a result of more than one year of hard work by a team of very committed artists who went through very deep and critical process to design an engagement that is meaningful, challenging, and thought-provoking, hence exciting.

But the most upsetting part of this matter is that NYC has set up an engagement programme that instead of embracing differences and diversity, perpetuates prejudices and discriminations. Let me explain.

This is the write up that NYC provided:

"As part of the social experiment, the youth participants would be put into a future scenario 2030 where collectively they are part of a particular estate and have chosen to reallocate to another precinct because of the perceived benefits. This choice of reallocation comes with a tradeoff that not all families within the community now has a place to stay because of the reconfiguration of space. The 4 families that are kind of 'left out' are :

1. Farah- Single parent with 2 kids
2. Grace- Single but married with same sex partner overseas, returned to SG with the hope of adopting a child and starting a family here
3. Ah Biao- Single Elderly
4. Janice- Just married without kids; just graduated and started working

In this scenario, the community decides that it no longer wants to leave it to the current HDB balloting system to decide the fate of the families. The families also entrusts the decision to the community, with each of them knowing they will have a 75% chance of getting the flat.

The role of the community is to come to a consensus to choose one out of the four families who would be voted out as there are only 3 out of 4 spaces left in this new precinct."

Are you aware that this context that NYC has set up, seems to imply that heterosexual couples with children would be spared from such a cruel selection system, thus further reinforce the idea that they should be the only accepted norm.

Are you also aware that the context further sanctions the other 4 family units as alternatives, not preferred and left out, and hence deserved to be displaced just because they do not fit the 'norm'? Furthermore, are you aware that this scenario is patronizing because it implies that since 3 more units were available, these four alternative family units were fortunate enough to have 75% fighting chance to stay in the precinct.

Finally, the community who voted, if they did not question these fundamental assumptions, would be misguided to feel like they were helping these families, when in fact they have partake in a placation exercise.

If this is meant to be an engagement project, then it seems that NYC used engagement techniques, not to dialogue, but to reinforce or propagate the idea that alternative family units have no place in Singapore.

NYC has appropriated THE LESSON and that is why we are upset. THE LESSON was meant to create space for dialogue, to understand, to negotiate, to allow everyone a voice, and embrace diversity. What has happened is disrespectful because it went against the fundamental belief of this work, of the artists involved and Drama Box. Most importantly, the project has perpetuated prejudices and discriminations (knowingly or otherwise) towards elderlies, single parents, married couples without children and gay couples. The hurt that you mentioned in your posting, is just not inflicted on artists but also to those 'left-out' families.

I am saddened by this incident. Such things have happened countless times: appropriations, using ideas without crediting and so on. If citizen participation is what the agency desire and advocate, then one should learn to respect the rights of citizens: their choices, their ideas, their freedom and their dreams.

I look forward to your further clarifications and thoughts on this matter.

Thank you.

Yours sincerely,  
Heng Leun