

ASIA TOPA
JANUARY — MARCH 2020

ASIA TOPA CO-COMMISSION
ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE AND THE SUBSTATION PRESENT

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep

FEATURING MARGARET LENG TAN IN A CO-PRODUCTION
BY CHAMBER MADE AND CULTURELINK SINGAPORE
WORLD PREMIERE

Double Phase

A COLLABORATION BETWEEN MAKINO TAKASHI
+ LAWRENCE ENGLISH
WORLD PREMIERE

28 FEBRUARY

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE

Double Phase: 25 mins

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep: 60 mins



DRAGON LADIES DON'T WEEP

Musician/performer Margaret Leng Tan

Composer Erik Griswold

Director Tamara Saulwick

Dramaturg Kok Heng Leun | Drama Box

Video artist Nick Roux

Lighting design Andy Lim | ARTFACTORY

Costume design Yuan Zhiying

Additional video footage Tey Mun Sen (Margaret and Mum), Chuang Xu (Dog walking), Erik Griswold (Biscuit time), Rick Tejada-Flores (Margaret and John Cage)

Production Emily O'Brien, Leo Gester, Yap Seok Hui | ARTFACTORY

Co-Executive producers

Kylie McRae | Chamber Made

Goh Ching Lee | CultureLink Singapore

Administration

Jocelyn Chng | CultureLink Singapore

Emilie Collyer | Chamber Made

Dan Sheehan | Chamber Made

The text for *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* is drawn from Margaret Leng Tan's writings, observations and reflections.

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep is part of the SUBSONIC program curated for Asia TOPA by The SUBSTATION.

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep is a Chamber Made and CultureLink Singapore co-production and is co-commissioned by Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay and Asia TOPA. This activity received grant funding from the Australian Cultural Diplomacy Grants Program of the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and is supported by Creative Victoria, Australia Council for the Arts, National Arts Council (Singapore), Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth (Singapore), The SUBSTATION, Playking Foundation, Asia TOPA, Sidney Myer Fund and the Robert Salzer Foundation.

THANKS AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to Stephen Armstrong and the Asia TOPA team, Brad Spolding and The SUBSTATION, Faith Tan, Lynn Yang and the Esplanade team, Lucy Guerin Inc, Matt Delbridge and VCA Theatre School, Sara Pheasant and Orchestra Victoria, Beau McCafferty and Samantha Butterworth at Northcote Town Hall, Huzir Sulaiman and Claire Wong, Hoo Kuan Cien, Chng Yi Kai, Eugene Ughetti, John Byrne, Jem Savage, Blair Hart and Chunky Move.



OPENING WORK

DOUBLE PHASE

Makino Takashi + Lawrence English

Filmed entirely on location in Australia, *Double Phase* follows a discrete visual chronology captured by Makino Takashi. It considers how the complexity of the 'natural world' continues to be reductively framed within contemporary society. Pushing back against the simplistic and monocular sensing of the world, Makino responds with an intensely affective projection of sensed experience. Moving far beyond the capacity of lived day to day, the film collides image after image into a cascade of almost-cosmic complexity. A reminder that we must always be reaching out and extending ourselves into the world that emerges before us.

Double Phase has been supported by the Japan Foundation and Gandel Philanthropy

DRAGON LADIES DON'T WEEP – MUSIC BY ERIK GRISWOLD

Obsessive Precision

The Moon is Bright (Cantonese nursery rhyme)

This Counting Thing

The Secret Room

Dragon Lady Calling

El Chapo

One

4's and 3's

A Little Winter Music

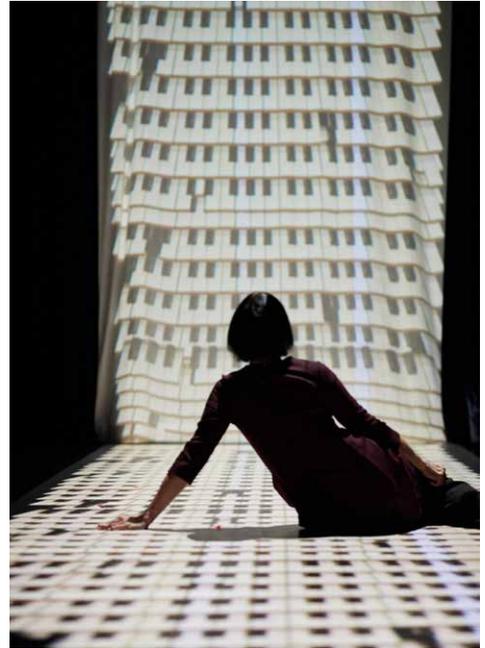
On the Move

Wearing Treads In The Carpet Of My Mind

Riceshowers

Sisyphus (structured improvisation)

Transcendence



MUSIC OF THE UNQUIET MIND

By Margaret Leng Tan

“WHY DO YOU NOT DO AS I DO? LETTING GO OF YOUR THOUGHTS AS THOUGH THEY WERE THE COLD ASHES OF A LONG DEAD FIRE?”

— John Cage

In 1944 the avant-garde composer John Cage wrote *Four Walls*, a 70-minute work using only the white keys of the piano. It was the music for a “dance play” in two acts by the dancer and choreographer Merce Cunningham, who would later become Cage’s lifelong partner. I rediscovered *Four Walls*, virtually forgotten for four decades, in the 1980s. It has since become one of the most personal works in my repertoire. Its repetitive, insistent nature struck a deep chord within me. It was as if someone had entered the innermost rooms of my mind and translated their contents into sound.

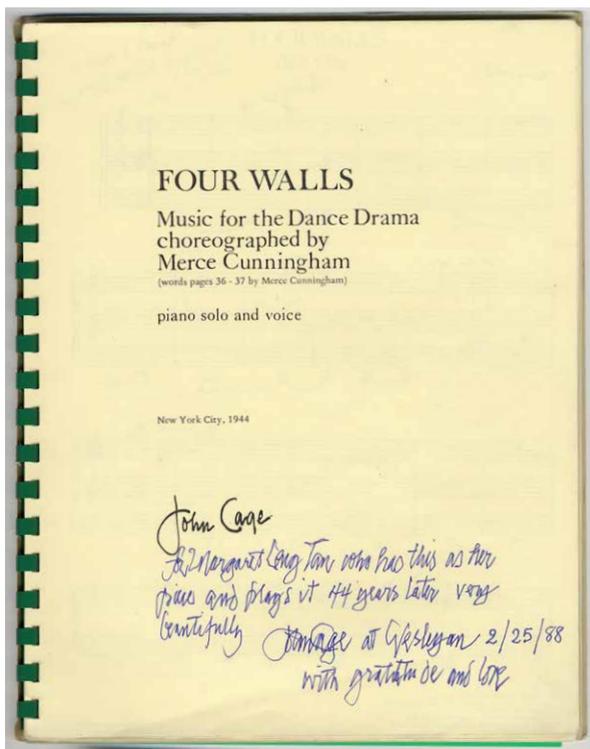
I asked Cage, whom I first met in 1981, about this compelling musical essay in inquietude. He told me that *Four Walls* was about the disturbed mind, a subject of fascination for Cunningham and himself during the mid-1940s. Two years after the completion of *Four Walls*, Cage seriously considered giving up composing to undergo psychoanalysis; he turned instead to Asian philosophy and Zen Buddhism.

The music in *Four Walls* is of a non-narrative nature. Its many silences and static repetitions do, however, contribute to an atmosphere of growing entrapment, inviting the listener to probe the deep recesses of his psyche. Each person brings to the experience what he wishes or, rather, what he *is*.



When Cage and I discussed the piece, he did not elaborate on the nature of the disturbances that had led to its creation. Not only would asking about it have been a trespass, I really preferred not to know. Instead, I would draw on my own experience of the disturbed mind and interpret the work accordingly.

I have lived with obsessive compulsive disorder for as long as I can remember. When I was a child it manifested itself in a spectrum of behavioral quirks ranging from an adamant insistence that the bow in my hair be perfectly straight to a perpetual need for reassurance to allay my many fears, largely imagined but painfully real to me. A few years ago I came across the perfect depiction of OCD: an image of a child trapped in a merry-go-round cage while his parents looked on helplessly.



A dedication by John Cage on the score of *Four Walls*

"For Margaret Leng Tan who has this as her piece and plays it 44 years later very beautifully.

John Cage at Wesleyan 2/25/88
With gratitude and love"

My own parents did not know what to make of it all and did their best to cope with my idiosyncrasies. Fortunately for them I insisted on having piano lessons when I was six, and this became a creative channel for my obsessive energies. One of the classic manifestations of OCD is compulsive counting. Till this day I count the number of steps when climbing a flight of stairs or the number of times I rinse after brushing my teeth. These counting rituals permeating my daily life serve no particular purpose other than to satisfy the need to perform them. That is the nature of OCD.

Enter music and rhythm: you can imagine how delighted I was to be actually *required* to count the beats in a piece of music. I could now count to my heart's content in a totally creative fashion!

When I was 16, I left my home in Singapore to study at Juilliard. In my 30s, I had the great good fortune to meet John Cage – a milestone for me musically, personally and philosophically. In fact, I still define my life in two periods, BC and AC – Before Cage and After Cage.

Cage was a pioneer in what is now regarded as the American maverick tradition. Like his revered predecessor, the transcendentalist philosopher Henry David Thoreau, Cage was a one-of-a-kind spirit in the way he lived, thought and made art. A towering iconic presence, his writings, most notably the anthology *Silence* (essentially Cage's interpretation of Zen), have had a defining influence on subsequent generations of artists across all disciplines. Philip Glass and Steve Reich, the progenitors of Minimalism in music, regard it as their bible.

Through Cage and his take on Zen philosophy, I have made a truce with my OCD. I recognise that it is integral to who I am and have come to accept myself, warts and all. Obsessive-compulsives are, not surprisingly, perfectionists. Yet, I have learned to relinquish the grand illusion of the goal and relish, instead, the unfolding of the process. Cage's highly forgiving definition of error, as "simply a failure to adjust immediately from a preconception to an actuality," has helped temper my self-judgmental parameters of right and wrong, all or nothing.

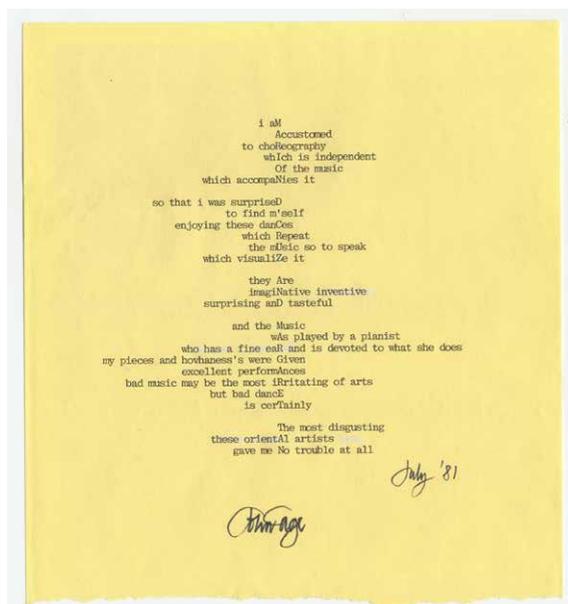
When I am entangled in an *idée fixe*, one of Cage's favourite Zen proverbs "Taking a nap I pound the rice" offers a welcome antidote, empowering me to step away and let the unconscious work its magic. OCD's most salient feature is its viselike hold on the mind, imbuing unwanted thoughts with a ferocious, pitiless tenacity. Cage's Zen-inspired text *Lecture on Nothing* is balm to an obsessive-compulsive: "Regard it as something seen momentarily, as though from a window while traveling... at any instant, one may leave it, and whenever one wishes one may return to it. Or you may leave it forever and never return to it, for we possess nothing... Anything therefore is a delight (since we do not possess it) and thus need not fear its loss."

Fear of loss rules the life of an obsessive-compulsive — fear of loss of control, fear of loss in both physical and metaphysical realms (paradoxically, the fear of losing worthwhile thoughts), and the ultimate fear — fear over the loss of time when consumed by compulsive rituals; I live in a constant race with time to make up for the time lost to the dictates of the dis-ease. Now, with Cage's wise words of counsel I have on occasion triumphed, actually retreated from the precipice of an impending attack and, even more impressively, curtailed a bout in progress.

Running like a vein through the writings in *Silence* is what Cage liked to call the "now" moment. Living in the "now" moment means relinquishing the previous moment and forgoing anticipation of the next. As Cage wrote, "Each now is the time, the space." I have recently discovered that this focus on the "now" moment can counter the grip of an OCD attack. The mere act of stepping outside oneself, even momentarily, can serve as an OCD circuit breaker, which is reinforced by the addition of each successive "now" moment. This is of course contingent on the severity of the attack; I am always grateful for good days when the distancing process can work its spell.

People tell me that I have accomplished a great deal. I don't know if it is in spite of or because of my obsessive-compulsive disorder. I do know that I would not wish this affliction on my worst enemy, and of course I would prefer not to wear holes in the carpet of my mind. But, as Cage said, "...the important questions are answered by not liking only but disliking and accepting equally what one likes and dislikes. Otherwise there is no access to the dark night of the soul."

Music of the Unquiet Mind was originally published in *The New York Times* on September 1, 2012. It was written as a John Cage 100th birthday tribute.



Mesostic for Marion d'Cruz and Margaret Leng Tan by John Cage



ARTIST STATEMENT

TAMARA SAULWICK, DIRECTOR

Conceived as a sonic portrait, *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* is a collage of some of the key forces and figures that have shaped the life and career of Margaret Leng Tan. This new work has come into focus amidst a gently unfolding series of conversations — bridging cultures, generations, continents and artforms.

Counting is the recurring motif that threads through *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep* and speaks to the underlying themes of memory, time, loss and control that have emerged throughout the work's development. We witness the counting which marks time and time passing; the counting that catalogues our rapidly changing world; the ritualised counting that soothes the nerves; and the counting which lives within the architecture of music and inside the mind of the musician. Through this motif a portal is opened into the interior world of this most singular artist, offering glimpses into the passions and obsessions that sustain and compel her.

Margaret tells me her life is divided into 'BC/AC' — 'Before Cage/After Cage'. The figure of John Cage looms large in her life, as does the profound influence of his work on 20th century avant-garde music and the performing arts. Symbiotically, Cage was deeply influenced by Zen philosophy and Asian aesthetics. Erik Griswold's exquisite compositions for *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep*, often evoking 20th century minimalism, are also in dialogue with Cage's aesthetic and innovations. Erik's music is the driving force of *Dragon Ladies Don't Weep*, around which visual and text materials have been woven.

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep is also in part an ode to Margaret's mother who passed away aged 98 years-old in December 2018. Her decline into dementia in her final years hovers spectre-like in the shadows of the work. Margaret reveals her greatest fear: "not remembering how to remember". Aged 74 and with no signs of slowing down, Margaret's vitality as a performer and her energy for life continue unabated. It is rare for performers of Margaret's years to grace our stages, and rarer still for them to be women. In this way, and in her continued passion to explore new territories, she remains a pioneer. It has been a pleasure and a privilege to work with her and the entire creative team.



ARTIST STATEMENT

MARGARET LENG TAN, MUSICIAN & PERFORMER

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep is my first fully-fledged foray into theatre. I have been heading in this direction for quite some time and now it's finally happening. It is a milestone, perhaps decades in the making. In the 1980s John Cage used to say that I was a very good actor. I didn't know what he meant at the time but then, Cage was always prescient. I dedicate this performance to John Cage and my mother. Their presence looms large.

I have always been fiercely autonomous in my performance practice. Now I find myself engaged with a formidable creative team and loving it! When I eventually step onstage I will represent the collective voice and vision of all these extraordinarily gifted people.

My heartfelt thanks to Team Dragon Lady!

Margaret Leng Tan
(The Dragon Lady herself)

ARTIST STATEMENT

ERIK GRISWOLD, COMPOSER

Working with Margaret certainly makes one feel connected to the history of American experimental music. As she and I are both "children of John Cage" (her words), we share a lot of very particular interests, including prepared piano, toy piano, minimalism, and a strong connection to Chinese music, so our collaboration is a natural fit. And when Tamara and Heng Leun joined the project, I knew that they were going to be able to shape significant themes, stories and figures from Margaret's life into something thoughtful and beautiful.

The music of *Dragon Ladies*... plays a double role, functioning as concert music – spotlighting Margaret's musical virtuosity and performance intensity, and as theatre music – underscoring action and dialogue, and creating emotional resonance. Sometimes the music needs to shift from foreground to background imperceptibly, to create space for something larger to develop. There was a lot of interplay between Margaret and myself in the development of these compositions and I have really valued all input – she's a tough editor!





Image: Pier Carthew

ARTIST BIOGRAPHIES

MARGARET LENG TAN

Singaporean pianist Margaret Leng Tan is one of the most highly regarded performers in American new music. Tan, whose work embraces theatre, choreography and performance, has been hailed as the “diva of avant-garde pianism” by *The New Yorker*. She is renowned as a pre-eminent John Cage interpreter (her mentor of 11 years) and for her performances of American and Asian music that transcend the piano’s conventional boundaries. She was the featured performer in a tribute to Cage’s memory at the 45th Venice Biennale. Her Cage recordings are critically regarded as definitive performances and she performs Cage’s music in the PBS *American Masters* films on John Cage and Jasper Johns. She is also one of George Crumb’s favourite performers, for whom he composed *Metamorphoses (Book I)*, a major piano cycle which Tan has performed to critical acclaim throughout the world since 2017.

The first woman to earn a doctorate from Juilliard, Margaret Leng Tan is recognised as the world’s first toy piano virtuoso. Her groundbreaking 1997 recording *The Art of the Toy Piano* (Point/Universal) transformed a humble toy into a real instrument. She has been called “the queen of the toy piano” (*The New York Times*) and “the toy piano’s Rubenstein” (*The Independent*, UK). The BBC, CNN, ABC and National Public Radio (USA) have all profiled her career as a concert toy pianist. Her curiosity has extended to other toy instruments as well, substantiating her credo: “Poor tools require better skills” (Marcel Duchamp).

Tan is a recipient of The National Endowment for the Arts’ Solo Recitalist Award in the United States. In 2015 she was awarded the Cultural Medallion, Singapore’s highest artistic accolade.

margaretlengtan.com



TAMARA SAULWICK – DIRECTOR (CHAMBER MADE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR)

Appointed as Artistic Director in early 2017, Tamara is an accomplished performance-maker, director and dramaturg working across and between artforms. Over 20 years, she has presented her award-winning work nationally and internationally — most recently touring *Endings* to Canada, USA, Ireland and the UK. Tamara's first work for Chamber Made, *Permission to Speak*, co-created with composer Kate Neal, won the 2017 APRA/AMCOS Victorian Performance of the Year and was nominated for Choral/Vocal Work of The Year. In her role at Chamber Made, Tamara continues to conceive and direct new works, collaborating with artists exploring the intersection of performance, sound and music.



ERIK GRISWOLD – COMPOSER

Erik Griswold is a composer and pianist working in contemporary classical, improvised, and experimental forms. His interests include prepared piano, percussion, environmental music, and music of Sichuan province. Born in Los Angeles and now living in Brisbane, he has received an Australia Council Fellowship, two APRA-AMCOS Art Music Awards, two Green Room Awards, and was an Aria Award finalist. His music has been performed in Carnegie Hall, Sydney Opera House, Cafe Oto, Shanghai International Festival, Melbourne Festival, and many other venues. Griswold's *Old MacDonald's Yellow Submarine*, written for Margaret Leng Tan, was selected to represent the ABC at the 2010 International Rostrum of Composers. Together with Vanessa Tomlinson, Griswold directs *Clocked Out*, which produces original music and innovative events.



NICK ROUX – VIDEO ARTIST

Nick Roux is an artist working in sound and video: composing, editing, directing and designing, in performance, installation and screen-based work. He has been involved with Chunky Move since 2006 collaborating in productions such as *AORTA* (2013), *Connected* (2011), *Two Faced Bastard* (2008), *Singularity* (2006), *I want to Dance Better at Parties* (2004) and *Tense Dave* (2003), and toured to an extensive list of venues throughout the world, operating and engineering sound and multi-media systems for numerous productions including the Kalypso motion tracking system for *Glow* (2006) and *Mortal Engine* (2008).

Nick produces video works alone and in collaboration with performance makers and visual artists, and his works have been shown at numerous international festivals and galleries including Flickerfest International Short Film Festival, and Cinedans Dance on Screen Festival in the Netherlands. Since meeting Frieder Weiss in 2006 he has toured to an extensive list of festivals and venues around the world engineering the Kalypso motion tracking system. In 2013, Roux worked on the world premiere of *King Kong* – using the Kalypso system – for Global Creatures.



KOK HENG LEUN | DRAMA BOX – DRAMATURG

Kok Heng Leun is a prominent figure in the Singapore arts scene, having built his artistic career as a theatre director, playwright, dramaturg and educator. He is known for engaging the community on various issues through the arts, championing civil discourse across different segments of society. Having begun his work in the theatre almost 30 years ago, some notable directorial works include *Drift, Trick or Threat, Manifesto* and *Underclass*. His exploration with multi-disciplinary engaged arts has produced works like *Project Mending Sky* (2008, 2009 and 2012), a series on environmental issues; *Both Sides, Now* (2013, 2014 and 2017-2019), a project that seeks to normalise end-of-life conversations; and *It Won't Be Too Long*, which touched on the dynamics of space in Singapore.

His most recent work *Tanah-Air 水土: A Play In Two Parts* was about the dispossession of the indigenous Malays and Orang Seletar of Singapore. Heng Leun's contributions to the arts have landed him awards from the Singapore National Arts Council – the Young Artist Award in 2000 and Cultural Fellowship in 2014. He also served as a Nominated Member of Parliament from 2016 to 2018, representing the arts sector.

ANDY LIM | ARTFACTORY – LIGHTING DESIGNER

Andy Lim is a designer who has worked extensively in and outside of Singapore for theatre and dance production, art installation and film. His work spans from drama, dance and music to film; from intimate black box performances to large theatre main stages; from site-specific installations to unconventional outdoor staging. His work has been seen locally and in major international performing arts festivals, including Esplanade – Theatres on the Bay & Singapore International Arts Festival (Singapore), Kunsten Festival Des Arts (Belgium), Theatre Der Welt (Germany), 54th Venice Biennale (Italy), Festival/ Tokyo (Japan) and SIDance (Korea).

YUAN ZHIYING – COSTUME DESIGNER

Yuan Zhiying is a designer with ready-to-wear womenswear label MAX.TAN. The Singapore-based brand has garnered international attention with numerous media features and shows, particularly in Europe and the Middle East. Locally, the label works on multifaceted projects from designing red carpet looks to collaborating with multimedia artists and designers. With designer Max Tan, Yuan Zhiying also produces costumes and uniforms for events and stage productions, including the costume designs for *Songs of Liu Sanjie – A Musical Film in Concert* at Huayi.

CHAMBER MADE

Interrogating the intersections of music, sound and contemporary performance, Chamber Made makes intimate works that defy, challenge and renegotiate artform boundaries, speaking directly to a 21st century Australia enriched by the meeting and intersection of cultures.

Chamber Made is known for offering unique opportunities to some of Australia's most exciting composers, sound artists and musicians to explore beyond the borders of their artform through collaboration with theatre and performance practitioners. The company is led by Artistic Director Tamara Saulwick, who brings to her role a deep knowledge of collaborative practice and over 20 years' experience as a director and performer working with sound and composition. Her multi-award-winning performance works have been presented nationally and internationally.

The company is dedicated to making an enduring contribution to the broader Australian performing arts landscape, creating a locale for research, collaboration, experimentation and innovation in music via dedicated artform and sector development programs and a research stream with a focus on the intersection of technology, music and performance.

Chamber Made has presented over 100 performance seasons in Australia, NZ, Asia, Europe, USA and South America, has commissioned over 50 new Australian works and engaged countless artists since it was founded in 1988.

CULTURELINK SINGAPORE

CultureLink Singapore is a multi-dimensional arts production, management and consulting agency dedicated to connecting inspiring ideas, people, and places across cultures and continents through the arts. Through artists' tours, artistic collaborations, cultural exchanges and special events commissions, it acts as a steadfast cultural catalyst animating the spaces in-between to spark and deliver creative opportunities and meaningful encounters for artists and their audiences on the international stage.

Dragon Ladies Don't Weep continues its commitment to establish deep links with the Australian arts community, building on collaborative partnerships established with OzAsia Festival, Brisbane Festival, Melbourne International Jazz Festival, Stephanie Lake Dance Company, Liveworks Festival, Multicultural Arts Victoria and Malthouse Theatre.

CultureLink Singapore was founded by Goh Ching Lee who is its Executive and Artistic Director.

ARTS CENTRE MELBOURNE

PO Box 7585 MELBOURNE VIC 3004 Australia T +61 3 9281 8000
info@artscentremelbourne.com.au artscentremelbourne.com.au
ABN 83 295 983 059

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